

Thesis: some errata

p.3

Paragraph 2: 'they reflect the period in which **these women** were growing up'

p.20

Paragraph 2: 'both **were** crucial to the way in which all women...'

p.54

Line 2: insert comma thus 'work, and can be defined...'

p.135

Footnote 120: insert full stop after initials thus 'I. Goodson and S. Ball'

p.145

Footnote 1: Delete 'n' to read 'A paper on this...'

p.212

Paragraph 1: Quote from Alice Foley already recorded as part of longer quote on p.110-11.

p.214

Paragraph 1: footnote Alice Foley quote re: 'knocker-up' as *A Bolton Childhood* p.15.

p.226

Paragraph 2: repeat of 'positions' in first two sentences, change second sentence to 'This led to better **pay** and...' delete 'paid positions'.

p.285

Last line: delete final '**in 1940s**'

p.288

Paragraph 2: lower case letter for **board** at end of first sentence.

p.295

Paragraph 3: delete '**in**' to read: 'This was illustrated as the women'

p.343.

Insert gap between top two titles.

p.344 Insert issue number, thus 'Issue **44**'

Appended material: Elaine's copy only? First page of WH Magazine article missing.

Abstract

This thesis contributes to our understanding of women's social history, and particularly the social, personal and political achievements of women born into the working-class in late Victorian England. Preliminary research involved autobiographies from working-class women born throughout the nineteenth century, and a change in tone and content was discovered in those written by women born from 1870 to 1900: for the first time women of this class were beginning to write about their experiences of success.

This cohort of women was born into different strata of working-class society, in disparate areas of England, both rural and urban, with a variety of family, educational and occupational experiences. Yet despite the diversity in their texts, they reveal a commonality in their motivation and ability to express themselves in terms of the struggles they have overcome and the importance to them of achievements gained. The importance of these texts is in the wider sweep of working-class history, they reflect the period in which they were growing up and they provide a wealth of detail about the gendered and class-specific experiences of working-class women during a period of profound social and political change.

The women express a sense of success that each felt about her life in the interwoven and sometimes interdependent areas of education, domesticity, economics and politics – each of which is explored as a chapter in the thesis. Undeniably, their achievements were facilitated by widening opportunities for women as a result of educational, economic, and most importantly, political reforms. With the support of parents, family members or networks of friends, colleagues or neighbours the writers describe the interconnected

series of chance and planned actions by which they achieved their ambitions. They describe, variously, some upward social mobility, an improved standard of living, more personal freedom, and their formal acceptance into the public arena of both local and national politics. These autobiographies are important as the personal, and in the case of these women, often the only, view of one person and their relationship with the broadening societal reflections of gender and class imposed by the changing social landscape of the period.

Thesis word count: 84338

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THE NATURE OF SUCCESS IN THE PUBLISHED AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF
WOMEN BORN INTO THE WORKING CLASS IN ENGLAND 1870-1900.

CAROL ANN JENKINS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements of the University of the West of England, Bristol
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Bath Spa University College

School of History, Bath Spa University College

July 2003

**The Nature of Success in the Published Autobiographies of Women Born into the
Working Class in England 1870-1900.**

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Gan, without whose forbearance, support and encouragement, it may not have been written. Also to my dear friend Myrtle Shipway, who died in February 2000, and is sadly missed.

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Abstract

This thesis contributes to our understanding of women's social history, and particularly the social, personal and political achievements of women born into the working-class in late Victorian England. Preliminary research involved autobiographies from working-class women born throughout the nineteenth century, and a change in tone and content was discovered in those written by women born from 1870 to 1900: for the first time women of this class were beginning to write about their experiences of success.

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The Nature of Success in the Published Autobiographies of Women Born into the Working Class in England 1870-1900.

Introduction

Perceptions of Success

The nature of success, which is central to this thesis, is open to many different interpretations. Individuals mostly have their own ideas of what success means to them, and definitions can thus be highly subjective. But while success has an abstract quality, it is also something tangible for most people: something to which they aspire and work towards, and something that they celebrate when they feel they have attained it.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century the means to success and the fulfilment of personal ambition has become big business. In bookshops, much shelf space is given over to the subject; an industry has grown up around the idea that anyone, anywhere, can achieve success. Ideas on what comprises success are legion. It may mean material wealth, encompassing a good position at work and the attendant lifestyle this brings: a large well-furnished house, a fast car and other up-market life acquisitions. Success may also be more nebulous: job satisfaction, a good marriage, pride in personal achievements, a sense of happiness, inner peace, or fulfilment. Increasingly, it involves celebrity status. Success may almost be described as all things to all people. The descriptions of success that permeate modern literature support the notion of an individual 'having it all'.¹ Books offer advice on ways to achieve the material affluence and personal fulfilment to which, it is suggested, all can aspire. Strategies which 'lead to happiness', 'reaching goals' or

¹ Nicola Horlick, *Can You Have It All? How to Succeed in a Man's World* (London: Macmillan, 1997); Helen Gurley Brown, *Having It All* (London: Sedgwick, 1983).

‘fulfilling your heart’s desire’ are offered to the reader.² These prescriptions for success differ profoundly from the descriptions found in literature written on the subject in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Success for individuals in the late Victorian and early Edwardian period depended on cultural and societal assumptions about both gender and class. At this time the attainment and celebration of success were essentially a male preserve and this was reflected in contemporary literature which focussed very much on the achievements of successful men.

For men, perceptions of success in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were invariably bound up with the notion of ‘progress’ that was so important to Victorian society. This was reflected in public achievements across a wide spectrum, including advances in exploration and science, public building and city infrastructure, as well as manufacturing and entrepreneurial ventures. It encompassed some women, but the individuals concerned were mostly drawn from the elite sections of society: women born into the working class were notably absent.

In addition, those women who were perceived to have achieved success shone in the field of personal rather than public achievement: their contribution was assessed in terms of morality and good works. Women were expected to be modest, humble, obedient, pious, temperate, patient, silent and chaste, and above all to find happiness and contentment in activities associated with the home. To a large degree this echoed the conventions of the period: men could achieve in the public sphere, whereas successful women had a

² See, for example: James Houston, *The Heart’s Desire: A Guide to Personal Fulfilment* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1992); Dorothy Rowe, *Wanting Everything: The Art of Happiness* (London: Harper Collins, 1991); Jeff Davidson, *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Reaching Your Goals* (New York: Macmillan, 1999).

supporting role or else operated in a 'feminine' sphere. Their experience was restricted to the home, to caring domestic-based professions, or to charitable ventures.³

A close examination of contemporary literature illustrates this point. Typical is Ernest Bryant's *A New Self-Help: A Story of Worthy Success Achieved in Many Paths of Life By Men and Women of Today and Yesterday*.⁴ First published in 1908 the book was an eclectic, worldwide collection, dealing with the lives of mainly middle-class men, such as Charles Darwin, Abraham Lincoln, Cecil Rhodes, Thomas Cooke and John Wesley. As his title suggests, Bryant did include some women. In Chapter 4, entitled 'Life's Handicap', he cited Helen Keller, a dedicated teacher of sign language to a profoundly deaf student.⁵ And in a later chapter, 'A Woman's Place in Progress', he told of public recognition of the success of Florence Nightingale in establishing the nursing profession, and identified this as a step towards the equality of women with men, at least in terms of their intellectual capacity:

One of the most striking events of 1907 was the bestowal by King Edward of the order of merit upon Miss Florence Nightingale...the bestowal of that Order marked an entirely new departure, it was created for men only. King Edward, with the advice of his ministers, in honouring Miss Nightingale, set an example which we shall see generally followed. It is part of a great movement towards the recognition of the intellectual equality of women with men. It is late in the day, but better late than never.⁶

To underline his point, the chapter 'Towards Self-Help' included some twenty or so women, worldwide, who had a right to claim a place in the forward march of 'progress'.

He included the Baroness Burdett-Coutts, the astronomers Miss Agnes Clerke and Lady

³ For discussion of separate spheres in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries see, for example, Susan Kingsley Kent, *Gender and Power in Britain, 1640-1990* (London: Routledge, 1999), particularly pp. 147-184, 260-302. See also Chapter 1, p. 25 of this thesis.

⁴ Ernest A. Bryant, *A New Self-Help: A Story of Worthy Success Achieved in Many Paths of Life by Men and Women of Today and Yesterday* (London: Cassell and Co., 1980).

⁵ Bryant, *A New Self-Help*, pp.326-328.

⁶ Bryant, *A New Self-Help*, p.329.

Huggins (the latter rather tellingly identified as ‘the wife of Sir William Huggins’), Mrs Somerville, and Lady Bullen ‘the famous artist’. Bryant had made an attempt to appear even-handed, and to include women as well as men. He went as far as to claim that ‘where a man can go, a woman can follow’. However, his use of ‘follow’ seemed to reflect the mores of a society which believed that a woman could succeed only if man showed her the way, or allowed her to act in a prescribed field, as was the case with Florence Nightingale.

Bryant promulgated the gendered view that it was possible for women to be successful, but only by behaving in a manner prescribed by society. They could succeed as wife, daughter or mother, or in a caring profession such as nursing and teaching. He unwittingly demonstrated this in his references to explorers’ wives - Mrs Francis V. Campbell ‘wife of the daring English traveller’, and Mrs Percy, ‘who accompanied her husband on his early trips to the North Pole’ - although she was left at the first base camp, from where she ‘was *sent* (my italics) to meet him in 1900’.⁷

Most importantly, for this thesis, Bryant’s women were all, without exception, from the middle or upper classes. By the omission of working-class women from his book, it might be concluded that they had little hope of achieving the success that Bryant envisaged for more elite women. When he declared that with ‘progress’, the coming of equal educational opportunities, and with the help of men, women too could achieve, Bryant was referring to the kind of middle-and upper-class women he had described in his book. He concluded with an appeal for men to broaden the idea of self-help in order to assist women, who, although weak, could still have potential:

The spirit of the new Self-Help is not the selfish spirit of gain to be sought by the individual; it is a Self-Help which

⁷ Bryant, *A New Self-Help*, pp.338-339.

lightens the burdens of others equally with our own, and enables us to assist the weaklings not yet risen to their feet. The hand stretched forth to succour and guide will not be withheld from those to whom man first owes courtesy, respect, and reverence.⁸

The notion of achieving success by means of self-help, introduced by Bryant, is a further important strand within this thesis.

Ideas of self-help, though prevalent well before the nineteenth century, were perhaps crystallised in the public mind by a book written by Samuel Smiles (1812-1904), and first published some fifty years before Bryant's book, in 1859. Bryant's chapter heading, *Self Help* echoes the title of Smiles's book.⁹ Smiles's *Self Help* was a best seller. Printed in many editions it was widely read: over 250,000 copies were sold in his lifetime and the book was still in print well into the twentieth century. Smiles dealt with the benefits of thrift, temperance, work and a good character. He promulgated the notion of the independent self-made working-class man within the general consciousness by encouraging, in mid-Victorian society, the belief that by thrift and hard work any morally sound person could gain material success or rise in society. He illustrated the possibilities of rags to riches to all who could read. Like Bryant, however, Smiles's main target audience, although admittedly working-class, was male.

Smiles included nothing controversial in his advice. There was no hint that the lot of working people may have been improved by political action, and in fact Smiles was promulgating acquiescence in conventional Victorian values and a hierarchical social order, through a cult of 'independence', 'systematic industry' and 'self-help'.¹⁰ The idea that such social progress could include working-class women was barely acceptable even

⁸ Bryant, *A New Self-Help*, p.343.

⁹ Samuel Smiles, *Self Help* (London: n.pub., 1859).

¹⁰ Samuel Smiles, *Self Help* (London: n.pub., 1860 edition), p. v.

by late nineteenth-century society, which still regarded it an axiom that working-class women should know their place, and that the place for respectable women was in the home.

Such societal values were also suggested in a later and less well-known book by Smiles: *Life and Labour*, first published in 1887, purported to throw light on the changing attitudes towards women in society, it explored also the idea of a fundamental equality between men and women. But in spite of this supposedly progressive approach it reinforced the idea of 'separate spheres', assigning to women a primarily domestic role. Women, whom Smiles described as man's 'helps-meet', are limited to a clearly subordinate role:

There are many more single women than single men. Man has strength and power; he acts, moves, thinks, and works alone. He looks ahead. But the woman stays at home, for joy or for sorrow. To feel, to love, to suffer, to devote herself, - is this not the sum of woman's life? There are many single women animated by the most beautiful of motives, and associated with the noblest and most honourable members of society. Need we mention the names of Florence Nightingale, Catherine Stanley and Sister Dora?

Single women are in many cases the best comforters, the best sympathisers, the best nurses, the best companions... There is no record made of the constant, watchful daily service of the patient woman who keeps her home healthy and peaceful. Even in the humblest classes, single women do more than their fair share of useful and honourable work, often in the face of trials, difficulties, and temptations.¹¹

In the context of Smiles' book, therefore, the whole concept of success at the end of the nineteenth century appears only attainable for women in a subservient role, helping, or comforting, men. Success for women could only be realized within parameters set by

¹¹ Samuel Smiles, *Life and Labour: Or, Characteristics of Men of Industry, Culture and Genius* (London: John Murray, 1887) pp.388-391.

society, in which women had a role to fulfil in the domestic sphere in serving men, or as carer, companion or nurse.

Given the self-effacing role assigned to women, especially those from the working class, one might not expect to find that women from this class and period had written their autobiographies. Still less would one expect them to write about their lives in terms of success. There are nevertheless extant as many as twenty-six published autobiographies, written by women born into the working class in England between 1870 and 1900, and they are all success stories in one form or another. That these women should have the ability, motivation and impetus to write about their success is surprising, but they nevertheless chronicled the pathways by which they improved their lives and attained their goals.

Although these women do not generally use the word success, their autobiographies describe their social advancement and the fulfilment of ambitions in various areas of their lives. They took pride in their varied achievements and illustrate that success, rather than the ‘usefulness’ referred to by Smiles in the quote above, was attainable for women whose origins were working-class and who grew up in late Victorian and early Edwardian England. To write about success was a new phenomenon for this class of women, and one that it is the purpose of this thesis to examine.

Statement of Objectives

The present work is of particular importance because it addresses a neglected field of enquiry. It engages with a cohort of twenty-six women autobiographers born into the

working class in England between 1870 and 1900, who perceived themselves as successful, and found the language and motivation to write about their experience.

The research began as an enquiry into the earliest working-class women's autobiographies. It progressed to include all of the one hundred and thirty-six extant published and unpublished autobiographies written by working-class women born in England during the nineteenth century. This was an important period in women's writing, especially for those from the working class. It was only in that century that they began, in any number, to write their autobiographies. Before then there were few texts of any sort written by this class of women, and certainly few that were published.

During preliminary reading, a marked difference in tone and content was noted in 26 of the 55 autobiographies written by women born between 1870 and 1900. Unlike the other 29 writers, whose texts are grounded in, and accepting of, working-class existence, these 26 all presented a record of personal achievement in various areas of their lives. In these texts there is an implicit sense of individual success, and of subsequent upward social mobility between, or within, social strata. All 26 of the autobiographies in question have been published in some form. Their publication not only gives wider access to this cohort of writers, but also says something about the interest inherent in their writing. But despite this interest, the autobiographies from this cohort of women have hitherto been neglected. It is the purpose of this thesis to address this neglect, and to use the autobiographies to illuminate the details of their success.

It is important at this early stage to state that the term 'working class' is used flexibly here, as an analytical tool, rather than rigidly, as a defining category. The class of society into

which these women were born was not a monolithic, homogeneous group. As Engels claimed in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, the category 'working class' included a variety of social types under its umbrella.¹² It consisted of various strata, ranging from those living in abject poverty, to the relatively affluent upper working-class artisans. This diversity is reflected in the cohort.

Some of the women were born into what appeared to be inescapable poverty, while others had parents with relatively good jobs and a reasonable standard of living, and were sometimes wealthy enough to employ help in the home on a limited scale, such as engaging a laundress once a week.¹³ Many of them were denied access to resources or to education, and while some overcame these obstacles, they had to struggle. In so doing they faced difficult choices, such as whether to stay at school and gain some educational success, or leave and earn a wage, and so contribute towards the family economy.¹⁴ A few were able to achieve scholarships and went on to further education, gaining professional qualifications.

The term 'working-class' therefore must be used with care. It is employed in this thesis in broadly the way in which it is defined in E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. Thompson stresses the social and cultural fluidity of class-consciousness which arises when 'some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.'¹⁵ In these terms, 'working-class women' may be defined as those women who identify themselves,

¹² Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of The Working Class in England*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

¹³ Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie: From Suffragette to Stepney Councillor* (London: Stepney Books, 1980), p.7.

¹⁴ See, for instance, Mary Luty, *A Penniless Globetrotter* (Accrington: Wardleworth, 1927), p.39.

¹⁵ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1991), pp.8-9.

both socially and culturally, as working class; who are born into a wage-earning family and who have in common the experience of having to work in paid employment at some stage in their lives, in order to support themselves and often also their families. Judged by this standard the twenty-six women in question are undeniably working-class. They present themselves as working class; and they were born into environments where the common experience was of families supported by one or two wage earners. Nevertheless, the women in the cohort exhibit some fluidity in their social position throughout their lives. Although the degree of this varies, all of them, to a greater or lesser extent, became upwardly mobile in terms of education, occupation or lifestyle.

While defining terms, it is also necessary at this point to clarify the use of the term 'separate spheres'. During analysis of the texts it has been useful in some instances to employ the terms 'public sphere' and 'private sphere' in order to differentiate between activities that were societally gendered. Much has been written on these divisions and want of space precludes a detailed discussion here.¹⁶ However it is important to stress that the model of separate spheres is only a rhetorical tool, as Linda Kerber has argued.¹⁷

Mitzi Myers has elaborated further and claimed, albeit disapprovingly:

It demarcates and organizes things tidily, so that even though feminist revisionists know that spheres cannot truly be separate, we are still stuck with an orthodoxy of

¹⁶ For an historiography of the emergence of separate spheres for women debate see, for example: Patricia Branca, *Silent Sisterhood: Middle-Class Women in the Victorian Home*, (London: Croom Helm 1975); Sarah Delamont and Lorna Duffin, *The Nineteenth Century Woman: Her Cultural and Physical World* (London: Croom Helm, 1978); Martha Vicinus, *Suffer and Be Still* (London: Virago, 1974); also Amanda Vickery 'Shaking the Separate Spheres. Did Women Really Descend Into Graceful Indolence?' in *The Times Literary Supplement* issue 4693 (12 March 1993), pp.6-7. The ideology of the golden age of domesticity is discussed in detail in Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortune: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (London: Hutchinson Educational, 1987), and for an interesting historical perspective, see, Alice Clark, *Working Lives of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1919).

¹⁷ Linda K Kerber, 'Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Woman's History' in *Journal of American History*, issue 75, vol.1 (June 1998), pp.9-39.

public and private realms, with women as domestic pawns
and men as public actors.¹⁸

In describing the various kinds of success achieved by the cohort these terms have proved useful. However, it is important to state here that these are not mutually exclusive categories: in the women's lives the 'public' and the 'private' are so intertwined that one must, of necessity, have an impact on the other.

The thesis examines the nature of success in its various forms. Against a backdrop of social and political change it investigates the ways in which, by a combination of chance and strategy, these women achieved their ambitions. Undeniably, their success was facilitated by important social and political changes. Key changes included legislation for shorter working hours, provision of better elementary education and some secondary education, wider employment opportunities, and openings for women in politics. Shorter working hours gave single working-class women of the period more leisure time, and it became acceptable for even married working-class women to join newly established clubs and societies such as the Co-operative Women's Guild, which encouraged its members to broaden their reading skills and become involved in voicing their opinions at public meetings. Some of the women in the cohort became involved in political organizations including trade unions, socialist societies and the suffrage movement.

Interwoven through all of the autobiographies was the claim to respectability. Ideologies of womanhood required by Victorian and Edwardian society incorporated a range of qualities including Christian values of caring for others, together with modesty, humility, self-denial and propriety. These values were incompatible with public self-representation,

¹⁸ Mitzi Myers, 'Completing the Union: Critical Enui, the Politics of Narrative' in *Intersecting of Public and Private*, ed. Caroline Steedman (London: Virago, 1986), p.42.

and this may be a reason why many of the women offered an explanation, or justification, of their achievements when recording their experiences.

The articulacy of these women lifted them above the ordinary. In writing their autobiographies they presented themselves not only as successful, but also as different from other women of their class and background. Their individual experiences of life were of course diverse: they came from various areas of England, different strata of working-class society, varying positions in the family, and they describe accordingly a variety of different educational, family and occupational experiences. Yet paradoxically, despite these differences, the lives of these women may also be seen as representative. They reveal the possibility of achievement for working-class women of the period and so provide a link between the individual and the collective experience.

It is this combination of similarities and differences which makes these twenty-six women worthy of study. They provide personal histories rooted in an historical context: as witnesses at the centre of working-class society they described transitional periods in their lives in which they gradually worked towards, and ultimately achieved, success in the areas of education, domesticity, economics and politics. They illustrate their ability to capitalize on societal changes and to turn them to their advantage. At the same time their pursuit of respectability and their religious, social and political beliefs, all emerge from their writing. Their autobiographies augment an understanding of working-class history as sometimes upwardly socially mobile. Most importantly, it reveals the emergence of a new type of autobiography: that of successful working-class women.

Outline of Chapters

There are a number of ways in which this study of the perceptions of success in the autobiographies of the cohort could be presented. It could be written by considering each woman in turn: but this approach, although it might highlight the differences between individuals, would mean a great deal of repetition regarding the similarities. Alternatively, it could have been written chronologically: but then societal changes are slow to register, and they also take effect unevenly between urban and rural areas; and even between different strata of the working class. Such changes would thus have different repercussions at different stages in the lives of the autobiographers, who were born over a period of three decades, and in many different parts of the country.

The shortcomings of the individual and chronological approaches meant that a thematic approach was adopted. Despite the considerable diversity in the lives of these women there are also clear themes running through all of the autobiographies: although not always clear-cut, they encompass educational, domestic, economic and political success. These four themes surface and subside at various times and are often intertwined. Domestic skills were taught both in the home and at school. Education was also achieved formally at school and informally at home. For some of the cohort attaining an education was an end in itself, others used educational success, in the form of qualifications or scholarships, to enter further education or obtain higher-paid employment and so achieve economic success. Economic success, although perceived mainly in the public sphere of paid employment, was also illustrated as the women improved their standard of living and material wealth domestically, in an increasingly consumer society. Economic success was also discerned in the home as women took control of the family income from husbands and older children. Political success was achieved in the domestic sphere, as some women

became householders and so gained the right to a local franchise, or else found a public voice when they joined clubs, societies and political or suffrage movements. Political success could also begin as women took an active role in work-place trade unions. Despite the difficulties of unravelling these areas of their lives, the chapter headings are based on the themes given obvious importance by the autobiographers themselves.

Chapter one outlines the methodology employed for the thesis. It begins with a discussion of working-class women's autobiography, and emphasizes the importance of the autobiographies in question as, in many cases, the only material surviving from this group of women. It continues with an overview of the historiography of the working-class; considers why published autobiographies from this group of women were chosen; and discusses what problems were inherent in the study. It concludes by reviewing the historical context in which the texts were written.

Chapter two introduces the twenty-six autobiographers – the cohort of women – with a brief biography of each, and a bibliographical note on their autobiography. There follows a short review of the texts as a body of work, which discusses the reasons the women gave for writing, and in some cases publishing, their autobiographies. Finally there is the suggestion that because of the diversity of their lives, the cohort's autobiographies are important in representing the increasingly wide range of experiences possible for working-class women during the period. It stresses the importance of biographical detail in history, and in particular the importance of autobiographies such as these, which give a thoughtful reflection of a personal history.

Chapter three explores educational achievement in the lives of the women in the cohort, examining ways in which they describe educational ambition; how they used societal changes in education to fulfil these ambitions; and how they presented their educational success. Education, in its various forms, appeared to be seen by most of these women as the most important contributing factor to their success, as it is given prominence in almost all of the autobiographies. The chapter argues that with a network of support from family, friends, and neighbours, the writers overcame the constraints of gender and class at school and in the home to achieve an education through both formal and informal means. Furthermore, the kind of education they acquired was dependent mainly on parental attitude to education, most particularly that of their mothers.

Of social changes, perhaps the most relevant for the cohort was the improvement in education due mainly to the Education Act brought in by W. E. Forster in 1870. This legislated for the provision of schooling for all children up to the age of ten.¹⁹ Most of the women in the cohort were therefore enabled to take advantage of educational reforms during their childhood and gained some measure of formal education. Some, however, were not and found strategies to cope with what they saw as a lack of opportunity. They learned to read informally by borrowing books or enlisting the help of friends and families. Interest in Socialism for many of the cohort came about through reading material borrowed in this way: most notably the work of the socialist Robert Blatchford, which had particular relevance for political involvement later in life for many of the cohort.²⁰ In some cases, educational achievement was seen as an end in itself; the cohort in

¹⁹ W. E. Forster (1818-1886) was a Quaker wool merchant who was vice-president of the committee of the Privy Council for education and to whom Gladstone left the framing of the 1870 Education Act.

²⁰ Robert Blatchford (1851-1943), Socialist and writer, was the author of such titles as *Socialism: A Reply to the Encyclical of the Pope* (1893); *Merrie England* (1895); *The New Religion* (1897); *Competition: A Plain Lesson for the Workers* (1898); *Britain for the British* (1902); *God and My Neighbour* (1904). Perhaps the most notable of which was *Merrie England* which provoked much discussion in the national press.

general were better educated than their parents. In others the writers clearly indicated that educational success was a first step to a more public success in further education, politics or the work-place.

Chapter four examines domestic success, which for many of these women, at least during some period of their lives, meant marriage, a happy home life, children and perhaps buying or renting their own home. Domestic success was often measured by respectability, both crucial to the way in which all women were perceived by society over the period. Domesticity was an area for which working-class girls, in particular, were trained during childhood at home and at school. Girls growing up were given clear instruction from parents and teachers about women's place in society: they must be good girls who would become good workers, most notably good domestic servants, as well as good wives and mothers. Skills 'appropriate' for girls were therefore taught which would prepare them for typically female employment and for women's work, and women's place, within the home. The chapter argues that, far from resenting this situation, the cohort, with a few exceptions, welcomed their training in domestic skills and wrote proudly of their respectability: their ability to manage their homes and make them comfortable and attractive, and to bring up their children well and to be good wives and neighbours. In doing so, they were both reflecting and promoting societal values of domesticity.

Chapter five considers success in economic terms, illustrated primarily in the ways that the women controlled their own and the family income. For many women economic success was contingent upon educational success and many of the cohort used their educational achievements to gain fulfilment, and better pay in the work-place. As young

workers, the women contributed to family economics and in time to their own economic independence away from the family home. There was a change over the period and beyond, and the cohort illustrated that increasing access to occupations such as teaching, tailoring and clerical work, once male-dominated, opened up better-paid opportunities for women.²¹ For married women family duties often merged with paid work. The 'double shift' of paid employment and housework was not the same for all of the women in the cohort, any more than it was for working-class women in general during the nineteenth century and beyond. In particular, there were differences between married and single women, childless and childbearing women, and urban and rural women. Women at different times of their life also had varying responsibilities and experienced varying degrees of economic success. Nevertheless, this chapter reveals the possibilities for social advancement, and a better standard of living, for working-class women as a widening range of consumer goods became available to society in general. Working-class women, in controlling how family income was spent, played an increasingly important role in the development of the consumer society.

Chapter six examines the nature of success that was bound up with political rights and freedoms, both in the work-place and at home, or in participation in social clubs and societies. Importantly, a political and social awareness is seen emerging in many of the autobiographies written by the cohort. Working conditions improved over the period, as the factory acts came into being and new reforms were enforced as factory inspections began to take place. The chapter argues that the reforms were to affect the lives of many of the women in the cohort and of working-class women in general: they became involved

²¹ The 1891 Census, *Employment: Table 6, England and Wales*, pp. 26-30 showed that in the 1891 census the employment of women could be divided into: 1,386,167 indoor domestic servants; 415,961 milliners, dressmakers and staymakers; 332,784 in cotton and cotton goods manufacturing; 185,246 in washing, mangling and other laundrywork; 144,393 in teaching and 89,244 in tailoring.

with politics in the work-place, joined trade unions and became familiar with political behaviours such as voting, balloting, canvassing and public speaking.

Political action was not new to working-class women. Historical accounts of popular protest written since the 1960s have emphasized the trend towards various forms of collective action – exemplified by Eric Hobsbawm’s analysis of ‘collective bargaining by riot’.²² This behaviour involved women in the community, and those in the cohort were no exception to the trend. Those who stayed at home after marriage, as well as those who continued to work in paid employment, became involved with clubs, societies or political movements in the public arena outside both home and work. In many cases those in work who joined trades union became members of the Independent Labour Party, which was affiliated to the unions. Others joined socialist societies such as the Clarion Club, mainly for recreational reasons such as cycling or choral singing. Those women who saw success centred mainly in the domestic sphere could also take part in political activities. As members of the Working Women’s Guild, for example, they had a public voice, they took part in ballots and voted within the Guild on a variety of social and women’s issues. This sort of activity could translate to the wider political field of organizations such as the suffragette movement or the Women’s Labour League. Even the act of shopping at a co-operative could be seen as supporting, in a general way, a political ideal.

Political activity, and in particular suffragism and the struggle for equal rights, was given great prominence in a few of the autobiographies, and had a place in most of them. It is this involvement with the public sphere of politics that, arguably, is most relevant to the continuity of history. Political and social changes had enabled women to effect changes in

²² Eric Hobsbawm, ‘The Machine Breakers,’ in *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964), p. 45.

their own lives, and by joining a political party they could, in turn, themselves have some effect on changes in society. Their involvement with the public sphere of politics reflects the reciprocal nature of social and political change.

The conclusion of the thesis draws together the threads of discussion in the preceding chapters. The four chapters - on education, domesticity, economics and politics - reveal much about the nature of success in these areas as experienced by the autobiographers. They also show that there were possibilities for advancement for women like themselves, since it is not unreasonable to suppose that many more such women had similar aspirations but failed to realize their dreams or potential; or did so, but were not inspired to write their personal history. Nevertheless the cohort illustrate that women born into the working-class could achieve success: they tested the limits of, and in some cases defied, Victorian cultural assumptions. The autobiographies studied here thus represent a valuable record and are testimony to, if not a new social phenomenon – the successful working-class woman – then at least to a new expression of it.

Chapter 1: Methodology

Introduction

During the nineteenth century there was a marked increase in literacy amongst the working class in England, and as a result for the first time written primary source material from this section of society can be found. There are over 1,000 known autobiographies from working-class people born in England between 1790 and 1900: 136 of these are by women.¹

The relatively low output of working-class women's writing compared to that of working-class men cannot be attributed to a low level of literacy.² There was a rapid growth in literacy for both girls and boys, who had relatively equal opportunities to attend some form of primary schooling. Furthermore, although in 1840 one-third of all grooms and one-half of all brides could not sign their names, by 1900 virtually all brides and grooms were able to sign the marriage register.³ In essence, there was little difference between working men and women in the acquisition of literacy skills.⁴

¹ Literature searches were undertaken for working-class female autobiographies in the Bodleian Library Oxford, Bath County Library, Bath Spa University College Library and the British Library. Letters were written to county libraries throughout England. In addition, a record of known female autobiographies was extrapolated from: John Burnett, David Vincent and David Mayall, *The Autobiography of the Working Class 1790-1900*, vol. I, II and III, and Supplement (Brighton: Harvester Press, Leverhulme Trust, 1984). Altogether this resulted in the finding of a total of 136 texts of women who had lived all or part of their lives in the nineteenth century.

² For discussion on the literacy of working-class women, see: W. B. Stephens, *Education, Literacy and Society, 1880-1870: The Geography of Diversity in Provincial England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987); David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

³ David F. Mitch *The Rise of Popular Literacy in Victorian England: The Influence of Private Choice and Public Policy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), p.1.

⁴ On average, female literacy rates at the beginning of the nineteenth century were about ten to fifteen points behind male rates, becoming closer as the century progressed. There is evidence that in some areas of high female unemployment the rate could be very lower, but this does not explain the one to ten ratio of female to male autobiographers. For discussion of illiteracy in the nineteenth century see, for instance, Roger Schofield, 'Dimensions of Illiteracy 1750-1850', in *Explorations in Economic History*, volume I no.4 (Summer, 1973), p.453.

One possible explanation is that societal conventions did not encourage women to write about themselves. Respectable women were modest, retiring, supportive of their husband (Samuel Smiles's 'best comforters, the best sympathisers, the best nurses, the best companions')⁵ and were to be found, ideally, at the centre of a happy family home. The difficulty encountered in breaking from the 'separate sphere', historically claimed to have been imposed on women, may explain, in part at least, why only one-tenth of the extant autobiographical material from working people of this period was written by women.⁶ By writing, and even more so, by making their writing public, these women would be rebelling: transcending the societally constructed hegemony of both class and gender.⁷ Working-class women who aspired to respectability may therefore have hesitated to write their autobiographies. Those who did so, as will be shown, often conformed to a common writers' tradition and incorporated a justification for their writing as a preface, foreword or passage within the texts of their autobiographies.⁸

An alternative explanation is that the majority of working-class women did not live lives that encompassed the sorts of success discussed earlier. They may not have regarded the 'ordinariness' of their lives as worthy of recording and so there will have been little motivation to write about them. Nevertheless, some working-class women did overcome

⁵ See above, p. 10.

⁶ The notion of 'separate spheres' while still a useful descriptive tool for the historian has come under attack in recent years. See, for example, Linda Kerber, 'Separate spheres, female worlds, woman's place: the rhetoric of woman's history' in *Journal of American History*, 75, 1 (1988); Amanda Vickery 'Golden age to separate spheres? A review of the categories and chronology of English women's history' in *Historical Journal*, 36, 2 (1993). For a critique of the separate spheres model and post-structuralist feminist theory, see, Ann-Louise Shapiro, ed. *Feminist Revision History*, (New Brunswick: New Jersey, 1994).

⁷ For a discussion of ideology and gender see, for instance: Lesley Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain Since 1880* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000); Susan Kingsley Kent, *Gender and Power in Britain 1640-1990*; Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments* (London: Virago, 1989).

⁸ Jane Rendall has illustrated this trend in '“A Short Account of My Unprofitable Life”: Autobiographies of Working Class Women in Britain c.1775-1845' in *Women's Lives/Women's Times: New Essays on Auto/Biography*, ed. Trev Lynn Broughton and Linda Anderson (Albany: State University of New York: 1997), pp.31-50.

the obstacles of class and gender facing them, and found the ability and motivation to write their autobiographies.

During the preliminary research for this thesis and following a general enquiry to librarians in England for lists of relevant holdings, all of the 136 known autobiographies written by working-class women born during the nineteenth century were read.⁹

Comprising both published and unpublished texts, they were found to be a very disparate and varied group. Initial analysis revealed a general change of emphasis over time and, although these overlap, there was a general trend from spiritual to mainly secular writing as the century progressed.

Fourteen of the autobiographies were written by women born before mid-century.¹⁰ All of these were spiritual or confessional autobiographies. They were formulaic, religious in tone and followed an older puritan pattern found in chapbooks, evangelical texts and Sunday school prize-books, all of which may have been available to working-class women at this time.¹¹ Spiritual autobiographies, or 'testimonies', continue to be written up to the present day, especially by women of all classes involved with Quakerism or Christian 'Born Again' movements. These texts describe a personal introspective spiritual journey from an early life of sin, through enlightenment from God, to a state of grace. In general they give few personal details and are not set into any historical context. Moreover, they were mostly written when the author was relatively young, triggered by a religious

⁹ See 'Bibliography' appendix IV, pp. 305-313.

¹⁰ These were Rose Allen (b.1809); Jane Andrew (b.1815); Janet Bathgate; Ruth Bryan (b.1805); Mrs Collier (b.1805); Kezzie Crawford (b.1835); Barbara Farquhar (b.1800); Marianne Hearn (b.1834); Lucy Luck (b.1848); Mary Smith (b.1822); Elizabeth Squirrell (b.1838); Elizabeth Storie (b.1818); Louisa Twining (b.1820) and Mary Weston (b.1840), see 'Bibliography'.

¹¹ For discussion on contact with the printed word for the working class during this period see, for instance, David F. Mitch, *The Rise of Popular Literacy in Victorian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1992), pp.43-79.

conversion, which in many instances was claimed to have taken place in the early adulthood, or even childhood, of the writer.

The numbers of spiritual testimonies declined as working-class women born in the second half of the nineteenth century began to write more secular autobiographies. The writers tended to be older than those writing spiritual testimonies, and in many cases were responding to competitions run by local history groups or to calls for 'memoirs' by welfare associations for the elderly, which became especially popular in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.¹² These secular recollections did not have passages of thoughtful retrospection, or introspection, but were rather on the pattern of an oral recollection. They tended to be short autobiographical narratives about events or periods of time in the writer's lives, such as day trips or childhood; histories of places in which the writer had lived, or memories of specific people, especially parents.¹³ These writers also expressed acceptance of their working-class identity in the titles of their autobiographical writing which reflect their own, or their husband's, employment: *The Factory Girl*, *The Platelayer's Wife*, *A Servant*.¹⁴ Local history groups have published some of these in leaflets or booklet form. Many more remain unpublished and may be found in small

¹² For discussion of this change over time see, Carol Jenkins, '“The Major Silence”: Autobiographies of Nineteenth Century Working Women' in *Victorianism* ed. J. B. Bullen (London: Longman, 1997), pp.38-53. Appended.

¹³ For example: Beatrice Stallan, 'Childhood Recollections' TS (1940), Cambridge Record Office; Mary Weston, *The Story of Our Trip to Hastings* (London: Working Men's Association, 1890); Dorothy Alice Warwick, *Meon Valley Memories* (Farnham: Rich Tomes, 1982); Elsie M. Watts, *Personal Recollections of Old Trowbridge, by an Old Trowbridgean* (Trowbridge: F.A.Shugg, 1978); Millie Toole, *Our Old Man* (London: Dent and Sons, 1949).

¹⁴ Ellen Johnston, *Autobiography, Poems and Songs of Ellen Johnston 'The Factory Girl'* (Glasgow: William Love, 1897); Mrs Wrigley 'A Plate-Layer's Wife' in *Life As We Have Known It*, ed. Margaret Llewelyn Davies (London: Hogarth Press, 1931); Hannah Cullwick, *A Servant's Life* ed. Liz Stanley (London: Virago, 1984).

collections or singly in archives and local history sections of public and university libraries.¹⁵ Others may lie forgotten in attics.

This gradual process of change, from spiritual testimonies to a mainly secular genre of autobiographical recollections, may be explained as a manifestation or reflection of the process of secularisation which took place in the wider culture during the nineteenth century and beyond. Religion, by the end of the nineteenth century, was declining as a central societal and intellectual authority. Changes such as the advancement of technology, scientific discoveries throwing light on evolution, and new intellectual thinking on the meanings of the Scriptures, as well as divisions from both within and outside the established Church, all contributed to this growing secularism, a process which has been well-documented.¹⁶ Orthodox religion seemed to be in decline and no longer of central importance in the lives of the majority of the populace.

Yet although the autobiographers from mid-century onwards were secular rather than religious writers, the majority of them were believers, in the widest sense, and many continued to be practising Christians who went to church regularly and took part in family prayers and hymn singing. More broadly, their belief encompassed the motivation for personal actions and morals resulting in a way of life rather than adherence to a particular denomination. In other words, the autobiographies reflect the fact that, by this period,

¹⁵ The majority of collections are located in Brunel University Library, Middlesex. The Northampton and Cambridge Record Offices also house a good number.

¹⁶ For discussion of the process of secularisation in the nineteenth century see, for example: Owen Chadwick, *The Secularisation of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church Parts I and II* (London: A & C Black, 1970); B. G. Worrall, *The Making of the Modern Church: Christianity in England Since 1800* (London: SPCK, 1988). For a study, which re-examines the assumption that religion was in decline during the last quarter of the nineteenth century because of the increase in modern industry and the industrialization of society in the industrial towns, see, S. J. D. Green, *Religion in the Age of Decline: Organization and Experience in Industrial Yorkshire 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

'religion' had become a more personal faith or morality, which coloured and informed the lives of the cohort, rather than an orthodox religion.

The years 1870-1900 were a period of social, cultural and political change in the nineteenth century during which education, working conditions and opportunities as well as legal rights improved for working-class women. There is a change in the tone and content of a significant number of the autobiographies written by women born in these years. Close reading of the 55 extant autobiographies relating to this period reveals that just over half - 29 in all - were similar in content to those written by authors born before 1870.¹⁷ These twenty-nine texts were found to be mostly short, essay-style manuscripts.¹⁸ With two exceptions they comprise an average of between 500 and 1,000 words.¹⁹ Like the earlier group, they were written in response to calls for local memoirs and they too comprise anecdotal memories of place, family members, local environment, or details of a particular event - often taking place during the childhood of the writer. While these texts are interesting as social documents, they do not give a thoughtful, subjective viewpoint of a personal life, and none have been published.

¹⁷ It should be noted that although unpublished as entire texts, edited excerpts of 6-8 pages, from four of these unpublished autobiographies were used by John Burnett in his working-class anthologies. These are: Faith Dorothy Osgerby 'My Memoirs' in *Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood Education and Family* ed. John Burnett (London: Allen Lane, 1972), pp.77-84; Rosina Whyatt, 'Munitions Factory Worker' and Lilian Westall 'The Good Old Days' in *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s* ed. John Burnett (London: Allen Lane, 1974), pp.116-124, 215-221.

¹⁸ Bexley Library housed the autobiographical text of May Wasson (b.1890); Brunel University Local History Department housed the autobiographical texts of: Alice Maud Chase (b.1880); Maud Clarke (b.1887); Ruth Cox (1890); Mabel Cutts (1894); Anita Hughes (b.1892); Charlotte Jordan (b.1894); Ethel M Ley (b.1880); Martha Martin (b.1871); Catherine McLoughlin (b.1889); Dora A. Nicholls (b.1881); Annie E Passiful (b.1895) and Elizabeth Rignall (b.1894); Cambridge Record Office housed those of Amy Grace Rose (b.1877); Beatrice Stallan (b.1873); Lilian Westall (b.1893); Northampton Record office housed those of: Mrs E Arch (b.1871) and Emma Spriggs (b.1885); The Bodleian Library housed that of: Florrie Davis (b.1892) and Edith Simcox (1876); Sussex Record Office housed that of Mrs R Downer (b.1884); Crosby Local History Library housed that of Zoe Fairhurst (b.1887); Ruskin College, Oxford housed those of Sarah Landymore (b.1894) and Jessie Stephen (b.1894); In addition, five remaining autobiographies were privately held and were not available for inspection: those written by: Hilda R Fowler (b.1890), Ellen Gill (b.1888), Edith Griffin (b.1870); Mrs P Marrin (b.1890) and Mary L Triggall (b.1888).

¹⁹ The exceptions are the substantial autobiographies of Jessie Stephen, the manuscript of which comprises some 198 pages (c.67,000 words) and located in Ruskin College, Oxford, and that of Faith Dorothy Osgood which was partially published by John Burnett in *Destiny Obscure* (pp.77-84) the remainder of the manuscript was held privately by Osgood's granddaughter and is now unobtainable.

In contrast are the twenty-six published texts.²⁰ These differ in important ways from the earlier genre of autobiographical writing. In general the published texts are more substantial, extending, in many cases, to several hundred pages.²¹ They relate to national – and sometimes international – issues, rather than only those of local or parochial interest, and focus on events and people both outside and within the immediate family. They show an awareness of historical context and chronology not found in the unpublished texts. They include passages of introspection and are thoughtful, retrospective, personal, extended life-narratives, which are also contextualized against details of the time in which they were written.

Most importantly this group of twenty-six writers, though rarely using the word ‘success’, describe achievements of various kinds, often realized in the face of adversity. Hitherto the study of women’s autobiography has been used to illustrate working-class life, lived within class boundaries where little aspiration towards social mobility is shown. This was essentially John Burnett’s approach when he featured working-class autobiographies in his series of books: *Destiny Obscure*, *Useful Toil* and *Idle Hands*.²² Working class women’s autobiographies have not generally been seen as celebrating success or achievement in their lives. Instead, as in Ernest Bryant’s *Self Help*, success has been presented as the prerogative of middle-class women and men. There are exceptions, which have begun to reclaim the place of working-class women in feminist and political history. For example Margaret Llewelyn Davies’s 1931 collection of Women’s Co-operative Guild member’s

²⁰ This number does not include the largely fictionalised ‘autobiographies’ written by writers: Catherine Cookson, *Our Kate. An Autobiography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969); Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise To Candleford* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939; reprinted Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973, 1979); Kate Mary Edwards, *Fenland Chronicle* ed. Sybil Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967) and the anonymous *Confessions of a Dancing Girl* (London: Heath, Cranton and Ousley, 1913).

²¹ For brief biographies and bibliography of the twenty-six autobiographies see below, p.57- 83.

²² John Burnett, *Idle Hands: The Experience of Unemployment 1790-1990* (London: Routledge, 1994); *Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and Family From the 1820s to the 1920s* (London: Allen Lane, 1982) and *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s* (London: Allen Lane, 1974).

autobiographies *Life As We Have Known It*. Featuring the autobiographies of working-class women, it includes two women, Mrs Scott and Mrs Yearn, who meet the birth-date criterion of the cohort.²³ And the political role of working-class women in the subject area of suffrage was largely neglected until 1978, when Jill Liddington and Jill Norris published *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, which challenged the view that the female vote was won by middle-class activists.²⁴ Since the 1970s and Standish Meacham's examination of the lives led by working-class women and their relevance to their communities, *A Life Apart: The English Working Class 1890-1914*, there has been rapid growth in studies of working-class women's history by writers such as Leonore Davidoff, Angela John, Martin Pugh, Ellen Ross, Martha Vicinus and others who indicate the crucial position women held within the working class.²⁵ However, none of these works has specifically examined fluidity in the lives of working-class women, so the assumption has been that they remain in the strata of society in which they were born, with no discussion of the women's own perceptions of success.

The texts considered here constitute a rich source for the history of working-class women allowing current assumptions about the static nature of their lives to be examined and perhaps revised. A criticism which may be levelled at this study is the of sample size, which is unavoidably small and it may be argued that this small number of texts cannot

²³ Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker' and Mrs Yearn, 'A Public-Spirited Rebel' in Margaret Llewelyn Davies, ed. *Life As We Have Known It: By Co-operative working Women* (London: Hogarth Press, 1931; republished Virago, 1977, 1982, 1984, 1990), pp. 81-101 and 102-109.

²⁴ Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us* (London: Virago, 1978; republished Rivers Oram, 2000.)

²⁵ Leonore Davidoff and Belinda Westover, ed., *Our Work, Our Lives, Our Words* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986); Angela John, *Unequal Opportunities: Women's Employment in England 1800-1918* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986); Martin Pugh, *The March of the Women: A Revisionist Analysis of the Campaign for Women's Suffrage 1866-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992); Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Martha Vicinus, *Suffer and be Still. Women in the Victorian Age* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972); Martha Vicinus, ed., *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).

represent anything but an anomalous group of women. However, it is important that this group of autobiographies are given some prominence since they are the first group of women, originally from the working class, to discuss the nature of their own success. If the quantity of texts is statistically small, the quality of experience that they record is of great value, and it is precisely the rarity of the texts that gives them significance, and demands that they be given due acknowledgement in the historical record. In Sheila Rowbotham's phrase, working-class women have been 'hidden from history'.²⁶ It is a history which has been hitherto largely ignored. The thesis rescues this cohort of women from what E. P. Thompson called 'the enormous condescension of posterity'.²⁷

Despite similarities in terms of upward social mobility, aspirations and achievements, close analysis of the texts enables the reader to appreciate the complexity of the lives of the cohort, and through this the great diversity of experience to be found in the lives of this generation of working-class women. It is these differences, as well as the similarities, which make their autobiographies worthy of further study. To a great extent, these writers were women who fought to take charge of their own destiny rather than merely being constrained by societal conventions of class and gender. One important way they took responsibility for their own lives was in choosing to write their own history.²⁸ In doing so, they have made a claim that the women of their class and period had a history worth

²⁶ Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden From History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It* (London: Pluto Press, 1973).

²⁷ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p.12.

²⁸ For instance, Ada Nield Chew wrote much of her autobiography in the form of articles for a local newspaper; Alice Foley was in correspondence with her publishers and the letters remain in the Foley archives in Bolton Central Library; Hannah Mitchell published sections of her autobiography during her lifetime and tried, unsuccessfully, to find a publisher to take the whole manuscript; Nellie Scott and Mrs Yearn wrote specifically for the Working Women's Guild publication, *Life As We Have Known It*. Winifred Griffiths was encouraged by relatives and friends 'to put the story of my life into print'; Annie Kenney, in her 'Foreword' of her autobiography wrote of 'presenting my narrative to the public' Annie Kenney, *Memoirs of a Militant* (London: Edward Arnold, 1924), p. v.

recording. Their autobiographies remain a physical presence from a group of women from whom little material evidence remains.

Working-class Autobiography

Until the last half of the twentieth century the study of the working class in general, and working-class women in particular had remained a fairly neglected area of social history. The poor may have been always with us, but, it seemed, they were of little interest.²⁹ Those nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social historians who did acknowledge the relevance of the working class, tended to see it as a monolithic, ungended group. They grounded studies of the conditions of working-class life within class boundaries and made no acknowledgement of social mobility, one of the notable features of the autobiographies of the cohort.

Nineteenth-century studies of working-class society include those by Henry Mayhew, Charles Booth and, at the end of the century, Seebohm Rowntree.³⁰ Both Booth and Mayhew, although writing forty years apart, described minimum wages, maximum work hours in the casual or sweated trades, dismal living conditions, drunken males and women forced into prostitution. They were writing for an audience with strongly held beliefs about the place of the 'poor-but-honest' in society. They also catered for those who had an insatiable desire for facts, particularly sensational ones, and who wanted to read about the hardships of life for people less fortunate than themselves.³¹ Their studies took the form of reported interviews and may be criticized because of poor technique: in particular

²⁹Paraphrased from a quote 'The poor always ye have with you' *The Bible* (Authorized Version, 1611) St. John, ch.12 v.8.

³⁰ Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (London, Woodfall, 1851, 1861); Seebohm Rowntree, (London: 1901); Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London, 1875-1903*, ed. Guy Routh (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987).

³¹ This point was underlined by contemporary writers, for instance, Octavia Hill, writing in the journal *The Nineteenth Century* in 1884: 'I notice a depraved hunger for rags, sharp need and slums, which pollutes some who profess charity'.

leading or directed questioning by middle-class interviewers who had established little rapport with their subjects.³² Such interviews may well have been subjectively reported, although for the best of motives: the writers were pressing for social reforms and of course they did alert society to the reality of urban poverty, contributing to the ‘Condition of England’ debate at the time of the Boer War.³³

Social studies of the twentieth century were less lurid and sensationalist. They began in 1906 when Maud Pember-Reeves published *Round About a Pound a Week*, an investigation of the finances of one hundred working-class families from the East End of London. It involved women recording the way they spent the wages brought home by their husbands. Findings were then extrapolated by the team of, again, middle-class social observers.³⁴ After Pember-Reeves’s study, there were few investigations on working-class life undertaken although Beatrice Potter, later Webb, made a series of studies on rural and urban poor.³⁵ In 1963, E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*, and its many subsequent reprints are witness to the increasing interest in working-class history by the end of the century.³⁶ The Mass Observation studies from 1937, and the early 1950s, although not confined to working-class people, broke new ground as, for the first time, volunteer writers recorded their own observations on everyday life without an

³² For a critique of Mayhew’s work see, E. P. Thompson and E. Yeo, *The Unknown Mayhew* (London: Merlin Press, 1971).

³³ The ‘Condition of England’ question (Carlisle’s phrase from the Journal *Past and Present*) referred to the relations between Britain and the rest of the world, religion and science, and most importantly, for the social observers, it was about social justice and discontent of the poor. See, for example, A. N. Wilson, *The Victorians*, pp.53-62.

³⁴ Maud Pember-Reeves, *Round About A Pound A Week* (London: G Bell and Sons, 1906).

³⁵ Beatrice Potter had long been a chronicler and observer of the lives of the poor in London’s Dockland and amongst the Jewish immigrants of the East End, and in the 1880s became involved with trade unions and the Co-operative Movement. She and her Socialist husband Sidney Webb had founded the London School of Economics by 1898.

³⁶ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*.

observer or interviewer to prompt them.³⁷ The idea of a panel of writers was revived by the Mass Observation Study in 1981.

In addition, one or two studies were undertaken in the late 1950s and early 1960s, in the field of working-class religion. These used a limited number of working-class sources. E. R. Wickham (1957) and Kevin Inglis (1963), for example, investigated the history of English working-class religion in an attempt to explain present day religious apathy amongst the working class.³⁸ Another wave of studies on the working class, again on their attitude to religion, came in the 1970s. In 1974 Hugh McLeod argued that the prevailing religious outlook in nineteenth-century working-class London was not indifference, as contemporary middle- and upper-class writers had suggested, but a 'diffusive Christianity' or what other historians have described as 'popular religion'. This notion has echoes within the writing of the cohort.³⁹ Wickam, Inglis and McLeod, however, based their arguments mainly on the 'abundant secondary literature'.⁴⁰ A similar criticism may be levelled at Ainsworth, who, in a 1977 study, argued that the working classes had their own approach to religion that was embodied in the ideology of respectability, self-help and self-improvement, which, Ainsworth claimed, exercised a huge influence on the Lancashire working class.⁴¹ Again secondary sources were quoted, while direct testimony from the working class was not sought.

³⁷ The Mass-Observation Archive is collected in the University of Sussex at Brighton and open to visitors.

³⁸ Kevin Stanley Inglis, *Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963); E. R. Wickham, *Church and People in an Industrial City* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1957).

³⁹ Hugh McLeod, *Religion and Society in England 1850-1914*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1996), p.6.

⁴⁰ The two primary sources McLeod used are the oral history project conducted by Elizabeth Roberts which, McLeod acknowledges 'provides some of the richest material on religion, because of her outstanding ability to empathise with the interviewees and to persuade them to enlarge on interesting points'; and the Bristol Oral History Project which 'focused more directly on questions of individual belief and unbelief, and so provided information of a kind which is often lacking where the focus is more on topics such as church-going.' McLeod, *Religion and Society*, p.10.

⁴¹ A. Ainsworth, 'Religion in the Working Class Community and the Evolution of Socialism in Later Nineteenth-Century Lancashire' in *Historie Sociale*, Vol. 10 (1977).

Despite this groundswell of interest in the history of the working class, it was not until the 1980s that attention turned to working-class autobiography in particular, with publications from social historians such as John Burnett and David Vincent.⁴² Also in the 1980s came Carl Chinn's study of social conditions for the working poor in Manchester, based mainly on autobiographical sources, as was Ellen Ross's three articles on women of the urban poor in London.⁴³ At this time too, arguably one of the first oral histories of the working class was published: Elizabeth Roberts' study on the lives of working-class women in Birmingham.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, at the time of writing present time female working-class autobiography remains a less explored source than those written by working-class men, early examples of which proved popular.⁴⁵ The autobiographies written by the cohort are thus especially significant because of the recent establishment of autobiographical history as an important source of direct evidence about past lives. Although collections of autobiographies from working-class women may often be found in local history archives, few have been collated and published. One notable exception is the work of Margaret Llewellyn Davies in editing and publishing, in 1931, the manuscripts of Co-operative Working Women Guild members.⁴⁶ More recently, there have been biographies from historians such as Hilda Kean, and Angela John and the work of Jill Liddington and Jill Norris on working-

⁴² John Burnett, *Idle Hands: The Experience of Unemployment 1790-1990* (London: Routledge, 1994), *Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and Family From the 1820s to the 1920s* (London: Allen Lane, 1982) and *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s* (London: Allen Lane, 1974); David Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom* (London: Europa, 1981).

⁴³ Carl Chinn, *They Worked All Their Lives: Women of the Urban Poor in England, 1880-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988); Ellen Ross 'Survival Networks: Women's Neighbourhood Sharing in London Before World War I' in *History Workshop Journal*, Spring 1983, Vol. 15, p.7.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women 1890-1940* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985).

⁴⁵ For example, Joseph Arch, *The Story of My Life* (London: Hutchinson, 1898); Samuel Bamford, *Passages in the Life of a Radical* (London: Simpkin Marshall, 1859); James Dawson Burn, *The Autobiography of a Begar Boy: The Progress of a Ploughboy to a Seat in Parliament* (London: Tweedie, 1855); John Hodge, *Workman's Cottage to Windsor Castle*, (London: n.pub., 1931).

⁴⁶ Margaret Llewellyn Davies, *Life As We Have Known It*.

class suffragettes include autobiographical material as well as interviews, diaries and newspaper accounts, as does Anna Davin's book on working-class children growing up in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century London.⁴⁷

The collation of autobiographical texts themselves may be said to date from 1968 when William Matthew's pioneering guide to research, *British Autobiographies: An Annotated Bibliography of British Autobiographies Written or Published before 1955* was published.⁴⁸ Building on Matthew's work, several historians published collections of autobiographical writings that focused exclusively on working-class writers. John Burnett's historical discourses on working-class autobiography, for example, included both male and female. Although the numbers of male writers did exceed those of female, Burnett has made an effort to include a high percentage of women.⁴⁹ In *Destiny Obscure*, for example, Burnett cites 16 male and 12 female autobiographies, while in *Useful Toil* he cites 20 male autobiographies and 7 female. Yet the experiences of economic and industrial change in the nineteenth century were different for working-class women and working-class men.⁵⁰ One might argue, therefore, that both were equally valid and should be given equal weighting by historians despite the scarceness of female source material.

In the preface to his 1981 work, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, David Vincent noted the paucity in numbers of female working-class autobiographers and stated that 'the major

⁴⁷ Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor: Home, School and Street in London 1870-1914* (London: Rivers Oram, 1996); Angela John, *By the Sweat of Their Brow: Women Workers at Victorian Coal Mines* (London: Virago, 1980); Hilda Kean, *Deeds Not Words: The Lives of Suffragette Teachers* (London: Pluto Press, 1990); Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*.

⁴⁸ William Matthews, *British Autobiographies: An Annotated Bibliography of British Autobiographies Written or Published before 1955* (first published London: 1955; republished Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

⁴⁹ John Burnett uses working-class autobiographies as the primary source material in *Destiny Obscure*, *Useful Toil* and *Idle Hands*.

⁵⁰ For discussion of this theme see, Jane Rendall, *Women in an Industrializing Society: England 1750-1880* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

silence is that of women'.⁵¹ His survey of 142 autobiographies included only 6 by women. In an attempt to explain the imbalance, he claimed: 'the answer must lie ...in the absence among women of the self-confidence required to undertake the unusual act of writing an autobiography'.⁵² However, Julia Swindells has criticized Vincent's methodology in *creating* 'a silence of women' with his imbalance of numbers and argued that 'gender consciousness, with class, is constructed within autobiography as a genre.'⁵³

In 1984, John Burnett, David Vincent, and David Mayall published their collaborative bibliography, *The Autobiography of the Working Classes* an edited and a more comprehensive venture than the 1955 work by Matthews. It confirmed that only one tenth of working-class autobiographies were written by women. The authors claimed:

The range of topics which has been touched on [are] ancestry and childhood, education, relationships, work, religion, politics, leisure...Autobiographies can reach into this world in a way which no other form of evidence provides, can even take us into the private world of attitudes and beliefs, hopes and fears, joys and sorrows.⁵⁴

They further argued that an important aspect of autobiographical texts is that 'they remain pieces of literature, their contents shaped not only by the intentions of the writers and the traditions in which they were working, but also by the mode in which they were recorded.'⁵⁵ Three years earlier, David Vincent had written along the same lines, claiming that autobiographies are 'units of literature'.⁵⁶ Many writers on the genre of

⁵¹ David Vincent, *Bread Knowledge and Freedom*, p.6.

⁵² David Vincent, *Bread Knowledge and Freedom*, p.8.

⁵³ Julia Swindells, *Victorian Writing and Working Women: The other side of silence* (Cambridge: Polity, 1985), p.124-125.

⁵⁴ Burnett, Vincent and Mayall ed., *The Autobiography of the Working Classes*, p.xxix.

⁵⁵ Burnett, Vincent and Mayall ed., *The Autobiography of the Working Classes*, p. xix.

⁵⁶ David Vincent, *Bread Knowledge and Freedom*, p.27.

autobiography, therefore, consider it a literary as well as an historical field, and recently historians have blurred these interdisciplinary divisions even more.⁵⁷

Furthermore, in the field of literary criticism, a number of female working-class autobiographies have been examined in order to illustrate the autobiographical genre. Such extensive work in a complementary discipline to that of history serves to underline the importance of these texts. Literary critics such as Linda Anderson, Shari Benstock, Regenia Gagnier, Leigh Gilmore and Barbara Kanner have used examples from the autobiographies of working-class women to illustrate, for instance, their arguments on subjectivity.⁵⁸ Regenia Gagnier refers to autobiography as 'an axiology of the self: the system of values, expectations, and constraints that come into play when one represents oneself to others in the concrete circumstances of daily life.' Linda Anderson, supporting the importance of autobiography in the history of literature, claimed that it was individual memory 'which allowed the past reality to be reflected upon'.⁵⁹ She quoted Phillipe Lejeune, who in 1982 produced the following widely quoted definition: '[Autobiography is] a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focussing on his individual life.'⁶⁰ Autobiography therefore represents an individual view of self-identity and provides the writers' personal view of a particular life. As Barbara Kanner concludes: 'autobiography provides a more open perspective on a world of women

⁵⁷ Carolyn Steedman (University of Warwick), as yet unpublished paper on this topic, presented at the *Texts of Testimony Conference* held at Liverpool John Moores University, August 2001.

⁵⁸ Linda Anderson *Autobiography: The New Critical Idiom* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001); Shari Benstock, *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings* (London: Routledge, 1988); Regenia Gagnier, *Subjectivities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self Representation* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994); Barbara Kanner, *Women in English Social History 1800-1914, Volume III: Autobiographical Writings* (London and New York: Garland Press, 1987).

⁵⁹ Linda Anderson, *Autobiography*, p.2.

⁶⁰ Cited Linda Anderson, *Autobiography*, p.2.

who have asked to be perceived in their own time, place, circumstances, and in their own words.’⁶¹

Others have identified strands within the genre of autobiography which are also of importance to the thesis. Leigh Gilmore, writing in 1994, stressed the importance in autobiography of: ‘(one) self representation constructed by autobiography studies and (two) the contemporary discursive histories of specific autobiographical texts.’⁶²

Examination of the autobiographies written by working-class women born prior to 1870 reveals that these two strands do not occur. They do, however, occur in those published autobiographies written by the cohort.

The viewpoints from literary criticism have highlighted an important discussion about texts as history. Historians have traditionally placed autobiography low in a hierarchy of texts. Women’s history, which often talks about recovering lost voices from the past, should, and increasingly does, have a particular interest in autobiography. A study of working-class autobiography can, with careful analysis, inform the historian about the individual experiences of women of working-class origin. It throws light on the shaping of their lives, the class and gender restrictions and constraints imposed on them, and the context in which they wrote their autobiographies.

The discussion above underlines the relevance of this particular group of texts. Nevertheless, they cannot be studied in isolation from the context in which they were written, and must of course be studied with reference to other disciplines and to other contemporary sources. It is important to identify any reading

⁶¹ Barbara Kanner, *Women in English Social History*, p.38.

⁶² Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics*, p.xiii.

matter with which the writers may have been familiar in order to determine possible bias within the texts of the autobiographies in question. Literary or social mores in the novels of the period may have reflected, or shaped, these women's consciousness. The ideal of respectability, for example, was widely defined in nineteenth-century literature.⁶³

Religious reading material - the Bible, evangelical tracts, cheap paper-bound chap books or reward books given as prizes at school and Sunday-school - was also pervasive and must have influenced the women.⁶⁴ As the century progressed, letter-writing manuals, essays, magazines and novels may have also played a role as printed material became cheaper, more widely distributed and more available to the working-class consumer through bookshops, public libraries and subscriptions.⁶⁵ By 1890 the most important journalistic development in terms of working-class women's reading, was arguably the penny domestic weekly, and titles such as *Household Ways*, *Home Chat* and *Home News* were widely read. They assumed that their readers were actively involved in running a home and sought to help them achieve this successfully, while also endeavouring to close the gap between an ideal of femininity defined by domesticity and the care of family and home, and one defined by wealth and appearance where someone else performed the domestic labour.⁶⁶

The cohort almost certainly had knowledge of Samuel Smiles's ideas, and may have even had access to his book *Self Help*, since it was printed in such vast numbers and at varying

⁶³ For example; Mrs Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1864); George Gissing, *The Nether World* (London: Smith Elder, 1889).

⁶⁴ For discussion on the way reading material influences thought and use of language see, for instance, Karin Lesnik Oberstein, *Children's Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), especially pp.23-24.

⁶⁵ See, for example, David F. Mitch, *The Rise of Popular Literacy in Victorian England*, pp.47-52.

⁶⁶ For discussion of the penny domestic magazine, see, for instance, Margaret Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.190-209.

prices throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Another possible source of success stories may have been the various series of pamphlets published by the Religious Tract Society, for example those in the series entitled *Excellent Women*.⁶⁷ Here success was described in terms of personal achievement, often against the odds although, as in Bryant's book, these again tended to be about middle-class women. During the nineteenth century and before, popular novels were being written featuring working-class people. The novels of Mrs Gaskell and George Eliot portrayed working-class characters 'bettering themselves'.⁶⁸ Such ideas of ambition, achievement, and success may be seen in the autobiographies. Several of the cohort, as will be discussed later, give lists of books that they read: these include novels and political treatises, but do not list magazines or periodicals, which they must have read but probably did not think them worth recording.⁶⁹

Although autobiographies provide valid historical texts, they must be carefully questioned with regard to context: who wrote them, when, and for what purpose? The historian also needs to ask what supports, generates or undermines the reality of the text: in other words, how was reality constructed for the autobiographer? All of this may introduce bias within the texts and will shape its meaning. Local historians may have requested details on a particular village, or about a specific event and the writer may therefore have given such subjects more prominence than might have otherwise been the case. Collections of autobiographies, solicited by a particular institution may be biased towards a particular ethos. For example, the autobiographies in the Working Women's Co-operative Guild collection made by Margaret Llewelyn Davis, were written with the authors knowing they

⁶⁷ *Excellent Women* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1906).

⁶⁸ See, for example, George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (London: Folio Society, 1986, originally published 1860); Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1849); Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (originally serialized in *Household Words* and published London: Chapman and Hall, 1855);

⁶⁹ Charmian Cannon 'The Everyday Life of an Edwardian Mother and her Daughters' in *Women's History Magazine*, Issue 43, (March 2003), suggests a similar occurrence in middle-class women's writing.

would almost certainly be read by an audience with an interest in the Guild, and probably by those outside their family circle. The Guildswomen, of whom Mrs Nellie Scott and Mrs Yearn are examples from the cohort, therefore placed emphasis on their membership of the Guild, Guild events and the precepts underpinning Guild ideology.

It may be imagined that oral history would complement the autobiographies. In general, however, the time-span encompassed by the lives of the cohort ends before oral history became a widespread and popular method of throwing light on working-class lives. Only one of the women autobiographers is known to have orally recorded her autobiography.⁷⁰ Similarly, one might argue that letters and diaries are more worthy of attention than autobiographies.⁷¹ As early as 1923 Arthur Ponsonby argued the importance of what he claimed to be: 'the fresh relation of events at the moment' in contrast to the crafted autobiography where events, he argued, had been 'shaped into a unified whole more often than not with a view to publication.'⁷² However, there is an important difference between the unconsidered immediacy of contemporary accounts found in letters, and to some extent diaries, and the considered thoughtful and retrospective account found in the autobiographies. Written with hindsight, the autobiographies allowed the writer to gain a perspective on the events of her life against the events of the wider world.

Autobiographies are often more informative in their descriptions of aspects of daily life which are frequently taken for granted in diaries and letters. They also display a surprising amount of detail about feelings, fears, ambitions and hopes. While all these

⁷⁰ Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie* was recorded and transcribed in 1979 when Annie was 92 years old. The editors declare they have 'changed nothing and added nothing' of Annie's spoken memoirs, apart from arranging the text chronologically and editing out repetitions.

⁷¹ Indeed Barbara Kanner has claimed that autobiographical writings may be said to *include* memoirs, journals, letters and diaries, see 'Introduction' in Barbara Kanner, *Women in English Social History*.

⁷² Arthur Ponsonby, *British Diaries* (London: Ben's Sixpenny Library, 1929), p.2.

texts may be of great value to the historian, it is with these published autobiographies that this thesis engages not least because since letters and diaries from the cohort, if they existed, have not generally been retained. For this reason, where the archival material is available, personal as well as official documents have been used during research for this thesis to authenticate the details of the autobiographies.⁷³

In having to overcome the stigma of both gender and class, the cohort may have feared a mixed reception from their readers. Interest in working-class history is, as has been discussed, a relatively new phenomenon, and the very fact of being a woman from a working-class background may have posed problems of 'authority' in print. Their texts required some form of legitimisation and this may have been the reason that so many of the texts have a dedication, foreword, introduction or afterward in which the writers stress their personal integrity and claimed the veracity - 'the truth' or 'the real life' - of their writing.

These working-class autobiographers may be accused of exaggeration: making their childhood seem worse than it was in order to make more of a contrast with their success later in life, or even as justification for wanting to better themselves. In many cases persons of note added credulity to the texts. Grace Foakes included an authenticating introduction by Lady Rose Henriques. Emma Smith's autobiography has a foreword by the historian and writer A.L. Rowse.⁷⁴ Ellen Wilkinson's autobiography appears in a

⁷³ For example, the Alice Foley papers in Bolton City Archives; Mary Gawthorpe, Annie Kenney Hannah Mitchell in Manchester City Archives; Winifred Griffiths in The National Library of Wales; Mary Luty in Rawtenstall Central Library Record Office, Hannah Mitchell and Margaret Bondfield in The Fawcett Library, London.

⁷⁴ Emma Smith, *A Cornish Waif's Story: An Autobiography* (London: Odhams Press, 1954).

volume of autobiographies collected by Margot Asquith, the Countess of Oxford.⁷⁵ In addition, several of the autobiographers – Margaret Bondfield, Alice Foley, Winifred Griffiths, and Ellen Wilkinson – received public honours and awards for their work, which they saw as watersheds of achievement, and their lives became public knowledge and so more easily verifiable.

Autobiographies may also be validated by recourse to officially recorded facts such as dates of birth, and marriage, or numbers of children, which are accepted as criteria of validity. Parliamentary papers, Court records, wills, birth-, death- and marriage-certificates are elevated texts, giving credence. This point has been underlined by Joy Webster Barbre who, in an echo of Leigh Gilmore's work discussed earlier, stresses the importance of acknowledging all facets of history in the study of autobiography: the verifiable truths as well as the experience and perceptions of individual narratives. The picture thus obtained, Barbre claims, gives 'a more nuanced understanding of humanity and reconstruction of knowledge and show's the centrality of gender to human life and thought...a symbolic as well as semantic revolution by which we both challenge and reconstruct the traditional definitions of reality.'⁷⁶

It is here that the importance of the cohort's autobiographies lies. Having taken the above ideas into consideration, the texts in question are nevertheless valuable and important historical evidence. The lives of the cohort were based in a time in which changes in society happened, and the writers were aware of such changes, and took advantage of them, to a greater or lesser degree. Whatever embellishment they may have made to their

⁷⁵ Ellen Wilkinson, untitled, in *Myself When Young* ed. Margot Asquith, Countess of Oxford (London: Frederick Muller, 1938), pp.399-416.

⁷⁶ Joy Webster Barbre and The Personal Narratives Group ed. *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1989), p.263.

lives, the broad sweep of evidence can be corroborated. The social and political changes of which these women wrote most certainly took place.

These texts from this group of women should therefore be acknowledged in the areas of working class history, women's history, and the study of autobiography. This thesis acknowledges the importance of autobiography as the personal, and in the case of the women in the cohort, often the only, view of an individual and their relationship to society. Their experiences therefore give us a way of glimpsing the formation of lives of other women like themselves within the class and economic constraints imposed by the changing social landscape of the period.

The Historical Context of the Cohort

The period 1870-1900, during which these women were born, was one of far-reaching social and political changes which made their lives significantly different from those of their forebears. In their autobiographies the women recorded an awareness of the changes going on in the society in which they lived. Many of the cohort were born during the years of 'The Great Depression' of 1873-96, but notwithstanding this urban growth and the factory system had transformed consumption patterns in England during the period so that, as goods became cheaper and more readily available, even working class families became important consumers of manufactured goods. The cohort saw the acquisition of material goods as a significant part of their economic success.

Also seminal to the greater personal freedom of women, and particularly working-class women, were legislation within the series of Married Women's Property Acts. That passed in 1870, for instance, allowed women to keep income earned by themselves and

thus did a great deal to prevent exploitation of working-class women. Other significant legislation of the period included the Matrimonial Causes Act – aimed largely at working-class women victims of marital abuse; the consolidation of factory reforms in the Factory Act of 1878, which improved working conditions; the property qualification of the Franchise Reforms of 1884; the Redistribution Act of 1885 and the Public Health Acts of 1872, 1874 and 1875.⁷⁷

Arguably the most important societal changes as the cohort grew up, however, were educational reforms. Most notable was the Education Act of 1870, which legislated for public funding of compulsory primary education and so made schooling more readily available to this generation of working-class women. Educational reform largely came about because of anxiety from the intellectual and political elite about the advent of mass politics. Literary figures such as Matthew Arnold, Thomas Carlyle and George Eliot looked to primary education as a means of avoiding the political chaos which might result from giving uneducated masses the vote.⁷⁸ There was, therefore, a direct link between the 1867 Reform Act and the 1870 Education Act. During these years, literacy increased even in rural areas. The Act of 1870 laid a foundation for a formal system of public education with the construction of school boards in areas where no voluntary schools existed, so theoretically bringing primary education to the reach of all.

The Act, together with a series of factory reforms, also restricted children's work in paid employment. This did not change either their unpaid labour in the domestic sphere or their

⁷⁷ For discussion of these and other social changes from the 1880s until the end of the twentieth century, see, for instance, Lesley A Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain Since 1880*, in particular, for the changes affecting the working-class women of our period see, pp. 10-30, 'The Victorian Background'. See also the chronological table in appendix III, p.302 of this thesis for reforms of importance to the lives of the cohort.

⁷⁸ M. Wolff, 'The Uses of Context: Aspects of the 1860s' in *Victorian Studies*, supplement to vol.11, (September 1965), examines the responses of Matthew Arnold, Thomas Carlyle and George Eliot to the Reform crisis.

undertaking casual labour out of school for pocket money, which contributed to family economics.⁷⁹ It did, however, redefine childhood for all but the very poor. Children in general could now attend school instead of working in paid employment. School attendance was perceived as a sign of family respectability.

Compulsory schooling to the age of ten was made general by the 1880 Act so that by the 1890s school figured as a prominent, compulsory part of childhood for almost all children. The school-leaving age was raised to eleven in 1893 and to twelve – except for children employed in agriculture – in 1899. The Education Acts were reforms from which most, although not all, of the autobiographers benefited: one of the autobiographers, Hannah Mitchell, for example, although born in 1870, had only two weeks of formal schooling.⁸⁰ Most of the autobiographers record attending school until at least ten years of age. Whether learning by formal or informal means, however, being able to write enabled working-class women to commit their thoughts to paper, and wider reading allowed them to recognise parallels to their own lives in works of fiction. Access to cheaper books, newspapers, and the building of more public libraries also played an important part in their education, both during school years and afterwards.

Perhaps more importantly for the cohort, compulsory schooling meant that children could not be employed before school-leaving age, so the Education Act was in reality another Factory Act for children. Factories in the industrial north took advantage of the ‘half-time’ legislation, which allowed girls who passed the ‘labour test’ (a test of their aptitude for factory work rather than their level of educational achievements) to begin working half-days and attend school for the other half-day.

⁷⁹ Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor*, p.48.

⁸⁰ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up: The Autobiography of Hannah Mitchell, Suffragette and Rebel* ed. Geoffrey Mitchell (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), p. 49.

Nevertheless, most of the cohort received an elementary education; those that did not resented it and expressed discontent, which in some cases seems to have fuelled their ambition, making them more open-minded to opportunities for informal learning, or turning to education later in life. Several of the cohort were able to take advantage of some secondary education: 3 of the 26 took advantage of the pupil-teaching scheme and 2 of them became qualified as teachers, 3 won various scholarships, and of these 1 attained university education. Education, in all its variations, was therefore seminal to the cohort and their autobiographies are testimony to various ways they achieved an education and the different advantages they gained from learning.

The period also saw a great improvement in working conditions. Of particular importance to the cohort was the reduction of working hours to a maximum of ten hours a day (seven on Saturdays) in 1874. Reforms for better health care and working conditions left women more leisure hours, and more energy at the end of the working day. Although women of conviction had always found some means to become involved in activities which concerned them, a greater number of working-class women were now enabled to become involved with various movements and societies - political, religious and domestic - during their time away from paid employment. Women in the cohort joined variously the Co-operative Working Woman's Guild, socialist bodies such as the Clarion Club, the Independent Labour Party (ILP), the Labour Church, and various suffrage groups including the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) and the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS).

Franchise reforms during the years in which the cohort were growing up meant that the enfranchisement of women seemed an attainable goal. The Reform Act of 1867 had

broadened the electorate by decreasing financial qualifications and by enfranchising householders, mostly working-class men, in the boroughs. Following this came the Reform Bill of 1884, which virtually doubled the electorate by enfranchising workers and agricultural labourers. This act made representation possible for almost all of the male population. Working-class women, especially those in the industrial north who were members of trade unions and therefore used to public discussion and voting, could then envisage enfranchisement as a possibility, however remote, for the future. One result of this was that suffrage movements gained important working-class support during the last years of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: it will be shown in later chapters that some of the autobiographers in question achieved success within such movements.⁸¹

Subsequent reform acts during the lives of the cohort gave them greater freedoms, culminating in the Representation of the People Act of 1918. This granted the franchise to women after many years of struggle. It formed only part of a package which included universal suffrage for adult men of 21 years of age or over, whereas only rate-paying women of 30 or more years of age could vote. This was followed by the 1928 Act which, most importantly, set equal voting qualifications for men and women.

A further change discernable during the period, and beyond, was related to religious observance. Despite the decline in both religious writing and religious orthodoxy noted earlier, most of the autobiographers placed some importance on religious faith.⁸² Apart from the Roman Catholic Alice Foley, they did not specify a particular denomination, but referred to 'church' or 'chapel'. Nevertheless, the assumption within their writing that faith was present in all of their lives. This strongly suggests that the values of the set of

⁸¹ See Chapter 6, 'Politics' p.242 *ff.*

⁸² See this chapter pp.27-28.

beliefs which are generally termed Christian and which were held by Victorian society, still applied to society into the twentieth century.

Dissatisfaction with orthodox religion during the period was often channelled into non-conformist allegiance with the help of the successful revivalist campaigns, such as those of 1875 and 1884, from American Evangelists Dwight Moody (1837-1899) and Ira Sankey (1840-1908). The effects of these campaigns persisted well into the twentieth century. The concept of individual conversion following recognition of personal sinfulness has echoes of the earlier spiritual autobiographies. By the late nineteenth century this was translated into a personal morality, and the social concern epitomised by William Booth (1829-1912) and the Salvation Army, although this tended to be a middle-class movement. Religion, in this period, had a facilitating role for women. Quaker meeting houses had long encouraged female speakers and the non-conformist churches allowed women to be more involved with the organizational or celebrant side of church-going rather than merely attending as worshippers. Of indirect importance was the Labour Church founded in 1891 by John Trevor. Trevor left his Unitarian pulpit because he felt that he could not reach the poor in his chapel - the same reason given by William Booth when he left the Methodists.⁸³ In membership, organization and circulation of literature, the Labour Churches had far less success than the Salvation Army. Whilst data on the subject is difficult to obtain, there were probably never more than thirty churches at one time, and few of them existed twenty years after the first one was formed.⁸⁴ However, while it was

⁸³ John Trevor, *My Quest for God*, (London: Labour Prophet, 1897) p.90.

⁸⁴ E. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the Nineteenth and twentieth Centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959), p. 144; S. Pierson 'John Trevor and the Labour Church Movement in England 1891-1900' in *Church History* XXIX (1960), p.248.

in existence, the Labour Church had a striking proportion of working-class female followers.⁸⁵

Formal politics in general were regarded as men's domain until the women's movement gave women a focus for public political activity. The appearance of so many women on Labour Church platforms towards the end of the century was one sign that attitudes were beginning to change from the Victorian idea of politics as a male preserve. It also suggested that working-class women were becoming involved in more public movements than hitherto: the emancipation of women was supported (at least officially) in the Labour Churches and this set them at odds with gender conventions. However, there were exceptions: the committee of the Birmingham church, for example, refused to let women help take up the collection.⁸⁶ Most importantly however, the emergence of female as well as male lay leaders, in churches such as the Labour Church, showed that women, as well as men, could hold positions of influence.⁸⁷

The lives of the autobiographers were therefore informed by the Evangelical movement as a whole, rather than by any particular denomination. The autobiographies included in this study show that nineteenth-century Evangelicalism brought moral and family issues to the forefront of respectable working-class women's lives. The impact of Evangelicalism was, arguably, the most important influence on late Victorian/early Edwardian culture and thought.

⁸⁵ Working class women: Katherine Conway, Annie Jackson, Eleanor Keeling, Caroline Martyn, Fyvie Mayo, Margaret McMillan, Enid Stacey and Ada Ward were all Labour Church speakers. For instance at the first open-air meeting held by the Oldham church, Katherine Conway (later Mrs J Bruce Glasier) spoke to over 3,000 people. *Labour Prophet* (London): Feb 1892, p.10; Oct 1894, p.144; Feb 1895, p.28; Jan 1897, p.5; April 1893, p.32.

⁸⁶ Located in Birmingham City Library archives: *Birmingham Labour Church: Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting*, 27th July 1894.

⁸⁷ For a discussion of the Evangelical revival in the nineteenth century see, 'Movements of Revival and Evangelicalism' in B. G. Worrall, *The Making of the Modern Church* (London: SPCK, 1991), pp. 223-250.

By the late nineteenth century, as the cohort were growing up, the significance of Evangelicalism lay in its values, standards and attitudes, rather than in its role as a religious movement which in the mid- and late eighteenth century had set its stamp on the religion, morality, social ethos and even the architecture of churches inherited by Victorian society. Evangelicalism as a theological and religious movement involved a belief in the supreme authority of scripture and 'The Word' of God. It centred on the experience of conversion, hence the proliferation of conversion and spiritual testimonies amongst autobiographers in general from the eighteenth- to the mid-nineteenth centuries. Evangelicalism was not linked to any single denomination but influenced Anglican and non-conformist churches in a diffuse, rather than a specific way. It manifested itself both socially and culturally, in a period in which religion as a whole influenced societal mores, in a concern for moral and social improvement and the desire to lead useful lives. On a personal and societal level, this translated into an expression of faith in leading a moral life. Social reform was to come through individual duty, hard work, sobriety, earnestness and philanthropy, rather than change in the structure of society. The legacy of this was the intense seriousness which characterized the Victorians as a whole and which was exhibited by certain of the autobiographers: personal morality was expressed in temperance, hard work, a sense of duty and the centrality of home and family as the focus of a secure moral foundation.

Particular denominations do not seem to figure highly in the lives of the cohort. However, Evangelicalism, while not described specifically in any of the autobiographies, can be seen to inform their lives at various times and to varying degrees. For example those who wrote about success in the domestic sphere were manifesting the importance of domesticity and the presence of a caring wife and mother at the centre of respectable

family life. Respectability governed many facets of the women's lives: their education, domesticity, and an Evangelical sense of duty at home and work, and can be defined as a conforming to values promulgated by the Evangelical churches. It included notions of masculinity/femininity and ideals of virtue, chastity and obedience; it also encompasses helping others. In the pages of the autobiographies there are many examples of casual neighbourhood networks, without which many working-class women would have found it difficult to cope with their lives. The notion of 'good' neighbour, wife, homemaker and mother percolates through most of the autobiographies.

The intense moral seriousness which characterises the autobiographies and, most notably, those of Margaret Bondfield and Winifred Griffiths, can be seen as the legacy of their Evangelical Methodist upbringing.⁸⁸ The thoughtful rebellion against her childhood Catholicism described by Alice Foley, and the embracing of Socialism on a personal level recalled by several of the women, are all manifestations, not of particular denominations, but of the influence of Evangelicalism in the culture in which they lived. Altruism is shown to exist by autobiographers such as Margaret Bondfield, Ada Nield Chew, Alice Foley, Winifred Griffiths, Annie Kenney, and Ellen Wilkinson who expressed charitable feelings overtly in their desire to help improve conditions for their fellow-workers. Similarly, the Evangelical notion of hard work is present in most of the texts.

The autobiographers were born during the final decades of Queen Victoria's reign. Their lives, although all different, were shaped by their parents' Victorian societal values, thoughts and ideas. They will have been coloured by that Victorian optimism about progress which was so severely damaged by the great depression and events leading up to

⁸⁸ Margaret Bondfield, *A Life's Work* (London: Frederick Muller, 1938); Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story* (Rhondda: Ron Davis, 1979).

and including World War One. Many of these women lived on into the 1960s, through all the changes encompassed by two world wars. Many Victorian values persisted well into the twentieth century. As Michael Mason has suggested, a persuasive case can be made for the persistence of a 'long Victorian era' which extended far into the twentieth century in some aspects of life, rather than ending at the death of Queen Victoria in 1901.⁸⁹

All of the societal changes outlined above opened up opportunities to women from the working class, and those who were able to take advantage of these could improve their lives in a variety of ways. The cohort, in utilizing to a varying degree these changes in society, gained not only the confidence and pride to want to write about their success, but with improvements in education, they also gained the ability to do so.

⁸⁹ Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); see also Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexual Attitudes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Chapter 2: The Authors, Their Lives and Their Autobiographies.

Introduction

The twenty-six members of the cohort were identified during preliminary research on nineteenth-century working-class women's autobiographies. They described the mechanics of their social advancement during a period of far-reaching social change. The women were geographically dispersed and there is thirty years age difference between the first born, Ada Nield Chew in 1870, and the last, Grace Foakes in 1900. Most married and had children, but five did not. A further two give no record of marriage. All were born into what may be called working-class families, but there were inevitably differences in their material circumstances. Some describe themselves as 'comfortably off' whilst others tell of miserable childhoods in abject poverty. There was disparity too in their education, and in their occupations, as well as in the success that they enjoyed. All, however, wrote autobiographies that (consciously or otherwise) described lives of struggle and achievement. The texts themselves vary considerably in length and literary style. They also vary in time of publication; the majority were published during the life-time of the writer.

Below, in chronological order of birth, are concise biographies providing such information as is known about the women, in order to underline the similarities and differences in their life experiences, and giving a brief summary of their autobiographies.¹ For reasons of consistency a basic formula has been adopted for each biography.

¹ Appendix I comprises a chart giving biographical details of the autobiographer's lives while the chart in Appendix II gives bibliographical details of the autobiographies.

Ada Nield Chew

Ada Nield Chew was born in Staffordshire in 1870. Her father, William Nield, had been a small-time farmer, but soon after Ada was born he began work in a brickworks. Ada was the eldest of three girls in a large family of twelve children. She attended local school until aged eleven, when she left to look after the home and her younger siblings. In 1887 she trained and worked as a factory tailor. She came to public attention because of letters and articles written by her as 'A Crewe Factory Girl' for the *Crewe Chronicle*. She lost her job in the factory as a result of the notoriety she gained from her publications. Ada became a Poor Law guardian in 1894, and at this time joined the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in Crewe and later, in 1896, joined the *Clarion* Propaganda Van. In 1897 she married George Chew, a weaver. Their only daughter, Doris, was born in 1898. Ada became an organizer for the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) 1900-1908 and a paid organizer for the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies in Rossendale 1911-1914, becoming the secretary for the Rochdale Suffrage Society in 1915. During the war she became a member of the women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and determined to achieve economic freedom, began a mail-order drapery business. Ada died in 1945.

Ada wrote her autobiography under a pseudonym as an entry in a publisher's competition around 1930. A middle-class ballet dancer won the competition and Ada was not offered publication. According to her daughter, Ada felt rejected 'in more ways than one' and destroyed the manuscript, feeling that it had been judged as valueless, and embarrassed that she had, as a working-class woman, entered the competition.² If this is so, it points to some loss of confidence, at odds with Ada's determination and outspoken 'factory girl' image.

² See 'Introduction' by Ada's daughter, Doris, in *Ada Nield Chew: The Life and Writings of a Working Woman* ed. Doris Nield Chew (London: Virago, 1982), pp.6-7.

The published version of her autobiography, *Ada Nield Chew: The Life of a Working Woman* was edited by her daughter, who pieced it together from extensive publications written by Ada, including her articles as 'A Crewe factory girl' in *The Crewe Chronicle* from 1894, and a series of autobiographical letters. The text was published in 1982 by Virago, which classified it as a biography, although it has been included here as an autobiography as it consists almost exclusively of edited autobiographical texts.

Hannah Mitchell

Born in 1871 at Alport Castles Farm in the Peak District, Derbyshire Hannah Maria Mitchell was the fourth of six children of a poor tenant farmer. Apart from Sunday school, she had only two weeks of formal schooling. Otherwise she was self-educated, after being taught to read by family members. She helped on the farm and at home during her childhood, until 1885, when her mother sent her to be an apprentice dressmaker. Hannah worked subsequently in domestic service, clothing sweatshops and as a shop assistant. She became an organizer for the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1905. A Pacifist during the 1914-18 War, Hannah was elected to Manchester City Council in 1924. She became involved in the ILP and local politics. Hannah married the socialist Gibbon Mitchell in 1895 and had one child, a son, Geoffrey. She finished writing her autobiography in 1946 and died in 1956.

Hannah's autobiography, which she began during the Second World War, is constructed in distinct thematic and chronological sections: childhood, woman, wife, suffragette, Socialist, councillor and, in 1926, magistrate. A noted leader of the Suffragette and Labour movements in the North of England, details are given of her childhood, thirst for

‘culture’, her home, married life and childbirth. She describes her personal involvement in the militant suffragette campaign; followed by memories of the impact of World War I, Labour electioneering and the years spent as a councillor and as a magistrate.

Some autobiographical extracts were published during the author’s lifetime as dialect sketches in *The Northern Voice* and articles in various periodicals. Hannah tried, several times and unsuccessfully to get her manuscript published. The full text of 260 pages: *The Hard Way Up: The Autobiography of Hannah Mitchell, Suffragette and Rebel* was posthumously published by Faber and Faber in 1968, edited by Hannah’s only child, her son Geoffrey. According to his introduction he made no substantial alteration to the text. Virago published a second edition, with a preface by Sheila Rowbotham, in 1977.

Margaret Grace Bondfield

Margaret Bondfield was born in 1873 in Furnham, near Chard, Somerset, the tenth in a family of eleven children. Her father was a foreman lace-maker. Margaret was educated at Chard Board School: she was due to leave in 1886, but she stayed at the school as a pupil-teacher for an extra year. In 1887 she moved to Brighton to become an apprentice shop assistant (1887-98) and joined the trade union movement. She was forced to resign from her position as union secretary owing to ill-health in 1908, although she continued in union work to 1938.

Her political career was an extraordinary one for a woman born into a working-class family. She was a founder member and organising secretary of the Women’s Labour League and chief women’s officer of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers from 1921. After this she joined the Women’s Trade Union League and the Adult

Suffrage Society. She was elected MP for Northampton in 1923, losing her seat in the 1924 General Election. She was re-elected as the member for Wallsend 1926-1931 and became the first woman Cabinet Minister, as Minister of Labour, in 1929. She helped to found the Women's Group on Public Welfare. Throughout her life Margaret was a teetotaler and deeply religious. She avoided marriage in favour of her dedication to the Labour movement, politics, women's and family issues and social service. She died in 1953.

Margaret's autobiography *A Life's Work* comprised 359 pages and was published by Hutchinson & Co in 1949. It was probably written in the three years before publication when she retired from public life. It is a revealing account of the political activities of the first woman to become a member of the Privy Council, a Minister and a Member of the Cabinet. In it she claimed that she found it difficult 'to separate my personal adventure from the history of the Labour Party.' She gave full details of the organisational side of Labour history, and is particularly informative on the place of women in employment and the Trade Union Movement in the late nineteenth century.

Bessie Harvey

Bessie Harvey was born in 1874 in Newton-Le-Willows. Her maiden name is not known and few details are known of her family. Her father was an ostler. Bessie was educated at a local school leaving at the age of twelve to work as a domestic servant. She married in 1896, but her husband's occupation is not known, nor is the date of her death. Her anecdotal autobiography 'Youthful Memories of my Life in a Suffolk Village' comprises 500 words. It was published in Ipswich in 1976, as part of a collection of local memoirs entitled *East Anglian Reminiscences* edited by E. A. Goodwin and J. C. Baxter.

Agnes Cowper

Agnes Cowper was born in 1874 in Liverpool, the second of nine children of a seaman. Agnes attended church school to 1885 and Sunday school. She took on the housekeeping at home when she left school at eleven years of age. When her father died she left domestic chores to become a shop assistant. In 1906 she left Liverpool and moved to Port Sunlight, where she was employed as a clerk in the head office of Lever Brothers. She was promoted to librarian of the Lever Library, Port Sunlight in 1917 and retained the post until her retirement. There is no mention of marriage. Agnes died in Heswell in 1963. Her autobiography of 114 pages, *A Backward Glance at Merseyside*, was written in the years between 1944 and its publication in Birkenhead by Wilmer Brothers in 1948. The author recalled her Liverpool childhood and described school, games, Church and Church parades. One national event is included: the Exhibition of 1885. Otherwise it is a record of her successful working life and the life histories of family members, mostly her brothers.

Louise Jermy

Born in London in 1877, Louise Withers was the daughter of a stonemason, and had one older sister. Her grandparents lived in Bow. Her mother, Selina, died when Louisa was young and she then lived with her father and his new wife, Louise's stepmother, by whom she was badly treated. Louisa suffered constant ill health, fainting and headaches from blows to the head. She attended Sunday school and Chapel regularly, and read the Bible. On leaving school she became apprenticed to a dressmaker: at the end of her five-year apprentice Louise found herself a job in domestic service, which enabled her to leave home and finally escape her step-mother's cruelty. She married in 1911 and had two sons.

After her marriage Louise became a member of the Woman's Institute (WI), which was founded in 1915. Her date of death is unknown.

Louise Jermy's autobiography of 188 pages was entitled *The Memoirs of a Working Woman*, and was published in 1934 in Norwich, by Goose and Son. It has a foreword written by R. H. Mottram, which authenticates the work: Mottram claimed that Louise Jermy's was 'The first autobiography written by a WI member.' The narrative covers mainly her childhood, her early working life and her relationship with her stepmother, whom she finally forgave for her cruelty.

Susan Silvester

Susan Silvester was born 13 November 1878 at Minworth, Warwickshire, the second of four daughters. Her father was an agricultural labourer, waggoner and later a water-worker. Her mother occasionally took in clothes for mangling and assisted with seasonal agricultural labour. Susan was educated at Cudworth Board School (1883-88) and at the village school in Warmley (1888-90). She lived in or near Minworth for most of her life. On leaving school aged 12 she went into domestic service for a year and then became a shop assistant. In 1902 she married the village blacksmith and they had two sons. Following her husband's death in 1928 Susan obtained a small income by making and selling pork pies, socks and sundry items. She died on 28 April 1968.

Susan wrote her autobiography at the age of ninety, in the year of her death. The 31-page text, *In a World That Has Gone*, was privately printed in Loughborough the same year. The only known copy is now located in Brunel University Library, Uxbridge. In her autobiography Susan Silvester provided a straightforward account of a poor but not

deprived upbringing, a happy marriage and a woman supporting herself successfully after her husband's death. Interesting comments are made on various aspects of turn-of-the-century village life, including domestic arrangements; rural recreations – from May Day and St. Clement's Day celebrations; superstitions; church and chapel activity and the work of the blacksmith.

Annie Kenney

Annie Kenney, trade unionist and suffragette, was born 1879 at Springhead near Oldham in Lancashire, the fifth of twelve children of a cotton operative. She was educated at the village school, from 1884 until 1892, and Sunday school. She worked as a half-timer in a cotton mill between 1889-92, becoming a full-time card- and blowing-room operative in 1892 at the age of 13. Inspired by the writings of Robert Blatchford, Annie joined the textile union in 1904 and became the first woman to be elected to her district committee. She used her fees to become a correspondence student of Ruskin College, Oxford.

In her early twenties as a member of Oldham Clarion Vocal Union, she met Christabel Pankhurst by whom she was profoundly influenced. Adopted as protégé by the Pankhursts, she became an organiser for the Womens' Social and Political Union in 1905. In October 1905, together with Christabel Pankhurst, she challenged Sir Edward Grey at the Liberal Party meeting in Manchester Free Trade Hall and the two were the first women to be imprisoned for the suffragette cause. Several spells of prison followed, and under the 'Cat and Mouse Act' Annie became ill in 1913 when on hunger strike during eighteen months in prison. She was a WSPU organiser in London and the West Country, and continued working for the WSPU throughout the War until the franchise was widened to women over 30 in 1918. In 1921 she married James Taylor and moved to Letchworth.

Little is known of her life after this time except that she had two sons, and died in 1953 at Hitchin.

The text, consisting of 308 pages, mostly located in the years 1905-1918 at the height of the suffragette movement, was written in 1924 in order to tell the 'truth' about the movement. Entitled *Memories of a Militant* it was published by Edward Arnold in London that year and commences with recollections of a happy childhood, religious influences and work in the cotton mill, but soon moves on to provide an extensive account of her propagandist and organising activities for the militant movement, with full details of her many terms of imprisonment. The autobiography ends in 1918 and it gives a strong indication that she had turned to Theosophy.³

Nellie Scott

No date of birth and no maiden name are recorded for Nellie Scott and there are few family details surviving. Her record of activities after marriage put her birth-date around 1890. Her father kept a draper's shop and she attended Sunday school. She became a felt-hat worker from age 12 and a member of the Felt Hatter's Trade Union. About the time of the outbreak of war in 1914, Nellie worked for four years as a Superintendent at a centre for feeding school children. She married and lived in Stockport. She became a sickness visitor for the Approved Society for seven years. She and her husband were avid readers and members of the Clarion Fellowship. Nellie served on the national executive of the Labour Church; was a member of the Co-operative Society; a member of Ruskin Hall Settlement; the treasurer of the Women's Labour league; served on the Labour Representation Committee; was secretary of Stockport Women's Co-operative Guild

³ Theosophy was a religious sect following Hindu and Buddhist teachings of universal brotherhood, Annie Kenney was involved with the Rosicrucian Order, which was devoted to occult law.

where she acted as a delegate to various conferences and was made a JP. Her autobiography was published as 'A Felt Hat Worker' on pages 81-101 in *Life As We Have Known It, by Co-operative Working Women*. Contributions for the book were collected and edited by Margaret Llewelyn Davies and published with an introductory letter by Virginia Woolf in London by the Hogarth Press in 1931. It was reprinted by Virago in 1977, with a new introduction by Anna Davin. Nellie Scott gives a detailed account of work and conditions in a felt-hat shop and the beginnings of trade union organization among the trimmers.

Mary Gawthorpe

Born in 1881, Mary Gawthorpe grew up in the back streets of Meanwood in Leeds, Yorkshire, where her father, John, worked at the local tannery. Her mother, Annie, had escaped work in the mill by helping her sister with her newly established dressmaking business. Mary attended the local Church of England school until 1893 when she took advantage of the pupil-teacher scheme, qualifying as a primary school teacher just before her twenty-first birthday. Coming to the fore in the National Union of Teachers, she took a prominent part in the campaign for school meals in the winter of 1904-5, when unemployment exacerbated the problem of hunger in the classroom. In 1906 she became secretary of the Women's Labour League, editing the woman's page of its local paper the *Labour News*. Mary had joined the WSPU in October 1905. By August 1908 she had left the Labour party and was based in Manchester, her popularity making her a national figure to followers of the suffrage cause. Mary emigrated to the United States in 1916 and worked for the New York Women's Suffrage Party. After American women won the vote Mary became involved in the trade union movement, becoming a full-time official of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union in New York. The date of her marriage is not

known but in 1933, after 17 years in the United States she returned to Leeds on a visit with her American husband John Sanders; she made a subsequent visit in 1950. She died in 1973.

Her 254-page autobiography, *Up Hill to Holloway*, was written around 1932, probably because the Suffragette Fellowship had mounted a campaign at that time to preserve some of the history of the movement, although it was finally published by Traversity Press, Maine in 1962. In her autobiography Mary describes her home as a 'slum' and attributed the early death of her two sisters and the illness of her mother to poverty, poor housing and bad sanitation, and the 'family pattern breaking up' to her father's political activities and increasing fecklessness and drunkenness. She attributed her determination to succeed in gaining qualifications to her early ambition to move her mother and remaining siblings away from her father.

Maria Hull

Maria Hull, née Payne, was born in 1881 in Pool Village, Church Gresley in Derbyshire. Maria had an older brother and sister, and two younger sisters. The narrative of her brief memoir consists mainly of details of her schooldays at the village school. Mary went into domestic service on leaving school and married a potter, Richard Hull, whom she had met at school, in 1908. The couple had one son. Maria's 4-page autobiography 'A Derbyshire Schooling: 1884-1893' was written in 1968 and published in spring 1988 in *History Workshop Journal*.

Mary Luty

Mary Luty was born in June 1885 at Newchurch-in-Rossendale, Lancashire; her father was a tenant-farmer at the remote Waugh's Well. When Mary was sixteen months old her mother left the family home after some unexplained upset with her father, and took Mary, together with her three month-old brother, to live on her grandparent's farm nearby. The farm was sold by auction following the death of grandfather when Mary was seven. The family moved to Ballenden and her mother took work as a weaver in a local cotton mill. Mary was educated at the village school from age seven until eleven when she took the labour test and became a half-timer, joining her mother in the mill. She became a full-time 'tenter' at thirteen. However since her ambition was to travel she continued her education at night school in order to obtain a better-paid job.⁴ She was an active trade unionist, became a social worker for two years and then a political organiser, travelling 'nearly every part of Britain'. Mary achieved her ambition and undertook a five-year world tour on the death of mother in 1909, travelling to Canada, New Zealand and Australia, funding her travel through various jobs, including hospital worker, housekeeper and cook. Returning home she gave lectures and radio broadcasts about her travels. There is no mention of marriage. She was active in church work and Sunday school throughout her life. Mary Luty lived with her brother until his death, she then moved to Burnley, she died in 1967.

The typescript of Mary's autobiography is entitled 'My Life has Sparkled' and was renamed *A Penniless Globetrotter* for publication in Accrington in 1937 by Wardleworth. The only known copy of the autobiography is located in Rossendale Public Library.⁵ It comprises 147 pages. The typescript of Mary's manuscript is catalogued with the

⁴ 'Tenters' were usually children or beginners employed to stretch the wet fabric on a system of frames and pegs.

⁵ Rawtenstall library catalogue number RC.921.L.3704.

published version, as is a copy of an article from the Rawtenstall Free Press, which commemorates Mary's donation of her typescript to Rawtenstall Public Library, in pencil at the top of the cutting is written a date of '29.10.66'. The text of the typescript is almost identical to the published version except that it continues for two pages after Mary's return from her travels abroad, which is where the published version ends. Mary's ambition was to travel, so perhaps it is fitting that her published autobiography ended with her having successfully achieved her ambition. There are also discrepancies on the details given of Mary's birth: for example her place and date of birth are recorded in the typescript, but not in the published text, and nor is her father mentioned. Early chapters tell of a happy and carefree childhood spent on her grandparent's farm, with observations on the home, butter-making, pig-killing, hay-making, Irish harvesters, sheep-dipping and diet. She then included a detailed account of factory labour. Mary also comments on her trade union and political activities, with brief reference to the suffragette movement. The remainder of the text describes her world tour and adventures. She returned from her travels just before the outbreak of war in 1914.

Annie Barnes

Annie was born in 1887, the eldest of three children, in the East End of London. She enjoyed perhaps the most affluent childhood of the cohort: her father was a fruiterer, the family lived above the shop, and her mother had hired help in the house. Annie attended local schools until she was 15 years old, in 1902, when she abandoned her ambition to be a teacher and left school to nurse her mother, bring up the younger siblings and help in the shop. Annie's mother died in 1910. Annie married Albert Barnes in 1919, on condition that her brother and sister could move in with them. Barnes encouraged her to join the Labour Party in 1919. They lived in Stepney until they were bombed out in 1944.

Annie's autobiography, *Tough Annie: From Suffragette to Labour Councillor* is the only audio-recorded autobiography of the cohort. It was recorded in 1979 by Kate Harding and Caroline Gibbs, who edited the tapes by arranging them chronologically and omitting repetitions. The edited, 69-page transcript was published by Stepney Books in 1980. The text gives an account of Annie's schooling and home upbringing during which her mother instilled a strong sense of right and wrong, experiences as a suffragette, her marriage, her work as a Labour Party activist and councillor as well as for the Charity Organisation Society.

Mildred Edwards

Mildred Edwards (née Curtis) was born on 22 August 1889, in Carlisle, the third of seven children of Earnest Curtis; her father was a railwayman and her mother a children's nurse. Mildred attended her local infant school and then junior school until aged thirteen. When Mildred left school, instead of starting to train as a teacher as she had wanted, she was required to stay at home to help her mother, whose health was failing. At aged fifteen Mildred's sister took over domestic duties and she began work as a nurse in the infirmary until her sister married two years later. Mildred recalled the outbreak of the 1914-18 War when her brothers joined the Artillery. Her mother died that Christmas and Mildred married her fiancé, Jack, after an engagement of three years. The wedding was by special licence at St Michael's Church Stanwix, after which Jack served in France for two years and Mildred worked in the Recruitment Office for thirty shillings a week. Jack died aged 83. Mildred wrote her autobiography after his death when she was 88. She died in 1978 aged 89.

Her autobiography *Our City, Our People 1889-1978: Memories* describes her childhood in Carlisle and provides a vivid account of neighbours, local shops and shopkeepers in 'Bochergate' where she grew up. Occasionally national events such as Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee (1897), death and funeral, and Edward VII's coronation impinge upon the narrative, but for the most part this is taken up with details of school days, Band of Hope membership and entertainments such as visits to a fairground, theatre and circus. There are also details of domestic chores and health remedies. The only known copy is in the Local Studies department of Carlisle City Library. It consists of a 73-page booklet sold in aid of The Animal's Refuge, Blackwell Road. The title page has a dedication: 'My thanks go out to my cousin's wife Grace Charles, and Miss C. Hilton, without whose help publication would have been impossible.'

Isabella Cooke

Isabella Cooke (née Smith) was born in 1890 in Great Strickland, Westmorland. She was the third of eight children of a general labourer, later a gamekeeper. The family moved to Cliburn when she was a year old and Isabella attended Cliburn day school until she was thirteen when she left to assist in home duties. At sixteen she began work as domestic servant, starting as housemaid, then kitchen maid and finally, in 1912, cook. In December that year she met Frank Burns a stone-mason and part-time soldier in the Territorial Army. Frank served in the war and the couple married in 1916. They had one daughter, Betty. Frank was killed while working as a building labourer in 1919. Isabella returned to domestic service on a large estate in Gainsborough in Lincolnshire. She re-married in 1923, to a stud-groom named Cooke who also worked there. The couple moved into one of the cottages on the estate, and lived there for thirty-five years. Isabella died in 1981 when she was ninety.

Isabella wrote her autobiography in 1980-1981 for publication in a series of articles in the *Cumberland and Westmorland Herald*. In 1982 the paper published her collected articles 'with the minimum of editing' as *A Hired Lass in Westmorland: The Story of a Country Girl at the Turn of the Century*. The booklet comprises 20 pages and was illustrated by a local artist Pamela Jones. The only known copy is in the Local Studies Department of Carlisle Central Library. The text mostly centres on domestic life and members of the family, although she does recall a childhood meeting with the poet Sir Walter Scott, and his dogs. Isabella recollected standing at the Hirings Fair in Burrowsgate, Penrith to obtain her first paid employment. She described the daily work of a domestic and farm servant, meeting and courtship and the death of her husband in a tragic accident, her remarriage and a long and happy relationship with her second husband.

Betty May

Betty May was born in the East End of London. No date for her birth is given in the text, but photographs and description of various events, for example her reference to childhood recollections of Queen Victoria's 1897 Diamond Jubilee, and her details of life as a young adult in the Edwardian period, suggest that she was born around 1890. Her father, a mechanic, abandoned his wife and four children soon after the author's birth. Betty's mother began work in a chocolate factory to support her family. Betty was educated at a village school in Somerset while staying with relatives for a few years.

Betty was introduced to London nightclub and café society on her return from Somerset, working as a singer, dancer and 'baby and mascot' to the 'Café Royal set'. She spent her time in pursuit of an active social life. She married a man of some wealth and status but was soon divorced. Betty lived in London, but also spent time in France, Sicily and

America. She also worked as an artists' model, and the sculptor Jacob Epstein (1880-1959) used her as his model for his work 'The Savage'.

Betty May's autobiography *Tiger Woman: My Story* provides a very good account of her early life in 'one of the poorest and most squalid' districts of London, with details of her home and early struggles. Introduced to London's bohemian and affluent society in adolescence, the author provides lively descriptions of a life centred on drugs, sex and alcohol: a rare glimpse at nightclub existence. Her text of 232 pages was published in London by Duckworth in 1929, and is illustrated by photographs and paintings of Betty May in her various roles. She declared her intent to write her 'further adventures' at a later date but these did not materialize and nothing is known of her later life.

Mrs Yearn

No first or maiden name and no date of birth are given for Mrs Yearn, whose mid-life activities put her birth-date c.1890, although it could have been earlier. She was one of 14 children, 8 of whom died in infancy or childhood, of a brick-setter. Her mother was a mill-hand. No mention is made of schooling, except to say she left school to become a half-timer, which would have been between twelve and fourteen years of age. Mrs Yearn worked as a mill hand before and after her marriage, she had at least two children and lived in Oldham.

Mrs Yearn had an active political life: was a member of the local committee of Women's Co-operative Guild; Director of Oldham Equitable Co-operative Society (1924); member of the Court of Referees; Oldham Unemployment Exchange (1927); Oldham National Health Insurance Committee (1928); ran for Town Council, JP; assisted in the foundation

of a Maternity and Child Welfare Centre (1928); member of the local committee of the NSPCC (1928); and a member of the Tenants Defence Association (1928).

Mrs Yearn's autobiography 'A Public Spirited Rebel' written c.1930 comprises 6 pages and was published in 1931 by Hogarth Press in *Life As We Have Known It: by Co-operative Working Women*, collected and edited by Margaret Llewelyn Davies. Mrs Yearn made perceptive observations on trade unionism among women textile workers and ended with the hope that she could promote international peace and expose 'shady dealings' by Lancashire cotton and coal owners.

Ellen Wilkinson

Ellen Cicely Wilkinson was born on 5 October 1891 in Chorlton upon Medlock, Manchester. Her father was a cotton operative and insurance agent, and her mother a dressmaker. Ellen was the second youngest of two boys and two girls. She attended local elementary and secondary schools. At fourteen she became a pupil teacher while she worked for, and achieved, the Jones Scholarship in History which enabled her to attend Manchester University from 1910: she graduated with an MA in 1913. While at University she embraced Socialism and became a member of the Fabian Society, becoming closely associated with the Fabian research department. She joined the ILP in 1912. In 1913 she became an organizer of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (1913-15) and a speaker for the ILP. Like her mother and grandmother, she was a member of the Manchester and Salford Co-operative Society.

Ellen remained unmarried, though she was engaged for one year to John Turner Walter Newbold, son of a wealthy Liberal Irish Quaker, who influenced her towards Marxism:

she joined the Communist party in 1920 for four years, visiting the USSR in 1921. In 1923 she stood unsuccessfully as Labour candidate for Ashton-Under-Lyme, but won a seat for Middlesborough (1924-31), becoming the first woman Labour MP. Known as 'Red Ellen', as much for the colour of her hair as for her politics, she became a prominent Labour Party propagandist, and was active on unemployment demonstrations: she was one of the leaders of the Jarrow March in 1936. She organized for the Amalgamated Union of Co-operative Employees and held Middlesborough East and Jarrow (1935-47). She was appointed as Parliamentary Secretary to Susan Lawrence (the Minister of Pensions) in 1940 and to the Ministry of Home Security (1940-45). Following the Labour Party victory in 1945 she was made a member of the Privy Council as Minister of Education and implemented the Education Act of 1944; she received an Honorary Degree for her work for the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in 1946. Ellen died in 1947.

Ellen's publications include *Clash* (1929); *Peeps at Politicians* (1930) and *Jarrow: The Town that was Murdered* (1939), and declaring her pacifist beliefs, *Why War?* (1934). Her sixteen-page untitled autobiography was published in 1938 by Frederick Muller in an anthology *Myself When Young by Famous Women of Today*, edited by Margot Asquith, the Countess of Oxford and Asquith. It was written during 1937-38 and gave Ellen's recollections of her working-class childhood in Manchester, her family and social life and the Wesleyan Chapel which greatly influenced her later life. She described her schooling, discussed teaching methods, and told of political influences and her early political life at school and College. Ellen had been asked to write her autobiography for the anthology so the narrative ends before she became a noted figure of the twentieth century Labour Party as those day, she wrote, 'had no place in the 'Myself when young' period.'

Alice Foley

Born on 28 November 1891, in Backshaw Street, Bolton Alice Foley was the sixth child of mill hand Thomas Foley and his wife Alice Foley, née Mont. Educated at St. Peter and St. Paul's Catholic School to age twelve, Alice left school to become a shop assistant. However shortly after this, in 1905, she left to work as a 'little tenter' in a local cotton mill, progressing later to weaver. She continued her education through evening classes and cultural opportunities offered by her Clarion Club membership, and with her sister Cissy's encouragement she turned away from her Catholic upbringing, became a Socialist and joined the Weaver's Union. She worked in the factory for seven years. After the passing of the 1911 Insurance Act she was promoted to sick visitor for the Weaver's Association and became a clerk in the Bolton Weaver's Association office in 1917. She served as Secretary of Bolton and District Weavers' and Winders' Association between 1949-61. She was president of Bolton United Trades Council from 1956-7 and was appointed a JP in 1931. She served at every level for the Workers' Educational Association and was awarded the MBE in 1951. She did not marry and lived in Bolton until her death in 1974.⁶

Alice's autobiography of 92 pages, *A Bolton Childhood*, was published in Manchester in 1973, by Manchester University Extra-Mural Department & the North Western District of the Workers Educational Association. An extract from her autobiography may also be found on pages 90-99 in *Destiny Obscure* edited by John Burnett and published in London by Allen Lane, in 1992. Alice's text, which differs little from her typed manuscript, gives a colourful account of a frugal and austere working-class childhood spent in Bolton around the turn of the century. It includes comments and observations on home and

⁶ For further details, see also, Carol Jenkins, 'Foley, Alice' in *The New Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2004). Appended.

family life, street traders and entertainers, street games, retailing, fairs, schooling, working conditions in the cotton mill, the Daubhill strike of 1905 and her break from Catholicism to become a Socialist. The narrative ends around 1918 with the author beginning work for the trade union movement and the WEA which was to continue for the next fifty years.⁷ The original of her manuscript, a scrapbook of newspaper cuttings from Bolton papers, and a few letters about her MBE and the publication of her manuscript are in the Foley Collection, Bolton City Library archives.⁸

Rose Gibbs

Rose was born in 1892 in the East End of London, her father served as a soldier in the Boer War but on discharge, following injury, was unemployed for long periods. To support the family her mother worked as a domestic servant when extra staff was required at various establishments. This meant she was away from home for two- to three-week periods. Rose was the eldest of three children so looked after the home while her mother was away working. Rose was educated at the local council school to age 13, and then went into domestic service until her marriage in 1915. She lived in London and moved to Comberton in 1969. Rose died in 1981.

In her autobiography of eighteen pages, *In service: Rose Gibbs Remembers*, Rose provided anecdotes of childhood, schooling and her time in domestic service. She wrote her memoirs when she was ninety, and there were to be more instalments to follow, but this is all there was time for. It was published after her death, by Ellison's Editions of Orwell, Cambridgeshire, for Bassingbourn Village Colleges, who hold a copy of the text in their archives.

⁷ The Workers' Educational Association was founded by Thomas Hill Green for discussion of the ethos behind the association see, A. N. Wilson, *The Victorians*, pp.519-520

⁸ For further details, see also, Carol Jenkins, 'Foley, Alice' in *The New Dictionary of National Biography*.

Mrs Hills

No first or maiden name is given for Mrs Hills who was born in Leighton Bromswold on 5 April 1893; her father was a horse-keeper for a local farmer. Mrs Hills attended the village school between the ages of three and twelve. She left Leighton Bromswold to work for relatives in Brixworth who had a shop and a café. After this she worked in domestic service at Whittlesey as a maid and aged fourteen 14 became a parlourmaid in Field House, Silver Street, Buckden. Here she was confirmed into the Church of England, although she had been brought up 'Chapel'. After eight years during which she was paid about ten shillings a month, she left to marry a soldier in 1916 and the couple had one son, who was stillborn. At the end of the war her husband returned to his painting and decorating trade, and worked in Thrapston village. However, his lungs were weak from gas attacks during the war and Mrs Hills managed to get him work as a steward with a tied cottage. His job was to collect rents in the village, and she worked as a cleaner at a local farm, and then as a school cleaner for fourteen years. Mrs Hills records that they were very happy. The couple took two little boys as evacuees during the Second World War, which meant they had more money.

Her two-page autobiography, 'Reminiscences of Mrs. Hills, formerly of Leighton Bromswold', was published as the second of four contributions to a small pamphlet funded by the Huntingdon Local History Society. A copy of the pamphlet is located in Cambridgeshire Record Office, Huntingdon Branch. Mrs Hills' memoirs are on pages 3 and 4 and are an outline life history with personal comments and descriptions of managing on a tight budget in a small rural village around the turn of the century. She discussed food prices and wages, help from neighbours, her home which she retained after her husband's death, local fairs and leisure activities.

Emma Smith

Born 24 January 1894, at Redruth, Cornwall, Emma was the illegitimate daughter of 'Cod' Murphy, a fisherman, and the woman whom she knew as her sister Maud. She never knew her father and rarely saw her mother. Her brother Harry, two years her junior, was later to become an officer in the army. As an infant Emma lived with her grandparents. Her grandfather was a Cornish tin-miner blinded in an accident. She was educated at infants' school and Methodist Sunday school but only in 'fits and starts' and did not receive a fuller education until living in a convent penitentiary between 1906-10. At the age of five Emma was sold by her mother to an 'adopted' father, Pratt, whose name she took. He worked her in an itinerant lifestyle as a street entertainer, singing hymns, begging or assisting with the hurdy-gurdy from the mid-1890s until 1903. Emma then ran away and worked briefly as a parlourmaid and general servant, worked in the convent penitentiary as a laundress, then as a domestic servant where she met her husband whom she married in 1920. The couple had three daughters and emigrated to Australia in 1924, but were homesick and so returned to Cornwall within the year and settled in Penzance. Her autobiography, written under the pseudonym 'Emma Smith', is 188 pages with a foreword by A. L. Rowse, himself the author of *A Cornish Childhood*, possibly the reason why Emma sent her manuscript to him. Entitled *A Cornish Waif's Story: An Autobiography*, it was written in 1954, when Emma was sixty, at the suggestion of 'a friend who happens to be a sociologist'.⁹ It was published in London by Odhams Press later the same year. Most of the autobiography is taken up with an account of the author's childhood, a mixture of poverty, institutional living, travelling as an itinerant entertainer and various (pleasurable) stays in a convent penitentiary. The narrative includes much

⁹ Emma Smith, *A Cornish Waif's Story*, p.13.

dialogue and incidental detail; it ends with the author's return to England from Australia in 1924, and describes her pride in her home in Cornwall and her family.

Winifred Griffiths

Born Winifred Rutley in 1895 at Overton, Hampshire, her father was a paper-mill worker, while her mother had worked at home sewing garments for a clothing factory until she married. Winifred was educated at local church school from age of four to fourteen. On leaving school she became an apprentice at Burberry's gabardine factory but soon moved to a smaller workshop to work alongside an aunt. In 1911 she took a position in domestic service as a housemaid and parlourmaid (1911-15) and then took a war job as a Co-operative Stores shop assistant. She became an active Socialist and member of the Labour Party and in 1918 married a coal miner, James Griffiths, who later became a Labour politician.¹⁰

A short extract from Winifred's autobiography was first published in *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s*, edited by John Burnett, and published in London by Allen Lane in 1974. The full text, of 169 pages, *One Woman's Story* written by 'Mrs James Griffiths' was published in 1979, the year Winifred died, by Ron Jones of Rhondda. It was also published by Ferndale in the same year. Brief mention is made of the author's family and their domestic and work lives, but the narrative gives much post 1900 detail with Edwardian village life and leisure, work and politics. Following her marriage to James Griffiths, the autobiography concentrates on her political activities on behalf of the Labour movement.

¹⁰ For further details, see, Carol Jenkins, 'Griffiths, Winifred' in *The New Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2004). Appended.

Kathleen Woodward

Born in September 1896 in Peckham, London, Kathleen Doris Woodward was one of five children. Her father had been a lithographic printer, at the time of Kathleen's birth he was a casual labourer in the printing trade, but was soon afflicted with an illness that left him an invalid. Her mother, Ellen, took in washing to support the family. Kathleen gave her birth-place as a fictional street in Bermondsey: it is not known whether the family moved north to Bermondsey, but other autobiographical details are accurate. There are no details of school, except that she left at thirteen to work in a factory on the north side of the Thames. By 1914 she was working in a Bermondsey collar factory. During this period Kathleen met Mary Macarthur, then secretary of the National Federation of Women Workers. In the following years Kathleen worked her passage across the Atlantic, was a receptionist in a London club, wrote children's stories and was a freelance journalist. In 1927 her first book was published and she was feted as 'the daughter of a washerwoman who grew up to be the biographer of a queen.'¹¹ Kathleen wrote *The Lady of Marlborough House* (1939) and *Queen Mary: A Life and Intimate Study* (1927). She converted to Roman Catholicism in the 1930s and died in 1961.

Her autobiography, *Jipping Street: Childhood in a London Slum*, consists of 150 pages of text. It has a frontispiece by Leon Underwood and was published simultaneously in London and New York by Harper & Brothers in 1928. It was re-published with a new introduction by Carolyn Steedman, in London by Virago Press in 1983. The narrative is a graphic account of growing-up in a London slum in the late nineteenth century; there is much introspection on her relationship with her mother, death, and her writing ambitions. It has references to charity both from neighbours and from official sources including

¹¹ Carolyn Steedman's introduction to the new edition of Woodward's autobiography (London: Virago, 1983.)

workhouses, local clergy and Poor Law guardians. She gives details of local characters and friends and describes her thoughts on the Suffragette movement and sex education.

Daisy Hills

Born in 1899 on the Warren House estate, Old Frimley, near Camberley, Daisy Hills was one of twins, her brother dying when a few hours old. Her father, Albert Hills, was a farm bailiff on the estate and the family lived on a small tied farm. Daisy's mother Jane (née Cayzer) had been in service as a school-room maid at Frimley Park House before her marriage to Albert Hills in 1896.

Daisy recalled a happy childhood on the farm, and a Christian upbringing. Daisy attended the children's service in Frimley Church on Sundays where her father was in the choir. She was taught at home until she was eight, and then walked the two and a half miles each day to school in Camberley. She left school in 1911 and began work on the farm. She recollects church-cleaning duties, and farm work such as thatching, spring cleaning, poultry keeping, repairing fences, and also the farm cat, and animal illnesses such as foot and mouth, swine fever and milk fever. When World War One broke out she helped her aunt with 'war work,' making bristle brushes and shirts for the overseas troops. She took the place of the farm help when he left to join the army, cleaned stables, helped with the poultry, learnt to milk the cows and was happy working with her father until April 1932 when he died of a heart attack, aged 67. Shortly after this Daisy moved to a flat attached to an old people's home which she helped her two aunts to run.

The Second World War came and Daisy described the German prisoners and the blackout. She also worked for a newsagent. At the end of the war Daisy bought a larger house, 'The

Anchorage’, and cared for her now-ageing aunts, as well as the retired District Nurse ‘Grace,’ who came for the last five years of her life, two doctors and an elderly lady she refers to as ‘Miss Seymour’. She went on several holiday coach tours in the British Isles. Her grandmother had told her all about the beautiful Lake District and the Highlands and Daisy wrote: ‘at last her granddaughter had fulfilled her hopes in a way’. Eventually Daisy became wheelchair bound and was no longer able to care for others. She sold the large house and bought a ground floor flat at Merlin Court near Frimley church. She died in 1977. Her 140-page autobiography, *Old Frimley* was published locally by Kestrel Graphics in 1978.

Grace Foakes

Grace Foakes (née Platt) was born in 1900, one of five children, in three-roomed tenement flat in Jubilee Buildings, Wapping High Street, Stepney. Her father was a dock-worker until 1912. Grace describes living in conditions of poverty and overcrowding which were so dreadful they might sound incredible: but in her 1972 introduction to the book Lady Rose Henriques CBE wrote ‘I have worked and lived in the area of Stepney for the greater part of my life and know that the living conditions described are not exaggerated, neither is the poverty’. Grace attended the Anglican Church – St John of Wapping. After school she worked as a waitress until her mother became ill with cancer when Grace ‘took mother’s place at home’ until her marriage to Reuben Foakes in the 1920s. Her autobiography was written in three volumes during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Between High Walls; My Life With Reuben and *My Part of the River* were all published by Walwyn Shepherd in London in 1972 and 1974. Although there is considerable overlap between the volumes, Grace gives descriptions of trade unions and the General Strike in 1926, as well as more personal details of her schooling and upbringing, joining the Band

of Hope and the Wesleyan East End Mission. She continued in her last two volumes the details of meeting her husband Reuben Foakes, their council house and married life.

Chronology

A chronology in the form of a table is provided in Appendix III, p.300. It includes a record of the birth-dates of the twenty-six women of the cohort together with some relevant milestones in their lives. Also included are the significant historical events, taking place over the time period up to the end of World War II in 1944, these taken in conjunction will help to set the lives of the women within an historical context.

The Texts

The autobiographies in question have been drawn from a survey carried out from a range of standard bibliographical sources and historical works and from contact with libraries throughout England. Not all of them are listed in any one source. They vary in length and in the form they have been published, from the five hundred words written by Bessie Harvey, or the two or three pages by Mrs Hills, to the three-volume autobiography written by Grace Foakes. Most were published during the lifetime of the authors.

The autobiographies in question were usually written towards the end of the author's life. In some cases the narrative ends at defining moments in their lives, often when they have achieved a goal, or become what they had wanted to be. Annie Kenney ended hers in 1918 when the franchise was widened to include women over thirty years of age, something she had campaigned for as one of the militant suffragettes. Mary Luty's published autobiography ended as she arrived home after her world travels, a trip she had planned and worked towards for many years. Most of the autobiographies, therefore, were

written years after the events they describe by women often nearing the end of their lives. In effect, these women have written their own history from a unique viewpoint: that of personal experience. They are important social documents as examples of micro-history, and give a thoughtful reflection of the personal history of an individual written from the vantage of hindsight.

The women of the cohort were born in the final three decades of the nineteenth century into a transitional period when women's place as a strictly defined and observed separate sphere was changing. By the first decade of the twentieth century it was beginning to be accepted that respectable women could achieve in the public sphere of work and politics. This transitional period encompassed the cohort's formative years during which they were growing up and which they later wrote about. They describe the means by which it was beginning to be possible for working-class women like themselves to take advantage of changes in educational provision, health at work and home, and more acceptance of the public voice of women both politically and socially, to achieve goals which had been impossible for previous generations of working-class women.

The women appear to have written their autobiographies for a variety of reasons. Some wrote to prove themselves worthy of an audience, others from a sense of pride in their achievements and a desire to record their success in life from humble beginnings; it may have been designed to pass down to future generations, it may have been to encourage others, like themselves, to succeed. Many of the women wrote of defining moments of her life – when she became what she had wanted to be. In many instances the writers acknowledge their reasons and clearly state their purpose. Motives are found outlined within the main text, or in the foreword or dedication. Some claim within their

autobiographies that they have written in order to tell the ‘truth’. Suffragette Annie Kenney struck what may be seen as the keynote to this group of autobiographies when she wrote:

This book not being a record of dates and names but simply an account of events that are engraved on my heart...it may not be the truth to any other individual, but one can only speak or write as one feels, sees or reasons for oneself.¹²

A few of the women towards the end of their lives wrote their stories for their families. Others acknowledge help and encouragement they have had from family members or friends. Mary Luty the self-styled ‘penniless globetrotter’ signalled her pride in success and her gratitude to her mother for her support, when she dedicated her autobiography: ‘To my Mother, and all who have encouraged me to try and accomplish things.’¹³

Mildred Edwards expressed both family pride and pride in herself in her dedication at the front of her autobiography. After quoting what she calls her ‘Family Motto’ as “Dogged As Does It”, she claimed: ‘In the following stories no records have been consulted or persons interviewed, it has all been in my memory.’¹⁴ Grace Foakes wrote her autobiography in the late 1960s, when she was almost seventy years old, writing ‘for the younger generation’ she expressed a hope that her writing would help them understand elderly people like herself:

I hope you may now have some idea of the vast difference in our way of living. I write mainly for the younger generation, feeling they will understand the bewilderment some of us elderly people feel when we see and hear the things that happen today, for I feel the young can adapt much more easily than we of the older generation. Remember, this was yesterday’s world, a world seemingly

¹² Annie Kenney, *Memoirs of a Militant* (London: Edward Arnold, 1924), p. 136.

¹³ Mary Luty, *A Penniless Globetrotter*, frontispiece.

¹⁴ Mildred Edwards, *Our City...Our People 1889-1978: Memories* (Brampton, Cumbria: Howe, 1978), frontispiece.

far removed from today, a world of people who were just as you are but without the opportunities or knowledge.¹⁵

Winifred Griffiths dedicated her autobiography, written in 1979 when she was eighty-four: 'To my late Husband, The Rt. Hon. James Griffiths, C.H, In Memory of our many years together.' After thanking various relatives, friends and members of the Labour Party for their help, Winifred suggests that she saw her life as having achieved some good, quoting from *The Times London Diary* of October 10th 1978: 'As you grow older you want to have some proof that your life was not wasted.'¹⁶ Others wrote to encourage working-class women like themselves to have, and to work towards, personal aspirations. By making public their thoughts and feelings in writing their autobiographies, our cohort revealed a self-conscious differentiation of themselves and their life experiences. They are expressions of their awareness of, and their pride in, their own achievements.

Within their narratives the autobiographers describe personal rebellions, against their upbringing, or against dominant ideology of religion, gender or class. If they needed to challenge authority in order to achieve their ambitions, these women were not easily cowed. Rebellion sometimes occurred against the authority of parents at home. Mary Gawthorpe rebelled against her father's feckless and drunken behaviour; she was determined to work for the qualifications she needed to teach so that she could afford to move her family away from her father's house. Alice Foley, a trade unionist and member of the Workers' Education Association (WEA), was born into a Roman Catholic family and went to a Roman Catholic school. Yet in her early twenties, Alice found that her faith did not provide reason enough for the everyday drudgery and constant grind undertaken by herself and her fellow cotton mill workers. She rebelled, and turned to Socialism, and

¹⁵ Grace Foakes, *My Part of the River* (London: Shepherd Walwyn, 1974), p.85.

¹⁶ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, frontispiece.

undertook trade union work and later a position with the WEA. By these means she lifted herself out of her frugal and austere life, and also found a means to help her fellow-workers. Hannah Mitchell rebelled against the gender discrimination within her family, which meant that she performed domestic chores while her brothers played or read; determined nevertheless to gain an education, an uncle taught her to read and she borrowed books from her brothers and neighbours. Emma Smith rebelled against the penury of her childhood as an illegitimate and abandoned child in Cornwall, and worked hard to achieve a happy family life with her own two daughters. All of them saw their rebellion as part of the mechanism for gaining their ambitions.

Among the autobiographers, 10 of the 26 wrote of success centred in the domestic sphere. Of these, the autobiographies of Isabella Cooke, Agnes Cowper, Mildred Edwards, Rose Gibbs, Daisy Hills, Maria Hull and Susan Sylvester, were published in booklets or pamphlets, or as part of a larger publication requested by local historians or for collections of memoirs. The autobiographies of Grace Foakes, Louise Jermy and Emma Smith were published in book form.¹⁷

The remaining sixteen autobiographers have written of their public success, in achieving positions of some standing in the, often overlapping, areas of the work-place or politics. In addition, public life is entwined with home life for most of the women, and this caused tensions for these women who, while valuing public success in various areas, stress that they also value their domestic success. One autobiographer, Margaret Bondfield, described this intertwining in her autobiography:

¹⁷ Grace Foakes, *Between High Walls* (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1972), *My Part of the River*, and *My Life With Reuben* (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1974) ; Louise Jermy, *The Memories of a Working Woman* (Norwich: Goose and Son, 1934); Emma Smith, *A Cornish Waif's Story*.

If, occasionally, it is difficult to separate my personal adventure from the history of the Labour Party, that is perfectly in harmony with the facts. I have been so identified with the Movement that it is not always possible to say where one ends and the other begins.¹⁸

The texts were therefore written for a variety of reasons, and they were published over a broad period of time. It is difficult to ascertain whether all of the women wrote specifically for publication. Most definitely did, and twenty of the autobiographies were published during the life-time of the writer. Kathleen Woodward published her autobiography as the first step on her ambition for a writing career. Nellie Scott and Mrs Yearn wrote for collection of memoirs to be published by the Working Women's Co-operative Guild. The Alice Foley Papers in Bolton library archives reveal a lively communication between Alice and her publishers, which resulted in very few changes between her original manuscript and the published version.

The six autobiographies published posthumously are those of: Ada Nield Chew, Bessie Harvey, Mrs Hills, Maria Hull and Hannah Mitchell. As described in their individual biographies earlier, Hannah Mitchell's text was edited and published by her son and Ada Nield Chew's with the help of her daughter.¹⁹ The four remaining texts were published by local history groups. Two of these are amongst the shortest of the autobiographies: those of Bessie Harvey and Mrs Hills. These two show an overlap in tone and content with the unpublished texts discussed earlier, so suggesting a continuum in the variety of working-class women's autobiographies, rather than a sharp demarcation point.

¹⁸ Margaret Bondfield, *The Hard Way Up*, p.9.

¹⁹ Hannah Mitchell's only son published his mother's autobiography 'with the minimum of editing' after her death. Hannah Mitchell, see, *The Hard Way Up*, 'Introduction'. Doris Nield Chew was contacted in the early 1970s by the authors of *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, who persuaded Doris to find her mother's autobiographical papers and from them piece together her autobiography.

The publication of the autobiographies continues over a fifty-year period: from the earliest – Annie Kenney’s *Memoirs of a Militant* – published in 1924, to the most recent Isabella Cooke’s *A Hired Lass in Westmorland* in 1982. Most are now out of print. Hannah Mitchell’s *The Hard Way Up*, was published by feminist publishers Virago in 1977. About this time Virago also republished Kathleen Woodward’s *Jipping Street* first published in 1928, as well as the collection of autobiographies by members of the Women’s Co-operative Guild, which included the autobiographies of Mrs Scott and Mrs Yearn and was originally published in 1931.²⁰ As well as these more recently published, or republished books, first editions of many of the others are available in the British Library, London or the Bodleian Library, Oxford. A few of the texts were more elusive: the only known copy of Winifred Griffiths’ autobiography, *One Woman’s Story*, for example, is in West Glamorgan County Library, and the only known copy of Mary Luty’s *A Penniless Globetrotter* is in Rawtenstall Public Library and Record Office, in Lancashire.

Conclusion

This biographical and bibliographical summary of the autobiographies serves to illustrate not only the great variety in the lives of the authors in terms of their lifestyle, geographical location, position within the working class, family experiences and opportunities for advancement, and their success at national, local or familial level, but also hints at the wealth of untapped material which these texts contain.²¹ Yet however different the life experiences of the twenty-six women in the cohort, the reasons for writing and the form and time at which they were written, their autobiographies have various broad themes in common and these encompass education, domesticity, economics and politics. There are

²⁰ Kathleen Woodward, *Jipping Street* (London: Virago, 1983); Mrs Scott ‘A Felt Hat Worker’ and Mrs Yearn, ‘A Public Spirited Rebel’ in *Life as We Have Known It*.

²¹ See also bibliographical and biographical charts in Appendices I and II.

also strands which recur within these broad themes, arguably most prominent is that of respectability, but they also discuss: ambitions, rebellion, achievements, support networks of friends, family and neighbours, and a retrospective justification, rationale or explanation of their success. All of these run through the texts to a greater or lesser degree, they surface and subside, weave in and out, and are given prominence at different times in the various autobiographies. However, the main thread running through all of the autobiographies, and its importance in the autobiographies is reflected in the thesis, is the overarching theme of success. Set in the broad historical context of working-class women's writing the autobiographies reflect the nature of success as it was perceived, experienced, achieved and described by the cohort.

Chapter 3: Education

Introduction

During the period 1870-1900 various societal changes facilitated educational opportunities for the cohort, and working-class children in general. Wages for adults improved, so paid employment for children became generally less critical to family economy. A series of Factory Acts were passed, which curtailed the employment of children, while a succession of Education Acts legislated for the provision of formal elementary education - of which most, although not all, of the cohort were able to take advantage.

The cohort also record learning by less formal pathways: within the home, as family members or neighbours and friends encouraged reading and writing skills; and outside the home, in societies, girls clubs, and Sunday schools. Although the amount of education received by individual children was dependent on a variety of family circumstances, the cohort revealed that education was not only a childhood process. It was becoming possible to continue learning throughout life. Secondary education, teacher training schemes, and even a university degree were becoming attainable for working-class women. In addition, the proliferation of youth and adult clubs and societies, public lectures, and the wider availability of reading materials through the spread of public libraries, facilitated informal education and growing access to cheap printed magazines and books.¹

¹ For more on this topic, see, for example: Jonathan Ross, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New York: Yale University Press, 2001); for a classic appraisal of mass literacy see, Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London: Penguin, 1957).

Educational success was seen variously as learning to read and write - acquiring literacy was a skill that had often been denied to the women's parents - performing well at school and attaining qualifications. Perceptions changed during the lives of the women: as one educational milestone was achieved, ambitions often grew for further success. Some autobiographers acknowledged the importance of schooling as a stepping-stone to higher education; some saw education as success in itself, and valued some financial independence at the end of school years; others viewed education as a kind of apprenticeship where they could learn practical skills that would fit them for paid employment or family life.

Historical Context

The period 1870-1900 crystallised the concept of education as institutionalised formal learning, as we know it today: the imparting of knowledge became the duty of society and the state to every citizen.² Before 1870, the quality of education for working-class children was poor: families had to struggle if they wanted education for their children. Not only did it mean finding the few pennies required to pay for schooling, but it often also meant the loss of a wage hitherto earned by the child. In many families it was not economically viable to send the children to school, as they were required to work to help support the family as a whole.³

At this time any formal elementary education for the children of working-class families was provided either by individuals for profit, or by voluntary church or philanthropic organizations, who saw religious-based education as the means of moral improvement of the working class. Most Anglican and Catholic parishes sponsored day schools, which

² See, for instance, A. N. Wilson, *The Victorians*, pp.282-294.

³ See, for instance, Geoffrey Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain* (London: Fontana, 1987), p.174.

provided denomination-specific religious education. The National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church, founded in 1811, and the British and Foreign School Society founded in 1814, were the two most influential.⁴

Initially offering free day schooling, the two societies soon began to charge ‘school pence’. From 1833 onwards they began to receive a small government grant and to be supervised by the state. However, such organizations were inadequate to deal with the rapidly expanding child population as the century progressed. The State Education Act of 1870, put through Parliament by W. E. Forster, made a state system of elementary schooling possible. It was fuelled by ‘visions of childhood as a period of carefree independence’.⁵ The National Society, together with the British Schools, by 1870 offered over 90% of voluntary school places.⁶ Forster’s Act would ‘fill in the gaps’.⁷ Under the 1870 Act, a survey of schools in England and Wales was ordered and local School boards were to be established in areas not covered by the Societies. School boards could use funds from local taxes to build and operate the new schools. These would exist alongside the Societies’ schools financed by philanthropy. After the Act, the non-sectarian Board Schools continued non-denominational religious teaching with an emphasis on teaching knowledge of the Bible rather than the all-pervasive and proscribed religion of the denominational schools.

⁴ The British and Foreign Schools Society, so named in 1814, was established in 1810 by a mixture of dissenters and entrepreneurs in the non-conformist Royal Lancastrian Association.

⁵ Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor*, p.3.

⁶ John Hurt, *Elementary Schooling and the Working Classes 1860-1918* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), p.4.

⁷ For the details surrounding the passing of the 1870 Act see, for instance, Mary Sturt, *Education of the People: A History of Primary Education in England and Wales in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), see especially Chapter 14.

The Boards had the authority to require all children under their jurisdiction to meet minimum standards of school attendance: all children were to attend school for five hours every weekday until ten years of age. The age limit was later extended to eleven in 1893 and twelve in 1899.⁸ Before this time children in most working-class families were expected to take up paid employment at an early age in order to contribute to the family budget. Even after 1870, there was no guarantee that children would attend school. The minimum charge of 'school pence' did not begin to disappear until 1891, and precluded some of the poorest from attending. By the mid 1880s, prosecutions for violation of the Education Acts were close to their peak as the sustained efforts of school attendance officers became more effective, and it became increasingly difficult for parents and children to violate the laws against truancy.⁹ The school-leaving age and its enforcement made sure children did not enter factories, or other paid employment, until they had attained at least the minimum age. By 1900, elementary schools were charging no tuition and were meeting state certified standards of instruction.¹⁰

The Education Act of 1902, implementing the recommendations of the Bryce Commission, set up Local Education Authorities (LEA) to replace School boards. Part of the brief of the LEAs was to provide secondary schools. However most working-class children continued to receive only elementary school education. Secondary schools were not free until 1907 when a system of free places - 'the ladder of opportunity' - was introduced offering education up to the age of sixteen.¹¹ During the years between 1870-1900 educational standards in society were therefore changing fast. A high level of

⁸ This was the situation in London. Local School boards set the age and conditions for leaving school and these varied considerably, London leaving age was amongst the highest. See David Rubenstein, *School Attendance in London 1870-1914: A Social History* (Hull: Lampada Press, 1969), pp.35-38.

⁹ David E. Mitch, *The Rise of Popular Literacy in Victorian England: The Influence of Private Choice and Public Policy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), p.182.

¹⁰ David Mitch, *The Rise of Popular Literacy*, p.2.

¹¹ David Mitch, *The Rise of Popular Literacy*, p.9.

female illiteracy was no longer acceptable as it had been even fifty years before this period. The women in the cohort were therefore enabled, with a few exceptions, to attend school at least up to ten years of age.

Experiences of Sunday School

An important, and less formal, addition to weekday schooling was Sunday school. Almost all of the cohort refer to some period of time spent at Sunday school during their early years. Sunday schools throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century had a long-standing and continuing popularity. They were considered part of the total educational provision, and indeed may have been the only provision for lower working-class children before the 1870 Act.¹² It is not surprising that Sunday schools are recalled in all but three of the autobiographies.¹³ In 1870 the 'closer integration of chapel and school' was planned by the Methodist Sunday School Union. This became the basis of what has become known as 'the great era of the Sunday School' so would have reached its height as the cohort were of an age to attend.¹⁴

Sunday schools were also popular for more reasons than that of indoctrinating children into Christian ideology. They often gave free clothes to very poor children, and also provided child-care so that parents of working-class children had some time to themselves on what was often the only day they were not in paid employment. In addition Sunday school treats in the form of outings, teas, picnics or Parish breakfasts both entertained and fed children, and so helped with family economics.

¹² Geoffrey Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain*, pp.173, 178.

¹³ The autobiographies of Alice Foley, Betty May and Hannah Mitchell do not mention Sunday school attendance.

¹⁴ S. J. D. Green, *Religion in the Age of Decline: Organisation and Experience in Industrial Yorkshire 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.218.

As far as education was concerned, many children began to learn to read in Sunday school, and parents, even those who were not literate, were encouraged to listen to their children read a few verses of the Bible in the evening. Although this may be viewed as a form of social control through religious indoctrination, it was also a reflection of the spirit of co-operation, which often existed between parents and Sunday school. The importance the schools placed on parental participation also reflected the ethos of an earlier age when parents had stronger links with the church. In a similar dichotomy the reward books and the ceremony of presenting them, could be seen by some as a patronizing gesture by the local elite, but for others it was a ceremonial occasion which marked a milestone in Sunday School life, and thus valued.¹⁵

In many of the autobiographies Sunday school features as an integral part of childhood even amongst non-churchgoing families. Sending children to Sunday school was an important part of family respectability for aspiring working-class parents. It was a sign of respectability to be seen living a Christian way of life and this included encouraging even very young children into Sunday school attendance. Grace Foakes' family, for instance, were 'not church goers', however the children were sent to Sunday school.¹⁶ Mildred Edwards proudly recalled, as one of her earliest memories, walking to Sunday school at St John's in Upperby, a nearby village. 'I wasn't four,' she claimed, when her father took her for the first time to join her older sister and two brothers in Sunday school, between church services.¹⁷

¹⁵ Mary Clare Martin, *Parents, Children and Schools in London 1740-1870*, unpublished paper at 'Earning and Learning' conference Royal Holloway, September 2002.

¹⁶ Grace Foakes, *My Part of the River*, p. 35.

¹⁷ Mildred Edwards, *Our City...Our People*, p.13.

Louise Jermy also attended Sunday school, and recalled being taken to Romsey Abbey by her grandmother, 'a laundress to the great house'.¹⁸ Louise's mother, Selina, had died when Louise was eighteen months old and Louise had been told by her grandmother that she was in heaven. For Louise, Sunday school was therefore a link with her mother. She retained a potent memory of being taken when very young:

I remember I used to go to Sunday School just across from the Abbey, and that we walked into church after, two and two, and that we had to sit very quiet.¹⁹

Louise attended Sunday school into adulthood; it was of great importance in her life as it was here she learned to read. One of the Sunday school teachers, a schoolmistress during the week, encouraged her:

I loved my teacher. She was an Irish lady and a schoolmistress and she taught me to be patient and to do my best, and never forget that God was over all. She also advised me to take up daily Bible reading and gave me the Scripture Union card.²⁰

At sixteen, Louise suffered a long illness and was unable to attend Sunday school for a while. On her recovery, her return made her 'much happier than I had ever been. My stepmother had threatened to stop me from going to Sunday school, but my father happened to overhear that and at once said, I should go there till I was seventy if I desired.'²¹

Emma Smith also viewed Sunday school as an important part of her education. She attended Sunday school at the Salvation Army Children's Home in Plymouth where she lived for a few months when she was nine years old. The memory remained vivid for Emma many years later, when writing her autobiography in her sixties:

¹⁸ Louise Jermy, *The Memories of a Working Woman*, p.5.

¹⁹ Louise Jermy, *The Memories of a Working Woman*, p.6.

²⁰ Louise Jermy, *The Memories of a Working Woman*, p.49.

²¹ Louise Jermy, *The Memories of a Working Woman*, p.55.

In the afternoon the children gathered in a small room around a table on which there was a red cloth and a large open Bible. This was called our Sunday School class. Here I was an attentive and apt pupil. Soon I learned by heart the old, old stories of the Old Testament so beloved by children: and once again I listened eagerly to the story of God's love for children. I can still in fancy hear our voices at the Sunday School class as we sang [a] sweet old hymn.²²

Emma placed importance on 'listening eagerly' being an 'attentive and apt pupil' at Sunday school. She had little regular schooling, which gave Sunday school even more importance in her life, and her insistence on her good scholarly behaviour hints that she wished to show her aptitude, and how well she would have progressed in her education had she had the opportunity.

Experiences of Elementary Schooling

Given greater significance than Sunday school in the autobiographies, however, was the time spent at elementary school. Maria Hull, for instance, wrote almost exclusively about her schooldays: she had ambitions to become a schoolteacher and had even met her future husband when at school.²³ The importance of school in the lives of the women in the cohort becomes clear if compared to autobiographies examined during preliminary research, written by working-class women born before 1870. As described above, early in the nineteenth century religion was the dominant feature of their recollections, followed in mid-century by occupation.²⁴

Although the situation did not change suddenly in 1870, twenty of the cohort enjoyed at least a minimum of seven years of more or less full-time education between the ages of

²² Emma Smith, *A Cornish Waif's Story*, p.75.

²³ Maria Hull, 'A Derbyshire Schooling: 1884-1893' in *History Workshop Journal*, issue 25, Spring 1985, p.170.

²⁴ See above, p. 28.

five and twelve. Four of the autobiographers, Agnes Cowper, Mildred Edwards, Winifred Griffiths and Mrs Scott, attended Church of England elementary schools. Mildred Edwards, the daughter of a railwayman in Carlisle, recalled that when she was nine years old, in 1898, she left St John's Infants School in South Street, which she had attended since aged five, and joined her older brother and sister at 'the big school': Christ Church School in nearby Harraby.²⁵ Alice Foley in Bolton and Mary Gawthorpe in Leeds went to Catholic schools. The elementary schools attended by the remaining nineteen women of the cohort are referred to variously in their autobiographies as 'local', 'village', 'elementary', 'primary' or 'council'. Maria Hull attended 'Board School at Church Grisley' where payment was two pennies; her eldest brother as the first in the family paid three pennies.²⁶ Louise Jermy was a pupil at the 'British School' in Romsey until she was eleven.²⁷

The great detail in the recollections of their time in school is further evidence of the importance these women placed on education as part of their lives. Descriptions and the minutiae of day-to-day education – both formal and informal – are a significant part of the texts. Whether formally at school or informally at home or at Sunday school, all of the women learnt to read and write: The autobiographies are a record of the range of different circumstances that promoted and enhanced their abilities to do so. School and learning were central to their lives, and educational achievements – learning to read and write, school prizes, learning domestic skills – were seen, as they viewed their lives retrospectively, as part of their perceptions of success.

²⁵ Mildred Edwards, *Our City...Our People*, p.10.

²⁶ Maria Hull, 'A Derbyshire Schooling', p.167.

²⁷ Louise Jermy, *Memories of a Working Woman*, p.10.

The only exception was Betty May who was born in 1891 in Limehouse, London. The family lived in poverty. Betty and her brothers appear to have been left to care for themselves while their mother supported the family by working at a chocolate factory, her husband having deserted her and their four children. In 1900, aged nine, Betty was sent to an aunt's in a village in Somerset and, for the first time, attended school. Sending children to stay with relatives on extended visits was not unusual amongst working-class families at this period. This flexibility and fluidity was often an answer to the needs of friends and relatives, or a solution to overcrowding or periods of difficulties at home.²⁸ Betty wrote dismissively of her schooldays: 'I do not think I managed to learn very much there. In fact lessons rather bored me.'²⁹ In the introduction to her autobiography, however, Betty prided herself that she 'never tried to be ordinary and fit in with other people.' By diminishing or dismissing the importance of education in her life, while at the same time declaring that she liked to be different, she underlined the importance of education in the life of other women of the class and period.³⁰

Educational reforms were not evenly applied across the country. The women reveal that there was a great variation in the length of schooling received by individuals.

For example, Maria Hull's autobiography acknowledged some of the changes in society which came about by education reforms and illustrate that these were strictly observed in some areas. She remembered children in work being returned to education:

After the Education Act of 1872 made schooling compulsory for all children aged 5-10, some who had left at 9 years to start work in local industry (boys to do brick-carrying or work as trappers in coal mines) were recalled to continue their education.³¹

²⁸ See Anna Davin, 'Versatile Households' in *Growing Up Poor*, pp.38-43.

²⁹ Betty May, *Tiger Woman* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1929), p.29.

³⁰ Betty May, *Tiger Woman*, p.xi.

³¹ Maria Hull, 'A Derbyshire Schooling', p.167.

Maria's charted progress through her National elementary school, which began in 1884, reveals details of her education as a working-class girl in South Derbyshire and is worth quoting at length here as it sets the standard for the sort of elementary education which could be achieved at this time. Maria is more fortunate than many of the autobiographers, she appears to have learned reading, writing and arithmetic, some domestic skills and a little general knowledge:

At the National School I progressed from class to class. As early as age four I had a small slate costing a penny, and made pothooks figures and letters of the alphabet. At five, I was learning to read and write simple words. When I was six I remember knitting woollen cuffs on two needles. No exams, except one in Scripture conducted by a visiting parson.

In the sewing class when I was nine, we girls made calico underwear and did much knitting as well. We made woollen vests and petticoats. When I was in the fourth standard, at the age of ten, I left because my parents wished me to transfer to the Girls' Department of the local Board School.

In September 1891, along with my two younger sisters, I started my new school, in standard 4. Things were different here: much less scripture, and, for the first time I saw a blackboard and an easel. We had drill, which consisted of arm exercises in the playground. I recall doing what seemed to me complicated sums in arithmetic, but enjoyed them as I did all subjects, especially grammar. History lessons took the form of stories read by teacher. The only geography lessons we had were the learning by heart the names of the chief rivers and towns of England. In standard 6, I felt I had reached the top of the school.³²

However, not all of the autobiographers were fortunate enough to have had this level of basic formal schooling. Although all of the women were born after 1870, not all of them were at school for the years between five and twelve legislated for by the 1870 Act. Hannah Mitchell, Louise Jermy and Emma Smith were all denied a significant part of

³² Maria Hull, 'A Derbyshire Schooling', pp. 167-168.

these years of schooling and all three of them resented this lack of opportunity early in their lives, which they saw as denying them something that was theirs by right. All three women indicate the importance of their family situation, and the attitude of parents, on whom they were dependent, for the kind of education they received.

Hannah, for instance, was born only one year after the 1870 Act legislated for provision of elementary schooling for all, and it was seven years after this that she had a mere two weeks of formal school. Hannah's experience, compared with that of Maria's less than ten years later, underlines the unevenness of educational reforms, the difficulties of charting a chronological progress and, perhaps more significantly, it illustrates the gender bias in the education of girls of which Hannah was acutely aware. Born in 1871 in Alport Dale, in a remote part of the Peak District of Derbyshire, the nearest school for Hannah's family was five miles away by the shortest cut over the hill, which made daily attendance impossible. The children were to be sent in turn as they grew old enough to go into lodgings at the schoolhouse during the week. Hannah's two elder brothers went first, and two years later in 1878 Hannah and her sister Lizzie were eventually to have their turn. Education was not given much importance within the family, it was referred to only as 'a bit of schooling'.³³ Hannah, however, saw education as something to strive for. Going to school seemed to Hannah to be a 'magic key which would admit me to a treasure house of learning', and therefore valuable. She perceived learning as 'unlocking a door' to success.³⁴

But it was winter, the journey proved too long and rough for the girls, the school and schoolhouse were badly heated and after two weeks of school the girls fell ill and were

³³ Hannah Mitchell *The Hard Way Up*, p.48.

³⁴ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.49.

kept home for the rest of the winter. In the spring, elder sister Lizzie was sent to lodge at another school in the nearest town, which she attended for two years, but Hannah was kept at home to help on the farm and in the house. In comparison to the schooling provided for her brothers, Hannah felt she had missed out on an opportunity to learn. The family farm was remote, the family could not afford help; her labour was required in the fields and at home. She recorded: 'I realized with grief that I was not to have even the brief period at school which the three elder ones had.'³⁵ She recalled her rebellion against this unfair treatment and her complaint to her mother: 'when I boldly demanded the same, she said it was different for boys; girls must keep their place.'³⁶ Hannah resented her mother's attitude. Her autobiography gave no romantic picture of the cosy relationship between herself and her mother, often found in the autobiographies. She also resented the gender differentiation often accepted by others in the cohort.³⁷

Hannah's resentment appeared to have fuelled her will to succeed and she overcame what she perceived as this obstacle to her learning. Her lack of formal schooling did not prevent her from achieving a rudimentary education. She had been taught to read by relatives:

My father and Uncle had taught us all to read, so they said, but I cannot remember a time when I could not read. I was passionately fond of books, which as events turned out were to be my only source of learning. My Uncle taught me to write and I taught the two younger ones to read and write.³⁸

³⁵ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.52.

³⁶ Hannah Mitchell, *The hard Way Up*, p.114.

³⁷ Amongst the autobiographers, Hannah Mitchell, Emma Smith and Kathleen Woodward, are the only three to have an unhappy relationship with their mothers, as did Louise Jermy with her stepmother. Significantly, all four had poor school attendance.

³⁸ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p. 43.

Hannah saw the importance of literacy and taught her younger sisters, passing the skill on in the same manner that she had learned it: informally at home. She built on her rudimentary education: her ambition to learn prompted her to perform tasks such as cleaning shoes or gathering firewood for her brothers in exchange for them bringing books home from school at weekends for her. This was important enough for Hannah to undertake even more of the hated chores in order to take advantage of her brothers' two years of schooling. She acknowledged her success in obtaining some benefits from their teaching as she declared: 'this period of two years brought me also a small measure of education.'³⁹ She grew passionate about books from which she could learn, and as this became known she was also permitted to read books owned by neighbours. This, she described, 'led to my reading some curious and unsuitable matter, old-fashioned theological books, early Methodist magazines, cookery books and queer tales of robbery and murder.'⁴⁰

Louise Jermy and Emma Smith also reveal that the most relevant factor to their lack of schooling was the family situation and the attitude of their respective parents, or step-parents. Louise was born in 1877 at Howe in Hampshire: her mother died when she was eighteen months old, and her father remarried. Louise's family home was one of the most affluent of those described by the cohort: her father was in regular work and her stepmother ran a laundry business.⁴¹ Louise was nevertheless used as an unpaid servant in the house, and she blamed her stepmother for her 'little formal schooling. But for her I should have been educated, also I should have been taught to play the mandoline (*sic*),

³⁹ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.44.

⁴⁰ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.44.

⁴¹ A head of household in regular employment meant that this family would be in category E on Charles Booth's scale of social hierarchy. In 1889, Booth's study, *Life and Labour of the People in London*, he suggested eight groups; the very poor making up groups A to D. Group E, those poor whose head of family or chief wage earner was in regular employment was the largest group, forming 40% of London's population. A decade later, Seebohm Rowntree's study in York, *Poverty: A Study of Town Life* confirmed Booth's results, showing that a similar situation obtained in York.

which father had bought me.’⁴² The most probable explanation for her stepmother’s behaviour was her resentment of Louise as the child of her husband’s first wife. Like Hannah, Louise perceived education as important, and saw lack of schooling as a missed opportunity. The learning of a musical instrument would have certainly lifted her out of the ordinary. The mandolin is an interesting motif for aspirations to success in Louise’s autobiography: few, if any, working-class girls could have claimed to own, let alone learn to play, a musical instrument, which had long been considered a genteel pursuit for the daughters of middle-class or elite families.

Born in 1894, later in the period than Maria, Hannah or Louise, Emma Murphy, who wrote under the pseudonym Emma Smith, struggled for her education and ‘progressed as far as it was possible for one who was so often absent’.⁴³ Emma lived with her maternal grandparents until they began to fail in health when she was six years old in 1900. Emma’s mother whom she knew as her sister Maud, by then had two more children by a new partner, Jack O’Brien, who played a part in Emma’s circumstances.⁴⁴ Maud’s younger children were treated well, but he was unwilling to bring up Emma, the child of another man. Emma was sold to a travelling hurdy-gurdy man who used Emma to help collect money from the crowds. Emma Smith’s sparse and intermittent schooling could be linked with her wretched and itinerant life-style, caused by the illegitimacy of her birth, the poverty of her family and especially the callousness of her mother.

Emma did not begin regular schooling until she was nine, when she was taken in by the Salvation Army Children’s Home in Plymouth for a few months. There she attended both Sunday and day school. She recalled two earlier attempts at starting school whilst living

⁴² Louise Jermy, *The Memories of a Working Woman*, p.57.

⁴³ Emma Smith, *A Cornish Waif*, p.97.

⁴⁴ Emma Smith, *A Cornish Waif*, p.26.

with the hurdy-gurdy man and his wife in Penzance. These had failed, partly because of her itinerant way of life, but mainly because Emma's dirty and ragged appearance provoked cruel treatment at the hands of both teachers and pupils. Once she became a resident of the Children's Home, in 1904, things were different. Emma joyfully described her sense of achievement at the third attempt at school attendance. This was, she claimed 'a success':

Clean and tidily dressed, my awful sense of inferiority was lifted, and though I certainly felt out of it all where lessons were concerned, my teacher was patient and helpful. Besides, I had the other Home (*sic*) children to go to school with and to mix in with at playtime. We were not dressed in any sort of Home uniform, so that we were not obviously Home children.⁴⁵

For Emma, Hannah and Louise it appears that a combination of factors - gender, family economics, parental attitude, particularly that of the mother, and difficulty of journey to school - had an effect on their formal elementary school attendance. All were forced into some kind of employment instead of attending school. Despite this, their determination to succeed meant they learnt by more unconventional means. Hannah enlisted the help of family members, Louise learned at Sunday school and Emma studied piecemeal at various schools until she became resident in the children's home.

Most of the cohort were fortunate enough to spend the years between ages five and ten at school. In some areas, especially by the 1880s, it was possible to be at school between three and fourteen. Several autobiographers reported starting school at an earlier age than five. Schooldays for Rose Gibbs, Maria Hull and Winifred Griffiths, for instance, began when they were very young. They recorded this fact with some pride, emphasizing that their attendance at schooling at an early age was something they saw as a benefit. Rose

⁴⁵ Emma Smith, *A Cornish Waif's Story*, p.74.

Gibbs was born in the East End of London in 1892: her father was a soldier, until he was wounded in the Boer War, and this left him out of work for eight years. Rose's mother had been in domestic service before she was married and had to return to it while her husband was unemployed. This may be the reason why Rose was able to attend school so early in her life: certainly she took care to record the length of time she attended school, at a time when, despite the legislation, education was still not a given fact of life for all children of working class parents. Rose claimed 'I went to school when I was three and left when I was twelve.'⁴⁶ She eventually took her young sister to school with her. The headmistress of the council school which Rose Gibbs attended acknowledged the fact that working-class girls often took responsibility for younger siblings, and did something to help Rose and her small sister:

I often missed school, so in the end our headmistress, a lovely golden-haired lady used to let me bring [my younger sister] into school and have her all day with me in class. She was too young to follow the lessons, but it encouraged me to keep coming to school. And more than once the headmistress gave me free tickets for dinner, with one for her as well. School dinners were then a bowl of soup and beautiful crusty bread rolls – and free for the poorer children.⁴⁷

A common explanation given by the autobiographers for early attendance at school was the fact that they were younger siblings of children already attending. Maria Hull was born in Pool Village, South Derbyshire in 1881. Her elder sister and brother attended the Dame school in Pool Village, but by the time Maria began school in 1894, when she was only two years and nine months old, the Dame school had closed and she joined them instead at the newly opened National Board School. Maria explained in her autobiography

⁴⁶ Mrs Hills, 'Reminiscences of Mrs Hills: Formerly of Leighton Bromswold,' in *Memories of Life in the Village of Leighton Bromswold* (Cambridge: privately printed, 1977), pp.3-4 of a small pamphlet, Cambridgeshire Record Office, Huntingdon Branch.

⁴⁷ Rose Gibbs, *In Service: Rose Gibbs Remembers* (Basingbourn: Basingbourn and Comberton Village Colleges, 1948), p. 4.

that she started at school earlier than was normally the case because there were older children from her family already attending the school: 'It was not unusual for a child as young as I was to be accepted. Payment was each Monday morning, 3d. for the eldest child and 2d for each succeeding one.'⁴⁸ Winifred Griffiths, who had older siblings, began school when she was 'nearly four years old', however there were other, younger, children already attending school as she recalled: 'I was put into the second class as I was considered too big for a baby class.'⁴⁹

The age at which school began for these women, at least until 1900, appeared to depend on individual circumstances: in case of special needs, when the mother was in paid employment, and if there were older children at school who could help with their younger sibling when required. It was also dependent on whether or not the local school took younger children. Most Board schools acknowledged the situation and schools extended their register to include younger children. These had 'baby's rooms' where children from three to five years of age were prepared for 'standard school'.

By 1900, infant schools were coming under attack for allowing children under five to attend. Over the period there had been changes in attitudes to childcare. Firstly, more emphasis was being placed on the importance of mothering and some argued that children under the age of five should be with their mothers.⁵⁰ Secondly, ideas about the freedom of movement, play and individual learning were gaining ground. In 1906 a special report on schoolchildren under five, by the school inspector Rosalie M. Munday, claimed: 'the home developed child was better educated than the little scholar though he has not directly

⁴⁸ Maria Hull, 'A Derbyshire Schooling', p.167.

⁴⁹ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.11.

⁵⁰ For discussion of this trend, see for instance: Carolyn Steedman, *Childhood, Culture and Class: Margaret MacMillan 1860-1931* (London: Virago, 1990) and Anna Davin, 'Imperialism and Motherhood' in *History Workshop Journal* vol.5, 1978.

learned any of the three Rs.⁵¹ Although it was also argued that the often cramped and unhealthy working-class homes could not always give children the attention and stimulus they required, conditions in schools were not always much better. Miss Bathhurst, another inspector wrote: 'little children (at school) are subject to military rather than maternal influences... individuality is crushed out, spontaneous qualities are checked and at three years old children are forced to follow a routine only suitable to a far later age.'⁵²

In contrast, Mary Luty started school later than many of the other women. Mary was born in Newchurch-in-Rossendale in 1885.⁵³ When she was sixteen months old, her parents' marriage broke up. Her mother left the family home taking Mary, and her three-month-old brother to live with their grandparents, tenant farmers near Waugh's Well on the Yorkshire Moors. The farm was so remote that Mary gave this as a reason for not attending school until age seven.⁵⁴ As Mary failed to record any details of her brother's schooling, it is difficult to discern whether this was the case, or whether, if Mary had been a boy she would have been sent to school despite the remoteness, as had been Hannah Mitchell's brothers.

The new Education Acts notwithstanding, the period of schooling thus varied considerably from girl to girl, depending on various factors in their home background. They started school later, or earlier, in life and had periods of absence from school for domestic duties, or other family circumstances, during school years. Furthermore, although all the women seem to have been involved to a greater or lesser extent in home-based chores, paid employment was deferred until the end of legitimate schooling.

⁵¹ Cited in Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor*, p. 117.

⁵² Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor*, p.117.

⁵³ Mary's published autobiography: Mary Luty, *A Penniless Globetrotter* records her birthplace, but not her birthdate. This was obtained from her typescript 'My Life Has Sparkled', Rawtenstall Record Office.

⁵⁴ Mary Luty, *A Penniless Globetrotter*, p.26.

In industrial areas, especially those in the North of England, a loophole in this legislation was exploited to the disadvantage of children from poorer families. Four of the cohort - Annie Kenney, Mary Luty, Nellie Scott, and Mrs Yearn - left school earlier than their classmates and began work as soon as they could in order to supplement family income. They were enabled to do so by taking advantage of the half-time system. This curtailed school years for some of the women in the cohort as they became old enough for factory work. The half-time system, which continued until as late as 1918, set a so-called 'Labour Test' for children between ten and thirteen. If they 'passed', that is, their work was good enough for them to be taken on at the factory, they were able to work half-time, alternating mornings or afternoons weekly in the factory, the other half of the day to be spent at school.

The system was described by several of the autobiographers. Some welcomed it as a short-cut to the adult world of work, others viewed it as a flawed system which encroached on school years. In general the autobiographers' viewpoint appears to have depended on whether or not the half-time system was approved by their parents. Alice Foley was born in Bolton in 1891. Her father was unemployed during her childhood, as he had been sacked from the factory for drunkenness immediately following his celebrations of Alice's birth. Alice attended St Peter and Paul's, the local Catholic school in Bolton, from age five until thirteen. However, in 1903, many of Alice's friends had finished full-time schooling aged twelve, in order to work half-time as 'little tenters' at the local cotton mill.⁵⁵ Alice's father refused to take up the half-time system for his children. Alice was aware of his ideas and expressed her luck:

On reaching the age of twelve I was lucky to escape the effects of the Half-Time Factory System then in operation,

⁵⁵ 'Little tenters' usually children or beginners, were employed to stretch out the wet cloth over poles.

for father, with all his faults, strenuously opposed it as being a source of exploitation of child labour. Many of my classmates went half time as 'little tenters' in the surrounding weaving sheds. After working in a noisy, moist atmosphere from six in the morning to twelve noon, they were in no shape for lessons in a crowded classroom and often fell asleep over their books from sheer exhaustion.⁵⁶

The truth, as Alice described, was that meaningful schooling actually ceased from the time children started half-time work, since most were so fatigued by their working half days that they slept through their half-day at school. Although Alice decried the system which allowed children to start work in their twelfth year, her writing highlights the importance of the changes in child employment made by the combination of Education Acts and Employment of Children Acts discussed earlier. By 1900, few children worked before the age of twelve, in comparison to earlier in the century when children as young as six were in regular employment.

Nevertheless, for some of the cohort, gaining the labour certificate was perceived as an educational success. In 1886, Mary Luty became a 'half-timer'. She recorded her 'great pride' as she 'won' and brought home the Labour Certificate, impatient for her mother, already a mill worker, to hear the good news that she could now join her at work:

In those days an elementary school pupil on attaining the age of eleven could sit for what was known as the Labour Certificate, which enabled a young person to start work as a "half-timer".

When I had won mine I took it home with great pride and pinned it on the wall of the living room for my mother to see immediately she entered the home. The following week I started as a "half-timer"! This meant that I rose from my bed at five o'clock in the morning and half an hour later accompanied my mother to the factory, half an

⁵⁶ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, (Manchester, Manchester University Extra-Mural Department and the North Western District of the Workers' Educational Association, 1973) p.49.

hour's walk and commenced at six o'clock...worked until half-past twelve, then went to school in the afternoon.⁵⁷

How different from Alice Foley, who had considered herself fortunate to have avoided half-time employment. For Mary, as she left school, education seemed to have been important only as a means to an end, a passport to the adult world of work.

Only two of the cohort, Kathleen Woodward, a factory worker from Bermondsey, London, and Mrs Yearn, a Working Woman's Co-operative Guild member, did not record their schooldays in their autobiographies.⁵⁸ However, it is possible to deduce that they did attend school. Mrs Yearn was born in Oldham in 1891, the fourth of the six surviving children (of fourteen) of a brick-setter. She recalled that she 'had to stay at home to look after mother when two of the younger children were born' and it could be surmised that she would have otherwise been at school. Mrs Yearn also recorded that she became a 'half-timer' around 1902, suggesting that she had attended school to age twelve and then taken the Labour Test. Similarly, Kathleen Woodward began work in a factory on the north side of the Thames at age twelve, which was the school-leaving age for children born in 1896, the year of Katherine's birth, from which it may be deduced that she probably attended school up to that age.

The autobiographies serve to show that although many of these women missed some periods of schooling, for a variety of reasons to do with their families, they still perceived themselves as having achieved an education, even if this was by informal methods with the help of family members, friends or neighbours. However, most of their texts are

⁵⁷ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, pp. 37-38.

⁵⁸ The Woman's Co-operative Guild, of which autobiographers Nellie Scott and Mrs Yearn were members, was founded in 1883. By 1930 when the two wrote their autobiographies it had nearly 1400 branches and 67,000 members. The Guild became an important agent in the education of working-class women and encouraged them to help themselves, and others.

testimony to the fact that educational and employment reforms made formal elementary schooling possible for many working-class girls by the end of the period. Welcome as the changes in educational provision were, it must also be acknowledged, as Anna Davin has argued, that compulsory education of children between five and ten, also had the effect of making working-class children, who before this time had been expected to contribute towards the family income, totally dependent on the family breadwinner, usually the father.⁵⁹

The social function of educating working-class girls in school was to carry this dependency further, and teach these girls to be good wives to working men, and good mothers to the next generation of the work-force. Most of the cohort record that they were required to help in the home: the potential for girls to gain an education was often outweighed by their domestic usefulness, which also had a marked influence on school attendance. Girls were kept at home to look after sick parents, help with chores or mind younger family members. Older girls in poorer families were therefore more likely to miss school for family requirements. This suggests that ideologies of gender and class were inextricably inherent in the formal education system as well as in the home environment.

The Ideologies of Gender and Class

The sort of gender discrimination identified so strongly by Hannah Mitchell in regards to both domestic chores and schooling, was constructed both socially and *inter-familias*. Whatever age they were when they began attending school, absence from school because of domestic duties was a fairly common occurrence for working-class girls. The autobiographers were no exception: older girls were expected to help their mothers with

⁵⁹ Anna Davin, 'Mind That You Do As You Are Told: Reading Books For Board School Girls 1870-1902', in *Feminist Review* Vol. 3 (1979), p.89.

housework and care of younger siblings, even if this did mean missing school. Annie Barnes, Ada Nield Chew, Mildred Edwards, Rose Gibbs and Louise Jermy all describe this reason for their irregular attendance. The situation established tension in working-class girls' lives between their ambition to succeed at school and their pride in undertaking adult family duties. It was accepted almost as a matter of course that girls should miss school when required at home. Older girls in large families tended to have the hardest time, with more expectations of domestic duties within the home.

These women faced what might be viewed as a double setback to any ambitions for achievements when, in addition to this kind of family-generated gender bias, they also faced gender and social class discrimination at school. Patriarchal and family ideologies are evident in the gendered bias which advocated that any academic honours to which girls might aspire were not to take precedence over domestic skills. This situation is underlined by research into the English working class before 1870. Results of this indicate a gendered bias; the schooling of girls was both quantitatively and qualitatively more restricted than that of boys.⁶⁰ Girls were offered fewer places than boys and differential stress was placed on appearance, with neatness and cleanliness considered more important for girls. Both the 1851 Census and the Newcastle Report in 1861 showed that less priority was placed on the education of girls in all academic subjects except reading.⁶¹ Furthermore, after the Revised Code of 1862 made needlework an obligatory subject for girls in State-maintained schools, they frequently spent their afternoons sewing, and were subsequently permitted a lower standard in the annual arithmetic

⁶⁰ J. Martin, 'The Origins and Development of Gendered Schooling' unpublished MA dissertation, University of Warwick (1987).

⁶¹ For an account of the introduction of subjects specifically for girls and the growing emphasis on a sharp separation of masculine and feminine spheres found in reading books in schools, see, for instance, Stephen Heathorn, *For Home, Country and Race: Constructing Gender, Class and Englishness in the Elementary School, 1880-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), pp.13-17 and Appendices.

examination.⁶² Working-class girls were expected, by society and often by their parents, to take up domestic-based employment and seek work as servants, seamstresses or textile workers, as soon as they left school. Arithmetic, for example, was often not perceived as a subject to be taught to girls. On marriage, it was their domestic skills which would help them become 'good' wives and mothers. As a result, proficiency in 'male' subjects such as arithmetic was not deemed important.⁶³

There were some moves to redress this problem as educated middle-class women were elected onto School boards. Before 1869 Boards had consisted only of men. In 1869 the Municipal Franchise Act allowed women to vote in municipal elections on exactly the same terms as men and the Boards were opened to women.⁶⁴ By 1879, seventy women had been elected to local School boards, although they were still outnumbered by men.⁶⁵ Elizabeth Garret and Emily Davis were the first two women in England to be elected to positions of political responsibility on the first London School board.⁶⁶

It is here that an inherent policy of class, as well as gender differentiation occurs. School board members, as well as the patrons organizing both the National and British Schools Societies, were drawn from middle- and upper- class society. They possessed both the time and the level of income to support such philanthropic activity. Working-class girls were expected to use their training in domestic skills to enhance their own home life, but

⁶² Anne Digby, *Children, School and Society in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Macmillan Press, 1981), p.46.

⁶³ June Purvis 'The Double Burden of Class and Gender in the Schooling of Working Class Boys and Girls in Nineteenth Century England' in L Barton and S Walker, *Schools, Teachers and Teaching* (Lewes: Falmer Press, 1981), pp.80-103.

⁶⁴ Philippa Levine, *Victorian Feminism* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), p. 142.

⁶⁵ For an interesting discussion on women moving into this and other previously male clerical occupations see, for example, Ellen Jordan, 'The Lady Clerks at the Prudential: The Beginning of Vertical Segregation by Sex in Clerical Work in Nineteenth-Century Britain' in *Gender and History*, vol.8 (1996), pp.65-81.

⁶⁶ Both women had established reputations within their own field: Emily Davis through her work on behalf of middle-class girls' education and Elizabeth Garrett as the first British-trained woman doctor.

they were also expected to enhance the home life of middle-class women by becoming domestic servants, thus allowing middle- and upper-class campaigners the freedom from domestic duties which enabled them to take their place in the public domain.

Elementary education was thus associated with bringing up a moral, temperate and well-behaved working class which was clearly segregated by both class and gender from the forms of secondary schooling offered to middle-class children. Ellen Wilkinson was resentful of the state system of education which did nothing to encourage bright children, like herself, who were often rebellious because they were bored.⁶⁷

I was just a little sausage in the vast educational sausage factory in the eyes of the makers of the state scheme. That I, and others like me, were keen, intelligent, could mop up facts like blotting paper, wanted to stretch our minds in every direction, was merely a nuisance. We must fit into a mould, or be pressed into it.⁶⁸

Alice Foley wrote in similar vein. She recalled that when she reached the school-leaving age of fourteen: 'little persuasion or encouragement was available to promising pupils to continue their studies.'⁶⁹

Irrespective of who provided the education for working-class children, it was seen as inferior in quality and status to that provided for middle-class children. June Purvis claimed:

Working-class boys and girls...learnt...that they were of the 'lower' social orders. Working-class girls...also learnt that masculinity was the dominant gender form. Working-class parents were likely to give more priority to the schooling of their sons than of their daughters.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Ellen Wilkinson was Minister for Education in 1935.

⁶⁸ Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, p.404.

⁶⁹ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.49.

⁷⁰ June Purvis 'The Double Burden of Class and Gender', in *Schools, Teachers and Teaching*, p.90.

Inequality, both gendered and class-based, and the continued emphasis on home-based occupations for working-class girls, can be traced within the autobiographies written by the women of the cohort. Pictures of the role models the girls were expected to aspire to were even provided in some classrooms, as autobiographer Winifred Griffiths, who wanted ‘fame and glory’, described disparagingly:

But alas, we were expected to set our sights somewhat lower. If one was clean and industrious one might hope to become a housemaid or a laundry maid like those pictured on our classroom wall.⁷¹

The message, disseminated by the school system, and the ironic comment by Winifred Griffiths, suggests that society promulgated very different images of success from that which Winifred envisioned for herself. Working-class women, who knew their place in society, were permitted to become good domestic servants, factory workers, laundresses, seamstresses and so on. According to such directives, they could aspire to be ‘successful’ only at this kind of work.⁷² Winifred’s words reveal that hard work and cleanliness was encouraged but not ambition for, or still less achievement of, academic honours. Societal images of success for them were bound by ideas, prevalent in Victorian society, of a hierarchical, and fixed, system of class.

Working-class girls were offered lower status curricula subjects than their middle-class counterparts. The middle-class idea of femininity was inherent in ‘young ladies’ accomplishments – sketching, piano playing, and embroidery. The curricula for working-class women underlined the ‘good wife and mother’ and the ‘good servant’ who required practical, household training. Society also promulgated the theoretical model of separate

⁷¹ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman’s Story*, p.28.

⁷² For discussion of this topic see, June Purvis, *Hard lessons: The Lives and Education of Working-Class Women in Nineteenth Century England* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989); see also, Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1981).

spheres in segregating boys from girls in lessons, and giving girls gender-specific domestic training, so both class and gender-specific social and domestic ideologies were upheld.

The women autobiographers were aware of the difference between schooling of girls like themselves, and that of boys. Children tended to be segregated at elementary school once they had progressed from the infant classes. Amongst the cohort there were several who recorded their awareness of the gender differentiation in provision of lessons. Mildred Edwards recalled the headmistress of her secondary school in Harraby, Cumbria, taking a class of eighty girls for sewing: although she does not record what lesson the boys were given, we can assume it was not sewing, since this class was only for girls. Mildred recalled the Mission Hall in the corner of the playground, 'which was where we older girls went for cookery lessons.'⁷³ Isabella Cooke described walking to school from her home in Great Strickland to nearby Cliburn where the schoolmistress would teach the infant classes, and also took the girls for needlework:

There was only one master and one mistress. She taught the infants 1 to 2 standard, and used to teach the girls two afternoons a week to sew and knit, and the master taught the rest in his room.⁷⁴

Margaret Bondfield, born in 1873, one of eleven children of a Somerset lace-maker, attended Chard Board School, which was segregated into girls and boys. Margaret described the difference between the lessons taught in male and female classes.⁷⁵ She underlined the narrow curriculum available to girls, although in her school they did learn arithmetic, as she wrote: 'In the girls' school we were taught reading, writing and

⁷³ Mildred Edwards, *Our City...Our People*, p.41.

⁷⁴ Isabella Cooke, *A Hired Lass in Westmorland* (Penrith: The Cumberland and Westmorland Herald, 1982), p.1.

⁷⁵ Margaret Bondfield was the first woman member of the Privy Council when she became Minister of Labour in 1929.

arithmetic, and needlework – no geography, no history except the dates of kings.⁷⁶ Ellen Wilkinson drew attention to gender differentiation when she recalled that some boys in her class, unlike the girls, were given more encouragement. She explained:

The boy rebels had a better time. The masters would often give extra time, lend books and so on to a bright lad. I never remember such encouragement. I was only a girl anyway.⁷⁷

The gendered schooling of girls, as described by many of the women in the cohort had been in place from the eighteenth century and earlier. It had certainly changed little from the mid-Victorian period, in terms of an ideological framework for the education of working-class girls, since it was advocated by the National Society as early as 1861:

It is be hoped that no desire to make girls little Newtons, little Captain Cooks, little Livingstones, Little Mozarts and Handels and little Joshua Reynoldses will ever take us too low for keeping in sight the object of teaching them to make and mend shirts, to make and mend pinafores, and darn stockings and socks. If it does, then from that day the Society will go back.⁷⁸

The autobiographies are testimony to the cohorts' success in surmounting most of the problems and gaining some kind of formal education, despite the vagaries of the education system, which still discriminated against working class girls on two counts – those of gender and class. Where the women were unable, for various reasons, to take full advantage of formal education provisions, many turned to informal methods of acquiring literacy.

⁷⁶ Margaret Bondfield, *A Life's Work*, p.21.

⁷⁷ Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, p.404.

⁷⁸ *The National Society Annual Report* (1861), p.77.

Informal Education

Despite the variety of schooling they received, all of the women in the cohort had learnt to read during their childhood, either at school, Sunday school or at home. Informal learning sometimes supplemented, or in some cases took the place of formal schooling. They expressed pride in this achievement and referred to their reading ability throughout their autobiographies, detailing the difficulties many had to overcome in order to gain this skill. Most of the cohort report help or encouragement either from a kind of mentor or role model, whom they admire and in whom they find inspiration for their own success in either formal or informal learning. This was sometimes a school or Sunday school teacher, but was more often a parent or someone within the family such as an older sister or brother, or a relation such as an aunt or uncle. Mary Luty, for example, recorded that she was not totally uneducated, despite her limited time at school. She had help from other family members in learning: 'I was seven years old before I had even heard of school, although I had been taught my alphabet, I could recite one or two short poems, and do a little sewing.'⁷⁹

Mary Gawthorpe illustrated the progress and improvement in education from the previous two generations of her family. Annie Gawthorpe, Mary's mother, remembered her own mother crying when Annie had to leave school and was sent to the mill to work. After a few years, her eldest sister's dressmaking business had become established and Annie was able to leave the mill to become an assistant in the 'home dressmaking establishment' with her sister. A younger sister was enabled, by the income thus generated, to become a college-trained teacher. Mary's mother had therefore seen in her own generation the

⁷⁹ Mary Luty, *A Penniless Globetrotter*, p. 26.

opportunities that were available through education and was determined to make sure her daughter finished her education.

Mary admired her youngest aunt, and considered her teaching achievement was ‘certainly a feat in those struggling times when fathers were thrown on the industrial refuse heap.’⁸⁰ Annie Gawthorpe’s understandable pride in her sister’s achievements, in what was a time of recession, was perhaps the spur to her encouragement of her own children, girls as well as boys, to read. She gave a good start in reading to all of her five children; there seemed no gender bias in this family:

Four girls and one boy, were taught to know their letters
and to read before they went to the Infant’s School at St
Michael’s when five years old. Mamma had taught them
from the big illustrated blue book full of rhymes.⁸¹

Books played an important part of Mary’s childhood, and the possession of them was part of the family’s respectability. She described the bookcase in the sitting room of their home as ‘our most distinguished furnishing.’⁸²

Alice Foley also had good access to books at home. She proudly described her family as ‘a reading family’ for whom she was to become ‘the chief book-borrower. This entailed carrying a bag of heavy books on Monday evenings for exchange at the branch library some distance away.’⁸³ It was a task she seemed to have accepted willingly in order to have access to books. Alice’s father Thomas Foley, ‘a big, intelligent, but unruly Irishman,’ though often drunk, had instilled a love of literature into his children. Alice

⁸⁰ Mary Gawthorpe, *Up Hill to Holloway* (Penobscot, Maine: Traversity Press, 1962), p.8.

⁸¹ Mary Gawthorpe, *Up Hill to Holloway*, p.19.

⁸² Mary Gawthorpe, *Up Hill to Holloway*, p.16.

⁸³ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.25.

described how he ‘could quickly capture my imagination by his store of Irish folk-lore’.

As a boy he had been employed as a scene-shifter at the local theatre, and during this time:

Had heard many of the great tragedians of the day, and
had learned by rote most of the Shakespearean soliloquies.
Often, with unexpected dignity, he stalked around the
house declaiming magnificent passages from the plays.⁸⁴

Thomas obviously wanted his children to take any available opportunities to be educated; it was he who prevented Alice becoming a half-timer. However, although her father and her older siblings could read, literacy did not extend to Alice’s mother. In her autobiography written in 1917, Alice recalled herself as a small child sitting on potato sacks in the local corner shop trying to spell out the names of the goods on the shelves while her mother and ‘Kitty’, the shopkeeper, worked out the family grocery bill from a list of symbols, since ‘neither could read or write.’ Intriguingly, this incident shows that simple arithmetic had not been a problem for Alice’s mother!

At first her mother resented Alice learning to read, she seemed to feel out of place during family discussions over books, referring to this as ‘long curtain’ talk.⁸⁵ Soon, however, she began to encourage her daughter. Alice became her ‘official reader, and almost every day when I returned from school she would say coaxingly “Let’s have a chapthur (*sic*).”’⁸⁶

Isabella Cooke, who was also aware of being the first generation of her family to learn to read, tells a similar story. She too, tells of her mother’s ability with counting money:

When my granny’s family was young they didn’t worry
about the children attending school so my mother could
not either read or write. She couldn’t even write her own
name yet she could add figures up if she was in a shop,

⁸⁴ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.11.

⁸⁵ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.25.

⁸⁶ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.25.

and she was very good at dictating a letter. We would write out all her letters and read them.⁸⁷

Other autobiographers had mothers who could read, and who supported and encouraged their children in gaining reading skills. Annie Kenney's mother like Mary Gawthorpe's, had encouraged reading in the home: 'on Sunday evening Mother read us stories. They all seemed to be about London life among the poor'.⁸⁸ Annie described her mother as 'A wonderful woman...ever ready to lend a patient ear to other people's troubles, while at the same time showing a remarkable fortitude in her own'.⁸⁹ She also had a strong faith, and in spite of the hard day's work she had done, she always found time to hear the little ones say their prayers, and insisted the children all went to Sunday school and church. She also loved walking on the Lancashire moors, and it is this spirituality and closeness to nature which Annie inherited, and to which she attributed her determination to succeed. She described the strength she gained from nature: 'the open air has ever given me the courage and enthusiasm to press on, hold tight and have the grit to carry on.' It also was thanks to her mother, Annie recalled, that she had grown up 'with a smattering of knowledge on many questions'.⁹⁰ Believing in freedom of expression on all subjects, on Sundays, Annie's mother encouraged her children into debates at home:

Mother would be with us, and when we all assembled round the large table discussion would begin. At this period the elders of the family had been reading Haeckel, Spencer, Darwin. Mother would be as interested as we were until the arguments got so heated that she felt it wise to close the discussion because of the younger children. All these discussions, though I did not really understand them, made me unwilling in later life to accept statements without proof.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Isabella Cooke, *A Hired Lass in Westmorland*, p.8.

⁸⁸ Annie Kenney, *Memories of a Militant*, pp.6-7.

⁸⁹ Annie Kenney, *Memories of a Militant*, p.2.

⁹⁰ Annie Kenney, *Memories of a Militant*, p.1.

⁹¹ Annie Kenney, *Memories of a Militant*, p.20.

These examples from the cohort suggest increasing standards of literacy in the extended family. The significance of literacy, by this period at least, had been realized by many in the working class, perhaps because of improved opportunities for school attendance for their children as well as growing access to print in all areas of life. In many cases adults had taken education into their own hands so there was a growing culture of informal education within families, and sometimes neighbourhoods. Having somebody involved in or at least encouraging, educational self-improvement was important. The increase in literacy skills which the cohort illustrates took place throughout the nineteenth century, and was a reflection of the 'progress' seen as occurring in the Victorian period.

Informal education continued for many of the cohort throughout most of their lives. In five of the autobiographies the authors list the books they have read, revealing that they are keen to show the wide range of their interest and, by implication, their intellect. This also serves to confirm the women's widening interests as they grew older and provided reassurance to themselves, and proof to others of their success in gaining reading skills. Nellie Scott, for instance, born in Stockport around 1890 listed some of the books she was familiar with as a child. She was able to use the library attached to the Sunday school she attended and also described the encouragement she and her sister had from her family, especially an uncle who 'lived just across the road.' He was a great reader who 'used to read aloud so that we knew and loved the characters in Dickens' works.' She recalled:

While at home we had *Chambers' Miscellany* and *Chambers Journals*. I used to sit for hours lost in these books and Wednesday was a joyful day for it brought *The Family Circle* and *The Girls' Own Paper*. I used to creep downstairs to see if they were under the shop door, so that we could read them before we went to school. We went through the usual girls' books, *The Wide, Wide World*, *Queechy*, *The Lamplighter*, and at our Sunday School we had a very good library, where the librarian used to let me roam through the shelves. One book from there made me

keen on housing and Garden Cities, *The Door Without a Knocker*.⁹²

These book lists also indicate the increasing access to reading material for this group in society. Mrs Yearn was a member of the Co-operative Women's Guild and the Guild encouraged members to read and to spread co-operative ideals of self-improvement:

We have a very good library at our Co-operative Society, and we are able to get some very useful books, which are so helpful to those of us who have to be Missionaries for the Co-operative Societies.

What I have read myself are all the Co-operative papers, that wonderful little book, *Working Men Co-operators*, *Storekeeping Understood* by Sydney R. Elliott; *Education and Citizenship*, by G.M. MacTavish; *Nationality* by S. Herbert; *The Municipal Year Book*, *The Local Government Year Book*, *The History of Old Peru*, *The Voice of the People*, by G.L. Stocks; *Progress and Poverty*, by Henry George; *The Old Nobility*, by Howard Evans; *The Book on Natural Laws*, by William Whiteworth, and the *Daily Herald*.

A short time ago I went through a class with Professor Hall at Holyoake House on "The Mechanism of Exchange" dealing with *Currency, Banking and Trade in Peace and War*, by John A Todd.⁹³

As if to place a final seal of approval on what she has achieved, Mrs Yearn added the comment, 'my husband reads the same books'.⁹⁴ For Mrs Yearn, part of her success, therefore, lay in her ability to compete equally on an intellectual level with her husband.

Winifred Griffiths remembered being encouraged to read by a particular teacher at school during her time in standard seven, when she and her classmates were in general 'restless and dissatisfied and impatient of restraint' for the last few months of school. A new headmistress, Miss Snashall, 'had a good and lasting influence on the girls who came

⁹² Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.84.

⁹³ Mrs Yearn, 'A Public-Spirited Rebel', p.106.

⁹⁴ Mrs Yearn, 'A Public-Spirited Rebel', p.106.

under her care', and was wise enough to allow the older girls some freedoms during these last schooldays, an influence for which Winifred was grateful as it instilled in her a love of reading:

Miss Snashall was enthusiastic about encouraging reading, as a great source of joy as well as instruction. I have reason to bless her memory if only for this.⁹⁵

Winifred continued to read avidly after she left school, when employed as a housemaid at East Oakley House, a few miles east of Overton in Hampshire where she was born. On the nurse's day off Winifred looked after the children of the family and discovered that she could borrow books from the nursery library. She described her wide range of reading material:

An abridged *Old Curiosity shop* called *Little Nell* which we had read at school and which had whetted my appetite for Dickens and I was now able to read almost all of his novels and of course many other books. Almost every room in the house had its bookshelves. As housemaid I had access to most of the rooms, and many a time, while ostensibly cleaning, I would steal a few minutes to open and read from some book that caught my eye. In addition I found a good deal of interest in magazines and periodicals which came into the house.⁹⁶

Winifred's ability to read well gave her some status amongst the other servants most of whom were above her in the servant hierarchy. The staff were allowed an hour for 'mid-day dinner' and developed the habit of 'readings' after their meal. Winifred was proud to note:

Soon all conceded that I was the best reader, and from then on it was my pride and pleasure to read aloud such books as the others chose – popular novels of the time like 'East Lynne' and 'Lady Audley's Secret.'⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.30.

⁹⁶ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.48.

⁹⁷ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.51.

Annie Kenney also continued to read after leaving school. She began work in Wood End cotton mill at twelve, as a half-timer, then at thirteen she began full-time work. Annie spent her spare time in 'dreaming and fantasies' and, taking an interest in her fellow-workers, she encouraged them to read, persuading the women working with her to subscribe to a weekly girls' magazine which she read to them in factory breaks.⁹⁸

Reading and learning skills were therefore forged through access to both formal and informal means of education, and all of these women were successful in gaining literacy skills, often against a background of discrimination found within the family and at school. They had help from family members, friends or mentors, and in their turn would often help others to learn. Alice Foley and Isabella Cooke made a significant point in recording that neither their mothers nor their grandmothers could read. They were the only women in the cohort who record that this was the case, but they appear proud of their success in becoming better educated than the previous generation of women in their family. This change from the previous generation to their own, throws light on the significance of the improvements in education for the cohort's potential for success, although class and gender issues were still weighted against working-class girls. Perhaps their achievements are best illustrated by the lives of women such as Mary Gawthorpe, and Ellen Wilkinson who, as will be discussed below, overcame obstacles of class and gender and found their route through the education system and into higher education.

Higher Ambitions: Adult Education, the Pupil Teaching Scheme, and University

In the late 1880s, London University was alone in allowing women to sit examinations and receive degrees. The numbers of places taken by women at Girton College or

⁹⁸ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.16.

Newham in Cambridge, or Lady Margaret Hall, Somerville, St Hugh's and St Hilda's in Oxford, were small, but significant.⁹⁹ However, this was an important change, as educational life for women of all classes was eventually to change as a result of these few. They provided role models of female behaviour which would suggest that empowerment, intellectually, was possible for all women.¹⁰⁰

Balfour's Education Act of 1902 established Local Education Authorities and encouraged them to extend educational provision at both elementary and secondary levels.¹⁰¹ 'Able' working-class children could acquire a secondary education, especially when debates about social equality between 1906 and 1914 resulted in the Free Place Regulations, introduced to ensure that all secondary schools aided by grants 'shall be made fully accessible to children of all classes'.¹⁰² Higher education, for ambitious working-class women who sought it, was therefore not entirely out of reach from the beginning of the twentieth century.

Changes in the accessibility to further education later in the period meant that it was possible for the cohort to take adult education classes at night school, train as teachers or attend university to degree standard. The autobiographies of those who achieved further education are an important record, since over the past century historians of education have tended to concentrate on the experiences of middle-class girls and women, and in

⁹⁹ A. N. Wilson, *The Victorians*, p.480.

¹⁰⁰ It must be noted here that such changes took time. See for instance, Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1929), which was originally two papers delivered to Girton students in October 1928, and exposed the structure of male privilege, female exclusion and the effects of poverty on women in society, almost fifty years after the universities began accepting women students.

¹⁰¹ Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain*, p.116.

¹⁰² Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain*, p.116.

particular on the extraordinary struggles by a minority of middle-class women to enter higher education.¹⁰³

For those of the cohort who continued their education after elementary school, such ambitions were not always obvious at school or even on first entering employment. Mary Luty's dream was to learn about the world first-hand, by travelling. It surfaced after leaving school to begin work as a half-timer in the local factory at age eleven. At that time Mary seems to have abandoned any idea of furthering her education, as she wrote: 'all one's interest in school seemed to vanish at this stage and become centred on wage earning.' After a few months, however, the pride and joy in earning a wage and gaining material possessions dwindled:

The extra money meant much in the home, and we began to have little luxuries not known previously. Soon, however, the glamour of wage earning began to fade.¹⁰⁴

Mary's ambitions for a more adventurous life surfaced and was the spur to attending evening classes, as she tried to achieve academic qualifications. She reasoned that a better-paid job outside the factory would mean earning more money to fund her adventures abroad. Success for Mary was the ability to travel, and after leaving school she saw that education could be a means to that end. She gained qualifications by attending evening lectures and classes and succeeded in her ambitions: the second half of Mary's autobiography detailed her extensive travels, successfully funded by a variety of jobs.

¹⁰³ See, for example: Christina S Breinner, *Education of Girls and Women* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1897); Margaret Bryant, *The Unexpected Revolution: The History of the Education of Women and Girls in the Nineteenth Century* (London: University of London Institute of Education, 1980); B Stephen, *Emily Davis and Girton College* (London: Constable, 1927); Barry Turner, *Equality For Some* (London: Ward Lock, 1974); Martha Vicinus, 'One Life to Stand Beside Me' in Felicity Hunt ed., *Lessons for Life* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

¹⁰⁴ Mary Luty, *A Penniless Globetrotter*, p.39.

As in elementary education, gender- and class-based discrimination was apparent in evening classes. Alice Foley sought to further her education once she was in paid employment. After leaving full-time schooling at the age of thirteen in 1904, Alice began to attend night school and later that year was invited to select subjects for study at the secondary evening classes held at the Municipal school in Great Moor Street, Bolton.

My odd choice of economics, logic and elocution landed me before the Director and Chairman of the local Education Committee. The latter gentleman, I recall, operated a number of tripe shops in the town and he enquired why a nice, quiet girl wanted to study economics and logic. I murmured, I suppose in order to impress, that I knew a little about Karl Marx and *Das Kapital*, although the extent of my knowledge was limited to overhearing a cursory discussion in my sister's circle. Both gentlemen frowned heavily and, following a few solemn whispers between them, the tripe man announced with a touch of finality that I would be allocated to a millinery class at the Women's Institute as more suitable to my aptitude and ability. Bored but obedient, I dutifully attended the class and remember being given a strip of green velvet to hem without letting the stitches show through the fabric.¹⁰⁵

Higher education could bring status: women could become teachers rather than factory workers, with the economic and social advantages that this meant. Many of the changes in educational opportunities came about by the Education Act of 1870, as the requirement for more classroom places had stimulated in turn a great demand for teachers. Between 1861 and 1911, the number of women teachers had grown by 129% and opportunities were becoming available for working-class girls of the period.¹⁰⁶

There was also an opportunity for working-class girls to stay on at school and to become 'unqualified' teachers. An alternative choice was often given to bright pupils to stay on in the classroom as teaching assistants, also known as 'monitors'. Maria Hull described

¹⁰⁵ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, pp.55-6.

¹⁰⁶ Jane Rendall, *Women in an Industrializing Society*, p. 75.

some of the duties of a monitor: 'The monitors did bell ringing duties to signal lesson time, home time and start of school and assisted with some lessons.'¹⁰⁷ Maria was interested in this pathway to success. She expressed her ambition 'I knew that I should like to be a teacher.'¹⁰⁸ Later, in 1889, an opportunity presented itself:

At the end of my time in standard 6, the headmistress sent a letter by me to my parents, asking if they would allow me to stay at school and be a paid monitress. The answer was, no. I would have liked to have stayed.¹⁰⁹

Maria was disappointed in her desire for a teaching career when her parents refused the offer. Her ambition had been thwarted, as it was for several of the women, because of family economy. Maria would have earned less as a monitor than she could earn as a domestic servant, so the decision was made for her.

Others could take up such openings. Margaret Bondfield became a school monitor for a year in 1886 when she was thirteen. In the Chard Boys School register for 1886 is the entry: 'have taken on Maggie Bondfield as a monitor for the first standard until another teacher has been found'. Margaret recalled:

I was paid 3s. a week. There were 42 boys and myself in one of these small classrooms and 38 of them passed in reading, writing and arithmetic.¹¹⁰

However, not all succeeded in their ambitions to teach. Annie Barnes was born in 1887 in Stepney, East London. She attended the Ben Johnson School and 'loved every minute.' Annie would have liked to become a teacher:

I did quite well in some exams and the headmistress called me into her room and asked me "Annie, would you like to be a teacher? I think you've got the makings of one." I

¹⁰⁷ Maria Hull, 'A Derbyshire Schooling', p.168.

¹⁰⁸ Maria Hull, 'A Derbyshire Schooling', p.170.

¹⁰⁹ Maria Hull, 'A Derbyshire Schooling', p.170.

¹¹⁰ Margaret Bondfield, *A Life's Work*, p.22.

loved school, I never used to be late and I said, “Oh yes, I would.” The headmistress said that Daisy Dormer (she became a singer) and I were at the top of the school. We used to have an examination and compete with the secondary school girls, and we came second, Daisy and me. I had a lot of prizes from the school board, books mostly.

“I want you to take the class next week,” the headmistress said. “I think you’ll be a good teacher.”¹¹¹

This was not to be, as Annie’s mother became ill and she was required at home to look after her younger siblings and to nurse her mother. Her ambitions were given up for family duty for a few years, but were to surface later in life as she found success in the political arena.

A similar pattern can be seen in the life of Winifred Griffiths who also held early ambitions to teach. Winifred, whose father was a Wesleyan lay preacher, was brought up in a strongly puritanical tradition, attending the Wesleyan chapel every Sunday and the local National school, in which the church was a strong influence, from 1899 until 1909. Winifred described how her ambition to succeed at school was inspired by a book she had read:

On reaching Standard 4, I began to take a real interest in schoolwork, ambition stirred and I wanted to do well. I had received as a prize a book called “Brave boys and girls”. In it were stories of perseverance in acquiring knowledge against the odds – stories of those who had triumphed over adverse circumstances and risen to fame and glory. I wanted to be like them.¹¹²

The drive for self-improvement for Winifred can be seen therefore to have resulted from examples of success, even if these were only fictional. They provided her with the idea that something better, a higher standard of living, educational success, and even ‘fame and

¹¹¹ Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie*, p.7.

¹¹² Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman’s Story*, p.28.

glory' was possible. Winifred recalled the series of opportunities which she took advantage of at school. When she reached standard five and six she was top of her class and she realized achievement was within her reach: 'now I had my eye on the top prizes of the school'.¹¹³ In standard seven, her final year, she won the coveted 'Guinea Bible', a legacy prize of a family-sized Bible awarded to the top girl and boy each year.

Attendance at Basingstoke High School was now considered. However, family economics were a limit to Winifred's progress, as her parents could not afford to continue her education, so at the age of fourteen she left school. Her aunt fell ill at this time, and Winifred looked after the family home while her mother was with the aunt. Winifred had not yet given up her ambition to further her education:

My father had talked to a workmate whose daughters were taking postal courses from a correspondence college, in order to pass some qualifying examinations for school teachers. To be a school teacher was the only career I could really feel excited about and I gladly consented to try my luck with lessons by post. But alas! With no one to guide me I was soon bogged down in a maze of subjects, many of which I had never tackled before. In addition I had to make do with substitute textbooks which I could borrow or buy cheaply, as my parents could not afford the recommended ones. Added to this I still had many domestic duties and to take my aunt out in a wheelchair. By the end of my first term it was fairly plain that I could not cope with the work required. If only I had had some expert guidance and the right books it might well have been otherwise.¹¹⁴

Winifred described the 'disappointment and frustration of failure' and soon afterwards she gave up her ambitions, at least temporarily, and became an apprentice at Burberry's Gabardine Factory, and from thence into domestic service. However, later in life, after her marriage, Winifred took evening classes at 'The Labour College', in London, part of

¹¹³ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.29.

¹¹⁴ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, pp.36-37.

Ruskin College, Oxford. Her husband, James Griffiths was a full-time student at the College, having won a two-year scholarship from the South Wales Miner's Federation. Winifred worked as a shop assistant during the day, and she recalled her evening classes at the College:

There was an interesting course on Industrial History with the Principal – W. W. Craik as lecturer; a series on Marxian economics, which I am afraid, left me little wiser than before; and an elocution class run for the students by Miss Clara Bunn.¹¹⁵

Interestingly, it is arguably the elocution class, which was one of the subjects also chosen by Alice Foley in Bolton several years earlier, which is most telling in the women's ambitions. By taking elocution classes they express their ambitions to improve themselves, publicly as well as privately. A good speaking voice would help with teaching, public speaking, and enhance social status, an appearance, at least, of upward mobility. Received pronunciation was aspirational, and proclaimed respectability for a working-class women who wished to present themselves well. This idea had been prevalent since the nineteenth century and before, as Lord Chesterfield noted in his popular book *Lord Chesterfield's Letters to His Son*, 'no man or woman can hope to become successful unless they articulate correctly'.¹¹⁶ Winifred, for instance, supported her husband's political career and later in life both she and Alice Foley became successful in local politics in their own right as is discussed below.¹¹⁷

Elocution classes were also one of the classes chosen by pupil-teacher, Mary Gawthorpe. Unlike becoming a teaching assistant or monitor, which provided teaching experience, respectability and a wage, but no qualifying examination, the Pupil Training Scheme gave

¹¹⁵ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, pp.81-82.

¹¹⁶ Phillip Dormer Stanhope ed. *Lord Chesterfield's Letters to His Son* (London: J. M. Dent, 1957), p.29.

¹¹⁷ See Chapter 6, p.289.

professional status on completion. It was a combination of practical class teaching and evening and weekend study, leading to a series of qualifying examinations. Usually taken up by the daughters of skilled workers and tradesmen, the scheme allowed bright working-class girls such as Mary Gawthorpe to stay on at school as paid teachers, while studying for qualifications at evening classes and part-time in teacher training colleges.¹¹⁸

The scheme meant that girls spent five years as a pupil teacher, usually from the school-leaving age of thirteen.¹¹⁹ It entailed long hours of work, and then study in the evenings and weekends. Studies were orientated to memorization of factual information that was to be presented in an explicit, institutionalized way. It was then repeated by pupils in their examinations in an equally stylised fashion. Training for the teaching qualification involved numerous standard examinations leading up to the State examination for the teaching certificate.¹²⁰

It was no easy pathway to success. An article in the *Cornhill Magazine* of 1873 stressed the long working and study hours required as pupil teachers, and pointed to social class differentials in terms of background and experience. The life of a schoolmistress, the article claimed, was not the life for a 'lady':

A pupil teacher has been acclimatized to this sort of life since she was thirteen, but a lady who enters upon it may find to her cost that she has altogether miscalculated her powers of endurance.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Pupil teaching was celebrated in fiction in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1896), as the only way to independence for the heroine, the intelligent, yet penniless, 'Sue'.

¹¹⁹ See, for instance, Stephen Heathorn, *School For Women* (London: Virago, 1996).

¹²⁰ For more on the Pupil Teaching Scheme, see also Michael John Illing 'A Little Vineyard of Economic Emancipation' in *Pupil Teachers and the Emancipation of Women 1870-1905* unpublished MA Thesis, University of London (1978), a study of the admission of working-class girls into the occupation of teaching; also 'The Experience of Schooling for Working-Class Girls and Boys in Nineteenth-Century England' in *Defining the Curriculum* ed. I. Goodson and S. Ball (London: Falmer, 1984).

¹²¹ D. Lathbury 'Ladies as Elementary Schoolmistresses' in *The Cornhill Magazine* Vol.28 (1873), pp.690-704.

By 1881 the proportion of working-class girls engaged in pupil teacher training was 41%, those from the lower middle classes 53%, and girls from professional families only 6%.¹²² The work was hard, and time spent at college was harder, with a Spartan life-style and strenuous domestic duties, unlikely to appeal to 'a lady'. Nevertheless by becoming pupil teachers, working-class girls received a comparatively sound education, free of charge, and with a wage which enabled them to contribute to the family economy while they were training. If they stayed the course and passed the examinations, it was also a way of achieving better paid employment than factory, domestic or shop work. As education historian Frances Widdowson has pointed out: 'they were coached for examinations which could lead to a college certificate, or at least an Acting Teacher's Certificate; and these certificates would give them some guarantee of economic security.'¹²³ Becoming a qualified teacher was therefore one way that working-class girls could see success in the form of upward mobility and a better standard of living.

Mary Gawthorpe chronicled very clearly her ambitions and strategy for achieving educational success, which she saw as leading to social advancement. She could see that life for herself and her mother and siblings could be better if she successfully completed her teacher training, and she was willing to do what was necessary to gain her qualifications. For Mary, a home away from her drunken father would give herself, her mother and siblings a happier and more comfortable life.

It had come as a dawning recognition for Mary Gawthorpe that her father was not teetotal. John Gawthorpe wasted family income as he turned more and more to drink. This realization seems to have triggered Mary's ambition to become a teacher. She

¹²² Cited in Jane Rendall, *Women in an Industrializing Society*, p. 75.

¹²³ Frances Widdowson, *Going Up Into the Next Class: Women and Elementary Teacher Training 1840-1914* (London: Hutchinson, 1983), pp. 77-78.

acknowledged a significant moment in her childhood when this ambition was crystallized.

Her father having come in drunk one night, Mary recalled her mother glancing at her:

Looking backwards I do not know, if Mother had not looked at me just then, as she did, whether in the interior places, I should have so judged my Father and in the judging deserted his standard. But Mother did look, and though I did not know all that look might have said, if translated into words, hidden within, known only to myself, a half-conscious resolve had formed. My soul affirms and remembers the very words: "When I am twentyone (*sic*)," it called itself. This was sometime between my tenth and eleventh year.¹²⁴

'When I am twentyone' can be taken as a very clear motive, it recurs often in Mary's autobiography. It encompasses Mary's ambition to rebel against her life with her father, who was leading the family into poverty with his alcoholism. The ensuing family tensions and her wish to protect her mother, who now slept with Mary rather than in the marital bed, resulted in Mary's resolve to achieve her ambition. She saw opportunities in education as the way to help her family.

At thirteen, Mary took a scholarship entrance examination for High School, which she passed, but she was not able to take advantage of the full-time education this offered, as the need for her to earn money to augment the income from her mother's laundry work was too great. However, when he realized that by joining the Pupil-Teaching Scheme, Mary would bring a wage into the house, her father, seeing another source of income, arranged for her to stay on at St. Michael's school as a pupil teacher. Undaunted, Mary took evening and Saturday classes to work towards a full teaching certificate. Eventually

¹²⁴ Mary Gawthorpe, *Up Hill to Holloway*, pp.26-27.

in 1902, just before she was twenty one, Mary succeeded in her ambition and was able to afford the rent for her own home into which she moved her mother and brother.¹²⁵

This window of opportunity was timely for these women, for in 1907 this entry to a more elite world for working-class children was closed. The recruits to qualified teaching from this date had to stay on at school until seventeen, and then go on to college for teacher training. There were bursaries available, but these were of little help to working-class girls required to contribute to the family economy and there was a marked decrease in entrants. The *Manchester Sunday Chronicle*, under the headline 'A Stolen Profession', pointed out that 'a barrier has been set up against the entrance of working-class children into the profession'.¹²⁶ Once again there was a discernable gender as well as class disability. Working-class parents who might be willing to make a sacrifice for their boys to train until the age of twenty-one, were unlikely to allow the same privilege to a girl, who might be married within a few years.

As well as teaching as a professional qualification, there was a channel for ambitious and able working-class women to achieve a university education. A few scholarships were available to help with finances. Ellen Wilkinson started at the local infant school at the age of six. A bright student, she was easily bored while waiting for others to catch her up, and she described her schooldays as 'the chaotic rebellion of my school years'.¹²⁷ Family funds would not stretch to further education so Ellen entered for a scholarship at age eleven to enable her to attend higher grade school. Board schools were attended by both working-class and middle-class girls, and perhaps because of this there were opportunities

¹²⁵ Sandra Stanley Holton, *Suffrage Days* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.116; see also, M Gawthorpe, 'Book of the Suffragette Prisoners' a typescript questionnaire, 1931, p.1, Suffragette Fellowship Collection, Manchester Public Library Archives.

¹²⁶ *Manchester Sunday Chronicle*, 12 October 1907.

¹²⁷ Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, p.406.

for working-class girls to move from the state sector to fee-paying grammar schools. The chairman of Manchester School board claimed, in 1887, that it was mainly the 'labour aristocracy' from the better paid 'upper strata' of the working class who benefited from this opportunity.¹²⁸ However, Ellen Wilkinson, the third child of a Manchester factory worker, took all the educational opportunities open to her as a girl born into the working-class, and like Mary Gawthorpe, she described in her autobiography the mechanics of her success in higher education.

Ellen passed a scholarship exam which enabled her to move first to the grammar school, then to teacher training college and finally to Manchester University via the scholarship system. Ellen, who described herself as 'just one of tens of thousands of working-class children playing in the streets of Manchester towards the end of last century', illustrated her progress through the system:

Once started at the infant school, I went straight through the "broad highway of state education", through elementary school, higher grade school, secondary school to the university. I won my first scholarship at the age of eleven, and from that time paid for my own education by scholarships till I left the university.¹²⁹

Tentative conclusions may be drawn as to how Ellen had the ambition to succeed in secondary education where other working-class children may not have. Earlier in her autobiography, Ellen pointed to encouragement from both of her parents. She described her mother as "'advanced" for her day', and in her it is possible to see the seeds of Ellen's determination to succeed. Ellen recalled her mother's protests at the 'iron conventions which gripped working-class life at that period'.¹³⁰ Ellen also recalled that after school

¹²⁸ J. Lawson and H Silver, *A Social History of Education* (London: Methuen, 1973), p.338.

¹²⁹ Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, pp.403-404.

¹³⁰ Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, p.399.

her father took her, as a twelve-year-old, to evening lectures at the local Mechanics

Institute and Free Trade Hall:

My father, a lonely man, who yet hated going out by himself, liked attending lectures on theological subjects, so he took me with him. I heard Dr. Frank Ballard discourse on Christian Evidence, and the Free Trade Hall lectures on Darwin and evolution. We went to lots of lectures on evolution, for and against. I was barely twelve, and had no background for most of it. By the time I was fourteen I was reading Haeckel, and Huxley and Darwin with my father.¹³¹

Evening classes and lectures were therefore open to women at local Mechanics Institutes, and attracted a great number of women from a variety of occupations.¹³² Schoolgirls such as Ellen Wilkinson were able to attend the lectures although always with friends or family members, so that respectability was maintained.

All of the autobiographers benefited in varying degrees from educational reforms as they were growing up. Curtailment of working hours and provision for schooling, while redefining the years of childhood for some, did not necessarily mean that all working class girls of the period received formal education. The cohort revealed that educational reform was far from uniform across England. Educational advances did not necessarily follow a chronological or a geographical pattern, nor did it depend on living in a city or country environment. Hannah Mitchell, born on a remote Peak District farm in 1871, a year after the Act providing elementary schooling for all, had only two weeks of formal schooling. Twenty years later Betty May, born in inner city London in 1891, attended school only while she was living with relatives in Somerset. In contrast, Ellen Wilkinson, born around the same time as Betty, in 1891 in Ardwick, Manchester, attended school from the age of

¹³¹ Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, pp. 404-405.

¹³² For the history of the Mechanics Institutes and women's involvement in them see, for instance, June Purvis *Hard Lessons*.

five and, with the aid of a series of scholarships, gained a degree at Manchester University. Ellen Wilkinson and Mary Gawthorpe are perhaps the best examples amongst the autobiographers of working-class women who succeeded in gaining the sort of education hitherto reserved for middle-class girls, and it may not be coincidence that both of these women had the benefit of parental support and encouragement, in Ellen's case, from both parents, and in Mary's, from her mother. They both described the mechanics of their route through the opportunities opened up by educational reforms to an educational success denied to many women, especially working-class women, earlier in the nineteenth century.

Conclusion

In contrast to autobiographies written by women earlier in the nineteenth century, most of the cohort committed a significant part of their texts to descriptions of gaining an education. They highlighted the changes from the paucity of educational opportunities for working-class girls earlier in the century and showed that by the end of the century it was possible that ten or more years of life for working-class girls like themselves could be devoted to acquiring a formal elementary education. However, protective legislation restricting child labour, combined with educational legislation, could cause tensions for working-class family economics which in some cases meant that girls were not always given these educational opportunities.

Nevertheless the majority of the cohort placed great value on learning to read and those denied a formal education described the extraordinary lengths they went to in order to gain this skill by informal means: listening to people read, at church, Sunday school and in the family circle, accessing reading materials within the home and from neighbours, libraries

and subscription lists. They drew comparisons with the previous generation, some of whom never learnt to read.

There were also advances in secondary education during the period: the Pupil Teacher Scheme, and various scholarship provisions, enabled some women to achieve professional qualifications. Their autobiographies reveal pathways to continued education through evening classes, and describe life-long learning and enjoyment of their literacy.

Importantly, for their later autobiographical writing, education also gave them the ability to think about the world and their situation in it. In order to gain educational success, the autobiographers had to negotiate what has been seen as a top-down model of social control: the ideology of gender and class in the schooling of working-class girls.

Their writing discloses the variety of educational success achieved by individuals, and the mechanics of their achievements. Although it is difficult to see change over time in such a small sample, especially since developments were uneven across geographical, class, and even family boundaries, it reveals that working-class girls were now able to aspire to a good primary education as a stepping-stone to further education or a better job. How far they progressed was dependent on a variety of factors. Many of the cohort were ambitious but would not have been able to achieve education on their own. Girls were helped in their education by the support, financial and otherwise, of an extended network of family members, friends and neighbours. Some families wished their daughters to gain an education, Mary Gawthorpe for instance had great encouragement from her mother, and the role model of her youngest aunt who had trained as a teacher. Alice Foley's father allowed her to stay on at school for a year instead of becoming a half-timer in the local factory. Winifred Griffith's father investigated correspondence courses for his daughter.

Some were not so lucky and tensions developed in families such as Hannah Mitchell's, where her mother refused to allow her more than two weeks at school. However, Hannah's uncle taught her to read, and she borrowed books from her brothers and various neighbours.

The fact that so many men were involved in helping their female relatives toward an education is also suggestive of a change in social perceptions of what it was acceptable for women to do or become. Feminist writing may have established a history of top-down control for keeping working-class girls in their place, and certainly ideologies of gender and class control did reinforce working-class women's domestic role by limiting their educational choice. However, the cohort shows that either there were discrepancies in such history, or there was a gap between rhetoric and reality which allowed some negotiation: it enabled those of the cohort who had the ability, motivation and support to access the sort of education which fitted them for a wider range of employment than their mothers could have aspired to.

The cohort reveal that the key factor at least in the early years of their lives, is their family environment: the strata of working class to which the family belonged, proximity of schools, family economics, position and number of children in family. Perhaps most important of all was the attitude of the parents, and with some exceptions, this depended mostly the attitude of the mother. Her acceptance or rejection of the social order and the work discipline, her ideas on the importance of education, and her management of the family budget – not least so that educational opportunities could be taken up - as well as the amount of calls on her daughter's time during school hours, all had relevance to the amount of schooling the women received. A mother's attitude to her daughter may

therefore have played its part in the drive and determination of individual women to overcome, and in doing so to help to change, societal constraints of gender and class in education.

Chapter 4: Domesticity

Introduction

A happy marriage, a well-run and respectable home, and successful motherhood, were seen as the domestic ideal during the period. The learning of domestic skills such as needlework, cookery and childcare were strongly promoted in elementary schooling in order to promote a high standard of working-class family life, and also to provide good domestic servants.¹ Grants were given to schools for domestic science, cookery and laundry classes. The teaching of these skills, and the training of teachers to impart them were given importance in teacher-training establishments, and domestic science gained some status in universities. Domesticity during this period was therefore important to society, and it was also important to the majority of the cohort. They wrote about their domestic role in positive terms, and twelve of them saw it as one of the most important facets of their lives, featuring it prominently in their autobiographies.²

In conforming to the domestic ideal these women were also proclaiming their respectability. Respectability meant conforming to socially acceptable behaviours: it had a moral dimension, but was generally manifested in practicalities such as taking good care of the family in a clean and well-run home, in helping others, and in being a good daughter, mother, wife and neighbour. Importance was placed on showing that they conformed to these behaviours; and respectability was one of the most important societal values for almost all the women. It encompassed keeping up a good appearance both within the home and in the surrounding neighbourhood. Children were to be well

¹ An paper on this subject was presented at the Women's History Network conference in 2002, and has since been published. See, Carol Jenkins, 'Learning Domesticity in Late Victorian England', in *Women's History Magazine*, issue 44, June 2003, pp.19-30.Appended.

² The twelve who saw domesticity as the epitome of success were: Isabella Cooke, Agnes Cowper, Mildred Edwards, Grace Foakes, Rose Gibbs, Bessie Harvey, Mrs Hills, Daisy Hills, Maria Hull, Louise Jermy, Emma Smith and Susan Sylvester.

behaved, attend school and Sunday school; they had to be neat, clean, and punctual and seen to be so. There were also financial benefits for well-brought-up children when they left school. Working-class girls from respectable homes, like Rose Gibbs and Winifred Griffiths, could aspire to work as domestic servants in a large house where conditions were better and there were more opportunities for advancement than in small establishments. Or, like Margaret Bondfield, they could apply for training as shop assistants in one of the new large department stores, which would only employ working-class girls if they came from respectable homes.³

Domesticity was an attainable goal for most of the cohort, and, as well as the twelve who saw it as of major importance, most of the women welcomed their domestic role at some stage in their lives, particularly after marriage and when they had young children at home. Also important to the well-being of the family as a whole was the acquisition of child-care skills. Society valued the good mother and the caring woman, and in presenting themselves as having nurturing skills, the autobiographers illustrated that they conformed to this ideal. Literary and artistic representations of women and their social role suggested that even Victorian writers and artists who were critical of prevailing assumptions tended, in the end, to see women as determined by their potential as mothers.⁴ Recently, critic Matthew Sweet has underlined the ‘propaganda’ of texts such as Ruskin’s *Of Queen’s Gardens* and Coventry Patmore’s *The Angel in the House*, both of which gave idealized views of women and invited them to see themselves as fulfilling an ideological role

³ Erika Diane Rappaport, *Shopping For Pleasure: Women in the Making of London’s West End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p.201.

⁴ For example, see Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poem *Lord Walter’s Wife* (1850), or one of John Ruskin’s most popular works, ‘Of Queen’s Gardens’ one of two lectures, later published together in a book entitled *Sesame and Lilies* (1865).

essentially different from that of men.⁵ These texts can be used to illustrate the different view of domesticity which has evolved since they were written. Patmore's domestic epic poem, for instance, once popular at all levels of society, has recently been described as 'now-notorious'.⁶ Such texts centred the ideal female figure in the separate sphere of the home, and most particularly as a mother at the centre of her family.⁷ As the twentieth century progressed it became unfashionable for women to be content with ambitions that were realized within the compass of the home. By the end of the century society expected 'more' of women and it became acceptable to shun domesticity of any kind in favour of a career. From the perspective of the twenty-first century then, the late nineteenth-century viewpoint can seem difficult to understand; and there is potentially a difficulty in reading the autobiographies as the modern age confronts the attitudes of women born between 1870-1900.

It might be expected that some of the cohort rebelled against the confines of domesticity, and indeed, a few did, both in childhood and adulthood. This inevitably resulted in tension – as they tried to reconcile their domestic and public roles – and indeed some of the autobiographers were describing a dilemma between home life and a career that has been increasingly confronted by women since then. Hannah Mitchell in particular, describes this tension most eloquently, although even she recalled that she enjoyed her time at home with her son. However the remainder, with two exceptions, strike a happy balance between work and home: most write of their enjoyment of home life and pride in their respectability, and also accept or enjoy their work commitments for at least part of their lives – usually before marriage and after their youngest child starts school. Two of

⁵ Coventry Patmore (1823-96) wrote *The Angel in the House* (1893) as a tribute poem to married love and the joys of domestic life.

⁶ Matthew Sweet, *Inventing the Victorians* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p.181.

⁷ Matthew Sweet, *Inventing the Victorians*, p.181.

the cohort do not mention their domestic life after childhood: Betty May, the model and night-club dancer, married a succession of wealthy men and was more concerned with writing about her adventures, while Margaret Bondfield, who remained a spinster all of her life, wrote mainly of her successful political career. Indeed, she claimed that it was difficult to separate her own history from the history of the Labour party. Yet in 1924, when she was a leading trade union activist and was later to become the first female Cabinet Minister, she promulgated the ideal that the rightful place for women's duty and interest was in the domestic sphere. That year Margaret addressed the Independent Labour Party's summer school on the theme 'Women's Place in the Community':

The woman who fulfils the function belonging to her sex, who builds up the life of the family around her, who recognises the importance of bringing to the service of the home every new development of science, who realizes that her job is to create an environment for every child...to raise the whole line of civilization to a higher place – that woman is doing the greatest work in the world.⁸

Margaret's autobiography is almost entirely, apart from her childhood, set in the public sphere of work: it covers her trade union work and the majority of it details the part she played in the history of the Labour movement. Yet even she, as the quote above reveals, acknowledged the domestic ideal. The complexities of the situation which obtained in even this relatively small group of women reflects change over time: domesticity was not the only route to success for the cohort once they had left school. It was becoming possible for working-class women to achieve outside the domestic sphere, as Margaret Bondfield illustrated. But her story has little place in a discussion about domesticity, and this subject will be addressed in subsequent chapters.

⁸ Mary Agnes Hamilton, *Margaret Bondfield* (London: Leonard Parsons, 1924), p.183.

Most of the cohort therefore valued their home and domestic skills. They portrayed themselves as the moral guardians at the centre of the home, and in taking care of their family they epitomised contemporary notions of respectability and status. Within the family, women conformed to societal conventions of the 'good' wife and mother, and these were continued as domestic skills were taught to their daughters at school. The cohort, with few exceptions, saw that the acquisition of domestic skills equipped them for success in their domestic lives and they accepted the opportunity given by schools and evening classes to take lessons in sewing, cookery, childcare and household management. Between school and marriage, their domestic skills could be adapted for the work-place - good servants were much in demand - and eleven of the autobiographers turned to employment as domestic servants, laundresses or cooks. The utilization of domestic skills in paid employment will be discussed in the next chapter. Only Hannah Mitchell and Louise Jermy rebelled against the enforced and unfair burden of their domestic chores in childhood. In general, although the autobiographies revealed that not all felt that they were discriminated *against* in the emphasis on learning domestic skills, working-class girls had little choice but to accept this gendered position, defined for them at home and at school. This shaped their activities towards 'female' home-based domestic skills, and taught them to be 'good' girls.

The Good Girl

All of the women's autobiographies indicate that they were trained in domestic skills as children, at first within the home, and later, as was discussed in the previous chapter, during gendered lessons at school. The idea of domesticity was an integral and normal part of their girlhood. The majority described chores as an accepted part of their life and expressed pride in their ability to help their families. For them, the acquisition of

domestic skills within the family was a stepping-stone towards family respectability and their own success in a future home of their own.

Whether they viewed it positively or, like Hannah and Louise, negatively, early training in domestic skills was not initially a matter of choice. As young girls, the cohort learned at home because they had to. Most working-class women had little alternative to performing their own domestic chores and looking after their own children, and so looked to their children, and principally the eldest girl, for help. The employment of domestic workers in the home was out of the question financially. Only Annie Barnes recorded that her parents employed help during her childhood: 'we always had help in the house, a washerwoman used to come every Monday.'⁹

Domestic training for girls within the family was effectively an apprenticeship. Although the girls remained in their home environment, roles, knowledge, and status were transmitted via a combination of instruction and emulation, as in any training situation. Inside the family, relationships between the parents and the organization of domestic life constituted the first lessons in the sexual division of labour. If these relationships conformed to the patterns the child could see in the world around her, in the families of friends and neighbours, then they were likely to be accepted as 'normal'. In most cases mothers provided their small daughters with their first model of feminine behaviour. Most girls learnt domestic skills in what was, usually, a non-threatening, familiar and informal setting. The ideology of service to, and dependence upon, the male members of the family permeated their childhood.

⁹ Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie*, p.7.

The autobiographers recalled play during childhood, when games were part of their learning experiences. The games played by boys and girls were very different, and reflecting a marked gender difference, they showed how early, and deeply, gendered roles were imprinted. Girls' games illustrated female attributes in the making, they were more sociable, and less aggressively competitive, as Mildred Edwards recalled:

Then of course we had our dolls. I loved mine and kept them until I was quite a big girl, and very reluctantly gave them away. The lads had their games too, marbles, whip and top, peggy, football, cricket, also rugby, but Mothers thought it all a bit too rough, as there were many black eyes and bloody noses.¹⁰

Alice Foley, at play in her Bolton childhood, described how she and her friends enjoyed imitating the sorts of gendered occupations followed by their parents. While the boys were builders the girls were 'busy' housewives:

Our childhood playgrounds were the streets, and for a short time, the ruins of near-by Chamber Hall, a former mansion once the home of a county family, now demolished to make way for an infant school and new houses. Before the site was re-occupied we neighbouring kids spent gleeful hours among the ruins and rubble. Whilst the boys built castles and viaducts out of larger boulders, we smaller girls played in the sand-pits. With a good 'knocker' we powdered stones into imaginary pepper, sugar, salt and snuff; buttons were used for money and with the aid of a pair of toy scales we became a group of busy little housewives, buying and selling groceries to our mutual satisfaction.¹¹

Almost all of the women in the cohort recalled helping in the home with domestic chores during their girlhood and while some were happy to help their mothers, others felt injustice when comparing the extent of their duties to the few their brothers were expected to perform. This gender differentiation at home was not an unusual situation in families and has been well-documented elsewhere, for example the historian Carol Dyhouse has

¹⁰ Mildred Edwards, *Our City...Our People*, p. 12.

¹¹ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p. 28.

drawn attention to 'differences in treatment of children according to sex.'¹² Some girls, as in Hannah Mitchell's case, were expected to help full-time. Hannah's parents had borrowed money to start a farm, so the children, especially the girls, were expected to help with the work:

It was a hard life for us all, especially the girls, as my mother was a harder taskmaster than my father. She never seemed to realize how small and weak we were. She made us sweep and scrub, turn the heavy mangle on washing days and the still heavier churn on butter-making days. Stone floors had to be whitened, brasses and steel fire-irons polished every week.¹³

Hannah resented having to work so hard, and noted the preferential treatment given to her brothers:

On winter evenings there was sewing by hand, making and mending shirts and underwear. At eight years old my weekly task was to darn all the stockings for the household, and I think my first reaction to feminism began at this time when I was forced to darn my brothers' stockings while they read or played cards or dominoes. Sometimes the boys helped with rugmaking, or in cutting up wool or picking feathers for beds and pillows, but for them it was voluntary work; for the girls it was compulsory, and the fact that the boys could read if they wished filled my cup of bitterness to the brim.¹⁴

Hannah acknowledged that the unfairness of this gender discrimination in childhood sowed the seeds of feminism. Reaction to the enforcement of what she perceived as an unfair burden of chores was at the root of her success later in life as will be shown later. It gave her the strength of character and determination to become a leader of the WSPU and the Labour Party in the North of England.

¹² Dyhouse cites the different training given to girls and boys in most families: Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, pp. 3-4.

¹³ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p. 43

¹⁴ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.43.

However most of the women viewed the undertaking of domestic chores as a step towards their own success in adulthood and were proud of their ability to help with the smooth running of their home. These experiences as children gave them an idea of their own self-worth. Their own domestic skills made a difference to their mother's workload, and ultimately contributed to the respectability of the family as a whole. Alice Foley expressed her pride and pleasure in undertaking duties in the home when she was young. She remembered the importance for family respectability of one particular domestic chore:

On reaching an appropriate age we younger children were allocated small duties about the house and I remember with deep pleasure my first initiation into the care of our family aspidistra which, at that time, occupied a place of honour on top of the sewing machine. Each Friday morning the ritual was observed, first to place the giant plant-pot overhead in water in the kitchen sink. Even today I can hear the eager bubbling and gurgling of those thirsty roots sucking in the refreshing draught. Then the single leaves were carefully sponged with a wash-leather, cracked portions and faded tips nipped off to make room for younger shoots, and all finally polished with a spot off milk. Under these ministrations our aspidistra flourished prodigiously, and though in after years this household favourite of the poor became despised and rejected, for me, in those formative decades, it was a much-loved oasis in a flower-less home.¹⁵

Alice was aware of the significance of the aspidistra in its 'place of honour', for her family. These plants were iconic amongst working-class families for several decades at the end of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. They signalled respectability, and illustrated the family efforts to keep up appearances. Aspidistras flourished in poor light and with few nutrients so were the 'much loved favourite of the poor', as Alice claimed, especially in industrial areas such as her home-town of Bolton, where few other

¹⁵ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.24.

houseplants could survive the polluted air and lack of light behind net curtains in gloomy back-to-back streets.

Other women expressed similar pride in undertaking domestic chores and performing them well. Emma Smith undertook domestic duties with some degree of enjoyment, when, after a harrowing few years with a travelling hurdy-gurdy man, she was taken into a Salvation Army home.

Saturday evening was mending time. I was taught to darn my stockings; at least an attempt was made to teach me. Everyone was given mending to do. Then clean linen would be given round for the following day. The Home had a steam laundry, and we children on Saturdays or in holidays usually went over for an hour or two just to rub collars or some such light duty. I don't think it did us any harm. We had certain duties to fulfil on Saturday morning, such as rubbing up the wooden handled forks...with what pride we made them shine! ¹⁶

For Emma, the performance of these simple tasks had a great significance as part of the normal domesticity which was so lacking in her miserable childhood. Emma's training enabled her to enter domestic service before her marriage, and it was here that she met her future husband, as he was a gardener in the same house. Her acquisition of domestic skills added a welcome normalcy and respectability to her life and her domestic training later provided her with a job and a way up in the world.

Also important to the well-being of the family as a whole was the acquisition of child-care skills. In working-class homes, mothering skills were essentially a practical advantage for bringing up a family. Although some secondary schools and night-schools offered child-care classes, most of the autobiographers learnt these skills at home during the practical

¹⁶ Emma Smith, *A Cornish Waif's Story*, pp.65-67.

care of younger siblings, often alongside other domestic duties. Mildred Edwards, born in 1889, was the third child in her family. She was expected to miss school to help her mother when younger children were born. Mildred accepted without question that she would look after her younger brother and sister when required, even if it meant missing school. She revealed her pride in her nurturing skills, the closeness of family bonds, and the willing effort it took for her as a small girl to take on the care of the younger children:

One day I remember well I was kept at home to mind the babies, while mother did the family washing. The little baby had to be nursed a lot, as she was delicate, and I was rocking her on my knee and had got her to sleep, when my little brother Billy, toddled up and lisped “put that one in the cradle Milly and nurse me”. What could I do, so I took him up as well and he too went to sleep. I called Mother that they were both asleep, but she had gone out to put the clothes to dry, so I had to sit until they had their nap. I think I was about nine at the time. However I was healthy and happy.¹⁷

Constant child-bearing took its toll on Mildred’s mother, for as Mildred grew older she records further time taken from school, although not without a touch of pride in her ability to take on an adult role:

I had to stay off school, a good deal at this time, as Mamma’s health was poor and she just couldn’t cope with the housework and the cooking. I got my hand in fairly early.¹⁸

Even when she was back at school, chores were still to be performed. Mildred recalled walking home from school and back during the mid-day break when:

Sometimes there was a job waiting for us at home. Washing day we had to rub out all the family stockings, rinse them well, put them through the mangle and peg them out to dry on the line – every stocking a peg. Another day perhaps setting the bread and kneading it, that

¹⁷ Mildred Edwards, *Our City...Our People*, p.10.

¹⁸ Mildred Edwards, *Our City...Our People*, p.41.

was while Mama got the dinner ready, then back to school, pretty often at the trot, but I think I was only late once.¹⁹

Mildred seemed to have accepted her lunch-time chores which she thought were well within her capabilities. As she 'got her hand in' she showed her skills in the sort of multi-tasking required to be successful in the domestic sphere and demonstrated her ability to handle the competing demands of school and home.

Winifred Griffiths also contributed her labour towards the successful running of the family home by helping with younger siblings and general household duties. Before she was old enough for school, she looked after her baby brother while her mother was busy with wash-day chores. When Winifred was aged six, a second baby brother was born and the chores became more demanding and varied:

I now had to help mother with her work. Dusting was an easy job, but I also had to learn to clean the baby's pram, to clean steel knives on a board, and to polish forks and spoons. We kept chickens in a house and run which my father had built at the bottom of the garden and I was required to sweep up grit from the gutters outside on the road and bring it in a bucket to be given to the hens to harden the eggshells. Again when horses obligingly left manure on the road I must shovel it up for the garden. Another job was to break up small brushwood for starting the fire. This wood came in small bundles called 'faggots', four or five feet in length. The thicker sticks in the middle had to be left for my father to chop.²⁰

Ada Nield Chew was born on a farm near Crewe, the oldest daughter of thirteen children.

The only other surviving daughter was born with epilepsy, so Ada was the only dependable daughter in a household where for many years there was a new baby every year. Her help became indispensable to her mother. Boys in the family were not expected to assist with the cooking, baking, cleaning, washing and care of younger children, so Ada

¹⁹ Mildred Edwards, *Our City...Our People*, p.14.

²⁰ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, pp.13-14.

had to shoulder all these burdens from an early age. When she was eight she was sent over the fields in the dark to fetch the midwife, and after this incident she ‘was proud when she overheard her mother telling a neighbour that “Ada was a good girl.”’²¹ Ada’s early training proved essential to the family: her mother died when Ada was aged sixteen and the running of the home and care of younger siblings became her sole responsibility. Some thirty years later Ada was to recount this story to her daughter; the pride in her ability to take on an adult role and to be ‘a good girl’ was still obviously a strong memory.

The training in domesticity begun at home continued for working-class girls in school, with sewing and cookery classes. As was discussed in the previous chapter, older girls were in many cases able to take housewifery classes, and the numbers of girls voluntarily attending these classes points towards the fact that the situation was tolerated, and in many cases welcomed, by working-class girls who enjoyed, or at least were resigned to, the attainment of domestic skills. Housewifery classes run by local School boards proved so popular that they often had to be re-run in the evenings. And in 1878, when domestic economy was made a compulsory subject specific to girls, Alice Westlake, an Education Board member, observed that ‘the cookery lessons were very popular.’²²

Nevertheless, the enjoyment of class- and gender-specific lessons must not be taken as proof that no top-down social control existed. Working-class girls’ education did have a domestic orientation with which they were forced to comply.²³ There were societal

²¹ Ada Nield Chew, *The Life and Writings of a Working Woman*, p.9.

²² A Special Report compiled for the Education Department in 1896-97, cited by Jane Martin in ‘The Only Place for Women was Home: Gender and class in the Elementary School Curriculum, 1870-1904’, *Journal of the Association of Open University Graduates* (1993/4), p. 15.

²³ New research on the subject has illustrated that this situation continued well into the twentieth century even when the call for domestic staff was almost at an end. In Norwich in 1939 for example the labour market for women and girls showed a ‘large increase in shop and office work, a move from sewing trades to boot and shoe manufacture and a reduction in domestic service.’ Yet the domestic skills classes continued.

assumptions that the purpose of education for working-class girls was to turn them into good domestic servants. Domestic skills classes were therefore a reflection of separate spheres ideology, itself a reflection of the need for society to have girls in low-paid and low-skilled domestic work.

Furthermore, gendered schooling also illustrated assumptions that women's role in society lay in the private sphere of the home. The teaching of domestic skills in schools, of course, required trained teachers to encompass domestic subjects. Teacher-training colleges continued the gender and class discrimination which obtained in schools and was reflected in society. Tied in with assumptions of a domestic future for women, female pupil teachers in 1871 had to show themselves to be competent seamstresses and to satisfy the inspector of their annual progress in needlework.²⁴ This situation continued over the period 1870-1900. More than thirty years later, in 1904, an article in the *Contemporary Review* argued that for girls, training in cookery was more important than the three Rs, because, 'it has directly to do with the preservation of health, the comfort of home life and the prevention of that curse of civilization, drunkenness.'²⁵ Cookery teachers, it seemed, now had a responsibility for the well-being of the nation.

This ideology was intensified during the early years of the twentieth century due to heightened fears about the standard of working-class health, arising from the poor health and fitness of the British soldiers recruited for the Boer War when a high percentage of such recruits were found unfit for service. Teachers were reminded that girls needed a thorough training in domestic duties and that they must 'be taught " to set a high value on

See Jenny Zmroczek, ' "If girls would take more kindly to domestic work": Norwich, 1900-39' in *Women's History Magazine*, 44, (June 2003), pp. 9-18.

²⁴ Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor: Home, School and Street in London 1870-1914*, p.143.

²⁵ 'Physical Deterioration and the Teaching of Cookery' in *Contemporary Review* (London:1904), pp. 88-89.

the housewife's position" on the grounds that national efficiency must inevitably depend upon a strong tradition of home life.²⁶ By the end of the nineteenth century domesticity in general had been given a higher status. Home management and social science were becoming acknowledged subjects for further education and gained a higher academic standing in the late-Victorian and Edwardian era.²⁷

Educational reforms which enabled even the poorest of working-class girls to gain some kind of education in domestic skills, were sometimes acknowledged by the autobiographers. Maria Hull, for instance, wrote: 'After the 1891 Education Act we were supplied, besides copybooks, with materials for needlework and lined paper for patterns.'²⁸ The women recalled, with evident pleasure, complex details of the domestic-skills classes many years later. Their vivid recollections were a further sign that the learning of domestic skills was welcomed, and enjoyed, by many of the cohort. Maria, writing her autobiography in 1968, at the age of seventy-seven described her sewing classes at the National Board School. At age nine 'we girls made calico underwear and did much knitting as well.'²⁹ At the age of ten, in 1891, Maria transferred to the girl's department of the Board School and here the sewing lessons are obviously a vivid memory. The minutiae of fabrics, colours and stitches are recollected:

In 'scientific' needlework lessons, we cut out paper patterns of undergarments – drawers, chemise and nightgowns – to our individual measurements. I kept the patterns for a long time and found them useful. We were taught how to patch on both calico and flannel, how to gather and make buttonholes and a gusset. I made a maroon-coloured flannel petticoat, feather-stitched in golden silk on the hem. In knitting we made our own

²⁶ Penny Tinkler, 'Girlhood and Growing Up' in *Women in Twentieth-Century Britain*, ed. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (London: Longman, 2001), p.37.

²⁷ See, for example, Mark Pottle, 'McKillop, Margaret S. (1864-1929): Lecturer in Home Economics', in *The Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2004).

²⁸ Maria Hull, 'A Derbyshire Schooling', p.170.

²⁹ Maria Hull, 'A Derbyshire Schooling', p.168.

woollen stockings, with either 'Dutch' or 'French' heels,
and woollen gloves.³⁰

Maria saw her sewing skills as important and remembered their successful acquisition when, at the age of eighty-eight, she wrote her autobiography. She recalled her use of these skills later in life, as she kept the patterns from her sewing class and 'found them useful' in her married life.

Similarly, Winifred Griffiths attended the National School in Overton, Hampshire, and at the age of seven went up to the 'big school', which was separated into boys' school and girls' school. Although these were in the same block the rooms were quite separate.

Winifred, like Maria, particularly recalls sewing lessons in the girls' school:

The girls' school had about 120 pupils and usually three teachers beside the headmistress. I remember very little about lessons in standard 1 & 2, except that I knitted a red woollen scarf and learned to stitch on pieces of calico and afterwards hemmed real handkerchiefs and dusters.³¹

Needlework classes were perhaps recalled by Winifred as they had a resonance within her family. From an early age she had helped her two aunts in their sewing business which took place in her parent's front room. Winifred used the sewing skills learned at school and home in her first job at a local gabardine factory. Her domestic training continued to be important throughout her life; both at work in her later position in domestic service, and in her home life after her marriage when bringing up her four children. Many of the cohort, therefore, recalled gender-specific sewing, knitting, and cooking, lessons from their schooldays. They welcomed the opportunity to learn domestic skills at a time when society valued domesticity and when avenues to advancement could be found in running

³⁰ Maria Hull, 'A Derbyshire Schooling', p.170.

³¹ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.27.

their own home or in domestic service: educational reforms thus allowed them to succeed in the domestic sphere.

Historian Caroline Steedman has argued that the teaching of household skills to girls in schools was seen as practice for the 'real role' of mother.³² This official ideology, she continued, was developed within a set of social theories that, at the end of the nineteenth century, saw schools as places where working-class children might be 'compensated' for belonging to working-class families. The Whitbread Report on popular education used the same argument: it claimed that at school these children could be physically and emotionally compensated for the perceived absence of morality and discipline in working-class homes.³³ The autobiographers reveal that, rather than being absent from working-class homes, ideologies of morality and discipline were, rather, an important underpinning to the way most of the women were brought up.

Annie Barnes illustrated this morality as she described her feelings of guilt when, as a young girl, she had stolen a few flowers from inside the gates of a large house near where her family were staying on their few days at the seaside. She was caught by the owner of the house, who then allowed her to take the flowers. Annie recalls him explaining kindly:

"There are plenty here."
He walked me back to where we were staying and he sent
flowers every day of our holiday. Charming he was.
Mind you, I never told my mother how it all happened.
She'd have been furious. I just said I'd admired the
garden and he'd given me some of the flowers from it, or
something like that. That's the only thing I've ever stolen
in my life.³⁴

³² Carolyn Steedman, *Past Tenses* (London: Rivers Oram, 1992) p.189.

³³ *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into Popular Education*, pp. 81-99, cited in *Past Tenses*, ed. Carolyn Steedman, p.190.

³⁴ Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie*, pp. 9-10.

Annie lied to her mother in order to escape detection of this small transgression. But she had learned her lesson instilled by her mother's moral code. She felt guilt in the act of stealing the flowers and in telling the lie to her mother - in not being a good girl. That she still recalled the incident, and her guilty feelings, at the age of ninety-two, when recording her autobiography, suggests the importance she placed on the moral values implicit in her upbringing.

A Good Wife and Mother

The place of the good mother as moral guardian at the centre of the home was an important attribute of respectability, already shown to be an important facet in the women's childhoods, and continuing in importance as they grew up. For the twelve autobiographers who described their success as centred in the domestic, private sphere of home, marriage and family, their role also meant holding a position of moral guardianship and ensuring their family adhered to social mores based on a broadly Christian way of life. The importance of family values and the notion of respectability were potent ideas which emerged in the early nineteenth century, promulgated by, and associated with, the rising middle classes.³⁵

As the nineteenth century progressed, the idea of respectability extended beyond the middle classes and was universally adopted by those families who had aspired towards bettering themselves. It was increasingly portrayed through magazines and literature aimed at respectable working people; or through a number of middle-class novels, also read by working-class families, such as those by Charles Dickens; or else was assimilated

³⁵ For arguments supporting the idea that separate feminine characteristics were associated with the middle class see for example: Philippe Aries *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, ed. Robert Baldick (London: Vintage, 1962); J. A. Banks *Prosperity and Parenthood. A Study of Family Planning Amongst the Victorian Middle Classes* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954); and J. A. and Olive Banks, *Feminism and Family Planning in Victorian England* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1964).

by families where Sunday school, Band of Hope and church or chapel were part of the weekly routine.³⁶ In addition, domestic service was the largest employer of female labour and it may well have been that many working-class girls absorbed some middle-class values held by their employers, and then attempted to put these in place in their own families.³⁷

Of the cohort, nineteen are known to have married and, with the exception of Betty May and Margaret Bondfield, they all saw the successful running of their own homes as an achievable ambition. Increased wages for working men by the end of the nineteenth century meant that financial constraints were eased for working class families where the main breadwinner was male and in regular employment. When total household earnings reached a certain level, which varied according to individual family requirements, the value of a wife and mother at home, not least as a symbol of family respectability, tended to outstrip the value of her wage: as Joanna Bourke has argued, there was much to be gained from full-time housewifery.³⁸

Furthermore, apart from industrial areas, many work-places refused to employ married women.³⁹ It was frowned on in many cases for married women to be in paid employment outside the home.⁴⁰ This was especially true after the Armistice in 1918, when women, particularly married women, who sought to retain the jobs they had taken on as 'war work' were criticised for taking the work from returning ex-servicemen.⁴¹ Apart from the

³⁶ Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor*, p.53.

³⁷ *A Hidden Workforce: Homeworkers in England, 1850-1985*, ed. Shelley Pennington and Belinda Westover (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p.5.

³⁸ Joanna Bourke 'Housewifery in Working-class England 1860-1914' in *Women's Work: The English Experience* ed. Pamela Sharpe (London: Arnold, 1998), pp. 332-359.

³⁹ Shelley Pennington and Belinda Westover, *A Hidden Workforce*, pp. 5-6.

⁴⁰ Shelley Pennington and Belinda Westover, *A Hidden Workforce*, pp. 6-8.

⁴¹ Pamela Horne, *Women in the 1920s* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1995), p. 73.

1914-18 war years, working-class women who aspired to respectability in the first quarter of the twentieth century therefore, tended to give up paid employment when they married, or at least when they began having children. In addition, conditions in paid employment for many women, although improving in industry in terms of hours worked, were often poor in domestic service, and this enhanced the appeal of full-time domesticity.⁴²

For over half of the women autobiographers, therefore, a combination of factors meant that they left paid employment upon marriage. And in using the domestic skills learnt at home, school, and often in the work-place, to manage the private lives of their families, they achieved an important measure of success in the domestic sphere. If not required to work for financial reasons, managing the home was an invaluable alternative way to increase their own status. They took responsibility not only for cooking, cleaning and childcare, but also the day-to-day control of finances and spiritual and moral welfare of the family. Part of the domestic ideal for most women was a wife at home with a husband as breadwinner, providing for his family. This model had begun to filter through the various strata of the working class as the nineteenth century progressed, and became a stereotyped ideal for those seeking respectability.

Centred in morality, home, and family, success in the domestic sphere was expressed and defined by the cohort in terms of respectability. In respectable working-class homes, thrift and hard work were admired and practised. Successful economic management provided a further strand to the complex position of working-class women's domestic lives as they took control of managing the family budget. There was a great need for good budgeting of the family income. Winifred Griffiths described her fears and worries:

⁴² For a discussion of this see, for instance, Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain*.

For as long as I lived at home, and indeed right up to the beginning of the 1914 war, when money values fell, my father's wage had stood at 30/- per week. Debt was considered a disgrace. Everything must be paid for straight away and so my mother's thrifty upbringing was very useful. In addition to paying one's way there was a great urge to save. Old age was a kind of spectre which few cared to gaze upon in those pre-pension days. I remember talk of the small amount doled out by the Guardians to needy old people who were trying to live out their life in their own homes rather than go into the 'House' or the 'Union' as the Workhouse was often called. I heard of curtainless windows, of chilly wards with scrubbed wooden floors and never a mat by the bedside, and of a diet just enough to keep body and soul together. Surely it was worth scheming to save in order to put something by to avoid such a fate! ⁴³

This situation was improved for families, at least those with young children, after the war when local authorities set up welfare clinics. These were of great help to working-class mothers in caring for themselves and their small children. Alice Foley's sister Cissy took charge of one such Child Clinic (known as 'Babies' Welcome') in Bolton in 1918.⁴⁴ Alice described the aim of the new clinics as 'the nurturing and cherishing of the new generation of infants so urgently need (*sic*) to bridge Europe's yawning fertility gap caused by the wholesale slaughter of the nation's manhood.'⁴⁵ Women could ask advice from the doctor about pregnancy, birth and child-care issues. Their babies were weighed and given an allowance of free or cheap milk and cod-liver oil.⁴⁶ Mothers, therefore, found reassurance as well as practical help with the finances of feeding their family.

Family economics were entwined with domestic success and better management meant upward mobility: moving to a better house, employing help in the home. The budgeting of family finances was seen as an extension of their domestic success and a role which most

⁴³ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p. 35.

⁴⁴ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.80.

⁴⁵ Alice Foley, *a Bolton Childhood*, p. 80.

⁴⁶ Pamela Horn, *Women in the 1920s*, p. 121.

of the cohort seemed to take on willingly. As the cohort revealed, women could continue to contribute to the family budget by staying at home. For example, they could minimise the hidden costs of women's full-time work by caring for their children. Child-care costs were an important consideration for married women in paid employment: older children could help, but with compulsory schooling it became more difficult to keep them at home to care for younger siblings.

It is therefore not surprising that twelve of the autobiographers chose to centre their adult success in the home. Leaving paid employment at the time of their marriage was an increasingly attainable goal between 1900 and the outbreak of war in 1914, as male wages improved. This had not always been the case. The 1851 census revealed that 75% of wives undertook paid employment. By 1911, when Annie Barnes left her job to take her mother's place at home, only 10% of married women were recorded as in paid employment.⁴⁷ Feminist historians in the last quarter of the twentieth century have portrayed late nineteenth-century domesticity as a narrow and confining gendered ideology of social control. Nancy Tomes has argued that previously dominant or confrontational working-class women began to assume middle-class acquiescent feminine roles.⁴⁸ David Levine has seen women as increasingly passive within the home, as the acceptance of a male family breadwinner as the head of the household took over from family wage economy.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ For a discussion of this subject see, for example, *Married Women's Work: Report of an Enquiry By the Women's Industrial Council* ed. Clementina Black (London: Bell, 1915; republished ed. Ellen Mappen, London: Virago, 1983).

⁴⁸ Nancy Tomes, 'A "Torrent of Abuse:" Crimes of Violence Between Working-Class Men and Women in London, 1840-1875', *Journal of Social History*, no.11 (1978), pp.328-345.

⁴⁹ David Levine, 'Industrialization and the Proletariat Family in England' in *Past and Present*, issue 107 (1985), p.181.

In contrast to this position, the cohort show that the balance of power within the family did not always result, as both Levine and Tomes had argued, in female subservience, although this may have been what was presented publicly. Hannah Mitchell painted a lively picture of the covert, yet powerful, matriarchal rule in her description of her home life when she was a child:

My mother, who quite definitely ruled the roost in our home, paid lip service to the idea of the dominant male. She always spoke of my father as 'The Master', and when the dealers came to buy cattle, she always left the room while they bargained, as if leaving him to decide, although in reality she and my father had privately agreed the price to be asked.⁵⁰

Hannah's description reveals her father's tacit agreement in conforming to the covert equal, if not dominant, position of his wife within the home, and underlines the existence of a double standard between the public and private face of domesticity with which both men and women complied. Women could show their success, at least within the family, through their control in the domestic sphere.

Some women continued to earn money from paid employment inside the home, and this was an accepted and important part of family economics for many working-class wives and mothers.⁵¹ Good, careful housewifery and other domestic work such as sewing could make a substantial difference to the family expenditure. Many of the cohort took in casual, or more organised, sewing, laundry or other domestic work, which they could fit in at home around the needs of their families, and to which children sometimes contributed their labour. Girls learnt by example, and the cohort were aware at an early age of the importance and difficulties of managing on slim domestic finances. It was shown earlier that Alice Foley and Isabella Cooke both recalled their mother's skill in calculating prices

⁵⁰ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.114.

⁵¹ For discussion of this topic see, Shelley Pennington and Belinda Westover *A Hidden Workforce*.

in local shops – even though neither mother could read or write.⁵² Such calculations obviously play an important part in family economics and girls learnt this, as they did other managing strategies.

Isabella Cooke was the eldest girl, and third born, in a family of six children. The youngest boy was five months old when Isabella left school in 1904 aged thirteen.

Isabella had to stay at home and help her mother. She described boiling up the washing in an iron pot over the fire which she had to feed with sticks. To earn some money, she recalled that as well as the ‘awful lot of washing’ for the family:

She used to take in washing for the farm lads and she got ten shillings for the six months, but they didn’t have a lot as they didn’t wear pyjamas in those days and no fancy shirts. I think one shirt and one pair of stockings lasted a week.⁵³

Winifred Griffiths described the women of her family undertaking a more organised method of earning money from home. Before she was of school age Winifred would help her aunts. Her words provide an insight on domestic industry in 1900:

My three aunts earned a living at home making garments for a sewing factory. There were two large treadle sewing machines in the living room and these were used by Aunt Jenny and Aunt Lil, while Aunt Nell did the buttonholes and the finishing. They were neat clean workers and usually had white garments to make up. These arrived ready cut out. The pay was 4 1/2d each for stitching up, making buttonholes or eyelet holes, finishing and pressing white jackets such as were worn by grocers and painters. Each earned about 12/- per week. My mother had worked with them before she married.⁵⁴

Winifred’s description of home-working points to a ‘hidden work-force’ of women who contributed in various ways to the household budget, yet in a further example of the

⁵² See above, pp. 122-123.

⁵³ Isabella Cooke, *A Hired Lass in Westmorland*, p.3.

⁵⁴ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman’s Story*, p.10.

domestic double standard noted earlier, were unacknowledged publicly, as they do not appear in any census for occupations.⁵⁵

Alice Foley recorded that her mother was the main breadwinner. For Alice's mother successful rearing of her family had come via hard work: she took in other people's washing, 'starched and ironed piles of shirts and collars' and also did laundry work in people's homes. When too young to attend school Alice would be taken with her mother:

We were brought up mainly out of her wash-tub earnings.
Frequently I accompanied her to various better-off houses,
and sitting on the floor amongst a pile of dirty clothes
played games and prattled aloud whilst she silently
scrubbed shirts or mangled heavy sheets.⁵⁶

The family budget was also stretched by visits by her mother to the local pawnbroker. Routine pawning of goods was almost exclusively a female method of extending the resources available to feed the family. Under the control of the wife as part of her domestic management, it very often took place without the men of the family knowing, despite the fact that it was often their Sunday suit or overcoat which was pawned, usually on Monday mornings. As Alice recalled:

About this time there emerged the consciousness of accompanying mother on her weekly visits to the nearby pawnbroker's. Each Monday morning, after brushing and sorting out the Sunday clothes, such as they were, a big parcel was made up... The pawnshop was owned by a big, jovial man who I later knew as 'Bill'. He was invariably perched on a high stool behind a long wire-netted counter. As mother was a regular customer he never opened her parcel, but placed it in one of the cubicles just above his head and slipped some silver coins to her under the grill.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ See, for example, June Purvis, *Hard Lessons*; Elizabeth Roberts, *Women's Work: 1840-1940* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1988; republished 1994), pp. 18-20.

⁵⁶ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.9.

⁵⁷ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.7.

Grace Foakes remembered that her father was dominant in one area of family economics: he taught Grace and his other children the maxim 'neither a borrower nor a lender be' and refused to allow the family to borrow money, so her family could not use the services of the pawnbroker. Grace described an alternative scheme that her mother evolved to stretch family finances. Although the family were 'not church goers' the children all attended Sunday school. Grace's mother insisted that her children stay on for the evening service afterwards, because they were given afternoon tea, and when the service was ended were allowed to take home 'left-overs' from the tea. Grace recalled:

There were sandwiches, scones and cake enough to fill a large bag. When we got home they were put away to be eaten on Monday, thus helping out my mother's tight budget.' ⁵⁸

After her marriage to Reuben Foakes and the birth of their daughter, Grace gave up her job as a waitress. At home she managed an often-tight budget and took pride in doing so. She made and sold plum jam, and when the plum season was over:

I took in washing. There were many men in Dagenham who worked at 'Fords' the car manufacturers. Their jobs were well paid, but dirty. I canvassed for washing, and had many customers. I charged one shilling for a dozen twelve pieces. I washed men's shirts, vests, pants and greasy overalls. I also did sheets and pillow cases. All these I did on a rubbing board placed in a bath, washing, wringing and rinsing them by hand; washing machines and automatics were unheard of. On bad days the house was full of wet washing. I ironed them by hand with a flat iron heated on the gas. I was tired, my back ached and my fingers were sore. I collected and delivered the washing, pushing it around in Kathleen's pram. I am not pitying myself; rather I glory in the fact that I held my head high, asking nothing of anyone, satisfied I had made an effort to help myself.⁵⁹

Grace's pride in making economies and taking in washing to help the family budget was an important part of her domestic success. In feeding and clothing her family without the

⁵⁸ Grace Foakes, *My Part of the River*, p.35.

⁵⁹ Grace Foakes, *My Life With Reuben*, p.45.

need to borrow from others, Grace had kept her father's maxim, which she had 'never forgotten.' She did not take advantage of the 9.30 'pawnshop bus' which ran from the Dagenham council estate to Barking every Monday morning and was filled with women taking bundles of goods to pawn, still resorting to old methods to make ends meet in their new homes.⁶⁰

Hannah Mitchell had given up her employment as a dressmaker on her marriage. However to 'make ends meet' she began to take in dressmaking which she did at home. Finding herself to be pregnant with their first (and only) child she decided to work harder at her dressmaking, let the housework go for a few months, and try to save a little money 'for this emergency'. Hannah was both proud of her ability to manage on a small budget, and concerned that the burden of budgeting for the baby was all hers. Her husband was already earning as much money as he could in his employment as a shop assistant, so would not be able to help with this added cost, as she explained to future readers of her autobiography:

If any modern girl reading this wonders why I did not expect my husband to provide for this emergency, I can only say that it would have been useless. His wages were fixed and he could not earn anymore by overtime. Shop hours were long in those days and it was often near midnight when he got home. Besides, I never seemed to make him understand that money was not elastic. Like most men, he had a comfortable idea that it cost no more to keep two than to keep one. He was not very house-proud, and was content with a comfortable chair and a good fire, and he was so extravagant with coals and light as to drive me nearly frantic when he was at home. At first I tried to get him to reckon up the cost-of-living with me and keep a sort of weekly budget. But he refused, just handing his wages over and leaving all the worry to me.

⁶⁰ Andrzej Olechnowicz, *The Economic and Social Development of Inter-war Out-County Municipal Housing Estates, With Special Reference to London County Council's Beacontree and Dagenham Estate* (Oxford: unpublished D.Phil thesis, 1991), pp. 149, 157.

I realized later that I ought to have insisted on his sharing the domestic responsibilities, because I found that he never really valued my contribution to the housekeeping which was often just as much as his own. Most of my sewing was done while he was at work and I did not say much about it. I was proud of being able to help in this way.⁶¹

Hannah appeared to be both accepting and resentful of her husband's limitations. Her success lay in managing on what he gave her, by frugality and by supplementing it with her own skills. Despite trying to involve him in the budgeting, her husband, 'Like most men', just expected her to manage on what he gave her and did not want to know how she did it. Husbands usually expected their wives to manage all of the household expenses out of their own, or their joint, weekly earnings, taking no further interest in what the money was spent on as long as their meals were supplied on time. Hannah's words suggest that this situation was not uncommon. Her experience underlines the notion that women who earned money at home, as well as those in paid employment, were well able to control, with whatever constraints were imposed by poverty, the spending of their own wages.

The descriptions of family income and its management in the autobiographies reveal that women who saw their success in domesticity generally took on, or retained, the ownership of the family finances. Although their work, both inside and outside the home, was assumed to be subordinate to that of their male partner, there was a tradition of what Ellen Ross calls an 'internal wage system' operating in most working class households.⁶² This situation, most notably reported by autobiographers Grace Foakes, Alice Foley, and Hannah Mitchell, is underlined and further illustrated in a social study of working-class

⁶¹ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, pp.100-101.

⁶² Ellen Ross 'Survival Networks: Women's Neighbourhood Sharing in London Before World War I' in *History Workshop Journal*, (Spring 1983), Vol. 15, p.7.

families in London, conducted by Maud Pember-Reeves from 1908-1913.⁶³ Pember-Reeves found that most husbands handed over to their wives the largest part of their weekly earnings, retaining 'pocket money' for themselves.⁶⁴ With their pocket money the men bought beer and tobacco, paid for some kind of insurance and any transport costs to get themselves to work.

Alice Foley's 'feckless Irish' father, having spent any money he did have, would be forced to ask his wife for money to fund his drinking.

I recall his following mother persistently about the kitchen whining monotonously, "lend us a penny, Meg; lend us a penny; I'm choking." At length, in a fit of desperation, a penny was flung onto the table.⁶⁵

It is interesting to speculate as to why, in what was perceived as a male-dominated society, the management of household economy was left to the woman even in respectable working-class families where ideology would place the man at the head of the household. This may have been retained from an earlier period when production had been carried on at home and a domestic-based, rather than an industrial, economy obtained.⁶⁶ The female members of the family, however, with the main responsibility for marketing, would have had control of consumer spending. As the segregation from home to factory or other place of production took place, women were confined to the home by child-bearing and child-rearing. They also retained control of the marketing and therefore the family budget.

⁶³ Maud Pember-Reeves, *Round About A Pound A Week* (London: Garland Press, 1980, first published 1913), p.11.

⁶⁴ This custom has been found to be widespread throughout England and Wales, although the portion given by the male earner varied according to region, neighbourhood and even individual couple. See Laura Oren 'The Welfare of Women in Labouring Families: England 1860-1950', *Feminist Studies*, Vol.I. (Spring 1993) pp.107, 112-113; also, Elizabeth Roberts 'Working Women in the North-West', *Oral History*, Vol.5, (Autumn 1977), p.7-30.

⁶⁵ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.10.

⁶⁶ For a survey of the historical changes involved in the move from domestic based economy see, for example, Anne Lawrence, *Women in England, 1500-1760: A Social History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994) and Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class: 1780-1850* (London: Routledge, 1992).

There are some indications that women also took some control of family size, which may also be seen as part of family economy in terms of how many mouths the total family income, from whichever source, was to feed. Only tentative conclusions may be drawn as to whether or not these women practiced any form of birth control, since it is mentioned by only four of the cohort, and then euphemistically. However, the reason this subject occurred in so few of the autobiographies could be that the practice of birth control was considered immoral, against the will of God, by a society which professed itself to uphold Christian values. It was certainly considered unsuitable for open discussion by respectable women. In intending their autobiography for public consumption, as many of the cohort did, they therefore may not have written about the subject whether or not they practised it. This conclusion was also postulated by Kate Fisher, in her article on gender and birth control in Britain. Fisher suggested that we should not accept at face value women's protests that they knew little or nothing about contraception. Their emphasis on their 'innocence' was 'a part of self representation and bound up with notions of respectability, modesty and chastity.'⁶⁷ Ellen Ross extended this discussion further and maintained that such self-representation could also explain claims for being (or appearing to be) passive during sexual encounters.⁶⁸

Nevertheless it has been established that working-class women sometimes tried to avert or end pregnancies when health or family circumstances made them inopportune.⁶⁹ There are indications that birth control was a possibility for the women in the cohort - sometimes

⁶⁷ Kate Fisher, "'She Was Quite Satisfied With the Arrangements I Made'": Gender and Birth Control in Britain, 1920-1950' in *Past and Present* (November 2000), Vol.169, p. 165.

⁶⁸ Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London 1870-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.101.

⁶⁹ See, for example, Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor*, p.18; for general discussion of the subject see: Jane Lewis, *Politics of Motherhood: Child and Maternal Welfare in England: 1900-1939* (London: Croom Helm, 1980), pp.199-200; Angus McLaren, *Birth Control in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), chapters 12 and 13; Leslie Phillips, *Abortion: Pathology and Treatment* (Birmingham: Cornish Brothers, 1887), p.106.

hidden in references to what other people had said. Grace Foakes, for example, discussed the subject in some detail. Although she professed that as a young wife she had no personal knowledge of birth control, and little idea about childbirth, she described other mother's actions on birth control. In this way she was able, in her text, to removed herself slightly from what was still, for her generation, a taboo subject:

Mothers would breastfeed their babies until they were 2 years old in the hope of keeping themselves from having another baby, for it was a common belief that they couldn't conceive while breast feeding. (As far as I know there was no contraception at that time) I do not think people knew how to prevent more babies arriving. This subject was never spoken of in my young days, it was considered a dirty subject and one to be avoided. Many young girls had babies. Certainly most of them were ignorant of the facts of life. I myself was never told about babies and when my first child was about to be born I was most shocked to find out how she would arrive. I had imagined my tummy would open to let the baby out. With such widespread ignorance it is a small wonder that so many babies died soon after birth.⁷⁰

Kathleen Woodward's mother made it clear to Kathleen, her youngest child, born in Peckham in 1896, that her children had not been wanted; she told the young Kathleen 'that if she had known as much when her first child was born as she learned by the time she bore her sixth, a second child would never have been.'⁷¹ Nellie Scott indicated that she was aware of, and would use, birth control if her child were to be brought up as she had been. She remembered: 'hoping I should never have to bring a child into the world if it was condemned to that life, for I reasoned: I have no right to bring in anyone else if this is all we can offer it.'

⁷⁰ Grace Foakes, *Between High Walls*, p.69.

⁷¹ Kathleen Woodward, *Jipping Street*, p.7.

Hannah Mitchell was perhaps the only woman in the cohort to indicate overtly that she had used birth control methods of some kind, although she does not specify which. She and her husband agreed to limit their family to one child, her son Geoffrey. After the rather gruelling birth, she revealed:

My joy was clouded by the fear that I could not give my baby the opportunities in life which I had missed so much, and my convalescence was retarded by worry about the future. Only one thing emerged clearly from much bitter thinking at that time, the fixed resolve to bring no more babies into the world. I felt it impossible to face again either the personal suffering, or the task of bringing a second child up in poverty.

Fortunately, my husband had the courage of his Socialist convictions on this point and was no more anxious than myself to repeat the experience.⁷²

The cohort therefore showed that they held the financial reins in a number of ways. They manage the family income by careful and resourceful housekeeping of family income. Some of them stretched the budget by resourceful earning of extra money at home. Furthermore, there is a suggestion from several women that a limit could be placed on family size and so the number of mouths that a tight budget would be required to feed.

As well as the diminishing employment opportunities, there may be another reason why the majority of the cohort conformed to this dominant ideology of a wife and mother at the centre of the home, at least for part of their lives. It may also have been a form of self-preservation, for the very practical reason that continuing in paid employment for married women - especially those with young children - increased their workload. Some married women valued their own wage and the independence this brought them, especially in the industrial north where factory wages were relatively high for women workers. Many

⁷² Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.102.

married women, however, made a virtue of necessity. The alternative of working all day for a wage and then coming home to domestic chores placed a double burden on them.

Mrs Scott, a member of the Co-operative Women's Guild wrote of some of her fellow guildswomen who had to do just that:

I feel ashamed sometimes when I think of some of our women, how they have worked and striven, for truly the life of a working-woman with a large family is one of self-denial.⁷³

Once a working-class woman married and elected to stay at home, her normal way of life depended, as discussed above, on her husband's income, together with that of any older children living at home, plus any money she could earn. Such domesticity was the epitome of success for twelve of the women in the cohort. Of the remaining sixteen, apart from Margaret Bondfield and Betty May, domesticity, although usually important at some stage in their lives, was not always fulfilling. Some of the women clearly described frustration with the constraints of domestic life. Tensions built within their marriage as the ambitions surfaced for success outside the confines of the home. Hannah Mitchell, who later achieved fame as a suffragette and Socialist, had looked forward to her marriage and a home shared with her future husband: 'we were both tired of living in lodgings, and felt that our own hearth, however humble, would be more comfortable.'⁷⁴ Hannah had trained as a dressmaker so was skilful at sewing, and she used this to good effect in the early days of her marriage in the 1890s. She expressed pride in her home, giving great details of her home-making skills.

I made hearthrugs of cloth cuttings, such as my mother had taught me to make, window curtains of spotted muslin and patchwork cushions which looked gay and comfortable. My parents sent some bedding, blankets and patchwork quilts, and great sacks of wool, which enabled me to fix up a second bed.

⁷³ Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.100.

⁷⁴ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.88.

I was very proud of this, for I did not like the way some of my friends kept house, with only one bed, excusing themselves on that ground from entertaining friends overnight. I hunted the fent shop for remnants of gay prints. I draped two large boxes with these to serve as dressing-table and washstand in my little guest room.⁷⁵

Hannah enjoyed creating a comfortable home, but she soon found domesticity constraining and frustrating. The tensions between private and public were very real for those amongst the autobiographers who enjoyed the domestic success they achieved in homemaking and caring for their husband and children, yet also wanted to succeed outside the home.

While claiming that the three years spent at home with her small son to be ‘among the happiest years of my life’, Hannah Mitchell also described the ‘tyranny’ of having to serve four meals every day:

Home life was in those days, indeed still is, for the wife and mother a constant round of wash days, cleaning days, cooking and serving meals. ‘The tyranny of meals’ is the worse snag in a housewife’s lot. Her life is bounded on the north by breakfast, south by dinner, east by tea, and on the west by supper, and the most sympathetic man can never be made to understand that meals do not come up through the tablecloth, but have to be planned, bought and cooked.⁷⁶

For Hannah, therefore, expressions of domestic success were complex and not without problems for her perceptions of herself. Domestic success meant being a ‘traditional’ woman: she had longed for a home of her own; it was one of her ambitions, and one of the reasons for marrying. Yet she expected some acknowledgement from her husband of the hard work she put into the marriage. The fact that he appears to have thought that meals ‘just came up through the tablecloth’ highlights the tensions and frustrations she felt.

⁷⁵ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.95. A fent shop, as the quote suggests, sold remnants of fabric.

⁷⁶ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, pp.113-114.

Success for Hannah also meant being a 'new' woman, with a career as well. While enjoying her home life, this alone was not enough for Hannah: 'I soon realized that married life, as men understand it, calls for a degree of self-abnegation, which was impossible for me. I needed solitude, time for study, and the opportunity for a wider life.'⁷⁷ At the end of her autobiography 'most of it written during the war years with the drone of aircraft overhead, and the guns roaring out their challenge', Hannah added a finale in 1946, entitled 'The Kitchen Sink.' In it she described again these tensions, which were felt by many of the autobiographers: 'Looking back on my own life, I feel my greatest enemy has been the cooking stove – a sort of tyrant who has kept me in subjection!'⁷⁸

After her marriage in 1918 Winifred Griffiths, by then active within local politics and social work, also supported her husband in his career as a Labour MP even though she did not always agree with the form this support was expected to take. At the same time her domestic duties and her family were of great importance to her. She too identified the situation when writing her autobiography in the years after World War II:

My life at this time took on a form of dichotomy. On the one hand was the fulfilling of Social engagements expected of the wife of a Minister of the Crown – against many of which my Socialist conscience rebelled, especially at a time when rationing and shortages were still the order of the day. On the other hand was my life as a housewife and mother, running the flat myself, trying to feed them family adequately, and taking under my wing and into our family circle some other young people who failed to get accommodation in London.⁷⁹

Winifred expressed the difficulties of balancing domesticity and work. She identified the tensions between her public and private life. Winifred recalled: 'I don't quite know how I

⁷⁷ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.88.

⁷⁸ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, pp.240-241.

⁷⁹ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.137

managed to keep the home going between all these social engagements. At times like that I felt I had a “split personality.”

When the couple retired, political success became less important, and with old age, a happy domestic life came to the forefront. Although still keeping abreast with developments in the world, domestic success, the companionship of loved ones and a warm comfortable home was more important for Winifred.

Now in the evening of my life my husband and I are fortunate that we still have each other. Our needs are simple and are amply supplied – a house of our own, warmth, plain food, a garden to potter in, occasional walks, visits and letters from children, grandchildren and friends, writing, reading, keeping in touch with events by newspapers radio and television. We count our blessings and wish that all old folks could enjoy them.⁸⁰

Many of the autobiographers have written in similar vein, valuing their domestic success as in old age they looked back over their long lives; often they have lived through two world wars. Mildred Edwards wrote her autobiography in 1977 when she was aged eighty-eight. She also celebrated domestic success and a happy and loving marriage. Despite her husband, Jack, having been gassed and shell-shocked during the World War I, the couple had worked for, and bought, their own home.

Our married life was happy, just a little marred by Jack's poor health, but he was never “on the panel”, the Doctors always kept him patched up and on the go; he also had his gun and his dog and this was his sole hobby, also helped my larder. I did very well and am very thankful to God for a good life and all the wonderful people I have met and loved. I had to part with Jack when he was in his eighty-third year, and was given strength to nurse him to the end. He used to say, “You're my doctor and my nurse, don't have anybody else”, and so it was, and I was eighty. It all got by, and I was able to sell our house at Summer Hill – we lived on the hill for fifty years – and come to this little

⁸⁰ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.166.

bungalow at Upperby, where I am very happy, alone with my rich memories.⁸¹

Mildred's success lay in the very ordinariness of her happy life with her much-loved husband. The societal conventions were observed: it was *her* larder, *his* gun and dog. Her words epitomise a genteel respectability.

Autobiographer Emma Smith wrote about success in the domestic sphere placing herself at the centre of respectable family life. It is possible to trace, within her autobiography, the continued ambitions and striving for domestic success from early in her childhood.

Dreams of domesticity in a happy home life seemed to be crystallized for her one cold winter's night when she was begging, by singing from door to door at Sennen Cove in Cornwall. Emma described:

The lamplit cottages looked Homely (*sic*) and inviting. I imagined families gathered around firesides, laughing, chattering, and a longing would sweep over me to be one of a real family, happy and carefree, decently clothed and clean.⁸²

At fourteen, after leaving the Salvation Army home where she had been for some years, Emma was taken into a penitentiary where she worked in the laundry. At the age of twenty-five she became a postulant at the Convent of All Hallows in Ditchingham, Norfolk:

After I had served three months as a postulant, the Reverend Mother sent for me. This lady told me in the kindest way that she and the Chaplain had had a talk about me, and had decided that my place was in the world. "Your vocation my child," she said, "is to be a wife and mother. And," she added sweetly, "a very good wife and mother you will make.'

⁸¹ Mildred Edwards, *Our City... Our People*, p.70.

⁸² Emma Smith, *A Cornish Waif's Story*, p.107.

A thrill went through me at her words. Here was something that had never before been suggested. A wife and mother! Was it possible? Suddenly, in my mind's eye, I saw a little home, furniture, curtains, a cradle – and I tried to imagine (only this was more difficult) a man in slippers.⁸³

Emma left the convent to go into domestic service, and married a gardener in 1922 and the couple continued in service for a while. However, after the birth of their daughter, Emma wanted to ensure that her daughter's life was an improvement on her own:

We had not yet got a home of our own, for after the wedding I continued to work and we lived in the house. I now became restless and ambitious on my baby's account. I wanted something better for her than what my own life had been.⁸⁴

Soon the couple, with their baby girl, emigrated to Australia where they found work, did well and were very happy until a year later. Then feelings of homesickness drew them back to Cornwall. As she arrived home Emma described her thoughts, marking her success as she had progressed from poverty, to the sort of domestic life of which she had dreamed:

How well I remembered all the different Landmarks! Could I possibly be the same person, I wondered, as that dirty ragged unkempt child of so long ago that tramped round here with the hurdy-gurdy, truly it seemed as if it must have been in another existence.⁸⁵

Eventually, Emma's three daughters attended the same school that she had. She recorded her pride and satisfaction as she compared 'their neat appearance in white blouses, navy tunics and neat trimmed hair, to my own unkempt condition while at school'. For Emma, respectability was very much bound up with pride in her daughters, in giving them a better life than she had had. Her attainment of domestic success was illustrated in her life

⁸³ Emma Smith, *A Cornish Waif's Story*, pp.174-175.

⁸⁴ Emma Smith, *A Cornish Waif's Story*, p.177.

⁸⁵ Emma Smith, *A Cornish Waif's Story*, p.195.

journey, from 'that ragged unkempt child of so long ago' to the fulfilment of her dream of a happy marriage: her success was measured by her ability to care for her home, her husband and her clean, well-dressed and well-educated daughters.

Respectability was also reflected in outward signs such as accent, and where one lived, and Emma Smith was not the only woman with ambitions and dreams of a better life. Felt hat worker Nellie Scott who lived in Stockport, described her dream of a utopian city where she would like to live: 'I have sat hours at work planning, a city, fitting in beautiful homes and everything to make life beautiful and happy, instead of sordid and ugly like our factory towns.'⁸⁶

In their writing the cohort illustrate the Christian values of hard work, care for others, domestic order and cleanliness, implicated in the ideology of respectability. Grace Foakes recalled some rituals of respectability when she lived in one of the poorest areas of London at the turn of the century:

The majority were clean, patient and hardworking, bringing up families under the worst kinds of conditions. They cleaned their windows each week, and their curtains were taken down and washed every fortnight. They got so black that you soaked them in salted water before you washed them. When this water was poured away it was as black as soot. The air was full of smoke and grime from many factories and ships, and from the coal fires which everyone used, but each fortnight those curtains went up clean. When the front door opened, in many cases one would see lace curtains draped just half-way down the passage or hall, as it is now called. This looked nice, and also prevented people seeing into the room beyond, which in nearly every case was the living-room-cum-everything. No matter how poor or how little a family had, this outward appearance had to be kept up at all costs.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.85.

⁸⁷ Grace Foakes, *My Part of the River*, pp. 53-54.

The need to be perceived as a good manager, wife and mother, and to keep a clean home, were therefore an added responsibility in the already difficult lives of many working women.⁸⁸ Low wages and misfortune did not erase the desire for respectability, even though they made its conventions harder to observe. Further tensions arose when school-age children were required at home. Well-educated children were a sign of respectability: education was important, but was also often in conflict with the need for children to contribute to the family budget.

Children, primarily cared for by their mothers, were affected by their mothers' aspirations and soon learnt the distinction between 'rough' and 'respectable'. They were caught up in the identity and image of their own family and respectability, for those who aspired to it, was invariably a family enterprise.⁸⁹ Children's clothes and conduct signalled the efforts of the mother. Her self-respect was asserted through domestic competence, and achieved and maintained through the cleanliness of her house and the appearance of her children. Effort was made to show neighbours that she took good care of her children and was training them well. This involved, even when money was short, ensuring that they were regular and punctual at school and Sunday school, that they had good manners and clean clothes.⁹⁰ The poorer the family, the harder it was to maintain such ideals, and women expended much energy in hiding the miseries of poverty. But then any rise in living standards was also likely to require more effort on the domestic front. As historian

⁸⁸ The net curtains to which Grace referred for example, may well have looked 'nice' and also hid less-than-affluent homes from prying eyes, but they were also likely to have been put up to keep in precious heat, and even more importantly to prevent the incursion of soot and airborne dirt which was a problem until at least the 1950s when the Clean Air Act was introduced.

⁸⁹ Standish Meacham, *A Life Apart: The English Working Class 1890-1914* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), p.27.

⁹⁰ A. Jobson, *The Creeping Hours of Time: An Autobiography* (London: Hale, 1977) p.82; see also examples from Ada S. of Spitalfields and Mary H., cited in Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor*, chapter 4.

Kathryn Gleadle has argued: 'Increased resources usually meant the preparation of more complex dishes; ornaments to polish; and more washing to launder.'⁹¹

Grace Foakes was aware that social mobility could take place within, as well as between, classes. Grace was 'courted' by Reuben Foakes, and recalled that some of her future husband's family, although working-class, were 'superior':

It was generally believed in Reuben's family that they had descended from a family much higher up the social ladder. This was probably true, for during our courting days, Reuben often took me to visit his aunts who lived in nice houses in the suburbs of London. I was always struck by the marked difference in their manner of speaking and their way of living. They were working class with a difference. None lived in Wapping as we did, with its noise, poverty and dirt. They lived in places like Welling in Kent, Forest Gate and East Ham, which in those days were select places. Each had a nice house and garden, and each one I visited seemed to be superior to Reuben's family.⁹²

Grace was highlighting several indications of success in this passage: a nice house and garden in a 'select' area, a different way of living and a particular manner of speaking. Grace's reference to the differences in manner of speaking recall the importance of elocution classes revealed in the previous chapter by autobiographers Alice Foley, Mary Gawthorpe and Winifred Griffiths.

Grace Foakes achieved her dreams of a 'nice' house as she fought for a place on the council list for new homes.⁹³ She and her husband with their baby daughter, Kathleen, were eventually allocated a house on the new council estate in Dagenham. Grace

⁹¹ Kathryn Gleadle, *British Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p.21.

⁹² Grace Foakes, *My Life With Reuben*, p.14.

⁹³ Grace Foakes, *My Life With Reuben*, pp.37-40.

described the move from Wapping in 1932, and compared the old home and the new, reflecting on the differences, and showing her pride in what she and Reuben had achieved:

Reuben and I were among the many Londoners who during 1932 escaped from the slums of London's East End, and went to live on a Council Estate at Dagenham in Essex. We were overjoyed at being given our own house, complete with garden. The plans we made were as fantastic as they were impossible, for to us this was paradise compared to what we had left behind.

Upstairs three bedrooms. Just imagine it! One whole bedroom for my baby, one for us, and actually a spare bedroom. I stood and remembered the one poor bedroom I had shared throughout my childhood with my three brothers and my sister.

If you have never had a garden, or if you had never seen fruit and vegetables growing in a garden, then you might get some idea of the pride and joy one feels when one digs up one's first potato, beetroot or carrot.

This was a clean new town and we were part of it. Our children could play in the garden while we women did our housework and washing. Each taking pride in as to who could make her whites whitest or her coloured clothes the most colourful. And who can say aught about it? If you had been bred and born in a grey place then no doubt you would love bright cheerful colours about you too.⁹⁴

Domestic success for other autobiographers also came with a move to a more respectable or better-off neighbourhoods. Alice Foley was 1 of the 5 autobiographers known to have remained as spinsters.⁹⁵ Family and home were still important to Alice who cared for her disabled mother, and brought her to share the new council house in Dean during the 1920s. She expressed her joy when she and her invalid mother moved from the centre of industrial Bolton. They were one of the first to be allocated a council house with a garden, on a new estate in the 1920s:

⁹⁴ Grace Foakes, *My Life With Reuben*, pp.37-40.

⁹⁵ Margaret Bondfield, Alice Foley, Mary Luty, Daisy Hills and Ellen Wilkinson, remained spinsters. Two of the others, Agnes Cowper and Kathleen Woodward, made no mention of marriage. So at least five, and possibly seven of the women, supported themselves all of their lives.

We were allocated a house by the local authority, at Chip Hill Road in Dean, on a new council estate on the edge of a green belt. How delighted we were to expand and spread our wings in cleaner air and quietude! I also remember how eagerly I took up the challenge to till and fashion a garden out of virgin brick and clay, enduring much joy and no little backache in the process, yet often thrilling in harmony with the song birds overhead.⁹⁶

Council house accommodation was not the last resort it is often seen as today. Communal housing was established in the 1890s and even earlier with the co-operative and co-partnership housing movements. During the first decades of the twentieth century the ‘Garden City Movement’ began which espoused the Utopian idea of bringing the countryside into the lives of the city poor living in the grim slums of housing built in the early nineteenth century, by moving them to ‘cottages’ with gardens. Council housing gained in popularity between the wars, when Grace and Alice were allocated houses, but it expanded an already established ideal.

Access to a warm, dry comfortable house was an achievement, and seen as going up in society, which indeed it was in many cases. For families who had previously shared accommodation there was a sheer sense of excitement at getting a key to a home of their own. Prospective tenants were well vetted. They had to agree to terms and conditions in their lease, which seemed to enforce a measure of respectability, such as cultivating their gardens, and not hanging out washing on a Sunday. The paternalism of the council estate managers who were employed by the local council to maintain standards of behaviour on estates was accepted by tenants. Council housing was seen as the future. The Local Authorities were funded by central government as part of the welfare strategy of building ‘Houses to let and not houses to sell’.

⁹⁶ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.79.

Once they had their new homes, the need to maintain respectability, and thus publicly declare their success, became even more important. In order to maintain their domestic ideals, on an often-tight budget, working-class women had long depended in a greater or lesser measure on the help of friends and neighbours. There existed a casual system of neighbourhood networks of, usually female, friends and neighbours, to whom they also gave support. Grace Foakes had seen the move from Wapping as ‘an escape’ but still she admitted she would miss friends and neighbours: ‘I wanted to go. But I wanted to stay. Here was home. Here were my friends and neighbours. Here were the people with whom I had grown up.’⁹⁷ The importance of neighbourhood networks is apparent in the inclusion, in almost all of the cohorts’ autobiographies, of vivid anecdotes of neighbours working together to keep up appearances and help each other.

The Good Neighbour

The morality expressed by Annie Barnes, Emma Smith’s pride in her daughters’ achievements, the descriptions of upward mobility by Alice Foley and Grace Foakes as they moved from inner city to clean countryside, the legislation for respectable behaviour expected of council house tenants are all examples which shed light on the complex moral and religious underpinnings to the notion of respectability which is an important facet of domestic success for many of the autobiographers. Christianity in its widest form is behind the idea of the ‘good’ mother at the centre of a respectable home, caring for others, and living a ‘Christian’ life. And the idea of caring for others, for the women in the cohort, did not only include immediate family, but extended to neighbours.

⁹⁷ Grace Foakes, *Between High Walls*, p.82.

In addition to the moral duty of caring for neighbours, a successful housewife also had a stake in keeping her neighbourhood respectable. Coming from a respectable neighbourhood was as important as having a home of which to be proud. This can be translated to the wider nineteenth-century ideal of being a good citizen, of 'Civic Pride'.⁹⁸ Respectability, therefore, extended to the local neighbourhood, and this was not just true for the new council estates. It had long been of importance in poor inner city areas. Grace Foakes recalled that all of her neighbours had taken part in a cleaning routine in front of their houses in an effort to enhance the appearance of the London back street from where she had moved:

Then there were the doorsteps. Each front door had a wooden doorstep which was scrubbed white each morning. The pavement outside the house was swept and then the woman of the house, kneeling down with a bucket of hot water and some whitening, proceeded to wash the pavement immediately in front of her door, making a half-circle which she would afterwards whiten with the whitening. Thus each house you passed had its own half-circle of white pavement and its white-scrubbed doorstep.⁹⁹

Many incidents are recalled by the cohort which reflect the help and support given by, usually gender-specific, neighbourhood networks. Families often lived close to their relatives and for many working-class women grandparents and aunts, as well as neighbours, played a large part in the care of children. The neighbourhood and the extended family thus provided a major survival network: this was of seminal importance to the way the autobiographers perceived themselves as having successful lives despite their poverty. Alice Foley described this situation as 'community life':

⁹⁸ Civic pride sprang from the idea of a 'Civic Gospel', originally a development of middle-class non-conformists, and preached by, most notably, Congregationalist Minister R. W. Dale, in Birmingham. By the period 1870-1900 this movement had crossed classes and encompassed changes in society which combined Christian social concern with municipal welfare and the reform of the urban environment.

⁹⁹ Grace Foakes, *My Part of the River*, p. 53

The street in which I was nurtured as a small girl had little to boast of, except that in an odd way, we regarded it as Our Street and rich in its own quality of community life. We were all poor of a ruck but hardships were shared in a spirit of cheerfulness and characteristic good humour.¹⁰⁰

This quality of community life was based on co-operation between neighbours, as well as kindness and caring for others. It was an expression of the way the neighbourhoods placed importance on keeping up appearances. No family, striving for respectability, would wish to live next to a home where standards were not 'kept up'. There was an overriding sense of community which developed with common experiences. This sense of community seemed to be a predominantly working-class phenomenon. Virginia Woolf, writing in 1915, looked down on it, and decried 'the horrible sense of community which the war produces, as if we all sat in a third class railway carriage together.'¹⁰¹ Certainly, the closeness of housing and the sharing of water and toilet facilities meant that working-class neighbours were often on fairly intimate terms. They pooled resources, sharing clothes, cooking utensils, childcare and even helping with rent money or food in times of illness or death.

In childbearing years and in old age, women were especially dependent on neighbourhood and family networks for help. Children, too, were a vulnerable group. Many of the women in the cohort have recalled kindly acts from caring neighbours, which made an otherwise unhappy childhood bearable. Kathleen Woodward wrote that the only tenderness she ever received was in the home of a neighbour, Jessica Mourn:

When I was a child I used to sit in Jessica's front parlour whenever it was possible; she was my refuge and my shelter, and she had about her an inexpressible tenderness and that refinement which grows out of a soul laid away in suffering.

¹⁰⁰ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.15.

¹⁰¹ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf* ed. Anne Oliver Bell (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979, first published 1977), p. 153.

Her tenderness stands out in relief against the bleak,
spartan tone of my own home, and my mother's
impatience with the outward forms of affection. At home
it was always wintry. Mother had no love to give us.¹⁰²

In writing this, Kathleen was primarily highlighting tension between herself and her mother, similar to that described earlier in the autobiography of Hannah Mitchell.¹⁰³

However, Kathleen's words also reveal the importance of neighbours in children's lives. Childcare could be shared between neighbours, especially in times of trouble. In addition, the years before school, when children were sensible enough to run errands for others in the neighbourhood, but not constrained to spend the day in school, were a time, for girls like Kathleen, when valuable lessons in domesticity were learned. It also began the habit of participating in, and contributing to, neighbourhood networks.

The habit of helping others was therefore deeply ingrained in working-class women's lives. Kathleen Woodward's neighbour, Jessica, seemed to have been a good neighbour to everyone, especially in times of bereavement or sickness, Kathleen wrote:

She (Jessica) drew trouble to her like a magnet...everyone
sent for Jessica Mourn: she watched the dying; she laid out
the dead. These melancholy tasks were her daily portion.
The excursions she made beyond the confines of Jipping
Street were invariably undertaken to comfort the afflicted.¹⁰⁴

Alice Foley's mother was frustrated by her frequently out-of-work husband who would do his best to drink away any money she saved out of her wash-tub earning. Sometimes this would be too much for Alice's mother to bear. At such times her mother found some comfort in having neighbours to share her troubles. Alice recalled that after an argument

¹⁰² Kathleen Woodward, *Jipping Street*, p.32.

¹⁰³ See above, p.152-153; also Caroline Steedman, *Past Tenses* p.121.

¹⁰⁴ Kathleen Woodward, *Jipping Street*, pp.47-48.

her father would storm out of the house: 'whilst mother snatched up her shawl and vanished into the street to find temporary refuge in a neighbour's home.'¹⁰⁵

The tight-knit nature of their communities ensured that neighbours always seemed to know when help was needed. Women giving birth would be cared for, families would be given help at times of death, sickness or when the usual wage-earner was out of work.¹⁰⁶ Powerful links between women and their neighbours and relatives showed a gender difference, which further complicates the discussion. Husbands and wives had different responsibilities for money and children, and a daily existence so separate that gender differences were reproduced in patterns of movement in streets, shops and pubs, as well as in their own homes and in the work-place. Ties of friendship and mutual aid amongst neighbours and friends rarely crossed gender boundaries, as apart from relatives, men and women rarely knew each other if they came from different families, even on their own streets. Women shared extensively and unsentimentally in female-centred networks of domestic help: women helped women in the nurture and care of their families. If any male network existed it might be found in the camaraderie of work and trade union meetings, or street corners and public houses, rather than bound up with the home and family.

Neighbourhood networks were an extension of home, and as well as offering support to other working-class women in difficult times, the neighbourhood was often a source of pride. Alice Foley recalled a rich quality of life in the Bolton of her childhood: hardships were shared, but so were good fortune and successes. She wrote of neighbours sharing a suit belonging to her brothers, gladly loaned to help express the respectability of the neighbourhood:

¹⁰⁵ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.10.

¹⁰⁶ Lillian Hine, 'A Popular Childhood' in *East London Record*, Vol. III, (London: East London History Association, 1980), pp.32-43.

If father came up on a horse we usually had a bit of a 'do'; this might stretch to buying a new suit for one of the older boys. Later it would be loaned out to neighbours on the occasion of weddings or funerals. "Con (*sic*) I borrow your John's suit" was frequently heard and, sure enough, even if it happened to be in pawn, it was cheerfully redeemed in order to help maintain the dignity of our street on its big occasion.¹⁰⁷

Keeping up appearances was therefore an important part of personal and neighbourhood respectability, and was especially important at events such as funerals, weddings and christenings. Mildred Edwards recalled a funeral of one of her classmates, who died in 1888, when Mildred was nine years old:

Women stood weeping and men took off their hats...after a funeral all who had attended, returned to the house for tea, which was always sumptuous, however poor, it was always managed whether by borrowing, on tick, or good management mattered not.¹⁰⁸

Hannah Mitchell described her wedding day, which was held at her sister Sallie's house.

Hannah and Sallie had prepared the wedding breakfast, and friends and relatives had been generous with gifts:

But the most vivid memory of my wedding day, even yet, was a little act of kindness, which always seemed to me one of the loveliest things I have ever known. My sister's house was one in a row of eight or ten. At the front were small gardens, divided from the roadway and each other by iron railings. But the back was open, with a stone-flagged passage between the houses and the back gardens. When I rose early on my wedding day, I found that every neighbour had risen earlier still, cleaned her windows, and whitened the flags both back and front, thus giving the whole street quite a festive appearance on that glorious September morning.

The memory is clearer than any other I retain of my wedding day: it shows the lasting effect of one little kindly

¹⁰⁷ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.15.

¹⁰⁸ Mildred Edwards, *Our City...Our People*, p.11.

action done so long ago and probably soon forgotten by the women who did it.¹⁰⁹

In helping others to maintain standards of care and appearances of respectability, Hannah and others of the cohort were complying with the Christian values of cleanliness, morality, caring for others and helping their neighbours, which were an integral part of respectable Victorian and Edwardian society. Women's networks are an example of the Christianity expressed in the Socialism of the Labour Church, and the writer Robert Blatchford, to whom autobiographers Alice Foley, Annie Kenney, and Ellen Wilkinson all refer.

Hannah Mitchell encapsulated the caring nature of neighbourhood networks when she described, in almost biblical terms, the help she got from one of her neighbours:

I could never have managed to do my work as Guardian, had it not been for the help of a kindly neighbour whom I had the good fortune to meet soon after coming to Ashton in 1900, and who is still a dear and valued friend. There should be a special blessing on good neighbours: they are God's best servants on earth.¹¹⁰

The cohort therefore maintained respectability, both within their home and within their neighbourhood, with the compliance of their families and the help of friends and neighbours. To present their families in the best possible light to the outside world, these women also controlled the economics of their family in a careful balance of total income with required expenditure.

Conclusion

The importance of the home and domestic skills, instilled into girls at home and at school during childhood, continued into adult life for the majority of the cohort. Domestic success was perceived as being in control of the home environment, being a good mother

¹⁰⁹ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, pp.90-91.

¹¹⁰ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.125.

with well-brought-up children and a well-managed home of which they could be proud. It was also bound up with being a caring neighbour and responsible citizen, both on altruistic and moral grounds, and for the practical reason of ensuring that those around them also promulgated the respectability of the neighbourhood in which they lived. The cohort were complying with Patmore's 'Angel' and separate spheres ideology, but not succumbing to it: they wanted to offer practical help to the people they loved, and see their families, and themselves, advance. The emphasis on success in the domestic sphere in their autobiographies therefore reflects their compliance with the role for which society had fitted them. It also suggests, however, that they were able to use their domestic role for their own ends: to help those around them - who in turn helped them - and also to maintain respectability, and by good housekeeping to advance their standard of living.

Domestic success was celebrated by the majority of the cohort because it reflected social conventions: it mirrored the social order and the respectability demanded by societal values of the period. It was facilitated for the cohort by improving social conditions: the increase in wages for men, the building of new council homes, the emphasis given to domestic training in school and higher education. Such developments allowed the women to succeed, advancing in society, yet within socially acceptable boundaries. Up to the outbreak of World War I at least, it was considered respectable for married women to stay at home and look after the home and family, redefining themselves as house-wives and working in the domestic sphere. In doing so they took individual responsibility for their own lives. Most saw as valuable and important their work as wife, homemaker and mother and were proud of achieving a higher standard of living for their families: they strove towards upward social mobility, if not between classes, then within the working class. Respectability was seen as personal, but also as collective: within the family, and within

the neighbourhood. So in striving for respectability the support of family and neighbourhood networks was vital, and the cohort acknowledge this in their writing.

There was a high value placed on domesticity by the society in which they lived, against which only a few of the women rebelled. Yet these rebels are amongst the most interesting. Some of them, for instance Winifred Griffiths, were successful in balancing the public and private spheres. Hannah Mitchell, however, while conforming to her role as good wife and mother in the early years of her marriage, soon felt constrained by domesticity. Margaret Bondfield, on the other hand, was the only autobiographer who wrote nothing about her own domestic life as an adult: domesticity was simply not part of her success. Although she encouraged it in other women, success for her was entirely bounded by the work environment. Their public success will be discussed further in subsequent chapters, but it is women such as Margaret Bondfield, Winifred Griffiths and Hannah Mitchell, who more than any other of the autobiographers revealed that the way society viewed the role of working-class women could not remain static. The majority of the cohort who conformed to the domestic ideal were following an already existing pattern in society of the woman as good girl, good wife and mother and good neighbour.

Winifred Griffiths balanced the public and domestic spheres successfully, but Hannah Mitchell, while accepting domesticity for part of her life, saw her real success elsewhere. Margaret Bondfield made speeches about domesticity, but she was speaking of other women, not of herself: she was a successful politician and did not comply with society's gender construction of what her life should be - domesticity was not personally important to her, although she acknowledged its importance to society. These rebels were unusual; they broke the pattern set out for women of their class and illustrated that women's

success did not have to conform to the separate spheres ideology of the home-based female.

Success in the domestic sphere for most of the cohort meant conforming to an essentially middle-class domestic ideology, which a significant number of the cohort valued for all, or at least part of, their lives. The women who chose domesticity perceived themselves as successful, measured not only by the standards they set themselves, but also by the standards set by society, one of the most important criteria of which was respectability. Yet female working-class culture was dynamic, rather than static, and the autobiographies of Margaret Bondfield, Winifred Griffiths and Hannah Mitchell illustrate that the societal view of domesticity as the only sphere to which working-class women could aspire was beginning to change. It was becoming increasingly possible for working-class women to achieve success outside the home.

Chapter 5: Economics

Introduction

All of the autobiographers commemorate the importance of economic success, which was achieved step by step through a variety of means and at differing times of life. It meant different things to different women and was manifested as the achievement of various ambitions: financial independence; higher earning power; the enhanced ability to purchase consumer goods; a move to a better home in a more prestigious or more respectable area; and the enjoyment of leisure and cultural activities such as visits to the theatre, day trips and holiday travel. Their spending power increased gradually as they acquired better jobs, and this reflects the dynamics of change in both gender and class: working-class women no longer stayed in one job for twelve hours a day, six days a week, but could climb up the ladder of employment to improve their earning power or job status and consequently their standard of living. Opportunities were opening up for women in the job market over this period, and this gave them increasing room to manoeuvre into previously male-dominated occupations. Economic success changed their lives: the women could aspire to a lifestyle denied to their parents and hitherto out of reach of working-class families generally. Although a few of the cohort reveal short or long term plans, most achieved economic success in an almost serendipitous way, and gradually enhanced their lives by taking opportunities as they became available.

The women invariably viewed their first job on leaving school as an achievement, and a step towards adulthood and financial independence from their childhood home. Most started work between twelve and fourteen years of age. The choice of initial occupation was rarely left to the women themselves, for as well as societal class and gender limitations on the sorts of occupations available to working-class women, the kind of work

undertaken by daughters was usually determined by parents, or by local or family custom.¹ The latter was especially true of women such as Alice Foley, Mary Luty and Nellie Scott, living in northern industrial areas, where throughout the period, family or neighbourhood traditions dictated that they entered into factory or mill work. There was also an informal support network in operation, information was passed around about job opportunities, and family members or acquaintances offered advice on positions in local households, or performed introductions to prospective employers, as Winifred Griffiths and Louise Jermy both recalled.

The women indicated that their ability to undertake paid employment, as school-leavers, and the degree of independence which came with this, was part of their success. They welcomed some autonomy over their own lives, while their willingness to comply with the 'good girl' model of expected behaviour meant that they also enjoyed their ability to help their parents by contributing to the family economy. Their contribution to family economics often made it possible for their mothers to leave paid employment: a sign of respectability amongst aspiring working-class families. Economic success was therefore seen both personally and familially by the cohort; however it was attained. And whatever way it was manifested, economic success throughout life was a product of their own, their children's and/or their husbands' labour: earned income was pooled so that, embedded in a familial economic framework, life was enhanced for the whole family. Certainly in most cases family economics were run on collective, utilitarian, lines: the family was an economic unit to which all contributed according to their ability.

¹ Jenny Zmroczek, ' "If girls would take more kindly to domestic work": Norwich 1900-39', pp.11-12.

At this early stage in their lives, only Mary Gawthorpe and Ellen Wilkinson saw work as a career. The remainder, as school-leavers, did not seek the sort of personal satisfaction that girls of the twenty-first century expect. As the women gained in work experience they become less dependent on their families. Revealing the ability and motivation to improve their economic success, the women began to make decisions about their own lives by taking advantage of any opportunities which presented themselves. Many then began to seek fulfilment in their work as they took on more challenging positions.

Those women who remained in traditional female occupations, in textiles or domestic service, could work their way up a hierarchy of jobs in their field; others changed to different kinds of employment. Winifred Griffiths left the factory, and the family home, to gain independence and more pay in domestic service; economic success for Louise Jermy also included moving to a better paid position in domestic service from her dressmaking apprenticeship. The work-pattern of the cohort reveals the changing opportunities available to working-class women over the period: Alice Foley was promoted from the factory floor to an administrative position as an insurance collector, with more status, higher pay and what was seen as a more respectable and varied type of employment. Ada Nield Chew left the textile factory to work as a clerk in a local government office – a position previously held by a male employee. For economic reasons Margaret Bondfield's parents sent her away from home to train as a shop assistant shortly after she had completed an extra year at school as a pupil-teacher; she had no choice in the matter. Yet later in life she was able to choose to become involved in union activities and eventually, in the 1920s, when she was in her fifties, she gained national prominence as a Labour politician. None of these options for change would have been available earlier in the period to women from their class.

Over time, therefore, changes were occurring in the roles of working-class women. Their aspirations also broadened, as it became easier for them to succeed through a range of paid employment. Wider opportunities in office, clerical and retail employment, tailoring and teaching, previously areas dominated by men, began opening up for women from the 1880s.² Most working-class women benefited from improvements in working hours and conditions in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Also importantly, throughout the period part-time or evening education was becoming an option, as shorter working hours enabled women, including Winifred Griffiths, Ada Nield Chew and Mary Luty, to take evening classes which led to more qualifications and a higher earning power. The First World War brought further openings: Mildred Edwards moved from home duties to clerical work in a Government Department, and Winifred Griffiths moved from her position in domestic service to a position in retail, with good prospects for promotion - one of thousands of jobs vacated by men who had volunteered to serve their country in 1914.³

Economic success was therefore achieved primarily in the public sphere of the workplace, yet the autobiographers reveal that it was facilitated by, and contingent upon, domestic and educational success. Educational success led to a choice of higher status occupations, especially for those women such as Mary Gawthorpe and Ellen Wilkinson, born in 1881 and 1891 respectively, who were unusual within the cohort as they revealed long-term plans through teaching and university qualifications. Economic success was an increasingly attainable goal for those working-class girls who were able to seek it. With a small sample of twenty-six women it is of course difficult to identify a trend over the

² Teresa Davy, '“A Cissy Job for Men; a Nice Job for Girls”'; Women Shorthand Typists in London 1900-1939' in *Our Work, Our Lives, Our Words, Women's History and Women's Work*, ed. Leonore Davidoff and Belinda Westover (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), p.142.

³ Conscription began in 1916, before this the men joining up were all volunteers.

cohort as a whole, but in the lives of the individual women there was a discernable change over time, as new opportunities arose and societal views of what was appropriate for working-class women grew broader.⁴

In the home, careful budgeting of available funds by the wife and mother within the domestic sphere further contributed to improvement of finances within the family and to the way the family was presented to the outside world. The benefits of economic success therefore included respectability and a degree of upward social mobility. Societal notions of the ideal woman encompassed ideas of modesty and self-effacement. In order to gain economic success, the women in the cohort, while not rejecting such ideals, worked within them in order to re-define their place in society. Many included in their writing a rationale, which justified their ambitions by giving them an altruistic dimension. These ideals reflect those discussed in the previous chapter, where caring for family and neighbours was described as an important facet of domestic success. Using similar explanations the cohort's ambitions for more pay, prestige, upward social mobility in terms of housing and consumer goods were not always sought for themselves. All of the women, apart from the unconventional Betty May, described altruistic motives for wanting financial success. In general they initially wanted to help their families. Kathleen Woodward enabled her mother to give up the laundry-work she took in and leave behind the 'years of wet wash-tubs'.⁵ Mary Gawthorpe gained freedom from her tyrannical father for herself, her siblings and her mother. Ellen Wilkinson wanted to pay her mother back for all her sacrifices when Ellen was a child and which had helped her achieve so much.⁶

⁴ For instance Margaret Bondfield's parents sent her away from home to train as a shop assistant; she had no choice in the matter. Yet later in life she was able to choose to become involved in union activities and eventually, in the 1920s when she was in her fifties she gained national prominence as a Labour politician.

⁵ Kathleen Woodward, *Jipping Street*, p.92.

⁶ Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, p.400.

Others professed a wish to help those less fortunate than themselves. Mildred Edward's economic success meant that late in life she was able to give the profit she made from selling her home to a local children's charity. After their promotion to administrative posts Ada Nield Chew and Alice Foley both explained that they wished to help their fellow-workers left behind on the factory floor. Economic success was therefore often explained as being rooted in a desire to help others: their families or those less fortunate than themselves. As with domestic success, there appears to be an altruistic motive to their actions which had its origins in Christian ideals: as well as their own success, the women wanted to offer practical help to those around them – their family, neighbours and fellow-workers.

Employment – The Historical Context

For girls growing up at the turn of the twentieth century, the most usual occupation upon leaving school was to enter domestic service or to take up family duties at home, and this was reflected within the cohort. Ten of the women were employed in domestic-based occupations.⁷ In addition, Mildred Edwards and Agnes Cowper both took up family duties on leaving school, Annie Barnes worked in the family shop and on her mother's death combined this with family duties, and Daisy Hills was employed as a farm worker, with a mixture of domestic and agricultural work. During the 1890s and 1900s, and indeed until World War II, the highest proportion of women in paid employment were those in domestic service or related occupations.⁸ Numbers had reached a peak in 1891

⁷ Rose Gibbs, Bessie Harvey, Mrs Hills, Maria Hull, Emma Smith and Susan Sylvester were employed as domestic servants, as was Isabella Cooke, although as her position was on a farm a condition of her employment was that she learned to milk. In addition, Grace Foakes was a waitress, and Louise Jermy and Hannah Mitchell were employed as dressmakers, both occupations under the umbrella of domestic skills.

⁸ Census returns cited in Deirdre Beddoe, *Discovering Women's History* (London: Pandora, 1983; revised and updated 1993), p.112.

when there were a total of 1,759,555 domestic servants (9.1 percent of the female population) in England and Wales.⁹

Domestic skills learned both at home and school transferred readily to the work-place, as Sally Alexander pointed out in her study of women's employment in London in the nineteenth century.¹⁰ However, the situation was not uniform throughout England. Since the eighteenth century, for instance, young women in factory towns, mostly in the North of England, had begun to choose to work in industry rather than domestic service and the numbers working in domestic service in these areas began to fall. The pay in industry was higher and conditions, although harsh and appalling by today's standards, were generally better. Treatment by employers was often less degrading than that of some positions in domestic service, since a long series of Factory Acts improved the situation in terms of maximum hours worked, working conditions and pay.¹¹

This trend is, again, reflected by the cohort, eight of whom entered into factory work upon leaving school.¹² The fact that these mostly lived in the north of England indicates both the higher number of factories in the north as well as the lack of geographical mobility for working-class women at this period. Wages also varied with geographical location and trade union activity. In 1906, for instance, official statistics showed that the average earnings of an adult woman textile worker for a week ranged from 18s.8d. in the

⁹ Cited in Elizabeth Roberts, *Women's Work*, p.31.

¹⁰ Sally Alexander, 'Women's Work in Nineteenth Century London: A Study of the Years 1820-1850' in *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1976), p.73.

¹¹ For discussion of the Acts of 1878, 1891 and 1895, see, for example, Elizabeth Roberts, *Women's Work 1840-1940*, pp.56-57.

¹² These are: Ada Nield Chew, Alice Foley, Winifred Griffiths, Annie Kenney, Mary Luty, Nellie Scott, Kathleen Woodward and Mrs Yearn.

Lancashire cotton industry, where the workers tended to be organized, down to ten shillings a week in the Bristol weaving districts, where they were not.¹³

Nevertheless, opportunities for working outside the home opened up for unmarried working-class women in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and into the first decade of the twentieth century. Some continued to find paid employment on the factory floor or in traditional domestic fields, and still had their place in a few key service industries - domestic service, dressmaking, cleaning, cooking and laundry-work.¹⁴ Others saw the possibilities of a move into catering, typewriting, teaching or shop assistant positions in larger stores, which until the turn of the century were seen as male-orientated occupations.¹⁵ At the same time there was a wider range of employment and options for working-class women: they could change jobs, take evening classes and re-train. There were increased possibilities of promotion into administrative posts from the factory floor, and the beginnings of openings for women from the working-class as new white-collar jobs in industry, finance, education, government, commerce and the professions had become available by the 1880s. Although these tended to be taken at first by single middle-class women who were able to take up paid employment without loss of respectability, soon working-class women began to follow suit as clerical and office employment also began to become available for them.¹⁶ By the 1920s, magazines such as *Girls' Friend* and *Girls' Favourite* referred to their working-class and lower middle-class

¹³ Edward Cadbury, *Women's Work and Wages: A Phase of Life in an Industrial City* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1906), p.86.

¹⁴ Ruth Adam, *A Woman's Place*, p.21.

¹⁵ Angela John, *Unequal Opportunities: Women's Employment in England 1800-1918* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), p.37.

¹⁶ Jane Rendall, *Women in an Industrializing Society*, p.72.

readership as 'business girls' and encouraged them to think seriously about employment in offices.¹⁷

As well as new opportunities in office work, there was also the chance for working-class girls to obtain what they saw as more prestigious and higher paid work in the teaching or nursing professions. The Pupil Teacher scheme was described earlier.¹⁸ Of the cohort, Margaret Bondfield was a teaching assistant for a year and Mary Gawthorpe and Ellen Wilkinson both became pupil teachers. Nursery Nurse Training Colleges, such as the Norland, which was founded in 1892 provided prestigious child-care training for upper-working-class and middle-class girls.¹⁹ In industry too, from 1875, when women delegates attended the Trades Union Congress (TUC) for the first time, there was a gradual opening up of trade unions to female officials.²⁰ Several of the cohort moved to positions in this field - as will be discussed in the next chapter.

Opportunities in many fields came about through improvements in technology. The typewriter, for instance, which first came into use in the 1870s, had been used primarily by male clerks. By 1911 female short-hand typists held one in five of office clerk jobs. By 1914 women had taken over the typewriter as their own machine. As with the sewing machine, they were deemed to be better operators, and the number of women clerks in business and in the Civil Service was twenty times higher than before the typewriter.²¹ Women could also take employment at some distance from home as the bicycle gained in popularity, providing cheap transport. By the first decade of the twentieth century the ownership of a bicycle was attainable by many working-class girls. Among the

¹⁷ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Women in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London: Longman, 2001), p.45.

¹⁸ See above, pp. 135-136.

¹⁹ Ruth Adam, *A Woman's Place*, p.170.

²⁰ Jane Rendall, *Women in an Industrializing Society*, p.71.

²¹ Jane Rendall, *Women in an Industrializing Society*, p.19.

autobiographers, for instance, Isabella Cooke, Alice Foley, Winifred Griffiths and Annie Kenney owned their own bicycles. Isabella recalled buying her first bike at sixteen when she worked as a domestic servant on a farm in 1906.²² Alice, writing of life when she was twenty, in 1910, four years before the First World War began, recalled:

Scrupulously hoarding my scanty pocket money, I bought a second-hand bicycle for twenty-five shillings, which was overhauled and titivated up by an elder brother.²³

Winifred's parents acquired a second-hand cycle for which she paid them back 'by instalments.' She recorded budgeting her wages, which, after paying board and lodgings and one shilling to her mother for doing her washing, left Winifred 'with 6/6 to cover everything else including running my bicycle.'²⁴ Her words signalled that the bicycle was important in her life, since it was the only single item to be mentioned in Winifred's budget.

Perhaps the most far-reaching changes over time in the work-place came during and after the 1914-18 war years, when women took employment in areas vacated by male employees who had joined the forces. At that time, especially after conscription began in 1916, women were encouraged to take over jobs vacated by men. Ironically, this included work in engineering, heavy industry and the new munitions factories hitherto denied them, as well as further opportunities in a hierarchy of retail and clerical positions. This was to change after the war, as a barrage of media propaganda encouraged women to return to the home, and leave the jobs for returning war heroes. The end of the war brought about massive unemployment for women in the spring of 1919.²⁵ The post-war message was reinforced by government policies which denied women unemployment benefit, and by

²² Isabella Cooke, *A Hired Lass in Westmorland*, p.10.

²³ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.72.

²⁴ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.60.

²⁵ Sarah Boston, *Women Workers and the Trade Union Movement* (London: Davis Poynter, 1995), p.137.

marriage bars in the professions which proved further hurdles in the attainment of economic success in the public sphere.²⁶

Starting Work

The difference in standard of living for themselves and their families which was realized when they began paid employment was a source of pride described by autobiographers Alice Foley, Mary Gawthorpe, Winifred Griffiths, Mary Luty, Nellie Scott and Kathleen Woodward. Earning their own wage gave them a measure of economic independence. Starting a job was a sudden transition in working-class children's lives, as Alice Foley described: 'No bridge existed between school life and industry.'²⁷

Despite the sudden change in life-style most of the cohort looked forward to the self-reliance that earning a wage would bring; a degree of economic independence was part of growing up. Joining the adult world of work was perceived as an achievement. Whether it occurred as soon as the earliest school-leaving age was reached, or after a period of further education, embarking on paid employment was a milestone in their lives marking a crossroads between dependent child and independent adult. The women enjoyed the ability to provide goods for their families. Ellen Wilkinson recalled that she was pleased for her mother's sake when she began to earn a wage after completing a degree at Manchester University. Ellen acknowledged her economic success in her ability at last to give money to her mother, who had helped her achieve so much. Sadly though, she wrote: 'The maddening thing was that I had only been earning the money to give her little luxuries for a year and a half before she died.'²⁸

²⁶ Dierdre Beddoe, *Back To Home And Duty: Women Between The Wars* (London: Pandora, 1989).

²⁷ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p. 49.

²⁸ Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, p.400.

Others contributed their labour to the family economy instead of earning a wage. Five of the cohort took on adult duties at home on leaving school or shortly afterwards and so contributed indirectly to their family finances by negating the need for paid help. Mildred Edwards, for example, did not work in paid employment outside the home until after 1914 when she was married and war had begun. After leaving school in the mid-1890s she was required to stay at home as housekeeper, nurse to her mother and to look after her younger brothers and sisters. Annie Barnes, on leaving school took over from her mother in the grocery shop, managed by her father. Living accommodation above the shop served as their family home. However, when her mother became ill in 1910, Annie stayed at home to nurse her and help with her younger siblings. Agnes Cowper left school aged 14 in 1888, and was housekeeper for her father until his death a few years later, when she became a shop assistant. Isabella Cooke left school in 1903, when she was thirteen. She moved in with her maternal grandmother who had become too frail to live alone. It was only when her grandmother died that Isabella began paid employment. Isabella attended a hiring fair in nearby Penrith; she was offered a position as domestic servant on a farm, where as well as domestic duties she helped with the animals.

Paid employment was therefore not continuous for all of the women: family circumstances often dictated that they gave up work to bring up siblings in place of a parent, or help aging or infirm relatives. There could also be periods of unemployment between various jobs. Nineteen of the autobiographers are known to have married, and most gave up employment on marriage, or at least when they had children, complying with the general view that this was the respectable option. The majority of the women therefore largely acceded to gender expectations for women and took up domestic roles. At least four of the cohort, Margaret Bondfield, Alice Foley, Daisy Hills and Ellen Wilkinson, remained

spinsters who supported themselves throughout their lives, and their economic success continued the independence attained when they first left the family home.²⁹ None of the cohort were forced to give up work on marriage, although June Purvis gives examples of clerical professions, teaching, the Civil Service and other occupations where a marriage bar was in operation from the first decade of the twentieth century until it was repealed by an Act of Parliament in 1944.³⁰ In industrial areas women were traditionally more likely to continue with paid employment in the period between marriage and starting a family.³¹ This tradition was particularly appropriate for providing women with a model of economic success, as they could contribute both their wages and their domestic skills and labour to the family economy without losing respectability.

Until school-leaving age, the autobiographers had all been dependent on their family to provide at least the necessities of life. Rising real wages over the period made children's earnings less necessary to the domestic economy in the same way that it became more viable for women to stay at home after marriage.³² As children, most of the women had been expected to help with domestic chores to a greater or lesser degree, but, with the exception of Louise Jermy who worked in her stepmother's laundry and Hannah Mitchell who helped all day on the family farm, they were not generally expected to contribute their labour directly to the family income or business. Both of these women were born in the 1870s, before legislation for school attendance was in place. By 1900 the situation had

²⁹ As well as the five mentioned in the text: Margaret Bondfield, Alice Foley, Daisy Hills, Mary Luty and Ellen Wilkinson; there were possibly two more of the cohort who remained spinsters as neither Agnes Cowper nor Kathleen Woodward mentioned marriage in their autobiographies and no record of their marriage has been found.

³⁰ June Purvis, *Women's History: Britain, 1850-1945* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 74, 100, 124.

³¹ Hakim has identified a 'double peak' of women's employment in Britain with a high level of employment in the younger age groups, followed by a fall as they reach child-bearing age, and an increase as their youngest child reached school age around their mid-thirties. C. Hakim, 'Grateful Slaves and Self-Made Women: Fact and Fantasy in Women's Work Orientations' in *European Sociological Review* no.7, vol.2 (1991).p.35.

³² Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor*, p.3.

changed for all but the poorest families, and school attendance was better enforced. Even then, however, Isabella Cooke living in rural Westmoreland in 1902 tells of her father sending her, while still a schoolgirl, to work for a local farmer to whom he owed money. Reflecting ideas against child labour prevalent in the wider community, the farmer disapproved of Isabella's father using his daughter to pay off his debt.

It was a grand farm, everything in good order. I went there when I was 12 and still at school to pick potatoes in the field along with some women, to pay for a load of manure that my father had had. Robin, the boss, said "Tell your father to come and pay for it himself," and made me have the money.³³

Factory work, at least in the northern industrial areas was relatively highly paid, which encouraged married women to stay on at work, Nellie Scott and Mrs Yearn for instance both continued to work in textile mills after marriage. It also meant that girls in industrial areas were generally encouraged to leave school as soon as they legally could and, dependent on the local economy, girls could begin half-time work in factories before they were fourteen. This was standardised in 1902, when girls had to be aged at least twelve before they could take advantage of the Labour Test.³⁴ Having passed this they could begin working part of the school day under the half-time factory system. The extra wage was welcomed within the family. It gave them a measure of economic independence, and was earned in a protected environment: girls often worked in a quasi-parental setting at first in workrooms near their parents or older siblings. Nevertheless there was some disquiet from social observers and educationalists who saw early school-leaving as 'coarsening' the girls, undoing the work done by the schools to educate them in domestic skills.³⁵

³³ Isabella Cooke, *A Hired Lass in Westmorland*, p.2.

³⁴ For details see above, p.111.

³⁵ *The School Monthly*, January 1893.

The half-time system was relevant throughout the period when the cohort were growing up and starting work. Three of the cohort record taking the labour test: Annie Kenney, Mary Luty and Mrs Yearn. Annie Kenney, and Mary Luty were born in the 1870s, and Mrs Yearn was born twenty years later in 1890: all three joined the adult world of work as factory half-timers before they were fourteen. Not everyone in industrial areas took the Labour Test. In 1903, when she was twelve, Alice Foley recalled that she 'escaped the effects of the Half-Time Factory System then in operation, for father, with all his faults, strenuously opposed it as being the source of exploitation of child labour.'³⁶ However, Mrs Yearn and Mary Luty specifically recorded that they left school under the half-time system in order to help with their family's budget. Family finances were critical for poorer families like theirs so more emphasis is placed on early economic success. The need for earning a living appears to have been instilled in them from childhood so they may have seen the need for financial improvement as one of the marks of success as a reaction to childhood poverty. Both women regarded earning a wage and the economic success and small luxuries this brought to their families, as an achievement.

Mary Luty's mother had left her husband, taking her two small children, when Mary was three. Despite help from her grandparents, money was tight throughout Mary's childhood and she saw the importance of economic success in the form of financial help to her family. In 1888, when she was thirteen years of age, Mary left school after taking the labour test. She expressed her pride in passing and began half-time work, with her mother in the cotton-mill, as a "tenter" for three shillings a week. Mary disclosed the difference this made: 'The extra money meant much in the home, and we began to have little luxuries not known previously.'³⁷ Mary soon realized that her job was monotonous and boring.

³⁶ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.49.

³⁷ Mary Luty, *A Penniless Globetrotter*, p.39.

She revealed a conscious effort to improve her economic prospects by studying at evening classes until she was qualified for a trade union job. After this she became a social worker in Manchester. Economic success later in her life meant that after her mother's death around 1930, Mary was able to realize her aim of seeing the world, with a variety of jobs undertaken to fund her as she travelled.

Mrs Yearn's family was very poor: there were fourteen children born, only six of whom survived. Mrs Yearn and her two older sisters all took advantage of the half-time system: 'Eventually things became a little better. We had grown up, and as one became full-time, another was ready to be half time.'³⁸ Their wages had helped her family out of financial poverty after several bad years of scraping by, when the frosts and snow of winter precluded her father's brick-setting trade for six months in the year and even her mother, still nursing her youngest child, had been forced to seek work. Once the children were also contributing to the family budget, her mother was enabled to leave work. She also join the Co-operative stores. Purchases were made: 'when Whitsuntide came round we were the first out showing our new clothes. So proud we were of them. They were the first we had made by a dressmaker.'³⁹ Mrs Yearn's pride in helping the family was tinged with regret as her mother died of cancer soon after: 'just when we were able to give her the best.'⁴⁰

Before starting paid employment, in most cases however, there was the decision to be made as to which kind of employment to undertake. Where there was a choice of occupation the decision was made partially by themselves, but mostly by their parents, and often dictated by family economics. Sometimes it was accepted that children followed

³⁸ Mrs Yearn, 'A Public Spirited Rebel', p.102.

³⁹ Mrs Yearn, 'A Public Spirited Rebel', p.103.

⁴⁰ Mrs Yearn, 'A Public Spirited Rebel', p.103.

into their parents' occupations as in Mary Luty, Mrs Yearn and Annie Kenney's families. In areas of high industrialization all members of a family, in some instances, worked in the nearest factory or mill. Whole streets could be woken by the 'official knocker-up to the neighbourhood', as Alice Foley recalled, and workers walked together to the factory gates to 'clock on'. In other cases women took different jobs from other girls in their neighbourhoods. Alice Foley and Winifred Griffith were encouraged by members of their families to aim for shop-work rather than factory work. Mary Gawthorpe's mother took in laundry so that Mary could become a pupil teacher.

Hannah Mitchell's mother gave her no choice over her first job. Considering it a 'ladylike' occupation, while at the same time earning money to help the farm budget, she decided that her daughters were to learn needlework. Hannah was to learn dressmaking from her older sister, but Hannah's lack of motivation for working at home persuaded her mother to send her to town as an apprentice where she was thought her daughter would be sternly supervised. Hannah had been unhappy at home where her labour was required on the farm, and her childhood was filled with resentment against the unfairness of her upbringing and her mother's harshness. With paid employment, success, for Hannah was not merely financial. It also meant that she felt 'really happy' for the first time with the 'kind and gentle' treatment she received from her employer:

Looking back I feel this was the first time in my life that I was really happy. Even a very strict mistress who did not scold would have seemed kind after my mother's harshness, but Miss Brown was so kind and gentle she soon roused my interest, and for the first time I realized that work could also be a pleasure.⁴¹

⁴¹ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.57.

A year later in 1886 Hannah was forced to return home to be 'the domestic drudge and the scapegoat for my mother's temper' once again. However, her time away from her mother had equipped Hannah 'both physically and mentally' for economic independence. A few months later Hannah left home for good and went into domestic service as maid in a schoolmaster's home.

Other women were also under the control of their parents when first starting work. Personal choice gave way, and ambitions for prestigious or fulfilling work were thwarted, as parents in poor families obliged dependent children to enter better-paid factory work or domestic service in order to bring income to the family. Maria Hull had been pleased when she was offered a position as a school monitor, which would mean her eventually becoming an uncertified schoolteacher. However, the low pay for this position also meant that she would remain living at home, still mainly dependent on her parents for board and lodgings. Maria had ambitions to teach, but for what they perceived as sound economic reasons her parents decided she had to apply for employment in domestic service. Maria would have liked to have stayed on at school: the position of school monitor, leading to a teaching post with better pay and prospects, would have been more to her preference than domestic service. For the family budget, however, it was important to have one less child living at home. Prospects for a better job for Maria were sacrificed for a short-term financial gain for the family. Maria would have earned sixpence a week as a school monitor, which she 'would have liked' and which would allow her to gain prestige eventually as an, albeit uncertified, school-teacher. However, the money was obviously not enough to offset the cost of her food and laundry at home, and domestic service was

one way to have Maria fed at 'someone else's table' so helping to stretch the family budget.⁴²

For Maria, the decision was made by her family and ruled by the need to save family expenditure. Her sense of duty to her parents, and her understanding of the benefit her family would gain if she lived elsewhere, meant she gave in without a quarrel. Despite the measure of economic success which going into service brought her this may be viewed as a set-back for her personally. The teacher training would have meant long-term gains in economic success as well as prestige and a higher status job. Maria's description particularly emphasises the importance of family control and the constraints of family finances on young women who were embedded in the financial unit of the family. This utilitarian notion of economic success was the normal situation for working-class families, and one with which Maria was content to comply.

Winfred Griffiths lived at Basingstoke in Hampshire and so was away from the industrial north and its tradition of textile factory work, but she too was constrained in her choice of employment by family economics. Winifred had performed well at school and had ambitions to become a teacher. However, her parents had been unable to afford her training and books, and Winifred left school in 1910 when she was fourteen. Despite the need for her to begin paid employment, her father still had higher ambitions than factory work for his daughter and, as had Alice Foley's sister, he envisioned work as a shop assistant as an opportunity for betterment. This was much to Winifred's amusement:

My father thought I should do well in a pleasant shop, like a florists – that would be a nice job for me to learn! I did not much favour this, but it did not matter, as my parents had little idea of where I could get such a post. My father

⁴² Maria Hull, 'A Derbyshire Schooling', p.170.

was adamant that I should not go to work at the paper mill. The girls earned more money there, but life was rough and he wanted to protect me from that.⁴³

Winifred did begin work in a factory, it was not in the dreaded paper mill, but as an apprentice at Burberry's gabardine factory, recommended by her uncle as having 'good reputation as employers,' a description which appeared to satisfy the ambitions of both Winifred and her parents.⁴⁴ She soon described making 'fair progress with the work at the factory'.⁴⁵

Margaret Bondfield had been a pupil-teacher for one year at Chard Board School in 1887. Family economies meant, that in common with Maria Hull and Winifred Griffiths, she was required to seek more lucrative employment rather than continue in low-paid training. Margaret was offered an apprenticeship as a shop assistant in a Brighton draper's shop where she was to be taught to embroider and trim trousseaux and layettes, which had been bought plain from wholesalers. From the 1870s there had been a dramatic increase in women shop assistants. Mid-Victorian shops had been run by an independent shopkeeper with perhaps a few male apprentices. Young women were required as the century progressed and the capitalist consumer society provided customers for the large new departmental stores built to serve it. Women were generally introduced where no great training was required and customers were mainly women: in shops selling drapery, millinery, underwear, food, flowers or stationery.⁴⁶ By 1888, when Margaret began her apprenticeship, it was an accepted occupation for respectable, and presentable, girls. Margaret enjoyed her work; it enabled her to live independently away from the family home, but she was later to find more fulfilment in the political field.

⁴³ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.36.

⁴⁴ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.37.

⁴⁵ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.39.

⁴⁶ Jane Rendall, *Women in an Industrializing Society*, p.77.

In other cases parents or older siblings wanted the best for the younger members of a family and would offer advice, rather than control. There was a perception of a hierarchy of respectability in occupations available to working-class girls, which had geographical and historical variations.⁴⁷ Work was seen as a way to gain status. Factory employment in the industrial North-east of England was relatively well paid, but was not always seen as the best choice of employment. Alice Foley's older sister, Cissy, worked in the local textile mill in Bolton. In Alice's eyes, Cissy seemed to have become a 'young lady' who spent money on herself and brought about many improvements at home as a sign of her economic success:

My eldest sister had now developed into a young lady. As a jack-frame tenter in the cardroom she earned enough money to 'keep herself'. She gave up a portion of her wages towards the family support but bought her own clothes and cheap accessories. She now insisted on various refinements in the home; the sanded kitchen was no more; the floor sported bright-coloured linoleum; cups and saucers replaced the old blue and white-rimmed basins and the oil lamp was ousted by the incandescent gas-jet.⁴⁸

However, Cissy did not view her job in the same light. When Alice left school aged thirteen, in 1904, Cissy encouraged Alice to set her sights higher than factory work and to apply for the poorer paid, but 'more genteel' shop work, a comment which underlines the girls' notions of respectability and status. Cissy knew what factory work entailed and her ambition was for her younger sister to have a more prestigious, and perhaps easier, occupation:

I was urged by Cissy to apply for shop work, which though lowly paid was considered more genteel than entering a factory, so as a tall, gawky, shy girl I was taken on a month's trial as junior assistant in a fancy goods store in Corporation Street...My job was to clean out the shop, polish glass show-cases, dust countless shelves, run errands and mark retail prices on incoming stock.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.16.

⁴⁸ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.44.

⁴⁹ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, pp.49-50.

Alice was deemed 'clean and obedient' (in an echo of the ideology taught at school), but her mother was informed at the end of the month's trial that she would 'never make a shop girl'. Far from realizing her ambitions, Alice felt 'an acute sense of failure'. She proceeded 'on a dull trek round streets, warehouses, offices and shops seeking any kind of work in efforts to retrieve [her] tarnished self-respect.' Alice felt even more humiliated, when she finally began work with Cissy in the 'mill'. Cissy's fears for her younger sister were realised for Alice initially found the work as a tenter in the weaving shed daunting:

At first I was highly terrified by the noise and proximity of clashing machinery. The flying picking-sticks seemed like giant arms seeking to catch me in their toils and the unfenced straps in narrow alley-ways tormented my awkward movements. The weaving shed was a large one with hundreds of towel looms belting to and fro, operated by women and girls. It was a vast unexplored region, stifling, deafening and incredibly dirty.⁵⁰

Later Alice became accustomed to the factory, and earning a wage meant the freedom to enjoy her leisure time with some spending money. As well as contributing to the family budget she was able to buy a bicycle and join various social clubs. Economic success also enabled her to expand her cultural horizons, recording 'a moment of magic' in 1905 with her first visit to the Theatre Royal, Churchgate in Bolton to see the Gilbert and Sullivan opera *The Yeoman of the Guard*. After this her freedom expanded, she attended *The Mikado* and grand opera when the Moody Manners or Carl Rosa companies visited the town. Alice described her enjoyment, but with an eye to cost:

These shaping years also included the gay, gracious days of Miss Horniman's reign at the Gaiety Theatre, Manchester. As a member of a group of young Socialists I hoarded my scanty pocket-money, amounting at that time to one penny in the shilling of factory earnings, so that I could afford with them the luxury of a monthly matinee. With a cheap seat in pit or gallery we saw most of the early Shaw and Galsworthy plays, followed by tea in the

⁵⁰ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, pp. 51-52.

Clarion café in Market Street. The whole outing cost about five shillings each.⁵¹

After seven years in the factory even these outings failed to lighten the monotony of her work. This, and her concerns for her older work-mates, were to have the effect of politicising Alice and, like Margaret Bondfield, she later found success in politics - as will be discussed in the next chapter.

Kathleen Woodward did not rely on a network of family or friends to help her towards economic success. She showed an early independence and initiative all of her own, although the need to earn money also dictated her choice of occupation. Kathleen had become familiar with the inside of the shirt factory when she had worked in the evenings after school, putting the machines away and sweeping up at the end of the factory working day. She and her mother survived on this money and her mother's wash-tub earnings. Instead of starting work as a half-timer when she left school in 1908, Kathleen recalled the successful outcome of the trick she played on the factory forewoman:

I pinned my hair up at the back and presented myself as a person much older than I was. With the utmost effrontery I offered myself as a skilled worker.

When I had run errands in the factory I had watched the women working at their machines, and on one or two occasions I had clandestinely worked the machines before I put them away in their nightgowns. On this precarious basis I thought to take on the status – and the wages – of a grown woman.

I managed to keep my new job and effect the giddy elevation in my wages from five shillings to fifteen shillings a week. Oh then for weeks I walked on air!⁵²

Kathleen recalled joyously the difference the 'elevation' in her wages wrought at home:

⁵¹ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.66.

⁵² Kathleen Woodward, *Jipping Street*, pp.91-92.

In Jipping Street the change in my status was swift – marvellous. My mother was able to give up taking in washing, and now devoted her afternoons tending and resting the wounds of the varicose veins she had developed in years of standing at the wet wash-tub and rising prematurely from childbirths casually attended.

I got me a room, a back room opposite the hospital. In time I grew to feel at ease in the grown company of the women in the factory.⁵³

Kathleen's economic success had been achieved by joining the adult workers and so earning a higher wage. The effect of this was an improvement in home life, especially for her mother, and, personal independence in lodgings away from home.

Others lived away from home because it was required by the nature of their employment. Night-club dancer Betty May took lodgings near her work, Rose Gibbs and Winifred Griffiths began work as live-in domestic servants, seamstress Hannah Mitchell and shop girl Margaret Bondfield, started apprenticeships away from home, while the itinerant Emma Smith had no settled home. However all but these five continued, at least for a time after leaving school, to live in the family home and were still dependent on their parents to some degree. The girl's wages, whether living at home or away, made an important, and in some cases vital, contribution to the economics of their family.

Improving Prospects

Earning a living brought various benefits: contributing to the family budget and having some spending money of their own, or gaining independence from their family by moving away from home. Once they were in paid employment there were various ways in which the ambitious amongst the women could improve their economic success. Some found that

⁵³ Kathleen Woodward, *Jipping Street*, pp. 92-93.

they could change employment as they gained experience. Those entering domestic service, for example, had the chance of bettering themselves if they were ambitious and worked hard. Employment in a small establishment with only one or two domestic staff could be arduous and lonely, especially for a young girl straight from school. But once experienced, employment in a large household keeping a good number of domestic staff could offer the chance of learning a recognised job, with good prospects, under a skilled expert, in a hierarchical community in which it was possible to rise through the ranks.

Winifred Griffith's first job was in the local gabardine factory. At first she was interested in working on clothing for a polar expedition, but she soon felt discontent. Her pay was limited and although she was able to help a little at home she craved more:

For five months I was reasonably happy in this work at the factory. I often wished I could earn a little more money and so be able to make a more adequate contribution at home, as well as be able to buy the occasional lemonade or sweets I sometimes craved. The future appeared rather drab.⁵⁴

After the first five months, economic success for Winifred did not appear to be in factory work. She wanted a better-paid job, which would enable her to buy a more comfortable life for her family and a few luxuries for herself. Once again, a family member was to help. In 1911 her aunt Lizzie found an opening for her as a housemaid. This meant more pay and a step up on the ladder of economic success. Winifred 'jumped at the idea' of going into domestic service.⁵⁵ She saw domestic service as an improvement in her situation, it would also enable her to gain independence in living away from home. Winifred left the factory and took her new post as housemaid at East Oakley House, a large country house in Hampshire. For her, this was a 'milestone' in her life. She recorded her new life as a happy period when she achieved economic independence.

⁵⁴ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.41.

⁵⁵ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.43.

I grew accustomed to the routine of the house and to the family and staff, and so entered on what was to be a very happy period of my life. It was in the spring of 1911 that I took up my new post. I was nearly 16 years of age and from now on I was self-supporting, earning my keep and a little beside. Although I visited home regularly and spent short holidays there, I was never more to live at home. I had become independent, I had passed a decisive milestone on life's journey.⁵⁶

Winifred was to stay at East Oakley House for four years during which time she progressed from housemaid to parlourmaid and the luxury of a room of her own. Other women who embarked on domestic service also showed that this could be a route to economic success. Rose Gibbs worked her way up from 'tweeny' to more pay and status as housekeeper;⁵⁷ Doris Hill, after working on the family farm, left home and eventually owned and ran a thriving guesthouse, and farm servant Isabella Cooke moved from a small farm to a larger one where, she claimed, she was 'working in a gentleman's house', before she moved further upwards in the servant hierarchy by becoming a cook for a city banking family.⁵⁸ Upward mobility was seen, in these examples, to be the attainment of a more responsible position, or a place in a larger or more prestigious household, or even running a business. These were accepted and respectable methods of social advancement for women engaged in paid domestic service. Domestic service was also an apprenticeship for the sorts of skills required to run a home, and a rise in the servant hierarchy could mean better marriage prospects. Although some of these women did turn away from domestic service, and this is generally in line with much historiographical evidence, the

⁵⁶ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.45.

⁵⁷ The 'tweeny' or between maid, combined the duties of under-housemaid with those of kitchenmaid, helping both the cook and the housemaid. This was often the lowest paid and least prestigious of indoor servants: duties included rising by 5.30 every morning to clean and light the kitchen range before any of the other servants were up. See, for example, Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1990), pp.151, 197.

⁵⁸ Isabella Cooke, *A Hired Lass in Westmorland*, p.15.

cohort show that this was not always the case.⁵⁹ Winfred Griffiths and Isabella Cooke for example both achieved some of their ambitions via the hierarchy of domestic service.

Others in the cohort went into one kind of paid employment on leaving school and then found better opportunities, more pay or prestige, by seeking work in a completely different kind of job. Unlike the serendipitous chances for improved economic status which was the pathway for most of the cohort to advance, Louise Jermy revealed that her success was no chance occurrence: she had planned the achievement of independence away from her unhappy home life. Louise trained as an apprentice dressmaker in the early 1890s and her employer, who she referred to as 'Madame', appreciated her talents and treated her kindly. However, on the money she could earn as a dressmaker, Louise realized that she would never be able to leave home, where she had lived unhappily with her father and her abusive stepmother. On leaving work one day she asked the advice of one of her older workmates.

I began to talk to her about the wages and she said "Well, if your people wanted you to earn a good screw they should have put you into something very different, for you'll never get it at dressmaking. But you know dearie, it is not how much you earn that matters, but what you do with it and what it will do for you."⁶⁰

Louise told her stepmother that she wanted to enter into domestic service away from home. 'Not that I was shamed at being a servant, but I meant to get away, where she could not easily interfere with me.' Having obtained a position via one of the newly set up servants' registry offices, she left home, and soon began to get stronger. For Louise,

⁵⁹ For discussion on women turning from domestic service during the first decades of the twentieth century, see, for instance, Harriet Bradley *Men's Work, Women's Work* (Cambridge, Polity, 1989); Jane Lewis *Women in England 1870-1950: Sexual Division and Sexual Change* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1984); Elizabeth Roberts, *Women's Work*.

⁶⁰ Louise Jermy, *Memories of a Working Woman*, p.70.

economic success meant that her health improved and she gained freedom and independence away from her stepmother's cruelty:

I soon settled down in my new home. My wages were only £7 a year which is 11s. 8d. per month, and I may tell you I turned every penny over twice before parting with it, every month as I took it; my first outlay was in some liniment or oils to rub my hip, for I had set myself to get it well if I could so I was always nursing it up and coaxing the stiffness out of it. It was truly wonderful the way I improved. I went home for the monthly outing every month, and all who saw me remarked on the change and told me how much better I looked. I said to all "Yes, I feel better," and always ended by saying happily "You know my hip is getting quite well."⁶¹

Nellie Scott did not change her occupation in order to find economic success but she did change her place of work. Nellie began work when she was fourteen, around 1894, in a felt hat factory, which she referred to as 'the Hatshop'. She described the conditions in which she worked: 'the room, one big room, was warehouse, machine room and trimming room, half taken up with six tables. Ten people sat at each, mounted on three-legged stools, gas lights on a level with the eyes, steam, and ventilation only up the staircase.'⁶² Nellie was not afraid of hard work, but after a serious respiratory illness, she moved to a larger factory where conditions and pay were better.

I went to work at Christie's Hat Works in a lovely room, six stories up, with big windows and a splendid view of the hills, and they are always such a comfort and a help. In spite of very hard work I always looked back with pleasure to that room...I had loved working at Christie's.⁶³

Nellie remained in the family home after starting work. Those who did so were expected to contribute some of their income to the family budget, and this sometimes made it difficult to save for their own economic advancement. Nellie was still living at home

⁶¹ Louise Jermy, *Memories of a Working Woman*, p.77.

⁶² Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.86.

⁶³ Mrs. Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.88.

when she met her husband at a Clarion Fellowship meeting, and after some months of courtship they decided to save for their wedding. Nellie recorded their wages, 'he was getting 22/- a week. My wages did not amount to much more than 10/- per week'.

Despite both having to give some of their wages to their families, the couple managed to save '£20 for furniture and enough to pay for a week's honeymoon and a wedding.'⁶⁴ This small, but significant, amount of money must have been only just enough for the couple to embark on married life, as Nellie proudly added 'but we did it.' Contributing to her own wedding and new household in this way was remembered by her with pride.

Once they were established in their jobs, several of the women became involved in trade union work and took positions away from the factory floor. This led to better paid positions and a degree of economic success, but also signalled that financial success was not the only goal: political goals also played a part in their success. Work as a way to political involvement will be discussed further in the next chapter. Of the cohort, Alice Foley was promoted from the factory floor to work in the Textile Unions and later the Workers' Education Association; Margaret Bondfield progressed from shop assistant via trade union activities to become a Member of Parliament; Ellen Wilkinson, who gained a degree at Manchester University, progressed from teacher through suffrage and trade union organizer to become a Member of Parliament and the first woman Cabinet Minister; Mary Gawthorpe gained practice as a public speaker in the teachers' union, which was to stand her in good stead as a suffragette; and Ada Chew and Annie Kenney followed a similar path from Textile Union representatives to paid work as organisers for suffrage movements.

⁶⁴ Mrs. Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.89.

There were also opportunities for economic success in less conventional jobs. Entertainer Betty May, born in poverty in Limehouse around 1890, began her first paid work as a 'baby' mascot, singing and dancing in a nightclub, the Café Royal in London. Here she mixed with the so-called 'Bohemian Society' and met the first of her wealthy husbands. Betty was 'spotted' by the sculptor Jacob Epstein and became a renowned artists' and photographers' model. She sat for artists such as Nina Hamnett, Jacob Kramer, William Orpen, and B. N. Satterthwaite, amongst others; their portraits of Betty are reproduced in the pages of her autobiography. She also sat for Jacob Epstein, who modelled his bust 'The Savage', on her. Betty claimed he referred to the sculpture as 'Betty'.⁶⁵ When the bust was shown at the Leicester Galleries, she was very proud of her success in gaining the public notice which she had craved as a child: 'To him it was simply "Betty". This is a matter of great pride to me.'⁶⁶

Betty was also proud of her exciting life and her upward social mobility. 'I have never tried to be ordinary and fit in with other people...I have lived only for pleasure and excitement', she claimed, 'for I have lived in a world which I was certainly not born to. In fact nothing could have been further from it than the surroundings in which I was brought up.'⁶⁷ Economic success for Betty meant that she could maintain her lifestyle of gaiety, drugs and society life.

Kathleen Woodward also took an unconventional pathway for a working-class woman. At the end of her autobiography, written in 1928 when Kathleen was only 32, Kathleen claimed that she had gained the confidence to try to earn her living in a way of which she had often dreamed: she had become a successful writer. She had begun her working life

⁶⁵ Betty May, *Tiger Woman*, p.117.

⁶⁶ Betty May, *Tiger Woman*, p.117.

⁶⁷ Betty May, *Tiger Woman*, p.xi.

in a shirt-making factory in Bermondsey, London, in 1910, but after making life more comfortable for her mother, and starting an independent life away from home, she revealed: 'I could not resign myself to a life of hideous work in the factory, rounded out by death and possibly the workhouse. This and other small tragedies exercised my soul.'⁶⁸

Success for her came when she left Jipping Street behind. Encouraged by Mary Macarther, the trade union organiser, portrayed, Carolyn Steedman has argued, as 'Miss Doremus' in *Jipping Street*, Kathleen left her job in a shirt factory in 1915.⁶⁹ She ended her autobiography on a note of philosophical optimism:

In my books, in beautiful words, there is something
strangely like my dreams; they smile on me, beckon to me.
I must go on, following without seeing where they end.⁷⁰

Economic success came to Kathleen through following her dreams. After the war in 1918 she became a receptionist at a London Club, and in her spare time wrote several children's stories. Eventually she was able to find work as a freelance journalist, and was taken onto the staff of the *Daily Express*.⁷¹ Kathleen published her first book, *Queen Mary*, in 1927.⁷² *Jipping Street*, her autobiography, was published in 1928 to rave reviews both at home and abroad.⁷³ Several newspapers, including the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express* and *Daily Sketch* told her life-story, recounting how 'a worker in a south London collar factory was rescued by the late Mary Macarther, the trade union organiser and friend of the Queen.'⁷⁴ Kathleen worked on the *New York Times* after 1928, and her last book, *The Lady of Marlborough House* was published in 1938. However, before embarking on her writing

⁶⁸ Kathleen Woodward, *Jipping Street*, pp.132.

⁶⁹ Carolyn Steedman does much to refute and explain some of the details in the autobiography, see her 'Introduction' of 1977 publication of *Jipping Street* (London: Virago, 1977); see also, 'Kathleen Woodward's Jipping Street' in *The Written Self* (London: Rivers Oram, 1992), p.119-126.

⁷⁰ Kathleen Woodward, *Jipping Street*, p.151.

⁷¹ *Daily Mail*, 20th September, 1927.

⁷² Kathleen Woodward, *Queen Mary: A Life and Intimate Study* (London: Hutchinson, 1927).

⁷³ *Jipping Street* was simultaneously published in 1928 in the USA by Harpers and Row.

⁷⁴ *Daily Mail*, 20 September 1927.

career the First World War had intervened. Kathleen had taken one of the jobs vacated by men serving in the armed forces. She began work as a ship's steward, and worked her way back and forth across the Atlantic between 1915 and 1918. Kathleen Woodward was not the only woman to take on war work, which opened up yet more opportunities for women to move into previously male-gendered roles.

'War Work'

The coming of war in 1914 saw the emergence of a respectable patriotic role for women who took their opportunity to fill masculine roles while the men were away at the front. Tied up with notions of national pride, nationhood and service, new-found activities in previously male occupations gained respectability if they were 'war work'. For thousands of women the First World War brought a new involvement in society, greatly increased their earnings and provided a measure of independence and emancipation.

Interestingly, given the opportunities it opened up to them, apart from their existence in economic terms, the cohort record little about the war years. This was possibly because of the impossibility of articulating the horror they felt. It may have been that the economic situation improved considerably for some women during the war years, and they felt ambivalent about claiming success whilst others suffered. Nevertheless, several of the cohort undertook positions in paid employment hitherto held by men. Even the outrageous Betty May felt that she should 'do her bit' and complied for a while with the war effort by working as a shop assistant. It was perhaps typical of Betty that she chose a shop where the clients would be mostly male:

I took a job in a hairdressers and tobacconist's shop in the Buckingham Palace Road. I felt that I ought to do some work that would release a man for the army. My duties consisted of serving behind the counter, selling cigarettes,

matches, pipe cleaners, brushes, combs, hair-nets etc., and in taking the money for the shaves and haircuts. I entered into my new business with enthusiasm.⁷⁵

Before the outbreak of war in 1914 Nellie Scott had found success in her day-to-day work, and her participation in trade union activities. However, with the advent of war she was able to improve her situation even more. In 1906, the School Meals Act permitted local authorities to provide school meals, and this became compulsory at the outbreak of war in 1914.⁷⁶ At this time Nellie left her job as a felt hat worker to obtain a new and better-paid job at a Government Feeding Centre.⁷⁷

I left the hat works for a place as superintendent at a Centre for feeding school children and was there four years, a most strenuous time during the first years of the war when we had nearly 300 children each day at our Centre.⁷⁸

Leaving the factory to enter a better-paid administrative post was, for Nellie Scott, a way to economic success. After the war Nellie heard of government departments which were recruiting women. Thousands of women clerks were being recruited to staff the new ministries which were being set up in Whitehall and elsewhere.⁷⁹ Nellie became an official on the newly created Pensions and Benefits Committee, and felt she was also helping others:

I went to be sickness visitor for an Approved Society. I was able to do many little kindnesses through being on the Pensions' Committee and Insurance Committee; so many are robbed of benefits and pensions through ignorance.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Betty May, *Tiger Woman*, pp. 102-103.

⁷⁶ Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain*, p.17.

⁷⁷ One other of the autobiographers mentioned centres similar to this, organized during the Second World War. Grace Foakes recalled the 'British Restaurant' at Hall Green in Birmingham where her two school-age daughters had lunch. She wrote 'These restaurants had been opened by the Government to provide lunches for the people to help them eke out wartime rations. The food was as good as could be expected under wartime conditions. The price was reasonable and the people were thankful for the warmth and companionship these places provided.' See, Grace Foakes, *My Life With Reuben*, p.82.

⁷⁸ Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.96.

⁷⁹ Ray Strachey, *The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain* (1928), p. 344.

⁸⁰ Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.98.

She worked hard for many years to guide her clients through the complex system of benefits and pensions. As a paid official, appointed by the Treasury, she would have been briefed to restrain excessive generosity on the part of the local committees, but despite this she ensured that working people, like herself, obtained what was due to them.⁸¹ This enabled her to practice the Socialist principles in which she believed.

Winifred Griffiths, who had been delighted to leave Burberry's factory to go into domestic service, after four years began to feel just as constrained and unfulfilled by her work as a parlourmaid. She had not given up her ambitions for something more worthy, and still was persistent in seeking the 'fame and glory' which she had sought at school. By 1914, rapidly nearing the end of her teens, Winifred clearly signalled that the pathway to achieve her ambitions was one she had thought about and planned. She described her 'concern to work out for myself a satisfactory philosophy of life and to take steps to satisfy my ambitions',⁸²

Late in 1914 she was offered a chance to try yet another kind of employment when Mrs Scott, the Mistress of East Oakley House, realized Winifred's frustration:

In the meantime the war was changing peoples' lives. There was a great deal of talk about 'jobs of national importance' for women as well as men. Surely soon *My* (sic) chance would come. One day Mrs Scott spoke to me, letting me know that she knew how I was feeling. She told me that the Manager of the Co-operative Stores in Basingstoke was on the lookout for young women to train to take the places of grocery assistants who were joining the Forces. She was prepared to give me a very good reference if I was to apply. I accepted her offer with alacrity and in due course was taken on in the grocery department of the Co-operative Stores.⁸³

⁸¹ *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950: III Social Agencies and Institutions*, ed. F. M. L. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp.54-55.

⁸² Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.59.

⁸³ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, pp.59-60.

Winifred left East Oakley House and moved into lodgings in Basingstoke with another girl from her new job. She enjoyed the freedom that better pay allowed her, together they went to 'evening class, cinema, or to church or a walk on Sunday' and to farewell parties for the 'boys' who left to join the army.⁸⁴ The women left behind in the shop were required to work harder to make up staffing levels, but the management appeared to see their female staff as a temporary stop-gap instead of recruits for apprenticeship. Previously the male assistants had been required to undertake several years of training before they could progress to 'first hand' in charge of either the grocery or provision counter:

At the shop we were always busy for there never seemed to be a complete staff. Men left to join up and as yet the management could not imagine they could get along with women only. Hence the Co-op tried whenever possible to replace the men, who left for the army, by other men.⁸⁵

Winifred soon saw prospects for herself and used the experience she had gained to begin training as 'second hand' in a grocery shop in Basingstoke. However, the War had changed old traditions in the provisions trade. After three months the 'first hand' left to join up and Winifred's promotional pathway was complete. Winifred found economic success by taking over a man's job after a very short training period, and was proud at the speed of her advancement compared with the previous male apprentices. She detailed her newly-learned responsibilities:

So after only two or three months of training, as against several years that the old time apprentice would have had, I found myself in charge of the provision side in a very busy store, where we sold thirty sides of bacon a week when we could get them and as many cooked hams, as well as a whole range of other provisions. To help me I had as second hand a cheerful hard working girl who had had some experience in another store. We had a till on our counter and took the cash ourselves. It was, of course, before the time of automatic reckoning machines, so we

⁸⁴ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.60.

⁸⁵ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.63.

had to enter each amount as it was paid in. When we had finished taking money the roll had to be removed and the items totted up. If they did not correspond with the contents of the till we had to try and try again to get the total right.⁸⁶

Mildred Edwards had also taken advantage of the opportunities which came with war. Mildred's family home was a rented cottage supplied by the railway for its workers, of whom her father was one. On leaving school, Mildred had remained at home to nurse her mother, who had arthritis and was confined to a wheelchair, and to look after her younger brothers and sisters. By the time war broke out, Mildred was the only one of the children still at home. After her mother died in 1916 she felt 'very lonely and sad'. However, she soon got voluntary work and shortly after married her fiancé, to whom she had been engaged for three years. It was only then, at the age of twenty-seven, a married woman, that Mildred took her first paid job, a clerical job which before the war would have been held by a man. Women clerks, like Mildred, were more likely to be employed by government than by private employers. In the 1870s the Post Office had been the first government department to employ women clerks and by 1881 central government employed 53,106 women (compared to only 6,420 known to be privately employed). The expansion in numbers of women employees continued throughout the war years.⁸⁷ As well as economic success, Mildred gained self-esteem in earning a wage while her husband was away at war, she proudly recalled:

Well, I was a soldier's wife now, and set about preparing for the future, as neither of us was very wealthy. I got a job at the recruiting office, thirty shillings a week. The job was at the Castle...where there was a staff of about twenty or so. Afterwards it was much larger as it was taken over from the army and became the Ministry of National Service.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, pp.66-67.

⁸⁷ Jane Rendall, *Women in an Industrializing Society*, p.78.

⁸⁸ Mildred Edwards, *Our City, Our People*, p.60.

To prepare 'for the future' Mildred was able to save much of her wages during the war. She lived with her father who paid her housekeeping money, and she was also paid the army 'separation' allowance.

Strategies for Economic Success

Most of the cohort had achieved economic success in an almost serendipitous fashion: although vaguely wanting a better standard of living, they had tended to advance by making ad hoc short term decisions as chances came up, such as a changing job or taking up an evening class. However, like Mildred Edwards, who had planned 'for the future', one or two others revealed a long-term personal plan or strategy. Their record of this allows an insight into the method by which it was possible for some working-class women to achieve their ambitions.

Mary Luty had formed an ambition to travel in the 1890s when she was in her early teens. It had sprung from a series of revivalist meetings at the chapel she and her mother attended. 'The idea of seeing the world began to take root. I dreamt of being a medical missionary on a foreign field.'⁸⁹ Mary attended the local technical college and eventually was to leave the factory floor to work in a trade union office. Until after the First World War she lived at home to care for her mother, who was failing in health. When her mother died, Mary's ambitions to travel, although not as a missionary, re-surfaced. She met some opposition: 'when one mentioned a world trip alone, and financing myself as I journeyed, the idea was laughed at and ridiculed. A woman could not do that kind of thing; a man might, but a woman – never!'⁹⁰ Mary sailed from Liverpool around 1920 with only £15,

⁸⁹ Mary Luty, *A Penniless Globetrotter*, pp. 39-40.

⁹⁰ Mary Luty, *A Penniless Globetrotter*, p.52.

and for a year travelled around Canada, with a variety of jobs, one of which was a cook on a prairie farm. She recalled her triumph:

What an experience for a factory girl! A fig to those who said "a woman couldn't work her way around the world." I was doing it. I was rising in the world, having got two new dresses and also booked a second-class passage to New Zealand.⁹¹

Mary's economic success was manifested by her ability to finance her travels, and in her progress from factory girl to world-traveller. Success lay also in doing what people said she would not, as a woman, be able to do. Her travels gave her great confidence and having accomplished her world trip she wrote a manuscript of about 1000 words on her travels and sent it to the BBC. Mary was asked to submit more material and to give various talks on *Woman's Hour*, *Slices of Life* and several other programmes. This was followed by a series of paid lectures both home and abroad, visiting several European countries as well as Iceland. The money she earned from these ventures meant her economic success was assured. She was able to buy a house near Cleveleys in Lancashire, which she ran as a guest house.

Mary Gawthorpe was very also clear about her motivation for economic success from her early school years. She expressed her ambition when she was about eleven years old, and decided that she would have achieved it by the time she was twenty-one. Her plan was to succeed in becoming a fully qualified teacher so that she could earn a good salary. She wrote: 'I felt it my duty to come more substantially to the support of Mother'.⁹² She worked hard towards this goal, teaching the boy's classes at St Luke's Roman Catholic School in South Leeds, while still studying for her final examinations at night:

⁹¹ Mary Luty, *A Penniless Globetrotter*, p.97.

⁹² Mary Gawthorpe, *Up Hill To Holloway*, p.105.

It was very hard work which the steady upward surge of youthful energies gladly supported. Nothing seemed impossible. I loved teaching, loved the little lads, raced from one end of the city to another, then down to the certificate classes, coming and going and going and coming, one blessed thing after another.⁹³

Mary finally achieved her long-held ambition in 1902, after she had been working as a probation teacher at St Luke's for two years. With the help of an advance of her salary from her local Vicar, Reverend E.T. Birch-Reynardson, whose approval she appeared to have valued, she moved her mother and younger brother to a new home, leaving her abusive, alcoholic father behind: 'A bell had rung for father though as yet he was unaware.'⁹⁴

Mary rejoiced in the difference the move had made to her mother, who 'became distinctly younger looking'. Her long-held ambition had been achieved. Although it had brought professional success and the attainment of a career, and was also apparent in the material wealth her teacher's salary brought to the family, for Mary the most important aspect of her economic success was manifested in her ability to free her mother by providing her with a home away from her father. It was this that she had planned and worked for. Writing her autobiography in the 1930s, Mary was the only one of the cohort to use the word 'success' when reviewing her progress. Looking back at the pathway she had followed she wrote 'Considered as drive and accomplishment all was success.'⁹⁵

Mary had planned her future from an early age, determined to bring all to fruition before she was 'twenty-one'. From a working-class background, Mary had been bright enough to take advantages of the opportunities open to her in education and the changes in

⁹³ Mary Gawthorpe, *Up Hill To Holloway*, p.148

⁹⁴ Mary Gawthorpe, *Up Hill To Holloway*, p.152.

⁹⁵ Mary Gawthorpe, *Up Hill To Holloway*, p.153.

employment as more women teachers were encouraged into schools.⁹⁶ Most significantly, she had illustrated this progress in her autobiography. This threw light on the attainment of success for herself, and the possibilities available during this period for other women from working-class backgrounds.

Material Wealth

Between the wars life seemed to have become easier for most of the cohort, and many achieved material wealth, sometimes after many years of hard work. Economic success was expressed in home ownership, leisure activities, consumer goods and generally a more comfortable standard of living compared to their childhood. Most of the cohort gave examples of the way their lives were enhanced by economic success. Mildred Edwards listed some of the consumer goods which were beginning to be affordable to her family in Carlisle during the first decades of the twentieth century: best tea, perfumed soaps, tailor-made clothing, pretty hats and all manner of foodstuff – including country butter and eggs, and ‘the weekend joint, a five pound piece of beef three and six, or shoulder of mutton two and six, or a leg about four shillings’.⁹⁷ By the end of the Second World War Mildred Edward and her husband had saved £430, enough to buy their own home. Upward mobility came with home ownership. Their economic success had been assured by a combination of domestic skills, paid employment and careful saving. The couple lived in the same house for fifty years. In 1971, after the death of her husband, Mildred sold the house to Carlisle Corporation for £2,400. Mildred by this time could afford to endorse the cheque ‘to be passed on to three children’s institutions’: a philanthropic gesture indicative of Mildred’s economic success.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ In 1875 women represented just over half of all elementary school teachers, by 1914, twelve years after Mary qualified, three-quarters were women.

⁹⁷ Mildred Edwards, *Our City...Our People*, p.29.

⁹⁸ Mildred Edwards, *Our City...Our People*, p.67.

Leisure and cultural activities became important. A week or even a fortnight's holiday at a seaside resort was becoming possible for all but the poorest, and day excursions were enjoyed as special cut-price trips by the railway and bus companies were offered, especially at Bank Holidays. In 1923 the Southern Railway alone advertised twenty-six day excursions from London over the August Bank Holiday period and the General Omnibus Company offered forty-one different destinations. This company also suggested various 'Honeysuckle By-Ways' to cater for ramblers.⁹⁹ Trips such as these were described by a significant number of the autobiographers, and several went on holidays. In August 1904, Alice Foley was taken on a holiday to Morecambe, by her elder sister Cissy:

My eldest sister and her factory companion, Lizzie, kindly invited me to join them on their four days annual Holiday in August of that year. This caused wild excitement within me, especially the prospect of staying in a boarding house, for I had never left home before.¹⁰⁰

Visits to the theatre, day trips and holidays began to be part of a comfortable lifestyle. Winifred Griffiths continued paid employment after her marriage. Her wages were vital when her husband James attended the Ruskin Labour College in London between 1919-1921. Winifred took on a variety of jobs to supplement his student allowance, including a position as waitress at Lyons Tea Rooms where she worked at branches in Gloucester Road, Waltham Green and Richmond. However, the couple enjoyed leisure time together including visits to London theatres. Winifred recalled:

Although I found this job tiring, Jim and I still managed to live a very full life in our spare time. I have still in my possession a sheaf of 2d and 3d Theatre Programmes of the shows we saw, mainly from seats in the 'gods'. We saw Sybil Thorndike in 'The Trojan Women', Mrs Patrick

⁹⁹ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 1 and 3 August 1923. According to the issue on 7 August 1923, over 2000 of the 'newer' type of buses had operated on country routes over the holiday period, with 3,800 buses of all kinds pressed into service in London. More than 80,000 passengers had been taken to Epping Forest alone.

¹⁰⁰ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.39. Alice is unsure of the year and wrote 'I think it was 1905', but she was in her final year at school when she went on holiday and she left school in 1904, so I have assumed that this was the correct year.

Campbell in 'Pygmalion', William J. Rea in the name part of John Drinkwater's 'Abraham Lincoln', Matheson Lang in 'The Wandering Jew'. There was also the marvellous spectacle of 'Chew Chin Chow', which ran for four years, and there was the great experience of seeing Anna Pavlova dance at Drury Lane.¹⁰¹

In 1925 the couple had moved back to Wales, where James' future lay in Labour politics. Despite the years of depression with miner's strikes and lockouts over the next few years, economic success seemed assured and they no longer needed Winifred's wages to supplement their budget. A daughter and a son were born and Winifred had a succession of girls to look after the children as well as employing a woman to come to do the washing. Later they moved to a house with a garden in the Swansea valley, two more children were born and in 1938 they moved to a larger house in the suburbs and bought a car, which Winifred soon learned to drive. Leisure time was enhanced: 'Now it was wonderful to take the children for rides in the country or to other and better seaside places.'¹⁰² Shortly before the Second World War began Winifred and James were able to take a motoring holiday in Somerset and Devon.

Conclusion

The autobiographies reveal the various changes in social and working conditions of which the cohort were able to take advantage during their lives. Technology had brought advances and opportunities for completely new kinds of work from which they could also benefit. More women gained employment in administrative posts, as office workers, or in new areas in retail or in teaching. Furthermore, with the coming of war, and later, conscription for men, women were enabled to advance in a hierarchy of jobs which

¹⁰¹ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, pp. 87-88.

¹⁰² Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.121.

society had previously assigned to a male work-force. As the century progressed therefore, society saw a wider range of occupations as appropriate for working-class women.

Economic success began with independence as the cohort started paid employment, contributed to the budget and brought a better standard of living to their families. Often the work was dull, arduous and monotonous. But, with confidence gained by their new-found independence and experience in the work-place, came the foresight and ambition to make decisions about themselves and their future: they could set their sights higher and change to new kinds of employment with better pay and prospects.

Better working conditions and shorter hours also gave women the choice of more time away from the work-place. Those with energy and motivation could attend evening classes so that educational success could improve their employment prospects, enabling them to seek more fulfilling or financially rewarding work. Economic success also had an impact on domestic success. While some of the autobiographers sought adventure and new experiences in travel most were happy with a better standard of domestic life. They described improvements in their domestic situation with a greater variety of consumer goods, better living conditions and more opportunities for a variety of leisure activities that a higher income could bring.

The women describe the various routes offered by changes occurring in society. In their autobiographies they described the small steps they took in order to achieve what they wanted in life. They improved their situation little by little as chances occurred, or in some cases saw the fruition of a long-held ambition to change the course of their lives. They were encouraged by family and friends and motivated by one or more of several

ambitions encompassed by economic success: personal independence, acquisition of material goods, social and cultural activities, travel, a higher status job and upward social mobility for themselves or their families. The cohort encompassed women across the disparate divisions within the working-class and across all occupations, educational standards and backgrounds. The different pathways to economic success taken by the autobiographers revealed insights into the possibilities for advancement for working-class women in general during the period.

Chapter 6: Politics

Introduction

The cohort includes some of the first working-class women to hold political or quasi-political public office. The autobiographers describe their sometimes pioneering involvement in Socialism and trades union, or within the local or national activities of the Labour Party and the suffrage movement. Some took part in quasi-political institutions such as the Co-operative Working Women's Guild, which campaigned on women's issues. They joined clubs and societies, and they were elected onto voluntary public offices as magistrate, Justice of the Peace (JP), Poor Law guardians or as members of school boards. By standing for public office or by taking part in a public expression of their feelings on a political issue, women in this period were effectively making a political act: they were striking a blow for women's equality in the broadest sense and their autobiographies give some idea of the pride they felt in moving into the political public sphere.

Of the 26 autobiographers, 12 can broadly be described as politically active in some way, at least for part of their lives. They were: Annie Barnes, Margaret Bondfield, Ada Nield Chew, Alice Foley, Mary Gawthorpe, Winifred Griffiths, Annie Kenney, Mary Luty, Hannah Mitchell, Nellie Scott, Ellen Wilkinson and Mrs Yearn. All saw their political involvement as important. These women gradually recognised that by their own actions they could contribute in some way to the public debate on issues affecting women: issues such as enfranchisement, working conditions, health-care, housing and education. In doing so they could make a difference to their lives. Perceptions of what constituted political action varied from woman to woman: for Annie Barnes, for example, it was secretly escaping from the family home to deliver suffragette literature, while for both

Margaret Bondfield and Ellen Wilkinson, it was a lifelong career which culminated in being appointed as cabinet ministers. For Winifred Griffiths it was working with her husband and supporting his parliamentary career, yet she was also proud of her own role in local politics as a district Councillor, a JP and a Poor Law guardian. For Mrs Yearn it was her election as the first woman director of her local Co-operative Society, and serving as a JP. These women saw political success within an intellectual and moral framework. They justified their actions as having Christian, moral or altruistic motives. Such justification was in some ways a double-edged sword. Already developed in the home, these caring moral attitudes were based on, and helped to reinforce, existing gender divisions; yet they could also motivate, and justify, women's engagement in public life. As Patricia Hollis has argued, women's involvement in local politics has:

Encouraged women to come forward with the confidence that their domestic and family background was as useful and relevant to public service as men's commercial and business experience.¹

This also appeared to be the view of the women autobiographers. They saw their own fight for equality with men as helping other women to have the confidence to campaign for issues of importance to their lives, and to strive for the rights and freedoms to express themselves. The women also took a personal pride in the fact that this had been achieved in a public arena: they had succeeded within a society which primarily valued male public success.

Previously women born into the working class had been held back by lack of education and low female participation in public and work-place organizations. Both improved over this period. The twelve autobiographers reveal that they took advantage of reforms which occurred as they were growing up. Changes in the political arena facilitated their

¹ Patricia Hollis, 'Women in Council: Separate Spheres, Public Space' in *Equal or Different* ed. J. Rendall, p.210.

achievements. Female ratepayers had the borough vote from 1869; from 1894 women could be elected onto a variety of public bodies – school boards, board of guardians, parish councils and later county councils; and in 1918 the parliamentary franchise was widened to include women aged over thirty. In the workplace, from 1875 and throughout the period, women were becoming accepted as delegates in the previously male bastion of trade unionism.² With additional help and encouragement, and sometimes even the example of family, friends, neighbours or work colleagues, these women were enabled to take up political opportunities denied to working-class women of previous generations.

Furthermore, as Susan Kingsley Kent has observed, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw developments in the public discussion of politics, which ‘acknowledged the voices of working-class women who sought change in the political, public sphere.’³ The autobiographers underline these changes and detail the complex, varied and overlapping routes through which they gained political success - from early awareness in childhood, through periods of rebellion at home or work.

Historical Context

The first forays by women from the domestic into the political sphere occurred in the late eighteenth century, when humanitarian campaigns such as prison reform, protection for children, education for the poor and the move to encourage breast feeding of infants, attracted many middle-class evangelical women.⁴ They included Methodist and Quaker reformers and arguably the most significant and widespread campaigns in which they

² Paula Bartley, *The Changing Role of Women*, pp.133 – 135; Patricia Hollis, *Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government, 1865-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), p. 210.

³ Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain 1860-1914* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.5.

⁴ Susan Kingsley Kent, *Gender and Power in Britain, 1640-1990*, p. 108.

were involved were the anti-slavery societies: by the 1840s women had begun to participate as audience, fund-raisers, and occasionally even as speakers.

The women's movement was therefore wider than just the campaign for female enfranchisement. For instance, the battle against state-regulated prostitution led by Josephine Butler (1828-1906) leading to the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts in 1886, was an integral aspect of a movement that included the other 'decorous struggles,' although perhaps the most notable was the suffrage campaign.⁵ The movement struck at the heart of women's difficulties: their sense of sexual objectification and victimization. The franchise movement - as well as the campaigns for property rights and access to medical training, higher education and the professions generally - all aimed at a redefinition of the roles of women in society. There were male supporters of such campaigns, John Stuart Mill and Sydney Webb, for example, and these have been too well documented elsewhere to require elaboration here, as have the debates over suffrage post-1867, which involved some key women on the anti-suffrage side.⁶ However, the evolution of women's public and political issues encompassed not only middle-class philanthropists, but also working-class altruists, including, by the late nineteenth century, members of the cohort.

Working-class women could be introduced to political ideas in a variety of ways. Clubs and societies were especially important. Reading material was borrowed from fellow members and Socialism, for example, was encouraged during leisure activities arranged for young, single working-class women under the umbrella of the Labour movement. The quasi-political sports and social clubs such as the Clarion Vocal Union and Clarion

⁵ Joan Perkin, *Victorian Women* (London: John Murray, 1993), pp. 232-234.

⁶ For general discussion of the debates and issues surrounding suffrage see, for instance, Martin Pugh *The March of the Women*; Sandra Stanley Holton, *Suffrage Days*; Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain: 1860-1914*.

Cycling Club, added to women's political education as well as their leisure pursuits.⁷ The Clarion Clubs centred around the socialist weekly, *The Clarion*, and were at least broadly political. These clubs and societies were often conducted in the spirit of Victorian enquiry and interest in the natural world, as Nellie Scott recalled, but their activities, and discussions with fellow-members, also set the scene for later public involvement with more overt political institutions.⁸ Such clubs also had practical benefits for working-class girls and young women living away from home, especially in big city centres such as Manchester and London.⁹ They enabled them to have a social life, as well as an introduction to political activities, while maintaining their respectability in the company of like-minded women.

Married women also could also be introduced to political ideas through meeting other women. They shopped at Co-operative Society Stores and joined the Working Women's Co-operative Guild. Later in the period they joined the Women's Institute (WI), which was founded in 1915 and began as a radical organisation campaigning on women's issues: autobiographer Louise Jermy was a member.¹⁰ Such organisations were also a route into the Independent Labour Party, the suffrage movement, or into voluntary public service.

⁷ The Clarion van, like the clubs, was funded by the journalists on the *Clarion*, a Socialist newspaper. The van, staffed by mainly female volunteers, of whom Ada Nield Chew was one, travelled through England carrying the Socialist message. The newspaper also founded several clubs and societies for working-class people.

⁸ Nellie Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p. 89.

⁹ City Centre clubs included the 'Snowdrop Band' members of which carried white flowers to suggest their purity, and the 'Travellers Aid Club' which helped young girls from the country to achieve respectable employment in the city.

¹⁰ Louise Jermy's autobiography, *Memoirs of a Working Woman*, has a 'Foreword' by R. H. Mottram, who claimed it to be 'the first autobiography written by a Women's Institute member.' The first UK Women's Institute (WI) met in Llanfairpwll, Wales, and rapidly spread to rural areas. It aimed to 'turn interests into achievements'. Each Institute was self-governing within the WI Constitution and rules, groups were organised into a committee framework and put forward annual resolutions to form the basis of campaigns.

For women in paid employment there was also the work-based trades union which tackled a variety of work-related and social issues.¹¹ More women became involved in trades union during the period. In 1886 it was estimated that 36,980 women were members: this rose to 142,000 in 1892 and 433,000 in 1913.¹² Although this meant that only 10% of the female work-force was unionised by 1913, compared to 30% of the male work-force; these figures nevertheless reveal a remarkable and dramatic increase of 300 per cent during the years spanning the early working lives of many of the cohort. For the first time, women from the working class gained positions of authority as trade union representatives and officials. The TUC was persuaded to accept women delegates to their conference in 1875, and by 1881 there were ten such members. In addition there was, in 1881, the first appointment of a female factory inspector, which meant further protection for female workers.¹³

In late Victorian and early Edwardian society women began to play an increasingly significant role in extending the social functions of local authorities, especially as Poor Law guardians and on school boards.¹⁴ On the level of national politics, from the first decade of twentieth century the Labour Party, although still in its early stages and facing opposition from radical Liberalism, found and encouraged support among many working-class people. One reason for this was that only a Labour government offered a comprehensive health policy which encompassed issues of housing, healthcare and poverty, all of seminal importance to working-class lives.

¹¹ F. L. M. Thompson, ed., *The Cambridge Social History of Britain*, p.441.

¹² Elizabeth Roberts, *Women's Work*, p.62.

¹³ Elizabeth Roberts, *Women's Work*, p.61.

¹⁴ Patricia Hollis, *Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government*, pp.71-194. See also F. M. L. Thompson, *The Cambridge Social History of Britain*, III, p.44.

Working-class women participated increasingly in the work of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) during the early twentieth century. The ILP was formed in 1893, but unlike the trades union it was not work-centred, so was also open to women based in the home as well as those in paid employment. As Eleanor Gordon has claimed, it emphasised social and political issues, rather than those of an industrial nature.¹⁵ Women were given equal membership rights with men, although there were also in existence women-only branches. The ILP supported woman's role as that of wife and mother, membership being mostly upper working-class and lower middle-class women, a social group which increasingly chose not to work in paid employment. Karen Hunt has argued that the women of the ILP were essential to the financial viability of the party because of their fund-raising activities. They also widened the cultural base of the movement by organising Sunday schools, outings and concerts.¹⁶

All of these routes therefore opened up new ground for the women, as at the end of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century educational opportunities and an increased public awareness at all levels of society paved the route to political activity for women from working class backgrounds. They joined committees and became familiar with processes such as canvassing and voting, public speaking and political organization and administration. In taking even a small part in social or political debates or action, the autobiographers were therefore following a female tradition of public engagement with societal issues. They became used to discussing ideas and forming opinions, and took advantage of opportunities to become involved with the social and political debates of the

¹⁵ Eleanor Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland: 1850-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p.264.

¹⁶ Karen Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists: The Social Democratic Federation and the Woman Question* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p.225

period. In many cases they recalled that the dawning of their political awareness had its roots in childhood.

Political and Social Awareness in Childhood

Interest in social and political questions in many cases came via the tradition of companionship and social awareness instilled by girlhood participation in church-based organizations. During the 1890 and 1900s, when the cohort were growing up, there was what F. M. L. Thompson has called ‘the transformation of formal religious structures’.¹⁷ Dozens of clubs, societies, associations and fellowships, which were held in chapels and church halls, brought the working classes into the environment of the Church by means of leisure activities such as sports and dancing. Grace Foakes and her sister Kathleen joined the Wesleyan Girl’s Guild in the East End of London, Alice Foley joined the Young Socialists and the Clarion cycling club, Mary Gawthorpe was a church service worker, Winifred Griffith’s family belonged to a friendly society, Annie Kenney was a member of the Clarion Vocal Union, Nellie Scott became a member of the Girl’s Friendly Society and Ellen Wilkinson recalled joining the Band of Hope.

Alice Foley, Mary Gawthorpe, Annie Kenney, Nellie Scott and Ellen Wilkinson record specifically that their interest in social questions or the politics of the day began during childhood, when they overheard or participated in discussions within the family, or helped their parents with the distribution of political leaflets or other electioneering work. Nellie Scott, for example, was exposed to a broad range of political ideas during her childhood in the early 1880s. Her father was a Liberal, having refused to turn ‘Conservative and

¹⁷ F. M. L. Thompson, *The Cambridge Social History of Britain*, pp.420-421.

Church' when required to by his employer.¹⁸ Nellie was immersed in political discussion from an early age and was encouraged by her parents to take part:

My father and mother always took a keen interest in politics, also my grandparents on father's side. Grandfather was a real old Tory, Grandmother a Liberal both of old Derbyshire families. Then mother's father was one of the men who came to Stockport (from Holcombe in Lancashire) when the Plug Riots were on. Then one of our visitors was a Bradlaughite, and we children used to look at him with awe because he was an atheist. And the arguments there used to be! I was only very small, very fond of reading, and I could get under the counter with my book and hear all the talk, or sit in a corner of the fender; and even though I had my book all these talks were a great joy to me. Mother was a strict Congregationalist, but she went to hear Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant; also Enid Stacey when she came. Then it all had to be talked over and the impressions received, so that though only a child I was learning and was allowed to speak. Mother used to call me her little Lydia Becker.¹⁹

Nellie's family were exceptional in that they displayed wide-ranging and opposing political interests. Her mother's open-minded and public involvement was especially notable, and it was almost certainly this early introduction to political awareness which led Nellie, as a pioneering female union representative, to fight for better working conditions amongst women felt hat workers.

Winifred Griffiths, who, later in life would become a social worker and the wife of a Labour politician, recalled that an awareness of the political issues during her 1890s rural Hampshire childhood came through her father:

Almost adjoining the Mill was the tiny village of Laverstoke where there was a reading room. A few workers, my father among them, paid a small subscription

¹⁸ Nellie Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p. 81.

¹⁹ Nellie Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', pp. 82-83. Charles Bradlaugh was a radical MP for Northampton in the Liberal Prime Minister Gladstone's second Government, he was famous for refusing to take a religious oath. Lydia Becker was one of the early campaigners in the movement to secure votes for women. Annie Besant was a Fabian who campaigned for birth control, and was also instrumental in supporting the match girls in their strike of 1888.

so that they might go there to eat their lunch and meanwhile read the papers. No daily paper came to our house, but I remember my father made a point at tea-time of relating to us the news he had read at lunch-time. Thus I became familiar at an early age with the names of the politicians of the day, and with phrases such as 'Free Trade', 'Tariff Reform', Home Rule, Welsh Disestablishment etc.²⁰

Ellen Wilkinson also saw the beginnings of her political interests stemming from her childhood. Her father, a staunch Wesleyan, was 'an ardent worker for Mr. Arthur James Balfour in the old north-west division of Manchester at election times.'²¹ Her mother was a Methodist and Ellen was reared in an 'atmosphere of sturdy Non-conformity.' As a small child she was encouraged by her grandmother to repeat the Sunday sermon aloud. Ellen acknowledged that this helped her later political career, as it gave her 'a long and largely unconscious training for complete unselfconsciousness on a public platform.'²²

During her childhood in the 1880s, Mary Gawthorpe had been immersed in Conservative doctrine. Her father, a leather currier in a tanning factory, was an active Conservative and insisted on his family following suit.²³ The owner of the leather factory, was the Right Hon. W. L. Jackson, until 1902 the Conservative MP for North Leeds, and he naturally encouraged his workers to support his party.²⁴ Mary's father was Honorary Secretary for the party and election agent in the North West ward, part of the North Leeds constituency. During election campaigns he received wages as an official worker for the Conservative Party, and, with the rise of the Conservative Working-men's Party sponsored by Lord Randolph Churchill, was even canvassed as a candidate. The whole Gawthorpe family

²⁰ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.19.

²¹ Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, p.401.

²² Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, p. 410-411.

²³ Leather currying is the process by which tanned leather is buffed and rolled to give it suppleness and elasticity.

²⁴ Before this time Jackson had been Financial Secretary to the Treasury and Chief Secretary for Ireland. He was a member for North Leeds until 1902 when he became Lord Allerton.

was involved on election nights. Mary's 'vigorous flowing legible handwriting', was used to good effect in her later journalism for the suffrage movement. It was, she claimed, attributable to the many copies of the voters' list that she helped to prepare.²⁵

Familiarity with the issues and debates of the day, and observation of discussion, public speaking and electioneering, was therefore a part of childhood for these women. Although it may not have been recognised until later in life, this political awareness gave impetus to their political involvement as adults. Examples from parents or other authority figures in their childhood made it easier for them to validate their own actions. Certainly none of the ten autobiographers who centred their success solely in domesticity mentioned discussions of politics taking place during their childhood, whereas the five who do recall childhood involvement all proceeded to realize political success as adults.

Rebellion

Although political discussion and participation was clearly a formative influence on some of the cohort, parental beliefs were often also questioned as the women established their own independence from the family home. Not all of the autobiographers continued to think along the same lines as their parents as they grew up. Those who did not described a stepping outside, or rebellion from, familial political or religious beliefs as they reached young adulthood. Their rebellion allowed them to espouse new ideas and a different political ethos. Margaret Bondfield, Alice Foley, Mary Gawthorpe, Winifred Griffiths and Ellen Wilkinson, for example, were all introduced to socialism by an older sibling, colleague or friend.

²⁵ Mary Gawthorpe, *Up Hill to Holloway*, p.32.

In her autobiography, written in the early 1970s, Alice Foley chronicled a ‘crisis of faith’, that she underwent as she was growing up, and which caused her to leave the Catholic religion in which she had been brought up and educated. Her self-styled ‘rebellion’ enabled Alice to declare publicly her growing interest in the politics of socialism. Alice’s older sister Cissy, a suffragist and socialist, was already active in her section of the Weaver’s Union and was a member of the local Labour Church. However, Alice was not merely imitating an older and much admired sibling, for although she embraced socialism, she did not blindly follow Cissy in her involvement with the suffragist movement.

Nevertheless, encouraged by the discussions of Cissy and her friends, and by readings of Robert Blatchford’s writings, Alice joined a group of young socialists. She also joined the Clarion Cycling Club. Unable to reconcile socialism with the family-held Catholicism, Alice began to question its doctrines and described her rejection of the faith:

The foundation of my childhood’s faith trembled and crumbled before the onslaught of a new and challenging Socialist philosophy. In its complete rejection of what then seemed to be religious shackles the new-born idealism was healthy and intoxicating.²⁶

For Alice the politics of Socialism were bound up with philanthropy and religious experience, and she appeared to have transferred her Catholic sense of duty to the church to more community-based social values in a secular realm. Her Socialism, fuelled by her new political convictions was later to lead her to political success.

Mary Gawthorpe also underwent a thoughtful rebellion and turned from her family’s Conservative convictions as she reached adulthood. In 1901 she was twenty years old, and had finished training as a teacher. Encouraged by a close friend, the journalist Tom Garrs,

²⁶ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p. 66-67.

Mary began to think about her beliefs and question the Conservative values which her family espoused:

I began a determined self-analysis, examining to the best of my ability the basic influences of my life. Instead of being the conservative I had imagined myself to be, I discovered I was not basically conservative but leaned to Labour. More than leaned so that I was compelled to think of it as Labour with the capital. As a matter of growth, the discovery was pure velvet, not a hardship. I seemed to be all set that way. The Labour Movement, it now seemed to me, was in aim and method all I had hitherto known as practical Christianity. I took to the new ethics like a duck to water.²⁷

Politics and Married Women

The politically active among the cohort did not give up their interest in politics after marriage. Their familiarity with public issues manifested itself in choosing to shop at the socialist-based Co-operative Stores as housewives and through trade union membership as working women. As married women, Annie Barnes, Ada Nield Chew, Mary Gawthorpe, Winifred Griffiths, Louise Jermy, Hannah Mitchell, Nellie Scott, and Mrs Yearn continued to participate in clubs and societies or follow interests in political parties or women's movements during the period. Historians have not always accepted this trend. Brian Harrison, for instance, has indicated that domesticity affected the political outlook of women and shaped them into a politically passive mould.²⁸ However, this was not the case among all of the autobiographers. Annie Barnes, Winifred Griffiths, Hannah Mitchell, Nellie Scott and Mrs Yearn for instance all valued their domestic success, particularly while their children were young, yet they were radical in that they also rebelled against the confines of a home life. By becoming involved in domestically orientated institutions, such as the Women's Co-operative Guild, the Women's Institute

²⁷ Mary Gawthorpe, *Up Hill to Holloway*, p. 173.

²⁸ Brian Harrison 'Class and Gender in Modern British Labour History' in *Past and Present*, issue 124 (1989), pp.121-158.

and the Women's Labour League, the women were enabled to find a voice outside the home without compromising their domestic roles.

Nellie Scott and Mrs Yearn were members of the Co-operative Women's Guild in the North of England. Mrs Yearn was a mill-worker in Oldham, and joined the Guild after her marriage around 1910. She attended her first conference in Liverpool in 1915, where the work of children in the factory under the half-time system was debated. Mrs Yearn recounted her feelings on this issue and underlined her motivation to improve working conditions, especially for children: 'The half-time question came to the front. That made me a real rebel, and helped me to work wholeheartedly for a better state of existence.'²⁹ She even canvassed for a place on the all-male Co-operative Committee. This was not easy and she recalled 'many a rough word' directed her way, as she was roundly abused by men when canvassing among the farms on the outskirts of Oldham. Nevertheless she was elected in 1924. Her claim to want to help others was more than just an excuse for stepping outside traditional female roles: her work for children continued. In 1928 she was one of the founders of a Maternity and Child Welfare Centre in Oldham and she also served on the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC).

Despite the difficulties she had encountered, Mrs Yearn was proud of her achievements within the Co-operative movement and beyond. Her list is well worth quoting here as it illustrates the breadth of this married working-class woman's activities. It also serves to emphasize the importance she placed on traditional male value systems in that she placed public service above, or at least equal with, her domestic role.

I may claim to be a pioneer of women in Oldham as far as the Co-operative and Labour women are concerned. The

²⁹ Mrs Yearn, 'A Public-Spirited Rebel', p.103.

following is a record of my work done since entering the Guild Movement:

1924. Elected a director of the Oldham Equitable Co-operative Society – the first and only woman to date, of any society in the District.

1925. First working-woman candidate for Oldham Poor Law Guardians. I was also a candidate for the Town Council, and failed by a small number.

1927. Made a member of the Court of Referees, Oldham Unemployment Exchange.

1928. Made a member of Oldham National Health Insurance Committee. Also made a Justice of the Peace for Oldham Borough. Assisted in forming a Maternity and Child Welfare Centre, now making splendid progress.

Served on the Local Committee of the N.S.P.C.C. Served on the Tenants' Defence League – the only woman.³⁰

Mrs Yearn's election as director of the Oldham Co-operative Society in 1924, really was the pioneering political success she claimed it to be. She was many years ahead of any other women in her area and remained the only female director in the Oldham district at the time she wrote her autobiography in 1931. While this adds to her achievement, it also underlines the slowness of change affecting women. Mrs Yearn's emphasis on her ground-breaking activities in public life in Oldham reflected her spirit, exemplified in the very title of her autobiography: *A Public-Spirited Rebel*. But there was, too, a keen altruism about her activities, again suggested in her choice of title: she worked on behalf of others, not for self-aggrandisement, and this is underlined by the welfare nature of the activities in which she was engaged. She took a great pride in the fact that her efforts were publicly honoured:

I gained honours for services rendered on behalf of the Sick and Wounded during the War. I received an illuminated address from Dame Sarah Lees, O.B.E., and also a Certificate of Merit from the British Red Cross and the Order of Saint John's.

³⁰ Mrs Yearn, 'A Public-Spirited Rebel', p.105.

She was unpaid for her work as a guardian, a magistrate and a Justice of the Peace, and acknowledged that she could not have achieved so much without the encouragement of her financially supportive husband:

I have the best husband in the world. He allowed me to leave my home many times without a grumble. He is a great believer in women, and says, given their opportunity, things will soon right themselves.³¹

The Co-operative Society was allied politically to the Labour Party and the Women's Co-operative Guild. The Guild was an overt instance of an institutionalised network of women, mostly married, who encouraged each other to achieve both individual and corporate success. It was founded in 1883 and by the early 1930s had 1,400 branches and 67,000 members.³² Nevertheless, the Board of Directors of the Co-operative Society were, at the time Mrs Yearn was elected, mostly men. As the long-serving General Secretary of the Guild, Margaret Llewelyn Davies, noted in 1920, two years after women aged over thirty gained the vote in Britain, 'It is always said that there is equality for men and women in the movement. Certainly most of the doors are open. But the seats are full and possession is nine-tenths of the law so in reality the opportunity is not equal and seats are hard to win.'³³ The Co-operatives in the North-west of England were more likely than those in the south to deny women access to the management committees and national offices. B. Blaszak has argued that this was because in the north-west Co-operatives were prosperous and well-established, unlike those in the south. Northern branches had no need to curry favour with working-class housewives to guarantee the success of their

³¹ Mrs Yearn 'A Public-Spirited Rebel' p.105.

³² Margaret Llewelyn Davies, ed., *Life As We Have Known It*, pp.xii - xiii.

³³ P. Graves, *Labour Women 1918-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.27.

establishments, and countered women's demands for public roles with an increased insistence on domesticity for wives.³⁴

Nellie Scott joined the Co-operative Society just before her marriage in 1900, when her mother died and Nellie took over management of her Co-operative Society book. In 1907 she became the secretary of the newly formed Stockport Co-operative Guild. The gendered political aspect of the Guild, and the achievement it was for women members to gain some equality with the men, is illustrated by the following extract from Nellie Scott's autobiography:

When the Guild was formed there was not a women in any position, but we now have six women delegates to the Co-operative Wholesale Society, four scrutineers, two on the Management Committee and three on the Educational Committee. I was the first woman delegate to the C.W.S., first members' delegate to Conferences and Congress, and was delegate to the International Conference.³⁵

Nellie, a pioneer like Mrs Yearn, saw political success in becoming the first women delegate for the Co-operative Women's Society, a step towards female equality with men in the hierarchy of the society. Before her election in 1907, the committee for the Women's branch of the Co-operative Society had been all male. She described the difficulties she had faced and the opportunities which the Guild had opened up to her and others. She wrote proudly of her achievements while still acknowledging the importance of her home life and the support of her husband and friends:

When a woman stood for any position in those days the abuse they met with was awful. I stood for Management Committee and my husband and the wife of the man who proposed me had some dreadful postcards sent to them. Now women take their place alongside the men, but there still remains much to be done. I think sometimes, when I

³⁴ B.J. Blaszk, 'The Gendered Geography of the English Co-operative Movement at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century', in *Women's History Review*, no.37.

³⁵ Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.95-96.

hear the women speaking of the influence of the Guild,
what a wonderful organization it is, and what it has meant
to so many women.³⁶

Nellie also took the advantage of openings which presented themselves for involvement in politics. She became one of the first women magistrates for the Stockport area. She was appointed to the national executive of the Labour Church, where she 'tried to make it a living force and thought we had failed'. However, she lived by the moral principles laid down by the Guild, which, she claimed had given her the 'strength and courage to fight' she commended the good work it had done, and also the work for women achieved by 'women's suffrage, internationalism, and many others'³⁷. At the end of her autobiography she once again referred to the Women's Co-operative Guild and its support of the wider enfranchisement, and her own success in learning to speak for what she believed in:

It has taught us to become articulate and able to ask for the things we need. For so many, although they have known the needs and desired a better system of society, have not been able to express themselves. But I do think that, in the coming years, with the greater freedom given to women, and also the vote (the key to so many doors), we shall reap the harvest of the years of sowing the good seed.³⁸

The women therefore placed their political activities within an intellectual and moral framework. They justified their actions as having Christian, moral or altruistic motives: they were helping others. They were gaining the confidence to express themselves on issues of importance to their lives and encouraged others to do likewise. The women also took a personal pride in their success, and the fact that this had been achieved in a public arena: they had succeeded within a society which valued male public success. Pioneers such as Nellie Scott and Mrs Yearn, although they may be exceptions, remind us that not all married women were made passive by domesticity, as Harrison described; rather,

³⁶ Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.96.

³⁷ Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.100.

³⁸ Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.101.

marriage provided a platform for political activity for some of these women. Far from constraining them within an institution that was generally seen as reinforcing their domestic role, marriage provided an emotional and even financial base. This was not always the case, though: others hid their activities from their families and relied on the support of fellow-activists; moreover some of the cohort were unmarried and relied on colleagues and friends for support. Striving for what they believed was right was the motivation behind the women, and similar support and motivation was described by the women pioneers in the trades union movement.

Trades Union Pioneers

For those women who remained in paid employment the routes to political activism was often opened by membership of trades union. By the end of the nineteenth century there were increasing opportunities for women in occupations such as factory workers and shop assistants to become members of trades union. It was also through this route that Margaret Bondfield, Ada Nield Chew, Alice Foley, Annie Kenney, Hannah Mitchell and Ellen Wilkinson, as well as Co-operative Guild members Nellie Scott and Mrs Yearn, gained political success in the form of some control over their working lives and a degree of equality with male colleagues. For these women involvement in trades union brought social status, financial, personal, and political success: yet they all stressed in their writing that financial gain was not their prime objective, but rather, a moral duty, an altruistic wish to help others.

In this they were echoing the Christian ethos behind trade unionism, to which they had pledged allegiance and from which their political involvement evolved. While not overtly church- or chapel-based, trades union often sprang out of church societies and drew

heavily on traditional Christian doctrine and morality.³⁹ Explicit moral values and social attitudes were portrayed in the membership certificates and advertised on the banners carried at meetings and marches: illustrations often stressed themes of unity, hard work and peaceful industrial production. With a mixture of classical and Christian imagery they embodied a vision of the worker in the ideal world. They presented, in words and pictures, a sense of pride in work, collective responsibility and also offered a statement to a wider audience of the respectable and skilled workers' claim to a place in society. These sentiments, displayed iconographically, on Trades Union banners, were echoed in the autobiographies of those of the cohort who achieved success in the industrial world of trades union.

From the 1880s and 1890s broad-based industrial unions, organized by industry instead of the individual skilled craftsmen, had begun to gain membership numbering in the thousands. Where the craft unions had generally avoided unrest, the trades union took action on behalf of their members. The textile trade had more women members than any other union and 80% of the increase in female trade union membership between the late 1880s and 1910 was drawn from the textile industries.⁴⁰ Although at the national level women were greatly under-represented and rarely had a voice in the Trades Union Congress, there were success stories of pioneering women.

Nellie Scott became a member of the Felt Hatters' Trade Union when she worked as a trimmer at Lees and Hatconk's factory in the early 1900s. All the men at the factory were

³⁹ An early and famous example of the relationship between trade and church was that of the Tolpuddle Martyrs. They were led by George Lovelace, a lay preacher and deacon in the little chapel at Tolpuddle. Lovelace became the leader of the Tolpuddle martyrs, a group of working men who attended the same chapel. He was transported for life in 1833 for trying to organize the men to protest against their low wages and the high cost of bread.

⁴⁰ Barbara Drake, *Women in Trade Unions* (London: Virago, 1884, first published 1920), p.30.

in the Union, but none of the women. In 1904 Nellie together with one of her workmates joined the Union. Nellie recalled: 'I worked with a Conservative, an Irish girl, and some Radicals and Socialists and we used to discuss everything'.⁴¹ They began to persuade the other girl trimmers to join and soon had them all involved in strike action. When all was resolved and the trimmers went back to work, the fore-mistress refused to let Nellie, whom she saw as an instigator of the union action, have materials for her work. Nellie Scott saw success in standing up for what she believed in, and was supported by the loyalty of her work-mates:

I went back and told the girls and everyone put down their work and two of those who had been worst against the Union went down to see the head of the firm. They all sat there until I was sent for and told it was a mistake. I always feel proud of the way they stood by me.⁴²

Nellie used her position in the Trade Union to agitate for improved conditions for herself and her fellow workers. She felt that she and her fellow workers were treated unfairly. They worked long hours at the factory but were also forced to take work home.

In our work we had to bring work home sometimes sitting up until twelve o' clock making linings. When we joined the Union that was one of the first things stopped. We ought to earn a decent wage without working meal times and taking work home; it was a hard struggle; but it was stopped and we had the nights to ourselves, though in those days there was housework to be done, baking at night and cleaning.⁴³

Nellie's words illustrate the double burden that was the lot of most married working-class women who continued in paid employment: after working all day they had to come home to domestic chores. However, her successful campaign meant that taking factory work

⁴¹ Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.88.

⁴² Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', pp.90-91.

⁴³ Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.92.

home had come to an end, and the women appeared to have been happy to have the extra time for caring for their families.

Alice Foley was also a pioneer for female equality in her union and was also driven by an altruistic ideal of helping her fellow workers. She recalled her first introduction to the power of the trades union as she witnessed the great Daubhill strike of 1905, which took place in a near-by mill:

The conflict grew out of the firm's action in applying a mechanical gadget to looms in the form of a warp-stop motion. In return for this technical innovation management claimed a substantial reduction in wage rates and this was stoutly resisted by both the trade union and the weavers concerned.⁴⁴

The outcome was favourable to the workers and it could have well been this early introduction to the successful outcome of an industrial dispute which raised Alice's awareness of the way unions could change conditions for the better. Alice recalled that as the weeks and months passed by she became used to the noise and machinery, but became more aware of the care-worn faces of her elderly workmates:

Trapped on a treadmill of monotony, I wondered vaguely must the years go on and on until I, too, became just such another faded figure. I increasingly rebelled against the injustice of a factory system that could not even offer a degree of security to its toilers.⁴⁵

Alice determined not to become such a 'faded figure'. She began to attend night school and worked hard enough to be given a free pass to secondary school evening classes.⁴⁶

Alice had been encouraged by her older sister Cissy and her friends to join in their debates and readings of socialist material at home. The rebellious nature which she had shown as a

⁴⁴ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.57.

⁴⁵ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.60.

⁴⁶ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.62

child against her Catholic upbringing re-surfaced, fuelled by her resentment against her employer's attitudes and the low workers' wages and poor working conditions. Alice justified her step outside the familial framework of Catholic beliefs by claiming that as a Socialist she could help her fellow-workers. She described:

An exhilarating experience of deeper awareness with which came an easing of the burden of guilt and a release from the passivity; I longed to transform an inborn humility into some kind of achievement, however insignificant it might prove, in the all pervading glow of Socialist idealism.⁴⁷

At fifteen she was chosen as 'spokeswoman' for a small deputation of workers presenting an outstanding grievance to the head manager. The realization of her fellow-workers' trust in her, together with the Socialist doctrines 'imbibed out of discussion of the weekly *Clarion* and Robert Blatchford's *Merry England* and *God and My Neighbour*' persuaded Alice to become more and more involved with the union.⁴⁸ She recalled:

It was, therefore, almost inevitable that under industrial pressures I should become official spokeswoman for other fellow-workers, in endeavours to steer immediate discontents into more manoeuvrable channels. This activity brought closer contact with the Weaver's Union and broadened attention to the wider issues of collective solidarity.⁴⁹

Alice encouraged women workers in her factory to participate in the union and to rebel against the conditions in the mill, and in particular the disparity between the way in which men and women workers were treated. This was a pioneering step, as the Weaver's Union had for many years had only men members, in common with the 'closed shop' unions of much of the textile trade.

⁴⁷ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p. 75.

⁴⁸ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.63.

⁴⁹ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.63.

Political success in the Trade Union gave Alice Foley public recognition and a rise in social status. Alice achieved her ambitions to escape from the monotony of factory life when she was appointed as an official by the Weaver's Trade Union Association in Bolton. She was able to leave the factory floor in 1912 when she became a sick-visitor for the supervision of scheduled benefit under Lloyd George's National Insurance Act. Alice wrote of her joy and relief at being free of the compulsory bell and buzzer which felt like 'the shedding of captive chains'. She acknowledged her success and saw it as opening up new opportunities for herself. Yet although she saw personal success in these 'new horizons', she also expressed her continuing socialist ambitions to help others in the future: 'It was a modest post, but at least an opening to wider horizons of new experience and human service.'⁵⁰ Alice's autobiography records that she did not desert her fellow-workers, when she left the factory floor:

Passing through that grim, impersonal watch-house for the last time, and fretted with disturbed emotions, there mingled a hope that sometime I might be permitted to plead, or battle, for my less articulate companions who, left behind in the weaving sheds, seemed to be destined to measure out their lives in shuttle changing.⁵¹

Alice's altruistic feelings towards others less fortunate than herself may be looked upon sceptically: she was a woman of working-class origin justifying her upward social mobility. However, as Alice remained a spinster and gave all of her time to the 'human service' she spoke of when first given the 'one small opening' of a job away from the factory floor, it is hard not to think that her sentiments were genuine. Alice became successful both personally and, on a local scale, publicly. During her life-time she was a respected local figure, well-known in the Bolton area, and, judging from letters in

⁵⁰ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.75.

⁵¹ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.76.

newspaper articles printed after her death, well-loved.⁵² She was successful in helping others through her political work. As well as caring for her invalid mother, she spent the rest of her working days in trade unionism, and also helped others to gain success by becoming involved with the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) from 1923 until her death in 1973. Alice gained public recognition for her union work when she was awarded the MBE. Her work in the WEA and on the Manchester University Joint Committee for Adult Education was recognised by the award of an honorary MA in 1962.⁵³

Alice described her first contact with the WEA, which came in the form of a holiday given to her in lieu of extra days on war work for the Trade Union, as 'a new and undreamt-of experience.' The happiness she felt, 'a pinnacle of joy' as she described it when she wrote her autobiography in 1949 'was to sustain and accompany me through long years of humble toil.'⁵⁴ Alice saw her WEA work as the epitome of her success and it is possible that this was why she ended her account at that point. She kept a scrapbook of her newspaper cuttings amongst her papers, as well as the letter announcing the award of the MBE, which suggests her pride in the public, as well as private, recognition of her achievements.⁵⁵

Political success for Alice Foley, Nellie Scott, and Mrs Yearn had come through union involvement. Their autobiographies illustrate this important route by which working-class women could have a significant role in changing social and working conditions for

⁵² The Foley Papers, in Bolton Library archives, include a scrapbook which, amongst other memorabilia, contains newspaper cuttings with several articles on Alice. Unfortunately these are not dated and no note has been made of the newspaper from which they are taken, but it is obviously a local paper.

⁵³ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p. 92.

⁵⁴ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.92.

⁵⁵ For newspaper cuttings and other papers on Alice Foley see Bolton Archives, Foley Collection.

themselves and others. Margaret Bondfield, born in 1873, and Ada Nield Chew, born in 1870, expressed the same sort of desire to help their fellow-workers. Ada was a tailor in the 1890s in a Crewe factory where uniforms were made on contract for policemen, soldiers and railway workers. She thought that one escape route from the factory floor would be education. But, she reflected, when did women like herself and her fellow-workers have the time or energy to attend evening classes? The only way Ada could see to improve conditions was to make it a matter of public awareness. She expressed her feelings on the 'impossibility' of self-improvement, because of the exhausting and long hours spent at work, in a letter to the *Crewe Chronicle* which was signed anonymously, 'Crewe Factory Girl'.⁵⁶ She admitted to being the sole author of the letter in further correspondence written shortly afterwards, on 6 October 1894. There followed a series, 'Letters of a 'Crewe Factory Girl''.⁵⁷ They gave critical detail about conditions and practices in the factory, providing a cumulative argument, expressed with more and more strength, about the need to organize and force changes upon the employers, and for change in the wider social structure. After publication of the letters her notoriety as a troublemaker meant that she was dismissed from the factory. For Ada, an opportunity came from an unexpected quarter: her local prominence as the writer of the 'Factory Girl' letters led to her election to the Nantwich board of guardians as Trades Council Representative in 1895. She also became a member of the Crewe ILP and was one of the first four women to travel in the Clarion Van which travelled around Durham and Northumberland to introduce Socialism to the miners.⁵⁸ Ada met George Chew through the ILP and the couple married in 1897.⁵⁹ In July 1900 she spoke to cotton operatives at

⁵⁶ On her marriage she became Ada Nield Chew.

⁵⁷ It is not known if she intended a series or if the editor encouraged her to continue.

⁵⁸ Ada Nield Chew, *The Life and Writings of a Working Woman* ed. Doris Nield Chew (London: Virago, 1982), p.20.

⁵⁹ One daughter was born to their marriage, in 1898. This was Doris, who was later to be instrumental in the editing and publication of her mother's autobiographical work.

Wigan who were striking for the increase in wages which had been granted by employees in other districts of Lancashire. In the first decade of the twentieth century Ada worked in the Women's Trade Union League with Mary MacArthur.⁶⁰ Political success for Ada came with raising awareness of the conditions under which women like herself were working in the factories and mills, and in her ability, as a working-class activist, to campaign and help to achieve improvements. She was to continue campaigning, as a pacifist and a member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom during the First World War.

Conditions of employment for Margaret Bondfield and her fellow shop assistants in the 1890s were also difficult. They seemed never to escape from their work environment; shop hours were long and one criterion for employment for many shop assistants, especially in larger stores, was that they 'lived in' in one of the several big drapery houses. In this period not one of these had bathrooms for the assistants. Some housekeepers allowed a jug of hot water and a footbath once a week. Usually rooms were shared with two or three other people, not necessarily room mates of one's own choosing.⁶¹

After five years of hard work and economies, Margaret finished her apprenticeship and had saved five pounds. She travelled to London for work and gained employment in a shop in the Tottenham Court Road. Here she found that conditions which she had thought peculiar to the Brighton shop 'were almost universal'.⁶² Margaret joined the National Union of Shop Assistants, Warehousemen and Clerks, which was urging shop assistants to

⁶⁰ Mary MacArthur is perhaps best known for her part as one of the main organizers of the famous 'Sweated Industries Exhibition' on June 2nd 1906. Held in the Queen's Hall, Langham Place, London, the exhibition was sponsored by the *Daily News*. Details of home-workers rates of pay were given to visitors, and similar exhibitions were organized throughout 1906 all over the country. See, for example, Shelley Pennington and Belinda Westover, *A Hidden Workforce*.

⁶¹ Margaret Bondfield, *A Life's Work*, p. 32.

⁶² Margaret Bondfield, *A Life's Work*, p.27.

join together to fight against the wretched conditions of employment. At that time, in 1894, Margaret was working about 65 hours a week for about £20 a year, living in. She saw that change could only come with trade union activities. Like Ada Nield Chew and Alice Foley, she wanted better working conditions for herself and her fellow-workers. She also sought equality of pay and conditions with male workers. Margaret was encouraged in her union activities by her brother Frank, and other male union members. Underlining the importance of this male support network, which validated her actions, Margaret wrote:

This was a happy time for me.
My Union Officers gave me all the work I could do in my scant leisure, and every kind of encouragement. They elected me on to the district council, and once I attended a national conference. For the next two years the Union utilized me for platform work in an ever increasing degree.

Encouraged by T. Spencer Jones, the editor of our little Union paper, I ventured first to undertake reports of meetings, and later to write a few short stories under the pen-name of Grace Dare.⁶³

To help improve conditions for her fellow-workers Margaret undertook a two-year investigation of shop conditions, which Mrs Gilchrist Thompson, a member of the Women's Industrial Council, described as 'in the highest degree self-sacrificing [as it was] ruining her future in her own profession for the sake of the well-being and safety of girls unknown to her.'⁶⁴ Margaret's reports were the basis of a series of articles written by Vaughan Nash in the *Daily Chronicle* and in turn used by Sir John Lubbock as material for the 1896 Shop Assistants Act, which made stringent alterations in 'living-in' conditions. This success gave Margaret the impetus to set her sights higher. She declared that her ambitions now lay, not in shop work, nor in domesticity, but in public service:

⁶³ Margaret Bondfield, *A Life's Work*, p.28.

⁶⁴ Margaret Bondfield, *A Life's Work*, p.32.

I had no vocation for wifehood and motherhood, but an urge to serve the Union – an urge which developed into ‘a sense of oneness with our kind.’⁶⁵

Margaret’s ‘sense of oneness’ with fellow-workers was the key to her successful union career. It may have had its roots in her childhood: she had been born into a working-class Methodist family and had been brought up in an atmosphere where respectable honest labour, a sober and earnest commitment to Chapel, and responsibility towards the family were expected. Her dedication to this wider family of fellow-workers helped her achieve success. In 1898 the Shop Assistants’ Union asked her to be their assistant secretary at a salary of £2 per week. She achieved a move towards the political equality she sought when in 1899 she was the first woman delegate at the Trades Union Congress in Plymouth. Her union career continued until in 1923: although she resigned from her position as union secretary owing to ill-health in 1908, she continued in union work to 1938. Her wider activities included becoming the founder member and organising secretary of Women’s Labour League and chief women’s officer of National Union of General and Municipal Workers from 1921. She was also a member of the Women’s Trade Union League. As a tribute to her energy and devotion to the union movement, she was made the first woman chairman of the General Council of the TUC.

Margaret’s autobiography also underlines that for her political success was entwined with idealism. She stressed the personal ethos behind her work with the trades union, which she envisaged as a ‘Christian society’ of people working together and doing the best they could with their lives:

Our task is to conserve the nobility of character and devotion which has been a feature of the working woman of the past, with a clear conception of shared responsibility, which for the working girl is best expressed

⁶⁵ Margaret Bondfield, *A Life’s Work*, p.37.

through active Trade Union membership. Each is capable of making an individual contribution to a Christian society of men and women, from whom the economic contribution may be large or small, but whose really important gift to the world will be that of living the best life of which they are capable.⁶⁶

And describing the religious ideology which underpinned the history of the trades union, she demonstrated that her motivation for union work sprang from her Christian upbringing:

From most points of view the Movement in Britain was inspired by religion, sometimes unorthodox, but was never anti-religious. There have always been ministers and clergy ready to stand by the worker, as far back as the seventeenth century and before with figures such as William Langland and John Ball.

Early Trade Union executive members worked for the Union after sixty or eighty hours a week in paid employment. Sacrificing nights' sleep and Sundays to attend meetings and help fellow-workers – continued patient effort with no immediate tangible results. To be as unselfish a human being must be sustained by faith and hope and helping others. The satisfaction of such sustained selflessness must be the very love of one's neighbours so emphasized in the New Testament. Workers have evolved a whole series of methods for interpreting the principles of Christianity so that they make sense of what could be a bleak workaday world – a social habit of caring for others.⁶⁷

Margaret's words were not just empty rhetoric. She never married, but remained in the Labour movement, the history of which, she claimed when writing her autobiography, was difficult to separate from her own. She continued to be both teetotal, and deeply religious. The strong Methodist tradition in which she had been raised strengthened her beliefs in doing what she felt was right. That this also brought success was something which she put into context as a practicing Christian.

⁶⁶ Margaret Bondfield, *A Life's Work*, p.330.

⁶⁷ Margaret Bondfield, *A Life's Work*, p.149.

When Annie Kenney left school at thirteen, in 1893, she began work at Wood End cotton mill, in Lees, Lancashire. After a few years in the mill, Annie became, with many of her fellow-workers, a member of the Cardroom Association Union. When she was twenty, Annie recalled a widening of political interests:

Life wore a still more serious aspect. I became interested in Labour, or I should say in Robert Blatchford's articles appearing in the *Clarion*. His writings on Nature, Poetry, Philosophy, Life, were my great weekly treat. Thousands of men and women in the Lancashire factories owe their education to Robert Blatchford.⁶⁸

In the early 1890s Annie was offered a job as Union organizer, persuading factory girls to join. She made a good recruiter, and was encouraged by the Union official who praised her success at bringing in more members than the male recruiters. Annie therefore had the support of at least one male colleague. Her union involvement made her aware of the inequalities between the treatment of men and women workers, and of the fact that women were under-represented in the trades union hierarchy:

I went to Blackburn and held meetings among the women and girls of the factories. When my two weeks were finished the Trade-Union Official informed me that I had made more members during my visit than they had made in a year. The news of this success pleased and encouraged me.

It was not until I had worked among them that I had fully realized the necessity of having women on the local committees. There were 96,000 women members of the Trade Union, and yet there was not one woman official.⁶⁹

In an attempt to improve this situation for the women Trade Union members, Annie put her name down for election on the local committee in Lees and began to canvass for votes. She was successful, and became the first woman in any of the textile unions to be elected to the district committee. She had got more votes than either of the two men candidates. Like Alice Foley and Nellie Scott, Annie saw this pioneering victory as a successful step

⁶⁸ Annie Kenney, *Memories of a Militant*, p.23.

⁶⁹ Annie Kenney, *Memories of a Militant*, p.31.

in her fight for equality: her fellow women workers now had some equity with men workers, and an officially elected spokeswoman to air their grievances at Union meetings. Annie Kenney's success in the work-place gave her the courage to broaden her campaigning and to confront the inequalities mirrored in society at large. A friend in the Union invited her to attend a meeting at the Oldham Trades Council in 1905, at which Christabel Pankhurst was to speak. Later that year Annie left for London to join the Pankhursts and was to come to the forefront of the suffragette movement.

The Suffrage Movement

Eight of the autobiographers describe their support of the suffrage movement. Of these Margaret Bondfield was a member of the Adult Suffrage Movement, Winifred Griffiths spoke at Labour meetings in support of women's suffrage, Ada Nield Chew and Mary Luty were members of the NUWSS, and Hannah Mitchell, Annie Kenney, Mary Gawthorpe and Annie Barnes were militant suffragettes for the WSPU.

Among the mass of women who worked, as Annie did, in the industrial north, there was a mostly untapped source of support for the suffrage cause, although the Special Appeal managed by Esther Roper between 1894-1896 had prompted her focus on women textile workers in the Manchester area as potential members of the NUWSS.⁷⁰ However Annie saw that middle-class political organizers were too removed from working-class lives; to encourage and recruit potential working-class support, organisers with an understanding of working-class lives were required.⁷¹ Yet Annie Kenney and other working-class women, could not, like their middle-class counterparts, afford to work voluntarily.⁷² This raised an obvious issue for working-class women activists for whom earning their own living could

⁷⁰ Sandra Stanley Holton, *Suffrage Days*, p.100.

⁷¹ See for instance, Sandra Stanley Holton, *Suffrage Days*, pp.49-52.

⁷² Martin Pugh, *The March of the Women*, pp.213-214.

be a double-edged sword. In some respects they already had many social freedoms denied to those middle class women without an income – not least that they could go out to work and earn a living. The drawback for many working-class women, however motivated, was that lack of spare time and money precluded them from offering to support the Suffrage Societies on a voluntary basis ⁷³. On the other hand, working-class women could be of immense use to the movement. As working women they were already in the public sphere, and often they were already involved with politics. As trade union members, for instance, they were used to attending meetings, speaking publicly, canvassing and casting votes, all of which could be useful skills to the suffrage movement.

By the first decades of the twentieth century the situation had changed. The WSPU began to encourage political actions by working-class supporters, using some of its funding to pay a salary to some working-class organizers for performing duties which middle-class suffragettes performed voluntarily.⁷⁴ Of the cohort, Ada Nield Chew, Mary Gawthorpe and Annie Kenney were all paid by the NUWSS or the WSPU.⁷⁵

Aware of the impact large organized groups of working-class women would make, in 1906 Annie brought 300 women from the East End of London to a meeting in Caxton Hall.⁷⁶ She later ensured that groups of women from the Lancashire mills would be conspicuously represented at the London rallies: as she insisted that they came to London dressed in ‘clogs and shawls’ to proclaim their working-class status.⁷⁷ One particular protest, when she persuaded a large deputation of Lancashire and Yorkshire factory

⁷³ Sandra Stanley Holton, *Suffrage Days*, p.121 described Mary Gawthorpe speaking to meetings in Leeds including local branches of teachers’ organizations and trades union as well as socialist and suffrage societies.

⁷⁴ Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, p.229.

⁷⁵ Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, p.232.

⁷⁶ Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, pp.204-205.

⁷⁷ Annie Kenney, *Memories of a Militant*, p.113.

women to come to London, was, for Annie, a 'supreme' measure of her political and personal success, as it epitomised all she had been working for. Political success for Annie had come in her ability to organise working-class women to help themselves, and to take pride in doing so:

No deputation that I had helped to work up gave me such supreme joy, satisfaction and happiness, as did the deputation of March 20th 1907.⁷⁸

In spite of their belief in the fight for equal rights and women's suffrage, many of the cohort perceived a need to justify their actions. Annie Kenney, for example, gave a religious underpinning to her work for the suffragette movement. In emotive terms she expressed the force and depth of her feelings when she wrote in her autobiography:

The Militant Movement was more like a religious revival than a political movement. It stirred the emotions, it aroused passions, it awakened the human chord which responds to the battle-cry of freedom. It was a genuine reform for emancipation, led by earnest, unselfish, self-sacrificing women.

All women were appealed to. Class barriers were broken down; political distinctions swept away; religious differences forgotten. All women were as one.⁷⁹

Annie appeared to be making little of class differences here, although she was by then a friend and colleague of the middle-class Pankhursts, so was one of the 'earnest, unselfish, self-sacrificing' leaders. She claimed that all women had a right to equality whatever their origins – there should be no differences. This was not just a retrospective viewpoint aired in 1924 when Annie wrote her autobiography: for in 1906 she had written an article encouraging support for the 'votes for women' campaign in the *Labour Record* on this very theme. Appealing to working women she called for unity:

For the love of Justice, home and the little ones, working women of England, I ask you to stand shoulder to shoulder

⁷⁸ Annie Kenney, *Memories of a Militant*, p.115.

⁷⁹ Annie Kenney, *Memories of a Militant*, p.298.

with us in demanding our Political Freedom. Remember,
“Those who would be free themselves must strike the first
blow.” *We have asked, pleaded, and prayed for over sixty
years: now we must fight.*⁸⁰

Autobiographer Hannah Mitchell also saw religion as the basis for her political involvement. When she was aged thirty-three, in 1905, she began to work for the Pankhursts, in Manchester sharing in ‘the intense propaganda which preceded the outbreak of militancy in October 1905.’⁸¹ She met Annie Kenney during this time, and in her autobiography Hannah described Annie as a ‘fine example of the self-respecting Lancashire mill girl, intellectual and independent. All the Kenney girls became active in the WSPU but Annie flung herself into the struggle with all the fervour of a religious crusader.’⁸² Hannah continued:

From every part of Britain, women began to respond,
everywhere we went women of all classes rallied to the
militant banner. Indeed the struggle of the women seemed
like the quest of the Holy Grail.⁸³

Hannah’s notion of a religious crusade and a search for the holy grail echoes the tone of Annie Kenney’s ‘religious revival’ simile quoted above, and illustrates the religious underpinning to the actions of women involved in the suffrage struggle.⁸⁴ In using such motifs they were drawing on religion and religious or moral ideology to explain or justify their actions. By doing so these women were putting up a protective barrier against accusations that could be levelled at them. Susan Kingsley Kent has argued that anti-suffrage supporters saw the entry of women into the public sphere as undermining the

⁸⁰ Annie Kenney, ‘Votes for Women: Stirring Scenes in London During the Month, A Message from Miss Annie Kenney’, in *The Labour Record*, March 1906.

⁸¹ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.127.

⁸² Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p. 127.

⁸³ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.135.

⁸⁴ Annie Kenney *Memories of a Militant*, p. 72.

security of women in general.⁸⁵ She cites the *Anti-Suffrage Review* of August 1909 which insists that the militants would undermine law and order.⁸⁶ Hannah and Annie's words reveal a gulf, and also a way of bridging the gulf, between prescription and practice in working class women's lives. By invoking religious ideology in their political activism they showed that they were conforming to the broadly accepted social conventions. And by adhering to family values of respectability, family and orthodox religion, they retained the womanly ideal while justifying their adoption of less womanly behaviour - such as public speaking, marching in demonstrations, and agitating for equality.

In stressing equality and unity of all women under the militant banner Annie and Hannah challenged the view that the suffrage movement was middle-class in perspective. Their autobiographies reveal that they saw their involvement as important as that of the middle-class and also that their union activities had given them confidence in their own abilities. They held the conviction that the small steps achieved towards equality with men in the work-place should be echoed in the wider society. There were many more working-class women involved in the movement than historians have generally acknowledged.⁸⁷ In 1901, for instance, a women's suffrage petition had been signed by as many as 29,359 Lancashire women textile workers.⁸⁸ However, in 1970 the seminal work, *One Hand Tied Behind Us* was published by the feminist historians Jill Liddington and Jill Norris. They brought together for the first time the scattered evidence of working women in the mill towns and other industrial areas of North east England.⁸⁹ The authors describe a network

⁸⁵ Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain*, pp. 180-183.

⁸⁶ Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain*, p. 181.

⁸⁷ See for instance, Ray Strachey, *The Cause* (London: G. Bell, 1928); Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain*; although Pugh has since acknowledged, to a certain extent, the input from working-class women in what he calls 'a revisionist analysis of the campaign for women's suffrage', Martin Pugh, *The March of the Women*.

⁸⁸ Kathryn Geadle, *British Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p.115.

⁸⁹ Liddington and Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*.

of Labour-orientated and mostly working-class 'radical suffragists' one of whom was Ada Nield Chew.

Ada Nield Chew was able to support the suffragette movement because, from 1911, the NUWSS paid her wages as full-time organizer, out of union funds. However, she was very sensitive about being paid for her suffrage work, as her daughter, Doris, recalled:

You have to remember that my mother was doing this work, not only because she believed in it, but because she wanted the money. She was an introvert and she was a very proud woman. I told you, the National Union was run mostly by women – well, it was run by - full stop - middle class women. And she liked them, and she admired them, and she respected them. But she thought that a few of them looked down on her because she had to be paid for what she did and she resented that very much.⁹⁰

Like Annie Kenney, Ada had become aware of suffrage issues through employment in the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL)⁹¹. In 1911 she started a series of articles to be published in the suffrage publication *The Common Cause*. To raise public awareness outside the suffrage movement Ada also wrote many letters, articles, sketches and stories, which were published in magazines and newspapers of the time, including *Freewoman* and *The Clarion*. These were controversial, and her article 'The Problem of the Married Woman', calling for equality within marriage, which was published on 6 March 1914, was prefaced by a disclaimer from the editors to distance themselves from her views.⁹² Nevertheless they continued to publish her articles, so Ada's controversial stance must have helped to sell the paper, and suggests growing support for her views.

⁹⁰ From an interview with Ada Nield Chew's daughter in 1976, recorded by Liddington and Norris in *One Hand Tied Behind Us* p. 232.

⁹¹ Ada was a WTUL organizer 1900-1908. See Ada Nield Chew, *The Life and Writings of a Working Woman*, p. 27.

⁹² See pp.230-234 in *Ada Nield Chew: The Life and Writings of a Working Woman*, for the full text of this article.

Political activism was sometimes difficult for those women who were not earning their own wage, but were at home with family duties, and dependent on husband or father who held different political views. Annie Barnes illustrated the difficulties for those with no income, who wanted to take part in the women's movement but to do so would go against the wishes of the male members of the family. On leaving school Annie had worked as a shop assistant in her father's grocery shop, and after the death of her mother around 1910 she ran the family home and brought up her younger brothers and sisters. Annie, however, remained dependent economically on her father, since she still lived in the family home and earned no money. However, that year Annie joined the East End London Federation of Suffragettes after talking to Sylvia Pankhurst at a meeting for new recruits. She had lively recollections of the 'adventures' that support for the suffrage movement entailed.⁹³ Annie's involvement at this stage was limited. She recalled a call for suffragettes to disrupt parliamentary proceedings by throwing bags of flour from the gallery:

I couldn't volunteer for that because I knew whoever did would get caught. I had commitments at home looking after all my brothers and sisters. I couldn't chance imprisonment. But I did volunteer for other things that were less risky.⁹⁴

Despite joining in some of the activities of the suffragettes, Annie was still under the jurisdiction of her father within the home where a patriarchal rule obviously held. The political activity she undertook was hidden from the rest of her family. Her father, Annie revealed, would not have looked favourably on her suffragette activities:

There was always a risk but I just had to accept that. I couldn't attend meetings regularly. I went now and again when I could slip out without my father noticing. The children didn't know, and goodness knows what the old man would have said if he'd ever found out what I was up to. I seem to have been very lucky to get away with it.⁹⁵

⁹³ Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie*, pp. 14-15.

⁹⁴ Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie*, p.15.

⁹⁵ Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie*, p.16.

Annie's strict moral upbringing and her mother's insistence on telling the truth seemed to have been forgotten. Her active support of the suffragettes gave Annie a sense of purpose outside her domestic duties: 'The East End had seemed so quiet, and all at once it became tense with excitement. Meetings here, meetings there. It was marvellous.'⁹⁶

Socialism and the Labour Movement

Suffrage activities or trade union participation often led to membership of a political party – usually the Labour Party, since this supported the trades union and a wider franchise.

Autobiographers Annie Barnes, Margaret Bondfield, Mary Gawthorpe, Hannah Mitchell and Ellen Wilkinson, who achieved success within an active political framework, were all members of the Labour movement. Changes were beginning to happen which encouraged an interest in political events, as feminist efforts to improve women's education and ensure more property rights for women had a knock-on effect for working-class women. As early as 1895 the property qualification for membership of, and voting rights for, local government office had been opened to all householders, increasing the number of women, as well as working men, eligible to stand. Mary Gawthorpe realised the irony that women could vote as householders in local government elections, but were still excluded from the national parliamentary electorate:

And I was the householder, the rent payer, thus qualified for the municipal vote. This experience became an asset when later I became a suffragist, demanding a real vote instead of what we called a property vote, a differentiation which had aspects of humour, considering. But as of the period of which I am writing, I had a vote as a householder yet could not vote for a parliamentary candidate. The practical illustration was potent.⁹⁷

Most of the politically active autobiographers came to Socialism with the encouragement of friends who lent them reading material. The writings of Robert Blatchford appeared

⁹⁶ Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie*, pp. 15-16.

⁹⁷ Mary Gawthorpe, *Up Hill to Holloway*, p.157.

seminal. Annie Barnes, Alice Foley, Winifred Griffiths, Annie Kenney and Ellen Wilkinson all mention his work. Socialism, and the political party which represented its beliefs, the ILP, thus facilitated women's involvement in political activism. A range of organizations which covered almost all social and economic life were developed by the labour movement from the 1890s.⁹⁸ By dealing with issues that most women felt strongly about and with which they could identify, their involvement with the ILP was encouraged. The passing or implementation of policies to do with housing, welfare, health and childcare was of major importance to the day to day life of women. Favourable outcomes, such as the setting up of child welfare clinics, as Alice Foley's sister Cissy had done, where organizational skills were utilized were therefore seen as political success.

In 1917 Annie Barnes founded a Co-operative Women's Guild in Stepney, and became a member of the Stepney Labour Party. She married Albert Barnes after the War in 1919, both had been members of the ILP before their marriage. Albert also became a Labour Party member after their marriage but, Annie wrote, 'he was never very active'. However, unlike Annie's father, Albert provides another example of male support for women's public achievement as Annie recalled his encouragement of her socialist activities. Annie worked to help build up the Labour Party in Stepney and laboured tirelessly for social causes. She attributed her confidence and success down to her early years as a suffragette:

It was all so exciting. We were going to change the world. Being a suffragette had started me off fighting and given me the training, as it were. Now that women had the vote (or some of them at any rate), it was time to start fighting for better conditions for ordinary people. The Labour Party really cared about the people.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ This is the labour movement rather than the Labour Party, which did not surface until 1900, winning 29 seats in the 1906 election. For a history of the British Labour Party, see, for instance, Henry Pelling, *A Short History of the Labour Party* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1961, republished in ten editions until 1993); Andrew Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997).

⁹⁹ Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie*, p.30.

The title of Annie Barnes' autobiography *From Suffragette to Stepney Councillor* reflects the importance she placed on her progress from the suffrage movement to taking public office, where she could continue her fight for equality on a wider front. Several of the women came to Socialism through suffrage. Although the Pankhursts were later to split from the ILP, 'Sylvia Pankhurst', Annie wrote, 'had us all join the ILP.'¹⁰⁰ She added, 'I never said anything if I wasn't sure I was right. Sylvia had taught me that. I got all that courage from the suffragettes.'¹⁰¹ Annie was elected a Councillor in the 1934 local elections when the Labour Party gained control of 24 out of the 28 London Boroughs. '1934 was a great victory' she claimed.¹⁰² Annie Barnes was to serve as Councillor until 1949. As she retired, her political success was acknowledged publicly. When it was announced that she would not be standing for the 1949 borough election, one of the male members of the Council gave a valedictory address in which he stated that Annie Barnes would always be 'remembered with pride and affection.'¹⁰³

In 1906, Sir Charles Dilke introduced the 'Franchise and Removal of Women's Disabilities Bill' to parliament.¹⁰⁴ Clause four of the Bill finally enabled women to stand for local election:

No person shall be disqualified by sex or marriage from being elected or being a member of either House of Parliament, or of a Borough or County Council, or from exercising any public function whatever.¹⁰⁵

The bill was to be instrumental in opening up a whole new range of careers in local government to women. The papers were quick to publicize this entrée for working-class

¹⁰⁰ Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie*, p.15.

¹⁰¹ Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie*, p.32.

¹⁰² Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie*, p. 40.

¹⁰³ *The East End News*, 5 March 1948.

¹⁰⁴ For more details on this bill see the British Library's holding of the pamphlet by Sir Charles W. Dilke, *Woman Suffrage and Electoral Reform*, published in London, 1906, by The People's Suffrage Federation it was sold at two pence a copy.

¹⁰⁵ The Franchise and Removal of Women's Disabilities Bill, Clause Four, Parliamentary Papers for 1906.

women, citing as their example Margaret Bondfield. *The Tribune* for example, that week described Margaret as ‘a hearty supporter of the woman MP.’ Margaret took advantage of the new legislation, and it set her on a political pathway, which after women were given the national franchise in 1918 eventually led her to a parliamentary career. This included her becoming Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Labour and MP for Northampton between 1923-4 and Walsend in 1926-31. Her career culminated in her becoming the first woman to attain Ministerial rank, she was in a cabinet post as Minister of Labour in 1929, and the first woman to become a member of the Privy Council. When she became a Cabinet Minister, Margaret expressed her ‘deep satisfaction’, and explained the religious basis for the idealism behind her feelings:

This ‘satisfaction’ when the work causing it is directed to the benefit of other people, is that very same love of one’s neighbour which is so emphasized in the New Testament. It is itself a religious experience.¹⁰⁶

Margaret helped to found the Women’s Group on Public Welfare; her life was continued in dedication to the Labour Movement, women and family issues and social service.

Towards the end of her autobiography, which she wrote between 1941 and its publication in 1950 Margaret again drew out the thread between her work in the Labour movement and the religious justification behind it:

I have staked my life upon the truth of certain principles which I believe experience has taught me; that no improvement improves unless reached through inward conviction. The great Movement to which I have given all my life holds by these principles.

To find out how to do it takes a long time, and may involve many errors and much going back to retrieve them. It is the long years, the constant attempt, gradually becoming successful, to interpret principle in practice, the continual study to improve – all this that makes it so important.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Margaret Bondfield, *A Life’s Work*, p.354.

¹⁰⁷ Margaret Bondfield, *A Life’s Work*, pp. 355-356.

Women's entry to political office meant that domestic policies were generally given a higher profile in the public domain as the twentieth century progressed. Margaret Bondfield, for instance, was involved in the series of measures which resulted finally in 1934 in an extension of unemployment insurance, enabling unemployed wage-earners to continue to provide for their families. Awareness of such issues, in part, came with feminist articles and periodicals, which were increasingly available to an expanding audience. Autobiographer Mary Gawthorpe, for example, was co-editor, with Dora Marsden, of *Freewoman* a short-lived 'radical weekly feminist review' which was published between November 1911 and October 1912. Both women were ex-WSPU activists and other contributors included Rebecca West, H.G.Wells, and Ada Nield Chew, all writers who by their ideas and in their lives were then challenging society. They discussed women's role, motherhood, reproduction and sexuality, and testified to the breadth of contemporary feminist debate.¹⁰⁸

Ellen Wilkinson joined the ILP at sixteen in 1897 when at the Pupil Teacher Centre in Manchester. Here she was encouraged by one of her lecturers Mr W. E. Elliot, to write articles and stories, and to stand for election to the school council.¹⁰⁹ Ellen, as the only girl who had spoken at school debates, was suggested as the socialist candidate. A senior pupil lent her Robert Blatchford's books *Britain for the British* and *Merry England*, and Mr Elliot suggested some further reading:

It was all very elementary, but Blatchford made Socialists in those days by the sheer simplicity of his argument. I went into that election an ardent, in fact a flaming, Socialist...I won by four.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Sandra Stanley Holton, *Suffrage Days*, pp. 156-158.

¹⁰⁹ Elliot was later to serve on the Board of Education for Manchester.

¹¹⁰ Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, pp. 406-7.

The ILP meetings were held on Sunday evenings and in order to attend her first socialist meeting in 1907, at which Katharine Bruce Glasier was to be the speaker, Ellen had to 'plan how I was to go to a political meeting instead of Chapel on a Sunday night.'¹¹¹ To miss Chapel was a rebellion from her strict upbringing:

All our social life, and that of nearly everyone we knew centred round the Wesleyan Chapel. In my younger days I thoroughly enjoyed it. But to my father, who started to preach at the age of fifteen as a "local preacher", chapel meant everything.¹¹²

However, Ellen's determination resulted in her father agreeing to her going. She found in the Socialist movement an assertion of an equality of the Wesleyan 'doctrine of the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of man'.¹¹³ Despite her rebellion Ellen could therefore justify her new faith in Socialism within the boundaries of family tradition. Later Ellen was to become an important figure in national politics. Ellen finished her training as a teacher, and taught for the required two years' as a probationer. But politics, and the Labour Party, were her first love and she continued her interest in Socialism throughout university and as a successful working politician. She became an organizer for the Amalgamated Union of Co-operative Employees, was appointed a school manager, and served on the Elementary Education Committee of Manchester City Council. Her political career began in earnest as she became active on unemployment demonstrations: she was one of those leading the Jarrow March in 1936. Ellen Wilkinson was elected as a Labour MP for Middlesbrough East and Jarrow between 1935-47. In 1940 she became Parliamentary Secretary to Susan Lawrence, the then Minister of Pensions. In 1940. Ellen

¹¹¹ Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, p.413.

¹¹² Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, p.401.

¹¹³ Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, p.401.

was made Minister of Education, and in 1946 she received an honorary degree from Manchester University.¹¹⁴

Hannah Mitchell also became interested in Socialism after reading the work of Robert Blatchford. Hannah particularly recalled reading *Nunquam*, in which Blatchford dealt with slums and sweated industries, as at the time she was working as a dressmaker, and lodging in a small and crowded house in Bolton. Here she was introduced to the socialist ideals of a richer communal life by her fiancé, Gibbon Mitchell, whom she married in 1895. Both had grown up in poor families and were used to the rigours of working-class life. Possessing intelligence and a strong independent character, both were determined to improve their lot in life. Hannah read the socialist theories put forward in *The Clarion*, and began to attend socialist meetings and to speak publicly 'on street corners'.¹¹⁵ Although married life at first 'had no attraction' for Hannah, the ideas promulgated by Socialists saw marriage as a partnership, and this influenced her, she wrote, 'the idea of a newer, freer partnership appealed to me, and a home of my own seemed well worth working for.'¹¹⁶

The couple continued their socialist interests when in May 1900 they moved to Ashton-Under-Lyne. Despite being at home caring for her family Hannah still had the ambition to fight for the equalities she had been denied as a child. She had never given up her love of books and her intellectual questioning and interest in politics. Soon after moving to Ashton she was drawn into the local Socialist group, a branch of the Independent Labour Party. From an early age Hannah had resented the inequalities between the sexes, and

¹¹⁴ For a biography of Ellen Wilkinson see, Betty Vernon, *Ellen Wilkinson: 1891-1947* (London: Croom Helm, 1982).

¹¹⁵ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.86.

¹¹⁶ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.88.

since her marriage her interest in politics had grown. Both these threads were to come together now as an impetus to her political activities:

This disability of women grew into a real grievance in my mind when I began to take a keener interest in politics. I saw there were no women in Parliament, no women councillors, no women Guardians or Magistrates, few women doctors – indeed few women in any well-paid work at all.¹¹⁷

These grievances were to fuel Hannah's political development when the family moved back to Lancashire. Hannah took over from her husband as lecture secretary and agreed to speak at the Labour Church, taking as her subject '“The Women's Cause”: the inequalities between the sexes'. Later Hannah gained some public recognition as she was invited to speak to Hyde and Stockport Labour Churches on the same subject.

Hannah worked for the ILP in Lancashire, and then in Newhall, Derbyshire. Her involvement with the ILP provided Hannah with opportunities and experiences: she was able to travel, attending mass rallies in the country and meet national political figures such as Tom Fox, Bruce and Katharine Glasier, Keir Hardie, Ramsay MacDonald, and Philip Snowden. Later in Manchester Hannah met Mrs Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel and joined the suffragettes in 1905. Hannah had therefore already been a member of the ILP when she joined the suffrage movement, whereas other women describe suffrage leading them to Socialism. However, this two-way overlap between the movements was not really surprising, since in 1905 suffragettes and ILP speakers were working closely together as Annie Barnes underlined earlier. Hannah was on a team of speakers, working closely with Annie Kenney and Teresa Billington a Manchester teacher, whom Hannah described as a 'brilliant speaker'. Here the local ILP provided a bodyguard for the

¹¹⁷ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.115.

suffragettes: 'as Socialists they had some experience of the hooligan, and came to see that the women got a fair hearing'.¹¹⁸

In 1904, Hannah was elected to the board of guardians and she soon acquired knowledge of the Poor Law, often speaking publicly on the subject for the Board. Hannah was a pacifist and when the First World War began in 1914 she supported the anti-war organizations, the ILP No-Conscription Fellowship and the Women's International League.¹¹⁹ At the end of the war Hannah put all of her energies into Socialism. Hannah successfully re-founded a local branch of the ILP and her career in the next twenty years seemed to follow the fortunes of the ILP nationally. In 1924 Hannah was elected to Manchester City Council as a Labour-ILP member, retaining the seat with increasing majorities. In common with several of the autobiographers, Hannah justified her belief in Socialism by confirming the ideology behind it when she described a neighbour who helped with looking after her son, as: 'not a Socialist, although she possessed the breadth of mind and love of beauty which characterized the early Socialists.'¹²⁰

Winifred Griffiths became involved in local politics in 1920. While working at the Co-operative Stores during the First World War, her love of reading prompted her conversion to Socialism and she met a Welsh miner, James Griffiths, who became a trade unionist, a Labour MP, and in 1950, Secretary of State for the Colonies and Cabinet Minister.

Winifred supported her husband's parliamentary career while remaining very active on her own behalf in local politics and social work in addition to bringing up her four children.

¹¹⁸ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.128.

¹¹⁹ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.185.

¹²⁰ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.125.

In 1928, as a member of the Women's section of the local Labour Party in the Yniscedwyn Ward, Llanelli, South Wales, Winifred was elected District Councillor and Member of the board of guardians for Pontardawe. She also began writing articles for publication in the *Social Democrat* and in 1942, was appointed a JP. Winifred recorded her awareness of the distance they had come in their working life together, on the occasion of her husband's first becoming Secretary of State:

I must confess to a thrill as we rode from the station in the official car with the pennant of the Secretary of State on the bonnet. I thought back to the time when I had married a young collier from the Anthracite coalfield, who, although beginning to make a name for himself in his own valley, was hardly known outside. Since then he had given a full life of service to the miners, to Wales, and to the whole country. This was a proud day for Jim and for me.¹²¹

As the couple retired from public life, Winifred looked back and highlighted the altruistic ideals behind her life as a Socialist, and her own achievements:

At times I think back to the years before the First World War, when I was still in my teens, and the idea of 'From each according to his ability, and to each according to his need' excited my imagination and made me a Socialist. The idea became a guiding light by which I hoped to shape my life. Since then I have tried to do so with success.¹²²

Winifred had enjoyed the public acknowledgement of her success, yet she also accepted the rules laid down by society about women's place, and also valued economic and domestic success; she and her husband brought up their four children in relative comfort, domestic fulfilment and happiness in their married life. However, Winifred also negotiated societal rules, and gained public success and recognition by concentrating her campaigning on domestic issues. In doing so she lived up to the accepted ideology of respectability, yet also demonstrated values important to herself, and to her success.

¹²¹ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.161.

¹²² Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, pp. 163-64.

Perhaps more than any of the twenty-six autobiographers, Winifred Griffiths epitomised the experiences of women who were born into the working class, took opportunities offered by changes in society to achieve success in both the domestic and public sphere of their lives, and who reveal the nature of that success in their autobiographies.

Conclusion

The ability to have a measure of control of their own lives was a major part of how the women perceived themselves as politically successful. In taking part in activities outside the home women were making a political statement about their place in society, their rights, and their freedoms. In general, the societal upsurge of political activity which was taking place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was reflected in a greater political awareness for women. The autobiographers show that this process extended to those from the working class.

The twelve members of the cohort who became politically active in some cases ascribe their awareness of politics to their childhood home environment: politically aware parents or siblings fostered expectations in the women's lives which made them see political activism for social change as part of striving for success. Activities in politically-orientated clubs and organizations as they were growing up also played their part in the process. As adults, work-place experiences and poor conditions for fellow-workers motivated their ambitions for bringing about change. Institutions such as the Women's Guild, trades union, socialist groups, and the labour movement, which the women joined as adults, gave impetus to their campaigns for reform. The women reveal that it was by participation in these institutions that they were enabled to find the confidence to speak publicly, and become familiar with voting and organizing themselves and others. These

skills facilitated participation as activists in the campaigns for wider franchise or else led to involvement in a more formal way with party politics. Local politics were also important in bringing about changes in society. Women used to using support networks in bringing up children, caring for elderly relatives, and generally running the home, took naturally to the communal ethos of Socialism. Local politics were seen as an extension of the home, charity and philanthropic work, and had a history of women's participation. Yet while adult women aged over twenty-one were able to vote from 1928, relatively few women of any class became representative at either national or local level in the succeeding years.¹²³ This makes the public activism and political success of the women autobiographers even more remarkable.

The women reconciled their potentially rebellious or unwomanly behaviour while engaged in political activism, with their need to be respectable by invoking religion and the scriptures to sanctify their political and public activities. Political success meant that the women could be perceived as stepping outside traditional female roles of modesty, subservience and self-effacement. This opened up a gulf between prescription – how they *should* behave as respectable women within proscribed spheres - and perception - how they *actually* behaved as campaigners, public speakers and successful socially mobile members of a new society. The justification they give in their autobiographies is their way of bridging this gap. They may have had selfish motivations for their ambitions – fame, fortune or glory, but they do not admit to this. Instead they retained their femininity by couching their writing in moral or religious terms, or suggesting an altruistic motivation for helping others. While these motifs were based on, and help to reinforce, existing gender roles, they also provide the women with a justification of their actions.

¹²³ For discussion of this topic see, for example, Ruth Henig and Simon Henig, *Women and Political Power*, pp. 1-22; Andrew Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, pp.175-176.

Childhood experiences and family background, the interests of friends in politically-orientated clubs and societies, or campaigning for work-place equality which translated to the wider society, all gave women the confidence to exert their own freedom to become engaged in public life. Some of the cohort were helped in their political activities by the support of their husbands or with encouragement of male colleagues or friends. Others were paid by the political institutions. The public recognition of their achievements in the form of awards and positions in government meant that social attitudes had changed regarding these women and their part in politics. Political reforms were the most important change possible in these women's lifetimes. By the early decades of the twentieth century their political power had been formalized. They encompassed the ideology of respectability and idealism while moving firmly onto the public stage, and achieved success in what was ostensibly a male sphere of action.

Thesis Conclusion

Preliminary research began with an interest in the autobiographies of working-class women born in England between 1790 and 1900, of which there are 136 extant examples. Before this period, inability to write, lack of time, or inclination, may have precluded autobiographies from such women. A difference in tone and content was noted in all of the 26 published autobiographies from a generation, or cohort, of women born between 1870 and 1900 when for the first time working-class women began to describe themselves as having successful lives. The thesis turns on why this should be so, and explores the nature of success described by the women.

The thesis opened with a brief introduction to recent publications about success, and present-day celebrity autobiographies, in which stories of success from humble beginnings abound. It continued by drawing attention to the difference in the perceptions of success of these modern success stories in comparison with nineteenth century writings. Success in the nineteenth century was achieved by men, and in a few cases, and in proscribed areas, by elite women. Working class women may have achieved success, but they left no record of it. This situation changed as the cohort wrote their autobiographies. These women describe success variously: learning to read and write; gaining scholarships and formal qualifications; acquiring domestic skills which gave them better job prospects or enabled them to care for their own home and family; gaining independence from their parents; the ability to buy a wide range of consumer goods; promotion to a better paid or more prestigious job; a better home; access to leisure pursuits and generally a more comfortable and upwardly-mobile life-style. Most significantly, they also describe success in terms of striving towards, and gaining, a measure of status, in society, in the workplace and in politics.

Although rarely using the word ‘success’ the women defined their achievements in life and described the routes they had taken to achieve their ambitions. Their progress was made possible because over the period the role of working-class women in society had begun to change. The cohort chose to describe these changes in the areas of education, domesticity, economics and politics. Led by the women’s texts, each of these areas has been the subject of a chapter of this thesis, for which, therefore, a thematic approach was adopted.

The importance of these texts in the wider sweep of working-class history is that they partly fill the transition between late nineteenth and late twentieth century perceptions of success. Although the autobiographies are few in number they reflect considerable diversity in the lives of the writers: the strata of working-class society into which they were born – from itinerant beggar to relatively affluent shop-keeper’s daughter; where they lived – from a remote hillside farm in Derbyshire to inner-city London; their education – from two weeks of formal schooling to a university education, and occupation – from seamstress to Cabinet Minister. Inevitably each account is highly individual; but taken together they contribute to the sum of historical knowledge by giving broad insights into the diverse gendered and class-specific experiences of a generation of working-class women during a seminal period in English history.

The cohort did not accept the lives they were born into. They displayed a contrast with the lives of previous generations of their families, as incrementally, and by a combination of serendipity and planned action, they found pathways to better themselves. Their writing showed an awareness of the constraints imposed by the gendered patriarchal society in which they lived. Yet, during the period studied, extensive political and social

changes took place which enabled them to improve their lives within a working-class culture which they perceived as changing and dynamic rather than static and repressive.

As a result of new legislation arising from the 1870 Education Acts most of the women were enabled to attend school for a significant part of their childhood. Furthermore, openings for secondary education, and institutional help in the form of scholarships created new opportunities that were changing educational outcomes for some women: those with the personal drive and ability to overcome the gender and class bias at home and school could achieve a place in further education. Yet a significant number of the cohort conformed to societal constraints: they welcomed the learning of domestic skills, but as a path to advancement rather than as a top-down method of social control for working-class girls. For all or part of their lives they were happy to adhere to their proscribed female role and took pride in the care of family and home, or a good position as a domestic servant in a large household, thus conforming to notions of respectability valued both by themselves and by society.

A fundamental difference between these women and preceding generations was that as they moved from childhood to adulthood, they had greater freedom to make decisions about their own lives. Although still limited by their class and gender, opportunities in a widening range of occupations enabled them to seek economic success. This was illustrated in as the women improved their standard of living, material wealth and social mobility: they took control of family income from their husbands and older children, and became one of a new generation of working-class consumer. They were helped by various factors: institutional reform in education; the workplace; and, most importantly, in politics; together with the encouragement and support of networks of family, friends,

neighbours, teachers, and work-colleagues, reinforced the motivation of these women to expand the boundaries of what working-class women could do or become.

Support networks were important for these women, and particularly for those rebels among them who defied social conventions that traditionally confined women's aspirations to the home. Male perceptions of women's gender and class roles began to change and as a result family dynamics altered so that some women during this period had the emotional and financial support of their husbands, or male colleagues as they took advantage of parliamentary reforms to succeed in the political arena. The cohort included some of the first pioneering women to take public office both locally and nationally. Many had important roles in campaigns for equality in the work-place and in the wider social and political sphere. It was in these areas that they were able to benefit not just themselves and their immediate family, but other women like themselves who lacked the opportunities, impetus or ability to succeed.

The cohort has revealed that during the period women of their class had new choices in their lives. No longer completely constrained by prescribed gendered roles, they could choose to conform to their traditional place in the private domestic sphere, to succeed in the public sphere of work or politics, or to achieve a balance of both public and private. They could change direction during their lives and were no longer limited to one set course. As a result of societal and political changes, in education, employment, and most significantly, the wider enfranchisement which opened up opportunities in politics, women born into the working class could now take their place on the public stage in what was previously an exclusively male arena.

The women's perceptions of success were as diverse as their experiences. The importance of their achievements was in the change not only within individual lives but in the contrast with the lives of previous generations of women born into the working-class. Working class women in general from this period have left scant evidence of their experiences and their thoughts. These autobiographies remain as a window into the lives of the cohort and other women like them. They have an emotional power: at one level they are a record of personal struggle and achievement: at another they are important social documents that chart the lives of working-class women at a time of profound social and political development. As a result, the success of working-class women, once neglected or discounted, has become the record of a changing society.

Last Name	First	DOB	Family	Place of Birth	Father's Job	Education	occupation	Faith	Marriage
Barnes	Annie	1887	1st of 3	East End, London	shop manager	local school to 15	shop assistant	C of E	married 1919
Bondfield	Margaret	1873	10th of 11	Chard, Somerset	lacemaker	local school to 14	shop assistant	Wesleyan	spinster
Chew (nee Neild)	Ada	1870	12th of 12	Crewe	brick setter	local school to 11	factory worker	u/k	married 1897
Cooke (nee Smith)	Isabella	1890	1st of 8	Grt Strickland, Westmorland	farm labourer	local school to 13	domestic service	u/k	married 1916
Cowper	Agnes	1874	2nd of 9	Liverpool	seaman	local school to 11	domestic duties	C of E	no record
Edwards (nee Cutis)	Mildred	1889	3rd of 7	Carlisle	railwayman	local school to 13	domestic duties	R C	married 1915
Foakes	Grace	1900	1 of 5	Stepney, London	dockworker	local school to 14	waitress	C of E	married 1920
Foley	Alice	1891	6th of 6	Bolton, Lancs	mill worker	Catholic School to 12	factory worker	R C	spinster
Gawthorpe	Mary	1881	3rd of 5	Meanwood, Leeds	tanner	trained as teacher	teacher	C of E	married 1921
Gibbs	Rose	1892	3rd of 3	East End, London	soldier	Local school to 13	domestic service	u/k	married 1915
Griffiths (nee Rutley)	Winifred	1895	2nd of 4	Overton, Hants	mill worker	Church school 4-14	factory worker	C of E	Married 1918
Harvey	Bessie	1874	u/k	Newton-Le-Willows	horse keeper	local school to 12	domestic service	u/k	Married 1896
Hills	Daisy	1899	1 of 2	Old Frimley, Surrey	Farm bailiff	local school 8-12	farm worker	C of E	spinster
Hills	u/k	1893	u/k	Leighton Bromswold, Cambs	horse keeper	Local school 3-12	domestic service	C of E	Married 1916
Hull (nee Payne)	Maria	1881	u/k	Derbyshire	barman	local school 3-12	domestic service	u/k	married 1906
Jerry (nee Withers)	Louise	1877	2nd of 2	Dalson, London	stonemason	Local school to 12	seamstress	Chapel	married 1911
Kenney	Annie	1879	5th of 11	Springhead, Lancs	textile worker	local school to 12	factory worker	C of E	married 1920
Luty	Mary	1875	1 of 2	Rossendale, Lancs	tenant farmer	local school 7-11	factory worker	C of E	spinster
May	Betty	c.1890	1 of 4	London	mechanic	local school 9-12	dancer	u/k	married u/k
Mitchell (nee Webster)	Hannah	1871	4th of 6	Alport Dale, Derbyshire	tenant farmer	local school fortnight	seamstress	u/k	married 1895
Scott	Nellie	c.1890	u/k	Stockport	shop assistant	local school to 12	factory worker	C of E	married 1910
Silvester	Susan	1878	2nd of 4	Minworth, Warwickshire	farm labourer	local school 5-12	domestic service	Chapel	married 1902
Smith (nee Murphy)	Emma	1894	1st of 2	Redruth, Cornwall	fisherman	little schooling	domestic service	C of E	married 1920
Wilkinson	Ellen	1891	3rd of 4	Chorlton on Medlock, Lancs	mill worker	university degree	teacher	u/k	spinster
Woodward	Kathleen	1896	1 of 6	London	printer	local school to 13	factory worker	u/k	no record
Yearn	u/k	c.1890	1 of 14	Oldham, Lancs	brick-setter	local school to 12	factory worker	u/k	married u/k
				Key: u/k = unknown information					
				C of E = Church of England					
				R C = Roman Catholic					

Appendix I Biographical Details of Cohort

Name	Autobiography Title	Written	Length	Where Published	Publisher	Date	Location
Barnes, A.	Tough Annie: From Suffragette to Stepney Councillor	1979	69 pages	London	Stepney Books	1979	Bodleian library
Bondfield, M	A Life's Work	c1947	359 pages	London	Hutchinson	1948	Bodleian library
Chew, A. N.	The Life and Writings of a Working Woman	1930	69 pages	London	Virago	1982	Bodleian
Cooke, I	A Hired Lass In Westmorland	1982	20 pages	Penrith	Cumberland Herald	1982	Carlisle library
Cowper, A	A backward Glance at Merseyside	1944-48	114 pages	Birkenhead	Willmer Brothers	1948	Brunel University
Edwards, M.	Our City, Our People 1889-1978: Memories	1977	73 pages	Carlisle	Private printers	1978	Carlisle library
Foakes, G.	Between High Walls/My Part of the River/Reuben	1960-70	3 volumes	London	Walwyn Shepherd	1972	British Library
Foley, A.	A Bolton Childhood	1972	92 pages	Manchester	Manchester University	1973	Bodleian
Gawthorpe, M.	Up Hill To Holloway	c1932	254 pages	Penobscot, USA	Traversity Press	1962	Oxford Law Library
Gibbs, R.	In Service: Rose Gibbs Remembers	c1979	18 pages	Cambridge	Elison's Editions	1981	Bodleian
Griffiths, W.	One Woman's Story	1979	169 pages	Rhondda	Ron Davis	1979	West Glamorgan
Harvey, B.	Youthful Memories of Life in a Suffolk Village	c.1975	500 words	Ipswich	Goodwin and Baxter	1976	Bodleian library
Hills, D.	Old Frimley	c1976	180 pages	Surrey	Kestrel Graphics	1978	Bodleian library
Hills, Mrs.	Reminiscences of Mrs. Hills, of Leighton Bromswold	c1970	2 pages	Huntingdon	Huntingdon History Soc.	1977	Huntingdon
Hull, M.	A Derbyshire Schooling: 1884-1893	1985	4 pages	London	Hogarth Press	1988	History Workshop
Jermy, L.	The Memories of a Working Woman	c1932	188 pages	Norwich	Goose & Sons	1934	Bodleian library
Kenney, A.	Memories of a Militant	1924	308 pages	London	Edward Arnold	1924	Bodleian
Luty, M.	A Peniless Globetrotter	c1937	147 pages	Accrington	Wardleworth	1937	Rawtenstall library
May, B.	Tiger Woman: My Story	c1928	232 pages	London	Duckworth	1929	Bodleian library
Mitchell, H.	The Hard Way Up	1940-46	260 pages	London	Faber and Faber	1968	Bodleian library
Scott, N.	A Felt Hat Worker	c1930	20 pages	London	Hogarth Press	1931	reprinted Virago
Sylvester, S.	In a World that has Gone	1968	31 pages	Loughborough	Private Printed	1968	Brunel University
Smith, E.	A Cornish Waif's Story	c 1924	188 pages	London	Odhams Press	1954	Bodleian library
Wilkinson, E.	untitled in Myself When Young	c. 1938	16 pages	London	Frederick Muller	1938	Bodleian library
Woodward, K.	Jipping Street: Childhood in a London Slum	1928	150 pages	London	Harper & Brothers	1928	Bodlian library
Yearn, Mrs.	A Public Spirited Rebel	1931	6 pages	London	Hogarth Press	1931	reprinted Virago

Appendix III: Chronological Table

Date	Cohort Birthdates and biographical events	National Events Relevant to the Cohort
1870	Ada Nield Chew born	Forster's Education Act established school boards on which women are given the right to vote. Married Women's Property Act
1871	Hannah Mitchell born	Women's Suffrage Bill lost in Commons
1872		Public Health Act Women employed in Post Office Savings Bank
1873	Margaret Bondfield born	Infant Custody Act Girton College, Cambridge founded
1874	Bessie Harvey born Agnes Cowper born	Public Health Act Factory Act limited working hours to 10 a day First woman appointed to workhouse inspectorate
1875		Public Health Act First woman Poor Law guardian elected Sankey and Moody Evangelical Revival Age of sexual consent raised to 13
1876		Women clerks employed at Post Office
1877	Louise Jermy born	Start of Besant/Bradlaugh trial
1878	Susan Sylvester born	Factory Act improved working conditions Matrimonial Causes Act: maintenance and separation could now be granted to women whose husbands had been convicted of assault. London University admits women Domestic economy established as compulsory for girls in Board Schools
1879	Annie Kenney born	
		Industrial Schools Act: children in moral danger could be removed from parents by local authorities.
1881	Maria Hull born Mary Gawthorpe born	New Civil Service grade of women clerk introduced
1882		Rate paying Spinsters allowed to vote for town councils Grants given to schools to teach cookery Married Women's property Act
1883		Women's Co-operative Guild formed Royal Holloway College, London, founded

1884		Amalgamated Association of Weavers formed 3 rd Reform Bill defeated by 136 votes Franchise Reforms gave Universal Suffrage to men Sankey and Moody Second Evangelical Revival Socialist League founded by William Morris
1885	Mary Luty born	ILP gives votes to men and women Redistribution Act Exhibition held in London Age of consent raised to 16
1886		Contagious Diseases Act repealed
1887	Annie Barnes born	NUWSS formed
1888		First women elected to London County Council
1889	Mildred Edwards born	
1890	Isabella Cooke born Nellie Scott born Betty May born Mrs Yearn born	Grants given to schools for teaching laundry
1891	Alice Foley born Ellen Wilkinson born	School fees abolished First publication of Blatchford's <i>Clarion</i> First Labour Church formed, in Manchester
1892	Rose Gibbs born	
1893	Mrs Hills born	School leaving age raised to 11 ILP founded locally in Manchester First woman factory inspector appointed
1894	Emma Smith born Ada Nield's 'Factory Girl' campaign	Women allowed to participate in parish, district and church councils Property qualifications abolished for Poor Law guardians
1895	Winifred Griffiths born	Summary Jurisdiction Act: battered women could obtain divorce
1896	Kathleen Woodward born Bessie Harvey married	
1897		Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee NUWSS founded
1898		
1899	Daisy Hills born	School leaving age raised to 12 Margaret Llewelyn Davies made general secretary of the Women's Co-operative Guild
1900	Grace Foakes born	
1901		January Queen Victoria Dies

1902		Education Act set up LEA's to provide state-run secondary education. Board Schools become council schools.
1903		WSPU founded
1904	Annie Kenney first woman elected to district committee from textile unions.	
1905	Mary Gawthorpe and Annie Kenney join WSPU.	
1906	Annie Kenney imprisoned for first time	Sweated Industries Exhibition Liberals win landslide election Labour Party created
1907		'Ladder of Opportunity' free secondary school places established Pupil-teacher scheme abandoned Women admitted to all aspects of local government
1908		Asquith becomes Prime Minister First Suffragette hunger strike
1909	Mary Luty embarks on her world tour	Forcible feeding begins of hunger strikers
1910		Year of truce by militant suffragettes
1911		East London Federation of Suffragettes founded by Sylvia Pankhurst
1912	Maria Hull married	Christabel Pankhurst flees to Paris
1913		'Cat and Mouse' act introduced Death of Emily Wilding Davidson Private members bill for votes for women defeated
1914		Outbreak of World War I ILP oppose war policy
1915	Winifred Griffiths took 'man's job' at Co-op Rose Gibbs married	
1916	Mrs Hills married	
1917	Agnes Cowper made librarian at Lever Library, Port Sunlight. Alice Foley left factory floor to become a sick visitor for Weaver's Union.	

1918	Winifred Rutley married James Griffiths, later an MP.	End of WWI Universal Suffrage for Men over 21 and Women over 30 Health Act provided Health visitors and Baby Welfare Clinics
1919	Annie Barnes Married	
1920	Annie Kenney married	
1921		
1922		First woman barrister
1923		
1924	Hannah Mitchell elected to Manchester City Council. Margaret Bondfield made Parliamentary Secretary. Annie Kenney's autobiography published.	First Labour Government MacDonald Prime Minister
1925		
1926		
1927		
1928		Women over the age of 21 obtain the vote.
1929	Margaret Bondfield becomes first woman to hold a cabinet post.	Second Labour Government
1930		
1931	Alice Foley appointed a JP. Autobiographies of Nellie Scott and Mrs Yearn published in 'Life As We Have Known It'.	ILP disaffiliates from Labour Party
1932		
1933		Women's Health Enquiry into the deaths of working-class women in childbirth
1934	Louise Jermy's autobiography published	
1935		
1936		
1937	Mary Luty's autobiography published	
1938		
1939-1945		World War II

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 Neil Sammells, Dean of Humanities, Bath College of Higher Education
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Crosscurrents is a new series which has grown directly out of exciting developments in higher education. The move towards modular courses amongst students and the evolution of interdisciplinary work at all levels of intellectual inquiry have expanded the horizons of the old subject areas. This series is aimed to show how English Studies is meeting the challenge of these developments by drawing upon the discourses of history, politics, race and gender studies in particular. Subjects range from those which are well established within the prevailing structure of English Studies to new and unusual areas which have emerged directly out of innovative interdisciplinary work.

Writing and Victorianism asks the fundamental question 'what is Victorianism?' and offers a number of answers taken from methods and approaches which have been developed over the last ten years. This collection of essays, written by both new and established scholars from Britain and the U.S.A., develops many of the themes of nineteenth-century studies which have lately come to the fore, touching upon issues such as drugs, class, power and gender. Some essays reflect the interaction of word and image in the nineteenth-century, and the notion of the city as spectacle; others look at Victorian science, finding a connection between writing and the growth of psychology and psychiatry on the one hand, and with the power of scientific materialism on the other.

As well as key figures such as Dickens, Tennyson and Wilde, a host of new names are introduced including working-class writers attempting to define themselves and writers in the periodical press who, once anonymous, exercised a great influence over Victorian politics, taste, and social ideals. From these observations there emerges a need for self-definition in Victorian writing. History, ancestry, and the past all play their part in figuring the present in the nineteenth-century, and many of these studies foreground the problem of literary, social, and psychological identity.

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J B Bullen is a Professor of English at Reading University.

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LONGMAN

WRITING AND VICTORIANISM

EDITED BY BULLEN



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J B BULLEN

primary schooling, and there was little difference between working men and women in the acquisition of literary skills.⁵ Many would have been taught through Bible instruction, or through the evangelical tracts and children's books used in schools, Sunday schools and offered extensively as school prizes. The book-lists of nineteenth-century England abound with religious texts. These varied from Puritan literature such as John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* or Milton's *Paradise Lost*, to the publications of The Religious Tract Society and The Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge.

Though working women were excluded from many collective leisure activities in the early years of the century, they regularly attended church or chapel. While this supported the ideal of the good wife and mother, it paradoxically also enabled women to enjoy leisure time in the company of other women and to share common experiences.

It was therefore in the language of religion that working women often first gained the confidence to write. Using familiar phrases and literary conventions from the Bible, evangelical literature and children's books from church, chapel and Sunday school,⁶ working women gained a confident voice with which to share their experiences with others like themselves. Early in the nineteenth-century it was working women's confessional testimonies which broke the silence and provide tangible evidence of the self-importance which was stirring within a new generation of female authors and poets.

The confessional or spiritual testimony is the earliest known form of autobiography. Religious self-examination has its roots in the *Confessions* of St Augustine,⁷ but the genre of the spiritual autobiography reached its peak during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁸ Spiritual autobiographies are concerned mainly with the religious life of the individual. They engage with the notion that the state of the soul can be explored through experience and that self-knowledge was a way to God.⁹ One of the challenges to the established Church during the nineteenth century was a resurgence of the traditional Puritan doctrine that all believers, even the most humble, could find their own salvation by study of the Bible and examination of their own conscience. In this way, the nineteenth-century revival of conversion experience, especially in nonconformists and evangelical churches, generated a

2 *The major silence: autobiographies of working women in the nineteenth century*

Carol Jenkins

'The one major silence is that of women.'

So David Vincent observed in the introduction to his anthology of nineteenth-century working-class autobiography. The silence, however, is not total, for of the thousand or so extant autobiographies from the nineteenth-century labouring poor in Britain, there are over ninety, some still in manuscript form,² written by working women.³ The autobiographies echoed the context in which they were set: the shift in tone within autobiographical writing from sacred to secular as the century progressed was a manifestation of the process of secularization which took place in the wider culture during the nineteenth century. Furthermore, by writing, and making their writing public, the women transcended class boundaries and stepped outside the role enforced on them by a society which constructed gender within an ideological polarity.⁴ The difficulty encountered in breaking from their separate sphere explains, in part at least, why only one-tenth of the extant autobiographical material from the working people of this period was written by women.

Certainly, a low level of literacy cannot be claimed as a reason for the small output of working women's writing. There was a rapid growth in literacy during the nineteenth century. Girls and boys had relatively equal opportunities to attend some form of

corresponding revival of interest in the spiritual autobiography. As a result, many Puritan works were republished. Most notably, in 1837, Thomas Jackson reprinted a series of the spiritual autobiographies of itinerant preachers,¹⁰ which were originally published during the eighteenth century by John Wesley.¹¹

The spiritual autobiography is hallmarked by its formulaic tripartite structure – three essential elements of a sinful early life, religious conversion, followed by a striving for everlasting salvation. Examination of the spiritual autobiographies of nineteenth-century working women demonstrates clearly that they were patterned on this old, Puritan form.

One must be cautious, however, in equating these autobiographies with the actual situation within the lives of working women of the period, since there are doubts about the general application of works which were both subjective in form and limited in number. Nevertheless, during the early nineteenth century, the spiritual autobiography became an important record of the experience of working women.

Generally, the autobiographers began by confessing, often in great detail, the sins of childhood or early adult life. Elizabeth Kenning, for example, wrote of a childhood spent in petty crime when she was 'deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked'.¹² This developed into a period spent in drunkenness and prostitution on the streets of Liverpool:

Many times I have been taken from the streets of this city, in a state of intoxication. . . . I was so wicked, that frequently I endeavoured to invent new oaths for the amusement of my companions in vice. I tremble almost to state how depraved I then was. The holy names of God were the subject of my profane oaths.¹³

Similarly, Mary Saxby, a female vagrant who adopted an itinerant way of life during her youth, recalled her 'addiction to obscene jests, filthy ribaldry and profane swearing'.¹⁴ Other autobiographers chronicled sins which amounted to nothing more than ignorance or childhood misdemeanours. Anne Walsh confessed to being 'wretchedly ignorant',¹⁵ whilst Sarah Martin described her rebellion against a strict upbringing in which the Bible was the only reading material permitted in the house:

I discovered an indescribable aversion to the Bible, and a bitter prejudice against spiritual truth, and the Gospel of Christ, in every

form that met me . . . when a ray of Gospel light came across me in any way, I turned from it as from a reptile.¹⁶

The descriptions of wrongdoing, although they may appear real enough, were influenced by the books to which the women had access. Many of these, such as reward books used as Sunday school prizes, abound with examples of similar petty sinfulness.¹⁷ Also commonplace were motifs such as self-conscious declaration of secret unhappiness at a sinful way of life,¹⁸ and such literary tropes can be found echoed in the working woman's confessions. Elizabeth Kenning, for example, insisted that 'instead of enjoying that happiness in the paths of sin, which I had anticipated, I experienced nothing but disgrace, misery and pain'.¹⁹

In common with the Puritan testimony, the autobiographers continued with a description of spiritual awakening and religious conversion. The authors described the transition which took place during the conversion: where once they had recoiled from the light they now embraced its swift and often dramatic entry into their lives. Sarah Martin's spiritual awakening came during a Sunday walk when she overheard the text being preached 'We persuade men'.²⁰ She recorded: 'the spirit of God sent a ray of light upon my guilty soul . . . and I learnt that the religion of the Bible was a grand reality, and that I had been wrong'.²¹ Anna Hinderer, brought up by her devout grandmother and aunt at Lowestoft recalled: 'I saw my need of a saviour, and in the saviour I felt there was all I needed . . . I was permitted to feel a great spring and glow in religion'.²²

These religious conversions are linked not only by the fact that they all take place suddenly and unexpectedly, but also because they often occur in the presence of a third party who showed then the evils of their lives, usually with the help of texts from the Bible – another literary convention common in evangelical literature.²³ Elizabeth Kenning recounted:

On taking my accustomed walk in the evening, along one of the streets of Liverpool, I overtook a gentleman, and . . . endeavouring to press upon my mind the wretchedness of my situation, he asked me if I thought anyone could see us. I answered, 'Who do you think can see us?' he replied, 'The all-penetrating eye of God sees you; and at this moment he knows your most secret thoughts.' My hardened and rebellious heart became softened and tears fell from those eyes that had never before wept for my transgressions . . .²⁴

Normally conversion was followed by moments of doubt and struggle on the road towards everlasting grace. The women professed concern that they were not close to God, but asked for His help to bring them to the right path. Ruth Bryan wrote on 10 January 1831:

I am at this time much perplexed on the subject of family prayer ... and till I am convinced that it would be in accordance with His heavenly will, I dare not attempt it. May he decide the doubtful case, and cause clear light to shine upon the path of duty which at present appears enveloped in thick darkness.²⁵

The third element of the spiritual autobiography chronicled the atonement for past sins as the women dedicated their lives to God. It is this third section of their narratives which is most heavily overlaid with language borrowed from the Scriptures. Whole passages are written in pious praise of God as the autobiographers described, in passionate detail, the pursuit of truth and grace in which they had engaged since their religious conversion. The 'sinners' have come fully into the 'light from God not to be obscured'. The autobiographers described lives spent in performing 'good works' in order to show that they had been 'born again' through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

There is little doubt that good work was done by many of the women. Sarah Martin became a Sunday school teacher and later a prison visitor. Anna Hinderer, after her marriage, took up missionary work. And Elizabeth Kenning, who was admitted to the Liverpool penitentiary at the age of twenty-four, despite chronic ill-health, spent her few remaining years in Bible reading and talking to other sinners in order to 'direct them to the Saviour'.

Autobiographies from the early part of the century thus represented, in a naive and simplistic fashion, a triumph of good over evil, and evinced the moral and intellectual development of the authors. They shared a common language, a common concern for moral values and a common didactic purpose: the pleasures of life must count as nothing before the writer could come to God through grace. Their autobiographies were a self-conscious effort to encourage others on the road to salvation, some overtly so. Janet Bathgate, in her devoutly religious recollections of a humble life in Yarrow at the beginning of the nineteenth century, wrote in her preface that she

was taught in her earliest youth to fear God, and all along she has been impressed with the feeling that His beneficent power is over all. She hoped to communicate this sense of the ever present guiding hand of a Father to her young friends, so that when similar trials and difficulties to hers meet them in the battle of life they may look to the same source for strength and comfort.²⁶

In the 'legacy' that followed, 'Aunt Janet' directed her nieces to 'mark the leading of God's providence, and see how He can out of little things bring great results'.²⁷ Similarly, Mrs Sydney Watson also painted a portrait in religious tones of her highly moral stance, exhorting others to behave in a similar manner. Her autobiography is very reminiscent of moral tales written for children, and had a preface written by her husband who set his seal of approval on his wife's work.²⁸

The publication of their autobiographies gave some working women the confidence to experiment with other forms of writing. Poetry, written to inspire and encourage neighbours and family, began to appear in print. Sarah Martin's poetry was published posthumously and Dora Greenwell had poetry published in tandem with her autobiography.²⁹ Mary Smith, who adopted a spiritual way of life after experiencing conversion in her early twenties, had many articles and verses published in various periodicals, including *The People's Journal*, *The Observer* and *The Carlisle Express*.³⁰

The voices of working women continued to be heard as the century progressed. They began to be viewed by nineteenth-century society as representative members of an increasingly literate group as they negotiated the space made for them by the spiritual autobiographers early in the century. Their increased self-confidence enabled them to convert the evangelical mode of writing into a secular language of interiority and self-hood with which to express themselves.

Marianne Farningham, a poet, author and lecturer on religious subjects,³¹ described in *A Working Woman's Life. An Autobiography*,³² her awakening to religion at an early age and a life governed by religious zeal. Religion continued to be important throughout Marianne's life, yet her work, although religious in tone, was written in a secular style, engaging with a vernacular vocabulary, rather than with the self-conscious evangelical language and piety of the earlier writers.

Paradoxically, the churches played their part in the movement towards a more secular culture. As early as 1830 and 1840 they became concerned with the fall in working-class attendance at church, confirmed by the census of 1851 and highlighted by Horace Mann in his review of the census published in 1853.³¹ The response from the churches was energetic and dedicated: they started a huge investment in church, chapel and mission buildings; more clergy, lay workers and evangelists were recruited; and new types of service and church organization were introduced with educational, philanthropic and self-help facilities – including access to books – provided by the church.

This trend towards the more social and secular within the churches themselves, gave rise to a blurring of the distinction between religion and recreation. Many of the working poor took advantage of the spare-time activities without necessarily attending church or chapel. Literacy enhanced the freedom of the working classes by giving them new ways of expressing themselves. Secular publications, cheap novels, newspapers and periodicals such as *Labour Prophet*, *Fraser's Magazine* and Dickens's *Household Words* became more readily available and this extension of popular culture enabled working men and women to encounter various forms of literature in their day-to-day lives.

As the labouring poor became familiar with stories involving people like themselves, the demand for this kind of literature grew, and invariably those whose narrative skills transferred to the printed page began to produce immensely readable eye-witness accounts of the underside of Victorian society. The social subordination of women, by mid-century, was no longer justified by reference to women's fallen nature. Secular autobiographies began to appear which made no mention of a past life of sin or of sudden conversion followed by a life of atonement. There was no clear tripartite structure and no overtly evangelical literary tropes. Instead, the structure of the narrative became unique to each writer.

A few autobiographers, for instance, chose to write only of their childhood. Mabel Curtis described the village in which she lived and the board school she attended.³⁴ Also, few of the autobiographies from the second half of the nineteenth century contain the sort of introspective outpourings found in the earlier spiritual autobiographies, although some autobiographers, such as Daisy

Cowper, described the dawning of self-awareness.³⁵ The majority of working women autobiographers writing in the second half of the nineteenth century wrote with pride of their own lives and work. Titles of autobiographies from this period often celebrated their own or their husband's employment: the factory girl, the plate-layer's wife, the servant, the schoolmistress.³⁶

Autobiographers such as Ellen Johnston drew heavily on secular literature in their writing. Born in Hamilton during the 1830s, Ellen began work as a power-loom weaver at the age of eleven. In her leisure time she wrote poetry, much of which was published in local papers.³⁷ A book of her poetry and songs was published in 1867 and she wrote her autobiography as a preface to this. Ellen acknowledged her familiarity with the autobiographical genre: 'Like every other autobiographer, I can only relate the events connected with my parentage and infancy from the communicated evidence of witnesses of those events.'³⁸ Books made a considerable impact on her. 'Before I was thirteen years of age', she wrote, 'I had read many of Sir Walter Scott's novels, and fancied I was a heroine of the modern style ... my brain was fired with wild imaginations.'³⁹

The transition from the tripartite form of the spiritual autobiography with its religious overtones, to a more secular, less proscribed form was complete by the end of the century. More autobiographies were being written by working women and more were being published. Intensely personal testimonies emerged – testimonies which were grounded in tangible events in the lives of the writers. God, the Bible, church and chapel were given less prominence in the writings of autobiographers from the later years of the century and piety dwindled. This move away from the sacred, reflected, even amongst working women, the corresponding shift away from religion as a central focus for much of Victorian life and thought.⁴⁰

Mrs Layton, born in Bethnal Green on 9 April 1855, wrote in a vernacular typical of late nineteenth-century autobiographers. Her writing reflected the importance of the small details which made up the substance of her life. The seventh of fourteen children, she described her mother as 'a perfect slave. Generally speaking, she was either expecting a baby to be born or had one at the breast.'⁴¹ Similar commonplace details are given of her home, of the domestic arrangements, of her elementary education at day school

and evening ragged school, but there are few overt references to organized religion. She described the Catholic Sisters of Mercy who moved into the area as part of a mission to the poor during her childhood, and later in her history she recalled 'we used to arrive home from church just as all the folk were fetching their dinners from the bakehouse'⁴² and 'It was at a mission hall, where I went when I found the church too stiff and conservative, that I met my husband'.⁴³

In their autobiographies, many working women expressed a pride in the ways that they had improved, by hard work, their position in life. Books such as Samuel Smiles's *Self Help* also promulgated the notion of using spare time for educational purposes, of rising in society, of becoming more respectable.⁴⁴ Autobiographies of working women from both the middle and late nineteenth century give individual accounts of upward mobility. Elizabeth Rignall, born in 1897, wrote of her late Victorian childhood and described the turn of the century education for women as she worked her way through training as a teacher to become a headmistress.⁴⁵ Rosa Lewis recalled her rise from general servant to scullery maid to a position as cook, and friend, to royalty.⁴⁶

Not all working women who improved their position in society, however, relinquished their pride in their working identity. Hannah Cullwick married her employer, Arthur J. Munby.⁴⁷ It was a rather odd marriage in which the master/servant relationship was maintained in private – Munby insisted that Hannah called him 'massa', for example – whilst in public she acted and dressed as his lady wife. Hannah's diaries, however, show that despite her enforced dual role, her belief in her own identity and the importance of her work as a servant was never shattered. Her strong sense of self is expressed in her discomfort with her fashionable clothes:

Massa says I behaved nicely and look'd like a lady too. He bought me a felt hat & plume of cock's feathers to wear, & a veil, & a new brooch to pin my shawl with, & a new waterproof cloak. But I generally wore my blue skirt & jacket over my grey frock, with frill around my neck, and white cuffs, & grey kid gloves, & carrying my striped sun shade. All so different to anything I had got used to, but one day in the train I got almost ill-temper'd at being so muffled up, & felt I'd much liefer feel my hands free as they used to be. But M.

made me put the gloves on again, & I thought it was hard to be forced to wear gloves ...⁴⁸

Happiness at resuming her servant's role was obvious as Hannah recorded that she was 'very glad to get home again ... I've doffed all my best clothes & put my own on again – my dirty cotton frock & apron & my cap'. Hannah's words echoed some journals and periodicals containing socially-conscious material aimed at 'respectable' women, which extolled the virtue of serving others and, paradoxically, encouraged contentment with life in the given sphere rather than 'self help' and striving for betterment.

Secular groups, unions and societies proliferated as the century drew to a close, and these gave those working women who joined them a collective identity apart from that previously provided by church-based groups. Shared discussion helped working women realize the importance of their own specific experiences, not necessarily in a religious context, and they gained the confidence to write about their lives in their own words. The excitement the women found in learning and taking responsibility as members of a group outside the confines of their 'separate sphere' is wonderfully illustrated by autobiographers such as Mrs Wrigley,⁴⁹ a member of the Co-operative Women's Guild which was founded in 1883.

Mrs Wrigley, a platelayer's wife, omitted all mention of organized religion in her memoirs. Details are given of a hard-working early life as part of a large family. Mrs Wrigley was employed from the age of nine as a child-minder and general servant. She recorded in her memoirs: 'Not able to read or write, I could not let my parents know, until a kind old lady in the village wrote to my parents to fetch me home from the hardships I endured'.⁵⁰ However, at the age of fourteen she took a situation at a Temperance Hotel and it was here that the formal education began: 'my master and mistress took an interest in me and paid for my education at night school for two years'.⁵¹ After her marriage Mrs Wrigley recalled joining the Co-operative:

We struggled along to get a nice home together, with my little sewing machine money. My first thing to do was to join the Co-operative Stores in one of the Oldham branches. ... I cannot say how it has helped with my little children.⁵²

Late in the century the suffragists sought the vote by constitutional means, and in 1903 the Women's Social and Political Union

was established, followed by the suffragette movement. The number of autobiographies from working women increased dramatically from 1890 onwards as they chronicled their political interests, often transcending the personal account, and women began to take their place in public areas. Hannah Mitchell, born in 1871 into the family of a tenant farmer, had only two weeks of formal schooling. She attended Sunday school and was educated by members of her family. After becoming an apprentice dressmaker in 1885, Hannah became an active member of the Women's Social and Political Union from whom she received a small income. She described her rise in politics from a member of the Independent Labour Party, to a secretary for Ashton Labour church, a militant suffragette from 1905 and finally a magistrate in 1926. Her pride in her rise from humble beginnings was echoed in the title of her autobiography: *The Hard Way Up*.⁵³

These later autobiographies testified to a growing sense of self amongst working women, a preoccupation with the importance of their own experience, and the ability to present this without direct recourse to religious language. Many of the late autobiographies continue to have a moral purpose in that they demonstrate the triumph of fortitude, hard work and education over poverty, deprivation or disability. Lucy Luck is typical. She recalled her miserable childhood in the workhouse, her father was 'a drunkard and a brute. After bringing his wife and children to poverty he deserted them'.⁵⁴ However, Lucy was able to attend a parish school, was later employed as a straw-plait worker making hats, and finally was happily married and she and her husband 'got along very well, adding a little more to our home whenever we could'.⁵⁵ Parallels can be drawn with the literature to which working women had access. Childhood deprivations followed by a bettering of oneself were analogous with the literary constructs in many novels from the nineteenth century, and before.⁵⁶

Religious belief was still important in the lives of some autobiographers late in the century, and did feature in their writing. Now, however, their words no longer had the cloak of piety that the spiritual genre had cast over them. Alice Maud Chase, born in Portsmouth in 1880, for example, gave a gentle description of her work as a domestic servant and dressmaker, her marriage and the birth of her three children. Church and chapel were vital elements in the life of Alice, who 'just lived for

Sundays'.⁵⁷ Sarah May Landymore wrote of an unselfish life in which she gave up her work as a shop assistant to nurse her bedridden widowed father.⁵⁸ Catherine Horne, who worked in a factory from the age of six as a bobbin winder to a hand-loom weaver, gave evidence of a more secular view of religious ideals when she described 'wasting waste' – the cotton waste which could be re-used – as being 'a sin to hand-loom weavers'.⁵⁹

Nineteenth-century working women's autobiographies changed in certain notable ways as the century progressed. Examples of the genre from the early years of the nineteenth century are influenced by Puritan spirituality and confessional testimonies. This is reflected in a society in which religion held a central position as a social, intellectual and cultural authority. The working-class spiritual autobiography represents an important stage in the growth of identity and consciousness amongst underprivileged women and a watershed in the revision, by working women themselves, of the ideologies imposed on them by Victorian society.

By mid-century the numbers of spiritual autobiographies were in decline. The spread of literacy and the availability of growing numbers of cheap novels and periodicals in which working women featured, enabled newly literate working women to gain a sense of self. The more secular culture of the late nineteenth century encouraged working women to testify to a growing preoccupation with their own experience and a different way of formulating what this meant in terms of relevance, communality and interest to others. The writing of their autobiographies gave working women a focused identity, it shaped their understanding and aspirations and placed the authors in the context of history, geography and social change. The earlier confessional autobiographies had been vehicles for encouraging others towards spiritual grace. The later more secular autobiographies enabled working women to claim the authority to communicate their individual personal experience, without the necessity of couching their writing in religious terms. In doing so, they attempted to make sense of their existence, and left behind a testimony: the significance of their life did not end with their deaths.

No one quintessential working woman emerges from David Vincent's 'silence'. The women came from a wide variety of occupations, but sharing their literacy, each one of these women found the confidence to set down a record of their lives from their

own point of view. In doing so they broke the silence. We may draw conclusions from the evidence provided by themselves, and honour the claim of nineteenth-century working women to have a hand in the writing of their own history.

Notes

1. David Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth Century Working Class Autobiography* (London, 1981), p. 8.
2. *The Autobiography of the Working Class, Vol. 1 1790-1900*, ed. John Burnett, David Vincent and David Mayall (London, 1984).
3. Not included in the essay are the autobiographical details of working women told through the mediation of an investigator. For example: Manuscript files in *The Foundling Hospital Collection* (1850-80); *Maternity, Letters from Working Women*, ed. Margaret Llewellyn Davies (London, 1915); Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 4 vols (1861-62; New York, 1968); *The Unknown Mayhew. Selections from the Morning Chronicle, 1849-1850*, ed. E.P. Thompson and Eileen Yeo (London, 1971).
4. For a discussion of ideology and gender see Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments* (London, 1989).
5. On average, female literacy rates at the beginning of the nineteenth century were about ten or fifteen points behind male rates, becoming closer as the century progressed. There is evidence that in some areas of high female unemployment the rate could be very low, but this does not explain the one to ten ratio of female to male autobiographies. See Roger Schofield, 'Dimensions of Illiteracy 1750-1850', in *Explorations in Economic History*, 1: 4 (Summer 1973), p. 453.
6. For a discussion of the topic, see Jacqueline Bratton, *The Impact of Victorian Children's Fiction* (London, 1981).
7. St Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth, 1971).
8. For a discussion of this, see Elaine Hobby, *Virtue of Necessity: English Women's Writing 1646-1688* (London, 1988).
9. For a detailed discussion of the Puritan tradition, see Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (Harmondsworth, 1964).
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17. For example, the tracts written by the Reverend Legh Richmond (1772-1827). His titles included: *The Negro Servant, Jane, The Young Cottager* and *The Dairyman's Daughter*. They were first published in a periodical, *The Christian Guardian*, between 1809 and 1811, and then collected as *The Annals of the Poor* (London, 1899).
18. See for instance, Mrs Martha Mary Sherwood, *The Fairchild Family*, (1818), and Charles B. Taylor, *Katherine* (1830).
19. Kennings, *Some Account*, p. 4.
20. 2 Corinthians V. 11.
21. Martin, *Sketch*, p. 4.
22. Anna Hinderer (née Martin), *Seventeen Years in the Yoruba Country* (London, 1867), p. 42. Later published by the Religious Tract Society, tract no. 15 of *Excellent Women*.
23. For example, Mrs Mary Martha Sherwood, *Little Henry and His Bearer* (Wellington, 1814).
24. Kennings, *Some Account*, p. 6.
25. Ruth Bryan, *Handfuls of Purpose, or Gleanings from the Inner Life of R. Bryan* (London, 1862), p. 27.
26. Janet Bathgate, *Aunt Janet's Legacy to her Nieces* (Selkirk, 1895), p. iii.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
28. Mrs Sydney Watson, *A Village Maiden's Career, Life Story of Mrs Sydney Watson, Told by Herself*, preface by Sydney Watson (London, 1897).
29. Sarah Martin, *Selections from the Poetical Remains of the late Miss Sarah Martin* (Yarmouth, 1845); Dora Greenwell, *Memoirs of Dora Greenwell* (London, 1885).
30. Mary Smith, *The Autobiography of Mary Smith, Schoolmistress and Nonconformist. A Fragment of a Life*, with letters from Jane Welsh Carlyle and Thomas Carlyle (London, 1902).
31. Marianne Farningham (née Hearn) edited the *Sunday School Times* from 1889 to 1906, and wrote many other literary works including *Girlhood* (London, 1869) and *Harvest Gleanings* (London, 1903).

32. Marianne Farningham, *A Working Woman's Life. An Autobiography* (London, 1907).
33. Horace Mann, 'On the Religious Census' (1853), reprinted in *Religion in Victorian Britain, Vol. III Sources* (Manchester, 1988), p. 315.
34. Mabel Cutts, untitled manuscript, Brunel University Library.
35. Daisy Cowper, 'De Nobis' typescript, Brunel University Library, extract in *Destiny Obscure. Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and Family from 1820s to 1920s*, ed. J. Burnett (London, 1982), pp. 198–204.
36. Ellen Johnston, *Autobiography, Poems and Songs of Ellen Johnston The Factory Girl*; Mrs Wrigley, 'A Plate-Layer's wife', in *Life as We Have Known It, by Co-operative Working Women*, ed. Margaret Llewelyn Davies (London, 1931), p. 56; Hannah Cullwick, *A Servant's Life*, manuscript, Trinity College Cambridge; Smith, *Autobiography*.
37. For example, the *Glasgow Examiner* in 1854 published Johnston's song, 'Lord Raglan's Address to the Allied Armies', and various poems were later published in the 'Poet's Corner' of the Dundee *Penny Post*.
38. Ellen Johnston, 'Autobiography', in *Autobiography, Poems and Songs*, p. 3.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
40. For a more detailed analysis of the process of secularization during the nineteenth century see Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1975).
41. Mrs Layton, 'Memoirs of Seventy Years', in *Life as We Have Known It*, p. 1.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
44. Samuel Smiles, *Self Help* (London, 1958).
45. Elizabeth Rignall, 'All so long ago', typescript (1973), Brunel University Library.
46. Rosa Lewis, *The Queen of Cooks – and Some Kings, the Story of Rosa Lewis* (New York, 1925).
47. Arthur J. Munby (1828–1910), a poet and ecclesiastical barrister, was sexually obsessed by a woman who performed physical labour. He carried on a long relationship with Hannah Cullwick, his housemaid, before marrying her. See Derek Hudson, *Munby, Man of Two Worlds: The Life and Diaries of Arthur J. Munby* (Boston, 1972).
48. Hannah Cullwick, *A Servant's Life*, manuscript, Trinity College Cambridge, entry for 30 August 1873.
49. *Life as We Have Known It*, p. 58.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
53. Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way up. The Autobiography of Hannah Mitchell, Suffragette and Rebel*, preface by George Ewart, introduced by Geoffrey Mitchell (London, 1968; reprinted London, 1977).
54. Lucy Luck, 'A Little of My Life', *London Mercury*, ed. J.C. Squire, 13: 76 (November 1925–April 1926).
55. *Ibid.* See also John Burnett, *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from 1820–1920* (London, 1974; reprinted London, 1994), p. 61.
56. See for instance: Mrs Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (1848); Frances Trollope, *The Life and Adventures of Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy* (1840); Charlotte Elizabeth (Mrs Tonna), *Helen Fleetwood* (1841).
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58. Sarah May Landymore, untitled typescript, Ruskin College Library, Oxford.
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on

Learning Domesticity in Late Victorian England



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helped by family members. In this informal way the women acquired not only domestic skills, but also more academic forms of knowledge. Often a parent or someone within the family, such as an older sister or brother, or an aunt or uncle, would have some degree of literacy. Having someone close involved in or at least encouraging educational self-improvement was obviously important for many of the women. Nellie Scott, a factory worker in Stockport in the 1900s, identified this informal method of learning and listed some of the books she had been familiar with as a child: *The Wide, Wide World*; *Queechy*; *The Lamplighter*; *The Door Without a Knocker*; *Chambers' Miscellany*; and *Chambers Journals*. She had been able to use the library attached to the Sunday School and she also described the encouragement she and her sister had from her family, especially from an uncle who 'lived just across the road'. He was a great reader, who 'used to read aloud so that we knew and loved the characters in Dickens' works'.¹⁶

For the majority of girls from working-class homes, formal schooling often came second to the economic strictures of the family budget; Similarly, the education of girls was generally secondary to that of boys. Help in the home could not be afforded, so girls were expected to fill the deficit. Absence from school because of domestic duties was a fairly common occurrence for working-class girls. Older girls were expected to help with younger children in the family, even if this did mean missing school. This meant that learning domestic skills of childcare and mothercraft skills took place informally and with a great deal of practical application. Mildred Edwards appeared to have been both accepting and proud of the help she gave her mother:

One day I remember well I was kept at home to mind the babies, while mother did the family washing. The little baby had to be nursed a lot, as she was delicate, and I was rocking her on my knee and had got her to sleep, when my little brother Billy, toddled up and lisped "put that one in the cradle Milly and nurse me". What could I do, so I took him up as well and he too went to sleep ... Mother had gone out to put the clothes to dry, so I had to sit until they had their nap. I think I was about nine at the time. However I was healthy and happy.¹⁷

Autobiographers Annie Barnes, Ada Neild Chew, Louise Jermy and Rose Gibbs, as well as Mildred Edwards, all saw this kind of informal learning positively, although they did

list it as the reason for their far from regular attendance at school. As Carol Dyhouse has highlighted elsewhere, the difference in training and expectations of girls and boys in families where there were children of both sexes could have far-reaching implications, leaving the girls 'to perceive differences in treatment ... expectations ... and ambitions'.¹⁸

The one exception from among the cohort was Mary Gawthorpe. Born in 1881 in Leeds, Mary was the daughter of a leather-worker. Although she does not record if the boys in her family helped with domestic chores, there does not appear to be any gender differentiation in the informal academic education they received at home. Mary claimed that her mother gave a good start in reading to all five children: 'Four girls and one boy, were taught to know their letters and to read before they went to the Infant's School at St Michael's when five years old. Mamma had taught them from the big illustrated blue book full of rhymes'.¹⁹ Books were certainly part of Mary's childhood: she described the bookcase in the sitting room of their home as 'our most distinguished furnishing'. However, Mary recalled that this equality of treatment changed with formal education. Once she left the infant school, the girls and boys were separated. She recollected that St Michael's Day School in Leeds consisted of: 'three departments, Infants, Girls, Boys, with separate playgrounds for girls and boys, infants excepted'.²⁰

Differentiation in the treatment of girls and boys, which was found in most cases within the families, extended to school where education was not only gendered but also ordered according to class. Working-class girls therefore had to contend with the double constraints of both class and gender. Nevertheless, during the last quarter of the nineteenth century educational standards in society were changing fast and a high level of female illiteracy was no longer as acceptable as it had been even fifty years before.²¹

The State Education Act of 1870, put through Parliament by Robert Forster, had made a state system of elementary schooling possible.²² Forster's Act would 'fill in the gaps': a survey of schools in England and Wales was ordered and local School Boards were to be established in areas not covered by the philanthropically financed National Society or the British Schools.²⁴ The Boards had the authority to require all children under their jurisdiction to meet minimum standards of school attendance: all children were to attend school until ten years of age. Before this, children in most working-class families were expected to take up paid employment at an early age in order to contribute to the family budget. However, there was still no

guarantee that children would attend school. Moreover, the minimum charge of 'school pence', which did not begin to disappear until 1891, also precluded some of the poorest from attending. School attendance to age eleven was not made compulsory until 1893, and to twelve until 1899. After this the school-leaving age and its enforcement made sure children did not enter the factories or other paid employment until they had attained at least the compulsory age. It also became increasingly difficult for parents and children to violate the laws against truancy as the sustained efforts of school attendance officers became increasingly effective.²⁵ The changes in educational provision and compulsory attendance requirements were welcomed by many of the working-class who were ambitious and aspiring to respectability. Yet it must also be acknowledged, as Anna Davin has argued, that compulsory education of children had the effect of making them dependant on the family breadwinner, usually the father.²⁶ The social function of educating working-class girls in school was to carry this ethos further: education was to teach these girls to be good wives to working men and good mothers to the next generation of the workforce.

The Education Act of 1902, implementing the recommendations of the Bryce Commission, set up Local Education Authorities to replace School Boards. Part of the brief of the LEAs was to provide secondary schools. However, most working-class children continued to receive only elementary-school education. Secondary schools were not free until 1907, when a system of free places — 'the ladder of opportunity' — was introduced, offering education up to the age of sixteen.²⁶ Elementary education was thus associated with the working class and was clearly segregated by both class and gender from the forms of secondary schooling offered to middle-class children. Irrespective of who provided the education for working-class children, it was seen as inferior in quality and status to that provided for middle-class children. As June Purvis has claimed, the education that working-class children received taught them about gender as well as class: 'that they were of the "lower" social orders. Working-class girls ... also learnt that masculinity was the dominant gender form. Working-class parents were likely to give more priority to the schooling of their sons than of their daughters'.²⁷ The notion that it was more important to educate the male members of a family reflected the male domination of nineteenth-century life and the idea that the serious education of girls, of all classes, was unnecessary. It was assumed that they would soon marry and become their husbands' responsibility, so they had no need for education. However, the autobiographers surmounted most of these problems and gained educations

despite the vagaries of the system.

Examples of this inequality, both gender- and class-based, and the continued emphasis on home-based occupations for working-class girls, can be traced within the autobiographies. Pictures of the role models they were expected to aspire to were even provided in some classrooms. Winifred Griffiths, who had hoped to become a teacher and wanted 'fame and glory', described them disparagingly: 'But alas, we were expected to set our sights somewhat lower. If one was clean and industrious one might hope to become a housemaid or a laundry maid like those pictured on our classroom wall'.²⁸

The message disseminated by the school system showed that society promulgated very different images of success for working-class girls from that which Winifred envisioned for herself. Class and gender hegemony prevailed in schools with the result that working-class women were permitted to become good domestic servants, factory-workers, shop girls, laundresses or seamstresses. According to such directives, they were taught their place in society and could aspire only to this kind of work. Hard work and cleanliness were encouraged, but not ambition for, or still less achievement of, academic honours.

Among the cohort there were several others who recorded their awareness of the gender differentiation in provision of lessons. Margaret Bondfield, born in 1873, one of eleven children of a Somerset lace-maker, attended Chard Board School, which was segregated by gender. Margaret described the difference between the lessons taught in male and female classes, underlining the narrow curriculum available to girls: 'In the girls' school we were taught reading, writing and arithmetic, and needlework — no geography, no history except the dates of kings'.²⁹ Similarly, Mildred Edwards recalled the headmistress of her secondary school in Harraby, Cumbria, taking a class of eighty girls for sewing, and recalled the Mission Hall in the corner of the playground, 'which was where we older girls went for cookery lessons'.³⁰ Isabella Cooke, who attended school in Cliburn, recalled that it was the schoolmistress who taught the infant classes, who also took the girls for needlework: 'There' was only one master and one mistress. She taught the infants 1 to 2 standard, and used to teach the girls two afternoons a week to sew and knit, and the master taught the rest in his room'.³¹ It was therefore the boys had the benefit of the more prestigious 'master'. Ellen Wilkinson, growing up in Manchester in the 1890s, was also resentful of the state system of education which did nothing to encourage bright children like herself, who were often

rebellious because they were bored. She recalled that 'boy rebels had a better time' of it:

I was just a little sausage in the vast educational sausage factory in the eyes of the makers of the state scheme. That I, and others like me, were keen, intelligent, could mop up facts like blotting paper, wanted to stretch our minds in every direction, was merely a nuisance. We must fit into a mould, or be pressed into it. The boy rebels had a better time. The masters would often give extra time, lend books and so on to a bright lad. I never remember such encouragement. I was only a girl anyway.³²

Girls, it seemed, were not worth the master's help.

Similar assumptions are reflected in many of the autobiographers descriptions of their education. They had been in place for some decades. It was advocated by the National Society as early as 1861:

It is be hoped that no desire to make girls little Newtons, little Captain Cooks, little Livingstones, Little Mozarts and Handels and little Joshua Reynoldses will ever take us too low for keeping in sight the object of teaching them to make and mend shirts, to make and mend pinafores, and darn stockings and socks. If it does, then from that day the Society will go back.³³

At school, working-class girls were therefore channelled into domestic subjects and taught sewing, knitting, child-care and cookery, reinforcing and continuing the early training for domesticity begun at home. Still, in most cases the autobiographers recorded their enjoyment of lessons. Furthermore, a female school board member, Alice Westlake, when making a report claimed that 'the cookery lessons were very popular'.³⁴ Older girls were in many cases able to take housewifery classes and the numbers of girls voluntarily attending these suggests that many working-class girls valued their attainment of domestic skills. The housewifery classes run by local School Boards proved so popular that they often had to be repeated in the evenings. Underlining this, in 1878, Domestic Economy was made a compulsory subject specific for girls.

The women revealed their knowledge of some of the

educational reforms which enabled even the poorest of working-class girls to gain some kind of education in domestic skills. Maria Hull, who had attended Board school in Derbyshire between 1884-1893, wrote: 'After the 1891 Education Act we were supplied, besides copybooks, with materials for needlework and lined paper for patterns'.³⁵ The women often recalled their domestic classes in complex detail when writing their autobiographies many years after their schooldays. Maria, writing her autobiography in 1968 at the age of eighty-seven, recalled her sewing classes. At age nine 'we girls made calico underwear and did much knitting as well'.³⁶ At the age of ten, in 1891, she transferred to the girl's department of the local Board School, where the sewing lessons left a vivid memory of fabrics, colours and stitches:

In "scientific" needlework lessons, we cut out paper patterns of undergarments — drawers, chemise and nightgowns — to our individual measurements. I kept the patterns for a long time and found them useful. We were taught how to patch on both calico and flannel, how to gather and make buttonholes and a gusset. I made a maroon-coloured flannel petticoat, feather-stitched in golden silk on the hem. In knitting we made our own woollen stockings, with either "Dutch" or "French" heels, and woollen gloves.³⁷

Similarly, Winifred Griffiths attended National School in Overton, Hampshire, and at the age of seven went up to the 'Big School' which was separated into a boys' school and girls' school. Although these were in the same block, the rooms were quite separate. Winifred, like Maria, particularly recalls sewing lessons in the girls' school: 'The girls' school had about 120 pupils and usually three teachers beside the headmistress. I remember very little about lessons in standard 1 & 2, except that I knitted a red woollen scarf and learned to stitch on pieces of calico and afterwards hemmed real handkerchiefs and dusters'.³⁸

The women therefore recalled in detail, and with varied degrees of pleasure, the gender-specific sewing, knitting and cooking lessons which played a prominent part in their upbringing. This does not negate the existence of a social control agenda: working-class girls' education did have a purposefully domestic orientation. This was intensified during the early years of the twentieth century due to renewed fears about the quality of the working-class British soldiers recruited for the Boer War (1899-1901), when a high percentage of such recruits were found unfit for service. Teachers were reminded that girls needed a thorough training in domestic duties and

that they must 'be taught 'to set a high value on the housewife's position', on the grounds that national efficiency must inevitably depend upon a strong tradition of home life'.³⁹

The autobiographers, therefore, were not alone in their positive appraisal of the benefits of domestic skills. Moreover, the subjects gained an academic standing in the Edwardian era.⁴⁰ For example, a three-year course in 'home and social science' began in 1908 as a university subject at King's College London, with a female graduate of Somerville College, Oxford, Margaret McKillop (1864–1929), as a lecturer in domestic science.⁴¹ The progress of 'domestic science' as a subject was further given impetus and status by the Edwardian interest in the reform of home as a social institution and by the increased demand for women teachers, school and factory inspectors and health visitors. Consequently, both performing domestic tasks in girlhood and gendered schooling, in line with the dominant ideology of the period, generally obtained in England during the years that these women were growing up. Although the domestic emphasis was sometimes resented, especially in terms of gender differences between siblings, the situation was tolerated and even welcomed, by many of the women.

As school-leavers, or shortly afterwards, three of the cohort were required to take over domestic duties on a full-time basis because of the ill-health of their mothers. Agnes Cowper and Mildred Edwards both left school and stayed at home to nurse their invalid mothers. Annie Barnes, born in Stepney, East London in 1887, the eldest daughter in her family, began training as a pupil-teacher. However, when her mother fell ill in 1911 and was unable to care for the home and family, Annie 'gave up work to nurse mother and look after the younger children'. Despite this, she also took over her mother's duties in the fruit shop which her father managed. Annie therefore nursed her mother, looked after her younger siblings, kept house for the family and helped in the shop!⁴²

For others women, domestic skills learned both at home and school transferred readily to paid work, as Sally Alexander has pointed out in her discussion of women's employment in London in the nineteenth century.⁴³ All of the autobiographers in the cohort worked in paid employment at some time in their lives. They started employment in domestic service, in the textile factories or in domestic-related jobs such as waitressing, dressmaking and nursing. The occupations of the twenty-six women autobiographers reflected broadly the occupations of working-class women in general during the 1890s and 1900s — indeed, until the Second World War — in that the highest numbers of women were those in domestic service or

related occupations.⁴⁴ Indicating the demand for such skills, local registers were set up throughout this period to help employers find suitably trained domestic staff.⁴⁵ In addition to the three autobiographers who stayed at home to keep house for their families, eleven of the other autobiographers were employed in domestic-related occupations after leaving school. Rose Gibbs, Bessie Harvey, Mrs Hills, Maria Hull, Emma Smith and Susan Sylvester were employed as domestic servants, as was Isabella Cooke, although, as her position was on a farm, a condition of her employment was that she also learned to milk. Hannah Mitchell and Louise Jermy were employed as dressmakers, and Grace Foakes as a waitress, both occupations under the umbrella of domestic skills.

Girls entering paid domestic service had the chance of bettering themselves if they were ambitious and worked hard. Employment in a small establishment with only one or two domestic staff could be arduous and lonely, especially for a young girl straight from school. But employment in a large household such as East Oakley House in Hampshire, and described by Winifred Griffiths, was different. Households keeping a good number of domestic staff could offer the chance of learning a recognized job with good prospects, under a skilled expert, in a hierarchical community in which it was possible to rise through the ranks. Although she had been employed in the local Burberry's factory on leaving school, after a year Winifred sought a 'better position' and more spending money for herself. She began work as a housemaid in East Oakley House, a large country house in Hampshire, in 1911. Despite her schoolgirl dreams of 'fame and fortune' she now valued the independence she had attained. For her, it was a milestone in her life. She recorded her contentment:

I grew accustomed to the routine of the house and to the family and staff, and so entered on what was to be a very happy period of my life. It was in the spring of 1911 that I took up my new post. I was nearly 16 years of age and from now on I was self-supporting, earning my keep and a little beside. Although I visited home regularly and spent short holidays there, I was never more to live at home. I had become independent, I had passed a decisive milestone on life's journey.⁴⁶

Winifred was to stay at East Oakley House for four years. In this time she progressed from housemaid to parlourmaid and the luxury of a room of her own. She regretted her lack of formal education, but when writing her autobiography in the early 1970s, acknowledged the benefits she had gained from employment: 'Lack of opportunity and my parent's lack of

means had denied me more formal education, but the four years I was about to spend at East Oakley House afforded me a large measure of compensation and in some respects broadened my horizons in a way further schooling may not have done'.⁴⁷

Among the autobiographers, others gained upward mobility through domestic service. Rose Gibbs worked her way up from 'tweeny' to housekeeper;⁴⁸ Doris Hill, after working on the family farm, left home and eventually owned a guesthouse and farm servant and Isabella Cooke moved from a small farm to a larger one where, she proudly claimed: 'Working in a gentleman's house had spoiled me'. Isabella moved further upwards in the servant hierarchy by then becoming a cook for a city banking family.⁴⁹

Many working-class women gave up paid employment when they were married. This was an increasingly attainable goal between 1900 and 1914 as male wages improved. Furthermore, as Joanna Bourke has argued, financial constraints were eased with changes in the structure of wages at the end of the nineteenth century and when total household earnings reached a certain level, the value of a wife and mother at home outstripped the value of her wage.⁵⁰ The 1851 census had revealed that three-quarters of wives undertook paid employment. By 1911, when Annie Barnes left her job to take her mother's place at home, only one-tenth of married women were recorded as in paid employment. However, examples of women like Winifred Griffith's aunts, who worked for money at home in sweated industries, point to a huge 'hidden workforce' of women who used domestic skills to contribute to the household budget, yet do not appear in any census for occupations.⁵¹

Bleak working conditions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries enhanced the appeal of full-time domesticity. If a married woman did not need to work for financial reasons, domesticity was also an alternative way to increase their control over their own lives and that of their family. Social studies from the early twentieth century show that women expressed pride in their domestic skills and saw as a sign of respectability the fact that their husbands were bread-winners, able to support non-wage-earning wives and mothers.⁵² The notion of respectability was pivotal to societal values during this period and was centred in morality, home and family. In an earlier period respectability had been perceived as entwined with middle-class mores, but by the nineteenth century it had been firmly adopted by the aspiring working class.

Within the autobiographies, respectability tends to be defined

as adopting a Christian way of life that encompasses ideals of domesticity: cleanliness, godliness, the importance of family and 'keeping up appearances'. Emma Smith typified this notion. After she had married and attained the home and family she had earlier dreamed about, Emma's three daughters began to attend the same school that she had. She recorded her pride as she compared 'their neat appearance in white blouses, navy tunics and neat trimmed hair, to my own unkempt condition while at school'.⁵³ She placed herself at the centre of respectable family life, happily complying with the female ideal figure of the angel of the house that historians see as embodying the model of separate spheres.

Skills learned at home and at school were good training for respectable married life, as many economies needed to be practised to help stretch the family budget. Hannah Mitchell, who later achieved fame as a suffragette and socialist, was one who looked forward to her marriage and a home shared with her fiancé: 'we were both tired of living in lodgings, and felt that our own hearth, however humble, would be more comfortable'.⁵⁴ Hannah, despite her girlhood resentment of domestic duties, had trained as a dressmaker, so was skilful at sewing. She used this to good effect in the early days of her marriage, expressing pride in her home and giving great importance in her autobiography to descriptions of her homemaking:

We had rented a cottage — living room, scullery, two bedrooms and an attic — for five shillings a week. A washstand, dressing-table and bed filled the front bedroom; the back room housed an old iron bedstead which had belonged to my husband's mother. I made hearthrugs of cloth cuttings, such as my mother had taught me to make, window curtains of spotted muslin and patchwork cushions which looked gay and comfortable. My parents sent some bedding, blankets and patchwork quilts, and great sacks of wool, which enabled me to fix up a second bed.

I was very proud of this. I hunted the fent shop for gay prints. I draped two large boxes with these to serve as dressing-table and washstand in my little guest room.⁵⁵

While she was obviously very proud her success in creating a comfortable home and claimed that the three years spent at home with her small son to be 'among the happiest years of my life', she also described the 'tyranny' of domesticity:

Home life was in those days, indeed still is, for the wife and mother a constant round of wash days, cleaning days, cooking and

serving meals. "The tyranny of meals" is the worse snag in a housewife's lot. Her life is bounded on the north by breakfast, south by dinner, east by tea, and on the west by supper, and the most sympathetic man can never be made to understand that meals do not come up through the tablecloth, but have to be planned, bought and cooked.⁵⁶

For Hannah, therefore, there was a dichotomy. She was the traditional ideal woman: she had longed for a home of her own; it was one of her ambitions and one of the reasons for marrying. Yet, at the same time, she expected some acknowledgement from her husband for the hard work she put into their home. The fact that he appears to have thought that meals 'just came up through the tablecloth' highlights the tensions and frustrations she felt. This was further highlighted in her autobiography when she recalled her pregnancy with their first (and only) child. Hannah decided to work harder at her dressmaking, let the housework go for a few months and try to save a little money 'for this emergency'. Hannah was both proud of her ability to manage on a small budget and concerned that the burden of budgeting for the baby was all hers. Her husband was already earning as much money as he could, so would not be able to help with this added cost, as she explained to future readers of her autobiography:

'If any modern girl reading this wonders why I did not expect my husband to provide for this emergency, I can only say that it would have been useless. His wages were fixed and he could not earn anymore by overtime. At first I tried to get him to reckon up the cost-of-living with me and keep a sort of weekly budget. But he refused, just handing his wages over and leaving all the worry to me.

I realized later that I ought to have insisted on his sharing the domestic responsibilities, because I found that he never really valued my contribution to the housekeeping which was often just as much as his own. Most of my sewing was done while he was at work and I did not say much about it. I was proud of being able to help in this way.⁵⁷

Hannah was both accepting and resentful of her husband's limitations. She managed the home on what he gave her, by frugality and by supplementing it with her own skills. Despite her trying to involve him in the budgeting, her husband, 'Like most men', just expected her to manage on what he gave her and did not want to know how she did it. Hannah's words suggest that this situation was not uncommon. It underlines the

notion that women who earned money at home, as well as those in paid employment, were well able to control, with whatever constraints were imposed by poverty, the family budget.

Many of the married women among the autobiographers seem to have been delighted to stay at home. Domestic work performed in the home was unpaid, at least directly, but many recalled ways in which they used their domestic skills to contribute to the family economy even if they were not in paid employment. Good, careful housewifery and other domestic work, such as sewing, could make a substantial difference to the family expenditure. Ellen Wilkinson whose father was a mill-worker, wrote of her mother, who 'kept the house going by dressmaking': 'She made every stitch that she and her four children wore, even some of father's suits, until my sister grew old enough to help her. We should have had precious little to wear otherwise'.⁵⁸ Grace Foakes evolved ways and means of surviving on her husband's small wage after her marriage. She stretched an often tight budget and took pride in doing so. She made and sold plum jam and, when the plum season was over, took in washing for the men in Dagenham who worked at Fords, the car manufacturers. The work was hard: 'I was tired, my back ached and my fingers were sore. I collected and delivered the washing, pushing it around in Kathleen's pram. I am not pitying myself; rather I glory in the fact that I held my head high, asking nothing of anyone, satisfied I had made an effort to help myself'.⁵⁹

The descriptions of family income and its management from the autobiographers show that even women who did not go out to work also took on, or retained, the ownership of the family finances. Although their work, both inside and outside the home was assumed to be subordinate to that of their male partner, there was a tradition of what Ellen Ross calls an 'internal wage system' operating in most working-class households.⁶⁰ This situation, reported by autobiographers Alice Foley, Grace Foakes and Hannah Mitchell, among others, is underlined and further illustrated by Maud Pember-Reeves in her social study of working-class families in London, from 1908 to 1913.⁶¹ Pember-Reeves found that most husbands handed over to their wives the largest part of their weekly earnings, retaining 'pocket money' for themselves.⁶² With their pocket money the men bought beer and tobacco, paid for some kind of insurance and any cost of travelling to work. As Hannah Mitchell illustrated, husbands usually expected their wives to manage all of the household expenses out of their own, or their joint, weekly earnings, the men taking no further interest in what the money was spent on as long as their meals were supplied on time. This hold on the financial reins of the family budget therefore provided a further strand to the

complex position of working-class women's domestic lives and highlights a further skill they were expected to acquire.

Conclusion

Early training in domestic skills, described by the autobiographers, was not initially a matter of choice. Working-class women had little alternative to performing their own domestic chores and looking after their own children, at least until elder children were old enough to help. At school, social control and class hegemony may have motivated nineteenth-century educational policy-makers. Certainly, the ideologies of gender and class were inextricably inherent in these women's formal and informal educations. One or two of the autobiographers, such as Hannah Mitchell and Ellen Wilkinson, both of whom were involved in politics during adult life, recorded their resentment at preferential treatment shown to boys both at home and at school. However, domesticity was not always seen by working-class girls as a constraint. Many of the women in the cohort presented the learning and practice of domestic skills as a choice which they made willingly, indeed, as something they strove towards. The attainment of practical domestic skills enabled some of them to seek better positions when they entered the workplace. It gave them an opening into domestic service, an area in which the highest percentage of working-class women earned their living and in which women could achieve some degree of upward mobility. For those women who centred their lives in the home, at least for part of their lives, a clean and neat house, well-cared for and well-behaved children, and thrifty economic management were all signs of respectability. Domestic skills learnt during childhood at home and at school were valued by aspiring working-class women at home and, although housework performed in the home was unpaid, good careful housewifery and other domestic skills could make a substantial contribution to family economics. Women's domestic skills may therefore be seen not merely as conforming to middle-class domestic ideology, which gave domesticity a higher status both academically and socially during the period, but as a vital part of feminine working-class culture. The attainment and practice of domestic skills, both formally at school and informally within the family, was a pathway by which working-class women were enabled to achieve better lives, not only by the standards they set themselves, but also by the standards and mores set by society.

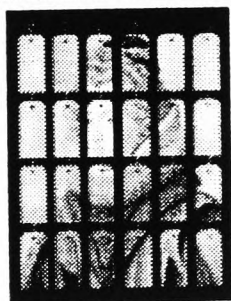
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- 1 Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie: From Suffragette to Stepney Councillor*, ed. Kate Harding and Caroline Gibbs (London, 1980); Margaret Grace Bondfield, *A Life's Work* (London, 1949); Ada Nield Chew, *The Life and Writings of a Working Woman* ed. Doris Chew (London, 1982); Isabella Cooke, *A Hired Lass in Westmorland: The Story of a Country Girl at the Turn of the Century* (Penrith, 1982); Agnes Cowper, *A Backward Glance at Merseyside* (Birkenhead, 1948); Mildred Edwards, *Our City, Our People 1889-1978: Memories* (Carlisle, 1978); Grace Foakes, *Between High Walls, My Life With Reuben and My Part of the River* (London, 1972, 1974, 1974); Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood* (Manchester, 1973); Mary Gawthorpe, *Up Hill to Holloway* (Penobscott, 1962); Rose Gibbs, *In service: Rose Gibbs Remembers* (Orwell, Cambs, 1981); Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story* (Rhondda, 1979); Mrs Hills, 'Reminiscences of Mrs. Hills' in *Memories of Life in the Village of Leighton Bromswold* (Huntingdon, Cambs, 1977); Miss Daisy Hills, *Old Frimley* (Frimley, Surrey, 1978); Bessie Harvey 'Youthful Memories of My Life in a Sussex Village' in *East Anglian Reminiscences* ed. E.A. Goodwin and J.C. Baxter (Ipswich, 1976); Maria Hull, 'A Derbyshire Schooling: 1884-1893', in *Hist. Workshop* 11, no. 25 (Spring 1985), 167; Louise Jermy, *The Memoirs of a Working Woman* (Norwich, 1934); Annie Kenney, *Memories of a Militant* (London, 1924); Mary Luty, *A Penniless Globetrotter* (Accrington, 1937); Betty May, *Tiger Woman: My Story* (London, 1929); Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up: The Autobiography of Hannah Mitchell, Suffragette and Rebel* ed. Geoffrey Mitchell (London, 1968); Mrs. Nellie Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker' in *Life As We Have Known It*, by Co-operative Working Women, ed. Margaret Llewelyn Davies, (London, 1931, 1977), 81-101; Susan Silvester, *In a World That Has Gone* (Loughborough, 1968); Emma Smith, *A Cornish Waif's Story: An Autobiography* (London, 1954); Ellen Wilkinson, untitled, in *Myself When Young by Famous Women of Today*, ed. Margot Asquith Countess of Oxford (London, 1938), 399-416; Kathleen Woodward, *Jipping Street: Childhood in a London Slum* (London, 1928, 1983); Mrs Yearn 'A Public Spirited Rebel', in *Life As We have Known It*, ed. Davies, 102-8.
- 2 Seminal to the greater personal freedoms of women born in this period, as well as a series of Education Acts, were for example, legislations encompassed by the Married Women's Act (1870), the consolidation of factory reforms in the Factory Act of 1878, the Franchise Reform of 1885 giving universal suffrage to men and the Public Health

- Acts of 1872, 1874 and 1875.
- 3 The term 'working class' is used in this paper in broadly the way in which it is defined in E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1991), 8–9. Judged by this standard, therefore, the twenty-six women of the cohort can be said to be working-class. They present themselves as working class and were born into environments where the common experience was of families supported by one or two wage earners. However, many of the women in the cohort improved their standard of living over the course of their lives and rose socially, within, and in some cases between, classes.
 - 4 See, for example, June Purvis, *Hard Lessons: The Lives and Education of Working-Class Women in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1989); Carol Dyhouse, *Girls growing up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (London, 1981); Betty Friedan,
 - 5 Edwards, *Our City... Our People*, 12.
 - 6 Foley, *Bolton Childhood*, 28.
 - 7 Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, 10.
 - 8 *Ibid.*, 13–14.
 - 9 Smith, *A Cornish Waif's Story*, 107.
 - 10 *Ibid.*, 65–7.
 - 11 Foley, *Bolton Childhood*, 24.
 - 12 Mitchell, *Hard Way Up*, 43.
 - 13 *Ibid.*, 43.
 - 14 *Ibid.*, 114.
 - 15 Hannah Mitchell did overcome her lack of schooling. She became an apprentice dressmaker, worked in domestic service and as a shop assistant. She married in 1895 and used her domestic skills, expressing her pride in the home she created for herself, husband and only son, Geoffrey. However domestic life palled after a while and in 1903 she began paid work for the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). She became a member of the Labour Party, was secretary of Ashton Labour Church, elected to the Board of Guardians in 1904, became a Manchester City Councillor in 1925 and a Magistrate in 1926. She also wrote for various periodicals, including *The Northern Voice*.
 - 16 Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', 84.
 - 17 Edwards, *Our City... Our People*, 10.
 - 18 Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, 3–4.
 - 19 Gawthorpe, *Up Hill to Holloway*, 19.
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 - 21 For discussion on the literacy of working-class women, see, for example, W. B. Stephens, *Education, Literacy and Society, 1880–1870: The Geography of Diversity in Provincial England* (Manchester, 1987); David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England, 1750–1914* (Cambridge, 1989).
 - 22 For the details surrounding the passing of the 1870 Act see, for example, Mary Sturt, *Education of the People: A History of Primary Education in England and Wales in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1967), ch. 14.
 - 23 John Hurt, *Elementary Schooling and the Working Classes, 1860–1918* (London, 1963), 4.
 - 24 David E Mitch, *The Rise of Popular Literacy in Victorian England: The Influence of Private Choice and Public Policy* (Philadelphia, 1992), 182.
 - 25 *Ibid.*, 375.
 - 26 Anna Davin, 'Mind that You do as You are Told: Reading Books for Board-School Girls, 1870–1902', *Feminist Rev.*, iii (1979), 89.
 - 27 June Purvis, 'The Double Burden of Class and Gender in the Schooling of Working-Class Girls in Nineteenth-Century England', in L. Barton and S. Walker (eds.), *Schools, Teachers and Teaching* (Lewes, 1981), 90.
 - 28 Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, 28.
 - 29 Bondfield, *A Life's Work*, 21.
 - 30 Edwards, *Our City... Our People*, 41.
 - 31 Cooke, *Hired Lass in Westmorland*, 1.
 - 32 Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, 404.
 - 33 The National Society Annual Report of 1861, as quoted in Johnson, *Education of Girls in Derby and Derbyshire* (MA diss., Oxford), 77.
 - 34 Special Report compiled for the Education Department in 1896–7, cited by Jane Martin in 'The Only Place for Women was Home: Gender and Class in the Elementary School Curriculum, 1870–1904', *Jl of the Association of Open University Graduates* (1993–4), 15.
 - 35 Hull, 'A Derbyshire Schooling, 1884–1893', 170.
 - 36 *Ibid.*, 168.
 - 37 *Ibid.*, 170.
 - 38 Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, 27.
 - 39 Cited in Penny Tinkler, 'Girlhood and Growing Up', in Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (ed.), *Women in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, 2001), 37.
 - 40 See, for example, Mark Pottle, 'McKillop, Margaret S. (1864–1929), lecturer in home economics', *DNB*, Oxford, forthcoming 2004).
 - 41 *Ibid.*, 2.
 - 42 See Barnes, *Tough Annie*.
 - 43 Sally Alexander, 'Women's Work in Nineteenth-Century London: A Study of the Years 1820–1850', in *The Rights and Wrongs of Women* ed. Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley (Harmondsworth, 1976), 73.
 - 44 Deirdre Beddoe, *Discovering Women's History* (London, 1993), 112.
 - 45 Cited in Elizabeth Roberts, *Women's Work, 1840–1940* (London, 1988), 31.
 - 46 Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, 45.
 - 47 *Ibid.*, 46.
 - 48 The 'tweeny' or between maid, combined the duties of under-housemaid with those of kitchenmaid, helping both the cook and the housemaid. She was often the lowest paid and least prestigious of indoor servants. Her duties included rising by 5.30 every morning to clean and light the kitchen range before any of the other servants were up. See, for example, Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant* (Stroud, 1990), 151, 197.
 - 49 Cooke, *Hired Lass in Westmorland*, 15.
 - 50 Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain, 1890–1960: Gender, Class and Ethnicity* (London, 1994), 120.
 - 51 See, for example, Ellen F. Mappen (ed.), *Married Women's Work* (London: 1983), originally ed. Clementina Black (London, 1915); Purvis, *Hard Lessons*; Roberts, *Women's Work*, 18–20.
 - 52 Maud Pember-Reeves, *Round About A Pound A Week*

(London, 1913, 1980).

- 53 Smith, *Cornish Waif's Story*, 205.
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55 *Ibid.*, 95.
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58 Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, 400.
59 Foakes, *My Life With Reuben*, 45.
60 Ellen Ross, 'Survival Networks: Women's Neighbourhood Sharing in London Before World War I', *Hist. Workshop* 31, no. 25 (Spring 1983), 7.
61 Pember-Reeves, *Round About A Pound A Week*, 11.
62 This custom has been found to be widespread throughout England and Wales, although the portion given by the male earner varied according to region, neighbourhood and even individual couple: Laura Oren, 'The Welfare of Women in Labouring Families: England, 1860–1950', *Feminist Studies*, i (Spring 1993), 107, 112–13; Elizabeth Roberts, 'Working Women in the North-West', *Oral Hist.*, v (Autumn 1977), 7–30.



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BOOK REVIEWS

Marie Sandeford, *Tales of Tudor Women* Great Glen, Leic.: Joroby Books, 2003. £5.95. 120 pp, ISBN 0 9534584 1 5.

Review by Amanda Capern, University of Hull

This little anecdotal book has been published by Joroby Books to mark the 400th anniversary of the death of Elizabeth I. It follows in the wake of Marie Sandeford's *The Second Sister: A Roydl Tudor Romance* (1999), a biography of Catherine Grey (the sister of Jane Grey) that charts her doomed marriage with Edward Seymour, Earl of Hertford and brother of Jane Seymour.

Tales of Tudor Women has little structure. It begins with John Knox's *First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, presumably as a way of introducing the reign of Elizabeth I, and ends with a chapter on the execution of Mary Queen of Scots and a final line about Elizabeth regretting the execution until her own death. It is clear from the first chapter that Sandeford has a commitment to making the lives of some Elizabethan women 'visible' and, in this way, *Tales of Tudor Women* has a serious purpose as women's history. However, readers should be warned that between Knox and Mary Queen of Scots there is truly a hotchpotch - the only themes that seem to stand out are melodramatic romance (including the romance of Catherine Grey and Edward Seymour summarised from her first book) and martyrdom (Protestant and Catholic).

For the most part these are *not* 'tales' about the average Elizabethan woman. For example, there is a chapter on Dorothy Vernon who was co-heiress of Haddon Hall in Derbyshire and who eloped with John Manners, son of the duke of Rutland. The rich and/or the sensational women get into this book - if they are not women of the extended court of Elizabeth, then they are martyrs like Margaret Clitheroe, crushed to death in just a cotton shift under rocks, or thieves like Moll Cutpurse. Even a chapter on ministers' wives begins with the improbably named Agnes Worship. However, some flavour of the lives of ordinary women can be found. Chapter 6 focuses on women's needlework and Chapter 8 tells of Grace Sharrington [Mildmay] and her book of 'phisick'. Some chapters are better than others. Chapter 5 is less than two pages long and consists solely of an anecdote about Elizabeth I and the production of silk stockings. Chapter 9 on 'Women in the World of Books' should have been omitted; the author's knowledge of Elizabethan women writers is too small for it to be viable. By contrast the chapters that end the book on the Marian martyrs and Margaret Clithrope are quite well-informed, quite well-written and readable.

Sandeford has had much fun with this book and her readers will have fun too. However, it needs to be pointed out that it is a bit cobbled together and source-driven, though without using systematically obvious books. The textbooks by Anne Laurence [1994] and Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford [1998] seem not to have been consulted at all. A

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Foley, Alice (1891-1974), trade unionist and autobiographer, was born at 22 Back Shaw Street, Bolton, Lancashire, on 28 November 1891. She was the youngest of six children—two sisters and three brothers—of a 'big, intelligent but unruly' Irish Catholic father, Thomas Foley (c.1850-c.1906), who worked sporadically, between bouts of drinking, gambling, and Fenian activities (Foley, 8), and his wife, Alice, *née* Mort. At the time of her birth her father was described as a boiler stoker in a cotton mill. Her mother, who was illiterate, was known as Meg. Born prematurely, after what she described as a 'moonlight flit' (ibid.3), Alice was not expected to survive, and so her sister took her immediately to the priest at St Patrick's Catholic Church for baptism. Her childhood was frugal and austere, the family, who lived in Milk Street, existing mainly on the money earned by her mother as a washerwoman. When Alice was three the family moved to a better house in Rankin Street, and in 1896 she began her education at St Peter's and St Paul's Catholic Infant School, taking her first holy communion and confirmation in due course. At twelve, unlike many of her classmates, Alice escaped the effects of the half-time factory system, as her father thought it an exploitation of child labour. She stayed at school for a final year, during which she was voted 'the most popular girl in the school'. While still at school she fell ill, distressed by the death of her sixteen-year-old brother Jimmie from appendicitis. On her recovery, in August 1904, she was taken on a four-day holiday to Morecambe by her eldest sister, Cissy, the first time Alice had left Bolton.

Shortly afterwards, helped by the older children's wages, the Foley family moved to Noble Street. In 1905, after fruitless searching for other work, Alice, aged thirteen, joined Cissy in rising at 5 a.m. to dress in clogs and shawl for work at the cotton mill. She first worked in Gibraltar Mill as a 'knotter', and then with the firm Hodgkinson and Gillbrands at Moor Mill on Derby Street, as a 'tenter', a 'cloth fettler', and finally in the preparation department. Always an avid reader, she continued her education, attending evening classes at her old school, and proceeding to secondary education at the municipal school in Great Moor Street.

Encouraged by Cissy, a suffragette and member of the

Labour church, and by family readings and discussion of the weekly *Clarion* and the socialist Robert Blatchford's publications, Alice Foley developed an interest in socialism. Her father's death broke her last link with the Catholic church, and she and her younger sister, Emily, joined the Labour church and the newly established Socialist Sunday School. She also became a member of the Bolton Social Club and the socialist-run *Clarion* Cycling Club, and, through her activity in the weavers' trade union, a spokeswoman for her fellow workers. Lloyd George's 1911 National Insurance Act enabled her to find an outlet for her social idealism when, after seven years of factory work, she was appointed as sick visitor by the Bolton Weavers' Association for the supervision of scheduled benefits.

During the First World War, when her two brothers enlisted (the elder was killed on the Somme), Alice Foley served on the Women's Conscientious Objectors Tribunal and the War Savings Committee. She established the first Women's Labour Group in Bolton and also became governor of Bolton Girls' School. In 1917 she became a clerk in the Bolton weavers' trade union office at a wage of 30s. a week and by 1920 she and her now invalid mother had moved to Chip Dean Road, in Dean, a new estate on the edge of the town.

Foley's long involvement with the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) began in 1918, when she attended a summer school in Bangor, north Wales. In 1923 she won the WEA Cassel scholarship to attend Manchester University for a year. Over the next fifty years she served at every level of the WEA; in the Bolton branch, on the north-western district executive committee, as vice-chair of the north-western district, and on the national central council, later the national committee. Her work for adult education in the WEA and on the Manchester University joint committee for adult education was recognized by the award of an honorary MA degree in 1962.

Foley's career as a trade union official culminated in her secretaryship of the Bolton and District Weavers' and Winders' Union from 1949 to 1961, for which she was appointed MBE in 1951. During 1956-7 she was president of the Bolton united trades council. She was a long-standing JP, having first been appointed in 1931, and served on the Bolton education committee.

Foley's autobiography, *A Bolton Childhood*, published in

1973, described her childhood and early adult life. In narrating her own rise from factory floor to clerk in the Bolton weavers' office up to her involvement with the WEA, she referred to her purpose of helping her fellow workers 'left behind in the weaving sheds' (Foley, 76). She never married, but instead devoted her life to trade unionism and the WEA in a career which bore out the altruistic claims of her autobiography. A modest, public-spirited woman, Alice Foley died on 30 June 1974 at Bolton District General Hospital, Farnworth, after a long illness. Her memorial service was held at Bank Street Chapel, Bolton.

Carol Jenkins

Sources

- A. Foley, *A Bolton childhood* (1973)
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- b. cert.
- d. cert.

Archives

- Bolton Central Library, political papers, incl. speeches

Likenesses

- photograph, 1907, repro. in Foley, *A Bolton childhood*
- photograph, c. 1920, repro. in Foley, *A Bolton childhood*

Wealth at death

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Griffiths [*née* Rutley], **Winifred** (1895-1982), politician's wife and autobiographer, was born at High Street, Overton, near Basingstoke, Hampshire, on 21 May 1895, the second of four children of William George Rutley (*d.* 1932), a paper-mill worker and Wesleyan lay preacher, and his wife, Rose Treacher (*d.* 1945). She was brought up in a strongly puritanical tradition, attending the Wesleyan chapel every Sunday, and from 1899 to 1909 she went to the local national school, where the church was a strong influence. She was top of her class in her final year, when she won the coveted 'guinea bible', but the family could not afford to continue her education, and she left school aged fourteen. After attempting to train for teaching by taking a correspondence course, she was forced to give up through lack of guidance and funds for textbooks. Instead she began an apprenticeship in Burberry's gabardine factory, and then worked for a ready-made tailoring firm. When this closed down she went into domestic service, becoming a housemaid at East Oakley House, near Basingstoke. She worked there for four years, during which time she became interested in socialism.

With the outbreak of the First World War Winifred Rutley began training at the co-operative stores, where a co-worker encouraged her to write to a fellow socialist friend of his, James (Jeremiah) *Griffiths (1890-1975), a Welsh miner and founder member of the Independent Labour Party in Ammanford, Carmarthenshire. In 1916 she visited James and by the end of her stay they had become unofficially engaged. On her return to Basingstoke she started work as a provisions hand at Walkers Stores and continued a correspondence with James which fostered their mutual socialism and their opposition to war. Although soon promoted to 'first hand', she moved to Llanelli to be closer to James during their two-year engagement; she obtained work in the co-operative store in Station Road. They were married at the Congregational church, Overton, on 20 October 1918 and after a brief honeymoon in Reading began their married life in Betws, Ammanford.

Winifred Griffiths took a keen interest in her husband's career and remained active in local politics and social work. Her autobiography records her speaking on women's rights, and her belief in socialism. While James attended

the Central Labour College in London she worked to support them both. When he completed his course they returned to Ammanford and shortly afterwards moved to Llanelli. Despite being pregnant she canvassed and addressed meetings at Llanelli during the general election of 1922, when labour won the seat for the first time. She gave birth to their daughter Jeanne the following February and the family moved to Burry Port. In 1926 their son Harold was born and this was followed by a move to Ystradgynlais, where they spent nine years in the south Wales coalfield; James became president of the South Wales Miners' Federation in 1934. Their family was completed by the birth of Sheila in 1928 and Arthur in 1931. Winifred had domestic help during this time and this enabled her to take part in public affairs as chairman of the local women's section of the Labour Party, district councillor for the Ynysgedwyn ward, member of the board of guardians, and local magistrate. When James was elected Labour MP for Llanelli in 1936 they returned to Burry Port and they moved to a larger house in 1938.

At the outbreak of the Second World War Winifred Griffiths joined the Women's Voluntary Service and throughout the war she was involved in social work. On James's appointment as minister of national insurance in the Labour government in 1945 she moved the family to Putney Heath. In the following years she fulfilled many social engagements expected of the wife of a minister. She joined the women's section of the local Labour Party, stood unsuccessfully as a candidate for London county council, and served as governor of two secondary schools and on the visiting committee for old people's homes and the management committee for children's homes. In 1951 she was appointed a JP. Their final home was in Teddington, London. Having outlived her husband, she died in the Memorial Hospital, Teddington, on 10 September 1982.

Winifred Griffiths was one of a number of women autobiographers born into the working class from the 1870s who chronicled their success in life. Extracts were published in 1974, and the full text appeared in 1979 as *One Woman's Story*. It reveals not only that she achieved domestic happiness and fulfilment, as well as upward social mobility, by marrying a man who became a prominent politician; but also that she was successful in her own career. Written in 'the evening of life' (W. Griffiths, 166), it included an epilogue added after her husband's death which supplied a touching tribute to their

1973, described her childhood and early adult life. In narrating her own rise from factory floor to clerk in the Bolton weavers' office up to her involvement with the WEA, she referred to her purpose of helping her fellow workers 'left behind in the weaving sheds' (Foley, 76). She never married, but instead devoted her life to trade unionism and the WEA in a career which bore out the altruistic claims of her autobiography. A modest, public-spirited woman, Alice Foley died on 30 June 1974 at Bolton District General Hospital, Farnworth, after a long illness. Her memorial service was held at Bank Street Chapel, Bolton.

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series of chance and planned actions by which they achieved their ambitions. They describe, variously, some upward social mobility, an improved standard of living, more personal freedom, and their formal acceptance into the public arena of both local and national politics. These autobiographies are important as the personal, and in the case of these women, often the only, view of one person and their relationship with the broadening societal reflections of gender and class imposed by the changing social landscape of the period.

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THE NATURE OF SUCCESS IN THE PUBLISHED AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF
WOMEN BORN INTO THE WORKING CLASS IN ENGLAND 1870-1900.

CAROL ANN JENKINS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements of the University of the West of England, Bristol
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Bath Spa University College

School of History, Bath Spa University College

July 2003

**The Nature of Success in the Published Autobiographies of Women Born into the
Working Class in England 1870-1900.**

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Gan, without whose forbearance, support and encouragement, it may not have been written. Also to my dear friend Myrtle Shipway, who died in February 2000, and is sadly missed.

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Abstract

This thesis contributes to our understanding of women's social history, and particularly the social, personal and political achievements of women born into the working-class in late Victorian England. Preliminary research involved autobiographies from working-class women born throughout the nineteenth century, and a change in tone and content was discovered in those written by women born from 1870 to 1900: for the first time women of this class were beginning to write about their experiences of success.

This cohort of women was born into different strata of working-class society, in disparate areas of England, both rural and urban, with a variety of family, educational and occupational experiences. Yet despite the diversity in their texts, they reveal a commonality in their motivation and ability to express themselves in terms of the struggles they have overcome and the importance to them of achievements gained. The importance of these texts is in the wider sweep of working-class history, they reflect the period in which they were growing up and they provide a wealth of detail about the gendered and class-specific experiences of working-class women during a period of profound social and political change.

The women express a sense of success that each felt about her life in the interwoven and sometimes interdependent areas of education, domesticity, economics and politics – each of which is explored as a chapter in the thesis. Undeniably, their achievements were facilitated by widening opportunities for women as a result of educational, economic, and most importantly, political reforms. With the support of parents, family members or networks of friends, colleagues or neighbours the writers describe the interconnected

series of chance and planned actions by which they achieved their ambitions. They describe, variously, some upward social mobility, an improved standard of living, more personal freedom, and their formal acceptance into the public arena of both local and national politics. These autobiographies are important as the personal, and in the case of these women, often the only, view of one person and their relationship with the broadening societal reflections of gender and class imposed by the changing social landscape of the period.

Thesis word count: 84338

The Nature of Success in the Published Autobiographies of Women Born into the Working Class in England 1870-1900.

Introduction

Perceptions of Success

The nature of success, which is central to this thesis, is open to many different interpretations. Individuals mostly have their own ideas of what success means to them, and definitions can thus be highly subjective. But while success has an abstract quality, it is also something tangible for most people: something to which they aspire and work towards, and something that they celebrate when they feel they have attained it.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century the means to success and the fulfilment of personal ambition has become big business. In bookshops, much shelf space is given over to the subject; an industry has grown up around the idea that anyone, anywhere, can achieve success. Ideas on what comprises success are legion. It may mean material wealth, encompassing a good position at work and the attendant lifestyle this brings: a large well-furnished house, a fast car and other up-market life acquisitions. Success may also be more nebulous: job satisfaction, a good marriage, pride in personal achievements, a sense of happiness, inner peace, or fulfilment. Increasingly, it involves celebrity status. Success may almost be described as all things to all people. The descriptions of success that permeate modern literature support the notion of an individual 'having it all'.¹ Books offer advice on ways to achieve the material affluence and personal fulfilment to which, it is suggested, all can aspire. Strategies which 'lead to happiness', 'reaching goals' or

¹ Nicola Horlick, *Can You Have It All? How to Succeed in a Man's World* (London: Macmillan, 1997); Helen Gurley Brown, *Having It All* (London: Sedgwick, 1983).

‘fulfilling your heart’s desire’ are offered to the reader.² These prescriptions for success differ profoundly from the descriptions found in literature written on the subject in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Success for individuals in the late Victorian and early Edwardian period depended on cultural and societal assumptions about both gender and class. At this time the attainment and celebration of success were essentially a male preserve and this was reflected in contemporary literature which focussed very much on the achievements of successful men.

For men, perceptions of success in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were invariably bound up with the notion of ‘progress’ that was so important to Victorian society. This was reflected in public achievements across a wide spectrum, including advances in exploration and science, public building and city infrastructure, as well as manufacturing and entrepreneurial ventures. It encompassed some women, but the individuals concerned were mostly drawn from the elite sections of society: women born into the working class were notably absent.

In addition, those women who were perceived to have achieved success shone in the field of personal rather than public achievement: their contribution was assessed in terms of morality and good works. Women were expected to be modest, humble, obedient, pious, temperate, patient, silent and chaste, and above all to find happiness and contentment in activities associated with the home. To a large degree this echoed the conventions of the period: men could achieve in the public sphere, whereas successful women had a

² See, for example: James Houston, *The Heart’s Desire: A Guide to Personal Fulfilment* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1992); Dorothy Rowe, *Wanting Everything: The Art of Happiness* (London: Harper Collins, 1991); Jeff Davidson, *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Reaching Your Goals* (New York: Macmillan, 1999).

supporting role or else operated in a 'feminine' sphere. Their experience was restricted to the home, to caring domestic-based professions, or to charitable ventures.³

A close examination of contemporary literature illustrates this point. Typical is Ernest Bryant's *A New Self-Help: A Story of Worthy Success Achieved in Many Paths of Life By Men and Women of Today and Yesterday*.⁴ First published in 1908 the book was an eclectic, worldwide collection, dealing with the lives of mainly middle-class men, such as Charles Darwin, Abraham Lincoln, Cecil Rhodes, Thomas Cooke and John Wesley. As his title suggests, Bryant did include some women. In Chapter 4, entitled 'Life's Handicap', he cited Helen Keller, a dedicated teacher of sign language to a profoundly deaf student.⁵ And in a later chapter, 'A Woman's Place in Progress', he told of public recognition of the success of Florence Nightingale in establishing the nursing profession, and identified this as a step towards the equality of women with men, at least in terms of their intellectual capacity:

One of the most striking events of 1907 was the bestowal by King Edward of the order of merit upon Miss Florence Nightingale...the bestowal of that Order marked an entirely new departure, it was created for men only. King Edward, with the advice of his ministers, in honouring Miss Nightingale, set an example which we shall see generally followed. It is part of a great movement towards the recognition of the intellectual equality of women with men. It is late in the day, but better late than never.⁶

To underline his point, the chapter 'Towards Self-Help' included some twenty or so women, worldwide, who had a right to claim a place in the forward march of 'progress'.

He included the Baroness Burdett-Coutts, the astronomers Miss Agnes Clerke and Lady

³ For discussion of separate spheres in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries see, for example, Susan Kingsley Kent, *Gender and Power in Britain, 1640-1990* (London: Routledge, 1999), particularly pp. 147-184, 260-302. See also Chapter 1, p. 25 of this thesis.

⁴ Ernest A. Bryant, *A New Self-Help: A Story of Worthy Success Achieved in Many Paths of Life by Men and Women of Today and Yesterday* (London: Cassell and Co., 1980).

⁵ Bryant, *A New Self-Help*, pp.326-328.

⁶ Bryant, *A New Self-Help*, p.329.

Huggins (the latter rather tellingly identified as ‘the wife of Sir William Huggins’), Mrs Somerville, and Lady Bullen ‘the famous artist’. Bryant had made an attempt to appear even-handed, and to include women as well as men. He went as far as to claim that ‘where a man can go, a woman can follow’. However, his use of ‘follow’ seemed to reflect the mores of a society which believed that a woman could succeed only if man showed her the way, or allowed her to act in a prescribed field, as was the case with Florence Nightingale.

Bryant promulgated the gendered view that it was possible for women to be successful, but only by behaving in a manner prescribed by society. They could succeed as wife, daughter or mother, or in a caring profession such as nursing and teaching. He unwittingly demonstrated this in his references to explorers’ wives - Mrs Francis V. Campbell ‘wife of the daring English traveller’, and Mrs Percy, ‘who accompanied her husband on his early trips to the North Pole’ - although she was left at the first base camp, from where she ‘was *sent* (my italics) to meet him in 1900’.⁷

Most importantly, for this thesis, Bryant’s women were all, without exception, from the middle or upper classes. By the omission of working-class women from his book, it might be concluded that they had little hope of achieving the success that Bryant envisaged for more elite women. When he declared that with ‘progress’, the coming of equal educational opportunities, and with the help of men, women too could achieve, Bryant was referring to the kind of middle-and upper-class women he had described in his book. He concluded with an appeal for men to broaden the idea of self-help in order to assist women, who, although weak, could still have potential:

The spirit of the new Self-Help is not the selfish spirit of gain to be sought by the individual; it is a Self-Help which

⁷ Bryant, *A New Self-Help*, pp.338-339.

lightens the burdens of others equally with our own, and enables us to assist the weaklings not yet risen to their feet. The hand stretched forth to succour and guide will not be withheld from those to whom man first owes courtesy, respect, and reverence.⁸

The notion of achieving success by means of self-help, introduced by Bryant, is a further important strand within this thesis.

Ideas of self-help, though prevalent well before the nineteenth century, were perhaps crystallised in the public mind by a book written by Samuel Smiles (1812-1904), and first published some fifty years before Bryant's book, in 1859. Bryant's chapter heading, *Self Help* echoes the title of Smiles's book.⁹ Smiles's *Self Help* was a best seller. Printed in many editions it was widely read: over 250,000 copies were sold in his lifetime and the book was still in print well into the twentieth century. Smiles dealt with the benefits of thrift, temperance, work and a good character. He promulgated the notion of the independent self-made working-class man within the general consciousness by encouraging, in mid-Victorian society, the belief that by thrift and hard work any morally sound person could gain material success or rise in society. He illustrated the possibilities of rags to riches to all who could read. Like Bryant, however, Smiles's main target audience, although admittedly working-class, was male.

Smiles included nothing controversial in his advice. There was no hint that the lot of working people may have been improved by political action, and in fact Smiles was promulgating acquiescence in conventional Victorian values and a hierarchical social order, through a cult of 'independence', 'systematic industry' and 'self-help'.¹⁰ The idea that such social progress could include working-class women was barely acceptable even

⁸ Bryant, *A New Self-Help*, p.343.

⁹ Samuel Smiles, *Self Help* (London: n.pub., 1859).

¹⁰ Samuel Smiles, *Self Help* (London: n.pub., 1860 edition), p. v.

by late nineteenth-century society, which still regarded it an axiom that working-class women should know their place, and that the place for respectable women was in the home.

Such societal values were also suggested in a later and less well-known book by Smiles: *Life and Labour*, first published in 1887, purported to throw light on the changing attitudes towards women in society, it explored also the idea of a fundamental equality between men and women. But in spite of this supposedly progressive approach it reinforced the idea of 'separate spheres', assigning to women a primarily domestic role. Women, whom Smiles described as man's 'helps-meet', are limited to a clearly subordinate role:

There are many more single women than single men. Man has strength and power; he acts, moves, thinks, and works alone. He looks ahead. But the woman stays at home, for joy or for sorrow. To feel, to love, to suffer, to devote herself, - is this not the sum of woman's life? There are many single women animated by the most beautiful of motives, and associated with the noblest and most honourable members of society. Need we mention the names of Florence Nightingale, Catherine Stanley and Sister Dora?

Single women are in many cases the best comforters, the best sympathisers, the best nurses, the best companions... There is no record made of the constant, watchful daily service of the patient woman who keeps her home healthy and peaceful. Even in the humblest classes, single women do more than their fair share of useful and honourable work, often in the face of trials, difficulties, and temptations.¹¹

In the context of Smiles' book, therefore, the whole concept of success at the end of the nineteenth century appears only attainable for women in a subservient role, helping, or comforting, men. Success for women could only be realized within parameters set by

¹¹ Samuel Smiles, *Life and Labour: Or, Characteristics of Men of Industry, Culture and Genius* (London: John Murray, 1887) pp.388-391.

society, in which women had a role to fulfil in the domestic sphere in serving men, or as carer, companion or nurse.

Given the self-effacing role assigned to women, especially those from the working class, one might not expect to find that women from this class and period had written their autobiographies. Still less would one expect them to write about their lives in terms of success. There are nevertheless extant as many as twenty-six published autobiographies, written by women born into the working class in England between 1870 and 1900, and they are all success stories in one form or another. That these women should have the ability, motivation and impetus to write about their success is surprising, but they nevertheless chronicled the pathways by which they improved their lives and attained their goals.

Although these women do not generally use the word success, their autobiographies describe their social advancement and the fulfilment of ambitions in various areas of their lives. They took pride in their varied achievements and illustrate that success, rather than the 'usefulness' referred to by Smiles in the quote above, was attainable for women whose origins were working-class and who grew up in late Victorian and early Edwardian England. To write about success was a new phenomenon for this class of women, and one that it is the purpose of this thesis to examine.

Statement of Objectives

The present work is of particular importance because it addresses a neglected field of enquiry. It engages with a cohort of twenty-six women autobiographers born into the

working class in England between 1870 and 1900, who perceived themselves as successful, and found the language and motivation to write about their experience.

The research began as an enquiry into the earliest working-class women's autobiographies. It progressed to include all of the one hundred and thirty-six extant published and unpublished autobiographies written by working-class women born in England during the nineteenth century. This was an important period in women's writing, especially for those from the working class. It was only in that century that they began, in any number, to write their autobiographies. Before then there were few texts of any sort written by this class of women, and certainly few that were published.

During preliminary reading, a marked difference in tone and content was noted in 26 of the 55 autobiographies written by women born between 1870 and 1900. Unlike the other 29 writers, whose texts are grounded in, and accepting of, working-class existence, these 26 all presented a record of personal achievement in various areas of their lives. In these texts there is an implicit sense of individual success, and of subsequent upward social mobility between, or within, social strata. All 26 of the autobiographies in question have been published in some form. Their publication not only gives wider access to this cohort of writers, but also says something about the interest inherent in their writing. But despite this interest, the autobiographies from this cohort of women have hitherto been neglected. It is the purpose of this thesis to address this neglect, and to use the autobiographies to illuminate the details of their success.

It is important at this early stage to state that the term 'working class' is used flexibly here, as an analytical tool, rather than rigidly, as a defining category. The class of society into

which these women were born was not a monolithic, homogeneous group. As Engels claimed in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, the category 'working class' included a variety of social types under its umbrella.¹² It consisted of various strata, ranging from those living in abject poverty, to the relatively affluent upper working-class artisans. This diversity is reflected in the cohort.

Some of the women were born into what appeared to be inescapable poverty, while others had parents with relatively good jobs and a reasonable standard of living, and were sometimes wealthy enough to employ help in the home on a limited scale, such as engaging a laundress once a week.¹³ Many of them were denied access to resources or to education, and while some overcame these obstacles, they had to struggle. In so doing they faced difficult choices, such as whether to stay at school and gain some educational success, or leave and earn a wage, and so contribute towards the family economy.¹⁴ A few were able to achieve scholarships and went on to further education, gaining professional qualifications.

The term 'working-class' therefore must be used with care. It is employed in this thesis in broadly the way in which it is defined in E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. Thompson stresses the social and cultural fluidity of class-consciousness which arises when 'some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.'¹⁵ In these terms, 'working-class women' may be defined as those women who identify themselves,

¹² Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of The Working Class in England*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

¹³ Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie: From Suffragette to Stepney Councillor* (London: Stepney Books, 1980), p.7.

¹⁴ See, for instance, Mary Luty, *A Penniless Globetrotter* (Accrington: Wardleworth, 1927), p.39.

¹⁵ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1991), pp.8-9.

both socially and culturally, as working class; who are born into a wage-earning family and who have in common the experience of having to work in paid employment at some stage in their lives, in order to support themselves and often also their families. Judged by this standard the twenty-six women in question are undeniably working-class. They present themselves as working class; and they were born into environments where the common experience was of families supported by one or two wage earners. Nevertheless, the women in the cohort exhibit some fluidity in their social position throughout their lives. Although the degree of this varies, all of them, to a greater or lesser extent, became upwardly mobile in terms of education, occupation or lifestyle.

While defining terms, it is also necessary at this point to clarify the use of the term 'separate spheres'. During analysis of the texts it has been useful in some instances to employ the terms 'public sphere' and 'private sphere' in order to differentiate between activities that were societally gendered. Much has been written on these divisions and want of space precludes a detailed discussion here.¹⁶ However it is important to stress that the model of separate spheres is only a rhetorical tool, as Linda Kerber has argued.¹⁷

Mitzi Myers has elaborated further and claimed, albeit disapprovingly:

It demarcates and organizes things tidily, so that even though feminist revisionists know that spheres cannot truly be separate, we are still stuck with an orthodoxy of

¹⁶ For an historiography of the emergence of separate spheres for women debate see, for example: Patricia Branca, *Silent Sisterhood: Middle-Class Women in the Victorian Home*, (London: Croom Helm 1975); Sarah Delamont and Lorna Duffin, *The Nineteenth Century Woman: Her Cultural and Physical World* (London: Croom Helm, 1978); Martha Vicinus, *Suffer and Be Still* (London: Virago, 1974); also Amanda Vickery 'Shaking the Separate Spheres. Did Women Really Descend Into Graceful Indolence?' in *The Times Literary Supplement* issue 4693 (12 March 1993), pp.6-7. The ideology of the golden age of domesticity is discussed in detail in Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortune: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (London: Hutchinson Educational, 1987), and for an interesting historical perspective, see, Alice Clark, *Working Lives of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1919).

¹⁷ Linda K Kerber, 'Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Woman's History' in *Journal of American History*, issue 75, vol.1 (June 1998), pp.9-39.

public and private realms, with women as domestic pawns
and men as public actors.¹⁸

In describing the various kinds of success achieved by the cohort these terms have proved useful. However, it is important to state here that these are not mutually exclusive categories: in the women's lives the 'public' and the 'private' are so intertwined that one must, of necessity, have an impact on the other.

The thesis examines the nature of success in its various forms. Against a backdrop of social and political change it investigates the ways in which, by a combination of chance and strategy, these women achieved their ambitions. Undeniably, their success was facilitated by important social and political changes. Key changes included legislation for shorter working hours, provision of better elementary education and some secondary education, wider employment opportunities, and openings for women in politics. Shorter working hours gave single working-class women of the period more leisure time, and it became acceptable for even married working-class women to join newly established clubs and societies such as the Co-operative Women's Guild, which encouraged its members to broaden their reading skills and become involved in voicing their opinions at public meetings. Some of the women in the cohort became involved in political organizations including trade unions, socialist societies and the suffrage movement.

Interwoven through all of the autobiographies was the claim to respectability. Ideologies of womanhood required by Victorian and Edwardian society incorporated a range of qualities including Christian values of caring for others, together with modesty, humility, self-denial and propriety. These values were incompatible with public self-representation,

¹⁸ Mitzi Myers, 'Completing the Union: Critical Enui, the Politics of Narrative' in *Intersecting of Public and Private*, ed. Caroline Steedman (London: Virago, 1986), p.42.

and this may be a reason why many of the women offered an explanation, or justification, of their achievements when recording their experiences.

The articulacy of these women lifted them above the ordinary. In writing their autobiographies they presented themselves not only as successful, but also as different from other women of their class and background. Their individual experiences of life were of course diverse: they came from various areas of England, different strata of working-class society, varying positions in the family, and they describe accordingly a variety of different educational, family and occupational experiences. Yet paradoxically, despite these differences, the lives of these women may also be seen as representative. They reveal the possibility of achievement for working-class women of the period and so provide a link between the individual and the collective experience.

It is this combination of similarities and differences which makes these twenty-six women worthy of study. They provide personal histories rooted in an historical context: as witnesses at the centre of working-class society they described transitional periods in their lives in which they gradually worked towards, and ultimately achieved, success in the areas of education, domesticity, economics and politics. They illustrate their ability to capitalize on societal changes and to turn them to their advantage. At the same time their pursuit of respectability and their religious, social and political beliefs, all emerge from their writing. Their autobiographies augment an understanding of working-class history as sometimes upwardly socially mobile. Most importantly, it reveals the emergence of a new type of autobiography: that of successful working-class women.

Outline of Chapters

There are a number of ways in which this study of the perceptions of success in the autobiographies of the cohort could be presented. It could be written by considering each woman in turn: but this approach, although it might highlight the differences between individuals, would mean a great deal of repetition regarding the similarities. Alternatively, it could have been written chronologically: but then societal changes are slow to register, and they also take effect unevenly between urban and rural areas; and even between different strata of the working class. Such changes would thus have different repercussions at different stages in the lives of the autobiographers, who were born over a period of three decades, and in many different parts of the country.

The shortcomings of the individual and chronological approaches meant that a thematic approach was adopted. Despite the considerable diversity in the lives of these women there are also clear themes running through all of the autobiographies: although not always clear-cut, they encompass educational, domestic, economic and political success. These four themes surface and subside at various times and are often intertwined. Domestic skills were taught both in the home and at school. Education was also achieved formally at school and informally at home. For some of the cohort attaining an education was an end in itself, others used educational success, in the form of qualifications or scholarships, to enter further education or obtain higher-paid employment and so achieve economic success. Economic success, although perceived mainly in the public sphere of paid employment, was also illustrated as the women improved their standard of living and material wealth domestically, in an increasingly consumer society. Economic success was also discerned in the home as women took control of the family income from husbands and older children. Political success was achieved in the domestic sphere, as some women

became householders and so gained the right to a local franchise, or else found a public voice when they joined clubs, societies and political or suffrage movements. Political success could also begin as women took an active role in work-place trade unions. Despite the difficulties of unravelling these areas of their lives, the chapter headings are based on the themes given obvious importance by the autobiographers themselves.

Chapter one outlines the methodology employed for the thesis. It begins with a discussion of working-class women's autobiography, and emphasizes the importance of the autobiographies in question as, in many cases, the only material surviving from this group of women. It continues with an overview of the historiography of the working-class; considers why published autobiographies from this group of women were chosen; and discusses what problems were inherent in the study. It concludes by reviewing the historical context in which the texts were written.

Chapter two introduces the twenty-six autobiographers – the cohort of women – with a brief biography of each, and a bibliographical note on their autobiography. There follows a short review of the texts as a body of work, which discusses the reasons the women gave for writing, and in some cases publishing, their autobiographies. Finally there is the suggestion that because of the diversity of their lives, the cohort's autobiographies are important in representing the increasingly wide range of experiences possible for working-class women during the period. It stresses the importance of biographical detail in history, and in particular the importance of autobiographies such as these, which give a thoughtful reflection of a personal history.

Chapter three explores educational achievement in the lives of the women in the cohort, examining ways in which they describe educational ambition; how they used societal changes in education to fulfil these ambitions; and how they presented their educational success. Education, in its various forms, appeared to be seen by most of these women as the most important contributing factor to their success, as it is given prominence in almost all of the autobiographies. The chapter argues that with a network of support from family, friends, and neighbours, the writers overcame the constraints of gender and class at school and in the home to achieve an education through both formal and informal means. Furthermore, the kind of education they acquired was dependent mainly on parental attitude to education, most particularly that of their mothers.

Of social changes, perhaps the most relevant for the cohort was the improvement in education due mainly to the Education Act brought in by W. E. Forster in 1870. This legislated for the provision of schooling for all children up to the age of ten.¹⁹ Most of the women in the cohort were therefore enabled to take advantage of educational reforms during their childhood and gained some measure of formal education. Some, however, were not and found strategies to cope with what they saw as a lack of opportunity. They learned to read informally by borrowing books or enlisting the help of friends and families. Interest in Socialism for many of the cohort came about through reading material borrowed in this way: most notably the work of the socialist Robert Blatchford, which had particular relevance for political involvement later in life for many of the cohort.²⁰ In some cases, educational achievement was seen as an end in itself; the cohort in

¹⁹ W. E. Forster (1818-1886) was a Quaker wool merchant who was vice-president of the committee of the Privy Council for education and to whom Gladstone left the framing of the 1870 Education Act.

²⁰ Robert Blatchford (1851-1943), Socialist and writer, was the author of such titles as *Socialism: A Reply to the Encyclical of the Pope* (1893); *Merrie England* (1895); *The New Religion* (1897); *Competition: A Plain Lesson for the Workers* (1898); *Britain for the British* (1902); *God and My Neighbour* (1904). Perhaps the most notable of which was *Merrie England* which provoked much discussion in the national press.

general were better educated than their parents. In others the writers clearly indicated that educational success was a first step to a more public success in further education, politics or the work-place.

Chapter four examines domestic success, which for many of these women, at least during some period of their lives, meant marriage, a happy home life, children and perhaps buying or renting their own home. Domestic success was often measured by respectability, both crucial to the way in which all women were perceived by society over the period. Domesticity was an area for which working-class girls, in particular, were trained during childhood at home and at school. Girls growing up were given clear instruction from parents and teachers about women's place in society: they must be good girls who would become good workers, most notably good domestic servants, as well as good wives and mothers. Skills 'appropriate' for girls were therefore taught which would prepare them for typically female employment and for women's work, and women's place, within the home. The chapter argues that, far from resenting this situation, the cohort, with a few exceptions, welcomed their training in domestic skills and wrote proudly of their respectability: their ability to manage their homes and make them comfortable and attractive, and to bring up their children well and to be good wives and neighbours. In doing so, they were both reflecting and promoting societal values of domesticity.

Chapter five considers success in economic terms, illustrated primarily in the ways that the women controlled their own and the family income. For many women economic success was contingent upon educational success and many of the cohort used their educational achievements to gain fulfilment, and better pay in the work-place. As young

workers, the women contributed to family economics and in time to their own economic independence away from the family home. There was a change over the period and beyond, and the cohort illustrated that increasing access to occupations such as teaching, tailoring and clerical work, once male-dominated, opened up better-paid opportunities for women.²¹ For married women family duties often merged with paid work. The 'double shift' of paid employment and housework was not the same for all of the women in the cohort, any more than it was for working-class women in general during the nineteenth century and beyond. In particular, there were differences between married and single women, childless and childbearing women, and urban and rural women. Women at different times of their life also had varying responsibilities and experienced varying degrees of economic success. Nevertheless, this chapter reveals the possibilities for social advancement, and a better standard of living, for working-class women as a widening range of consumer goods became available to society in general. Working-class women, in controlling how family income was spent, played an increasingly important role in the development of the consumer society.

Chapter six examines the nature of success that was bound up with political rights and freedoms, both in the work-place and at home, or in participation in social clubs and societies. Importantly, a political and social awareness is seen emerging in many of the autobiographies written by the cohort. Working conditions improved over the period, as the factory acts came into being and new reforms were enforced as factory inspections began to take place. The chapter argues that the reforms were to affect the lives of many of the women in the cohort and of working-class women in general: they became involved

²¹ The 1891 Census, *Employment: Table 6, England and Wales*, pp. 26-30 showed that in the 1891 census the employment of women could be divided into: 1,386,167 indoor domestic servants; 415,961 milliners, dressmakers and staymakers; 332,784 in cotton and cotton goods manufacturing; 185,246 in washing, mangling and other laundrywork; 144,393 in teaching and 89,244 in tailoring.

with politics in the work-place, joined trade unions and became familiar with political behaviours such as voting, balloting, canvassing and public speaking.

Political action was not new to working-class women. Historical accounts of popular protest written since the 1960s have emphasized the trend towards various forms of collective action – exemplified by Eric Hobsbawm’s analysis of ‘collective bargaining by riot’.²² This behaviour involved women in the community, and those in the cohort were no exception to the trend. Those who stayed at home after marriage, as well as those who continued to work in paid employment, became involved with clubs, societies or political movements in the public arena outside both home and work. In many cases those in work who joined trades union became members of the Independent Labour Party, which was affiliated to the unions. Others joined socialist societies such as the Clarion Club, mainly for recreational reasons such as cycling or choral singing. Those women who saw success centred mainly in the domestic sphere could also take part in political activities. As members of the Working Women’s Guild, for example, they had a public voice, they took part in ballots and voted within the Guild on a variety of social and women’s issues. This sort of activity could translate to the wider political field of organizations such as the suffragette movement or the Women’s Labour League. Even the act of shopping at a co-operative could be seen as supporting, in a general way, a political ideal.

Political activity, and in particular suffragism and the struggle for equal rights, was given great prominence in a few of the autobiographies, and had a place in most of them. It is this involvement with the public sphere of politics that, arguably, is most relevant to the continuity of history. Political and social changes had enabled women to effect changes in

²² Eric Hobsbawm, ‘The Machine Breakers,’ in *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964), p. 45.

their own lives, and by joining a political party they could, in turn, themselves have some effect on changes in society. Their involvement with the public sphere of politics reflects the reciprocal nature of social and political change.

The conclusion of the thesis draws together the threads of discussion in the preceding chapters. The four chapters - on education, domesticity, economics and politics - reveal much about the nature of success in these areas as experienced by the autobiographers. They also show that there were possibilities for advancement for women like themselves, since it is not unreasonable to suppose that many more such women had similar aspirations but failed to realize their dreams or potential; or did so, but were not inspired to write their personal history. Nevertheless the cohort illustrate that women born into the working-class could achieve success: they tested the limits of, and in some cases defied, Victorian cultural assumptions. The autobiographies studied here thus represent a valuable record and are testimony to, if not a new social phenomenon – the successful working-class woman – then at least to a new expression of it.

Chapter 1: Methodology

Introduction

During the nineteenth century there was a marked increase in literacy amongst the working class in England, and as a result for the first time written primary source material from this section of society can be found. There are over 1,000 known autobiographies from working-class people born in England between 1790 and 1900: 136 of these are by women.¹

The relatively low output of working-class women's writing compared to that of working-class men cannot be attributed to a low level of literacy.² There was a rapid growth in literacy for both girls and boys, who had relatively equal opportunities to attend some form of primary schooling. Furthermore, although in 1840 one-third of all grooms and one-half of all brides could not sign their names, by 1900 virtually all brides and grooms were able to sign the marriage register.³ In essence, there was little difference between working men and women in the acquisition of literacy skills.⁴

¹ Literature searches were undertaken for working-class female autobiographies in the Bodleian Library Oxford, Bath County Library, Bath Spa University College Library and the British Library. Letters were written to county libraries throughout England. In addition, a record of known female autobiographies was extrapolated from: John Burnett, David Vincent and David Mayall, *The Autobiography of the Working Class 1790-1900*, vol. I, II and III, and Supplement (Brighton: Harvester Press, Leverhulme Trust, 1984). Altogether this resulted in the finding of a total of 136 texts of women who had lived all or part of their lives in the nineteenth century.

² For discussion on the literacy of working-class women, see: W. B. Stephens, *Education, Literacy and Society, 1880-1870: The Geography of Diversity in Provincial England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987); David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

³ David F. Mitch *The Rise of Popular Literacy in Victorian England: The Influence of Private Choice and Public Policy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), p.1.

⁴ On average, female literacy rates at the beginning of the nineteenth century were about ten to fifteen points behind male rates, becoming closer as the century progressed. There is evidence that in some areas of high female unemployment the rate could be very lower, but this does not explain the one to ten ratio of female to male autobiographers. For discussion of illiteracy in the nineteenth century see, for instance, Roger Schofield, 'Dimensions of Illiteracy 1750-1850', in *Explorations in Economic History*, volume I no.4 (Summer, 1973), p.453.

One possible explanation is that societal conventions did not encourage women to write about themselves. Respectable women were modest, retiring, supportive of their husband (Samuel Smiles's 'best comforters, the best sympathisers, the best nurses, the best companions')⁵ and were to be found, ideally, at the centre of a happy family home. The difficulty encountered in breaking from the 'separate sphere', historically claimed to have been imposed on women, may explain, in part at least, why only one-tenth of the extant autobiographical material from working people of this period was written by women.⁶ By writing, and even more so, by making their writing public, these women would be rebelling: transcending the societally constructed hegemony of both class and gender.⁷ Working-class women who aspired to respectability may therefore have hesitated to write their autobiographies. Those who did so, as will be shown, often conformed to a common writers' tradition and incorporated a justification for their writing as a preface, foreword or passage within the texts of their autobiographies.⁸

An alternative explanation is that the majority of working-class women did not live lives that encompassed the sorts of success discussed earlier. They may not have regarded the 'ordinariness' of their lives as worthy of recording and so there will have been little motivation to write about them. Nevertheless, some working-class women did overcome

⁵ See above, p. 10.

⁶ The notion of 'separate spheres' while still a useful descriptive tool for the historian has come under attack in recent years. See, for example, Linda Kerber, 'Separate spheres, female worlds, woman's place: the rhetoric of woman's history' in *Journal of American History*, 75, 1 (1988); Amanda Vickery 'Golden age to separate spheres? A review of the categories and chronology of English women's history' in *Historical Journal*, 36, 2 (1993). For a critique of the separate spheres model and post-structuralist feminist theory, see, Ann-Louise Shapiro, ed. *Feminist Revision History*, (New Brunswick: New Jersey, 1994).

⁷ For a discussion of ideology and gender see, for instance: Lesley Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain Since 1880* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000); Susan Kingsley Kent, *Gender and Power in Britain 1640-1990*; Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments* (London: Virago, 1989).

⁸ Jane Rendall has illustrated this trend in '“A Short Account of My Unprofitable Life”: Autobiographies of Working Class Women in Britain c.1775-1845' in *Women's Lives/Women's Times: New Essays on Auto/Biography*, ed. Trev Lynn Broughton and Linda Anderson (Albany: State University of New York: 1997), pp.31-50.

the obstacles of class and gender facing them, and found the ability and motivation to write their autobiographies.

During the preliminary research for this thesis and following a general enquiry to librarians in England for lists of relevant holdings, all of the 136 known autobiographies written by working-class women born during the nineteenth century were read.⁹

Comprising both published and unpublished texts, they were found to be a very disparate and varied group. Initial analysis revealed a general change of emphasis over time and, although these overlap, there was a general trend from spiritual to mainly secular writing as the century progressed.

Fourteen of the autobiographies were written by women born before mid-century.¹⁰ All of these were spiritual or confessional autobiographies. They were formulaic, religious in tone and followed an older puritan pattern found in chapbooks, evangelical texts and Sunday school prize-books, all of which may have been available to working-class women at this time.¹¹ Spiritual autobiographies, or 'testimonies', continue to be written up to the present day, especially by women of all classes involved with Quakerism or Christian 'Born Again' movements. These texts describe a personal introspective spiritual journey from an early life of sin, through enlightenment from God, to a state of grace. In general they give few personal details and are not set into any historical context. Moreover, they were mostly written when the author was relatively young, triggered by a religious

⁹ See 'Bibliography' appendix IV, pp. 305-313.

¹⁰ These were Rose Allen (b.1809); Jane Andrew (b.1815); Janet Bathgate; Ruth Bryan (b.1805); Mrs Collier (b.1805); Kezzie Crawford (b.1835); Barbara Farquhar (b.1800); Marianne Hearn (b.1834); Lucy Luck (b.1848); Mary Smith (b.1822); Elizabeth Squirrell (b.1838); Elizabeth Storie (b.1818); Louisa Twining (b.1820) and Mary Weston (b.1840), see 'Bibliography'.

¹¹ For discussion on contact with the printed word for the working class during this period see, for instance, David F. Mitch, *The Rise of Popular Literacy in Victorian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1992), pp.43-79.

conversion, which in many instances was claimed to have taken place in the early adulthood, or even childhood, of the writer.

The numbers of spiritual testimonies declined as working-class women born in the second half of the nineteenth century began to write more secular autobiographies. The writers tended to be older than those writing spiritual testimonies, and in many cases were responding to competitions run by local history groups or to calls for 'memoirs' by welfare associations for the elderly, which became especially popular in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.¹² These secular recollections did not have passages of thoughtful retrospection, or introspection, but were rather on the pattern of an oral recollection. They tended to be short autobiographical narratives about events or periods of time in the writer's lives, such as day trips or childhood; histories of places in which the writer had lived, or memories of specific people, especially parents.¹³ These writers also expressed acceptance of their working-class identity in the titles of their autobiographical writing which reflect their own, or their husband's, employment: *The Factory Girl*, *The Platelayer's Wife*, *A Servant*.¹⁴ Local history groups have published some of these in leaflets or booklet form. Many more remain unpublished and may be found in small

¹² For discussion of this change over time see, Carol Jenkins, '“The Major Silence”: Autobiographies of Nineteenth Century Working Women' in *Victorianism* ed. J. B. Bullen (London: Longman, 1997), pp.38-53. Appended.

¹³ For example: Beatrice Stallan, 'Childhood Recollections' TS (1940), Cambridge Record Office; Mary Weston, *The Story of Our Trip to Hastings* (London: Working Men's Association, 1890); Dorothy Alice Warwick, *Meon Valley Memories* (Farnham: Rich Tomes, 1982); Elsie M. Watts, *Personal Recollections of Old Trowbridge, by an Old Trowbridgean* (Trowbridge: F.A.Shugg, 1978); Millie Toole, *Our Old Man* (London: Dent and Sons, 1949).

¹⁴ Ellen Johnston, *Autobiography, Poems and Songs of Ellen Johnston 'The Factory Girl'* (Glasgow: William Love, 1897); Mrs Wrigley 'A Plate-Layer's Wife' in *Life As We Have Known It*, ed. Margaret Llewelyn Davies (London: Hogarth Press, 1931); Hannah Cullwick, *A Servant's Life* ed. Liz Stanley (London: Virago, 1984).

collections or singly in archives and local history sections of public and university libraries.¹⁵ Others may lie forgotten in attics.

This gradual process of change, from spiritual testimonies to a mainly secular genre of autobiographical recollections, may be explained as a manifestation or reflection of the process of secularisation which took place in the wider culture during the nineteenth century and beyond. Religion, by the end of the nineteenth century, was declining as a central societal and intellectual authority. Changes such as the advancement of technology, scientific discoveries throwing light on evolution, and new intellectual thinking on the meanings of the Scriptures, as well as divisions from both within and outside the established Church, all contributed to this growing secularism, a process which has been well-documented.¹⁶ Orthodox religion seemed to be in decline and no longer of central importance in the lives of the majority of the populace.

Yet although the autobiographers from mid-century onwards were secular rather than religious writers, the majority of them were believers, in the widest sense, and many continued to be practising Christians who went to church regularly and took part in family prayers and hymn singing. More broadly, their belief encompassed the motivation for personal actions and morals resulting in a way of life rather than adherence to a particular denomination. In other words, the autobiographies reflect the fact that, by this period,

¹⁵ The majority of collections are located in Brunel University Library, Middlesex. The Northampton and Cambridge Record Offices also house a good number.

¹⁶ For discussion of the process of secularisation in the nineteenth century see, for example: Owen Chadwick, *The Secularisation of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church Parts I and II* (London: A & C Black, 1970); B. G. Worrall, *The Making of the Modern Church: Christianity in England Since 1800* (London: SPCK, 1988). For a study, which re-examines the assumption that religion was in decline during the last quarter of the nineteenth century because of the increase in modern industry and the industrialization of society in the industrial towns, see, S. J. D. Green, *Religion in the Age of Decline: Organization and Experience in Industrial Yorkshire 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

'religion' had become a more personal faith or morality, which coloured and informed the lives of the cohort, rather than an orthodox religion.

The years 1870-1900 were a period of social, cultural and political change in the nineteenth century during which education, working conditions and opportunities as well as legal rights improved for working-class women. There is a change in the tone and content of a significant number of the autobiographies written by women born in these years. Close reading of the 55 extant autobiographies relating to this period reveals that just over half - 29 in all - were similar in content to those written by authors born before 1870.¹⁷ These twenty-nine texts were found to be mostly short, essay-style manuscripts.¹⁸ With two exceptions they comprise an average of between 500 and 1,000 words.¹⁹ Like the earlier group, they were written in response to calls for local memoirs and they too comprise anecdotal memories of place, family members, local environment, or details of a particular event - often taking place during the childhood of the writer. While these texts are interesting as social documents, they do not give a thoughtful, subjective viewpoint of a personal life, and none have been published.

¹⁷ It should be noted that although unpublished as entire texts, edited excerpts of 6-8 pages, from four of these unpublished autobiographies were used by John Burnett in his working-class anthologies. These are: Faith Dorothy Osgerby 'My Memoirs' in *Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood Education and Family* ed. John Burnett (London: Allen Lane, 1972), pp.77-84; Rosina Whyatt, 'Munitions Factory Worker' and Lilian Westall 'The Good Old Days' in *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s* ed. John Burnett (London: Allen Lane, 1974), pp.116-124, 215-221.

¹⁸ Bexley Library housed the autobiographical text of May Wasson (b.1890); Brunel University Local History Department housed the autobiographical texts of: Alice Maud Chase (b.1880); Maud Clarke (b.1887); Ruth Cox (1890); Mabel Cutts (1894); Anita Hughes (b.1892); Charlotte Jordan (b.1894); Ethel M Ley (b.1880); Martha Martin (b.1871); Catherine McLoughlin (b.1889); Dora A. Nicholls (b.1881); Annie E Passiful (b.1895) and Elizabeth Rignall (b.1894); Cambridge Record Office housed those of Amy Grace Rose (b.1877); Beatrice Stallan (b.1873); Lilian Westall (b.1893); Northampton Record office housed those of: Mrs E Arch (b.1871) and Emma Spriggs (b.1885); The Bodleian Library housed that of: Florrie Davis (b.1892) and Edith Simcox (1876); Sussex Record Office housed that of Mrs R Downer (b.1884); Crosby Local History Library housed that of Zoe Fairhurst (b.1887); Ruskin College, Oxford housed those of Sarah Landymore (b.1894) and Jessie Stephen (b.1894); In addition, five remaining autobiographies were privately held and were not available for inspection: those written by: Hilda R Fowler (b.1890), Ellen Gill (b.1888), Edith Griffin (b.1870); Mrs P Marrin (b.1890) and Mary L Triggall (b.1888).

¹⁹ The exceptions are the substantial autobiographies of Jessie Stephen, the manuscript of which comprises some 198 pages (c.67,000 words) and located in Ruskin College, Oxford, and that of Faith Dorothy Osgood which was partially published by John Burnett in *Destiny Obscure* (pp.77-84) the remainder of the manuscript was held privately by Osgood's granddaughter and is now unobtainable.

In contrast are the twenty-six published texts.²⁰ These differ in important ways from the earlier genre of autobiographical writing. In general the published texts are more substantial, extending, in many cases, to several hundred pages.²¹ They relate to national – and sometimes international – issues, rather than only those of local or parochial interest, and focus on events and people both outside and within the immediate family. They show an awareness of historical context and chronology not found in the unpublished texts. They include passages of introspection and are thoughtful, retrospective, personal, extended life-narratives, which are also contextualized against details of the time in which they were written.

Most importantly this group of twenty-six writers, though rarely using the word ‘success’, describe achievements of various kinds, often realized in the face of adversity. Hitherto the study of women’s autobiography has been used to illustrate working-class life, lived within class boundaries where little aspiration towards social mobility is shown. This was essentially John Burnett’s approach when he featured working-class autobiographies in his series of books: *Destiny Obscure*, *Useful Toil* and *Idle Hands*.²² Working class women’s autobiographies have not generally been seen as celebrating success or achievement in their lives. Instead, as in Ernest Bryant’s *Self Help*, success has been presented as the prerogative of middle-class women and men. There are exceptions, which have begun to reclaim the place of working-class women in feminist and political history. For example Margaret Llewelyn Davies’s 1931 collection of Women’s Co-operative Guild member’s

²⁰ This number does not include the largely fictionalised ‘autobiographies’ written by writers: Catherine Cookson, *Our Kate. An Autobiography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969); Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise To Candleford* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939; reprinted Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973, 1979); Kate Mary Edwards, *Fenland Chronicle* ed. Sybil Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967) and the anonymous *Confessions of a Dancing Girl* (London: Heath, Cranton and Ousley, 1913).

²¹ For brief biographies and bibliography of the twenty-six autobiographies see below, p.57- 83.

²² John Burnett, *Idle Hands: The Experience of Unemployment 1790-1990* (London: Routledge, 1994); *Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and Family From the 1820s to the 1920s* (London: Allen Lane, 1982) and *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s* (London: Allen Lane, 1974).

autobiographies *Life As We Have Known It*. Featuring the autobiographies of working-class women, it includes two women, Mrs Scott and Mrs Yearn, who meet the birth-date criterion of the cohort.²³ And the political role of working-class women in the subject area of suffrage was largely neglected until 1978, when Jill Liddington and Jill Norris published *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, which challenged the view that the female vote was won by middle-class activists.²⁴ Since the 1970s and Standish Meacham's examination of the lives led by working-class women and their relevance to their communities, *A Life Apart: The English Working Class 1890-1914*, there has been rapid growth in studies of working-class women's history by writers such as Leonore Davidoff, Angela John, Martin Pugh, Ellen Ross, Martha Vicinus and others who indicate the crucial position women held within the working class.²⁵ However, none of these works has specifically examined fluidity in the lives of working-class women, so the assumption has been that they remain in the strata of society in which they were born, with no discussion of the women's own perceptions of success.

The texts considered here constitute a rich source for the history of working-class women allowing current assumptions about the static nature of their lives to be examined and perhaps revised. A criticism which may be levelled at this study is the of sample size, which is unavoidably small and it may be argued that this small number of texts cannot

²³ Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker' and Mrs Yearn, 'A Public-Spirited Rebel' in Margaret Llewelyn Davies, ed. *Life As We Have Known It: By Co-operative working Women* (London: Hogarth Press, 1931; republished Virago, 1977, 1982, 1984, 1990), pp. 81-101 and 102-109.

²⁴ Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us* (London: Virago, 1978; republished Rivers Oram, 2000.)

²⁵ Leonore Davidoff and Belinda Westover, ed., *Our Work, Our Lives, Our Words* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986); Angela John, *Unequal Opportunities: Women's Employment in England 1800-1918* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986); Martin Pugh, *The March of the Women: A Revisionist Analysis of the Campaign for Women's Suffrage 1866-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992); Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Martha Vicinus, *Suffer and be Still. Women in the Victorian Age* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972); Martha Vicinus, ed., *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).

represent anything but an anomalous group of women. However, it is important that this group of autobiographies are given some prominence since they are the first group of women, originally from the working class, to discuss the nature of their own success. If the quantity of texts is statistically small, the quality of experience that they record is of great value, and it is precisely the rarity of the texts that gives them significance, and demands that they be given due acknowledgement in the historical record. In Sheila Rowbotham's phrase, working-class women have been 'hidden from history'.²⁶ It is a history which has been hitherto largely ignored. The thesis rescues this cohort of women from what E. P. Thompson called 'the enormous condescension of posterity'.²⁷

Despite similarities in terms of upward social mobility, aspirations and achievements, close analysis of the texts enables the reader to appreciate the complexity of the lives of the cohort, and through this the great diversity of experience to be found in the lives of this generation of working-class women. It is these differences, as well as the similarities, which make their autobiographies worthy of further study. To a great extent, these writers were women who fought to take charge of their own destiny rather than merely being constrained by societal conventions of class and gender. One important way they took responsibility for their own lives was in choosing to write their own history.²⁸ In doing so, they have made a claim that the women of their class and period had a history worth

²⁶ Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden From History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It* (London: Pluto Press, 1973).

²⁷ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p.12.

²⁸ For instance, Ada Nield Chew wrote much of her autobiography in the form of articles for a local newspaper; Alice Foley was in correspondence with her publishers and the letters remain in the Foley archives in Bolton Central Library; Hannah Mitchell published sections of her autobiography during her lifetime and tried, unsuccessfully, to find a publisher to take the whole manuscript; Nellie Scott and Mrs Yearn wrote specifically for the Working Women's Guild publication, *Life As We Have Known It*. Winifred Griffiths was encouraged by relatives and friends 'to put the story of my life into print'; Annie Kenney, in her 'Foreword' of her autobiography wrote of 'presenting my narrative to the public' Annie Kenney, *Memoirs of a Militant* (London: Edward Arnold, 1924), p. v.

recording. Their autobiographies remain a physical presence from a group of women from whom little material evidence remains.

Working-class Autobiography

Until the last half of the twentieth century the study of the working class in general, and working-class women in particular had remained a fairly neglected area of social history. The poor may have been always with us, but, it seemed, they were of little interest.²⁹ Those nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social historians who did acknowledge the relevance of the working class, tended to see it as a monolithic, ungendered group. They grounded studies of the conditions of working-class life within class boundaries and made no acknowledgement of social mobility, one of the notable features of the autobiographies of the cohort.

Nineteenth-century studies of working-class society include those by Henry Mayhew, Charles Booth and, at the end of the century, Seebohm Rowntree.³⁰ Both Booth and Mayhew, although writing forty years apart, described minimum wages, maximum work hours in the casual or sweated trades, dismal living conditions, drunken males and women forced into prostitution. They were writing for an audience with strongly held beliefs about the place of the 'poor-but-honest' in society. They also catered for those who had an insatiable desire for facts, particularly sensational ones, and who wanted to read about the hardships of life for people less fortunate than themselves.³¹ Their studies took the form of reported interviews and may be criticized because of poor technique: in particular

²⁹Paraphrased from a quote 'The poor always ye have with you' *The Bible* (Authorized Version, 1611) St. John, ch.12 v.8.

³⁰ Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (London, Woodfall, 1851, 1861); Seebohm Rowntree, (London: 1901); Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London, 1875-1903*, ed. Guy Routh (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987).

³¹ This point was underlined by contemporary writers, for instance, Octavia Hill, writing in the journal *The Nineteenth Century* in 1884: 'I notice a depraved hunger for rags, sharp need and slums, which pollutes some who profess charity'.

leading or directed questioning by middle-class interviewers who had established little rapport with their subjects.³² Such interviews may well have been subjectively reported, although for the best of motives: the writers were pressing for social reforms and of course they did alert society to the reality of urban poverty, contributing to the ‘Condition of England’ debate at the time of the Boer War.³³

Social studies of the twentieth century were less lurid and sensationalist. They began in 1906 when Maud Pember-Reeves published *Round About a Pound a Week*, an investigation of the finances of one hundred working-class families from the East End of London. It involved women recording the way they spent the wages brought home by their husbands. Findings were then extrapolated by the team of, again, middle-class social observers.³⁴ After Pember-Reeves’s study, there were few investigations on working-class life undertaken although Beatrice Potter, later Webb, made a series of studies on rural and urban poor.³⁵ In 1963, E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*, and its many subsequent reprints are witness to the increasing interest in working-class history by the end of the century.³⁶ The Mass Observation studies from 1937, and the early 1950s, although not confined to working-class people, broke new ground as, for the first time, volunteer writers recorded their own observations on everyday life without an

³² For a critique of Mayhew’s work see, E. P. Thompson and E. Yeo, *The Unknown Mayhew* (London: Merlin Press, 1971).

³³ The ‘Condition of England’ question (Carlisle’s phrase from the Journal *Past and Present*) referred to the relations between Britain and the rest of the world, religion and science, and most importantly, for the social observers, it was about social justice and discontent of the poor. See, for example, A. N. Wilson, *The Victorians*, pp.53-62.

³⁴ Maud Pember-Reeves, *Round About A Pound A Week* (London: G Bell and Sons, 1906).

³⁵ Beatrice Potter had long been a chronicler and observer of the lives of the poor in London’s Dockland and amongst the Jewish immigrants of the East End, and in the 1880s became involved with trade unions and the Co-operative Movement. She and her Socialist husband Sidney Webb had founded the London School of Economics by 1898.

³⁶ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*.

observer or interviewer to prompt them.³⁷ The idea of a panel of writers was revived by the Mass Observation Study in 1981.

In addition, one or two studies were undertaken in the late 1950s and early 1960s, in the field of working-class religion. These used a limited number of working-class sources. E. R. Wickham (1957) and Kevin Inglis (1963), for example, investigated the history of English working-class religion in an attempt to explain present day religious apathy amongst the working class.³⁸ Another wave of studies on the working class, again on their attitude to religion, came in the 1970s. In 1974 Hugh McLeod argued that the prevailing religious outlook in nineteenth-century working-class London was not indifference, as contemporary middle- and upper-class writers had suggested, but a 'diffusive Christianity' or what other historians have described as 'popular religion'. This notion has echoes within the writing of the cohort.³⁹ Wickam, Inglis and McLeod, however, based their arguments mainly on the 'abundant secondary literature'.⁴⁰ A similar criticism may be levelled at Ainsworth, who, in a 1977 study, argued that the working classes had their own approach to religion that was embodied in the ideology of respectability, self-help and self-improvement, which, Ainsworth claimed, exercised a huge influence on the Lancashire working class.⁴¹ Again secondary sources were quoted, while direct testimony from the working class was not sought.

³⁷ The Mass-Observation Archive is collected in the University of Sussex at Brighton and open to visitors.

³⁸ Kevin Stanley Inglis, *Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963); E. R. Wickham, *Church and People in an Industrial City* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1957).

³⁹ Hugh McLeod, *Religion and Society in England 1850-1914*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1996), p.6.

⁴⁰ The two primary sources McLeod used are the oral history project conducted by Elizabeth Roberts which, McLeod acknowledges 'provides some of the richest material on religion, because of her outstanding ability to empathise with the interviewees and to persuade them to enlarge on interesting points'; and the Bristol Oral History Project which 'focused more directly on questions of individual belief and unbelief, and so provided information of a kind which is often lacking where the focus is more on topics such as church-going.' McLeod, *Religion and Society*, p.10.

⁴¹ A. Ainsworth, 'Religion in the Working Class Community and the Evolution of Socialism in Later Nineteenth-Century Lancashire' in *Historie Sociale*, Vol. 10 (1977).

Despite this groundswell of interest in the history of the working class, it was not until the 1980s that attention turned to working-class autobiography in particular, with publications from social historians such as John Burnett and David Vincent.⁴² Also in the 1980s came Carl Chinn's study of social conditions for the working poor in Manchester, based mainly on autobiographical sources, as was Ellen Ross's three articles on women of the urban poor in London.⁴³ At this time too, arguably one of the first oral histories of the working class was published: Elizabeth Roberts' study on the lives of working-class women in Birmingham.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, at the time of writing present time female working-class autobiography remains a less explored source than those written by working-class men, early examples of which proved popular.⁴⁵ The autobiographies written by the cohort are thus especially significant because of the recent establishment of autobiographical history as an important source of direct evidence about past lives. Although collections of autobiographies from working-class women may often be found in local history archives, few have been collated and published. One notable exception is the work of Margaret Llewellyn Davies in editing and publishing, in 1931, the manuscripts of Co-operative Working Women Guild members.⁴⁶ More recently, there have been biographies from historians such as Hilda Kean, and Angela John and the work of Jill Liddington and Jill Norris on working-

⁴² John Burnett, *Idle Hands: The Experience of Unemployment 1790-1990* (London: Routledge, 1994), *Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and Family From the 1820s to the 1920s* (London: Allen Lane, 1982) and *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s* (London: Allen Lane, 1974); David Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom* (London: Europa, 1981).

⁴³ Carl Chinn, *They Worked All Their Lives: Women of the Urban Poor in England, 1880-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988); Ellen Ross 'Survival Networks: Women's Neighbourhood Sharing in London Before World War I' in *History Workshop Journal*, Spring 1983, Vol. 15, p.7.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women 1890-1940* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985).

⁴⁵ For example, Joseph Arch, *The Story of My Life* (London: Hutchinson, 1898); Samuel Bamford, *Passages in the Life of a Radical* (London: Simpkin Marshall, 1859); James Dawson Burn, *The Autobiography of a Begar Boy: The Progress of a Ploughboy to a Seat in Parliament* (London: Tweedie, 1855); John Hodge, *Workman's Cottage to Windsor Castle*, (London: n.pub., 1931).

⁴⁶ Margaret Llewellyn Davies, *Life As We Have Known It*.

class suffragettes include autobiographical material as well as interviews, diaries and newspaper accounts, as does Anna Davin's book on working-class children growing up in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century London.⁴⁷

The collation of autobiographical texts themselves may be said to date from 1968 when William Matthew's pioneering guide to research, *British Autobiographies: An Annotated Bibliography of British Autobiographies Written or Published before 1955* was published.⁴⁸ Building on Matthew's work, several historians published collections of autobiographical writings that focused exclusively on working-class writers. John Burnett's historical discourses on working-class autobiography, for example, included both male and female. Although the numbers of male writers did exceed those of female, Burnett has made an effort to include a high percentage of women.⁴⁹ In *Destiny Obscure*, for example, Burnett cites 16 male and 12 female autobiographies, while in *Useful Toil* he cites 20 male autobiographies and 7 female. Yet the experiences of economic and industrial change in the nineteenth century were different for working-class women and working-class men.⁵⁰ One might argue, therefore, that both were equally valid and should be given equal weighting by historians despite the scarceness of female source material.

In the preface to his 1981 work, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, David Vincent noted the paucity in numbers of female working-class autobiographers and stated that 'the major

⁴⁷ Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor: Home, School and Street in London 1870-1914* (London: Rivers Oram, 1996); Angela John, *By the Sweat of Their Brow: Women Workers at Victorian Coal Mines* (London: Virago, 1980); Hilda Kean, *Deeds Not Words: The Lives of Suffragette Teachers* (London: Pluto Press, 1990); Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*.

⁴⁸ William Matthews, *British Autobiographies: An Annotated Bibliography of British Autobiographies Written or Published before 1955* (first published London: 1955; republished Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

⁴⁹ John Burnett uses working-class autobiographies as the primary source material in *Destiny Obscure*, *Useful Toil* and *Idle Hands*.

⁵⁰ For discussion of this theme see, Jane Rendall, *Women in an Industrializing Society: England 1750-1880* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

silence is that of women'.⁵¹ His survey of 142 autobiographies included only 6 by women. In an attempt to explain the imbalance, he claimed: 'the answer must lie ...in the absence among women of the self-confidence required to undertake the unusual act of writing an autobiography'.⁵² However, Julia Swindells has criticized Vincent's methodology in *creating* 'a silence of women' with his imbalance of numbers and argued that 'gender consciousness, with class, is constructed within autobiography as a genre.'⁵³

In 1984, John Burnett, David Vincent, and David Mayall published their collaborative bibliography, *The Autobiography of the Working Classes* an edited and a more comprehensive venture than the 1955 work by Matthews. It confirmed that only one tenth of working-class autobiographies were written by women. The authors claimed:

The range of topics which has been touched on [are] ancestry and childhood, education, relationships, work, religion, politics, leisure...Autobiographies can reach into this world in a way which no other form of evidence provides, can even take us into the private world of attitudes and beliefs, hopes and fears, joys and sorrows.⁵⁴

They further argued that an important aspect of autobiographical texts is that 'they remain pieces of literature, their contents shaped not only by the intentions of the writers and the traditions in which they were working, but also by the mode in which they were recorded.'⁵⁵ Three years earlier, David Vincent had written along the same lines, claiming that autobiographies are 'units of literature'.⁵⁶ Many writers on the genre of

⁵¹ David Vincent, *Bread Knowledge and Freedom*, p.6.

⁵² David Vincent, *Bread Knowledge and Freedom*, p.8.

⁵³ Julia Swindells, *Victorian Writing and Working Women: The other side of silence* (Cambridge: Polity, 1985), p.124-125.

⁵⁴ Burnett, Vincent and Mayall ed., *The Autobiography of the Working Classes*, p.xxix.

⁵⁵ Burnett, Vincent and Mayall ed., *The Autobiography of the Working Classes*, p. xix.

⁵⁶ David Vincent, *Bread Knowledge and Freedom*, p.27.

autobiography, therefore, consider it a literary as well as an historical field, and recently historians have blurred these interdisciplinary divisions even more.⁵⁷

Furthermore, in the field of literary criticism, a number of female working-class autobiographies have been examined in order to illustrate the autobiographical genre. Such extensive work in a complementary discipline to that of history serves to underline the importance of these texts. Literary critics such as Linda Anderson, Shari Benstock, Regenia Gagnier, Leigh Gilmore and Barbara Kanner have used examples from the autobiographies of working-class women to illustrate, for instance, their arguments on subjectivity.⁵⁸ Regenia Gagnier refers to autobiography as 'an axiology of the self: the system of values, expectations, and constraints that come into play when one represents oneself to others in the concrete circumstances of daily life.' Linda Anderson, supporting the importance of autobiography in the history of literature, claimed that it was individual memory 'which allowed the past reality to be reflected upon'.⁵⁹ She quoted Phillipe Lejeune, who in 1982 produced the following widely quoted definition: '[Autobiography is] a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focussing on his individual life.'⁶⁰ Autobiography therefore represents an individual view of self-identity and provides the writers' personal view of a particular life. As Barbara Kanner concludes: 'autobiography provides a more open perspective on a world of women

⁵⁷ Carolyn Steedman (University of Warwick), as yet unpublished paper on this topic, presented at the *Texts of Testimony Conference* held at Liverpool John Moores University, August 2001.

⁵⁸ Linda Anderson *Autobiography: The New Critical Idiom* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001); Shari Benstock, *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings* (London: Routledge, 1988); Regenia Gagnier, *Subjectivities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self Representation* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994); Barbara Kanner, *Women in English Social History 1800-1914, Volume III: Autobiographical Writings* (London and New York: Garland Press, 1987).

⁵⁹ Linda Anderson, *Autobiography*, p.2.

⁶⁰ Cited Linda Anderson, *Autobiography*, p.2.

who have asked to be perceived in their own time, place, circumstances, and in their own words.’⁶¹

Others have identified strands within the genre of autobiography which are also of importance to the thesis. Leigh Gilmore, writing in 1994, stressed the importance in autobiography of: ‘(one) self representation constructed by autobiography studies and (two) the contemporary discursive histories of specific autobiographical texts.’⁶²

Examination of the autobiographies written by working-class women born prior to 1870 reveals that these two strands do not occur. They do, however, occur in those published autobiographies written by the cohort.

The viewpoints from literary criticism have highlighted an important discussion about texts as history. Historians have traditionally placed autobiography low in a hierarchy of texts. Women’s history, which often talks about recovering lost voices from the past, should, and increasingly does, have a particular interest in autobiography. A study of working-class autobiography can, with careful analysis, inform the historian about the individual experiences of women of working-class origin. It throws light on the shaping of their lives, the class and gender restrictions and constraints imposed on them, and the context in which they wrote their autobiographies.

The discussion above underlines the relevance of this particular group of texts. Nevertheless, they cannot be studied in isolation from the context in which they were written, and must of course be studied with reference to other disciplines and to other contemporary sources. It is important to identify any reading

⁶¹ Barbara Kanner, *Women in English Social History*, p.38.

⁶² Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics*, p.xiii.

matter with which the writers may have been familiar in order to determine possible bias within the texts of the autobiographies in question. Literary or social mores in the novels of the period may have reflected, or shaped, these women's consciousness. The ideal of respectability, for example, was widely defined in nineteenth-century literature.⁶³

Religious reading material - the Bible, evangelical tracts, cheap paper-bound chap books or reward books given as prizes at school and Sunday-school - was also pervasive and must have influenced the women.⁶⁴ As the century progressed, letter-writing manuals, essays, magazines and novels may have also played a role as printed material became cheaper, more widely distributed and more available to the working-class consumer through bookshops, public libraries and subscriptions.⁶⁵ By 1890 the most important journalistic development in terms of working-class women's reading, was arguably the penny domestic weekly, and titles such as *Household Ways*, *Home Chat* and *Home News* were widely read. They assumed that their readers were actively involved in running a home and sought to help them achieve this successfully, while also endeavouring to close the gap between an ideal of femininity defined by domesticity and the care of family and home, and one defined by wealth and appearance where someone else performed the domestic labour.⁶⁶

The cohort almost certainly had knowledge of Samuel Smiles's ideas, and may have even had access to his book *Self Help*, since it was printed in such vast numbers and at varying

⁶³ For example; Mrs Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1864); George Gissing, *The Nether World* (London: Smith Elder, 1889).

⁶⁴ For discussion on the way reading material influences thought and use of language see, for instance, Karin Lesnik Oberstein, *Children's Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), especially pp.23-24.

⁶⁵ See, for example, David F. Mitch, *The Rise of Popular Literacy in Victorian England*, pp.47-52.

⁶⁶ For discussion of the penny domestic magazine, see, for instance, Margaret Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.190-209.

prices throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Another possible source of success stories may have been the various series of pamphlets published by the Religious Tract Society, for example those in the series entitled *Excellent Women*.⁶⁷ Here success was described in terms of personal achievement, often against the odds although, as in Bryant's book, these again tended to be about middle-class women. During the nineteenth century and before, popular novels were being written featuring working-class people. The novels of Mrs Gaskell and George Eliot portrayed working-class characters 'bettering themselves'.⁶⁸ Such ideas of ambition, achievement, and success may be seen in the autobiographies. Several of the cohort, as will be discussed later, give lists of books that they read: these include novels and political treatises, but do not list magazines or periodicals, which they must have read but probably did not think them worth recording.⁶⁹

Although autobiographies provide valid historical texts, they must be carefully questioned with regard to context: who wrote them, when, and for what purpose? The historian also needs to ask what supports, generates or undermines the reality of the text: in other words, how was reality constructed for the autobiographer? All of this may introduce bias within the texts and will shape its meaning. Local historians may have requested details on a particular village, or about a specific event and the writer may therefore have given such subjects more prominence than might have otherwise been the case. Collections of autobiographies, solicited by a particular institution may be biased towards a particular ethos. For example, the autobiographies in the Working Women's Co-operative Guild collection made by Margaret Llewelyn Davis, were written with the authors knowing they

⁶⁷ *Excellent Women* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1906).

⁶⁸ See, for example, George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (London: Folio Society, 1986, originally published 1860); Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1849); Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (originally serialized in *Household Words* and published London: Chapman and Hall, 1855);

⁶⁹ Charmian Cannon 'The Everyday Life of an Edwardian Mother and her Daughters' in *Women's History Magazine*, Issue 43, (March 2003), suggests a similar occurrence in middle-class women's writing.

would almost certainly be read by an audience with an interest in the Guild, and probably by those outside their family circle. The Guildswomen, of whom Mrs Nellie Scott and Mrs Yearn are examples from the cohort, therefore placed emphasis on their membership of the Guild, Guild events and the precepts underpinning Guild ideology.

It may be imagined that oral history would complement the autobiographies. In general, however, the time-span encompassed by the lives of the cohort ends before oral history became a widespread and popular method of throwing light on working-class lives. Only one of the women autobiographers is known to have orally recorded her autobiography.⁷⁰ Similarly, one might argue that letters and diaries are more worthy of attention than autobiographies.⁷¹ As early as 1923 Arthur Ponsonby argued the importance of what he claimed to be: 'the fresh relation of events at the moment' in contrast to the crafted autobiography where events, he argued, had been 'shaped into a unified whole more often than not with a view to publication.'⁷² However, there is an important difference between the unconsidered immediacy of contemporary accounts found in letters, and to some extent diaries, and the considered thoughtful and retrospective account found in the autobiographies. Written with hindsight, the autobiographies allowed the writer to gain a perspective on the events of her life against the events of the wider world.

Autobiographies are often more informative in their descriptions of aspects of daily life which are frequently taken for granted in diaries and letters. They also display a surprising amount of detail about feelings, fears, ambitions and hopes. While all these

⁷⁰ Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie* was recorded and transcribed in 1979 when Annie was 92 years old. The editors declare they have 'changed nothing and added nothing' of Annie's spoken memoirs, apart from arranging the text chronologically and editing out repetitions.

⁷¹ Indeed Barbara Kanner has claimed that autobiographical writings may be said to *include* memoirs, journals, letters and diaries, see 'Introduction' in Barbara Kanner, *Women in English Social History*.

⁷² Arthur Ponsonby, *British Diaries* (London: Ben's Sixpenny Library, 1929), p.2.

texts may be of great value to the historian, it is with these published autobiographies that this thesis engages not least because since letters and diaries from the cohort, if they existed, have not generally been retained. For this reason, where the archival material is available, personal as well as official documents have been used during research for this thesis to authenticate the details of the autobiographies.⁷³

In having to overcome the stigma of both gender and class, the cohort may have feared a mixed reception from their readers. Interest in working-class history is, as has been discussed, a relatively new phenomenon, and the very fact of being a woman from a working-class background may have posed problems of 'authority' in print. Their texts required some form of legitimisation and this may have been the reason that so many of the texts have a dedication, foreword, introduction or afterward in which the writers stress their personal integrity and claimed the veracity - 'the truth' or 'the real life' - of their writing.

These working-class autobiographers may be accused of exaggeration: making their childhood seem worse than it was in order to make more of a contrast with their success later in life, or even as justification for wanting to better themselves. In many cases persons of note added credulity to the texts. Grace Foakes included an authenticating introduction by Lady Rose Henriques. Emma Smith's autobiography has a foreword by the historian and writer A.L. Rowse.⁷⁴ Ellen Wilkinson's autobiography appears in a

⁷³ For example, the Alice Foley papers in Bolton City Archives; Mary Gawthorpe, Annie Kenney Hannah Mitchell in Manchester City Archives; Winifred Griffiths in The National Library of Wales; Mary Luty in Rawtenstall Central Library Record Office, Hannah Mitchell and Margaret Bondfield in The Fawcett Library, London.

⁷⁴ Emma Smith, *A Cornish Waif's Story: An Autobiography* (London: Odhams Press, 1954).

volume of autobiographies collected by Margot Asquith, the Countess of Oxford.⁷⁵ In addition, several of the autobiographers – Margaret Bondfield, Alice Foley, Winifred Griffiths, and Ellen Wilkinson - received public honours and awards for their work, which they saw as watersheds of achievement, and their lives became public knowledge and so more easily verifiable.

Autobiographies may also be validated by recourse to officially recorded facts such as dates of birth, and marriage, or numbers of children, which are accepted as criteria of validity. Parliamentary papers, Court records, wills, birth-, death- and marriage-certificates are elevated texts, giving credence. This point has been underlined by Joy Webster Babre who, in an echo of Leigh Gilmore's work discussed earlier, stresses the importance of acknowledging all facets of history in the study of autobiography: the verifiable truths as well as the experience and perceptions of individual narratives. The picture thus obtained, Barbre claims, gives 'a more nuanced understanding of humanity and reconstruction of knowledge and show's the centrality of gender to human life and thought...a symbolic as well as semantic revolution by which we both challenge and reconstruct the traditional definitions of reality.'⁷⁶

It is here that the importance of the cohort's autobiographies lies. Having taken the above ideas into consideration, the texts in question are nevertheless valuable and important historical evidence. The lives of the cohort were based in a time in which changes in society happened, and the writers were aware of such changes, and took advantage of them, to a greater or lesser degree. Whatever embellishment they may have made to their

⁷⁵ Ellen Wilkinson, untitled, in *Myself When Young* ed. Margot Asquith, Countess of Oxford (London: Frederick Muller, 1938), pp.399-416.

⁷⁶ Joy Webster Barbre and The Personal Narratives Group ed. *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1989), p.263.

lives, the broad sweep of evidence can be corroborated. The social and political changes of which these women wrote most certainly took place.

These texts from this group of women should therefore be acknowledged in the areas of working class history, women's history, and the study of autobiography. This thesis acknowledges the importance of autobiography as the personal, and in the case of the women in the cohort, often the only, view of an individual and their relationship to society. Their experiences therefore give us a way of glimpsing the formation of lives of other women like themselves within the class and economic constraints imposed by the changing social landscape of the period.

The Historical Context of the Cohort

The period 1870-1900, during which these women were born, was one of far-reaching social and political changes which made their lives significantly different from those of their forebears. In their autobiographies the women recorded an awareness of the changes going on in the society in which they lived. Many of the cohort were born during the years of 'The Great Depression' of 1873-96, but notwithstanding this urban growth and the factory system had transformed consumption patterns in England during the period so that, as goods became cheaper and more readily available, even working class families became important consumers of manufactured goods. The cohort saw the acquisition of material goods as a significant part of their economic success.

Also seminal to the greater personal freedom of women, and particularly working-class women, were legislation within the series of Married Women's Property Acts. That passed in 1870, for instance, allowed women to keep income earned by themselves and

thus did a great deal to prevent exploitation of working-class women. Other significant legislation of the period included the Matrimonial Causes Act – aimed largely at working-class women victims of marital abuse; the consolidation of factory reforms in the Factory Act of 1878, which improved working conditions; the property qualification of the Franchise Reforms of 1884; the Redistribution Act of 1885 and the Public Health Acts of 1872, 1874 and 1875.⁷⁷

Arguably the most important societal changes as the cohort grew up, however, were educational reforms. Most notable was the Education Act of 1870, which legislated for public funding of compulsory primary education and so made schooling more readily available to this generation of working-class women. Educational reform largely came about because of anxiety from the intellectual and political elite about the advent of mass politics. Literary figures such as Matthew Arnold, Thomas Carlyle and George Eliot looked to primary education as a means of avoiding the political chaos which might result from giving uneducated masses the vote.⁷⁸ There was, therefore, a direct link between the 1867 Reform Act and the 1870 Education Act. During these years, literacy increased even in rural areas. The Act of 1870 laid a foundation for a formal system of public education with the construction of school boards in areas where no voluntary schools existed, so theoretically bringing primary education to the reach of all.

The Act, together with a series of factory reforms, also restricted children's work in paid employment. This did not change either their unpaid labour in the domestic sphere or their

⁷⁷ For discussion of these and other social changes from the 1880s until the end of the twentieth century, see, for instance, Lesley A Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain Since 1880*, in particular, for the changes affecting the working-class women of our period see, pp. 10-30, 'The Victorian Background'. See also the chronological table in appendix III, p.302 of this thesis for reforms of importance to the lives of the cohort.

⁷⁸ M. Wolff, 'The Uses of Context: Aspects of the 1860s' in *Victorian Studies*, supplement to vol.11, (September 1965), examines the responses of Matthew Arnold, Thomas Carlyle and George Eliot to the Reform crisis.

undertaking casual labour out of school for pocket money, which contributed to family economics.⁷⁹ It did, however, redefine childhood for all but the very poor. Children in general could now attend school instead of working in paid employment. School attendance was perceived as a sign of family respectability.

Compulsory schooling to the age of ten was made general by the 1880 Act so that by the 1890s school figured as a prominent, compulsory part of childhood for almost all children. The school-leaving age was raised to eleven in 1893 and to twelve – except for children employed in agriculture – in 1899. The Education Acts were reforms from which most, although not all, of the autobiographers benefited: one of the autobiographers, Hannah Mitchell, for example, although born in 1870, had only two weeks of formal schooling.⁸⁰ Most of the autobiographers record attending school until at least ten years of age. Whether learning by formal or informal means, however, being able to write enabled working-class women to commit their thoughts to paper, and wider reading allowed them to recognise parallels to their own lives in works of fiction. Access to cheaper books, newspapers, and the building of more public libraries also played an important part in their education, both during school years and afterwards.

Perhaps more importantly for the cohort, compulsory schooling meant that children could not be employed before school-leaving age, so the Education Act was in reality another Factory Act for children. Factories in the industrial north took advantage of the ‘half-time’ legislation, which allowed girls who passed the ‘labour test’ (a test of their aptitude for factory work rather than their level of educational achievements) to begin working half-days and attend school for the other half-day.

⁷⁹ Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor*, p.48.

⁸⁰ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up: The Autobiography of Hannah Mitchell, Suffragette and Rebel* ed. Geoffrey Mitchell (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), p. 49.

Nevertheless, most of the cohort received an elementary education; those that did not resented it and expressed discontent, which in some cases seems to have fuelled their ambition, making them more open-minded to opportunities for informal learning, or turning to education later in life. Several of the cohort were able to take advantage of some secondary education: 3 of the 26 took advantage of the pupil-teaching scheme and 2 of them became qualified as teachers, 3 won various scholarships, and of these 1 attained university education. Education, in all its variations, was therefore seminal to the cohort and their autobiographies are testimony to various ways they achieved an education and the different advantages they gained from learning.

The period also saw a great improvement in working conditions. Of particular importance to the cohort was the reduction of working hours to a maximum of ten hours a day (seven on Saturdays) in 1874. Reforms for better health care and working conditions left women more leisure hours, and more energy at the end of the working day. Although women of conviction had always found some means to become involved in activities which concerned them, a greater number of working-class women were now enabled to become involved with various movements and societies - political, religious and domestic - during their time away from paid employment. Women in the cohort joined variously the Co-operative Working Woman's Guild, socialist bodies such as the Clarion Club, the Independent Labour Party (ILP), the Labour Church, and various suffrage groups including the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) and the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS).

Franchise reforms during the years in which the cohort were growing up meant that the enfranchisement of women seemed an attainable goal. The Reform Act of 1867 had

broadened the electorate by decreasing financial qualifications and by enfranchising householders, mostly working-class men, in the boroughs. Following this came the Reform Bill of 1884, which virtually doubled the electorate by enfranchising workers and agricultural labourers. This act made representation possible for almost all of the male population. Working-class women, especially those in the industrial north who were members of trade unions and therefore used to public discussion and voting, could then envisage enfranchisement as a possibility, however remote, for the future. One result of this was that suffrage movements gained important working-class support during the last years of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: it will be shown in later chapters that some of the autobiographers in question achieved success within such movements.⁸¹

Subsequent reform acts during the lives of the cohort gave them greater freedoms, culminating in the Representation of the People Act of 1918. This granted the franchise to women after many years of struggle. It formed only part of a package which included universal suffrage for adult men of 21 years of age or over, whereas only rate-paying women of 30 or more years of age could vote. This was followed by the 1928 Act which, most importantly, set equal voting qualifications for men and women.

A further change discernable during the period, and beyond, was related to religious observance. Despite the decline in both religious writing and religious orthodoxy noted earlier, most of the autobiographers placed some importance on religious faith.⁸² Apart from the Roman Catholic Alice Foley, they did not specify a particular denomination, but referred to 'church' or 'chapel'. Nevertheless, the assumption within their writing that faith was present in all of their lives. This strongly suggests that the values of the set of

⁸¹ See Chapter 6, 'Politics' p.242 *ff.*

⁸² See this chapter pp.27-28.

beliefs which are generally termed Christian and which were held by Victorian society, still applied to society into the twentieth century.

Dissatisfaction with orthodox religion during the period was often channelled into non-conformist allegiance with the help of the successful revivalist campaigns, such as those of 1875 and 1884, from American Evangelists Dwight Moody (1837-1899) and Ira Sankey (1840-1908). The effects of these campaigns persisted well into the twentieth century. The concept of individual conversion following recognition of personal sinfulness has echoes of the earlier spiritual autobiographies. By the late nineteenth century this was translated into a personal morality, and the social concern epitomised by William Booth (1829-1912) and the Salvation Army, although this tended to be a middle-class movement. Religion, in this period, had a facilitating role for women. Quaker meeting houses had long encouraged female speakers and the non-conformist churches allowed women to be more involved with the organizational or celebrant side of church-going rather than merely attending as worshippers. Of indirect importance was the Labour Church founded in 1891 by John Trevor. Trevor left his Unitarian pulpit because he felt that he could not reach the poor in his chapel - the same reason given by William Booth when he left the Methodists.⁸³ In membership, organization and circulation of literature, the Labour Churches had far less success than the Salvation Army. Whilst data on the subject is difficult to obtain, there were probably never more than thirty churches at one time, and few of them existed twenty years after the first one was formed.⁸⁴ However, while it was

⁸³ John Trevor, *My Quest for God*, (London: Labour Prophet, 1897) p.90.

⁸⁴ E. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the Nineteenth and twentieth Centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959), p. 144; S. Pierson 'John Trevor and the Labour Church Movement in England 1891-1900' in *Church History* XXIX (1960), p.248.

in existence, the Labour Church had a striking proportion of working-class female followers.⁸⁵

Formal politics in general were regarded as men's domain until the women's movement gave women a focus for public political activity. The appearance of so many women on Labour Church platforms towards the end of the century was one sign that attitudes were beginning to change from the Victorian idea of politics as a male preserve. It also suggested that working-class women were becoming involved in more public movements than hitherto: the emancipation of women was supported (at least officially) in the Labour Churches and this set them at odds with gender conventions. However, there were exceptions: the committee of the Birmingham church, for example, refused to let women help take up the collection.⁸⁶ Most importantly however, the emergence of female as well as male lay leaders, in churches such as the Labour Church, showed that women, as well as men, could hold positions of influence.⁸⁷

The lives of the autobiographers were therefore informed by the Evangelical movement as a whole, rather than by any particular denomination. The autobiographies included in this study show that nineteenth-century Evangelicalism brought moral and family issues to the forefront of respectable working-class women's lives. The impact of Evangelicalism was, arguably, the most important influence on late Victorian/early Edwardian culture and thought.

⁸⁵ Working class women: Katherine Conway, Annie Jackson, Eleanor Keeling, Caroline Martyn, Fyvie Mayo, Margaret McMillan, Enid Stacey and Ada Ward were all Labour Church speakers. For instance at the first open-air meeting held by the Oldham church, Katherine Conway (later Mrs J Bruce Glasier) spoke to over 3,000 people. *Labour Prophet* (London): Feb 1892, p.10; Oct 1894, p.144; Feb 1895, p.28; Jan 1897, p.5; April 1893, p.32.

⁸⁶ Located in Birmingham City Library archives: *Birmingham Labour Church: Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting*, 27th July 1894.

⁸⁷ For a discussion of the Evangelical revival in the nineteenth century see, 'Movements of Revival and Evangelicalism' in B. G. Worrall, *The Making of the Modern Church* (London: SPCK, 1991), pp. 223-250.

By the late nineteenth century, as the cohort were growing up, the significance of Evangelicalism lay in its values, standards and attitudes, rather than in its role as a religious movement which in the mid- and late eighteenth century had set its stamp on the religion, morality, social ethos and even the architecture of churches inherited by Victorian society. Evangelicalism as a theological and religious movement involved a belief in the supreme authority of scripture and 'The Word' of God. It centred on the experience of conversion, hence the proliferation of conversion and spiritual testimonies amongst autobiographers in general from the eighteenth- to the mid-nineteenth centuries. Evangelicalism was not linked to any single denomination but influenced Anglican and non-conformist churches in a diffuse, rather than a specific way. It manifested itself both socially and culturally, in a period in which religion as a whole influenced societal mores, in a concern for moral and social improvement and the desire to lead useful lives. On a personal and societal level, this translated into an expression of faith in leading a moral life. Social reform was to come through individual duty, hard work, sobriety, earnestness and philanthropy, rather than change in the structure of society. The legacy of this was the intense seriousness which characterized the Victorians as a whole and which was exhibited by certain of the autobiographers: personal morality was expressed in temperance, hard work, a sense of duty and the centrality of home and family as the focus of a secure moral foundation.

Particular denominations do not seem to figure highly in the lives of the cohort. However, Evangelicalism, while not described specifically in any of the autobiographies, can be seen to inform their lives at various times and to varying degrees. For example those who wrote about success in the domestic sphere were manifesting the importance of domesticity and the presence of a caring wife and mother at the centre of respectable

family life. Respectability governed many facets of the women's lives: their education, domesticity, and an Evangelical sense of duty at home and work, and can be defined as a conforming to values promulgated by the Evangelical churches. It included notions of masculinity/femininity and ideals of virtue, chastity and obedience; it also encompasses helping others. In the pages of the autobiographies there are many examples of casual neighbourhood networks, without which many working-class women would have found it difficult to cope with their lives. The notion of 'good' neighbour, wife, homemaker and mother percolates through most of the autobiographies.

The intense moral seriousness which characterises the autobiographies and, most notably, those of Margaret Bondfield and Winifred Griffiths, can be seen as the legacy of their Evangelical Methodist upbringing.⁸⁸ The thoughtful rebellion against her childhood Catholicism described by Alice Foley, and the embracing of Socialism on a personal level recalled by several of the women, are all manifestations, not of particular denominations, but of the influence of Evangelicalism in the culture in which they lived. Altruism is shown to exist by autobiographers such as Margaret Bondfield, Ada Nield Chew, Alice Foley, Winifred Griffiths, Annie Kenney, and Ellen Wilkinson who expressed charitable feelings overtly in their desire to help improve conditions for their fellow-workers. Similarly, the Evangelical notion of hard work is present in most of the texts.

The autobiographers were born during the final decades of Queen Victoria's reign. Their lives, although all different, were shaped by their parents' Victorian societal values, thoughts and ideas. They will have been coloured by that Victorian optimism about progress which was so severely damaged by the great depression and events leading up to

⁸⁸ Margaret Bondfield, *A Life's Work* (London: Frederick Muller, 1938); Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story* (Rhondda: Ron Davis, 1979).

and including World War One. Many of these women lived on into the 1960s, through all the changes encompassed by two world wars. Many Victorian values persisted well into the twentieth century. As Michael Mason has suggested, a persuasive case can be made for the persistence of a 'long Victorian era' which extended far into the twentieth century in some aspects of life, rather than ending at the death of Queen Victoria in 1901.⁸⁹

All of the societal changes outlined above opened up opportunities to women from the working class, and those who were able to take advantage of these could improve their lives in a variety of ways. The cohort, in utilizing to a varying degree these changes in society, gained not only the confidence and pride to want to write about their success, but with improvements in education, they also gained the ability to do so.

⁸⁹ Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); see also Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexual Attitudes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Chapter 2: The Authors, Their Lives and Their Autobiographies.

Introduction

The twenty-six members of the cohort were identified during preliminary research on nineteenth-century working-class women's autobiographies. They described the mechanics of their social advancement during a period of far-reaching social change. The women were geographically dispersed and there is thirty years age difference between the first born, Ada Nield Chew in 1870, and the last, Grace Foakes in 1900. Most married and had children, but five did not. A further two give no record of marriage. All were born into what may be called working-class families, but there were inevitably differences in their material circumstances. Some describe themselves as 'comfortably off' whilst others tell of miserable childhoods in abject poverty. There was disparity too in their education, and in their occupations, as well as in the success that they enjoyed. All, however, wrote autobiographies that (consciously or otherwise) described lives of struggle and achievement. The texts themselves vary considerably in length and literary style. They also vary in time of publication; the majority were published during the life-time of the writer.

Below, in chronological order of birth, are concise biographies providing such information as is known about the women, in order to underline the similarities and differences in their life experiences, and giving a brief summary of their autobiographies.¹ For reasons of consistency a basic formula has been adopted for each biography.

¹ Appendix I comprises a chart giving biographical details of the autobiographer's lives while the chart in Appendix II gives bibliographical details of the autobiographies.

Ada Nield Chew

Ada Nield Chew was born in Staffordshire in 1870. Her father, William Nield, had been a small-time farmer, but soon after Ada was born he began work in a brickworks. Ada was the eldest of three girls in a large family of twelve children. She attended local school until aged eleven, when she left to look after the home and her younger siblings. In 1887 she trained and worked as a factory tailor. She came to public attention because of letters and articles written by her as 'A Crewe Factory Girl' for the *Crewe Chronicle*. She lost her job in the factory as a result of the notoriety she gained from her publications. Ada became a Poor Law guardian in 1894, and at this time joined the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in Crewe and later, in 1896, joined the *Clarion* Propaganda Van. In 1897 she married George Chew, a weaver. Their only daughter, Doris, was born in 1898. Ada became an organizer for the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) 1900-1908 and a paid organizer for the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies in Rossendale 1911-1914, becoming the secretary for the Rochdale Suffrage Society in 1915. During the war she became a member of the women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and determined to achieve economic freedom, began a mail-order drapery business. Ada died in 1945.

Ada wrote her autobiography under a pseudonym as an entry in a publisher's competition around 1930. A middle-class ballet dancer won the competition and Ada was not offered publication. According to her daughter, Ada felt rejected 'in more ways than one' and destroyed the manuscript, feeling that it had been judged as valueless, and embarrassed that she had, as a working-class woman, entered the competition.² If this is so, it points to some loss of confidence, at odds with Ada's determination and outspoken 'factory girl' image.

² See 'Introduction' by Ada's daughter, Doris, in *Ada Nield Chew: The Life and Writings of a Working Woman* ed. Doris Nield Chew (London: Virago, 1982), pp.6-7.

The published version of her autobiography, *Ada Nield Chew: The Life of a Working Woman* was edited by her daughter, who pieced it together from extensive publications written by Ada, including her articles as 'A Crewe factory girl' in *The Crewe Chronicle* from 1894, and a series of autobiographical letters. The text was published in 1982 by Virago, which classified it as a biography, although it has been included here as an autobiography as it consists almost exclusively of edited autobiographical texts.

Hannah Mitchell

Born in 1871 at Alport Castles Farm in the Peak District, Derbyshire Hannah Maria Mitchell was the fourth of six children of a poor tenant farmer. Apart from Sunday school, she had only two weeks of formal schooling. Otherwise she was self-educated, after being taught to read by family members. She helped on the farm and at home during her childhood, until 1885, when her mother sent her to be an apprentice dressmaker. Hannah worked subsequently in domestic service, clothing sweatshops and as a shop assistant. She became an organizer for the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1905. A Pacifist during the 1914-18 War, Hannah was elected to Manchester City Council in 1924. She became involved in the ILP and local politics. Hannah married the socialist Gibbon Mitchell in 1895 and had one child, a son, Geoffrey. She finished writing her autobiography in 1946 and died in 1956.

Hannah's autobiography, which she began during the Second World War, is constructed in distinct thematic and chronological sections: childhood, woman, wife, suffragette, Socialist, councillor and, in 1926, magistrate. A noted leader of the Suffragette and Labour movements in the North of England, details are given of her childhood, thirst for

‘culture’, her home, married life and childbirth. She describes her personal involvement in the militant suffragette campaign; followed by memories of the impact of World War I, Labour electioneering and the years spent as a councillor and as a magistrate.

Some autobiographical extracts were published during the author’s lifetime as dialect sketches in *The Northern Voice* and articles in various periodicals. Hannah tried, several times and unsuccessfully to get her manuscript published. The full text of 260 pages: *The Hard Way Up: The Autobiography of Hannah Mitchell, Suffragette and Rebel* was posthumously published by Faber and Faber in 1968, edited by Hannah’s only child, her son Geoffrey. According to his introduction he made no substantial alteration to the text. Virago published a second edition, with a preface by Sheila Rowbotham, in 1977.

Margaret Grace Bondfield

Margaret Bondfield was born in 1873 in Furnham, near Chard, Somerset, the tenth in a family of eleven children. Her father was a foreman lace-maker. Margaret was educated at Chard Board School: she was due to leave in 1886, but she stayed at the school as a pupil-teacher for an extra year. In 1887 she moved to Brighton to become an apprentice shop assistant (1887-98) and joined the trade union movement. She was forced to resign from her position as union secretary owing to ill-health in 1908, although she continued in union work to 1938.

Her political career was an extraordinary one for a woman born into a working-class family. She was a founder member and organising secretary of the Women’s Labour League and chief women’s officer of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers from 1921. After this she joined the Women’s Trade Union League and the Adult

Suffrage Society. She was elected MP for Northampton in 1923, losing her seat in the 1924 General Election. She was re-elected as the member for Wallsend 1926-1931 and became the first woman Cabinet Minister, as Minister of Labour, in 1929. She helped to found the Women's Group on Public Welfare. Throughout her life Margaret was a teetotaler and deeply religious. She avoided marriage in favour of her dedication to the Labour movement, politics, women's and family issues and social service. She died in 1953.

Margaret's autobiography *A Life's Work* comprised 359 pages and was published by Hutchinson & Co in 1949. It was probably written in the three years before publication when she retired from public life. It is a revealing account of the political activities of the first woman to become a member of the Privy Council, a Minister and a Member of the Cabinet. In it she claimed that she found it difficult 'to separate my personal adventure from the history of the Labour Party.' She gave full details of the organisational side of Labour history, and is particularly informative on the place of women in employment and the Trade Union Movement in the late nineteenth century.

Bessie Harvey

Bessie Harvey was born in 1874 in Newton-Le-Willows. Her maiden name is not known and few details are known of her family. Her father was an ostler. Bessie was educated at a local school leaving at the age of twelve to work as a domestic servant. She married in 1896, but her husband's occupation is not known, nor is the date of her death. Her anecdotal autobiography 'Youthful Memories of my Life in a Suffolk Village' comprises 500 words. It was published in Ipswich in 1976, as part of a collection of local memoirs entitled *East Anglian Reminiscences* edited by E. A. Goodwin and J. C. Baxter.

Agnes Cowper

Agnes Cowper was born in 1874 in Liverpool, the second of nine children of a seaman. Agnes attended church school to 1885 and Sunday school. She took on the housekeeping at home when she left school at eleven years of age. When her father died she left domestic chores to become a shop assistant. In 1906 she left Liverpool and moved to Port Sunlight, where she was employed as a clerk in the head office of Lever Brothers. She was promoted to librarian of the Lever Library, Port Sunlight in 1917 and retained the post until her retirement. There is no mention of marriage. Agnes died in Heswell in 1963. Her autobiography of 114 pages, *A Backward Glance at Merseyside*, was written in the years between 1944 and its publication in Birkenhead by Wilmer Brothers in 1948. The author recalled her Liverpool childhood and described school, games, Church and Church parades. One national event is included: the Exhibition of 1885. Otherwise it is a record of her successful working life and the life histories of family members, mostly her brothers.

Louise Jermy

Born in London in 1877, Louise Withers was the daughter of a stonemason, and had one older sister. Her grandparents lived in Bow. Her mother, Selina, died when Louisa was young and she then lived with her father and his new wife, Louise's stepmother, by whom she was badly treated. Louisa suffered constant ill health, fainting and headaches from blows to the head. She attended Sunday school and Chapel regularly, and read the Bible. On leaving school she became apprenticed to a dressmaker: at the end of her five-year apprentice Louise found herself a job in domestic service, which enabled her to leave home and finally escape her step-mother's cruelty. She married in 1911 and had two sons.

After her marriage Louise became a member of the Woman's Institute (WI), which was founded in 1915. Her date of death is unknown.

Louise Jermy's autobiography of 188 pages was entitled *The Memoirs of a Working Woman*, and was published in 1934 in Norwich, by Goose and Son. It has a foreword written by R. H. Mottram, which authenticates the work: Mottram claimed that Louise Jermy's was 'The first autobiography written by a WI member.' The narrative covers mainly her childhood, her early working life and her relationship with her stepmother, whom she finally forgave for her cruelty.

Susan Silvester

Susan Silvester was born 13 November 1878 at Minworth, Warwickshire, the second of four daughters. Her father was an agricultural labourer, waggoner and later a water-worker. Her mother occasionally took in clothes for mangling and assisted with seasonal agricultural labour. Susan was educated at Cudworth Board School (1883-88) and at the village school in Warmley (1888-90). She lived in or near Minworth for most of her life. On leaving school aged 12 she went into domestic service for a year and then became a shop assistant. In 1902 she married the village blacksmith and they had two sons. Following her husband's death in 1928 Susan obtained a small income by making and selling pork pies, socks and sundry items. She died on 28 April 1968.

Susan wrote her autobiography at the age of ninety, in the year of her death. The 31-page text, *In a World That Has Gone*, was privately printed in Loughborough the same year. The only known copy is now located in Brunel University Library, Uxbridge. In her autobiography Susan Silvester provided a straightforward account of a poor but not

deprived upbringing, a happy marriage and a woman supporting herself successfully after her husband's death. Interesting comments are made on various aspects of turn-of-the-century village life, including domestic arrangements; rural recreations – from May Day and St. Clement's Day celebrations; superstitions; church and chapel activity and the work of the blacksmith.

Annie Kenney

Annie Kenney, trade unionist and suffragette, was born 1879 at Springhead near Oldham in Lancashire, the fifth of twelve children of a cotton operative. She was educated at the village school, from 1884 until 1892, and Sunday school. She worked as a half-timer in a cotton mill between 1889-92, becoming a full-time card- and blowing-room operative in 1892 at the age of 13. Inspired by the writings of Robert Blatchford, Annie joined the textile union in 1904 and became the first woman to be elected to her district committee. She used her fees to become a correspondence student of Ruskin College, Oxford.

In her early twenties as a member of Oldham Clarion Vocal Union, she met Christabel Pankhurst by whom she was profoundly influenced. Adopted as protégé by the Pankhursts, she became an organiser for the Womens' Social and Political Union in 1905. In October 1905, together with Christabel Pankhurst, she challenged Sir Edward Grey at the Liberal Party meeting in Manchester Free Trade Hall and the two were the first women to be imprisoned for the suffragette cause. Several spells of prison followed, and under the 'Cat and Mouse Act' Annie became ill in 1913 when on hunger strike during eighteen months in prison. She was a WSPU organiser in London and the West Country, and continued working for the WSPU throughout the War until the franchise was widened to women over 30 in 1918. In 1921 she married James Taylor and moved to Letchworth.

Little is known of her life after this time except that she had two sons, and died in 1953 at Hitchin.

The text, consisting of 308 pages, mostly located in the years 1905-1918 at the height of the suffragette movement, was written in 1924 in order to tell the 'truth' about the movement. Entitled *Memories of a Militant* it was published by Edward Arnold in London that year and commences with recollections of a happy childhood, religious influences and work in the cotton mill, but soon moves on to provide an extensive account of her propagandist and organising activities for the militant movement, with full details of her many terms of imprisonment. The autobiography ends in 1918 and it gives a strong indication that she had turned to Theosophy.³

Nellie Scott

No date of birth and no maiden name are recorded for Nellie Scott and there are few family details surviving. Her record of activities after marriage put her birth-date around 1890. Her father kept a draper's shop and she attended Sunday school. She became a felt-hat worker from age 12 and a member of the Felt Hatter's Trade Union. About the time of the outbreak of war in 1914, Nellie worked for four years as a Superintendent at a centre for feeding school children. She married and lived in Stockport. She became a sickness visitor for the Approved Society for seven years. She and her husband were avid readers and members of the Clarion Fellowship. Nellie served on the national executive of the Labour Church; was a member of the Co-operative Society; a member of Ruskin Hall Settlement; the treasurer of the Women's Labour league; served on the Labour Representation Committee; was secretary of Stockport Women's Co-operative Guild

³ Theosophy was a religious sect following Hindu and Buddhist teachings of universal brotherhood, Annie Kenney was involved with the Rosicrucian Order, which was devoted to occult law.

where she acted as a delegate to various conferences and was made a JP. Her autobiography was published as 'A Felt Hat Worker' on pages 81-101 in *Life As We Have Known It, by Co-operative Working Women*. Contributions for the book were collected and edited by Margaret Llewelyn Davies and published with an introductory letter by Virginia Woolf in London by the Hogarth Press in 1931. It was reprinted by Virago in 1977, with a new introduction by Anna Davin. Nellie Scott gives a detailed account of work and conditions in a felt-hat shop and the beginnings of trade union organization among the trimmers.

Mary Gawthorpe

Born in 1881, Mary Gawthorpe grew up in the back streets of Meanwood in Leeds, Yorkshire, where her father, John, worked at the local tannery. Her mother, Annie, had escaped work in the mill by helping her sister with her newly established dressmaking business. Mary attended the local Church of England school until 1893 when she took advantage of the pupil-teacher scheme, qualifying as a primary school teacher just before her twenty-first birthday. Coming to the fore in the National Union of Teachers, she took a prominent part in the campaign for school meals in the winter of 1904-5, when unemployment exacerbated the problem of hunger in the classroom. In 1906 she became secretary of the Women's Labour League, editing the woman's page of its local paper the *Labour News*. Mary had joined the WSPU in October 1905. By August 1908 she had left the Labour party and was based in Manchester, her popularity making her a national figure to followers of the suffrage cause. Mary emigrated to the United States in 1916 and worked for the New York Women's Suffrage Party. After American women won the vote Mary became involved in the trade union movement, becoming a full-time official of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union in New York. The date of her marriage is not

known but in 1933, after 17 years in the United States she returned to Leeds on a visit with her American husband John Sanders; she made a subsequent visit in 1950. She died in 1973.

Her 254-page autobiography, *Up Hill to Holloway*, was written around 1932, probably because the Suffragette Fellowship had mounted a campaign at that time to preserve some of the history of the movement, although it was finally published by Traversity Press, Maine in 1962. In her autobiography Mary describes her home as a 'slum' and attributed the early death of her two sisters and the illness of her mother to poverty, poor housing and bad sanitation, and the 'family pattern breaking up' to her father's political activities and increasing fecklessness and drunkenness. She attributed her determination to succeed in gaining qualifications to her early ambition to move her mother and remaining siblings away from her father.

Maria Hull

Maria Hull, née Payne, was born in 1881 in Pool Village, Church Gresley in Derbyshire. Maria had an older brother and sister, and two younger sisters. The narrative of her brief memoir consists mainly of details of her schooldays at the village school. Mary went into domestic service on leaving school and married a potter, Richard Hull, whom she had met at school, in 1908. The couple had one son. Maria's 4-page autobiography 'A Derbyshire Schooling: 1884-1893' was written in 1968 and published in spring 1988 in *History Workshop Journal*.

Mary Luty

Mary Luty was born in June 1885 at Newchurch-in-Rossendale, Lancashire; her father was a tenant-farmer at the remote Waugh's Well. When Mary was sixteen months old her mother left the family home after some unexplained upset with her father, and took Mary, together with her three month-old brother, to live on her grandparent's farm nearby. The farm was sold by auction following the death of grandfather when Mary was seven. The family moved to Ballenden and her mother took work as a weaver in a local cotton mill. Mary was educated at the village school from age seven until eleven when she took the labour test and became a half-timer, joining her mother in the mill. She became a full-time 'tenter' at thirteen. However since her ambition was to travel she continued her education at night school in order to obtain a better-paid job.⁴ She was an active trade unionist, became a social worker for two years and then a political organiser, travelling 'nearly every part of Britain'. Mary achieved her ambition and undertook a five-year world tour on the death of mother in 1909, travelling to Canada, New Zealand and Australia, funding her travel through various jobs, including hospital worker, housekeeper and cook. Returning home she gave lectures and radio broadcasts about her travels. There is no mention of marriage. She was active in church work and Sunday school throughout her life. Mary Luty lived with her brother until his death, she then moved to Burnley, she died in 1967.

The typescript of Mary's autobiography is entitled 'My Life has Sparkled' and was renamed *A Penniless Globetrotter* for publication in Accrington in 1937 by Wardleworth. The only known copy of the autobiography is located in Rossendale Public Library.⁵ It comprises 147 pages. The typescript of Mary's manuscript is catalogued with the

⁴ 'Tenters' were usually children or beginners employed to stretch the wet fabric on a system of frames and pegs.

⁵ Rawtenstall library catalogue number RC.921.L.3704.

published version, as is a copy of an article from the Rawtenstall Free Press, which commemorates Mary's donation of her typescript to Rawtenstall Public Library, in pencil at the top of the cutting is written a date of '29.10.66'. The text of the typescript is almost identical to the published version except that it continues for two pages after Mary's return from her travels abroad, which is where the published version ends. Mary's ambition was to travel, so perhaps it is fitting that her published autobiography ended with her having successfully achieved her ambition. There are also discrepancies on the details given of Mary's birth: for example her place and date of birth are recorded in the typescript, but not in the published text, and nor is her father mentioned. Early chapters tell of a happy and carefree childhood spent on her grandparent's farm, with observations on the home, butter-making, pig-killing, hay-making, Irish harvesters, sheep-dipping and diet. She then included a detailed account of factory labour. Mary also comments on her trade union and political activities, with brief reference to the suffragette movement. The remainder of the text describes her world tour and adventures. She returned from her travels just before the outbreak of war in 1914.

Annie Barnes

Annie was born in 1887, the eldest of three children, in the East End of London. She enjoyed perhaps the most affluent childhood of the cohort: her father was a fruiterer, the family lived above the shop, and her mother had hired help in the house. Annie attended local schools until she was 15 years old, in 1902, when she abandoned her ambition to be a teacher and left school to nurse her mother, bring up the younger siblings and help in the shop. Annie's mother died in 1910. Annie married Albert Barnes in 1919, on condition that her brother and sister could move in with them. Barnes encouraged her to join the Labour Party in 1919. They lived in Stepney until they were bombed out in 1944.

Annie's autobiography, *Tough Annie: From Suffragette to Labour Councillor* is the only audio-recorded autobiography of the cohort. It was recorded in 1979 by Kate Harding and Caroline Gibbs, who edited the tapes by arranging them chronologically and omitting repetitions. The edited, 69-page transcript was published by Stepney Books in 1980. The text gives an account of Annie's schooling and home upbringing during which her mother instilled a strong sense of right and wrong, experiences as a suffragette, her marriage, her work as a Labour Party activist and councillor as well as for the Charity Organisation Society.

Mildred Edwards

Mildred Edwards (née Curtis) was born on 22 August 1889, in Carlisle, the third of seven children of Earnest Curtis; her father was a railwayman and her mother a children's nurse. Mildred attended her local infant school and then junior school until aged thirteen. When Mildred left school, instead of starting to train as a teacher as she had wanted, she was required to stay at home to help her mother, whose health was failing. At aged fifteen Mildred's sister took over domestic duties and she began work as a nurse in the infirmary until her sister married two years later. Mildred recalled the outbreak of the 1914-18 War when her brothers joined the Artillery. Her mother died that Christmas and Mildred married her fiancé, Jack, after an engagement of three years. The wedding was by special licence at St Michael's Church Stanwix, after which Jack served in France for two years and Mildred worked in the Recruitment Office for thirty shillings a week. Jack died aged 83. Mildred wrote her autobiography after his death when she was 88. She died in 1978 aged 89.

Her autobiography *Our City, Our People 1889-1978: Memories* describes her childhood in Carlisle and provides a vivid account of neighbours, local shops and shopkeepers in 'Bochergate' where she grew up. Occasionally national events such as Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee (1897), death and funeral, and Edward VII's coronation impinge upon the narrative, but for the most part this is taken up with details of school days, Band of Hope membership and entertainments such as visits to a fairground, theatre and circus. There are also details of domestic chores and health remedies. The only known copy is in the Local Studies department of Carlisle City Library. It consists of a 73-page booklet sold in aid of The Animal's Refuge, Blackwell Road. The title page has a dedication: 'My thanks go out to my cousin's wife Grace Charles, and Miss C. Hilton, without whose help publication would have been impossible.'

Isabella Cooke

Isabella Cooke (née Smith) was born in 1890 in Great Strickland, Westmorland. She was the third of eight children of a general labourer, later a gamekeeper. The family moved to Cliburn when she was a year old and Isabella attended Cliburn day school until she was thirteen when she left to assist in home duties. At sixteen she began work as domestic servant, starting as housemaid, then kitchen maid and finally, in 1912, cook. In December that year she met Frank Burns a stone-mason and part-time soldier in the Territorial Army. Frank served in the war and the couple married in 1916. They had one daughter, Betty. Frank was killed while working as a building labourer in 1919. Isabella returned to domestic service on a large estate in Gainsborough in Lincolnshire. She re-married in 1923, to a stud-groom named Cooke who also worked there. The couple moved into one of the cottages on the estate, and lived there for thirty-five years. Isabella died in 1981 when she was ninety.

Isabella wrote her autobiography in 1980-1981 for publication in a series of articles in the *Cumberland and Westmorland Herald*. In 1982 the paper published her collected articles 'with the minimum of editing' as *A Hired Lass in Westmorland: The Story of a Country Girl at the Turn of the Century*. The booklet comprises 20 pages and was illustrated by a local artist Pamela Jones. The only known copy is in the Local Studies Department of Carlisle Central Library. The text mostly centres on domestic life and members of the family, although she does recall a childhood meeting with the poet Sir Walter Scott, and his dogs. Isabella recollected standing at the Hirings Fair in Burrowsgate, Penrith to obtain her first paid employment. She described the daily work of a domestic and farm servant, meeting and courtship and the death of her husband in a tragic accident, her remarriage and a long and happy relationship with her second husband.

Betty May

Betty May was born in the East End of London. No date for her birth is given in the text, but photographs and description of various events, for example her reference to childhood recollections of Queen Victoria's 1897 Diamond Jubilee, and her details of life as a young adult in the Edwardian period, suggest that she was born around 1890. Her father, a mechanic, abandoned his wife and four children soon after the author's birth. Betty's mother began work in a chocolate factory to support her family. Betty was educated at a village school in Somerset while staying with relatives for a few years.

Betty was introduced to London nightclub and café society on her return from Somerset, working as a singer, dancer and 'baby and mascot' to the 'Café Royal set'. She spent her time in pursuit of an active social life. She married a man of some wealth and status but was soon divorced. Betty lived in London, but also spent time in France, Sicily and

America. She also worked as an artists' model, and the sculptor Jacob Epstein (1880-1959) used her as his model for his work 'The Savage'.

Betty May's autobiography *Tiger Woman: My Story* provides a very good account of her early life in 'one of the poorest and most squalid' districts of London, with details of her home and early struggles. Introduced to London's bohemian and affluent society in adolescence, the author provides lively descriptions of a life centred on drugs, sex and alcohol: a rare glimpse at nightclub existence. Her text of 232 pages was published in London by Duckworth in 1929, and is illustrated by photographs and paintings of Betty May in her various roles. She declared her intent to write her 'further adventures' at a later date but these did not materialize and nothing is known of her later life.

Mrs Yearn

No first or maiden name and no date of birth are given for Mrs Yearn, whose mid-life activities put her birth-date c.1890, although it could have been earlier. She was one of 14 children, 8 of whom died in infancy or childhood, of a brick-setter. Her mother was a mill-hand. No mention is made of schooling, except to say she left school to become a half-timer, which would have been between twelve and fourteen years of age. Mrs Yearn worked as a mill hand before and after her marriage, she had at least two children and lived in Oldham.

Mrs Yearn had an active political life: was a member of the local committee of Women's Co-operative Guild; Director of Oldham Equitable Co-operative Society (1924); member of the Court of Referees; Oldham Unemployment Exchange (1927); Oldham National Health Insurance Committee (1928); ran for Town Council, JP; assisted in the foundation

of a Maternity and Child Welfare Centre (1928); member of the local committee of the NSPCC (1928); and a member of the Tenants Defence Association (1928).

Mrs Yearn's autobiography 'A Public Spirited Rebel' written c.1930 comprises 6 pages and was published in 1931 by Hogarth Press in *Life As We Have Known It: by Co-operative Working Women*, collected and edited by Margaret Llewelyn Davies. Mrs Yearn made perceptive observations on trade unionism among women textile workers and ended with the hope that she could promote international peace and expose 'shady dealings' by Lancashire cotton and coal owners.

Ellen Wilkinson

Ellen Cicely Wilkinson was born on 5 October 1891 in Chorlton upon Medlock, Manchester. Her father was a cotton operative and insurance agent, and her mother a dressmaker. Ellen was the second youngest of two boys and two girls. She attended local elementary and secondary schools. At fourteen she became a pupil teacher while she worked for, and achieved, the Jones Scholarship in History which enabled her to attend Manchester University from 1910: she graduated with an MA in 1913. While at University she embraced Socialism and became a member of the Fabian Society, becoming closely associated with the Fabian research department. She joined the ILP in 1912. In 1913 she became an organizer of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (1913-15) and a speaker for the ILP. Like her mother and grandmother, she was a member of the Manchester and Salford Co-operative Society.

Ellen remained unmarried, though she was engaged for one year to John Turner Walter Newbold, son of a wealthy Liberal Irish Quaker, who influenced her towards Marxism:

she joined the Communist party in 1920 for four years, visiting the USSR in 1921. In 1923 she stood unsuccessfully as Labour candidate for Ashton-Under-Lyme, but won a seat for Middlesborough (1924-31), becoming the first woman Labour MP. Known as 'Red Ellen', as much for the colour of her hair as for her politics, she became a prominent Labour Party propagandist, and was active on unemployment demonstrations: she was one of the leaders of the Jarrow March in 1936. She organized for the Amalgamated Union of Co-operative Employees and held Middlesborough East and Jarrow (1935-47). She was appointed as Parliamentary Secretary to Susan Lawrence (the Minister of Pensions) in 1940 and to the Ministry of Home Security (1940-45). Following the Labour Party victory in 1945 she was made a member of the Privy Council as Minister of Education and implemented the Education Act of 1944; she received an Honorary Degree for her work for the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in 1946. Ellen died in 1947.

Ellen's publications include *Clash* (1929); *Peeps at Politicians* (1930) and *Jarrow: The Town that was Murdered* (1939), and declaring her pacifist beliefs, *Why War?* (1934).

Her sixteen-page untitled autobiography was published in 1938 by Frederick Muller in an anthology *Myself When Young by Famous Women of Today*, edited by Margot Asquith, the Countess of Oxford and Asquith. It was written during 1937-38 and gave Ellen's recollections of her working-class childhood in Manchester, her family and social life and the Wesleyan Chapel which greatly influenced her later life. She described her schooling, discussed teaching methods, and told of political influences and her early political life at school and College. Ellen had been asked to write her autobiography for the anthology so the narrative ends before she became a noted figure of the twentieth century Labour Party as those day, she wrote, 'had no place in the 'Myself when young' period.'

Alice Foley

Born on 28 November 1891, in Backshaw Street, Bolton Alice Foley was the sixth child of mill hand Thomas Foley and his wife Alice Foley, née Mont. Educated at St. Peter and St. Paul's Catholic School to age twelve, Alice left school to become a shop assistant. However shortly after this, in 1905, she left to work as a 'little tenter' in a local cotton mill, progressing later to weaver. She continued her education through evening classes and cultural opportunities offered by her Clarion Club membership, and with her sister Cissy's encouragement she turned away from her Catholic upbringing, became a Socialist and joined the Weaver's Union. She worked in the factory for seven years. After the passing of the 1911 Insurance Act she was promoted to sick visitor for the Weaver's Association and became a clerk in the Bolton Weaver's Association office in 1917. She served as Secretary of Bolton and District Weavers' and Winders' Association between 1949-61. She was president of Bolton United Trades Council from 1956-7 and was appointed a JP in 1931. She served at every level for the Workers' Educational Association and was awarded the MBE in 1951. She did not marry and lived in Bolton until her death in 1974.⁶

Alice's autobiography of 92 pages, *A Bolton Childhood*, was published in Manchester in 1973, by Manchester University Extra-Mural Department & the North Western District of the Workers Educational Association. An extract from her autobiography may also be found on pages 90-99 in *Destiny Obscure* edited by John Burnett and published in London by Allen Lane, in 1992. Alice's text, which differs little from her typed manuscript, gives a colourful account of a frugal and austere working-class childhood spent in Bolton around the turn of the century. It includes comments and observations on home and

⁶ For further details, see also, Carol Jenkins, 'Foley, Alice' in *The New Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2004). Appended.

family life, street traders and entertainers, street games, retailing, fairs, schooling, working conditions in the cotton mill, the Daubhill strike of 1905 and her break from Catholicism to become a Socialist. The narrative ends around 1918 with the author beginning work for the trade union movement and the WEA which was to continue for the next fifty years.⁷ The original of her manuscript, a scrapbook of newspaper cuttings from Bolton papers, and a few letters about her MBE and the publication of her manuscript are in the Foley Collection, Bolton City Library archives.⁸

Rose Gibbs

Rose was born in 1892 in the East End of London, her father served as a soldier in the Boer War but on discharge, following injury, was unemployed for long periods. To support the family her mother worked as a domestic servant when extra staff was required at various establishments. This meant she was away from home for two- to three-week periods. Rose was the eldest of three children so looked after the home while her mother was away working. Rose was educated at the local council school to age 13, and then went into domestic service until her marriage in 1915. She lived in London and moved to Comberton in 1969. Rose died in 1981.

In her autobiography of eighteen pages, *In service: Rose Gibbs Remembers*, Rose provided anecdotes of childhood, schooling and her time in domestic service. She wrote her memoirs when she was ninety, and there were to be more instalments to follow, but this is all there was time for. It was published after her death, by Ellison's Editions of Orwell, Cambridgeshire, for Bassingbourn Village Colleges, who hold a copy of the text in their archives.

⁷ The Workers' Educational Association was founded by Thomas Hill Green for discussion of the ethos behind the association see, A. N. Wilson, *The Victorians*, pp.519-520

⁸ For further details, see also, Carol Jenkins, 'Foley, Alice' in *The New Dictionary of National Biography*.

Mrs Hills

No first or maiden name is given for Mrs Hills who was born in Leighton Bromswold on 5 April 1893; her father was a horse-keeper for a local farmer. Mrs Hills attended the village school between the ages of three and twelve. She left Leighton Bromswold to work for relatives in Brixworth who had a shop and a café. After this she worked in domestic service at Whittlesey as a maid and aged fourteen 14 became a parlourmaid in Field House, Silver Street, Buckden. Here she was confirmed into the Church of England, although she had been brought up 'Chapel'. After eight years during which she was paid about ten shillings a month, she left to marry a soldier in 1916 and the couple had one son, who was stillborn. At the end of the war her husband returned to his painting and decorating trade, and worked in Thrapston village. However, his lungs were weak from gas attacks during the war and Mrs Hills managed to get him work as a steward with a tied cottage. His job was to collect rents in the village, and she worked as a cleaner at a local farm, and then as a school cleaner for fourteen years. Mrs Hills records that they were very happy. The couple took two little boys as evacuees during the Second World War, which meant they had more money.

Her two-page autobiography, 'Reminiscences of Mrs. Hills, formerly of Leighton Bromswold', was published as the second of four contributions to a small pamphlet funded by the Huntingdon Local History Society. A copy of the pamphlet is located in Cambridgeshire Record Office, Huntingdon Branch. Mrs Hills' memoirs are on pages 3 and 4 and are an outline life history with personal comments and descriptions of managing on a tight budget in a small rural village around the turn of the century. She discussed food prices and wages, help from neighbours, her home which she retained after her husband's death, local fairs and leisure activities.

Emma Smith

Born 24 January 1894, at Redruth, Cornwall, Emma was the illegitimate daughter of 'Cod' Murphy, a fisherman, and the woman whom she knew as her sister Maud. She never knew her father and rarely saw her mother. Her brother Harry, two years her junior, was later to become an officer in the army. As an infant Emma lived with her grandparents. Her grandfather was a Cornish tin-miner blinded in an accident. She was educated at infants' school and Methodist Sunday school but only in 'fits and starts' and did not receive a fuller education until living in a convent penitentiary between 1906-10. At the age of five Emma was sold by her mother to an 'adopted' father, Pratt, whose name she took. He worked her in an itinerant lifestyle as a street entertainer, singing hymns, begging or assisting with the hurdy-gurdy from the mid-1890s until 1903. Emma then ran away and worked briefly as a parlourmaid and general servant, worked in the convent penitentiary as a laundress, then as a domestic servant where she met her husband whom she married in 1920. The couple had three daughters and emigrated to Australia in 1924, but were homesick and so returned to Cornwall within the year and settled in Penzance. Her autobiography, written under the pseudonym 'Emma Smith', is 188 pages with a foreword by A. L. Rowse, himself the author of *A Cornish Childhood*, possibly the reason why Emma sent her manuscript to him. Entitled *A Cornish Waif's Story: An Autobiography*, it was written in 1954, when Emma was sixty, at the suggestion of 'a friend who happens to be a sociologist'.⁹ It was published in London by Odhams Press later the same year. Most of the autobiography is taken up with an account of the author's childhood, a mixture of poverty, institutional living, travelling as an itinerant entertainer and various (pleasurable) stays in a convent penitentiary. The narrative includes much

⁹ Emma Smith, *A Cornish Waif's Story*, p.13.

dialogue and incidental detail; it ends with the author's return to England from Australia in 1924, and describes her pride in her home in Cornwall and her family.

Winifred Griffiths

Born Winifred Rutley in 1895 at Overton, Hampshire, her father was a paper-mill worker, while her mother had worked at home sewing garments for a clothing factory until she married. Winifred was educated at local church school from age of four to fourteen. On leaving school she became an apprentice at Burberry's gabardine factory but soon moved to a smaller workshop to work alongside an aunt. In 1911 she took a position in domestic service as a housemaid and parlourmaid (1911-15) and then took a war job as a Co-operative Stores shop assistant. She became an active Socialist and member of the Labour Party and in 1918 married a coal miner, James Griffiths, who later became a Labour politician.¹⁰

A short extract from Winifred's autobiography was first published in *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s*, edited by John Burnett, and published in London by Allen Lane in 1974. The full text, of 169 pages, *One Woman's Story* written by 'Mrs James Griffiths' was published in 1979, the year Winifred died, by Ron Jones of Rhondda. It was also published by Ferndale in the same year. Brief mention is made of the author's family and their domestic and work lives, but the narrative gives much post 1900 detail with Edwardian village life and leisure, work and politics. Following her marriage to James Griffiths, the autobiography concentrates on her political activities on behalf of the Labour movement.

¹⁰ For further details, see, Carol Jenkins, 'Griffiths, Winifred' in *The New Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2004). Appended.

Kathleen Woodward

Born in September 1896 in Peckham, London, Kathleen Doris Woodward was one of five children. Her father had been a lithographic printer, at the time of Kathleen's birth he was a casual labourer in the printing trade, but was soon afflicted with an illness that left him an invalid. Her mother, Ellen, took in washing to support the family. Kathleen gave her birth-place as a fictional street in Bermondsey: it is not known whether the family moved north to Bermondsey, but other autobiographical details are accurate. There are no details of school, except that she left at thirteen to work in a factory on the north side of the Thames. By 1914 she was working in a Bermondsey collar factory. During this period Kathleen met Mary Macarthur, then secretary of the National Federation of Women Workers. In the following years Kathleen worked her passage across the Atlantic, was a receptionist in a London club, wrote children's stories and was a freelance journalist. In 1927 her first book was published and she was feted as 'the daughter of a washerwoman who grew up to be the biographer of a queen.'¹¹ Kathleen wrote *The Lady of Marlborough House* (1939) and *Queen Mary: A Life and Intimate Study* (1927). She converted to Roman Catholicism in the 1930s and died in 1961.

Her autobiography, *Jipping Street: Childhood in a London Slum*, consists of 150 pages of text. It has a frontispiece by Leon Underwood and was published simultaneously in London and New York by Harper & Brothers in 1928. It was re-published with a new introduction by Carolyn Steedman, in London by Virago Press in 1983. The narrative is a graphic account of growing-up in a London slum in the late nineteenth century; there is much introspection on her relationship with her mother, death, and her writing ambitions. It has references to charity both from neighbours and from official sources including

¹¹ Carolyn Steedman's introduction to the new edition of Woodward's autobiography (London: Virago, 1983.)

workhouses, local clergy and Poor Law guardians. She gives details of local characters and friends and describes her thoughts on the Suffragette movement and sex education.

Daisy Hills

Born in 1899 on the Warren House estate, Old Frimley, near Camberley, Daisy Hills was one of twins, her brother dying when a few hours old. Her father, Albert Hills, was a farm bailiff on the estate and the family lived on a small tied farm. Daisy's mother Jane (née Cayzer) had been in service as a school-room maid at Frimley Park House before her marriage to Albert Hills in 1896.

Daisy recalled a happy childhood on the farm, and a Christian upbringing. Daisy attended the children's service in Frimley Church on Sundays where her father was in the choir. She was taught at home until she was eight, and then walked the two and a half miles each day to school in Camberley. She left school in 1911 and began work on the farm. She recollects church-cleaning duties, and farm work such as thatching, spring cleaning, poultry keeping, repairing fences, and also the farm cat, and animal illnesses such as foot and mouth, swine fever and milk fever. When World War One broke out she helped her aunt with 'war work,' making bristle brushes and shirts for the overseas troops. She took the place of the farm help when he left to join the army, cleaned stables, helped with the poultry, learnt to milk the cows and was happy working with her father until April 1932 when he died of a heart attack, aged 67. Shortly after this Daisy moved to a flat attached to an old people's home which she helped her two aunts to run.

The Second World War came and Daisy described the German prisoners and the blackout. She also worked for a newsagent. At the end of the war Daisy bought a larger house, 'The

Anchorage', and cared for her now-ageing aunts, as well as the retired District Nurse 'Grace,' who came for the last five years of her life, two doctors and an elderly lady she refers to as 'Miss Seymour'. She went on several holiday coach tours in the British Isles. Her grandmother had told her all about the beautiful Lake District and the Highlands and Daisy wrote: 'at last her granddaughter had fulfilled her hopes in a way'. Eventually Daisy became wheelchair bound and was no longer able to care for others. She sold the large house and bought a ground floor flat at Merlin Court near Frimley church. She died in 1977. Her 140-page autobiography, *Old Frimley* was published locally by Kestrel Graphics in 1978.

Grace Foakes

Grace Foakes (née Platt) was born in 1900, one of five children, in three-roomed tenement flat in Jubilee Buildings, Wapping High Street, Stepney. Her father was a dock-worker until 1912. Grace describes living in conditions of poverty and overcrowding which were so dreadful they might sound incredible: but in her 1972 introduction to the book Lady Rose Henriques CBE wrote 'I have worked and lived in the area of Stepney for the greater part of my life and know that the living conditions described are not exaggerated, neither is the poverty'. Grace attended the Anglican Church – St John of Wapping. After school she worked as a waitress until her mother became ill with cancer when Grace 'took mother's place at home' until her marriage to Reuben Foakes in the 1920s. Her autobiography was written in three volumes during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Between High Walls; My Life With Reuben and *My Part of the River* were all published by Walwyn Shepherd in London in 1972 and 1974. Although there is considerable overlap between the volumes, Grace gives descriptions of trade unions and the General Strike in 1926, as well as more personal details of her schooling and upbringing, joining the Band

of Hope and the Wesleyan East End Mission. She continued in her last two volumes the details of meeting her husband Reuben Foakes, their council house and married life.

Chronology

A chronology in the form of a table is provided in Appendix III, p.300. It includes a record of the birth-dates of the twenty-six women of the cohort together with some relevant milestones in their lives. Also included are the significant historical events, taking place over the time period up to the end of World War II in 1944, these taken in conjunction will help to set the lives of the women within an historical context.

The Texts

The autobiographies in question have been drawn from a survey carried out from a range of standard bibliographical sources and historical works and from contact with libraries throughout England. Not all of them are listed in any one source. They vary in length and in the form they have been published, from the five hundred words written by Bessie Harvey, or the two or three pages by Mrs Hills, to the three-volume autobiography written by Grace Foakes. Most were published during the lifetime of the authors.

The autobiographies in question were usually written towards the end of the author's life. In some cases the narrative ends at defining moments in their lives, often when they have achieved a goal, or become what they had wanted to be. Annie Kenney ended hers in 1918 when the franchise was widened to include women over thirty years of age, something she had campaigned for as one of the militant suffragettes. Mary Luty's published autobiography ended as she arrived home after her world travels, a trip she had planned and worked towards for many years. Most of the autobiographies, therefore, were

written years after the events they describe by women often nearing the end of their lives. In effect, these women have written their own history from a unique viewpoint: that of personal experience. They are important social documents as examples of micro-history, and give a thoughtful reflection of the personal history of an individual written from the vantage of hindsight.

The women of the cohort were born in the final three decades of the nineteenth century into a transitional period when women's place as a strictly defined and observed separate sphere was changing. By the first decade of the twentieth century it was beginning to be accepted that respectable women could achieve in the public sphere of work and politics. This transitional period encompassed the cohort's formative years during which they were growing up and which they later wrote about. They describe the means by which it was beginning to be possible for working-class women like themselves to take advantage of changes in educational provision, health at work and home, and more acceptance of the public voice of women both politically and socially, to achieve goals which had been impossible for previous generations of working-class women.

The women appear to have written their autobiographies for a variety of reasons. Some wrote to prove themselves worthy of an audience, others from a sense of pride in their achievements and a desire to record their success in life from humble beginnings; it may have been designed to pass down to future generations, it may have been to encourage others, like themselves, to succeed. Many of the women wrote of defining moments of her life – when she became what she had wanted to be. In many instances the writers acknowledge their reasons and clearly state their purpose. Motives are found outlined within the main text, or in the foreword or dedication. Some claim within their

autobiographies that they have written in order to tell the ‘truth’. Suffragette Annie Kenney struck what may be seen as the keynote to this group of autobiographies when she wrote:

This book not being a record of dates and names but simply an account of events that are engraved on my heart...it may not be the truth to any other individual, but one can only speak or write as one feels, sees or reasons for oneself.¹²

A few of the women towards the end of their lives wrote their stories for their families. Others acknowledge help and encouragement they have had from family members or friends. Mary Luty the self-styled ‘penniless globetrotter’ signalled her pride in success and her gratitude to her mother for her support, when she dedicated her autobiography: ‘To my Mother, and all who have encouraged me to try and accomplish things.’¹³

Mildred Edwards expressed both family pride and pride in herself in her dedication at the front of her autobiography. After quoting what she calls her ‘Family Motto’ as “Dogged As Does It”, she claimed: ‘In the following stories no records have been consulted or persons interviewed, it has all been in my memory.’¹⁴ Grace Foakes wrote her autobiography in the late 1960s, when she was almost seventy years old, writing ‘for the younger generation’ she expressed a hope that her writing would help them understand elderly people like herself:

I hope you may now have some idea of the vast difference in our way of living. I write mainly for the younger generation, feeling they will understand the bewilderment some of us elderly people feel when we see and hear the things that happen today, for I feel the young can adapt much more easily than we of the older generation. Remember, this was yesterday’s world, a world seemingly

¹² Annie Kenney, *Memoirs of a Militant* (London: Edward Arnold, 1924), p. 136.

¹³ Mary Luty, *A Penniless Globetrotter*, frontispiece.

¹⁴ Mildred Edwards, *Our City...Our People 1889-1978: Memories* (Brampton, Cumbria: Howe, 1978), frontispiece.

far removed from today, a world of people who were just as you are but without the opportunities or knowledge.¹⁵

Winifred Griffiths dedicated her autobiography, written in 1979 when she was eighty-four: 'To my late Husband, The Rt. Hon. James Griffiths, C.H, In Memory of our many years together.' After thanking various relatives, friends and members of the Labour Party for their help, Winifred suggests that she saw her life as having achieved some good, quoting from *The Times London Diary* of October 10th 1978: 'As you grow older you want to have some proof that your life was not wasted.'¹⁶ Others wrote to encourage working-class women like themselves to have, and to work towards, personal aspirations. By making public their thoughts and feelings in writing their autobiographies, our cohort revealed a self-conscious differentiation of themselves and their life experiences. They are expressions of their awareness of, and their pride in, their own achievements.

Within their narratives the autobiographers describe personal rebellions, against their upbringing, or against dominant ideology of religion, gender or class. If they needed to challenge authority in order to achieve their ambitions, these women were not easily cowed. Rebellion sometimes occurred against the authority of parents at home. Mary Gawthorpe rebelled against her father's feckless and drunken behaviour; she was determined to work for the qualifications she needed to teach so that she could afford to move her family away from her father's house. Alice Foley, a trade unionist and member of the Workers' Education Association (WEA), was born into a Roman Catholic family and went to a Roman Catholic school. Yet in her early twenties, Alice found that her faith did not provide reason enough for the everyday drudgery and constant grind undertaken by herself and her fellow cotton mill workers. She rebelled, and turned to Socialism, and

¹⁵ Grace Foakes, *My Part of the River* (London: Shepherd Walwyn, 1974), p.85.

¹⁶ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, frontispiece.

undertook trade union work and later a position with the WEA. By these means she lifted herself out of her frugal and austere life, and also found a means to help her fellow-workers. Hannah Mitchell rebelled against the gender discrimination within her family, which meant that she performed domestic chores while her brothers played or read; determined nevertheless to gain an education, an uncle taught her to read and she borrowed books from her brothers and neighbours. Emma Smith rebelled against the penury of her childhood as an illegitimate and abandoned child in Cornwall, and worked hard to achieve a happy family life with her own two daughters. All of them saw their rebellion as part of the mechanism for gaining their ambitions.

Among the autobiographers, 10 of the 26 wrote of success centred in the domestic sphere. Of these, the autobiographies of Isabella Cooke, Agnes Cowper, Mildred Edwards, Rose Gibbs, Daisy Hills, Maria Hull and Susan Sylvester, were published in booklets or pamphlets, or as part of a larger publication requested by local historians or for collections of memoirs. The autobiographies of Grace Foakes, Louise Jermy and Emma Smith were published in book form.¹⁷

The remaining sixteen autobiographers have written of their public success, in achieving positions of some standing in the, often overlapping, areas of the work-place or politics. In addition, public life is entwined with home life for most of the women, and this caused tensions for these women who, while valuing public success in various areas, stress that they also value their domestic success. One autobiographer, Margaret Bondfield, described this intertwining in her autobiography:

¹⁷ Grace Foakes, *Between High Walls* (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1972), *My Part of the River*, and *My Life With Reuben* (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1974) ; Louise Jermy, *The Memories of a Working Woman* (Norwich: Goose and Son, 1934); Emma Smith, *A Cornish Waif's Story*.

If, occasionally, it is difficult to separate my personal adventure from the history of the Labour Party, that is perfectly in harmony with the facts. I have been so identified with the Movement that it is not always possible to say where one ends and the other begins.¹⁸

The texts were therefore written for a variety of reasons, and they were published over a broad period of time. It is difficult to ascertain whether all of the women wrote specifically for publication. Most definitely did, and twenty of the autobiographies were published during the life-time of the writer. Kathleen Woodward published her autobiography as the first step on her ambition for a writing career. Nellie Scott and Mrs Yearn wrote for collection of memoirs to be published by the Working Women's Co-operative Guild. The Alice Foley Papers in Bolton library archives reveal a lively communication between Alice and her publishers, which resulted in very few changes between her original manuscript and the published version.

The six autobiographies published posthumously are those of: Ada Nield Chew, Bessie Harvey, Mrs Hills, Maria Hull and Hannah Mitchell. As described in their individual biographies earlier, Hannah Mitchell's text was edited and published by her son and Ada Nield Chew's with the help of her daughter.¹⁹ The four remaining texts were published by local history groups. Two of these are amongst the shortest of the autobiographies: those of Bessie Harvey and Mrs Hills. These two show an overlap in tone and content with the unpublished texts discussed earlier, so suggesting a continuum in the variety of working-class women's autobiographies, rather than a sharp demarcation point.

¹⁸ Margaret Bondfield, *The Hard Way Up*, p.9.

¹⁹ Hannah Mitchell's only son published his mother's autobiography 'with the minimum of editing' after her death. Hannah Mitchell, see, *The Hard Way Up*, 'Introduction'. Doris Nield Chew was contacted in the early 1970s by the authors of *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, who persuaded Doris to find her mother's autobiographical papers and from them piece together her autobiography.

The publication of the autobiographies continues over a fifty-year period: from the earliest – Annie Kenney’s *Memoirs of a Militant* – published in 1924, to the most recent Isabella Cooke’s *A Hired Lass in Westmorland* in 1982. Most are now out of print. Hannah Mitchell’s *The Hard Way Up*, was published by feminist publishers Virago in 1977. About this time Virago also republished Kathleen Woodward’s *Jipping Street* first published in 1928, as well as the collection of autobiographies by members of the Women’s Co-operative Guild, which included the autobiographies of Mrs Scott and Mrs Yearn and was originally published in 1931.²⁰ As well as these more recently published, or republished books, first editions of many of the others are available in the British Library, London or the Bodleian Library, Oxford. A few of the texts were more elusive: the only known copy of Winifred Griffiths’ autobiography, *One Woman’s Story*, for example, is in West Glamorgan County Library, and the only known copy of Mary Luty’s *A Penniless Globetrotter* is in Rawtenstall Public Library and Record Office, in Lancashire.

Conclusion

This biographical and bibliographical summary of the autobiographies serves to illustrate not only the great variety in the lives of the authors in terms of their lifestyle, geographical location, position within the working class, family experiences and opportunities for advancement, and their success at national, local or familial level, but also hints at the wealth of untapped material which these texts contain.²¹ Yet however different the life experiences of the twenty-six women in the cohort, the reasons for writing and the form and time at which they were written, their autobiographies have various broad themes in common and these encompass education, domesticity, economics and politics. There are

²⁰ Kathleen Woodward, *Jipping Street* (London: Virago, 1983); Mrs Scott ‘A Felt Hat Worker’ and Mrs Yearn, ‘A Public Spirited Rebel’ in *Life as We Have Known It*.

²¹ See also bibliographical and biographical charts in Appendices I and II.

also strands which recur within these broad themes, arguably most prominent is that of respectability, but they also discuss: ambitions, rebellion, achievements, support networks of friends, family and neighbours, and a retrospective justification, rationale or explanation of their success. All of these run through the texts to a greater or lesser degree, they surface and subside, weave in and out, and are given prominence at different times in the various autobiographies. However, the main thread running through all of the autobiographies, and its importance in the autobiographies is reflected in the thesis, is the overarching theme of success. Set in the broad historical context of working-class women's writing the autobiographies reflect the nature of success as it was perceived, experienced, achieved and described by the cohort.

Chapter 3: Education

Introduction

During the period 1870-1900 various societal changes facilitated educational opportunities for the cohort, and working-class children in general. Wages for adults improved, so paid employment for children became generally less critical to family economy. A series of Factory Acts were passed, which curtailed the employment of children, while a succession of Education Acts legislated for the provision of formal elementary education - of which most, although not all, of the cohort were able to take advantage.

The cohort also record learning by less formal pathways: within the home, as family members or neighbours and friends encouraged reading and writing skills; and outside the home, in societies, girls clubs, and Sunday schools. Although the amount of education received by individual children was dependent on a variety of family circumstances, the cohort revealed that education was not only a childhood process. It was becoming possible to continue learning throughout life. Secondary education, teacher training schemes, and even a university degree were becoming attainable for working-class women. In addition, the proliferation of youth and adult clubs and societies, public lectures, and the wider availability of reading materials through the spread of public libraries, facilitated informal education and growing access to cheap printed magazines and books.¹

¹ For more on this topic, see, for example: Jonathan Ross, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New York: Yale University Press, 2001); for a classic appraisal of mass literacy see, Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London: Penguin, 1957).

Educational success was seen variously as learning to read and write - acquiring literacy was a skill that had often been denied to the women's parents - performing well at school and attaining qualifications. Perceptions changed during the lives of the women: as one educational milestone was achieved, ambitions often grew for further success. Some autobiographers acknowledged the importance of schooling as a stepping-stone to higher education; some saw education as success in itself, and valued some financial independence at the end of school years; others viewed education as a kind of apprenticeship where they could learn practical skills that would fit them for paid employment or family life.

Historical Context

The period 1870-1900 crystallised the concept of education as institutionalised formal learning, as we know it today: the imparting of knowledge became the duty of society and the state to every citizen.² Before 1870, the quality of education for working-class children was poor: families had to struggle if they wanted education for their children. Not only did it mean finding the few pennies required to pay for schooling, but it often also meant the loss of a wage hitherto earned by the child. In many families it was not economically viable to send the children to school, as they were required to work to help support the family as a whole.³

At this time any formal elementary education for the children of working-class families was provided either by individuals for profit, or by voluntary church or philanthropic organizations, who saw religious-based education as the means of moral improvement of the working class. Most Anglican and Catholic parishes sponsored day schools, which

² See, for instance, A. N. Wilson, *The Victorians*, pp.282-294.

³ See, for instance, Geoffrey Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain* (London: Fontana, 1987), p.174.

provided denomination-specific religious education. The National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church, founded in 1811, and the British and Foreign School Society founded in 1814, were the two most influential.⁴

Initially offering free day schooling, the two societies soon began to charge ‘school pence’. From 1833 onwards they began to receive a small government grant and to be supervised by the state. However, such organizations were inadequate to deal with the rapidly expanding child population as the century progressed. The State Education Act of 1870, put through Parliament by W. E. Forster, made a state system of elementary schooling possible. It was fuelled by ‘visions of childhood as a period of carefree independence’.⁵ The National Society, together with the British Schools, by 1870 offered over 90% of voluntary school places.⁶ Forster’s Act would ‘fill in the gaps’.⁷ Under the 1870 Act, a survey of schools in England and Wales was ordered and local School boards were to be established in areas not covered by the Societies. School boards could use funds from local taxes to build and operate the new schools. These would exist alongside the Societies’ schools financed by philanthropy. After the Act, the non-sectarian Board Schools continued non-denominational religious teaching with an emphasis on teaching knowledge of the Bible rather than the all-pervasive and proscribed religion of the denominational schools.

⁴ The British and Foreign Schools Society, so named in 1814, was established in 1810 by a mixture of dissenters and entrepreneurs in the non-conformist Royal Lancastrian Association.

⁵ Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor*, p.3.

⁶ John Hurt, *Elementary Schooling and the Working Classes 1860-1918* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), p.4.

⁷ For the details surrounding the passing of the 1870 Act see, for instance, Mary Sturt, *Education of the People: A History of Primary Education in England and Wales in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), see especially Chapter 14.

The Boards had the authority to require all children under their jurisdiction to meet minimum standards of school attendance: all children were to attend school for five hours every weekday until ten years of age. The age limit was later extended to eleven in 1893 and twelve in 1899.⁸ Before this time children in most working-class families were expected to take up paid employment at an early age in order to contribute to the family budget. Even after 1870, there was no guarantee that children would attend school. The minimum charge of 'school pence' did not begin to disappear until 1891, and precluded some of the poorest from attending. By the mid 1880s, prosecutions for violation of the Education Acts were close to their peak as the sustained efforts of school attendance officers became more effective, and it became increasingly difficult for parents and children to violate the laws against truancy.⁹ The school-leaving age and its enforcement made sure children did not enter factories, or other paid employment, until they had attained at least the minimum age. By 1900, elementary schools were charging no tuition and were meeting state certified standards of instruction.¹⁰

The Education Act of 1902, implementing the recommendations of the Bryce Commission, set up Local Education Authorities (LEA) to replace School boards. Part of the brief of the LEAs was to provide secondary schools. However most working-class children continued to receive only elementary school education. Secondary schools were not free until 1907 when a system of free places - 'the ladder of opportunity' - was introduced offering education up to the age of sixteen.¹¹ During the years between 1870-1900 educational standards in society were therefore changing fast. A high level of

⁸ This was the situation in London. Local School boards set the age and conditions for leaving school and these varied considerably, London leaving age was amongst the highest. See David Rubenstein, *School Attendance in London 1870-1914: A Social History* (Hull: Lampada Press, 1969), pp.35-38.

⁹ David E. Mitch, *The Rise of Popular Literacy in Victorian England: The Influence of Private Choice and Public Policy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), p.182.

¹⁰ David Mitch, *The Rise of Popular Literacy*, p.2.

¹¹ David Mitch, *The Rise of Popular Literacy*, p.9.

female illiteracy was no longer acceptable as it had been even fifty years before this period. The women in the cohort were therefore enabled, with a few exceptions, to attend school at least up to ten years of age.

Experiences of Sunday School

An important, and less formal, addition to weekday schooling was Sunday school. Almost all of the cohort refer to some period of time spent at Sunday school during their early years. Sunday schools throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century had a long-standing and continuing popularity. They were considered part of the total educational provision, and indeed may have been the only provision for lower working-class children before the 1870 Act.¹² It is not surprising that Sunday schools are recalled in all but three of the autobiographies.¹³ In 1870 the 'closer integration of chapel and school' was planned by the Methodist Sunday School Union. This became the basis of what has become known as 'the great era of the Sunday School' so would have reached its height as the cohort were of an age to attend.¹⁴

Sunday schools were also popular for more reasons than that of indoctrinating children into Christian ideology. They often gave free clothes to very poor children, and also provided child-care so that parents of working-class children had some time to themselves on what was often the only day they were not in paid employment. In addition Sunday school treats in the form of outings, teas, picnics or Parish breakfasts both entertained and fed children, and so helped with family economics.

¹² Geoffrey Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain*, pp.173, 178.

¹³ The autobiographies of Alice Foley, Betty May and Hannah Mitchell do not mention Sunday school attendance.

¹⁴ S. J. D. Green, *Religion in the Age of Decline: Organisation and Experience in Industrial Yorkshire 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.218.

As far as education was concerned, many children began to learn to read in Sunday school, and parents, even those who were not literate, were encouraged to listen to their children read a few verses of the Bible in the evening. Although this may be viewed as a form of social control through religious indoctrination, it was also a reflection of the spirit of co-operation, which often existed between parents and Sunday school. The importance the schools placed on parental participation also reflected the ethos of an earlier age when parents had stronger links with the church. In a similar dichotomy the reward books and the ceremony of presenting them, could be seen by some as a patronizing gesture by the local elite, but for others it was a ceremonial occasion which marked a milestone in Sunday School life, and thus valued.¹⁵

In many of the autobiographies Sunday school features as an integral part of childhood even amongst non-churchgoing families. Sending children to Sunday school was an important part of family respectability for aspiring working-class parents. It was a sign of respectability to be seen living a Christian way of life and this included encouraging even very young children into Sunday school attendance. Grace Foakes' family, for instance, were 'not church goers', however the children were sent to Sunday school.¹⁶ Mildred Edwards proudly recalled, as one of her earliest memories, walking to Sunday school at St John's in Upperby, a nearby village. 'I wasn't four,' she claimed, when her father took her for the first time to join her older sister and two brothers in Sunday school, between church services.¹⁷

¹⁵ Mary Clare Martin, *Parents, Children and Schools in London 1740-1870*, unpublished paper at 'Earning and Learning' conference Royal Holloway, September 2002.

¹⁶ Grace Foakes, *My Part of the River*, p. 35.

¹⁷ Mildred Edwards, *Our City...Our People*, p.13.

Louise Jermy also attended Sunday school, and recalled being taken to Romsey Abbey by her grandmother, 'a laundress to the great house'.¹⁸ Louise's mother, Selina, had died when Louise was eighteen months old and Louise had been told by her grandmother that she was in heaven. For Louise, Sunday school was therefore a link with her mother. She retained a potent memory of being taken when very young:

I remember I used to go to Sunday School just across from the Abbey, and that we walked into church after, two and two, and that we had to sit very quiet.¹⁹

Louise attended Sunday school into adulthood; it was of great importance in her life as it was here she learned to read. One of the Sunday school teachers, a schoolmistress during the week, encouraged her:

I loved my teacher. She was an Irish lady and a schoolmistress and she taught me to be patient and to do my best, and never forget that God was over all. She also advised me to take up daily Bible reading and gave me the Scripture Union card.²⁰

At sixteen, Louise suffered a long illness and was unable to attend Sunday school for a while. On her recovery, her return made her 'much happier than I had ever been. My stepmother had threatened to stop me from going to Sunday school, but my father happened to overhear that and at once said, I should go there till I was seventy if I desired.'²¹

Emma Smith also viewed Sunday school as an important part of her education. She attended Sunday school at the Salvation Army Children's Home in Plymouth where she lived for a few months when she was nine years old. The memory remained vivid for Emma many years later, when writing her autobiography in her sixties:

¹⁸ Louise Jermy, *The Memories of a Working Woman*, p.5.

¹⁹ Louise Jermy, *The Memories of a Working Woman*, p.6.

²⁰ Louise Jermy, *The Memories of a Working Woman*, p.49.

²¹ Louise Jermy, *The Memories of a Working Woman*, p.55.

In the afternoon the children gathered in a small room around a table on which there was a red cloth and a large open Bible. This was called our Sunday School class. Here I was an attentive and apt pupil. Soon I learned by heart the old, old stories of the Old Testament so beloved by children: and once again I listened eagerly to the story of God's love for children. I can still in fancy hear our voices at the Sunday School class as we sang [a] sweet old hymn.²²

Emma placed importance on 'listening eagerly' being an 'attentive and apt pupil' at Sunday school. She had little regular schooling, which gave Sunday school even more importance in her life, and her insistence on her good scholarly behaviour hints that she wished to show her aptitude, and how well she would have progressed in her education had she had the opportunity.

Experiences of Elementary Schooling

Given greater significance than Sunday school in the autobiographies, however, was the time spent at elementary school. Maria Hull, for instance, wrote almost exclusively about her schooldays: she had ambitions to become a schoolteacher and had even met her future husband when at school.²³ The importance of school in the lives of the women in the cohort becomes clear if compared to autobiographies examined during preliminary research, written by working-class women born before 1870. As described above, early in the nineteenth century religion was the dominant feature of their recollections, followed in mid-century by occupation.²⁴

Although the situation did not change suddenly in 1870, twenty of the cohort enjoyed at least a minimum of seven years of more or less full-time education between the ages of

²² Emma Smith, *A Cornish Waif's Story*, p.75.

²³ Maria Hull, 'A Derbyshire Schooling: 1884-1893' in *History Workshop Journal*, issue 25, Spring 1985, p.170.

²⁴ See above, p. 28.

five and twelve. Four of the autobiographers, Agnes Cowper, Mildred Edwards, Winifred Griffiths and Mrs Scott, attended Church of England elementary schools. Mildred Edwards, the daughter of a railwayman in Carlisle, recalled that when she was nine years old, in 1898, she left St John's Infants School in South Street, which she had attended since aged five, and joined her older brother and sister at 'the big school': Christ Church School in nearby Harraby.²⁵ Alice Foley in Bolton and Mary Gawthorpe in Leeds went to Catholic schools. The elementary schools attended by the remaining nineteen women of the cohort are referred to variously in their autobiographies as 'local', 'village', 'elementary', 'primary' or 'council'. Maria Hull attended 'Board School at Church Grisley' where payment was two pennies; her eldest brother as the first in the family paid three pennies.²⁶ Louise Jermy was a pupil at the 'British School' in Romsey until she was eleven.²⁷

The great detail in the recollections of their time in school is further evidence of the importance these women placed on education as part of their lives. Descriptions and the minutiae of day-to-day education – both formal and informal – are a significant part of the texts. Whether formally at school or informally at home or at Sunday school, all of the women learnt to read and write: The autobiographies are a record of the range of different circumstances that promoted and enhanced their abilities to do so. School and learning were central to their lives, and educational achievements – learning to read and write, school prizes, learning domestic skills – were seen, as they viewed their lives retrospectively, as part of their perceptions of success.

²⁵ Mildred Edwards, *Our City...Our People*, p.10.

²⁶ Maria Hull, 'A Derbyshire Schooling', p.167.

²⁷ Louise Jermy, *Memories of a Working Woman*, p.10.

The only exception was Betty May who was born in 1891 in Limehouse, London. The family lived in poverty. Betty and her brothers appear to have been left to care for themselves while their mother supported the family by working at a chocolate factory, her husband having deserted her and their four children. In 1900, aged nine, Betty was sent to an aunt's in a village in Somerset and, for the first time, attended school. Sending children to stay with relatives on extended visits was not unusual amongst working-class families at this period. This flexibility and fluidity was often an answer to the needs of friends and relatives, or a solution to overcrowding or periods of difficulties at home.²⁸ Betty wrote dismissively of her schooldays: 'I do not think I managed to learn very much there. In fact lessons rather bored me.'²⁹ In the introduction to her autobiography, however, Betty prided herself that she 'never tried to be ordinary and fit in with other people.' By diminishing or dismissing the importance of education in her life, while at the same time declaring that she liked to be different, she underlined the importance of education in the life of other women of the class and period.³⁰

Educational reforms were not evenly applied across the country. The women reveal that there was a great variation in the length of schooling received by individuals.

For example, Maria Hull's autobiography acknowledged some of the changes in society which came about by education reforms and illustrate that these were strictly observed in some areas. She remembered children in work being returned to education:

After the Education Act of 1872 made schooling compulsory for all children aged 5-10, some who had left at 9 years to start work in local industry (boys to do brick-carrying or work as trappers in coal mines) were recalled to continue their education.³¹

²⁸ See Anna Davin, 'Versatile Households' in *Growing Up Poor*, pp.38-43.

²⁹ Betty May, *Tiger Woman* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1929), p.29.

³⁰ Betty May, *Tiger Woman*, p.xi.

³¹ Maria Hull, 'A Derbyshire Schooling', p.167.

Maria's charted progress through her National elementary school, which began in 1884, reveals details of her education as a working-class girl in South Derbyshire and is worth quoting at length here as it sets the standard for the sort of elementary education which could be achieved at this time. Maria is more fortunate than many of the autobiographers, she appears to have learned reading, writing and arithmetic, some domestic skills and a little general knowledge:

At the National School I progressed from class to class. As early as age four I had a small slate costing a penny, and made pothooks figures and letters of the alphabet. At five, I was learning to read and write simple words. When I was six I remember knitting woollen cuffs on two needles. No exams, except one in Scripture conducted by a visiting parson.

In the sewing class when I was nine, we girls made calico underwear and did much knitting as well. We made woollen vests and petticoats. When I was in the fourth standard, at the age of ten, I left because my parents wished me to transfer to the Girls' Department of the local Board School.

In September 1891, along with my two younger sisters, I started my new school, in standard 4. Things were different here: much less scripture, and, for the first time I saw a blackboard and an easel. We had drill, which consisted of arm exercises in the playground. I recall doing what seemed to me complicated sums in arithmetic, but enjoyed them as I did all subjects, especially grammar. History lessons took the form of stories read by teacher. The only geography lessons we had were the learning by heart the names of the chief rivers and towns of England. In standard 6, I felt I had reached the top of the school.³²

However, not all of the autobiographers were fortunate enough to have had this level of basic formal schooling. Although all of the women were born after 1870, not all of them were at school for the years between five and twelve legislated for by the 1870 Act. Hannah Mitchell, Louise Jermy and Emma Smith were all denied a significant part of

³² Maria Hull, 'A Derbyshire Schooling', pp. 167-168.

these years of schooling and all three of them resented this lack of opportunity early in their lives, which they saw as denying them something that was theirs by right. All three women indicate the importance of their family situation, and the attitude of parents, on whom they were dependent, for the kind of education they received.

Hannah, for instance, was born only one year after the 1870 Act legislated for provision of elementary schooling for all, and it was seven years after this that she had a mere two weeks of formal school. Hannah's experience, compared with that of Maria's less than ten years later, underlines the unevenness of educational reforms, the difficulties of charting a chronological progress and, perhaps more significantly, it illustrates the gender bias in the education of girls of which Hannah was acutely aware. Born in 1871 in Alport Dale, in a remote part of the Peak District of Derbyshire, the nearest school for Hannah's family was five miles away by the shortest cut over the hill, which made daily attendance impossible. The children were to be sent in turn as they grew old enough to go into lodgings at the schoolhouse during the week. Hannah's two elder brothers went first, and two years later in 1878 Hannah and her sister Lizzie were eventually to have their turn. Education was not given much importance within the family, it was referred to only as 'a bit of schooling'.³³ Hannah, however, saw education as something to strive for. Going to school seemed to Hannah to be a 'magic key which would admit me to a treasure house of learning', and therefore valuable. She perceived learning as 'unlocking a door' to success.³⁴

But it was winter, the journey proved too long and rough for the girls, the school and schoolhouse were badly heated and after two weeks of school the girls fell ill and were

³³ Hannah Mitchell *The Hard Way Up*, p.48.

³⁴ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.49.

kept home for the rest of the winter. In the spring, elder sister Lizzie was sent to lodge at another school in the nearest town, which she attended for two years, but Hannah was kept at home to help on the farm and in the house. In comparison to the schooling provided for her brothers, Hannah felt she had missed out on an opportunity to learn. The family farm was remote, the family could not afford help; her labour was required in the fields and at home. She recorded: 'I realized with grief that I was not to have even the brief period at school which the three elder ones had.'³⁵ She recalled her rebellion against this unfair treatment and her complaint to her mother: 'when I boldly demanded the same, she said it was different for boys; girls must keep their place.'³⁶ Hannah resented her mother's attitude. Her autobiography gave no romantic picture of the cosy relationship between herself and her mother, often found in the autobiographies. She also resented the gender differentiation often accepted by others in the cohort.³⁷

Hannah's resentment appeared to have fuelled her will to succeed and she overcame what she perceived as this obstacle to her learning. Her lack of formal schooling did not prevent her from achieving a rudimentary education. She had been taught to read by relatives:

My father and Uncle had taught us all to read, so they said, but I cannot remember a time when I could not read. I was passionately fond of books, which as events turned out were to be my only source of learning. My Uncle taught me to write and I taught the two younger ones to read and write.³⁸

³⁵ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.52.

³⁶ Hannah Mitchell, *The hard Way Up*, p.114.

³⁷ Amongst the autobiographers, Hannah Mitchell, Emma Smith and Kathleen Woodward, are the only three to have an unhappy relationship with their mothers, as did Louise Jermy with her stepmother. Significantly, all four had poor school attendance.

³⁸ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p. 43.

Hannah saw the importance of literacy and taught her younger sisters, passing the skill on in the same manner that she had learned it: informally at home. She built on her rudimentary education: her ambition to learn prompted her to perform tasks such as cleaning shoes or gathering firewood for her brothers in exchange for them bringing books home from school at weekends for her. This was important enough for Hannah to undertake even more of the hated chores in order to take advantage of her brothers' two years of schooling. She acknowledged her success in obtaining some benefits from their teaching as she declared: 'this period of two years brought me also a small measure of education.'³⁹ She grew passionate about books from which she could learn, and as this became known she was also permitted to read books owned by neighbours. This, she described, 'led to my reading some curious and unsuitable matter, old-fashioned theological books, early Methodist magazines, cookery books and queer tales of robbery and murder.'⁴⁰

Louise Jermy and Emma Smith also reveal that the most relevant factor to their lack of schooling was the family situation and the attitude of their respective parents, or step-parents. Louise was born in 1877 at Howe in Hampshire: her mother died when she was eighteen months old, and her father remarried. Louise's family home was one of the most affluent of those described by the cohort: her father was in regular work and her stepmother ran a laundry business.⁴¹ Louise was nevertheless used as an unpaid servant in the house, and she blamed her stepmother for her 'little formal schooling. But for her I should have been educated, also I should have been taught to play the mandoline (*sic*),

³⁹ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.44.

⁴⁰ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.44.

⁴¹ A head of household in regular employment meant that this family would be in category E on Charles Booth's scale of social hierarchy. In 1889, Booth's study, *Life and Labour of the People in London*, he suggested eight groups; the very poor making up groups A to D. Group E, those poor whose head of family or chief wage earner was in regular employment was the largest group, forming 40% of London's population. A decade later, Seebohm Rowntree's study in York, *Poverty: A Study of Town Life* confirmed Booth's results, showing that a similar situation obtained in York.

which father had bought me.’⁴² The most probable explanation for her stepmother’s behaviour was her resentment of Louise as the child of her husband’s first wife. Like Hannah, Louise perceived education as important, and saw lack of schooling as a missed opportunity. The learning of a musical instrument would have certainly lifted her out of the ordinary. The mandolin is an interesting motif for aspirations to success in Louise’s autobiography: few, if any, working-class girls could have claimed to own, let alone learn to play, a musical instrument, which had long been considered a genteel pursuit for the daughters of middle-class or elite families.

Born in 1894, later in the period than Maria, Hannah or Louise, Emma Murphy, who wrote under the pseudonym Emma Smith, struggled for her education and ‘progressed as far as it was possible for one who was so often absent’.⁴³ Emma lived with her maternal grandparents until they began to fail in health when she was six years old in 1900. Emma’s mother whom she knew as her sister Maud, by then had two more children by a new partner, Jack O’Brien, who played a part in Emma’s circumstances.⁴⁴ Maud’s younger children were treated well, but he was unwilling to bring up Emma, the child of another man. Emma was sold to a travelling hurdy-gurdy man who used Emma to help collect money from the crowds. Emma Smith’s sparse and intermittent schooling could be linked with her wretched and itinerant life-style, caused by the illegitimacy of her birth, the poverty of her family and especially the callousness of her mother.

Emma did not begin regular schooling until she was nine, when she was taken in by the Salvation Army Children’s Home in Plymouth for a few months. There she attended both Sunday and day school. She recalled two earlier attempts at starting school whilst living

⁴² Louise Jermy, *The Memories of a Working Woman*, p.57.

⁴³ Emma Smith, *A Cornish Waif*, p.97.

⁴⁴ Emma Smith, *A Cornish Waif*, p.26.

with the hurdy-gurdy man and his wife in Penzance. These had failed, partly because of her itinerant way of life, but mainly because Emma's dirty and ragged appearance provoked cruel treatment at the hands of both teachers and pupils. Once she became a resident of the Children's Home, in 1904, things were different. Emma joyfully described her sense of achievement at the third attempt at school attendance. This was, she claimed 'a success':

Clean and tidily dressed, my awful sense of inferiority was lifted, and though I certainly felt out of it all where lessons were concerned, my teacher was patient and helpful. Besides, I had the other Home (*sic*) children to go to school with and to mix in with at playtime. We were not dressed in any sort of Home uniform, so that we were not obviously Home children.⁴⁵

For Emma, Hannah and Louise it appears that a combination of factors - gender, family economics, parental attitude, particularly that of the mother, and difficulty of journey to school - had an effect on their formal elementary school attendance. All were forced into some kind of employment instead of attending school. Despite this, their determination to succeed meant they learnt by more unconventional means. Hannah enlisted the help of family members, Louise learned at Sunday school and Emma studied piecemeal at various schools until she became resident in the children's home.

Most of the cohort were fortunate enough to spend the years between ages five and ten at school. In some areas, especially by the 1880s, it was possible to be at school between three and fourteen. Several autobiographers reported starting school at an earlier age than five. Schooldays for Rose Gibbs, Maria Hull and Winifred Griffiths, for instance, began when they were very young. They recorded this fact with some pride, emphasizing that their attendance at schooling at an early age was something they saw as a benefit. Rose

⁴⁵ Emma Smith, *A Cornish Waif's Story*, p.74.

Gibbs was born in the East End of London in 1892: her father was a soldier, until he was wounded in the Boer War, and this left him out of work for eight years. Rose's mother had been in domestic service before she was married and had to return to it while her husband was unemployed. This may be the reason why Rose was able to attend school so early in her life: certainly she took care to record the length of time she attended school, at a time when, despite the legislation, education was still not a given fact of life for all children of working class parents. Rose claimed 'I went to school when I was three and left when I was twelve.'⁴⁶ She eventually took her young sister to school with her. The headmistress of the council school which Rose Gibbs attended acknowledged the fact that working-class girls often took responsibility for younger siblings, and did something to help Rose and her small sister:

I often missed school, so in the end our headmistress, a lovely golden-haired lady used to let me bring [my younger sister] into school and have her all day with me in class. She was too young to follow the lessons, but it encouraged me to keep coming to school. And more than once the headmistress gave me free tickets for dinner, with one for her as well. School dinners were then a bowl of soup and beautiful crusty bread rolls – and free for the poorer children.⁴⁷

A common explanation given by the autobiographers for early attendance at school was the fact that they were younger siblings of children already attending. Maria Hull was born in Pool Village, South Derbyshire in 1881. Her elder sister and brother attended the Dame school in Pool Village, but by the time Maria began school in 1894, when she was only two years and nine months old, the Dame school had closed and she joined them instead at the newly opened National Board School. Maria explained in her autobiography

⁴⁶ Mrs Hills, 'Reminiscences of Mrs Hills: Formerly of Leighton Bromswold,' in *Memories of Life in the Village of Leighton Bromswold* (Cambridge: privately printed, 1977), pp.3-4 of a small pamphlet, Cambridgeshire Record Office, Huntingdon Branch.

⁴⁷ Rose Gibbs, *In Service: Rose Gibbs Remembers* (Basingstoke: Basingstoke and Comberton Village Colleges, 1948), p. 4.

that she started at school earlier than was normally the case because there were older children from her family already attending the school: 'It was not unusual for a child as young as I was to be accepted. Payment was each Monday morning, 3d. for the eldest child and 2d for each succeeding one.'⁴⁸ Winifred Griffiths, who had older siblings, began school when she was 'nearly four years old', however there were other, younger, children already attending school as she recalled: 'I was put into the second class as I was considered too big for a baby class.'⁴⁹

The age at which school began for these women, at least until 1900, appeared to depend on individual circumstances: in case of special needs, when the mother was in paid employment, and if there were older children at school who could help with their younger sibling when required. It was also dependent on whether or not the local school took younger children. Most Board schools acknowledged the situation and schools extended their register to include younger children. These had 'baby's rooms' where children from three to five years of age were prepared for 'standard school'.

By 1900, infant schools were coming under attack for allowing children under five to attend. Over the period there had been changes in attitudes to childcare. Firstly, more emphasis was being placed on the importance of mothering and some argued that children under the age of five should be with their mothers.⁵⁰ Secondly, ideas about the freedom of movement, play and individual learning were gaining ground. In 1906 a special report on schoolchildren under five, by the school inspector Rosalie M. Munday, claimed: 'the home developed child was better educated than the little scholar though he has not directly

⁴⁸ Maria Hull, 'A Derbyshire Schooling', p.167.

⁴⁹ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.11.

⁵⁰ For discussion of this trend, see for instance: Carolyn Steedman, *Childhood, Culture and Class: Margaret MacMillan 1860-1931* (London: Virago, 1990) and Anna Davin, 'Imperialism and Motherhood' in *History Workshop Journal* vol.5, 1978.

learned any of the three Rs.’⁵¹ Although it was also argued that the often cramped and unhealthy working-class homes could not always give children the attention and stimulus they required, conditions in schools were not always much better. Miss Bathhurst, another inspector wrote: ‘little children (at school) are subject to military rather than maternal influences... individuality is crushed out, spontaneous qualities are checked and at three years old children are forced to follow a routine only suitable to a far later age.’⁵²

In contrast, Mary Luty started school later than many of the other women. Mary was born in Newchurch-in-Rossendale in 1885.⁵³ When she was sixteen months old, her parents’ marriage broke up. Her mother left the family home taking Mary, and her three-month-old brother to live with their grandparents, tenant farmers near Waugh’s Well on the Yorkshire Moors. The farm was so remote that Mary gave this as a reason for not attending school until age seven.⁵⁴ As Mary failed to record any details of her brother’s schooling, it is difficult to discern whether this was the case, or whether, if Mary had been a boy she would have been sent to school despite the remoteness, as had been Hannah Mitchell’s brothers.

The new Education Acts notwithstanding, the period of schooling thus varied considerably from girl to girl, depending on various factors in their home background. They started school later, or earlier, in life and had periods of absence from school for domestic duties, or other family circumstances, during school years. Furthermore, although all the women seem to have been involved to a greater or lesser extent in home-based chores, paid employment was deferred until the end of legitimate schooling.

⁵¹ Cited in Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor*, p. 117.

⁵² Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor*, p.117.

⁵³ Mary’s published autobiography: Mary Luty, *A Penniless Globetrotter* records her birthplace, but not her birthdate. This was obtained from her typescript ‘My Life Has Sparkled’, Rawtenstall Record Office.

⁵⁴ Mary Luty, *A Penniless Globetrotter*, p.26.

In industrial areas, especially those in the North of England, a loophole in this legislation was exploited to the disadvantage of children from poorer families. Four of the cohort - Annie Kenney, Mary Luty, Nellie Scott, and Mrs Yearn - left school earlier than their classmates and began work as soon as they could in order to supplement family income. They were enabled to do so by taking advantage of the half-time system. This curtailed school years for some of the women in the cohort as they became old enough for factory work. The half-time system, which continued until as late as 1918, set a so-called 'Labour Test' for children between ten and thirteen. If they 'passed', that is, their work was good enough for them to be taken on at the factory, they were able to work half-time, alternating mornings or afternoons weekly in the factory, the other half of the day to be spent at school.

The system was described by several of the autobiographers. Some welcomed it as a short-cut to the adult world of work, others viewed it as a flawed system which encroached on school years. In general the autobiographers' viewpoint appears to have depended on whether or not the half-time system was approved by their parents. Alice Foley was born in Bolton in 1891. Her father was unemployed during her childhood, as he had been sacked from the factory for drunkenness immediately following his celebrations of Alice's birth. Alice attended St Peter and Paul's, the local Catholic school in Bolton, from age five until thirteen. However, in 1903, many of Alice's friends had finished full-time schooling aged twelve, in order to work half-time as 'little tenters' at the local cotton mill.⁵⁵ Alice's father refused to take up the half-time system for his children. Alice was aware of his ideas and expressed her luck:

On reaching the age of twelve I was lucky to escape the effects of the Half-Time Factory System then in operation,

⁵⁵ 'Little tenters' usually children or beginners, were employed to stretch out the wet cloth over poles.

for father, with all his faults, strenuously opposed it as being a source of exploitation of child labour. Many of my classmates went half time as 'little tenters' in the surrounding weaving sheds. After working in a noisy, moist atmosphere from six in the morning to twelve noon, they were in no shape for lessons in a crowded classroom and often fell asleep over their books from sheer exhaustion.⁵⁶

The truth, as Alice described, was that meaningful schooling actually ceased from the time children started half-time work, since most were so fatigued by their working half days that they slept through their half-day at school. Although Alice decried the system which allowed children to start work in their twelfth year, her writing highlights the importance of the changes in child employment made by the combination of Education Acts and Employment of Children Acts discussed earlier. By 1900, few children worked before the age of twelve, in comparison to earlier in the century when children as young as six were in regular employment.

Nevertheless, for some of the cohort, gaining the labour certificate was perceived as an educational success. In 1886, Mary Luty became a 'half-timer'. She recorded her 'great pride' as she 'won' and brought home the Labour Certificate, impatient for her mother, already a mill worker, to hear the good news that she could now join her at work:

In those days an elementary school pupil on attaining the age of eleven could sit for what was known as the Labour Certificate, which enabled a young person to start work as a "half-timer".

When I had won mine I took it home with great pride and pinned it on the wall of the living room for my mother to see immediately she entered the home. The following week I started as a "half-timer"! This meant that I rose from my bed at five o'clock in the morning and half an hour later accompanied my mother to the factory, half an

⁵⁶ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, (Manchester, Manchester University Extra-Mural Department and the North Western District of the Workers' Educational Association, 1973) p.49.

hour's walk and commenced at six o'clock...worked until half-past twelve, then went to school in the afternoon.⁵⁷

How different from Alice Foley, who had considered herself fortunate to have avoided half-time employment. For Mary, as she left school, education seemed to have been important only as a means to an end, a passport to the adult world of work.

Only two of the cohort, Kathleen Woodward, a factory worker from Bermondsey, London, and Mrs Yearn, a Working Woman's Co-operative Guild member, did not record their schooldays in their autobiographies.⁵⁸ However, it is possible to deduce that they did attend school. Mrs Yearn was born in Oldham in 1891, the fourth of the six surviving children (of fourteen) of a brick-setter. She recalled that she 'had to stay at home to look after mother when two of the younger children were born' and it could be surmised that she would have otherwise been at school. Mrs Yearn also recorded that she became a 'half-timer' around 1902, suggesting that she had attended school to age twelve and then taken the Labour Test. Similarly, Kathleen Woodward began work in a factory on the north side of the Thames at age twelve, which was the school-leaving age for children born in 1896, the year of Katherine's birth, from which it may be deduced that she probably attended school up to that age.

The autobiographies serve to show that although many of these women missed some periods of schooling, for a variety of reasons to do with their families, they still perceived themselves as having achieved an education, even if this was by informal methods with the help of family members, friends or neighbours. However, most of their texts are

⁵⁷ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, pp. 37-38.

⁵⁸ The Woman's Co-operative Guild, of which autobiographers Nellie Scott and Mrs Yearn were members, was founded in 1883. By 1930 when the two wrote their autobiographies it had nearly 1400 branches and 67,000 members. The Guild became an important agent in the education of working-class women and encouraged them to help themselves, and others.

testimony to the fact that educational and employment reforms made formal elementary schooling possible for many working-class girls by the end of the period. Welcome as the changes in educational provision were, it must also be acknowledged, as Anna Davin has argued, that compulsory education of children between five and ten, also had the effect of making working-class children, who before this time had been expected to contribute towards the family income, totally dependent on the family breadwinner, usually the father.⁵⁹

The social function of educating working-class girls in school was to carry this dependency further, and teach these girls to be good wives to working men, and good mothers to the next generation of the work-force. Most of the cohort record that they were required to help in the home: the potential for girls to gain an education was often outweighed by their domestic usefulness, which also had a marked influence on school attendance. Girls were kept at home to look after sick parents, help with chores or mind younger family members. Older girls in poorer families were therefore more likely to miss school for family requirements. This suggests that ideologies of gender and class were inextricably inherent in the formal education system as well as in the home environment.

The Ideologies of Gender and Class

The sort of gender discrimination identified so strongly by Hannah Mitchell in regards to both domestic chores and schooling, was constructed both socially and *inter-familias*. Whatever age they were when they began attending school, absence from school because of domestic duties was a fairly common occurrence for working-class girls. The autobiographers were no exception: older girls were expected to help their mothers with

⁵⁹ Anna Davin, 'Mind That You Do As You Are Told: Reading Books For Board School Girls 1870-1902', in *Feminist Review* Vol. 3 (1979), p.89.

housework and care of younger siblings, even if this did mean missing school. Annie Barnes, Ada Nield Chew, Mildred Edwards, Rose Gibbs and Louise Jermy all describe this reason for their irregular attendance. The situation established tension in working-class girls' lives between their ambition to succeed at school and their pride in undertaking adult family duties. It was accepted almost as a matter of course that girls should miss school when required at home. Older girls in large families tended to have the hardest time, with more expectations of domestic duties within the home.

These women faced what might be viewed as a double setback to any ambitions for achievements when, in addition to this kind of family-generated gender bias, they also faced gender and social class discrimination at school. Patriarchal and family ideologies are evident in the gendered bias which advocated that any academic honours to which girls might aspire were not to take precedence over domestic skills. This situation is underlined by research into the English working class before 1870. Results of this indicate a gendered bias; the schooling of girls was both quantitatively and qualitatively more restricted than that of boys.⁶⁰ Girls were offered fewer places than boys and differential stress was placed on appearance, with neatness and cleanliness considered more important for girls. Both the 1851 Census and the Newcastle Report in 1861 showed that less priority was placed on the education of girls in all academic subjects except reading.⁶¹ Furthermore, after the Revised Code of 1862 made needlework an obligatory subject for girls in State-maintained schools, they frequently spent their afternoons sewing, and were subsequently permitted a lower standard in the annual arithmetic

⁶⁰ J. Martin, 'The Origins and Development of Gendered Schooling' unpublished MA dissertation, University of Warwick (1987).

⁶¹ For an account of the introduction of subjects specifically for girls and the growing emphasis on a sharp separation of masculine and feminine spheres found in reading books in schools, see, for instance, Stephen Heathorn, *For Home, Country and Race: Constructing Gender, Class and Englishness in the Elementary School, 1880-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), pp.13-17 and Appendices.

examination.⁶² Working-class girls were expected, by society and often by their parents, to take up domestic-based employment and seek work as servants, seamstresses or textile workers, as soon as they left school. Arithmetic, for example, was often not perceived as a subject to be taught to girls. On marriage, it was their domestic skills which would help them become 'good' wives and mothers. As a result, proficiency in 'male' subjects such as arithmetic was not deemed important.⁶³

There were some moves to redress this problem as educated middle-class women were elected onto School boards. Before 1869 Boards had consisted only of men. In 1869 the Municipal Franchise Act allowed women to vote in municipal elections on exactly the same terms as men and the Boards were opened to women.⁶⁴ By 1879, seventy women had been elected to local School boards, although they were still outnumbered by men.⁶⁵ Elizabeth Garret and Emily Davis were the first two women in England to be elected to positions of political responsibility on the first London School board.⁶⁶

It is here that an inherent policy of class, as well as gender differentiation occurs. School board members, as well as the patrons organizing both the National and British Schools Societies, were drawn from middle- and upper- class society. They possessed both the time and the level of income to support such philanthropic activity. Working-class girls were expected to use their training in domestic skills to enhance their own home life, but

⁶² Anne Digby, *Children, School and Society in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Macmillan Press, 1981), p.46.

⁶³ June Purvis 'The Double Burden of Class and Gender in the Schooling of Working Class Boys and Girls in Nineteenth Century England' in L Barton and S Walker, *Schools, Teachers and Teaching* (Lewes: Falmer Press, 1981), pp.80-103.

⁶⁴ Philippa Levine, *Victorian Feminism* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), p. 142.

⁶⁵ For an interesting discussion on women moving into this and other previously male clerical occupations see, for example, Ellen Jordan, 'The Lady Clerks at the Prudential: The Beginning of Vertical Segregation by Sex in Clerical Work in Nineteenth-Century Britain' in *Gender and History*, vol.8 (1996), pp.65-81.

⁶⁶ Both women had established reputations within their own field: Emily Davis through her work on behalf of middle-class girls' education and Elizabeth Garrett as the first British-trained woman doctor.

they were also expected to enhance the home life of middle-class women by becoming domestic servants, thus allowing middle- and upper-class campaigners the freedom from domestic duties which enabled them to take their place in the public domain.

Elementary education was thus associated with bringing up a moral, temperate and well-behaved working class which was clearly segregated by both class and gender from the forms of secondary schooling offered to middle-class children. Ellen Wilkinson was resentful of the state system of education which did nothing to encourage bright children, like herself, who were often rebellious because they were bored.⁶⁷

I was just a little sausage in the vast educational sausage factory in the eyes of the makers of the state scheme. That I, and others like me, were keen, intelligent, could mop up facts like blotting paper, wanted to stretch our minds in every direction, was merely a nuisance. We must fit into a mould, or be pressed into it.⁶⁸

Alice Foley wrote in similar vein. She recalled that when she reached the school-leaving age of fourteen: 'little persuasion or encouragement was available to promising pupils to continue their studies.'⁶⁹

Irrespective of who provided the education for working-class children, it was seen as inferior in quality and status to that provided for middle-class children. June Purvis claimed:

Working-class boys and girls...learnt...that they were of the 'lower' social orders. Working-class girls...also learnt that masculinity was the dominant gender form. Working-class parents were likely to give more priority to the schooling of their sons than of their daughters.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Ellen Wilkinson was Minister for Education in 1935.

⁶⁸ Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, p.404.

⁶⁹ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.49.

⁷⁰ June Purvis 'The Double Burden of Class and Gender', in *Schools, Teachers and Teaching*, p.90.

Inequality, both gendered and class-based, and the continued emphasis on home-based occupations for working-class girls, can be traced within the autobiographies written by the women of the cohort. Pictures of the role models the girls were expected to aspire to were even provided in some classrooms, as autobiographer Winifred Griffiths, who wanted ‘fame and glory’, described disparagingly:

But alas, we were expected to set our sights somewhat lower. If one was clean and industrious one might hope to become a housemaid or a laundry maid like those pictured on our classroom wall.⁷¹

The message, disseminated by the school system, and the ironic comment by Winifred Griffiths, suggests that society promulgated very different images of success from that which Winifred envisioned for herself. Working-class women, who knew their place in society, were permitted to become good domestic servants, factory workers, laundresses, seamstresses and so on. According to such directives, they could aspire to be ‘successful’ only at this kind of work.⁷² Winifred’s words reveal that hard work and cleanliness was encouraged but not ambition for, or still less achievement of, academic honours. Societal images of success for them were bound by ideas, prevalent in Victorian society, of a hierarchical, and fixed, system of class.

Working-class girls were offered lower status curricula subjects than their middle-class counterparts. The middle-class idea of femininity was inherent in ‘young ladies’ accomplishments – sketching, piano playing, and embroidery. The curricula for working-class women underlined the ‘good wife and mother’ and the ‘good servant’ who required practical, household training. Society also promulgated the theoretical model of separate

⁷¹ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman’s Story*, p.28.

⁷² For discussion of this topic see, June Purvis, *Hard lessons: The Lives and Education of Working-Class Women in Nineteenth Century England* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989); see also, Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1981).

spheres in segregating boys from girls in lessons, and giving girls gender-specific domestic training, so both class and gender-specific social and domestic ideologies were upheld.

The women autobiographers were aware of the difference between schooling of girls like themselves, and that of boys. Children tended to be segregated at elementary school once they had progressed from the infant classes. Amongst the cohort there were several who recorded their awareness of the gender differentiation in provision of lessons. Mildred Edwards recalled the headmistress of her secondary school in Harraby, Cumbria, taking a class of eighty girls for sewing: although she does not record what lesson the boys were given, we can assume it was not sewing, since this class was only for girls. Mildred recalled the Mission Hall in the corner of the playground, 'which was where we older girls went for cookery lessons.'⁷³ Isabella Cooke described walking to school from her home in Great Strickland to nearby Cliburn where the schoolmistress would teach the infant classes, and also took the girls for needlework:

There was only one master and one mistress. She taught the infants 1 to 2 standard, and used to teach the girls two afternoons a week to sew and knit, and the master taught the rest in his room.⁷⁴

Margaret Bondfield, born in 1873, one of eleven children of a Somerset lace-maker, attended Chard Board School, which was segregated into girls and boys. Margaret described the difference between the lessons taught in male and female classes.⁷⁵ She underlined the narrow curriculum available to girls, although in her school they did learn arithmetic, as she wrote: 'In the girls' school we were taught reading, writing and

⁷³ Mildred Edwards, *Our City...Our People*, p.41.

⁷⁴ Isabella Cooke, *A Hired Lass in Westmorland* (Penrith: The Cumberland and Westmorland Herald, 1982), p.1.

⁷⁵ Margaret Bondfield was the first woman member of the Privy Council when she became Minister of Labour in 1929.

arithmetic, and needlework – no geography, no history except the dates of kings.⁷⁶ Ellen Wilkinson drew attention to gender differentiation when she recalled that some boys in her class, unlike the girls, were given more encouragement. She explained:

The boy rebels had a better time. The masters would often give extra time, lend books and so on to a bright lad. I never remember such encouragement. I was only a girl anyway.⁷⁷

The gendered schooling of girls, as described by many of the women in the cohort had been in place from the eighteenth century and earlier. It had certainly changed little from the mid-Victorian period, in terms of an ideological framework for the education of working-class girls, since it was advocated by the National Society as early as 1861:

It is be hoped that no desire to make girls little Newtons, little Captain Cooks, little Livingstones, Little Mozarts and Handels and little Joshua Reynoldses will ever take us too low for keeping in sight the object of teaching them to make and mend shirts, to make and mend pinafores, and darn stockings and socks. If it does, then from that day the Society will go back.⁷⁸

The autobiographies are testimony to the cohorts' success in surmounting most of the problems and gaining some kind of formal education, despite the vagaries of the education system, which still discriminated against working class girls on two counts – those of gender and class. Where the women were unable, for various reasons, to take full advantage of formal education provisions, many turned to informal methods of acquiring literacy.

⁷⁶ Margaret Bondfield, *A Life's Work*, p.21.

⁷⁷ Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, p.404.

⁷⁸ *The National Society Annual Report* (1861), p.77.

Informal Education

Despite the variety of schooling they received, all of the women in the cohort had learnt to read during their childhood, either at school, Sunday school or at home. Informal learning sometimes supplemented, or in some cases took the place of formal schooling. They expressed pride in this achievement and referred to their reading ability throughout their autobiographies, detailing the difficulties many had to overcome in order to gain this skill. Most of the cohort report help or encouragement either from a kind of mentor or role model, whom they admire and in whom they find inspiration for their own success in either formal or informal learning. This was sometimes a school or Sunday school teacher, but was more often a parent or someone within the family such as an older sister or brother, or a relation such as an aunt or uncle. Mary Luty, for example, recorded that she was not totally uneducated, despite her limited time at school. She had help from other family members in learning: 'I was seven years old before I had even heard of school, although I had been taught my alphabet, I could recite one or two short poems, and do a little sewing.'⁷⁹

Mary Gawthorpe illustrated the progress and improvement in education from the previous two generations of her family. Annie Gawthorpe, Mary's mother, remembered her own mother crying when Annie had to leave school and was sent to the mill to work. After a few years, her eldest sister's dressmaking business had become established and Annie was able to leave the mill to become an assistant in the 'home dressmaking establishment' with her sister. A younger sister was enabled, by the income thus generated, to become a college-trained teacher. Mary's mother had therefore seen in her own generation the

⁷⁹ Mary Luty, *A Penniless Globetrotter*, p. 26.

opportunities that were available through education and was determined to make sure her daughter finished her education.

Mary admired her youngest aunt, and considered her teaching achievement was ‘certainly a feat in those struggling times when fathers were thrown on the industrial refuse heap.’⁸⁰ Annie Gawthorpe’s understandable pride in her sister’s achievements, in what was a time of recession, was perhaps the spur to her encouragement of her own children, girls as well as boys, to read. She gave a good start in reading to all of her five children; there seemed no gender bias in this family:

Four girls and one boy, were taught to know their letters
and to read before they went to the Infant’s School at St
Michael’s when five years old. Mamma had taught them
from the big illustrated blue book full of rhymes.⁸¹

Books played an important part of Mary’s childhood, and the possession of them was part of the family’s respectability. She described the bookcase in the sitting room of their home as ‘our most distinguished furnishing.’⁸²

Alice Foley also had good access to books at home. She proudly described her family as ‘a reading family’ for whom she was to become ‘the chief book-borrower. This entailed carrying a bag of heavy books on Monday evenings for exchange at the branch library some distance away.’⁸³ It was a task she seemed to have accepted willingly in order to have access to books. Alice’s father Thomas Foley, ‘a big, intelligent, but unruly Irishman,’ though often drunk, had instilled a love of literature into his children. Alice

⁸⁰ Mary Gawthorpe, *Up Hill to Holloway* (Penobscot, Maine: Traversity Press, 1962), p.8.

⁸¹ Mary Gawthorpe, *Up Hill to Holloway*, p.19.

⁸² Mary Gawthorpe, *Up Hill to Holloway*, p.16.

⁸³ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.25.

described how he ‘could quickly capture my imagination by his store of Irish folk-lore’.

As a boy he had been employed as a scene-shifter at the local theatre, and during this time:

Had heard many of the great tragedians of the day, and
had learned by rote most of the Shakespearean soliloquies.
Often, with unexpected dignity, he stalked around the
house declaiming magnificent passages from the plays.⁸⁴

Thomas obviously wanted his children to take any available opportunities to be educated; it was he who prevented Alice becoming a half-timer. However, although her father and her older siblings could read, literacy did not extend to Alice’s mother. In her autobiography written in 1917, Alice recalled herself as a small child sitting on potato sacks in the local corner shop trying to spell out the names of the goods on the shelves while her mother and ‘Kitty’, the shopkeeper, worked out the family grocery bill from a list of symbols, since ‘neither could read or write.’ Intriguingly, this incident shows that simple arithmetic had not been a problem for Alice’s mother!

At first her mother resented Alice learning to read, she seemed to feel out of place during family discussions over books, referring to this as ‘long curtain’ talk.⁸⁵ Soon, however, she began to encourage her daughter. Alice became her ‘official reader, and almost every day when I returned from school she would say coaxingly “Let’s have a chapthur (*sic*).”’⁸⁶

Isabella Cooke, who was also aware of being the first generation of her family to learn to read, tells a similar story. She too, tells of her mother’s ability with counting money:

When my granny’s family was young they didn’t worry
about the children attending school so my mother could
not either read or write. She couldn’t even write her own
name yet she could add figures up if she was in a shop,

⁸⁴ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.11.

⁸⁵ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.25.

⁸⁶ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.25.

and she was very good at dictating a letter. We would write out all her letters and read them.⁸⁷

Other autobiographers had mothers who could read, and who supported and encouraged their children in gaining reading skills. Annie Kenney's mother like Mary Gawthorpe's, had encouraged reading in the home: 'on Sunday evening Mother read us stories. They all seemed to be about London life among the poor'.⁸⁸ Annie described her mother as 'A wonderful woman...ever ready to lend a patient ear to other people's troubles, while at the same time showing a remarkable fortitude in her own'.⁸⁹ She also had a strong faith, and in spite of the hard day's work she had done, she always found time to hear the little ones say their prayers, and insisted the children all went to Sunday school and church. She also loved walking on the Lancashire moors, and it is this spirituality and closeness to nature which Annie inherited, and to which she attributed her determination to succeed. She described the strength she gained from nature: 'the open air has ever given me the courage and enthusiasm to press on, hold tight and have the grit to carry on.' It also was thanks to her mother, Annie recalled, that she had grown up 'with a smattering of knowledge on many questions'.⁹⁰ Believing in freedom of expression on all subjects, on Sundays, Annie's mother encouraged her children into debates at home:

Mother would be with us, and when we all assembled round the large table discussion would begin. At this period the elders of the family had been reading Haeckel, Spencer, Darwin. Mother would be as interested as we were until the arguments got so heated that she felt it wise to close the discussion because of the younger children. All these discussions, though I did not really understand them, made me unwilling in later life to accept statements without proof.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Isabella Cooke, *A Hired Lass in Westmorland*, p.8.

⁸⁸ Annie Kenney, *Memories of a Militant*, pp.6-7.

⁸⁹ Annie Kenney, *Memories of a Militant*, p.2.

⁹⁰ Annie Kenney, *Memories of a Militant*, p.1.

⁹¹ Annie Kenney, *Memories of a Militant*, p.20.

These examples from the cohort suggest increasing standards of literacy in the extended family. The significance of literacy, by this period at least, had been realized by many in the working class, perhaps because of improved opportunities for school attendance for their children as well as growing access to print in all areas of life. In many cases adults had taken education into their own hands so there was a growing culture of informal education within families, and sometimes neighbourhoods. Having somebody involved in or at least encouraging, educational self-improvement was important. The increase in literacy skills which the cohort illustrates took place throughout the nineteenth century, and was a reflection of the 'progress' seen as occurring in the Victorian period.

Informal education continued for many of the cohort throughout most of their lives. In five of the autobiographies the authors list the books they have read, revealing that they are keen to show the wide range of their interest and, by implication, their intellect. This also serves to confirm the women's widening interests as they grew older and provided reassurance to themselves, and proof to others of their success in gaining reading skills. Nellie Scott, for instance, born in Stockport around 1890 listed some of the books she was familiar with as a child. She was able to use the library attached to the Sunday school she attended and also described the encouragement she and her sister had from her family, especially an uncle who 'lived just across the road.' He was a great reader who 'used to read aloud so that we knew and loved the characters in Dickens' works.' She recalled:

While at home we had *Chambers' Miscellany* and *Chambers Journals*. I used to sit for hours lost in these books and Wednesday was a joyful day for it brought *The Family Circle* and *The Girls' Own Paper*. I used to creep downstairs to see if they were under the shop door, so that we could read them before we went to school. We went through the usual girls' books, *The Wide, Wide World*, *Queechy*, *The Lamplighter*, and at our Sunday School we had a very good library, where the librarian used to let me roam through the shelves. One book from there made me

keen on housing and Garden Cities, *The Door Without a Knocker*.⁹²

These book lists also indicate the increasing access to reading material for this group in society. Mrs Yearn was a member of the Co-operative Women's Guild and the Guild encouraged members to read and to spread co-operative ideals of self-improvement:

We have a very good library at our Co-operative Society, and we are able to get some very useful books, which are so helpful to those of us who have to be Missionaries for the Co-operative Societies.

What I have read myself are all the Co-operative papers, that wonderful little book, *Working Men Co-operators*, *Storekeeping Understood* by Sydney R. Elliott; *Education and Citizenship*, by G.M. MacTavish; *Nationality* by S. Herbert; *The Municipal Year Book*, *The Local Government Year Book*, *The History of Old Peru*, *The Voice of the People*, by G.L. Stocks; *Progress and Poverty*, by Henry George; *The Old Nobility*, by Howard Evans; *The Book on Natural Laws*, by William Whiteworth, and the *Daily Herald*.

A short time ago I went through a class with Professor Hall at Holyoake House on "The Mechanism of Exchange" dealing with *Currency, Banking and Trade in Peace and War*, by John A Todd.⁹³

As if to place a final seal of approval on what she has achieved, Mrs Yearn added the comment, 'my husband reads the same books'.⁹⁴ For Mrs Yearn, part of her success, therefore, lay in her ability to compete equally on an intellectual level with her husband.

Winifred Griffiths remembered being encouraged to read by a particular teacher at school during her time in standard seven, when she and her classmates were in general 'restless and dissatisfied and impatient of restraint' for the last few months of school. A new headmistress, Miss Snashall, 'had a good and lasting influence on the girls who came

⁹² Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.84.

⁹³ Mrs Yearn, 'A Public-Spirited Rebel', p.106.

⁹⁴ Mrs Yearn, 'A Public-Spirited Rebel', p.106.

under her care', and was wise enough to allow the older girls some freedoms during these last schooldays, an influence for which Winifred was grateful as it instilled in her a love of reading:

Miss Snashall was enthusiastic about encouraging reading, as a great source of joy as well as instruction. I have reason to bless her memory if only for this.⁹⁵

Winifred continued to read avidly after she left school, when employed as a housemaid at East Oakley House, a few miles east of Overton in Hampshire where she was born. On the nurse's day off Winifred looked after the children of the family and discovered that she could borrow books from the nursery library. She described her wide range of reading material:

An abridged *Old Curiosity shop* called *Little Nell* which we had read at school and which had whetted my appetite for Dickens and I was now able to read almost all of his novels and of course many other books. Almost every room in the house had its bookshelves. As housemaid I had access to most of the rooms, and many a time, while ostensibly cleaning, I would steal a few minutes to open and read from some book that caught my eye. In addition I found a good deal of interest in magazines and periodicals which came into the house.⁹⁶

Winifred's ability to read well gave her some status amongst the other servants most of whom were above her in the servant hierarchy. The staff were allowed an hour for 'mid-day dinner' and developed the habit of 'readings' after their meal. Winifred was proud to note:

Soon all conceded that I was the best reader, and from then on it was my pride and pleasure to read aloud such books as the others chose – popular novels of the time like 'East Lynne' and 'Lady Audley's Secret.'⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.30.

⁹⁶ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.48.

⁹⁷ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.51.

Annie Kenney also continued to read after leaving school. She began work in Wood End cotton mill at twelve, as a half-timer, then at thirteen she began full-time work. Annie spent her spare time in 'dreaming and fantasies' and, taking an interest in her fellow-workers, she encouraged them to read, persuading the women working with her to subscribe to a weekly girls' magazine which she read to them in factory breaks.⁹⁸

Reading and learning skills were therefore forged through access to both formal and informal means of education, and all of these women were successful in gaining literacy skills, often against a background of discrimination found within the family and at school. They had help from family members, friends or mentors, and in their turn would often help others to learn. Alice Foley and Isabella Cooke made a significant point in recording that neither their mothers nor their grandmothers could read. They were the only women in the cohort who record that this was the case, but they appear proud of their success in becoming better educated than the previous generation of women in their family. This change from the previous generation to their own, throws light on the significance of the improvements in education for the cohort's potential for success, although class and gender issues were still weighted against working-class girls. Perhaps their achievements are best illustrated by the lives of women such as Mary Gawthorpe, and Ellen Wilkinson who, as will be discussed below, overcame obstacles of class and gender and found their route through the education system and into higher education.

Higher Ambitions: Adult Education, the Pupil Teaching Scheme, and University

In the late 1880s, London University was alone in allowing women to sit examinations and receive degrees. The numbers of places taken by women at Girton College or

⁹⁸ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.16.

Newham in Cambridge, or Lady Margaret Hall, Somerville, St Hugh's and St Hilda's in Oxford, were small, but significant.⁹⁹ However, this was an important change, as educational life for women of all classes was eventually to change as a result of these few. They provided role models of female behaviour which would suggest that empowerment, intellectually, was possible for all women.¹⁰⁰

Balfour's Education Act of 1902 established Local Education Authorities and encouraged them to extend educational provision at both elementary and secondary levels.¹⁰¹ 'Able' working-class children could acquire a secondary education, especially when debates about social equality between 1906 and 1914 resulted in the Free Place Regulations, introduced to ensure that all secondary schools aided by grants 'shall be made fully accessible to children of all classes'.¹⁰² Higher education, for ambitious working-class women who sought it, was therefore not entirely out of reach from the beginning of the twentieth century.

Changes in the accessibility to further education later in the period meant that it was possible for the cohort to take adult education classes at night school, train as teachers or attend university to degree standard. The autobiographies of those who achieved further education are an important record, since over the past century historians of education have tended to concentrate on the experiences of middle-class girls and women, and in

⁹⁹ A. N. Wilson, *The Victorians*, p.480.

¹⁰⁰ It must be noted here that such changes took time. See for instance, Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1929), which was originally two papers delivered to Girton students in October 1928, and exposed the structure of male privilege, female exclusion and the effects of poverty on women in society, almost fifty years after the universities began accepting women students.

¹⁰¹ Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain*, p.116.

¹⁰² Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain*, p.116.

particular on the extraordinary struggles by a minority of middle-class women to enter higher education.¹⁰³

For those of the cohort who continued their education after elementary school, such ambitions were not always obvious at school or even on first entering employment. Mary Luty's dream was to learn about the world first-hand, by travelling. It surfaced after leaving school to begin work as a half-timer in the local factory at age eleven. At that time Mary seems to have abandoned any idea of furthering her education, as she wrote: 'all one's interest in school seemed to vanish at this stage and become centred on wage earning.' After a few months, however, the pride and joy in earning a wage and gaining material possessions dwindled:

The extra money meant much in the home, and we began to have little luxuries not known previously. Soon, however, the glamour of wage earning began to fade.¹⁰⁴

Mary's ambitions for a more adventurous life surfaced and was the spur to attending evening classes, as she tried to achieve academic qualifications. She reasoned that a better-paid job outside the factory would mean earning more money to fund her adventures abroad. Success for Mary was the ability to travel, and after leaving school she saw that education could be a means to that end. She gained qualifications by attending evening lectures and classes and succeeded in her ambitions: the second half of Mary's autobiography detailed her extensive travels, successfully funded by a variety of jobs.

¹⁰³ See, for example: Christina S Brenner, *Education of Girls and Women* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1897); Margaret Bryant, *The Unexpected Revolution: The History of the Education of Women and Girls in the Nineteenth Century* (London: University of London Institute of Education, 1980); B Stephen, *Emily Davis and Girton College* (London: Constable, 1927); Barry Turner, *Equality For Some* (London: Ward Lock, 1974); Martha Vicinus, 'One Life to Stand Beside Me' in Felicity Hunt ed., *Lessons for Life* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

¹⁰⁴ Mary Luty, *A Penniless Globetrotter*, p.39.

As in elementary education, gender- and class-based discrimination was apparent in evening classes. Alice Foley sought to further her education once she was in paid employment. After leaving full-time schooling at the age of thirteen in 1904, Alice began to attend night school and later that year was invited to select subjects for study at the secondary evening classes held at the Municipal school in Great Moor Street, Bolton.

My odd choice of economics, logic and elocution landed me before the Director and Chairman of the local Education Committee. The latter gentleman, I recall, operated a number of tripe shops in the town and he enquired why a nice, quiet girl wanted to study economics and logic. I murmured, I suppose in order to impress, that I knew a little about Karl Marx and *Das Kapital*, although the extent of my knowledge was limited to overhearing a cursory discussion in my sister's circle. Both gentlemen frowned heavily and, following a few solemn whispers between them, the tripe man announced with a touch of finality that I would be allocated to a millinery class at the Women's Institute as more suitable to my aptitude and ability. Bored but obedient, I dutifully attended the class and remember being given a strip of green velvet to hem without letting the stitches show through the fabric.¹⁰⁵

Higher education could bring status: women could become teachers rather than factory workers, with the economic and social advantages that this meant. Many of the changes in educational opportunities came about by the Education Act of 1870, as the requirement for more classroom places had stimulated in turn a great demand for teachers. Between 1861 and 1911, the number of women teachers had grown by 129% and opportunities were becoming available for working-class girls of the period.¹⁰⁶

There was also an opportunity for working-class girls to stay on at school and to become 'unqualified' teachers. An alternative choice was often given to bright pupils to stay on in the classroom as teaching assistants, also known as 'monitors'. Maria Hull described

¹⁰⁵ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, pp.55-6.

¹⁰⁶ Jane Rendall, *Women in an Industrializing Society*, p. 75.

some of the duties of a monitor: 'The monitors did bell ringing duties to signal lesson time, home time and start of school and assisted with some lessons.'¹⁰⁷ Maria was interested in this pathway to success. She expressed her ambition 'I knew that I should like to be a teacher.'¹⁰⁸ Later, in 1889, an opportunity presented itself:

At the end of my time in standard 6, the headmistress sent a letter by me to my parents, asking if they would allow me to stay at school and be a paid monitress. The answer was, no. I would have liked to have stayed.¹⁰⁹

Maria was disappointed in her desire for a teaching career when her parents refused the offer. Her ambition had been thwarted, as it was for several of the women, because of family economy. Maria would have earned less as a monitor than she could earn as a domestic servant, so the decision was made for her.

Others could take up such openings. Margaret Bondfield became a school monitor for a year in 1886 when she was thirteen. In the Chard Boys School register for 1886 is the entry: 'have taken on Maggie Bondfield as a monitor for the first standard until another teacher has been found'. Margaret recalled:

I was paid 3s. a week. There were 42 boys and myself in one of these small classrooms and 38 of them passed in reading, writing and arithmetic.¹¹⁰

However, not all succeeded in their ambitions to teach. Annie Barnes was born in 1887 in Stepney, East London. She attended the Ben Johnson School and 'loved every minute.' Annie would have liked to become a teacher:

I did quite well in some exams and the headmistress called me into her room and asked me "Annie, would you like to be a teacher? I think you've got the makings of one." I

¹⁰⁷ Maria Hull, 'A Derbyshire Schooling', p.168.

¹⁰⁸ Maria Hull, 'A Derbyshire Schooling', p.170.

¹⁰⁹ Maria Hull, 'A Derbyshire Schooling', p.170.

¹¹⁰ Margaret Bondfield, *A Life's Work*, p.22.

loved school, I never used to be late and I said, “Oh yes, I would.” The headmistress said that Daisy Dormer (she became a singer) and I were at the top of the school. We used to have an examination and compete with the secondary school girls, and we came second, Daisy and me. I had a lot of prizes from the school board, books mostly.

“I want you to take the class next week,” the headmistress said. “I think you’ll be a good teacher.”¹¹¹

This was not to be, as Annie’s mother became ill and she was required at home to look after her younger siblings and to nurse her mother. Her ambitions were given up for family duty for a few years, but were to surface later in life as she found success in the political arena.

A similar pattern can be seen in the life of Winifred Griffiths who also held early ambitions to teach. Winifred, whose father was a Wesleyan lay preacher, was brought up in a strongly puritanical tradition, attending the Wesleyan chapel every Sunday and the local National school, in which the church was a strong influence, from 1899 until 1909. Winifred described how her ambition to succeed at school was inspired by a book she had read:

On reaching Standard 4, I began to take a real interest in schoolwork, ambition stirred and I wanted to do well. I had received as a prize a book called “Brave boys and girls”. In it were stories of perseverance in acquiring knowledge against the odds – stories of those who had triumphed over adverse circumstances and risen to fame and glory. I wanted to be like them.¹¹²

The drive for self-improvement for Winifred can be seen therefore to have resulted from examples of success, even if these were only fictional. They provided her with the idea that something better, a higher standard of living, educational success, and even ‘fame and

¹¹¹ Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie*, p.7.

¹¹² Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman’s Story*, p.28.

glory' was possible. Winifred recalled the series of opportunities which she took advantage of at school. When she reached standard five and six she was top of her class and she realized achievement was within her reach: 'now I had my eye on the top prizes of the school'.¹¹³ In standard seven, her final year, she won the coveted 'Guinea Bible', a legacy prize of a family-sized Bible awarded to the top girl and boy each year.

Attendance at Basingstoke High School was now considered. However, family economics were a limit to Winifred's progress, as her parents could not afford to continue her education, so at the age of fourteen she left school. Her aunt fell ill at this time, and Winifred looked after the family home while her mother was with the aunt. Winifred had not yet given up her ambition to further her education:

My father had talked to a workmate whose daughters were taking postal courses from a correspondence college, in order to pass some qualifying examinations for school teachers. To be a school teacher was the only career I could really feel excited about and I gladly consented to try my luck with lessons by post. But alas! With no one to guide me I was soon bogged down in a maze of subjects, many of which I had never tackled before. In addition I had to make do with substitute textbooks which I could borrow or buy cheaply, as my parents could not afford the recommended ones. Added to this I still had many domestic duties and to take my aunt out in a wheelchair. By the end of my first term it was fairly plain that I could not cope with the work required. If only I had had some expert guidance and the right books it might well have been otherwise.¹¹⁴

Winifred described the 'disappointment and frustration of failure' and soon afterwards she gave up her ambitions, at least temporarily, and became an apprentice at Burberry's Gabardine Factory, and from thence into domestic service. However, later in life, after her marriage, Winifred took evening classes at 'The Labour College', in London, part of

¹¹³ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.29.

¹¹⁴ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, pp.36-37.

Ruskin College, Oxford. Her husband, James Griffiths was a full-time student at the College, having won a two-year scholarship from the South Wales Miner's Federation. Winifred worked as a shop assistant during the day, and she recalled her evening classes at the College:

There was an interesting course on Industrial History with the Principal – W. W. Craik as lecturer; a series on Marxian economics, which I am afraid, left me little wiser than before; and an elocution class run for the students by Miss Clara Bunn.¹¹⁵

Interestingly, it is arguably the elocution class, which was one of the subjects also chosen by Alice Foley in Bolton several years earlier, which is most telling in the women's ambitions. By taking elocution classes they express their ambitions to improve themselves, publicly as well as privately. A good speaking voice would help with teaching, public speaking, and enhance social status, an appearance, at least, of upward mobility. Received pronunciation was aspirational, and proclaimed respectability for a working-class women who wished to present themselves well. This idea had been prevalent since the nineteenth century and before, as Lord Chesterfield noted in his popular book *Lord Chesterfield's Letters to His Son*, 'no man or woman can hope to become successful unless they articulate correctly'.¹¹⁶ Winifred, for instance, supported her husband's political career and later in life both she and Alice Foley became successful in local politics in their own right as is discussed below.¹¹⁷

Elocution classes were also one of the classes chosen by pupil-teacher, Mary Gawthorpe. Unlike becoming a teaching assistant or monitor, which provided teaching experience, respectability and a wage, but no qualifying examination, the Pupil Training Scheme gave

¹¹⁵ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, pp.81-82.

¹¹⁶ Phillip Dormer Stanhope ed. *Lord Chesterfield's Letters to His Son* (London: J. M. Dent, 1957), p.29.

¹¹⁷ See Chapter 6, p.289.

professional status on completion. It was a combination of practical class teaching and evening and weekend study, leading to a series of qualifying examinations. Usually taken up by the daughters of skilled workers and tradesmen, the scheme allowed bright working-class girls such as Mary Gawthorpe to stay on at school as paid teachers, while studying for qualifications at evening classes and part-time in teacher training colleges.¹¹⁸

The scheme meant that girls spent five years as a pupil teacher, usually from the school-leaving age of thirteen.¹¹⁹ It entailed long hours of work, and then study in the evenings and weekends. Studies were orientated to memorization of factual information that was to be presented in an explicit, institutionalized way. It was then repeated by pupils in their examinations in an equally stylised fashion. Training for the teaching qualification involved numerous standard examinations leading up to the State examination for the teaching certificate.¹²⁰

It was no easy pathway to success. An article in the *Cornhill Magazine* of 1873 stressed the long working and study hours required as pupil teachers, and pointed to social class differentials in terms of background and experience. The life of a schoolmistress, the article claimed, was not the life for a 'lady':

A pupil teacher has been acclimatized to this sort of life since she was thirteen, but a lady who enters upon it may find to her cost that she has altogether miscalculated her powers of endurance.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Pupil teaching was celebrated in fiction in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1896), as the only way to independence for the heroine, the intelligent, yet penniless, 'Sue'.

¹¹⁹ See, for instance, Stephen Heathorn, *School For Women* (London: Virago, 1996).

¹²⁰ For more on the Pupil Teaching Scheme, see also Michael John Illing 'A Little Vineyard of Economic Emancipation' in *Pupil Teachers and the Emancipation of Women 1870-1905* unpublished MA Thesis, University of London (1978), a study of the admission of working-class girls into the occupation of teaching; also 'The Experience of Schooling for Working-Class Girls and Boys in Nineteenth-Century England' in *Defining the Curriculum* ed. I. Goodson and S. Ball (London: Falmer, 1984).

¹²¹ D. Lathbury 'Ladies as Elementary Schoolmistresses' in *The Cornhill Magazine* Vol.28 (1873), pp.690-704.

By 1881 the proportion of working-class girls engaged in pupil teacher training was 41%, those from the lower middle classes 53%, and girls from professional families only 6%.¹²² The work was hard, and time spent at college was harder, with a Spartan life-style and strenuous domestic duties, unlikely to appeal to 'a lady'. Nevertheless by becoming pupil teachers, working-class girls received a comparatively sound education, free of charge, and with a wage which enabled them to contribute to the family economy while they were training. If they stayed the course and passed the examinations, it was also a way of achieving better paid employment than factory, domestic or shop work. As education historian Frances Widdowson has pointed out: 'they were coached for examinations which could lead to a college certificate, or at least an Acting Teacher's Certificate; and these certificates would give them some guarantee of economic security.'¹²³ Becoming a qualified teacher was therefore one way that working-class girls could see success in the form of upward mobility and a better standard of living.

Mary Gawthorpe chronicled very clearly her ambitions and strategy for achieving educational success, which she saw as leading to social advancement. She could see that life for herself and her mother and siblings could be better if she successfully completed her teacher training, and she was willing to do what was necessary to gain her qualifications. For Mary, a home away from her drunken father would give herself, her mother and siblings a happier and more comfortable life.

It had come as a dawning recognition for Mary Gawthorpe that her father was not teetotal. John Gawthorpe wasted family income as he turned more and more to drink. This realization seems to have triggered Mary's ambition to become a teacher. She

¹²² Cited in Jane Rendall, *Women in an Industrializing Society*, p. 75.

¹²³ Frances Widdowson, *Going Up Into the Next Class: Women and Elementary Teacher Training 1840-1914* (London: Hutchinson, 1983), pp. 77-78.

acknowledged a significant moment in her childhood when this ambition was crystallized.

Her father having come in drunk one night, Mary recalled her mother glancing at her:

Looking backwards I do not know, if Mother had not looked at me just then, as she did, whether in the interior places, I should have so judged my Father and in the judging deserted his standard. But Mother did look, and though I did not know all that look might have said, if translated into words, hidden within, known only to myself, a half-conscious resolve had formed. My soul affirms and remembers the very words: "When I am twentyone (*sic*)," it called itself. This was sometime between my tenth and eleventh year.¹²⁴

'When I am twentyone' can be taken as a very clear motive, it recurs often in Mary's autobiography. It encompasses Mary's ambition to rebel against her life with her father, who was leading the family into poverty with his alcoholism. The ensuing family tensions and her wish to protect her mother, who now slept with Mary rather than in the marital bed, resulted in Mary's resolve to achieve her ambition. She saw opportunities in education as the way to help her family.

At thirteen, Mary took a scholarship entrance examination for High School, which she passed, but she was not able to take advantage of the full-time education this offered, as the need for her to earn money to augment the income from her mother's laundry work was too great. However, when he realized that by joining the Pupil-Teaching Scheme, Mary would bring a wage into the house, her father, seeing another source of income, arranged for her to stay on at St. Michael's school as a pupil teacher. Undaunted, Mary took evening and Saturday classes to work towards a full teaching certificate. Eventually

¹²⁴ Mary Gawthorpe, *Up Hill to Holloway*, pp.26-27.

in 1902, just before she was twenty one, Mary succeeded in her ambition and was able to afford the rent for her own home into which she moved her mother and brother.¹²⁵

This window of opportunity was timely for these women, for in 1907 this entry to a more elite world for working-class children was closed. The recruits to qualified teaching from this date had to stay on at school until seventeen, and then go on to college for teacher training. There were bursaries available, but these were of little help to working-class girls required to contribute to the family economy and there was a marked decrease in entrants. The *Manchester Sunday Chronicle*, under the headline 'A Stolen Profession', pointed out that 'a barrier has been set up against the entrance of working-class children into the profession'.¹²⁶ Once again there was a discernable gender as well as class disability. Working-class parents who might be willing to make a sacrifice for their boys to train until the age of twenty-one, were unlikely to allow the same privilege to a girl, who might be married within a few years.

As well as teaching as a professional qualification, there was a channel for ambitious and able working-class women to achieve a university education. A few scholarships were available to help with finances. Ellen Wilkinson started at the local infant school at the age of six. A bright student, she was easily bored while waiting for others to catch her up, and she described her schooldays as 'the chaotic rebellion of my school years'.¹²⁷ Family funds would not stretch to further education so Ellen entered for a scholarship at age eleven to enable her to attend higher grade school. Board schools were attended by both working-class and middle-class girls, and perhaps because of this there were opportunities

¹²⁵ Sandra Stanley Holton, *Suffrage Days* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.116; see also, M Gawthorpe, 'Book of the Suffragette Prisoners' a typescript questionnaire, 1931, p.1, Suffragette Fellowship Collection, Manchester Public Library Archives.

¹²⁶ *Manchester Sunday Chronicle*, 12 October 1907.

¹²⁷ Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, p.406.

for working-class girls to move from the state sector to fee-paying grammar schools. The chairman of Manchester School board claimed, in 1887, that it was mainly the ‘labour aristocracy’ from the better paid ‘upper strata’ of the working class who benefited from this opportunity.¹²⁸ However, Ellen Wilkinson, the third child of a Manchester factory worker, took all the educational opportunities open to her as a girl born into the working-class, and like Mary Gawthorpe, she described in her autobiography the mechanics of her success in higher education.

Ellen passed a scholarship exam which enabled her to move first to the grammar school, then to teacher training college and finally to Manchester University via the scholarship system. Ellen, who described herself as ‘just one of tens of thousands of working-class children playing in the streets of Manchester towards the end of last century’, illustrated her progress through the system:

Once started at the infant school, I went straight through the “broad highway of state education”, through elementary school, higher grade school, secondary school to the university. I won my first scholarship at the age of eleven, and from that time paid for my own education by scholarships till I left the university.¹²⁹

Tentative conclusions may be drawn as to how Ellen had the ambition to succeed in secondary education where other working-class children may not have. Earlier in her autobiography, Ellen pointed to encouragement from both of her parents. She described her mother as “‘advanced” for her day’, and in her it is possible to see the seeds of Ellen’s determination to succeed. Ellen recalled her mother’s protests at the ‘iron conventions which gripped working-class life at that period’.¹³⁰ Ellen also recalled that after school

¹²⁸ J. Lawson and H Silver, *A Social History of Education* (London: Methuen, 1973), p.338.

¹²⁹ Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, pp.403-404.

¹³⁰ Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, p.399.

her father took her, as a twelve-year-old, to evening lectures at the local Mechanics

Institute and Free Trade Hall:

My father, a lonely man, who yet hated going out by himself, liked attending lectures on theological subjects, so he took me with him. I heard Dr. Frank Ballard discourse on Christian Evidence, and the Free Trade Hall lectures on Darwin and evolution. We went to lots of lectures on evolution, for and against. I was barely twelve, and had no background for most of it. By the time I was fourteen I was reading Haeckel, and Huxley and Darwin with my father.¹³¹

Evening classes and lectures were therefore open to women at local Mechanics Institutes, and attracted a great number of women from a variety of occupations.¹³² Schoolgirls such as Ellen Wilkinson were able to attend the lectures although always with friends or family members, so that respectability was maintained.

All of the autobiographers benefited in varying degrees from educational reforms as they were growing up. Curtailment of working hours and provision for schooling, while redefining the years of childhood for some, did not necessarily mean that all working class girls of the period received formal education. The cohort revealed that educational reform was far from uniform across England. Educational advances did not necessarily follow a chronological or a geographical pattern, nor did it depend on living in a city or country environment. Hannah Mitchell, born on a remote Peak District farm in 1871, a year after the Act providing elementary schooling for all, had only two weeks of formal schooling. Twenty years later Betty May, born in inner city London in 1891, attended school only while she was living with relatives in Somerset. In contrast, Ellen Wilkinson, born around the same time as Betty, in 1891 in Ardwick, Manchester, attended school from the age of

¹³¹ Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, pp. 404-405.

¹³² For the history of the Mechanics Institutes and women's involvement in them see, for instance, June Purvis *Hard Lessons*.

five and, with the aid of a series of scholarships, gained a degree at Manchester University. Ellen Wilkinson and Mary Gawthorpe are perhaps the best examples amongst the autobiographers of working-class women who succeeded in gaining the sort of education hitherto reserved for middle-class girls, and it may not be coincidence that both of these women had the benefit of parental support and encouragement, in Ellen's case, from both parents, and in Mary's, from her mother. They both described the mechanics of their route through the opportunities opened up by educational reforms to an educational success denied to many women, especially working-class women, earlier in the nineteenth century.

Conclusion

In contrast to autobiographies written by women earlier in the nineteenth century, most of the cohort committed a significant part of their texts to descriptions of gaining an education. They highlighted the changes from the paucity of educational opportunities for working-class girls earlier in the century and showed that by the end of the century it was possible that ten or more years of life for working-class girls like themselves could be devoted to acquiring a formal elementary education. However, protective legislation restricting child labour, combined with educational legislation, could cause tensions for working-class family economics which in some cases meant that girls were not always given these educational opportunities.

Nevertheless the majority of the cohort placed great value on learning to read and those denied a formal education described the extraordinary lengths they went to in order to gain this skill by informal means: listening to people read, at church, Sunday school and in the family circle, accessing reading materials within the home and from neighbours, libraries

and subscription lists. They drew comparisons with the previous generation, some of whom never learnt to read.

There were also advances in secondary education during the period: the Pupil Teacher Scheme, and various scholarship provisions, enabled some women to achieve professional qualifications. Their autobiographies reveal pathways to continued education through evening classes, and describe life-long learning and enjoyment of their literacy.

Importantly, for their later autobiographical writing, education also gave them the ability to think about the world and their situation in it. In order to gain educational success, the autobiographers had to negotiate what has been seen as a top-down model of social control: the ideology of gender and class in the schooling of working-class girls.

Their writing discloses the variety of educational success achieved by individuals, and the mechanics of their achievements. Although it is difficult to see change over time in such a small sample, especially since developments were uneven across geographical, class, and even family boundaries, it reveals that working-class girls were now able to aspire to a good primary education as a stepping-stone to further education or a better job. How far they progressed was dependent on a variety of factors. Many of the cohort were ambitious but would not have been able to achieve education on their own. Girls were helped in their education by the support, financial and otherwise, of an extended network of family members, friends and neighbours. Some families wished their daughters to gain an education, Mary Gawthorpe for instance had great encouragement from her mother, and the role model of her youngest aunt who had trained as a teacher. Alice Foley's father allowed her to stay on at school for a year instead of becoming a half-timer in the local factory. Winifred Griffith's father investigated correspondence courses for his daughter.

Some were not so lucky and tensions developed in families such as Hannah Mitchell's, where her mother refused to allow her more than two weeks at school. However, Hannah's uncle taught her to read, and she borrowed books from her brothers and various neighbours.

The fact that so many men were involved in helping their female relatives toward an education is also suggestive of a change in social perceptions of what it was acceptable for women to do or become. Feminist writing may have established a history of top-down control for keeping working-class girls in their place, and certainly ideologies of gender and class control did reinforce working-class women's domestic role by limiting their educational choice. However, the cohort shows that either there were discrepancies in such history, or there was a gap between rhetoric and reality which allowed some negotiation: it enabled those of the cohort who had the ability, motivation and support to access the sort of education which fitted them for a wider range of employment than their mothers could have aspired to.

The cohort reveal that the key factor at least in the early years of their lives, is their family environment: the strata of working class to which the family belonged, proximity of schools, family economics, position and number of children in family. Perhaps most important of all was the attitude of the parents, and with some exceptions, this depended mostly the attitude of the mother. Her acceptance or rejection of the social order and the work discipline, her ideas on the importance of education, and her management of the family budget – not least so that educational opportunities could be taken up - as well as the amount of calls on her daughter's time during school hours, all had relevance to the amount of schooling the women received. A mother's attitude to her daughter may

therefore have played its part in the drive and determination of individual women to overcome, and in doing so to help to change, societal constraints of gender and class in education.

Chapter 4: Domesticity

Introduction

A happy marriage, a well-run and respectable home, and successful motherhood, were seen as the domestic ideal during the period. The learning of domestic skills such as needlework, cookery and childcare were strongly promoted in elementary schooling in order to promote a high standard of working-class family life, and also to provide good domestic servants.¹ Grants were given to schools for domestic science, cookery and laundry classes. The teaching of these skills, and the training of teachers to impart them were given importance in teacher-training establishments, and domestic science gained some status in universities. Domesticity during this period was therefore important to society, and it was also important to the majority of the cohort. They wrote about their domestic role in positive terms, and twelve of them saw it as one of the most important facets of their lives, featuring it prominently in their autobiographies.²

In conforming to the domestic ideal these women were also proclaiming their respectability. Respectability meant conforming to socially acceptable behaviours: it had a moral dimension, but was generally manifested in practicalities such as taking good care of the family in a clean and well-run home, in helping others, and in being a good daughter, mother, wife and neighbour. Importance was placed on showing that they conformed to these behaviours; and respectability was one of the most important societal values for almost all the women. It encompassed keeping up a good appearance both within the home and in the surrounding neighbourhood. Children were to be well

¹ An paper on this subject was presented at the Women's History Network conference in 2002, and has since been published. See, Carol Jenkins, 'Learning Domesticity in Late Victorian England', in *Women's History Magazine*, issue 44, June 2003, pp.19-30.Appended.

² The twelve who saw domesticity as the epitome of success were: Isabella Cooke, Agnes Cowper, Mildred Edwards, Grace Foakes, Rose Gibbs, Bessie Harvey, Mrs Hills, Daisy Hills, Maria Hull, Louise Jermy, Emma Smith and Susan Sylvester.

behaved, attend school and Sunday school; they had to be neat, clean, and punctual and seen to be so. There were also financial benefits for well-brought-up children when they left school. Working-class girls from respectable homes, like Rose Gibbs and Winifred Griffiths, could aspire to work as domestic servants in a large house where conditions were better and there were more opportunities for advancement than in small establishments. Or, like Margaret Bondfield, they could apply for training as shop assistants in one of the new large department stores, which would only employ working-class girls if they came from respectable homes.³

Domesticity was an attainable goal for most of the cohort, and, as well as the twelve who saw it as of major importance, most of the women welcomed their domestic role at some stage in their lives, particularly after marriage and when they had young children at home. Also important to the well-being of the family as a whole was the acquisition of child-care skills. Society valued the good mother and the caring woman, and in presenting themselves as having nurturing skills, the autobiographers illustrated that they conformed to this ideal. Literary and artistic representations of women and their social role suggested that even Victorian writers and artists who were critical of prevailing assumptions tended, in the end, to see women as determined by their potential as mothers.⁴ Recently, critic Matthew Sweet has underlined the ‘propaganda’ of texts such as Ruskin’s *Of Queen’s Gardens* and Coventry Patmore’s *The Angel in the House*, both of which gave idealized views of women and invited them to see themselves as fulfilling an ideological role

³ Erika Diane Rappaport, *Shopping For Pleasure: Women in the Making of London’s West End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p.201.

⁴ For example, see Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poem *Lord Walter’s Wife* (1850), or one of John Ruskin’s most popular works, ‘Of Queen’s Gardens’ one of two lectures, later published together in a book entitled *Sesame and Lilies* (1865).

essentially different from that of men.⁵ These texts can be used to illustrate the different view of domesticity which has evolved since they were written. Patmore's domestic epic poem, for instance, once popular at all levels of society, has recently been described as 'now-notorious'.⁶ Such texts centred the ideal female figure in the separate sphere of the home, and most particularly as a mother at the centre of her family.⁷ As the twentieth century progressed it became unfashionable for women to be content with ambitions that were realized within the compass of the home. By the end of the century society expected 'more' of women and it became acceptable to shun domesticity of any kind in favour of a career. From the perspective of the twenty-first century then, the late nineteenth-century viewpoint can seem difficult to understand; and there is potentially a difficulty in reading the autobiographies as the modern age confronts the attitudes of women born between 1870-1900.

It might be expected that some of the cohort rebelled against the confines of domesticity, and indeed, a few did, both in childhood and adulthood. This inevitably resulted in tension – as they tried to reconcile their domestic and public roles – and indeed some of the autobiographers were describing a dilemma between home life and a career that has been increasingly confronted by women since then. Hannah Mitchell in particular, describes this tension most eloquently, although even she recalled that she enjoyed her time at home with her son. However the remainder, with two exceptions, strike a happy balance between work and home: most write of their enjoyment of home life and pride in their respectability, and also accept or enjoy their work commitments for at least part of their lives – usually before marriage and after their youngest child starts school. Two of

⁵ Coventry Patmore (1823-96) wrote *The Angel in the House* (1893) as a tribute poem to married love and the joys of domestic life.

⁶ Matthew Sweet, *Inventing the Victorians* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p.181.

⁷ Matthew Sweet, *Inventing the Victorians*, p.181.

the cohort do not mention their domestic life after childhood: Betty May, the model and night-club dancer, married a succession of wealthy men and was more concerned with writing about her adventures, while Margaret Bondfield, who remained a spinster all of her life, wrote mainly of her successful political career. Indeed, she claimed that it was difficult to separate her own history from the history of the Labour party. Yet in 1924, when she was a leading trade union activist and was later to become the first female Cabinet Minister, she promulgated the ideal that the rightful place for women's duty and interest was in the domestic sphere. That year Margaret addressed the Independent Labour Party's summer school on the theme 'Women's Place in the Community':

The woman who fulfils the function belonging to her sex, who builds up the life of the family around her, who recognises the importance of bringing to the service of the home every new development of science, who realizes that her job is to create an environment for every child...to raise the whole line of civilization to a higher place – that woman is doing the greatest work in the world.⁸

Margaret's autobiography is almost entirely, apart from her childhood, set in the public sphere of work: it covers her trade union work and the majority of it details the part she played in the history of the Labour movement. Yet even she, as the quote above reveals, acknowledged the domestic ideal. The complexities of the situation which obtained in even this relatively small group of women reflects change over time: domesticity was not the only route to success for the cohort once they had left school. It was becoming possible for working-class women to achieve outside the domestic sphere, as Margaret Bondfield illustrated. But her story has little place in a discussion about domesticity, and this subject will be addressed in subsequent chapters.

⁸ Mary Agnes Hamilton, *Margaret Bondfield* (London: Leonard Parsons, 1924), p.183.

Most of the cohort therefore valued their home and domestic skills. They portrayed themselves as the moral guardians at the centre of the home, and in taking care of their family they epitomised contemporary notions of respectability and status. Within the family, women conformed to societal conventions of the 'good' wife and mother, and these were continued as domestic skills were taught to their daughters at school. The cohort, with few exceptions, saw that the acquisition of domestic skills equipped them for success in their domestic lives and they accepted the opportunity given by schools and evening classes to take lessons in sewing, cookery, childcare and household management. Between school and marriage, their domestic skills could be adapted for the work-place - good servants were much in demand - and eleven of the autobiographers turned to employment as domestic servants, laundresses or cooks. The utilization of domestic skills in paid employment will be discussed in the next chapter. Only Hannah Mitchell and Louise Jermy rebelled against the enforced and unfair burden of their domestic chores in childhood. In general, although the autobiographies revealed that not all felt that they were discriminated *against* in the emphasis on learning domestic skills, working-class girls had little choice but to accept this gendered position, defined for them at home and at school. This shaped their activities towards 'female' home-based domestic skills, and taught them to be 'good' girls.

The Good Girl

All of the women's autobiographies indicate that they were trained in domestic skills as children, at first within the home, and later, as was discussed in the previous chapter, during gendered lessons at school. The idea of domesticity was an integral and normal part of their girlhood. The majority described chores as an accepted part of their life and expressed pride in their ability to help their families. For them, the acquisition of

domestic skills within the family was a stepping-stone towards family respectability and their own success in a future home of their own.

Whether they viewed it positively or, like Hannah and Louise, negatively, early training in domestic skills was not initially a matter of choice. As young girls, the cohort learned at home because they had to. Most working-class women had little alternative to performing their own domestic chores and looking after their own children, and so looked to their children, and principally the eldest girl, for help. The employment of domestic workers in the home was out of the question financially. Only Annie Barnes recorded that her parents employed help during her childhood: 'we always had help in the house, a washerwoman used to come every Monday.'⁹

Domestic training for girls within the family was effectively an apprenticeship. Although the girls remained in their home environment, roles, knowledge, and status were transmitted via a combination of instruction and emulation, as in any training situation. Inside the family, relationships between the parents and the organization of domestic life constituted the first lessons in the sexual division of labour. If these relationships conformed to the patterns the child could see in the world around her, in the families of friends and neighbours, then they were likely to be accepted as 'normal'. In most cases mothers provided their small daughters with their first model of feminine behaviour. Most girls learnt domestic skills in what was, usually, a non-threatening, familiar and informal setting. The ideology of service to, and dependence upon, the male members of the family permeated their childhood.

⁹ Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie*, p.7.

The autobiographers recalled play during childhood, when games were part of their learning experiences. The games played by boys and girls were very different, and reflecting a marked gender difference, they showed how early, and deeply, gendered roles were imprinted. Girls' games illustrated female attributes in the making, they were more sociable, and less aggressively competitive, as Mildred Edwards recalled:

Then of course we had our dolls. I loved mine and kept them until I was quite a big girl, and very reluctantly gave them away. The lads had their games too, marbles, whip and top, peggy, football, cricket, also rugby, but Mothers thought it all a bit too rough, as there were many black eyes and bloody noses.¹⁰

Alice Foley, at play in her Bolton childhood, described how she and her friends enjoyed imitating the sorts of gendered occupations followed by their parents. While the boys were builders the girls were 'busy' housewives:

Our childhood playgrounds were the streets, and for a short time, the ruins of near-by Chamber Hall, a former mansion once the home of a county family, now demolished to make way for an infant school and new houses. Before the site was re-occupied we neighbouring kids spent gleeful hours among the ruins and rubble. Whilst the boys built castles and viaducts out of larger boulders, we smaller girls played in the sand-pits. With a good 'knocker' we powdered stones into imaginary pepper, sugar, salt and snuff; buttons were used for money and with the aid of a pair of toy scales we became a group of busy little housewives, buying and selling groceries to our mutual satisfaction.¹¹

Almost all of the women in the cohort recalled helping in the home with domestic chores during their girlhood and while some were happy to help their mothers, others felt injustice when comparing the extent of their duties to the few their brothers were expected to perform. This gender differentiation at home was not an unusual situation in families and has been well-documented elsewhere, for example the historian Carol Dyhouse has

¹⁰ Mildred Edwards, *Our City...Our People*, p. 12.

¹¹ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p. 28.

drawn attention to 'differences in treatment of children according to sex.'¹² Some girls, as in Hannah Mitchell's case, were expected to help full-time. Hannah's parents had borrowed money to start a farm, so the children, especially the girls, were expected to help with the work:

It was a hard life for us all, especially the girls, as my mother was a harder taskmaster than my father. She never seemed to realize how small and weak we were. She made us sweep and scrub, turn the heavy mangle on washing days and the still heavier churn on butter-making days. Stone floors had to be whitened, brasses and steel fire-irons polished every week.¹³

Hannah resented having to work so hard, and noted the preferential treatment given to her brothers:

On winter evenings there was sewing by hand, making and mending shirts and underwear. At eight years old my weekly task was to darn all the stockings for the household, and I think my first reaction to feminism began at this time when I was forced to darn my brothers' stockings while they read or played cards or dominoes. Sometimes the boys helped with rugmaking, or in cutting up wool or picking feathers for beds and pillows, but for them it was voluntary work; for the girls it was compulsory, and the fact that the boys could read if they wished filled my cup of bitterness to the brim.¹⁴

Hannah acknowledged that the unfairness of this gender discrimination in childhood sowed the seeds of feminism. Reaction to the enforcement of what she perceived as an unfair burden of chores was at the root of her success later in life as will be shown later. It gave her the strength of character and determination to become a leader of the WSPU and the Labour Party in the North of England.

¹² Dyhouse cites the different training given to girls and boys in most families: Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, pp. 3-4.

¹³ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p. 43

¹⁴ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.43.

However most of the women viewed the undertaking of domestic chores as a step towards their own success in adulthood and were proud of their ability to help with the smooth running of their home. These experiences as children gave them an idea of their own self-worth. Their own domestic skills made a difference to their mother's workload, and ultimately contributed to the respectability of the family as a whole. Alice Foley expressed her pride and pleasure in undertaking duties in the home when she was young. She remembered the importance for family respectability of one particular domestic chore:

On reaching an appropriate age we younger children were allocated small duties about the house and I remember with deep pleasure my first initiation into the care of our family aspidistra which, at that time, occupied a place of honour on top of the sewing machine. Each Friday morning the ritual was observed, first to place the giant plant-pot overhead in water in the kitchen sink. Even today I can hear the eager bubbling and gurgling of those thirsty roots sucking in the refreshing draught. Then the single leaves were carefully sponged with a wash-leather, cracked portions and faded tips nipped off to make room for younger shoots, and all finally polished with a spot off milk. Under these ministrations our aspidistra flourished prodigiously, and though in after years this household favourite of the poor became despised and rejected, for me, in those formative decades, it was a much-loved oasis in a flower-less home.¹⁵

Alice was aware of the significance of the aspidistra in its 'place of honour', for her family. These plants were iconic amongst working-class families for several decades at the end of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. They signalled respectability, and illustrated the family efforts to keep up appearances. Aspidistras flourished in poor light and with few nutrients so were the 'much loved favourite of the poor', as Alice claimed, especially in industrial areas such as her home-town of Bolton, where few other

¹⁵ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.24.

houseplants could survive the polluted air and lack of light behind net curtains in gloomy back-to-back streets.

Other women expressed similar pride in undertaking domestic chores and performing them well. Emma Smith undertook domestic duties with some degree of enjoyment, when, after a harrowing few years with a travelling hurdy-gurdy man, she was taken into a Salvation Army home.

Saturday evening was mending time. I was taught to darn my stockings; at least an attempt was made to teach me. Everyone was given mending to do. Then clean linen would be given round for the following day. The Home had a steam laundry, and we children on Saturdays or in holidays usually went over for an hour or two just to rub collars or some such light duty. I don't think it did us any harm. We had certain duties to fulfil on Saturday morning, such as rubbing up the wooden handled forks...with what pride we made them shine! ¹⁶

For Emma, the performance of these simple tasks had a great significance as part of the normal domesticity which was so lacking in her miserable childhood. Emma's training enabled her to enter domestic service before her marriage, and it was here that she met her future husband, as he was a gardener in the same house. Her acquisition of domestic skills added a welcome normalcy and respectability to her life and her domestic training later provided her with a job and a way up in the world.

Also important to the well-being of the family as a whole was the acquisition of child-care skills. In working-class homes, mothering skills were essentially a practical advantage for bringing up a family. Although some secondary schools and night-schools offered child-care classes, most of the autobiographers learnt these skills at home during the practical

¹⁶ Emma Smith, *A Cornish Waif's Story*, pp.65-67.

care of younger siblings, often alongside other domestic duties. Mildred Edwards, born in 1889, was the third child in her family. She was expected to miss school to help her mother when younger children were born. Mildred accepted without question that she would look after her younger brother and sister when required, even if it meant missing school. She revealed her pride in her nurturing skills, the closeness of family bonds, and the willing effort it took for her as a small girl to take on the care of the younger children:

One day I remember well I was kept at home to mind the babies, while mother did the family washing. The little baby had to be nursed a lot, as she was delicate, and I was rocking her on my knee and had got her to sleep, when my little brother Billy, toddled up and lisped “put that one in the cradle Milly and nurse me”. What could I do, so I took him up as well and he too went to sleep. I called Mother that they were both asleep, but she had gone out to put the clothes to dry, so I had to sit until they had their nap. I think I was about nine at the time. However I was healthy and happy.¹⁷

Constant child-bearing took its toll on Mildred’s mother, for as Mildred grew older she records further time taken from school, although not without a touch of pride in her ability to take on an adult role:

I had to stay off school, a good deal at this time, as Mamma’s health was poor and she just couldn’t cope with the housework and the cooking. I got my hand in fairly early.¹⁸

Even when she was back at school, chores were still to be performed. Mildred recalled walking home from school and back during the mid-day break when:

Sometimes there was a job waiting for us at home. Washing day we had to rub out all the family stockings, rinse them well, put them through the mangle and peg them out to dry on the line – every stocking a peg. Another day perhaps setting the bread and kneading it, that

¹⁷ Mildred Edwards, *Our City...Our People*, p.10.

¹⁸ Mildred Edwards, *Our City...Our People*, p.41.

was while Mama got the dinner ready, then back to school, pretty often at the trot, but I think I was only late once.¹⁹

Mildred seemed to have accepted her lunch-time chores which she thought were well within her capabilities. As she 'got her hand in' she showed her skills in the sort of multi-tasking required to be successful in the domestic sphere and demonstrated her ability to handle the competing demands of school and home.

Winifred Griffiths also contributed her labour towards the successful running of the family home by helping with younger siblings and general household duties. Before she was old enough for school, she looked after her baby brother while her mother was busy with wash-day chores. When Winifred was aged six, a second baby brother was born and the chores became more demanding and varied:

I now had to help mother with her work. Dusting was an easy job, but I also had to learn to clean the baby's pram, to clean steel knives on a board, and to polish forks and spoons. We kept chickens in a house and run which my father had built at the bottom of the garden and I was required to sweep up grit from the gutters outside on the road and bring it in a bucket to be given to the hens to harden the eggshells. Again when horses obligingly left manure on the road I must shovel it up for the garden. Another job was to break up small brushwood for starting the fire. This wood came in small bundles called 'faggots', four or five feet in length. The thicker sticks in the middle had to be left for my father to chop.²⁰

Ada Nield Chew was born on a farm near Crewe, the oldest daughter of thirteen children.

The only other surviving daughter was born with epilepsy, so Ada was the only dependable daughter in a household where for many years there was a new baby every year. Her help became indispensable to her mother. Boys in the family were not expected to assist with the cooking, baking, cleaning, washing and care of younger children, so Ada

¹⁹ Mildred Edwards, *Our City...Our People*, p.14.

²⁰ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, pp.13-14.

had to shoulder all these burdens from an early age. When she was eight she was sent over the fields in the dark to fetch the midwife, and after this incident she ‘was proud when she overheard her mother telling a neighbour that “Ada was a good girl.”’²¹ Ada’s early training proved essential to the family: her mother died when Ada was aged sixteen and the running of the home and care of younger siblings became her sole responsibility. Some thirty years later Ada was to recount this story to her daughter; the pride in her ability to take on an adult role and to be ‘a good girl’ was still obviously a strong memory.

The training in domesticity begun at home continued for working-class girls in school, with sewing and cookery classes. As was discussed in the previous chapter, older girls were in many cases able to take housewifery classes, and the numbers of girls voluntarily attending these classes points towards the fact that the situation was tolerated, and in many cases welcomed, by working-class girls who enjoyed, or at least were resigned to, the attainment of domestic skills. Housewifery classes run by local School boards proved so popular that they often had to be re-run in the evenings. And in 1878, when domestic economy was made a compulsory subject specific to girls, Alice Westlake, an Education Board member, observed that ‘the cookery lessons were very popular.’²²

Nevertheless, the enjoyment of class- and gender-specific lessons must not be taken as proof that no top-down social control existed. Working-class girls’ education did have a domestic orientation with which they were forced to comply.²³ There were societal

²¹ Ada Nield Chew, *The Life and Writings of a Working Woman*, p.9.

²² A Special Report compiled for the Education Department in 1896-97, cited by Jane Martin in ‘The Only Place for Women was Home: Gender and class in the Elementary School Curriculum, 1870-1904’, *Journal of the Association of Open University Graduates* (1993/4), p. 15.

²³ New research on the subject has illustrated that this situation continued well into the twentieth century even when the call for domestic staff was almost at an end. In Norwich in 1939 for example the labour market for women and girls showed a ‘large increase in shop and office work, a move from sewing trades to boot and shoe manufacture and a reduction in domestic service.’ Yet the domestic skills classes continued.

assumptions that the purpose of education for working-class girls was to turn them into good domestic servants. Domestic skills classes were therefore a reflection of separate spheres ideology, itself a reflection of the need for society to have girls in low-paid and low-skilled domestic work.

Furthermore, gendered schooling also illustrated assumptions that women's role in society lay in the private sphere of the home. The teaching of domestic skills in schools, of course, required trained teachers to encompass domestic subjects. Teacher-training colleges continued the gender and class discrimination which obtained in schools and was reflected in society. Tied in with assumptions of a domestic future for women, female pupil teachers in 1871 had to show themselves to be competent seamstresses and to satisfy the inspector of their annual progress in needlework.²⁴ This situation continued over the period 1870-1900. More than thirty years later, in 1904, an article in the *Contemporary Review* argued that for girls, training in cookery was more important than the three Rs, because, 'it has directly to do with the preservation of health, the comfort of home life and the prevention of that curse of civilization, drunkenness.'²⁵ Cookery teachers, it seemed, now had a responsibility for the well-being of the nation.

This ideology was intensified during the early years of the twentieth century due to heightened fears about the standard of working-class health, arising from the poor health and fitness of the British soldiers recruited for the Boer War when a high percentage of such recruits were found unfit for service. Teachers were reminded that girls needed a thorough training in domestic duties and that they must 'be taught " to set a high value on

See Jenny Zmroczek, ' "If girls would take more kindly to domestic work": Norwich, 1900-39' in *Women's History Magazine*, 44, (June 2003), pp. 9-18.

²⁴ Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor: Home, School and Street in London 1870-1914*, p.143.

²⁵ 'Physical Deterioration and the Teaching of Cookery' in *Contemporary Review* (London:1904), pp. 88-89.

the housewife's position" on the grounds that national efficiency must inevitably depend upon a strong tradition of home life.²⁶ By the end of the nineteenth century domesticity in general had been given a higher status. Home management and social science were becoming acknowledged subjects for further education and gained a higher academic standing in the late-Victorian and Edwardian era.²⁷

Educational reforms which enabled even the poorest of working-class girls to gain some kind of education in domestic skills, were sometimes acknowledged by the autobiographers. Maria Hull, for instance, wrote: 'After the 1891 Education Act we were supplied, besides copybooks, with materials for needlework and lined paper for patterns.'²⁸ The women recalled, with evident pleasure, complex details of the domestic-skills classes many years later. Their vivid recollections were a further sign that the learning of domestic skills was welcomed, and enjoyed, by many of the cohort. Maria, writing her autobiography in 1968, at the age of seventy-seven described her sewing classes at the National Board School. At age nine 'we girls made calico underwear and did much knitting as well.'²⁹ At the age of ten, in 1891, Maria transferred to the girl's department of the Board School and here the sewing lessons are obviously a vivid memory. The minutiae of fabrics, colours and stitches are recollected:

In 'scientific' needlework lessons, we cut out paper patterns of undergarments – drawers, chemise and nightgowns – to our individual measurements. I kept the patterns for a long time and found them useful. We were taught how to patch on both calico and flannel, how to gather and make buttonholes and a gusset. I made a maroon-coloured flannel petticoat, feather-stitched in golden silk on the hem. In knitting we made our own

²⁶ Penny Tinkler, 'Girlhood and Growing Up' in *Women in Twentieth-Century Britain*, ed. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (London: Longman, 2001), p.37.

²⁷ See, for example, Mark Pottle, 'McKillop, Margaret S. (1864-1929): Lecturer in Home Economics', in *The Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2004).

²⁸ Maria Hull, 'A Derbyshire Schooling', p.170.

²⁹ Maria Hull, 'A Derbyshire Schooling', p.168.

woollen stockings, with either 'Dutch' or 'French' heels,
and woollen gloves.³⁰

Maria saw her sewing skills as important and remembered their successful acquisition when, at the age of eighty-eight, she wrote her autobiography. She recalled her use of these skills later in life, as she kept the patterns from her sewing class and 'found them useful' in her married life.

Similarly, Winifred Griffiths attended the National School in Overton, Hampshire, and at the age of seven went up to the 'big school', which was separated into boys' school and girls' school. Although these were in the same block the rooms were quite separate.

Winifred, like Maria, particularly recalls sewing lessons in the girls' school:

The girls' school had about 120 pupils and usually three teachers beside the headmistress. I remember very little about lessons in standard 1 & 2, except that I knitted a red woollen scarf and learned to stitch on pieces of calico and afterwards hemmed real handkerchiefs and dusters.³¹

Needlework classes were perhaps recalled by Winifred as they had a resonance within her family. From an early age she had helped her two aunts in their sewing business which took place in her parent's front room. Winifred used the sewing skills learned at school and home in her first job at a local gabardine factory. Her domestic training continued to be important throughout her life; both at work in her later position in domestic service, and in her home life after her marriage when bringing up her four children. Many of the cohort, therefore, recalled gender-specific sewing, knitting, and cooking, lessons from their schooldays. They welcomed the opportunity to learn domestic skills at a time when society valued domesticity and when avenues to advancement could be found in running

³⁰ Maria Hull, 'A Derbyshire Schooling', p.170.

³¹ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.27.

their own home or in domestic service: educational reforms thus allowed them to succeed in the domestic sphere.

Historian Caroline Steedman has argued that the teaching of household skills to girls in schools was seen as practice for the 'real role' of mother.³² This official ideology, she continued, was developed within a set of social theories that, at the end of the nineteenth century, saw schools as places where working-class children might be 'compensated' for belonging to working-class families. The Whitbread Report on popular education used the same argument: it claimed that at school these children could be physically and emotionally compensated for the perceived absence of morality and discipline in working-class homes.³³ The autobiographers reveal that, rather than being absent from working-class homes, ideologies of morality and discipline were, rather, an important underpinning to the way most of the women were brought up.

Annie Barnes illustrated this morality as she described her feelings of guilt when, as a young girl, she had stolen a few flowers from inside the gates of a large house near where her family were staying on their few days at the seaside. She was caught by the owner of the house, who then allowed her to take the flowers. Annie recalls him explaining kindly:

"There are plenty here."
He walked me back to where we were staying and he sent
flowers every day of our holiday. Charming he was.
Mind you, I never told my mother how it all happened.
She'd have been furious. I just said I'd admired the
garden and he'd given me some of the flowers from it, or
something like that. That's the only thing I've ever stolen
in my life.³⁴

³² Carolyn Steedman, *Past Tenses* (London: Rivers Oram, 1992) p.189.

³³ *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into Popular Education*, pp. 81-99, cited in *Past Tenses*, ed. Carolyn Steedman, p.190.

³⁴ Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie*, pp. 9-10.

Annie lied to her mother in order to escape detection of this small transgression. But she had learned her lesson instilled by her mother's moral code. She felt guilt in the act of stealing the flowers and in telling the lie to her mother - in not being a good girl. That she still recalled the incident, and her guilty feelings, at the age of ninety-two, when recording her autobiography, suggests the importance she placed on the moral values implicit in her upbringing.

A Good Wife and Mother

The place of the good mother as moral guardian at the centre of the home was an important attribute of respectability, already shown to be an important facet in the women's childhoods, and continuing in importance as they grew up. For the twelve autobiographers who described their success as centred in the domestic, private sphere of home, marriage and family, their role also meant holding a position of moral guardianship and ensuring their family adhered to social mores based on a broadly Christian way of life. The importance of family values and the notion of respectability were potent ideas which emerged in the early nineteenth century, promulgated by, and associated with, the rising middle classes.³⁵

As the nineteenth century progressed, the idea of respectability extended beyond the middle classes and was universally adopted by those families who had aspired towards bettering themselves. It was increasingly portrayed through magazines and literature aimed at respectable working people; or through a number of middle-class novels, also read by working-class families, such as those by Charles Dickens; or else was assimilated

³⁵ For arguments supporting the idea that separate feminine characteristics were associated with the middle class see for example: Philippe Aries *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, ed. Robert Baldick (London: Vintage, 1962); J. A. Banks *Prosperity and Parenthood. A Study of Family Planning Amongst the Victorian Middle Classes* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954); and J. A. and Olive Banks, *Feminism and Family Planning in Victorian England* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1964).

by families where Sunday school, Band of Hope and church or chapel were part of the weekly routine.³⁶ In addition, domestic service was the largest employer of female labour and it may well have been that many working-class girls absorbed some middle-class values held by their employers, and then attempted to put these in place in their own families.³⁷

Of the cohort, nineteen are known to have married and, with the exception of Betty May and Margaret Bondfield, they all saw the successful running of their own homes as an achievable ambition. Increased wages for working men by the end of the nineteenth century meant that financial constraints were eased for working class families where the main breadwinner was male and in regular employment. When total household earnings reached a certain level, which varied according to individual family requirements, the value of a wife and mother at home, not least as a symbol of family respectability, tended to outstrip the value of her wage: as Joanna Bourke has argued, there was much to be gained from full-time housewifery.³⁸

Furthermore, apart from industrial areas, many work-places refused to employ married women.³⁹ It was frowned on in many cases for married women to be in paid employment outside the home.⁴⁰ This was especially true after the Armistice in 1918, when women, particularly married women, who sought to retain the jobs they had taken on as 'war work' were criticised for taking the work from returning ex-servicemen.⁴¹ Apart from the

³⁶ Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor*, p.53.

³⁷ *A Hidden Workforce: Homeworkers in England, 1850-1985*, ed. Shelley Pennington and Belinda Westover (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p.5.

³⁸ Joanna Bourke 'Housewifery in Working-class England 1860-1914' in *Women's Work: The English Experience* ed. Pamela Sharpe (London: Arnold, 1998), pp. 332-359.

³⁹ Shelley Pennington and Belinda Westover, *A Hidden Workforce*, pp. 5-6.

⁴⁰ Shelley Pennington and Belinda Westover, *A Hidden Workforce*, pp. 6-8.

⁴¹ Pamela Horne, *Women in the 1920s* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1995), p. 73.

1914-18 war years, working-class women who aspired to respectability in the first quarter of the twentieth century therefore, tended to give up paid employment when they married, or at least when they began having children. In addition, conditions in paid employment for many women, although improving in industry in terms of hours worked, were often poor in domestic service, and this enhanced the appeal of full-time domesticity.⁴²

For over half of the women autobiographers, therefore, a combination of factors meant that they left paid employment upon marriage. And in using the domestic skills learnt at home, school, and often in the work-place, to manage the private lives of their families, they achieved an important measure of success in the domestic sphere. If not required to work for financial reasons, managing the home was an invaluable alternative way to increase their own status. They took responsibility not only for cooking, cleaning and childcare, but also the day-to-day control of finances and spiritual and moral welfare of the family. Part of the domestic ideal for most women was a wife at home with a husband as breadwinner, providing for his family. This model had begun to filter through the various strata of the working class as the nineteenth century progressed, and became a stereotyped ideal for those seeking respectability.

Centred in morality, home, and family, success in the domestic sphere was expressed and defined by the cohort in terms of respectability. In respectable working-class homes, thrift and hard work were admired and practised. Successful economic management provided a further strand to the complex position of working-class women's domestic lives as they took control of managing the family budget. There was a great need for good budgeting of the family income. Winifred Griffiths described her fears and worries:

⁴² For a discussion of this see, for instance, Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain*.

For as long as I lived at home, and indeed right up to the beginning of the 1914 war, when money values fell, my father's wage had stood at 30/- per week. Debt was considered a disgrace. Everything must be paid for straight away and so my mother's thrifty upbringing was very useful. In addition to paying one's way there was a great urge to save. Old age was a kind of spectre which few cared to gaze upon in those pre-pension days. I remember talk of the small amount doled out by the Guardians to needy old people who were trying to live out their life in their own homes rather than go into the 'House' or the 'Union' as the Workhouse was often called. I heard of curtainless windows, of chilly wards with scrubbed wooden floors and never a mat by the bedside, and of a diet just enough to keep body and soul together. Surely it was worth scheming to save in order to put something by to avoid such a fate! ⁴³

This situation was improved for families, at least those with young children, after the war when local authorities set up welfare clinics. These were of great help to working-class mothers in caring for themselves and their small children. Alice Foley's sister Cissy took charge of one such Child Clinic (known as 'Babies' Welcome') in Bolton in 1918.⁴⁴ Alice described the aim of the new clinics as 'the nurturing and cherishing of the new generation of infants so urgently need (*sic*) to bridge Europe's yawning fertility gap caused by the wholesale slaughter of the nation's manhood.'⁴⁵ Women could ask advice from the doctor about pregnancy, birth and child-care issues. Their babies were weighed and given an allowance of free or cheap milk and cod-liver oil.⁴⁶ Mothers, therefore, found reassurance as well as practical help with the finances of feeding their family.

Family economics were entwined with domestic success and better management meant upward mobility: moving to a better house, employing help in the home. The budgeting of family finances was seen as an extension of their domestic success and a role which most

⁴³ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p. 35.

⁴⁴ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.80.

⁴⁵ Alice Foley, *a Bolton Childhood*, p. 80.

⁴⁶ Pamela Horn, *Women in the 1920s*, p. 121.

of the cohort seemed to take on willingly. As the cohort revealed, women could continue to contribute to the family budget by staying at home. For example, they could minimise the hidden costs of women's full-time work by caring for their children. Child-care costs were an important consideration for married women in paid employment: older children could help, but with compulsory schooling it became more difficult to keep them at home to care for younger siblings.

It is therefore not surprising that twelve of the autobiographers chose to centre their adult success in the home. Leaving paid employment at the time of their marriage was an increasingly attainable goal between 1900 and the outbreak of war in 1914, as male wages improved. This had not always been the case. The 1851 census revealed that 75% of wives undertook paid employment. By 1911, when Annie Barnes left her job to take her mother's place at home, only 10% of married women were recorded as in paid employment.⁴⁷ Feminist historians in the last quarter of the twentieth century have portrayed late nineteenth-century domesticity as a narrow and confining gendered ideology of social control. Nancy Tomes has argued that previously dominant or confrontational working-class women began to assume middle-class acquiescent feminine roles.⁴⁸ David Levine has seen women as increasingly passive within the home, as the acceptance of a male family breadwinner as the head of the household took over from family wage economy.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ For a discussion of this subject see, for example, *Married Women's Work: Report of an Enquiry By the Women's Industrial Council* ed. Clementina Black (London: Bell, 1915; republished ed. Ellen Mappen, London: Virago, 1983).

⁴⁸ Nancy Tomes, 'A "Torrent of Abuse:" Crimes of Violence Between Working-Class Men and Women in London, 1840-1875', *Journal of Social History*, no.11 (1978), pp.328-345.

⁴⁹ David Levine, 'Industrialization and the Proletariat Family in England' in *Past and Present*, issue 107 (1985), p.181.

In contrast to this position, the cohort show that the balance of power within the family did not always result, as both Levine and Tomes had argued, in female subservience, although this may have been what was presented publicly. Hannah Mitchell painted a lively picture of the covert, yet powerful, matriarchal rule in her description of her home life when she was a child:

My mother, who quite definitely ruled the roost in our home, paid lip service to the idea of the dominant male. She always spoke of my father as 'The Master', and when the dealers came to buy cattle, she always left the room while they bargained, as if leaving him to decide, although in reality she and my father had privately agreed the price to be asked.⁵⁰

Hannah's description reveals her father's tacit agreement in conforming to the covert equal, if not dominant, position of his wife within the home, and underlines the existence of a double standard between the public and private face of domesticity with which both men and women complied. Women could show their success, at least within the family, through their control in the domestic sphere.

Some women continued to earn money from paid employment inside the home, and this was an accepted and important part of family economics for many working-class wives and mothers.⁵¹ Good, careful housewifery and other domestic work such as sewing could make a substantial difference to the family expenditure. Many of the cohort took in casual, or more organised, sewing, laundry or other domestic work, which they could fit in at home around the needs of their families, and to which children sometimes contributed their labour. Girls learnt by example, and the cohort were aware at an early age of the importance and difficulties of managing on slim domestic finances. It was shown earlier that Alice Foley and Isabella Cooke both recalled their mother's skill in calculating prices

⁵⁰ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.114.

⁵¹ For discussion of this topic see, Shelley Pennington and Belinda Westover *A Hidden Workforce*.

in local shops – even though neither mother could read or write.⁵² Such calculations obviously play an important part in family economics and girls learnt this, as they did other managing strategies.

Isabella Cooke was the eldest girl, and third born, in a family of six children. The youngest boy was five months old when Isabella left school in 1904 aged thirteen.

Isabella had to stay at home and help her mother. She described boiling up the washing in an iron pot over the fire which she had to feed with sticks. To earn some money, she recalled that as well as the ‘awful lot of washing’ for the family:

She used to take in washing for the farm lads and she got ten shillings for the six months, but they didn’t have a lot as they didn’t wear pyjamas in those days and no fancy shirts. I think one shirt and one pair of stockings lasted a week.⁵³

Winifred Griffiths described the women of her family undertaking a more organised method of earning money from home. Before she was of school age Winifred would help her aunts. Her words provide an insight on domestic industry in 1900:

My three aunts earned a living at home making garments for a sewing factory. There were two large treadle sewing machines in the living room and these were used by Aunt Jenny and Aunt Lil, while Aunt Nell did the buttonholes and the finishing. They were neat clean workers and usually had white garments to make up. These arrived ready cut out. The pay was 4 1/2d each for stitching up, making buttonholes or eyelet holes, finishing and pressing white jackets such as were worn by grocers and painters. Each earned about 12/- per week. My mother had worked with them before she married.⁵⁴

Winifred’s description of home-working points to a ‘hidden work-force’ of women who contributed in various ways to the household budget, yet in a further example of the

⁵² See above, pp. 122-123.

⁵³ Isabella Cooke, *A Hired Lass in Westmorland*, p.3.

⁵⁴ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman’s Story*, p.10.

domestic double standard noted earlier, were unacknowledged publicly, as they do not appear in any census for occupations.⁵⁵

Alice Foley recorded that her mother was the main breadwinner. For Alice's mother successful rearing of her family had come via hard work: she took in other people's washing, 'starched and ironed piles of shirts and collars' and also did laundry work in people's homes. When too young to attend school Alice would be taken with her mother:

We were brought up mainly out of her wash-tub earnings.
Frequently I accompanied her to various better-off houses,
and sitting on the floor amongst a pile of dirty clothes
played games and prattled aloud whilst she silently
scrubbed shirts or mangled heavy sheets.⁵⁶

The family budget was also stretched by visits by her mother to the local pawnbroker. Routine pawning of goods was almost exclusively a female method of extending the resources available to feed the family. Under the control of the wife as part of her domestic management, it very often took place without the men of the family knowing, despite the fact that it was often their Sunday suit or overcoat which was pawned, usually on Monday mornings. As Alice recalled:

About this time there emerged the consciousness of accompanying mother on her weekly visits to the nearby pawnbroker's. Each Monday morning, after brushing and sorting out the Sunday clothes, such as they were, a big parcel was made up... The pawnshop was owned by a big, jovial man who I later knew as 'Bill'. He was invariably perched on a high stool behind a long wire-netted counter. As mother was a regular customer he never opened her parcel, but placed it in one of the cubicles just above his head and slipped some silver coins to her under the grill.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ See, for example, June Purvis, *Hard Lessons*; Elizabeth Roberts, *Women's Work: 1840-1940* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1988; republished 1994), pp. 18-20.

⁵⁶ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.9.

⁵⁷ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.7.

Grace Foakes remembered that her father was dominant in one area of family economics: he taught Grace and his other children the maxim 'neither a borrower nor a lender be' and refused to allow the family to borrow money, so her family could not use the services of the pawnbroker. Grace described an alternative scheme that her mother evolved to stretch family finances. Although the family were 'not church goers' the children all attended Sunday school. Grace's mother insisted that her children stay on for the evening service afterwards, because they were given afternoon tea, and when the service was ended were allowed to take home 'left-overs' from the tea. Grace recalled:

There were sandwiches, scones and cake enough to fill a large bag. When we got home they were put away to be eaten on Monday, thus helping out my mother's tight budget.' ⁵⁸

After her marriage to Reuben Foakes and the birth of their daughter, Grace gave up her job as a waitress. At home she managed an often-tight budget and took pride in doing so. She made and sold plum jam, and when the plum season was over:

I took in washing. There were many men in Dagenham who worked at 'Fords' the car manufacturers. Their jobs were well paid, but dirty. I canvassed for washing, and had many customers. I charged one shilling for a dozen twelve pieces. I washed men's shirts, vests, pants and greasy overalls. I also did sheets and pillow cases. All these I did on a rubbing board placed in a bath, washing, wringing and rinsing them by hand; washing machines and automatics were unheard of. On bad days the house was full of wet washing. I ironed them by hand with a flat iron heated on the gas. I was tired, my back ached and my fingers were sore. I collected and delivered the washing, pushing it around in Kathleen's pram. I am not pitying myself; rather I glory in the fact that I held my head high, asking nothing of anyone, satisfied I had made an effort to help myself.⁵⁹

Grace's pride in making economies and taking in washing to help the family budget was an important part of her domestic success. In feeding and clothing her family without the

⁵⁸ Grace Foakes, *My Part of the River*, p.35.

⁵⁹ Grace Foakes, *My Life With Reuben*, p.45.

need to borrow from others, Grace had kept her father's maxim, which she had 'never forgotten.' She did not take advantage of the 9.30 'pawnshop bus' which ran from the Dagenham council estate to Barking every Monday morning and was filled with women taking bundles of goods to pawn, still resorting to old methods to make ends meet in their new homes.⁶⁰

Hannah Mitchell had given up her employment as a dressmaker on her marriage. However to 'make ends meet' she began to take in dressmaking which she did at home. Finding herself to be pregnant with their first (and only) child she decided to work harder at her dressmaking, let the housework go for a few months, and try to save a little money 'for this emergency'. Hannah was both proud of her ability to manage on a small budget, and concerned that the burden of budgeting for the baby was all hers. Her husband was already earning as much money as he could in his employment as a shop assistant, so would not be able to help with this added cost, as she explained to future readers of her autobiography:

If any modern girl reading this wonders why I did not expect my husband to provide for this emergency, I can only say that it would have been useless. His wages were fixed and he could not earn anymore by overtime. Shop hours were long in those days and it was often near midnight when he got home. Besides, I never seemed to make him understand that money was not elastic. Like most men, he had a comfortable idea that it cost no more to keep two than to keep one. He was not very house-proud, and was content with a comfortable chair and a good fire, and he was so extravagant with coals and light as to drive me nearly frantic when he was at home. At first I tried to get him to reckon up the cost-of-living with me and keep a sort of weekly budget. But he refused, just handing his wages over and leaving all the worry to me.

⁶⁰ Andrzej Olechnowicz, *The Economic and Social Development of Inter-war Out-County Municipal Housing Estates, With Special Reference to London County Council's Beacontree and Dagenham Estate* (Oxford: unpublished D.Phil thesis, 1991), pp. 149, 157.

I realized later that I ought to have insisted on his sharing the domestic responsibilities, because I found that he never really valued my contribution to the housekeeping which was often just as much as his own. Most of my sewing was done while he was at work and I did not say much about it. I was proud of being able to help in this way.⁶¹

Hannah appeared to be both accepting and resentful of her husband's limitations. Her success lay in managing on what he gave her, by frugality and by supplementing it with her own skills. Despite trying to involve him in the budgeting, her husband, 'Like most men', just expected her to manage on what he gave her and did not want to know how she did it. Husbands usually expected their wives to manage all of the household expenses out of their own, or their joint, weekly earnings, taking no further interest in what the money was spent on as long as their meals were supplied on time. Hannah's words suggest that this situation was not uncommon. Her experience underlines the notion that women who earned money at home, as well as those in paid employment, were well able to control, with whatever constraints were imposed by poverty, the spending of their own wages.

The descriptions of family income and its management in the autobiographies reveal that women who saw their success in domesticity generally took on, or retained, the ownership of the family finances. Although their work, both inside and outside the home, was assumed to be subordinate to that of their male partner, there was a tradition of what Ellen Ross calls an 'internal wage system' operating in most working class households.⁶² This situation, most notably reported by autobiographers Grace Foakes, Alice Foley, and Hannah Mitchell, is underlined and further illustrated in a social study of working-class

⁶¹ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, pp.100-101.

⁶² Ellen Ross 'Survival Networks: Women's Neighbourhood Sharing in London Before World War I' in *History Workshop Journal*, (Spring 1983), Vol. 15, p.7.

families in London, conducted by Maud Pember-Reeves from 1908-1913.⁶³ Pember-Reeves found that most husbands handed over to their wives the largest part of their weekly earnings, retaining 'pocket money' for themselves.⁶⁴ With their pocket money the men bought beer and tobacco, paid for some kind of insurance and any transport costs to get themselves to work.

Alice Foley's 'feckless Irish' father, having spent any money he did have, would be forced to ask his wife for money to fund his drinking.

I recall his following mother persistently about the kitchen whining monotonously, "lend us a penny, Meg; lend us a penny; I'm choking." At length, in a fit of desperation, a penny was flung onto the table.⁶⁵

It is interesting to speculate as to why, in what was perceived as a male-dominated society, the management of household economy was left to the woman even in respectable working-class families where ideology would place the man at the head of the household. This may have been retained from an earlier period when production had been carried on at home and a domestic-based, rather than an industrial, economy obtained.⁶⁶ The female members of the family, however, with the main responsibility for marketing, would have had control of consumer spending. As the segregation from home to factory or other place of production took place, women were confined to the home by child-bearing and child-rearing. They also retained control of the marketing and therefore the family budget.

⁶³ Maud Pember-Reeves, *Round About A Pound A Week* (London: Garland Press, 1980, first published 1913), p.11.

⁶⁴ This custom has been found to be widespread throughout England and Wales, although the portion given by the male earner varied according to region, neighbourhood and even individual couple. See Laura Oren 'The Welfare of Women in Labouring Families: England 1860-1950', *Feminist Studies*, Vol.I. (Spring 1993) pp.107, 112-113; also, Elizabeth Roberts 'Working Women in the North-West', *Oral History*, Vol.5, (Autumn 1977), p.7-30.

⁶⁵ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.10.

⁶⁶ For a survey of the historical changes involved in the move from domestic based economy see, for example, Anne Lawrence, *Women in England, 1500-1760: A Social History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994) and Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class: 1780-1850* (London: Routledge, 1992).

There are some indications that women also took some control of family size, which may also be seen as part of family economy in terms of how many mouths the total family income, from whichever source, was to feed. Only tentative conclusions may be drawn as to whether or not these women practiced any form of birth control, since it is mentioned by only four of the cohort, and then euphemistically. However, the reason this subject occurred in so few of the autobiographies could be that the practice of birth control was considered immoral, against the will of God, by a society which professed itself to uphold Christian values. It was certainly considered unsuitable for open discussion by respectable women. In intending their autobiography for public consumption, as many of the cohort did, they therefore may not have written about the subject whether or not they practised it. This conclusion was also postulated by Kate Fisher, in her article on gender and birth control in Britain. Fisher suggested that we should not accept at face value women's protests that they knew little or nothing about contraception. Their emphasis on their 'innocence' was 'a part of self representation and bound up with notions of respectability, modesty and chastity.'⁶⁷ Ellen Ross extended this discussion further and maintained that such self-representation could also explain claims for being (or appearing to be) passive during sexual encounters.⁶⁸

Nevertheless it has been established that working-class women sometimes tried to avert or end pregnancies when health or family circumstances made them inopportune.⁶⁹ There are indications that birth control was a possibility for the women in the cohort - sometimes

⁶⁷ Kate Fisher, "'She Was Quite Satisfied With the Arrangements I Made'": Gender and Birth Control in Britain, 1920-1950' in *Past and Present* (November 2000), Vol.169, p. 165.

⁶⁸ Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London 1870-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.101.

⁶⁹ See, for example, Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor*, p.18; for general discussion of the subject see: Jane Lewis, *Politics of Motherhood: Child and Maternal Welfare in England: 1900-1939* (London: Croom Helm, 1980), pp.199-200; Angus McLaren, *Birth Control in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), chapters 12 and 13; Leslie Phillips, *Abortion: Pathology and Treatment* (Birmingham: Cornish Brothers, 1887), p.106.

hidden in references to what other people had said. Grace Foakes, for example, discussed the subject in some detail. Although she professed that as a young wife she had no personal knowledge of birth control, and little idea about childbirth, she described other mother's actions on birth control. In this way she was able, in her text, to removed herself slightly from what was still, for her generation, a taboo subject:

Mothers would breastfeed their babies until they were 2 years old in the hope of keeping themselves from having another baby, for it was a common belief that they couldn't conceive while breast feeding. (As far as I know there was no contraception at that time) I do not think people knew how to prevent more babies arriving. This subject was never spoken of in my young days, it was considered a dirty subject and one to be avoided. Many young girls had babies. Certainly most of them were ignorant of the facts of life. I myself was never told about babies and when my first child was about to be born I was most shocked to find out how she would arrive. I had imagined my tummy would open to let the baby out. With such widespread ignorance it is a small wonder that so many babies died soon after birth.⁷⁰

Kathleen Woodward's mother made it clear to Kathleen, her youngest child, born in Peckham in 1896, that her children had not been wanted; she told the young Kathleen 'that if she had known as much when her first child was born as she learned by the time she bore her sixth, a second child would never have been.'⁷¹ Nellie Scott indicated that she was aware of, and would use, birth control if her child were to be brought up as she had been. She remembered: 'hoping I should never have to bring a child into the world if it was condemned to that life, for I reasoned: I have no right to bring in anyone else if this is all we can offer it.'

⁷⁰ Grace Foakes, *Between High Walls*, p.69.

⁷¹ Kathleen Woodward, *Jipping Street*, p.7.

Hannah Mitchell was perhaps the only woman in the cohort to indicate overtly that she had used birth control methods of some kind, although she does not specify which. She and her husband agreed to limit their family to one child, her son Geoffrey. After the rather gruelling birth, she revealed:

My joy was clouded by the fear that I could not give my baby the opportunities in life which I had missed so much, and my convalescence was retarded by worry about the future. Only one thing emerged clearly from much bitter thinking at that time, the fixed resolve to bring no more babies into the world. I felt it impossible to face again either the personal suffering, or the task of bringing a second child up in poverty.

Fortunately, my husband had the courage of his Socialist convictions on this point and was no more anxious than myself to repeat the experience.⁷²

The cohort therefore showed that they held the financial reins in a number of ways. They manage the family income by careful and resourceful housekeeping of family income. Some of them stretched the budget by resourceful earning of extra money at home. Furthermore, there is a suggestion from several women that a limit could be placed on family size and so the number of mouths that a tight budget would be required to feed.

As well as the diminishing employment opportunities, there may be another reason why the majority of the cohort conformed to this dominant ideology of a wife and mother at the centre of the home, at least for part of their lives. It may also have been a form of self-preservation, for the very practical reason that continuing in paid employment for married women - especially those with young children - increased their workload. Some married women valued their own wage and the independence this brought them, especially in the industrial north where factory wages were relatively high for women workers. Many

⁷² Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.102.

married women, however, made a virtue of necessity. The alternative of working all day for a wage and then coming home to domestic chores placed a double burden on them.

Mrs Scott, a member of the Co-operative Women's Guild wrote of some of her fellow guildswomen who had to do just that:

I feel ashamed sometimes when I think of some of our women, how they have worked and striven, for truly the life of a working-woman with a large family is one of self-denial.⁷³

Once a working-class woman married and elected to stay at home, her normal way of life depended, as discussed above, on her husband's income, together with that of any older children living at home, plus any money she could earn. Such domesticity was the epitome of success for twelve of the women in the cohort. Of the remaining sixteen, apart from Margaret Bondfield and Betty May, domesticity, although usually important at some stage in their lives, was not always fulfilling. Some of the women clearly described frustration with the constraints of domestic life. Tensions built within their marriage as the ambitions surfaced for success outside the confines of the home. Hannah Mitchell, who later achieved fame as a suffragette and Socialist, had looked forward to her marriage and a home shared with her future husband: 'we were both tired of living in lodgings, and felt that our own hearth, however humble, would be more comfortable.'⁷⁴ Hannah had trained as a dressmaker so was skilful at sewing, and she used this to good effect in the early days of her marriage in the 1890s. She expressed pride in her home, giving great details of her home-making skills.

I made hearthrugs of cloth cuttings, such as my mother had taught me to make, window curtains of spotted muslin and patchwork cushions which looked gay and comfortable. My parents sent some bedding, blankets and patchwork quilts, and great sacks of wool, which enabled me to fix up a second bed.

⁷³ Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.100.

⁷⁴ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.88.

I was very proud of this, for I did not like the way some of my friends kept house, with only one bed, excusing themselves on that ground from entertaining friends overnight. I hunted the fent shop for remnants of gay prints. I draped two large boxes with these to serve as dressing-table and washstand in my little guest room.⁷⁵

Hannah enjoyed creating a comfortable home, but she soon found domesticity constraining and frustrating. The tensions between private and public were very real for those amongst the autobiographers who enjoyed the domestic success they achieved in homemaking and caring for their husband and children, yet also wanted to succeed outside the home.

While claiming that the three years spent at home with her small son to be ‘among the happiest years of my life’, Hannah Mitchell also described the ‘tyranny’ of having to serve four meals every day:

Home life was in those days, indeed still is, for the wife and mother a constant round of wash days, cleaning days, cooking and serving meals. ‘The tyranny of meals’ is the worse snag in a housewife’s lot. Her life is bounded on the north by breakfast, south by dinner, east by tea, and on the west by supper, and the most sympathetic man can never be made to understand that meals do not come up through the tablecloth, but have to be planned, bought and cooked.⁷⁶

For Hannah, therefore, expressions of domestic success were complex and not without problems for her perceptions of herself. Domestic success meant being a ‘traditional’ woman: she had longed for a home of her own; it was one of her ambitions, and one of the reasons for marrying. Yet she expected some acknowledgement from her husband of the hard work she put into the marriage. The fact that he appears to have thought that meals ‘just came up through the tablecloth’ highlights the tensions and frustrations she felt.

⁷⁵ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.95. A fent shop, as the quote suggests, sold remnants of fabric.

⁷⁶ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, pp.113-114.

Success for Hannah also meant being a 'new' woman, with a career as well. While enjoying her home life, this alone was not enough for Hannah: 'I soon realized that married life, as men understand it, calls for a degree of self-abnegation, which was impossible for me. I needed solitude, time for study, and the opportunity for a wider life.'⁷⁷ At the end of her autobiography 'most of it written during the war years with the drone of aircraft overhead, and the guns roaring out their challenge', Hannah added a finale in 1946, entitled 'The Kitchen Sink.' In it she described again these tensions, which were felt by many of the autobiographers: 'Looking back on my own life, I feel my greatest enemy has been the cooking stove – a sort of tyrant who has kept me in subjection!'⁷⁸

After her marriage in 1918 Winifred Griffiths, by then active within local politics and social work, also supported her husband in his career as a Labour MP even though she did not always agree with the form this support was expected to take. At the same time her domestic duties and her family were of great importance to her. She too identified the situation when writing her autobiography in the years after World War II:

My life at this time took on a form of dichotomy. On the one hand was the fulfilling of Social engagements expected of the wife of a Minister of the Crown – against many of which my Socialist conscience rebelled, especially at a time when rationing and shortages were still the order of the day. On the other hand was my life as a housewife and mother, running the flat myself, trying to feed them family adequately, and taking under my wing and into our family circle some other young people who failed to get accommodation in London.⁷⁹

Winifred expressed the difficulties of balancing domesticity and work. She identified the tensions between her public and private life. Winifred recalled: 'I don't quite know how I

⁷⁷ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.88.

⁷⁸ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, pp.240-241.

⁷⁹ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.137

managed to keep the home going between all these social engagements. At times like that I felt I had a “split personality.”

When the couple retired, political success became less important, and with old age, a happy domestic life came to the forefront. Although still keeping abreast with developments in the world, domestic success, the companionship of loved ones and a warm comfortable home was more important for Winifred.

Now in the evening of my life my husband and I are fortunate that we still have each other. Our needs are simple and are amply supplied – a house of our own, warmth, plain food, a garden to potter in, occasional walks, visits and letters from children, grandchildren and friends, writing, reading, keeping in touch with events by newspapers radio and television. We count our blessings and wish that all old folks could enjoy them.⁸⁰

Many of the autobiographers have written in similar vein, valuing their domestic success as in old age they looked back over their long lives; often they have lived through two world wars. Mildred Edwards wrote her autobiography in 1977 when she was aged eighty-eight. She also celebrated domestic success and a happy and loving marriage. Despite her husband, Jack, having been gassed and shell-shocked during the World War I, the couple had worked for, and bought, their own home.

Our married life was happy, just a little marred by Jack's poor health, but he was never “on the panel”, the Doctors always kept him patched up and on the go; he also had his gun and his dog and this was his sole hobby, also helped my larder. I did very well and am very thankful to God for a good life and all the wonderful people I have met and loved. I had to part with Jack when he was in his eighty-third year, and was given strength to nurse him to the end. He used to say, “You're my doctor and my nurse, don't have anybody else”, and so it was, and I was eighty. It all got by, and I was able to sell our house at Summer Hill – we lived on the hill for fifty years – and come to this little

⁸⁰ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.166.

bungalow at Upperby, where I am very happy, alone with my rich memories.⁸¹

Mildred's success lay in the very ordinariness of her happy life with her much-loved husband. The societal conventions were observed: it was *her* larder, *his* gun and dog. Her words epitomise a genteel respectability.

Autobiographer Emma Smith wrote about success in the domestic sphere placing herself at the centre of respectable family life. It is possible to trace, within her autobiography, the continued ambitions and striving for domestic success from early in her childhood.

Dreams of domesticity in a happy home life seemed to be crystallized for her one cold winter's night when she was begging, by singing from door to door at Sennen Cove in Cornwall. Emma described:

The lamplit cottages looked Homely (*sic*) and inviting. I imagined families gathered around firesides, laughing, chattering, and a longing would sweep over me to be one of a real family, happy and carefree, decently clothed and clean.⁸²

At fourteen, after leaving the Salvation Army home where she had been for some years, Emma was taken into a penitentiary where she worked in the laundry. At the age of twenty-five she became a postulant at the Convent of All Hallows in Ditchingham, Norfolk:

After I had served three months as a postulant, the Reverend Mother sent for me. This lady told me in the kindest way that she and the Chaplain had had a talk about me, and had decided that my place was in the world. "Your vocation my child," she said, "is to be a wife and mother. And," she added sweetly, "a very good wife and mother you will make.'

⁸¹ Mildred Edwards, *Our City... Our People*, p.70.

⁸² Emma Smith, *A Cornish Waif's Story*, p.107.

A thrill went through me at her words. Here was something that had never before been suggested. A wife and mother! Was it possible? Suddenly, in my mind's eye, I saw a little home, furniture, curtains, a cradle – and I tried to imagine (only this was more difficult) a man in slippers.⁸³

Emma left the convent to go into domestic service, and married a gardener in 1922 and the couple continued in service for a while. However, after the birth of their daughter, Emma wanted to ensure that her daughter's life was an improvement on her own:

We had not yet got a home of our own, for after the wedding I continued to work and we lived in the house. I now became restless and ambitious on my baby's account. I wanted something better for her than what my own life had been.⁸⁴

Soon the couple, with their baby girl, emigrated to Australia where they found work, did well and were very happy until a year later. Then feelings of homesickness drew them back to Cornwall. As she arrived home Emma described her thoughts, marking her success as she had progressed from poverty, to the sort of domestic life of which she had dreamed:

How well I remembered all the different Landmarks! Could I possibly be the same person, I wondered, as that dirty ragged unkempt child of so long ago that tramped round here with the hurdy-gurdy, truly it seemed as if it must have been in another existence.⁸⁵

Eventually, Emma's three daughters attended the same school that she had. She recorded her pride and satisfaction as she compared 'their neat appearance in white blouses, navy tunics and neat trimmed hair, to my own unkempt condition while at school'. For Emma, respectability was very much bound up with pride in her daughters, in giving them a better life than she had had. Her attainment of domestic success was illustrated in her life

⁸³ Emma Smith, *A Cornish Waif's Story*, pp.174-175.

⁸⁴ Emma Smith, *A Cornish Waif's Story*, p.177.

⁸⁵ Emma Smith, *A Cornish Waif's Story*, p.195.

journey, from 'that ragged unkempt child of so long ago' to the fulfilment of her dream of a happy marriage: her success was measured by her ability to care for her home, her husband and her clean, well-dressed and well-educated daughters.

Respectability was also reflected in outward signs such as accent, and where one lived, and Emma Smith was not the only woman with ambitions and dreams of a better life. Felt hat worker Nellie Scott who lived in Stockport, described her dream of a utopian city where she would like to live: 'I have sat hours at work planning, a city, fitting in beautiful homes and everything to make life beautiful and happy, instead of sordid and ugly like our factory towns.'⁸⁶

In their writing the cohort illustrate the Christian values of hard work, care for others, domestic order and cleanliness, implicated in the ideology of respectability. Grace Foakes recalled some rituals of respectability when she lived in one of the poorest areas of London at the turn of the century:

The majority were clean, patient and hardworking, bringing up families under the worst kinds of conditions. They cleaned their windows each week, and their curtains were taken down and washed every fortnight. They got so black that you soaked them in salted water before you washed them. When this water was poured away it was as black as soot. The air was full of smoke and grime from many factories and ships, and from the coal fires which everyone used, but each fortnight those curtains went up clean. When the front door opened, in many cases one would see lace curtains draped just half-way down the passage or hall, as it is now called. This looked nice, and also prevented people seeing into the room beyond, which in nearly every case was the living-room-cum-everything. No matter how poor or how little a family had, this outward appearance had to be kept up at all costs.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.85.

⁸⁷ Grace Foakes, *My Part of the River*, pp. 53-54.

The need to be perceived as a good manager, wife and mother, and to keep a clean home, were therefore an added responsibility in the already difficult lives of many working women.⁸⁸ Low wages and misfortune did not erase the desire for respectability, even though they made its conventions harder to observe. Further tensions arose when school-age children were required at home. Well-educated children were a sign of respectability: education was important, but was also often in conflict with the need for children to contribute to the family budget.

Children, primarily cared for by their mothers, were affected by their mothers' aspirations and soon learnt the distinction between 'rough' and 'respectable'. They were caught up in the identity and image of their own family and respectability, for those who aspired to it, was invariably a family enterprise.⁸⁹ Children's clothes and conduct signalled the efforts of the mother. Her self-respect was asserted through domestic competence, and achieved and maintained through the cleanliness of her house and the appearance of her children. Effort was made to show neighbours that she took good care of her children and was training them well. This involved, even when money was short, ensuring that they were regular and punctual at school and Sunday school, that they had good manners and clean clothes.⁹⁰ The poorer the family, the harder it was to maintain such ideals, and women expended much energy in hiding the miseries of poverty. But then any rise in living standards was also likely to require more effort on the domestic front. As historian

⁸⁸ The net curtains to which Grace referred for example, may well have looked 'nice' and also hid less-than-affluent homes from prying eyes, but they were also likely to have been put up to keep in precious heat, and even more importantly to prevent the incursion of soot and airborne dirt which was a problem until at least the 1950s when the Clean Air Act was introduced.

⁸⁹ Standish Meacham, *A Life Apart: The English Working Class 1890-1914* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), p.27.

⁹⁰ A. Jobson, *The Creeping Hours of Time: An Autobiography* (London: Hale, 1977) p.82; see also examples from Ada S. of Spitalfields and Mary H., cited in Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor*, chapter 4.

Kathryn Gleadle has argued: 'Increased resources usually meant the preparation of more complex dishes; ornaments to polish; and more washing to launder.'⁹¹

Grace Foakes was aware that social mobility could take place within, as well as between, classes. Grace was 'courted' by Reuben Foakes, and recalled that some of her future husband's family, although working-class, were 'superior':

It was generally believed in Reuben's family that they had descended from a family much higher up the social ladder. This was probably true, for during our courting days, Reuben often took me to visit his aunts who lived in nice houses in the suburbs of London. I was always struck by the marked difference in their manner of speaking and their way of living. They were working class with a difference. None lived in Wapping as we did, with its noise, poverty and dirt. They lived in places like Welling in Kent, Forest Gate and East Ham, which in those days were select places. Each had a nice house and garden, and each one I visited seemed to be superior to Reuben's family.⁹²

Grace was highlighting several indications of success in this passage: a nice house and garden in a 'select' area, a different way of living and a particular manner of speaking. Grace's reference to the differences in manner of speaking recall the importance of elocution classes revealed in the previous chapter by autobiographers Alice Foley, Mary Gawthorpe and Winifred Griffiths.

Grace Foakes achieved her dreams of a 'nice' house as she fought for a place on the council list for new homes.⁹³ She and her husband with their baby daughter, Kathleen, were eventually allocated a house on the new council estate in Dagenham. Grace

⁹¹ Kathryn Gleadle, *British Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p.21.

⁹² Grace Foakes, *My Life With Reuben*, p.14.

⁹³ Grace Foakes, *My Life With Reuben*, pp.37-40.

described the move from Wapping in 1932, and compared the old home and the new, reflecting on the differences, and showing her pride in what she and Reuben had achieved:

Reuben and I were among the many Londoners who during 1932 escaped from the slums of London's East End, and went to live on a Council Estate at Dagenham in Essex. We were overjoyed at being given our own house, complete with garden. The plans we made were as fantastic as they were impossible, for to us this was paradise compared to what we had left behind.

Upstairs three bedrooms. Just imagine it! One whole bedroom for my baby, one for us, and actually a spare bedroom. I stood and remembered the one poor bedroom I had shared throughout my childhood with my three brothers and my sister.

If you have never had a garden, or if you had never seen fruit and vegetables growing in a garden, then you might get some idea of the pride and joy one feels when one digs up one's first potato, beetroot or carrot.

This was a clean new town and we were part of it. Our children could play in the garden while we women did our housework and washing. Each taking pride in as to who could make her whites whitest or her coloured clothes the most colourful. And who can say aught about it? If you had been bred and born in a grey place then no doubt you would love bright cheerful colours about you too.⁹⁴

Domestic success for other autobiographers also came with a move to a more respectable or better-off neighbourhoods. Alice Foley was 1 of the 5 autobiographers known to have remained as spinsters.⁹⁵ Family and home were still important to Alice who cared for her disabled mother, and brought her to share the new council house in Dean during the 1920s. She expressed her joy when she and her invalid mother moved from the centre of industrial Bolton. They were one of the first to be allocated a council house with a garden, on a new estate in the 1920s:

⁹⁴ Grace Foakes, *My Life With Reuben*, pp.37-40.

⁹⁵ Margaret Bondfield, Alice Foley, Mary Luty, Daisy Hills and Ellen Wilkinson, remained spinsters. Two of the others, Agnes Cowper and Kathleen Woodward, made no mention of marriage. So at least five, and possibly seven of the women, supported themselves all of their lives.

We were allocated a house by the local authority, at Chip Hill Road in Dean, on a new council estate on the edge of a green belt. How delighted we were to expand and spread our wings in cleaner air and quietude! I also remember how eagerly I took up the challenge to till and fashion a garden out of virgin brick and clay, enduring much joy and no little backache in the process, yet often thrilling in harmony with the song birds overhead.⁹⁶

Council house accommodation was not the last resort it is often seen as today. Communal housing was established in the 1890s and even earlier with the co-operative and co-partnership housing movements. During the first decades of the twentieth century the ‘Garden City Movement’ began which espoused the Utopian idea of bringing the countryside into the lives of the city poor living in the grim slums of housing built in the early nineteenth century, by moving them to ‘cottages’ with gardens. Council housing gained in popularity between the wars, when Grace and Alice were allocated houses, but it expanded an already established ideal.

Access to a warm, dry comfortable house was an achievement, and seen as going up in society, which indeed it was in many cases. For families who had previously shared accommodation there was a sheer sense of excitement at getting a key to a home of their own. Prospective tenants were well vetted. They had to agree to terms and conditions in their lease, which seemed to enforce a measure of respectability, such as cultivating their gardens, and not hanging out washing on a Sunday. The paternalism of the council estate managers who were employed by the local council to maintain standards of behaviour on estates was accepted by tenants. Council housing was seen as the future. The Local Authorities were funded by central government as part of the welfare strategy of building ‘Houses to let and not houses to sell’.

⁹⁶ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.79.

Once they had their new homes, the need to maintain respectability, and thus publicly declare their success, became even more important. In order to maintain their domestic ideals, on an often-tight budget, working-class women had long depended in a greater or lesser measure on the help of friends and neighbours. There existed a casual system of neighbourhood networks of, usually female, friends and neighbours, to whom they also gave support. Grace Foakes had seen the move from Wapping as ‘an escape’ but still she admitted she would miss friends and neighbours: ‘I wanted to go. But I wanted to stay. Here was home. Here were my friends and neighbours. Here were the people with whom I had grown up.’⁹⁷ The importance of neighbourhood networks is apparent in the inclusion, in almost all of the cohorts’ autobiographies, of vivid anecdotes of neighbours working together to keep up appearances and help each other.

The Good Neighbour

The morality expressed by Annie Barnes, Emma Smith’s pride in her daughters’ achievements, the descriptions of upward mobility by Alice Foley and Grace Foakes as they moved from inner city to clean countryside, the legislation for respectable behaviour expected of council house tenants are all examples which shed light on the complex moral and religious underpinnings to the notion of respectability which is an important facet of domestic success for many of the autobiographers. Christianity in its widest form is behind the idea of the ‘good’ mother at the centre of a respectable home, caring for others, and living a ‘Christian’ life. And the idea of caring for others, for the women in the cohort, did not only include immediate family, but extended to neighbours.

⁹⁷ Grace Foakes, *Between High Walls*, p.82.

In addition to the moral duty of caring for neighbours, a successful housewife also had a stake in keeping her neighbourhood respectable. Coming from a respectable neighbourhood was as important as having a home of which to be proud. This can be translated to the wider nineteenth-century ideal of being a good citizen, of 'Civic Pride'.⁹⁸ Respectability, therefore, extended to the local neighbourhood, and this was not just true for the new council estates. It had long been of importance in poor inner city areas. Grace Foakes recalled that all of her neighbours had taken part in a cleaning routine in front of their houses in an effort to enhance the appearance of the London back street from where she had moved:

Then there were the doorsteps. Each front door had a wooden doorstep which was scrubbed white each morning. The pavement outside the house was swept and then the woman of the house, kneeling down with a bucket of hot water and some whitening, proceeded to wash the pavement immediately in front of her door, making a half-circle which she would afterwards whiten with the whitening. Thus each house you passed had its own half-circle of white pavement and its white-scrubbed doorstep.⁹⁹

Many incidents are recalled by the cohort which reflect the help and support given by, usually gender-specific, neighbourhood networks. Families often lived close to their relatives and for many working-class women grandparents and aunts, as well as neighbours, played a large part in the care of children. The neighbourhood and the extended family thus provided a major survival network: this was of seminal importance to the way the autobiographers perceived themselves as having successful lives despite their poverty. Alice Foley described this situation as 'community life':

⁹⁸ Civic pride sprang from the idea of a 'Civic Gospel', originally a development of middle-class non-conformists, and preached by, most notably, Congregationalist Minister R. W. Dale, in Birmingham. By the period 1870-1900 this movement had crossed classes and encompassed changes in society which combined Christian social concern with municipal welfare and the reform of the urban environment.

⁹⁹ Grace Foakes, *My Part of the River*, p. 53

The street in which I was nurtured as a small girl had little to boast of, except that in an odd way, we regarded it as Our Street and rich in its own quality of community life. We were all poor of a ruck but hardships were shared in a spirit of cheerfulness and characteristic good humour.¹⁰⁰

This quality of community life was based on co-operation between neighbours, as well as kindness and caring for others. It was an expression of the way the neighbourhoods placed importance on keeping up appearances. No family, striving for respectability, would wish to live next to a home where standards were not 'kept up'. There was an overriding sense of community which developed with common experiences. This sense of community seemed to be a predominantly working-class phenomenon. Virginia Woolf, writing in 1915, looked down on it, and decried 'the horrible sense of community which the war produces, as if we all sat in a third class railway carriage together.'¹⁰¹ Certainly, the closeness of housing and the sharing of water and toilet facilities meant that working-class neighbours were often on fairly intimate terms. They pooled resources, sharing clothes, cooking utensils, childcare and even helping with rent money or food in times of illness or death.

In childbearing years and in old age, women were especially dependent on neighbourhood and family networks for help. Children, too, were a vulnerable group. Many of the women in the cohort have recalled kindly acts from caring neighbours, which made an otherwise unhappy childhood bearable. Kathleen Woodward wrote that the only tenderness she ever received was in the home of a neighbour, Jessica Mourn:

When I was a child I used to sit in Jessica's front parlour whenever it was possible; she was my refuge and my shelter, and she had about her an inexpressible tenderness and that refinement which grows out of a soul laid away in suffering.

¹⁰⁰ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.15.

¹⁰¹ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf* ed. Anne Oliver Bell (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979, first published 1977), p. 153.

Her tenderness stands out in relief against the bleak,
spartan tone of my own home, and my mother's
impatience with the outward forms of affection. At home
it was always wintry. Mother had no love to give us.¹⁰²

In writing this, Kathleen was primarily highlighting tension between herself and her mother, similar to that described earlier in the autobiography of Hannah Mitchell.¹⁰³

However, Kathleen's words also reveal the importance of neighbours in children's lives. Childcare could be shared between neighbours, especially in times of trouble. In addition, the years before school, when children were sensible enough to run errands for others in the neighbourhood, but not constrained to spend the day in school, were a time, for girls like Kathleen, when valuable lessons in domesticity were learned. It also began the habit of participating in, and contributing to, neighbourhood networks.

The habit of helping others was therefore deeply ingrained in working-class women's lives. Kathleen Woodward's neighbour, Jessica, seemed to have been a good neighbour to everyone, especially in times of bereavement or sickness, Kathleen wrote:

She (Jessica) drew trouble to her like a magnet...everyone
sent for Jessica Mourn: she watched the dying; she laid out
the dead. These melancholy tasks were her daily portion.
The excursions she made beyond the confines of Jipping
Street were invariably undertaken to comfort the afflicted.¹⁰⁴

Alice Foley's mother was frustrated by her frequently out-of-work husband who would do his best to drink away any money she saved out of her wash-tub earning. Sometimes this would be too much for Alice's mother to bear. At such times her mother found some comfort in having neighbours to share her troubles. Alice recalled that after an argument

¹⁰² Kathleen Woodward, *Jipping Street*, p.32.

¹⁰³ See above, p.152-153; also Caroline Steedman, *Past Tenses* p.121.

¹⁰⁴ Kathleen Woodward, *Jipping Street*, pp.47-48.

her father would storm out of the house: 'whilst mother snatched up her shawl and vanished into the street to find temporary refuge in a neighbour's home.'¹⁰⁵

The tight-knit nature of their communities ensured that neighbours always seemed to know when help was needed. Women giving birth would be cared for, families would be given help at times of death, sickness or when the usual wage-earner was out of work.¹⁰⁶ Powerful links between women and their neighbours and relatives showed a gender difference, which further complicates the discussion. Husbands and wives had different responsibilities for money and children, and a daily existence so separate that gender differences were reproduced in patterns of movement in streets, shops and pubs, as well as in their own homes and in the work-place. Ties of friendship and mutual aid amongst neighbours and friends rarely crossed gender boundaries, as apart from relatives, men and women rarely knew each other if they came from different families, even on their own streets. Women shared extensively and unsentimentally in female-centred networks of domestic help: women helped women in the nurture and care of their families. If any male network existed it might be found in the camaraderie of work and trade union meetings, or street corners and public houses, rather than bound up with the home and family.

Neighbourhood networks were an extension of home, and as well as offering support to other working-class women in difficult times, the neighbourhood was often a source of pride. Alice Foley recalled a rich quality of life in the Bolton of her childhood: hardships were shared, but so were good fortune and successes. She wrote of neighbours sharing a suit belonging to her brothers, gladly loaned to help express the respectability of the neighbourhood:

¹⁰⁵ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.10.

¹⁰⁶ Lillian Hine, 'A Popular Childhood' in *East London Record*, Vol. III, (London: East London History Association, 1980), pp.32-43.

If father came up on a horse we usually had a bit of a 'do'; this might stretch to buying a new suit for one of the older boys. Later it would be loaned out to neighbours on the occasion of weddings or funerals. "Con (*sic*) I borrow your John's suit" was frequently heard and, sure enough, even if it happened to be in pawn, it was cheerfully redeemed in order to help maintain the dignity of our street on its big occasion.¹⁰⁷

Keeping up appearances was therefore an important part of personal and neighbourhood respectability, and was especially important at events such as funerals, weddings and christenings. Mildred Edwards recalled a funeral of one of her classmates, who died in 1888, when Mildred was nine years old:

Women stood weeping and men took off their hats...after a funeral all who had attended, returned to the house for tea, which was always sumptuous, however poor, it was always managed whether by borrowing, on tick, or good management mattered not.¹⁰⁸

Hannah Mitchell described her wedding day, which was held at her sister Sallie's house.

Hannah and Sallie had prepared the wedding breakfast, and friends and relatives had been generous with gifts:

But the most vivid memory of my wedding day, even yet, was a little act of kindness, which always seemed to me one of the loveliest things I have ever known. My sister's house was one in a row of eight or ten. At the front were small gardens, divided from the roadway and each other by iron railings. But the back was open, with a stone-flagged passage between the houses and the back gardens. When I rose early on my wedding day, I found that every neighbour had risen earlier still, cleaned her windows, and whitened the flags both back and front, thus giving the whole street quite a festive appearance on that glorious September morning.

The memory is clearer than any other I retain of my wedding day: it shows the lasting effect of one little kindly

¹⁰⁷ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.15.

¹⁰⁸ Mildred Edwards, *Our City...Our People*, p.11.

action done so long ago and probably soon forgotten by the women who did it.¹⁰⁹

In helping others to maintain standards of care and appearances of respectability, Hannah and others of the cohort were complying with the Christian values of cleanliness, morality, caring for others and helping their neighbours, which were an integral part of respectable Victorian and Edwardian society. Women's networks are an example of the Christianity expressed in the Socialism of the Labour Church, and the writer Robert Blatchford, to whom autobiographers Alice Foley, Annie Kenney, and Ellen Wilkinson all refer.

Hannah Mitchell encapsulated the caring nature of neighbourhood networks when she described, in almost biblical terms, the help she got from one of her neighbours:

I could never have managed to do my work as Guardian, had it not been for the help of a kindly neighbour whom I had the good fortune to meet soon after coming to Ashton in 1900, and who is still a dear and valued friend. There should be a special blessing on good neighbours: they are God's best servants on earth.¹¹⁰

The cohort therefore maintained respectability, both within their home and within their neighbourhood, with the compliance of their families and the help of friends and neighbours. To present their families in the best possible light to the outside world, these women also controlled the economics of their family in a careful balance of total income with required expenditure.

Conclusion

The importance of the home and domestic skills, instilled into girls at home and at school during childhood, continued into adult life for the majority of the cohort. Domestic success was perceived as being in control of the home environment, being a good mother

¹⁰⁹ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, pp.90-91.

¹¹⁰ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.125.

with well-brought-up children and a well-managed home of which they could be proud. It was also bound up with being a caring neighbour and responsible citizen, both on altruistic and moral grounds, and for the practical reason of ensuring that those around them also promulgated the respectability of the neighbourhood in which they lived. The cohort were complying with Patmore's 'Angel' and separate spheres ideology, but not succumbing to it: they wanted to offer practical help to the people they loved, and see their families, and themselves, advance. The emphasis on success in the domestic sphere in their autobiographies therefore reflects their compliance with the role for which society had fitted them. It also suggests, however, that they were able to use their domestic role for their own ends: to help those around them - who in turn helped them - and also to maintain respectability, and by good housekeeping to advance their standard of living.

Domestic success was celebrated by the majority of the cohort because it reflected social conventions: it mirrored the social order and the respectability demanded by societal values of the period. It was facilitated for the cohort by improving social conditions: the increase in wages for men, the building of new council homes, the emphasis given to domestic training in school and higher education. Such developments allowed the women to succeed, advancing in society, yet within socially acceptable boundaries. Up to the outbreak of World War I at least, it was considered respectable for married women to stay at home and look after the home and family, redefining themselves as house-wives and working in the domestic sphere. In doing so they took individual responsibility for their own lives. Most saw as valuable and important their work as wife, homemaker and mother and were proud of achieving a higher standard of living for their families: they strove towards upward social mobility, if not between classes, then within the working class. Respectability was seen as personal, but also as collective: within the family, and within

the neighbourhood. So in striving for respectability the support of family and neighbourhood networks was vital, and the cohort acknowledge this in their writing.

There was a high value placed on domesticity by the society in which they lived, against which only a few of the women rebelled. Yet these rebels are amongst the most interesting. Some of them, for instance Winifred Griffiths, were successful in balancing the public and private spheres. Hannah Mitchell, however, while conforming to her role as good wife and mother in the early years of her marriage, soon felt constrained by domesticity. Margaret Bondfield, on the other hand, was the only autobiographer who wrote nothing about her own domestic life as an adult: domesticity was simply not part of her success. Although she encouraged it in other women, success for her was entirely bounded by the work environment. Their public success will be discussed further in subsequent chapters, but it is women such as Margaret Bondfield, Winifred Griffiths and Hannah Mitchell, who more than any other of the autobiographers revealed that the way society viewed the role of working-class women could not remain static. The majority of the cohort who conformed to the domestic ideal were following an already existing pattern in society of the woman as good girl, good wife and mother and good neighbour.

Winifred Griffiths balanced the public and domestic spheres successfully, but Hannah Mitchell, while accepting domesticity for part of her life, saw her real success elsewhere. Margaret Bondfield made speeches about domesticity, but she was speaking of other women, not of herself: she was a successful politician and did not comply with society's gender construction of what her life should be - domesticity was not personally important to her, although she acknowledged its importance to society. These rebels were unusual; they broke the pattern set out for women of their class and illustrated that women's

success did not have to conform to the separate spheres ideology of the home-based female.

Success in the domestic sphere for most of the cohort meant conforming to an essentially middle-class domestic ideology, which a significant number of the cohort valued for all, or at least part of, their lives. The women who chose domesticity perceived themselves as successful, measured not only by the standards they set themselves, but also by the standards set by society, one of the most important criteria of which was respectability. Yet female working-class culture was dynamic, rather than static, and the autobiographies of Margaret Bondfield, Winifred Griffiths and Hannah Mitchell illustrate that the societal view of domesticity as the only sphere to which working-class women could aspire was beginning to change. It was becoming increasingly possible for working-class women to achieve success outside the home.

Chapter 5: Economics

Introduction

All of the autobiographers commemorate the importance of economic success, which was achieved step by step through a variety of means and at differing times of life. It meant different things to different women and was manifested as the achievement of various ambitions: financial independence; higher earning power; the enhanced ability to purchase consumer goods; a move to a better home in a more prestigious or more respectable area; and the enjoyment of leisure and cultural activities such as visits to the theatre, day trips and holiday travel. Their spending power increased gradually as they acquired better jobs, and this reflects the dynamics of change in both gender and class: working-class women no longer stayed in one job for twelve hours a day, six days a week, but could climb up the ladder of employment to improve their earning power or job status and consequently their standard of living. Opportunities were opening up for women in the job market over this period, and this gave them increasing room to manoeuvre into previously male-dominated occupations. Economic success changed their lives: the women could aspire to a lifestyle denied to their parents and hitherto out of reach of working-class families generally. Although a few of the cohort reveal short or long term plans, most achieved economic success in an almost serendipitous way, and gradually enhanced their lives by taking opportunities as they became available.

The women invariably viewed their first job on leaving school as an achievement, and a step towards adulthood and financial independence from their childhood home. Most started work between twelve and fourteen years of age. The choice of initial occupation was rarely left to the women themselves, for as well as societal class and gender limitations on the sorts of occupations available to working-class women, the kind of work

undertaken by daughters was usually determined by parents, or by local or family custom.¹ The latter was especially true of women such as Alice Foley, Mary Luty and Nellie Scott, living in northern industrial areas, where throughout the period, family or neighbourhood traditions dictated that they entered into factory or mill work. There was also an informal support network in operation, information was passed around about job opportunities, and family members or acquaintances offered advice on positions in local households, or performed introductions to prospective employers, as Winifred Griffiths and Louise Jermy both recalled.

The women indicated that their ability to undertake paid employment, as school-leavers, and the degree of independence which came with this, was part of their success. They welcomed some autonomy over their own lives, while their willingness to comply with the 'good girl' model of expected behaviour meant that they also enjoyed their ability to help their parents by contributing to the family economy. Their contribution to family economics often made it possible for their mothers to leave paid employment: a sign of respectability amongst aspiring working-class families. Economic success was therefore seen both personally and familially by the cohort; however it was attained. And whatever way it was manifested, economic success throughout life was a product of their own, their children's and/or their husbands' labour: earned income was pooled so that, embedded in a familial economic framework, life was enhanced for the whole family. Certainly in most cases family economics were run on collective, utilitarian, lines: the family was an economic unit to which all contributed according to their ability.

¹ Jenny Zmroczek, ' "If girls would take more kindly to domestic work": Norwich 1900-39', pp.11-12.

At this early stage in their lives, only Mary Gawthorpe and Ellen Wilkinson saw work as a career. The remainder, as school-leavers, did not seek the sort of personal satisfaction that girls of the twenty-first century expect. As the women gained in work experience they become less dependent on their families. Revealing the ability and motivation to improve their economic success, the women began to make decisions about their own lives by taking advantage of any opportunities which presented themselves. Many then began to seek fulfilment in their work as they took on more challenging positions.

Those women who remained in traditional female occupations, in textiles or domestic service, could work their way up a hierarchy of jobs in their field; others changed to different kinds of employment. Winifred Griffiths left the factory, and the family home, to gain independence and more pay in domestic service; economic success for Louise Jermy also included moving to a better paid position in domestic service from her dressmaking apprenticeship. The work-pattern of the cohort reveals the changing opportunities available to working-class women over the period: Alice Foley was promoted from the factory floor to an administrative position as an insurance collector, with more status, higher pay and what was seen as a more respectable and varied type of employment. Ada Nield Chew left the textile factory to work as a clerk in a local government office – a position previously held by a male employee. For economic reasons Margaret Bondfield's parents sent her away from home to train as a shop assistant shortly after she had completed an extra year at school as a pupil-teacher; she had no choice in the matter. Yet later in life she was able to choose to become involved in union activities and eventually, in the 1920s, when she was in her fifties, she gained national prominence as a Labour politician. None of these options for change would have been available earlier in the period to women from their class.

Over time, therefore, changes were occurring in the roles of working-class women. Their aspirations also broadened, as it became easier for them to succeed through a range of paid employment. Wider opportunities in office, clerical and retail employment, tailoring and teaching, previously areas dominated by men, began opening up for women from the 1880s.² Most working-class women benefited from improvements in working hours and conditions in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Also importantly, throughout the period part-time or evening education was becoming an option, as shorter working hours enabled women, including Winifred Griffiths, Ada Nield Chew and Mary Luty, to take evening classes which led to more qualifications and a higher earning power. The First World War brought further openings: Mildred Edwards moved from home duties to clerical work in a Government Department, and Winifred Griffiths moved from her position in domestic service to a position in retail, with good prospects for promotion - one of thousands of jobs vacated by men who had volunteered to serve their country in 1914.³

Economic success was therefore achieved primarily in the public sphere of the workplace, yet the autobiographers reveal that it was facilitated by, and contingent upon, domestic and educational success. Educational success led to a choice of higher status occupations, especially for those women such as Mary Gawthorpe and Ellen Wilkinson, born in 1881 and 1891 respectively, who were unusual within the cohort as they revealed long-term plans through teaching and university qualifications. Economic success was an increasingly attainable goal for those working-class girls who were able to seek it. With a small sample of twenty-six women it is of course difficult to identify a trend over the

² Teresa Davy, '“A Cissy Job for Men; a Nice Job for Girls”'; Women Shorthand Typists in London 1900-1939' in *Our Work, Our Lives, Our Words, Women's History and Women's Work*, ed. Leonore Davidoff and Belinda Westover (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), p.142.

³ Conscription began in 1916, before this the men joining up were all volunteers.

cohort as a whole, but in the lives of the individual women there was a discernable change over time, as new opportunities arose and societal views of what was appropriate for working-class women grew broader.⁴

In the home, careful budgeting of available funds by the wife and mother within the domestic sphere further contributed to improvement of finances within the family and to the way the family was presented to the outside world. The benefits of economic success therefore included respectability and a degree of upward social mobility. Societal notions of the ideal woman encompassed ideas of modesty and self-effacement. In order to gain economic success, the women in the cohort, while not rejecting such ideals, worked within them in order to re-define their place in society. Many included in their writing a rationale, which justified their ambitions by giving them an altruistic dimension. These ideals reflect those discussed in the previous chapter, where caring for family and neighbours was described as an important facet of domestic success. Using similar explanations the cohort's ambitions for more pay, prestige, upward social mobility in terms of housing and consumer goods were not always sought for themselves. All of the women, apart from the unconventional Betty May, described altruistic motives for wanting financial success. In general they initially wanted to help their families. Kathleen Woodward enabled her mother to give up the laundry-work she took in and leave behind the 'years of wet wash-tubs'.⁵ Mary Gawthorpe gained freedom from her tyrannical father for herself, her siblings and her mother. Ellen Wilkinson wanted to pay her mother back for all her sacrifices when Ellen was a child and which had helped her achieve so much.⁶

⁴ For instance Margaret Bondfield's parents sent her away from home to train as a shop assistant; she had no choice in the matter. Yet later in life she was able to choose to become involved in union activities and eventually, in the 1920s when she was in her fifties she gained national prominence as a Labour politician.

⁵ Kathleen Woodward, *Jipping Street*, p.92.

⁶ Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, p.400.

Others professed a wish to help those less fortunate than themselves. Mildred Edward's economic success meant that late in life she was able to give the profit she made from selling her home to a local children's charity. After their promotion to administrative posts Ada Nield Chew and Alice Foley both explained that they wished to help their fellow-workers left behind on the factory floor. Economic success was therefore often explained as being rooted in a desire to help others: their families or those less fortunate than themselves. As with domestic success, there appears to be an altruistic motive to their actions which had its origins in Christian ideals: as well as their own success, the women wanted to offer practical help to those around them – their family, neighbours and fellow-workers.

Employment – The Historical Context

For girls growing up at the turn of the twentieth century, the most usual occupation upon leaving school was to enter domestic service or to take up family duties at home, and this was reflected within the cohort. Ten of the women were employed in domestic-based occupations.⁷ In addition, Mildred Edwards and Agnes Cowper both took up family duties on leaving school, Annie Barnes worked in the family shop and on her mother's death combined this with family duties, and Daisy Hills was employed as a farm worker, with a mixture of domestic and agricultural work. During the 1890s and 1900s, and indeed until World War II, the highest proportion of women in paid employment were those in domestic service or related occupations.⁸ Numbers had reached a peak in 1891

⁷ Rose Gibbs, Bessie Harvey, Mrs Hills, Maria Hull, Emma Smith and Susan Sylvester were employed as domestic servants, as was Isabella Cooke, although as her position was on a farm a condition of her employment was that she learned to milk. In addition, Grace Foakes was a waitress, and Louise Jermy and Hannah Mitchell were employed as dressmakers, both occupations under the umbrella of domestic skills.

⁸ Census returns cited in Deirdre Beddoe, *Discovering Women's History* (London: Pandora, 1983; revised and updated 1993), p.112.

when there were a total of 1,759,555 domestic servants (9.1 percent of the female population) in England and Wales.⁹

Domestic skills learned both at home and school transferred readily to the work-place, as Sally Alexander pointed out in her study of women's employment in London in the nineteenth century.¹⁰ However, the situation was not uniform throughout England. Since the eighteenth century, for instance, young women in factory towns, mostly in the North of England, had begun to choose to work in industry rather than domestic service and the numbers working in domestic service in these areas began to fall. The pay in industry was higher and conditions, although harsh and appalling by today's standards, were generally better. Treatment by employers was often less degrading than that of some positions in domestic service, since a long series of Factory Acts improved the situation in terms of maximum hours worked, working conditions and pay.¹¹

This trend is, again, reflected by the cohort, eight of whom entered into factory work upon leaving school.¹² The fact that these mostly lived in the north of England indicates both the higher number of factories in the north as well as the lack of geographical mobility for working-class women at this period. Wages also varied with geographical location and trade union activity. In 1906, for instance, official statistics showed that the average earnings of an adult woman textile worker for a week ranged from 18s.8d. in the

⁹ Cited in Elizabeth Roberts, *Women's Work*, p.31.

¹⁰ Sally Alexander, 'Women's Work in Nineteenth Century London: A Study of the Years 1820-1850' in *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1976), p.73.

¹¹ For discussion of the Acts of 1878, 1891 and 1895, see, for example, Elizabeth Roberts, *Women's Work 1840-1940*, pp.56-57.

¹² These are: Ada Nield Chew, Alice Foley, Winifred Griffiths, Annie Kenney, Mary Luty, Nellie Scott, Kathleen Woodward and Mrs Yearn.

Lancashire cotton industry, where the workers tended to be organized, down to ten shillings a week in the Bristol weaving districts, where they were not.¹³

Nevertheless, opportunities for working outside the home opened up for unmarried working-class women in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and into the first decade of the twentieth century. Some continued to find paid employment on the factory floor or in traditional domestic fields, and still had their place in a few key service industries - domestic service, dressmaking, cleaning, cooking and laundry-work.¹⁴ Others saw the possibilities of a move into catering, typewriting, teaching or shop assistant positions in larger stores, which until the turn of the century were seen as male-orientated occupations.¹⁵ At the same time there was a wider range of employment and options for working-class women: they could change jobs, take evening classes and re-train. There were increased possibilities of promotion into administrative posts from the factory floor, and the beginnings of openings for women from the working-class as new white-collar jobs in industry, finance, education, government, commerce and the professions had become available by the 1880s. Although these tended to be taken at first by single middle-class women who were able to take up paid employment without loss of respectability, soon working-class women began to follow suit as clerical and office employment also began to become available for them.¹⁶ By the 1920s, magazines such as *Girls' Friend* and *Girls' Favourite* referred to their working-class and lower middle-class

¹³ Edward Cadbury, *Women's Work and Wages: A Phase of Life in an Industrial City* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1906), p.86.

¹⁴ Ruth Adam, *A Woman's Place*, p.21.

¹⁵ Angela John, *Unequal Opportunities: Women's Employment in England 1800-1918* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), p.37.

¹⁶ Jane Rendall, *Women in an Industrializing Society*, p.72.

readership as 'business girls' and encouraged them to think seriously about employment in offices.¹⁷

As well as new opportunities in office work, there was also the chance for working-class girls to obtain what they saw as more prestigious and higher paid work in the teaching or nursing professions. The Pupil Teacher scheme was described earlier.¹⁸ Of the cohort, Margaret Bondfield was a teaching assistant for a year and Mary Gawthorpe and Ellen Wilkinson both became pupil teachers. Nursery Nurse Training Colleges, such as the Norland, which was founded in 1892 provided prestigious child-care training for upper-working-class and middle-class girls.¹⁹ In industry too, from 1875, when women delegates attended the Trades Union Congress (TUC) for the first time, there was a gradual opening up of trade unions to female officials.²⁰ Several of the cohort moved to positions in this field - as will be discussed in the next chapter.

Opportunities in many fields came about through improvements in technology. The typewriter, for instance, which first came into use in the 1870s, had been used primarily by male clerks. By 1911 female short-hand typists held one in five of office clerk jobs. By 1914 women had taken over the typewriter as their own machine. As with the sewing machine, they were deemed to be better operators, and the number of women clerks in business and in the Civil Service was twenty times higher than before the typewriter.²¹ Women could also take employment at some distance from home as the bicycle gained in popularity, providing cheap transport. By the first decade of the twentieth century the ownership of a bicycle was attainable by many working-class girls. Among the

¹⁷ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Women in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London: Longman, 2001), p.45.

¹⁸ See above, pp. 135-136.

¹⁹ Ruth Adam, *A Woman's Place*, p.170.

²⁰ Jane Rendall, *Women in an Industrializing Society*, p.71.

²¹ Jane Rendall, *Women in an Industrializing Society*, p.19.

autobiographers, for instance, Isabella Cooke, Alice Foley, Winifred Griffiths and Annie Kenney owned their own bicycles. Isabella recalled buying her first bike at sixteen when she worked as a domestic servant on a farm in 1906.²² Alice, writing of life when she was twenty, in 1910, four years before the First World War began, recalled:

Scrupulously hoarding my scanty pocket money, I bought a second-hand bicycle for twenty-five shillings, which was overhauled and titivated up by an elder brother.²³

Winifred's parents acquired a second-hand cycle for which she paid them back 'by instalments.' She recorded budgeting her wages, which, after paying board and lodgings and one shilling to her mother for doing her washing, left Winifred 'with 6/6 to cover everything else including running my bicycle.'²⁴ Her words signalled that the bicycle was important in her life, since it was the only single item to be mentioned in Winifred's budget.

Perhaps the most far-reaching changes over time in the work-place came during and after the 1914-18 war years, when women took employment in areas vacated by male employees who had joined the forces. At that time, especially after conscription began in 1916, women were encouraged to take over jobs vacated by men. Ironically, this included work in engineering, heavy industry and the new munitions factories hitherto denied them, as well as further opportunities in a hierarchy of retail and clerical positions. This was to change after the war, as a barrage of media propaganda encouraged women to return to the home, and leave the jobs for returning war heroes. The end of the war brought about massive unemployment for women in the spring of 1919.²⁵ The post-war message was reinforced by government policies which denied women unemployment benefit, and by

²² Isabella Cooke, *A Hired Lass in Westmorland*, p.10.

²³ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.72.

²⁴ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.60.

²⁵ Sarah Boston, *Women Workers and the Trade Union Movement* (London: Davis Poynter, 1995), p.137.

marriage bars in the professions which proved further hurdles in the attainment of economic success in the public sphere.²⁶

Starting Work

The difference in standard of living for themselves and their families which was realized when they began paid employment was a source of pride described by autobiographers Alice Foley, Mary Gawthorpe, Winifred Griffiths, Mary Luty, Nellie Scott and Kathleen Woodward. Earning their own wage gave them a measure of economic independence. Starting a job was a sudden transition in working-class children's lives, as Alice Foley described: 'No bridge existed between school life and industry.'²⁷

Despite the sudden change in life-style most of the cohort looked forward to the self-reliance that earning a wage would bring; a degree of economic independence was part of growing up. Joining the adult world of work was perceived as an achievement. Whether it occurred as soon as the earliest school-leaving age was reached, or after a period of further education, embarking on paid employment was a milestone in their lives marking a crossroads between dependent child and independent adult. The women enjoyed the ability to provide goods for their families. Ellen Wilkinson recalled that she was pleased for her mother's sake when she began to earn a wage after completing a degree at Manchester University. Ellen acknowledged her economic success in her ability at last to give money to her mother, who had helped her achieve so much. Sadly though, she wrote: 'The maddening thing was that I had only been earning the money to give her little luxuries for a year and a half before she died.'²⁸

²⁶ Dierdre Beddoe, *Back To Home And Duty: Women Between The Wars* (London: Pandora, 1989).

²⁷ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p. 49.

²⁸ Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, p.400.

Others contributed their labour to the family economy instead of earning a wage. Five of the cohort took on adult duties at home on leaving school or shortly afterwards and so contributed indirectly to their family finances by negating the need for paid help. Mildred Edwards, for example, did not work in paid employment outside the home until after 1914 when she was married and war had begun. After leaving school in the mid-1890s she was required to stay at home as housekeeper, nurse to her mother and to look after her younger brothers and sisters. Annie Barnes, on leaving school took over from her mother in the grocery shop, managed by her father. Living accommodation above the shop served as their family home. However, when her mother became ill in 1910, Annie stayed at home to nurse her and help with her younger siblings. Agnes Cowper left school aged 14 in 1888, and was housekeeper for her father until his death a few years later, when she became a shop assistant. Isabella Cooke left school in 1903, when she was thirteen. She moved in with her maternal grandmother who had become too frail to live alone. It was only when her grandmother died that Isabella began paid employment. Isabella attended a hiring fair in nearby Penrith; she was offered a position as domestic servant on a farm, where as well as domestic duties she helped with the animals.

Paid employment was therefore not continuous for all of the women: family circumstances often dictated that they gave up work to bring up siblings in place of a parent, or help aging or infirm relatives. There could also be periods of unemployment between various jobs. Nineteen of the autobiographers are known to have married, and most gave up employment on marriage, or at least when they had children, complying with the general view that this was the respectable option. The majority of the women therefore largely acceded to gender expectations for women and took up domestic roles. At least four of the cohort, Margaret Bondfield, Alice Foley, Daisy Hills and Ellen Wilkinson, remained

spinsters who supported themselves throughout their lives, and their economic success continued the independence attained when they first left the family home.²⁹ None of the cohort were forced to give up work on marriage, although June Purvis gives examples of clerical professions, teaching, the Civil Service and other occupations where a marriage bar was in operation from the first decade of the twentieth century until it was repealed by an Act of Parliament in 1944.³⁰ In industrial areas women were traditionally more likely to continue with paid employment in the period between marriage and starting a family.³¹ This tradition was particularly appropriate for providing women with a model of economic success, as they could contribute both their wages and their domestic skills and labour to the family economy without losing respectability.

Until school-leaving age, the autobiographers had all been dependent on their family to provide at least the necessities of life. Rising real wages over the period made children's earnings less necessary to the domestic economy in the same way that it became more viable for women to stay at home after marriage.³² As children, most of the women had been expected to help with domestic chores to a greater or lesser degree, but, with the exception of Louise Jermy who worked in her stepmother's laundry and Hannah Mitchell who helped all day on the family farm, they were not generally expected to contribute their labour directly to the family income or business. Both of these women were born in the 1870s, before legislation for school attendance was in place. By 1900 the situation had

²⁹ As well as the five mentioned in the text: Margaret Bondfield, Alice Foley, Daisy Hills, Mary Luty and Ellen Wilkinson; there were possibly two more of the cohort who remained spinsters as neither Agnes Cowper nor Kathleen Woodward mentioned marriage in their autobiographies and no record of their marriage has been found.

³⁰ June Purvis, *Women's History: Britain, 1850-1945* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 74, 100, 124.

³¹ Hakim has identified a 'double peak' of women's employment in Britain with a high level of employment in the younger age groups, followed by a fall as they reach child-bearing age, and an increase as their youngest child reached school age around their mid-thirties. C. Hakim, 'Grateful Slaves and Self-Made Women: Fact and Fantasy in Women's Work Orientations' in *European Sociological Review* no.7, vol.2 (1991).p.35.

³² Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor*, p.3.

changed for all but the poorest families, and school attendance was better enforced. Even then, however, Isabella Cooke living in rural Westmoreland in 1902 tells of her father sending her, while still a schoolgirl, to work for a local farmer to whom he owed money. Reflecting ideas against child labour prevalent in the wider community, the farmer disapproved of Isabella's father using his daughter to pay off his debt.

It was a grand farm, everything in good order. I went there when I was 12 and still at school to pick potatoes in the field along with some women, to pay for a load of manure that my father had had. Robin, the boss, said "Tell your father to come and pay for it himself," and made me have the money.³³

Factory work, at least in the northern industrial areas was relatively highly paid, which encouraged married women to stay on at work, Nellie Scott and Mrs Yearn for instance both continued to work in textile mills after marriage. It also meant that girls in industrial areas were generally encouraged to leave school as soon as they legally could and, dependent on the local economy, girls could begin half-time work in factories before they were fourteen. This was standardised in 1902, when girls had to be aged at least twelve before they could take advantage of the Labour Test.³⁴ Having passed this they could begin working part of the school day under the half-time factory system. The extra wage was welcomed within the family. It gave them a measure of economic independence, and was earned in a protected environment: girls often worked in a quasi-parental setting at first in workrooms near their parents or older siblings. Nevertheless there was some disquiet from social observers and educationalists who saw early school-leaving as 'coarsening' the girls, undoing the work done by the schools to educate them in domestic skills.³⁵

³³ Isabella Cooke, *A Hired Lass in Westmorland*, p.2.

³⁴ For details see above, p.111.

³⁵ *The School Monthly*, January 1893.

The half-time system was relevant throughout the period when the cohort were growing up and starting work. Three of the cohort record taking the labour test: Annie Kenney, Mary Luty and Mrs Yearn. Annie Kenney, and Mary Luty were born in the 1870s, and Mrs Yearn was born twenty years later in 1890: all three joined the adult world of work as factory half-timers before they were fourteen. Not everyone in industrial areas took the Labour Test. In 1903, when she was twelve, Alice Foley recalled that she ‘escaped the effects of the Half-Time Factory System then in operation, for father, with all his faults, strenuously opposed it as being the source of exploitation of child labour.’³⁶ However, Mrs Yearn and Mary Luty specifically recorded that they left school under the half-time system in order to help with their family’s budget. Family finances were critical for poorer families like theirs so more emphasis is placed on early economic success. The need for earning a living appears to have been instilled in them from childhood so they may have seen the need for financial improvement as one of the marks of success as a reaction to childhood poverty. Both women regarded earning a wage and the economic success and small luxuries this brought to their families, as an achievement.

Mary Luty’s mother had left her husband, taking her two small children, when Mary was three. Despite help from her grandparents, money was tight throughout Mary’s childhood and she saw the importance of economic success in the form of financial help to her family. In 1888, when she was thirteen years of age, Mary left school after taking the labour test. She expressed her pride in passing and began half-time work, with her mother in the cotton-mill, as a “tenter” for three shillings a week. Mary disclosed the difference this made: ‘The extra money meant much in the home, and we began to have little luxuries not known previously.’³⁷ Mary soon realized that her job was monotonous and boring.

³⁶ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.49.

³⁷ Mary Luty, *A Penniless Globetrotter*, p.39.

She revealed a conscious effort to improve her economic prospects by studying at evening classes until she was qualified for a trade union job. After this she became a social worker in Manchester. Economic success later in her life meant that after her mother's death around 1930, Mary was able to realize her aim of seeing the world, with a variety of jobs undertaken to fund her as she travelled.

Mrs Yearn's family was very poor: there were fourteen children born, only six of whom survived. Mrs Yearn and her two older sisters all took advantage of the half-time system: 'Eventually things became a little better. We had grown up, and as one became full-time, another was ready to be half time.'³⁸ Their wages had helped her family out of financial poverty after several bad years of scraping by, when the frosts and snow of winter precluded her father's brick-setting trade for six months in the year and even her mother, still nursing her youngest child, had been forced to seek work. Once the children were also contributing to the family budget, her mother was enabled to leave work. She also join the Co-operative stores. Purchases were made: 'when Whitsuntide came round we were the first out showing our new clothes. So proud we were of them. They were the first we had made by a dressmaker.'³⁹ Mrs Yearn's pride in helping the family was tinged with regret as her mother died of cancer soon after: 'just when we were able to give her the best.'⁴⁰

Before starting paid employment, in most cases however, there was the decision to be made as to which kind of employment to undertake. Where there was a choice of occupation the decision was made partially by themselves, but mostly by their parents, and often dictated by family economics. Sometimes it was accepted that children followed

³⁸ Mrs Yearn, 'A Public Spirited Rebel', p.102.

³⁹ Mrs Yearn, 'A Public Spirited Rebel', p.103.

⁴⁰ Mrs Yearn, 'A Public Spirited Rebel', p.103.

into their parents' occupations as in Mary Luty, Mrs Yearn and Annie Kenney's families. In areas of high industrialization all members of a family, in some instances, worked in the nearest factory or mill. Whole streets could be woken by the 'official knocker-up to the neighbourhood', as Alice Foley recalled, and workers walked together to the factory gates to 'clock on'. In other cases women took different jobs from other girls in their neighbourhoods. Alice Foley and Winifred Griffith were encouraged by members of their families to aim for shop-work rather than factory work. Mary Gawthorpe's mother took in laundry so that Mary could become a pupil teacher.

Hannah Mitchell's mother gave her no choice over her first job. Considering it a 'ladylike' occupation, while at the same time earning money to help the farm budget, she decided that her daughters were to learn needlework. Hannah was to learn dressmaking from her older sister, but Hannah's lack of motivation for working at home persuaded her mother to send her to town as an apprentice where she was thought her daughter would be sternly supervised. Hannah had been unhappy at home where her labour was required on the farm, and her childhood was filled with resentment against the unfairness of her upbringing and her mother's harshness. With paid employment, success, for Hannah was not merely financial. It also meant that she felt 'really happy' for the first time with the 'kind and gentle' treatment she received from her employer:

Looking back I feel this was the first time in my life that I was really happy. Even a very strict mistress who did not scold would have seemed kind after my mother's harshness, but Miss Brown was so kind and gentle she soon roused my interest, and for the first time I realized that work could also be a pleasure.⁴¹

⁴¹ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.57.

A year later in 1886 Hannah was forced to return home to be ‘the domestic drudge and the scapegoat for my mother’s temper’ once again. However, her time away from her mother had equipped Hannah ‘both physically and mentally’ for economic independence. A few months later Hannah left home for good and went into domestic service as maid in a schoolmaster’s home.

Other women were also under the control of their parents when first starting work. Personal choice gave way, and ambitions for prestigious or fulfilling work were thwarted, as parents in poor families obliged dependent children to enter better-paid factory work or domestic service in order to bring income to the family. Maria Hull had been pleased when she was offered a position as a school monitor, which would mean her eventually becoming an uncertified schoolteacher. However, the low pay for this position also meant that she would remain living at home, still mainly dependent on her parents for board and lodgings. Maria had ambitions to teach, but for what they perceived as sound economic reasons her parents decided she had to apply for employment in domestic service. Maria would have liked to have stayed on at school: the position of school monitor, leading to a teaching post with better pay and prospects, would have been more to her preference than domestic service. For the family budget, however, it was important to have one less child living at home. Prospects for a better job for Maria were sacrificed for a short-term financial gain for the family. Maria would have earned sixpence a week as a school monitor, which she ‘would have liked’ and which would allow her to gain prestige eventually as an, albeit uncertified, school-teacher. However, the money was obviously not enough to offset the cost of her food and laundry at home, and domestic service was

one way to have Maria fed at 'someone else's table' so helping to stretch the family budget.⁴²

For Maria, the decision was made by her family and ruled by the need to save family expenditure. Her sense of duty to her parents, and her understanding of the benefit her family would gain if she lived elsewhere, meant she gave in without a quarrel. Despite the measure of economic success which going into service brought her this may be viewed as a set-back for her personally. The teacher training would have meant long-term gains in economic success as well as prestige and a higher status job. Maria's description particularly emphasises the importance of family control and the constraints of family finances on young women who were embedded in the financial unit of the family. This utilitarian notion of economic success was the normal situation for working-class families, and one with which Maria was content to comply.

Winfred Griffiths lived at Basingstoke in Hampshire and so was away from the industrial north and its tradition of textile factory work, but she too was constrained in her choice of employment by family economics. Winifred had performed well at school and had ambitions to become a teacher. However, her parents had been unable to afford her training and books, and Winifred left school in 1910 when she was fourteen. Despite the need for her to begin paid employment, her father still had higher ambitions than factory work for his daughter and, as had Alice Foley's sister, he envisioned work as a shop assistant as an opportunity for betterment. This was much to Winifred's amusement:

My father thought I should do well in a pleasant shop, like a florists – that would be a nice job for me to learn! I did not much favour this, but it did not matter, as my parents had little idea of where I could get such a post. My father

⁴² Maria Hull, 'A Derbyshire Schooling', p.170.

was adamant that I should not go to work at the paper mill. The girls earned more money there, but life was rough and he wanted to protect me from that.⁴³

Winifred did begin work in a factory, it was not in the dreaded paper mill, but as an apprentice at Burberry's gabardine factory, recommended by her uncle as having 'good reputation as employers,' a description which appeared to satisfy the ambitions of both Winifred and her parents.⁴⁴ She soon described making 'fair progress with the work at the factory'.⁴⁵

Margaret Bondfield had been a pupil-teacher for one year at Chard Board School in 1887. Family economies meant, that in common with Maria Hull and Winifred Griffiths, she was required to seek more lucrative employment rather than continue in low-paid training. Margaret was offered an apprenticeship as a shop assistant in a Brighton draper's shop where she was to be taught to embroider and trim trousseaux and layettes, which had been bought plain from wholesalers. From the 1870s there had been a dramatic increase in women shop assistants. Mid-Victorian shops had been run by an independent shopkeeper with perhaps a few male apprentices. Young women were required as the century progressed and the capitalist consumer society provided customers for the large new departmental stores built to serve it. Women were generally introduced where no great training was required and customers were mainly women: in shops selling drapery, millinery, underwear, food, flowers or stationery.⁴⁶ By 1888, when Margaret began her apprenticeship, it was an accepted occupation for respectable, and presentable, girls. Margaret enjoyed her work; it enabled her to live independently away from the family home, but she was later to find more fulfilment in the political field.

⁴³ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.36.

⁴⁴ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.37.

⁴⁵ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.39.

⁴⁶ Jane Rendall, *Women in an Industrializing Society*, p.77.

In other cases parents or older siblings wanted the best for the younger members of a family and would offer advice, rather than control. There was a perception of a hierarchy of respectability in occupations available to working-class girls, which had geographical and historical variations.⁴⁷ Work was seen as a way to gain status. Factory employment in the industrial North-east of England was relatively well paid, but was not always seen as the best choice of employment. Alice Foley's older sister, Cissy, worked in the local textile mill in Bolton. In Alice's eyes, Cissy seemed to have become a 'young lady' who spent money on herself and brought about many improvements at home as a sign of her economic success:

My eldest sister had now developed into a young lady. As a jack-frame tenter in the cardroom she earned enough money to 'keep herself'. She gave up a portion of her wages towards the family support but bought her own clothes and cheap accessories. She now insisted on various refinements in the home; the sanded kitchen was no more; the floor sported bright-coloured linoleum; cups and saucers replaced the old blue and white-rimmed basins and the oil lamp was ousted by the incandescent gas-jet.⁴⁸

However, Cissy did not view her job in the same light. When Alice left school aged thirteen, in 1904, Cissy encouraged Alice to set her sights higher than factory work and to apply for the poorer paid, but 'more genteel' shop work, a comment which underlines the girls' notions of respectability and status. Cissy knew what factory work entailed and her ambition was for her younger sister to have a more prestigious, and perhaps easier, occupation:

I was urged by Cissy to apply for shop work, which though lowly paid was considered more genteel than entering a factory, so as a tall, gawky, shy girl I was taken on a month's trial as junior assistant in a fancy goods store in Corporation Street...My job was to clean out the shop, polish glass show-cases, dust countless shelves, run errands and mark retail prices on incoming stock.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.16.

⁴⁸ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.44.

⁴⁹ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, pp.49-50.

Alice was deemed 'clean and obedient' (in an echo of the ideology taught at school), but her mother was informed at the end of the month's trial that she would 'never make a shop girl'. Far from realizing her ambitions, Alice felt 'an acute sense of failure'. She proceeded 'on a dull trek round streets, warehouses, offices and shops seeking any kind of work in efforts to retrieve [her] tarnished self-respect.' Alice felt even more humiliated, when she finally began work with Cissy in the 'mill'. Cissy's fears for her younger sister were realised for Alice initially found the work as a tenter in the weaving shed daunting:

At first I was highly terrified by the noise and proximity of clashing machinery. The flying picking-sticks seemed like giant arms seeking to catch me in their toils and the unfenced straps in narrow alley-ways tormented my awkward movements. The weaving shed was a large one with hundreds of towel looms belting to and fro, operated by women and girls. It was a vast unexplored region, stifling, deafening and incredibly dirty.⁵⁰

Later Alice became accustomed to the factory, and earning a wage meant the freedom to enjoy her leisure time with some spending money. As well as contributing to the family budget she was able to buy a bicycle and join various social clubs. Economic success also enabled her to expand her cultural horizons, recording 'a moment of magic' in 1905 with her first visit to the Theatre Royal, Churchgate in Bolton to see the Gilbert and Sullivan opera *The Yeoman of the Guard*. After this her freedom expanded, she attended *The Mikado* and grand opera when the Moody Manners or Carl Rosa companies visited the town. Alice described her enjoyment, but with an eye to cost:

These shaping years also included the gay, gracious days of Miss Horniman's reign at the Gaiety Theatre, Manchester. As a member of a group of young Socialists I hoarded my scanty pocket-money, amounting at that time to one penny in the shilling of factory earnings, so that I could afford with them the luxury of a monthly matinee. With a cheap seat in pit or gallery we saw most of the early Shaw and Galsworthy plays, followed by tea in the

⁵⁰ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, pp. 51-52.

Clarion café in Market Street. The whole outing cost about five shillings each.⁵¹

After seven years in the factory even these outings failed to lighten the monotony of her work. This, and her concerns for her older work-mates, were to have the effect of politicising Alice and, like Margaret Bondfield, she later found success in politics - as will be discussed in the next chapter.

Kathleen Woodward did not rely on a network of family or friends to help her towards economic success. She showed an early independence and initiative all of her own, although the need to earn money also dictated her choice of occupation. Kathleen had become familiar with the inside of the shirt factory when she had worked in the evenings after school, putting the machines away and sweeping up at the end of the factory working day. She and her mother survived on this money and her mother's wash-tub earnings. Instead of starting work as a half-timer when she left school in 1908, Kathleen recalled the successful outcome of the trick she played on the factory forewoman:

I pinned my hair up at the back and presented myself as a person much older than I was. With the utmost effrontery I offered myself as a skilled worker.

When I had run errands in the factory I had watched the women working at their machines, and on one or two occasions I had clandestinely worked the machines before I put them away in their nightgowns. On this precarious basis I thought to take on the status – and the wages – of a grown woman.

I managed to keep my new job and effect the giddy elevation in my wages from five shillings to fifteen shillings a week. Oh then for weeks I walked on air!⁵²

Kathleen recalled joyously the difference the 'elevation' in her wages wrought at home:

⁵¹ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.66.

⁵² Kathleen Woodward, *Jipping Street*, pp.91-92.

In Jipping Street the change in my status was swift – marvellous. My mother was able to give up taking in washing, and now devoted her afternoons tending and resting the wounds of the varicose veins she had developed in years of standing at the wet wash-tub and rising prematurely from childbirths casually attended.

I got me a room, a back room opposite the hospital. In time I grew to feel at ease in the grown company of the women in the factory.⁵³

Kathleen's economic success had been achieved by joining the adult workers and so earning a higher wage. The effect of this was an improvement in home life, especially for her mother, and, personal independence in lodgings away from home.

Others lived away from home because it was required by the nature of their employment. Night-club dancer Betty May took lodgings near her work, Rose Gibbs and Winifred Griffiths began work as live-in domestic servants, seamstress Hannah Mitchell and shop girl Margaret Bondfield, started apprenticeships away from home, while the itinerant Emma Smith had no settled home. However all but these five continued, at least for a time after leaving school, to live in the family home and were still dependent on their parents to some degree. The girl's wages, whether living at home or away, made an important, and in some cases vital, contribution to the economics of their family.

Improving Prospects

Earning a living brought various benefits: contributing to the family budget and having some spending money of their own, or gaining independence from their family by moving away from home. Once they were in paid employment there were various ways in which the ambitious amongst the women could improve their economic success. Some found that

⁵³ Kathleen Woodward, *Jipping Street*, pp. 92-93.

they could change employment as they gained experience. Those entering domestic service, for example, had the chance of bettering themselves if they were ambitious and worked hard. Employment in a small establishment with only one or two domestic staff could be arduous and lonely, especially for a young girl straight from school. But once experienced, employment in a large household keeping a good number of domestic staff could offer the chance of learning a recognised job, with good prospects, under a skilled expert, in a hierarchical community in which it was possible to rise through the ranks.

Winifred Griffith's first job was in the local gabardine factory. At first she was interested in working on clothing for a polar expedition, but she soon felt discontent. Her pay was limited and although she was able to help a little at home she craved more:

For five months I was reasonably happy in this work at the factory. I often wished I could earn a little more money and so be able to make a more adequate contribution at home, as well as be able to buy the occasional lemonade or sweets I sometimes craved. The future appeared rather drab.⁵⁴

After the first five months, economic success for Winifred did not appear to be in factory work. She wanted a better-paid job, which would enable her to buy a more comfortable life for her family and a few luxuries for herself. Once again, a family member was to help. In 1911 her aunt Lizzie found an opening for her as a housemaid. This meant more pay and a step up on the ladder of economic success. Winifred 'jumped at the idea' of going into domestic service.⁵⁵ She saw domestic service as an improvement in her situation, it would also enable her to gain independence in living away from home. Winifred left the factory and took her new post as housemaid at East Oakley House, a large country house in Hampshire. For her, this was a 'milestone' in her life. She recorded her new life as a happy period when she achieved economic independence.

⁵⁴ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.41.

⁵⁵ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.43.

I grew accustomed to the routine of the house and to the family and staff, and so entered on what was to be a very happy period of my life. It was in the spring of 1911 that I took up my new post. I was nearly 16 years of age and from now on I was self-supporting, earning my keep and a little beside. Although I visited home regularly and spent short holidays there, I was never more to live at home. I had become independent, I had passed a decisive milestone on life's journey.⁵⁶

Winifred was to stay at East Oakley House for four years during which time she progressed from housemaid to parlourmaid and the luxury of a room of her own. Other women who embarked on domestic service also showed that this could be a route to economic success. Rose Gibbs worked her way up from 'tweeny' to more pay and status as housekeeper;⁵⁷ Doris Hill, after working on the family farm, left home and eventually owned and ran a thriving guesthouse, and farm servant Isabella Cooke moved from a small farm to a larger one where, she claimed, she was 'working in a gentleman's house', before she moved further upwards in the servant hierarchy by becoming a cook for a city banking family.⁵⁸ Upward mobility was seen, in these examples, to be the attainment of a more responsible position, or a place in a larger or more prestigious household, or even running a business. These were accepted and respectable methods of social advancement for women engaged in paid domestic service. Domestic service was also an apprenticeship for the sorts of skills required to run a home, and a rise in the servant hierarchy could mean better marriage prospects. Although some of these women did turn away from domestic service, and this is generally in line with much historiographical evidence, the

⁵⁶ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.45.

⁵⁷ The 'tweeny' or between maid, combined the duties of under-housemaid with those of kitchenmaid, helping both the cook and the housemaid. This was often the lowest paid and least prestigious of indoor servants: duties included rising by 5.30 every morning to clean and light the kitchen range before any of the other servants were up. See, for example, Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1990), pp.151, 197.

⁵⁸ Isabella Cooke, *A Hired Lass in Westmorland*, p.15.

cohort show that this was not always the case.⁵⁹ Winfred Griffiths and Isabella Cooke for example both achieved some of their ambitions via the hierarchy of domestic service.

Others in the cohort went into one kind of paid employment on leaving school and then found better opportunities, more pay or prestige, by seeking work in a completely different kind of job. Unlike the serendipitous chances for improved economic status which was the pathway for most of the cohort to advance, Louise Jermy revealed that her success was no chance occurrence: she had planned the achievement of independence away from her unhappy home life. Louise trained as an apprentice dressmaker in the early 1890s and her employer, who she referred to as 'Madame', appreciated her talents and treated her kindly. However, on the money she could earn as a dressmaker, Louise realized that she would never be able to leave home, where she had lived unhappily with her father and her abusive stepmother. On leaving work one day she asked the advice of one of her older workmates.

I began to talk to her about the wages and she said "Well, if your people wanted you to earn a good screw they should have put you into something very different, for you'll never get it at dressmaking. But you know dearie, it is not how much you earn that matters, but what you do with it and what it will do for you."⁶⁰

Louise told her stepmother that she wanted to enter into domestic service away from home. 'Not that I was shamed at being a servant, but I meant to get away, where she could not easily interfere with me.' Having obtained a position via one of the newly set up servants' registry offices, she left home, and soon began to get stronger. For Louise,

⁵⁹ For discussion on women turning from domestic service during the first decades of the twentieth century, see, for instance, Harriet Bradley *Men's Work, Women's Work* (Cambridge, Polity, 1989); Jane Lewis *Women in England 1870-1950: Sexual Division and Sexual Change* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1984); Elizabeth Roberts, *Women's Work*.

⁶⁰ Louise Jermy, *Memories of a Working Woman*, p.70.

economic success meant that her health improved and she gained freedom and independence away from her stepmother's cruelty:

I soon settled down in my new home. My wages were only £7 a year which is 11s. 8d. per month, and I may tell you I turned every penny over twice before parting with it, every month as I took it; my first outlay was in some liniment or oils to rub my hip, for I had set myself to get it well if I could so I was always nursing it up and coaxing the stiffness out of it. It was truly wonderful the way I improved. I went home for the monthly outing every month, and all who saw me remarked on the change and told me how much better I looked. I said to all "Yes, I feel better," and always ended by saying happily "You know my hip is getting quite well."⁶¹

Nellie Scott did not change her occupation in order to find economic success but she did change her place of work. Nellie began work when she was fourteen, around 1894, in a felt hat factory, which she referred to as 'the Hatshop'. She described the conditions in which she worked: 'the room, one big room, was warehouse, machine room and trimming room, half taken up with six tables. Ten people sat at each, mounted on three-legged stools, gas lights on a level with the eyes, steam, and ventilation only up the staircase.'⁶² Nellie was not afraid of hard work, but after a serious respiratory illness, she moved to a larger factory where conditions and pay were better.

I went to work at Christie's Hat Works in a lovely room, six stories up, with big windows and a splendid view of the hills, and they are always such a comfort and a help. In spite of very hard work I always looked back with pleasure to that room...I had loved working at Christie's.⁶³

Nellie remained in the family home after starting work. Those who did so were expected to contribute some of their income to the family budget, and this sometimes made it difficult to save for their own economic advancement. Nellie was still living at home

⁶¹ Louise Jermy, *Memories of a Working Woman*, p.77.

⁶² Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.86.

⁶³ Mrs. Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.88.

when she met her husband at a Clarion Fellowship meeting, and after some months of courtship they decided to save for their wedding. Nellie recorded their wages, 'he was getting 22/- a week. My wages did not amount to much more than 10/- per week'.

Despite both having to give some of their wages to their families, the couple managed to save '£20 for furniture and enough to pay for a week's honeymoon and a wedding.'⁶⁴ This small, but significant, amount of money must have been only just enough for the couple to embark on married life, as Nellie proudly added 'but we did it.' Contributing to her own wedding and new household in this way was remembered by her with pride.

Once they were established in their jobs, several of the women became involved in trade union work and took positions away from the factory floor. This led to better paid positions and a degree of economic success, but also signalled that financial success was not the only goal: political goals also played a part in their success. Work as a way to political involvement will be discussed further in the next chapter. Of the cohort, Alice Foley was promoted from the factory floor to work in the Textile Unions and later the Workers' Education Association; Margaret Bondfield progressed from shop assistant via trade union activities to become a Member of Parliament; Ellen Wilkinson, who gained a degree at Manchester University, progressed from teacher through suffrage and trade union organizer to become a Member of Parliament and the first woman Cabinet Minister; Mary Gawthorpe gained practice as a public speaker in the teachers' union, which was to stand her in good stead as a suffragette; and Ada Chew and Annie Kenney followed a similar path from Textile Union representatives to paid work as organisers for suffrage movements.

⁶⁴ Mrs. Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.89.

There were also opportunities for economic success in less conventional jobs. Entertainer Betty May, born in poverty in Limehouse around 1890, began her first paid work as a 'baby' mascot, singing and dancing in a nightclub, the Café Royal in London. Here she mixed with the so-called 'Bohemian Society' and met the first of her wealthy husbands. Betty was 'spotted' by the sculptor Jacob Epstein and became a renowned artists' and photographers' model. She sat for artists such as Nina Hamnett, Jacob Kramer, William Orpen, and B. N. Satterthwaite, amongst others; their portraits of Betty are reproduced in the pages of her autobiography. She also sat for Jacob Epstein, who modelled his bust 'The Savage', on her. Betty claimed he referred to the sculpture as 'Betty'.⁶⁵ When the bust was shown at the Leicester Galleries, she was very proud of her success in gaining the public notice which she had craved as a child: 'To him it was simply "Betty". This is a matter of great pride to me.'⁶⁶

Betty was also proud of her exciting life and her upward social mobility. 'I have never tried to be ordinary and fit in with other people...I have lived only for pleasure and excitement', she claimed, 'for I have lived in a world which I was certainly not born to. In fact nothing could have been further from it than the surroundings in which I was brought up.'⁶⁷ Economic success for Betty meant that she could maintain her lifestyle of gaiety, drugs and society life.

Kathleen Woodward also took an unconventional pathway for a working-class woman. At the end of her autobiography, written in 1928 when Kathleen was only 32, Kathleen claimed that she had gained the confidence to try to earn her living in a way of which she had often dreamed: she had become a successful writer. She had begun her working life

⁶⁵ Betty May, *Tiger Woman*, p.117.

⁶⁶ Betty May, *Tiger Woman*, p.117.

⁶⁷ Betty May, *Tiger Woman*, p.xi.

in a shirt-making factory in Bermondsey, London, in 1910, but after making life more comfortable for her mother, and starting an independent life away from home, she revealed: 'I could not resign myself to a life of hideous work in the factory, rounded out by death and possibly the workhouse. This and other small tragedies exercised my soul.'⁶⁸

Success for her came when she left Jipping Street behind. Encouraged by Mary Macarther, the trade union organiser, portrayed, Carolyn Steedman has argued, as 'Miss Doremus' in *Jipping Street*, Kathleen left her job in a shirt factory in 1915.⁶⁹ She ended her autobiography on a note of philosophical optimism:

In my books, in beautiful words, there is something
strangely like my dreams; they smile on me, beckon to me.
I must go on, following without seeing where they end.⁷⁰

Economic success came to Kathleen through following her dreams. After the war in 1918 she became a receptionist at a London Club, and in her spare time wrote several children's stories. Eventually she was able to find work as a freelance journalist, and was taken onto the staff of the *Daily Express*.⁷¹ Kathleen published her first book, *Queen Mary*, in 1927.⁷² *Jipping Street*, her autobiography, was published in 1928 to rave reviews both at home and abroad.⁷³ Several newspapers, including the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express* and *Daily Sketch* told her life-story, recounting how 'a worker in a south London collar factory was rescued by the late Mary Macarther, the trade union organiser and friend of the Queen.'⁷⁴ Kathleen worked on the *New York Times* after 1928, and her last book, *The Lady of Marlborough House* was published in 1938. However, before embarking on her writing

⁶⁸ Kathleen Woodward, *Jipping Street*, pp.132.

⁶⁹ Carolyn Steedman does much to refute and explain some of the details in the autobiography, see her 'Introduction' of 1977 publication of *Jipping Street* (London: Virago, 1977); see also, 'Kathleen Woodward's Jipping Street' in *The Written Self* (London: Rivers Oram, 1992), p.119-126.

⁷⁰ Kathleen Woodward, *Jipping Street*, p.151.

⁷¹ *Daily Mail*, 20th September, 1927.

⁷² Kathleen Woodward, *Queen Mary: A Life and Intimate Study* (London: Hutchinson, 1927).

⁷³ *Jipping Street* was simultaneously published in 1928 in the USA by Harpers and Row.

⁷⁴ *Daily Mail*, 20 September 1927.

career the First World War had intervened. Kathleen had taken one of the jobs vacated by men serving in the armed forces. She began work as a ship's steward, and worked her way back and forth across the Atlantic between 1915 and 1918. Kathleen Woodward was not the only woman to take on war work, which opened up yet more opportunities for women to move into previously male-gendered roles.

'War Work'

The coming of war in 1914 saw the emergence of a respectable patriotic role for women who took their opportunity to fill masculine roles while the men were away at the front. Tied up with notions of national pride, nationhood and service, new-found activities in previously male occupations gained respectability if they were 'war work'. For thousands of women the First World War brought a new involvement in society, greatly increased their earnings and provided a measure of independence and emancipation.

Interestingly, given the opportunities it opened up to them, apart from their existence in economic terms, the cohort record little about the war years. This was possibly because of the impossibility of articulating the horror they felt. It may have been that the economic situation improved considerably for some women during the war years, and they felt ambivalent about claiming success whilst others suffered. Nevertheless, several of the cohort undertook positions in paid employment hitherto held by men. Even the outrageous Betty May felt that she should 'do her bit' and complied for a while with the war effort by working as a shop assistant. It was perhaps typical of Betty that she chose a shop where the clients would be mostly male:

I took a job in a hairdressers and tobacconist's shop in the Buckingham Palace Road. I felt that I ought to do some work that would release a man for the army. My duties consisted of serving behind the counter, selling cigarettes,

matches, pipe cleaners, brushes, combs, hair-nets etc., and in taking the money for the shaves and haircuts. I entered into my new business with enthusiasm.⁷⁵

Before the outbreak of war in 1914 Nellie Scott had found success in her day-to-day work, and her participation in trade union activities. However, with the advent of war she was able to improve her situation even more. In 1906, the School Meals Act permitted local authorities to provide school meals, and this became compulsory at the outbreak of war in 1914.⁷⁶ At this time Nellie left her job as a felt hat worker to obtain a new and better-paid job at a Government Feeding Centre.⁷⁷

I left the hat works for a place as superintendent at a Centre for feeding school children and was there four years, a most strenuous time during the first years of the war when we had nearly 300 children each day at our Centre.⁷⁸

Leaving the factory to enter a better-paid administrative post was, for Nellie Scott, a way to economic success. After the war Nellie heard of government departments which were recruiting women. Thousands of women clerks were being recruited to staff the new ministries which were being set up in Whitehall and elsewhere.⁷⁹ Nellie became an official on the newly created Pensions and Benefits Committee, and felt she was also helping others:

I went to be sickness visitor for an Approved Society. I was able to do many little kindnesses through being on the Pensions' Committee and Insurance Committee; so many are robbed of benefits and pensions through ignorance.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Betty May, *Tiger Woman*, pp. 102-103.

⁷⁶ Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain*, p.17.

⁷⁷ One other of the autobiographers mentioned centres similar to this, organized during the Second World War. Grace Foakes recalled the 'British Restaurant' at Hall Green in Birmingham where her two school-age daughters had lunch. She wrote 'These restaurants had been opened by the Government to provide lunches for the people to help them eke out wartime rations. The food was as good as could be expected under wartime conditions. The price was reasonable and the people were thankful for the warmth and companionship these places provided.' See, Grace Foakes, *My Life With Reuben*, p.82.

⁷⁸ Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.96.

⁷⁹ Ray Strachey, *The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain* (1928), p. 344.

⁸⁰ Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.98.

She worked hard for many years to guide her clients through the complex system of benefits and pensions. As a paid official, appointed by the Treasury, she would have been briefed to restrain excessive generosity on the part of the local committees, but despite this she ensured that working people, like herself, obtained what was due to them.⁸¹ This enabled her to practice the Socialist principles in which she believed.

Winifred Griffiths, who had been delighted to leave Burberry's factory to go into domestic service, after four years began to feel just as constrained and unfulfilled by her work as a parlourmaid. She had not given up her ambitions for something more worthy, and still was persistent in seeking the 'fame and glory' which she had sought at school. By 1914, rapidly nearing the end of her teens, Winifred clearly signalled that the pathway to achieve her ambitions was one she had thought about and planned. She described her 'concern to work out for myself a satisfactory philosophy of life and to take steps to satisfy my ambitions',⁸²

Late in 1914 she was offered a chance to try yet another kind of employment when Mrs Scott, the Mistress of East Oakley House, realized Winifred's frustration:

In the meantime the war was changing peoples' lives. There was a great deal of talk about 'jobs of national importance' for women as well as men. Surely soon *My* (sic) chance would come. One day Mrs Scott spoke to me, letting me know that she knew how I was feeling. She told me that the Manager of the Co-operative Stores in Basingstoke was on the lookout for young women to train to take the places of grocery assistants who were joining the Forces. She was prepared to give me a very good reference if I was to apply. I accepted her offer with alacrity and in due course was taken on in the grocery department of the Co-operative Stores.⁸³

⁸¹ *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950: III Social Agencies and Institutions*, ed. F. M. L. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp.54-55.

⁸² Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.59.

⁸³ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, pp.59-60.

Winifred left East Oakley House and moved into lodgings in Basingstoke with another girl from her new job. She enjoyed the freedom that better pay allowed her, together they went to 'evening class, cinema, or to church or a walk on Sunday' and to farewell parties for the 'boys' who left to join the army.⁸⁴ The women left behind in the shop were required to work harder to make up staffing levels, but the management appeared to see their female staff as a temporary stop-gap instead of recruits for apprenticeship. Previously the male assistants had been required to undertake several years of training before they could progress to 'first hand' in charge of either the grocery or provision counter:

At the shop we were always busy for there never seemed to be a complete staff. Men left to join up and as yet the management could not imagine they could get along with women only. Hence the Co-op tried whenever possible to replace the men, who left for the army, by other men.⁸⁵

Winifred soon saw prospects for herself and used the experience she had gained to begin training as 'second hand' in a grocery shop in Basingstoke. However, the War had changed old traditions in the provisions trade. After three months the 'first hand' left to join up and Winifred's promotional pathway was complete. Winifred found economic success by taking over a man's job after a very short training period, and was proud at the speed of her advancement compared with the previous male apprentices. She detailed her newly-learned responsibilities:

So after only two or three months of training, as against several years that the old time apprentice would have had, I found myself in charge of the provision side in a very busy store, where we sold thirty sides of bacon a week when we could get them and as many cooked hams, as well as a whole range of other provisions. To help me I had as second hand a cheerful hard working girl who had had some experience in another store. We had a till on our counter and took the cash ourselves. It was, of course, before the time of automatic reckoning machines, so we

⁸⁴ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.60.

⁸⁵ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.63.

had to enter each amount as it was paid in. When we had finished taking money the roll had to be removed and the items totted up. If they did not correspond with the contents of the till we had to try and try again to get the total right.⁸⁶

Mildred Edwards had also taken advantage of the opportunities which came with war. Mildred's family home was a rented cottage supplied by the railway for its workers, of whom her father was one. On leaving school, Mildred had remained at home to nurse her mother, who had arthritis and was confined to a wheelchair, and to look after her younger brothers and sisters. By the time war broke out, Mildred was the only one of the children still at home. After her mother died in 1916 she felt 'very lonely and sad'. However, she soon got voluntary work and shortly after married her fiancé, to whom she had been engaged for three years. It was only then, at the age of twenty-seven, a married woman, that Mildred took her first paid job, a clerical job which before the war would have been held by a man. Women clerks, like Mildred, were more likely to be employed by government than by private employers. In the 1870s the Post Office had been the first government department to employ women clerks and by 1881 central government employed 53,106 women (compared to only 6,420 known to be privately employed). The expansion in numbers of women employees continued throughout the war years.⁸⁷ As well as economic success, Mildred gained self-esteem in earning a wage while her husband was away at war, she proudly recalled:

Well, I was a soldier's wife now, and set about preparing for the future, as neither of us was very wealthy. I got a job at the recruiting office, thirty shillings a week. The job was at the Castle...where there was a staff of about twenty or so. Afterwards it was much larger as it was taken over from the army and became the Ministry of National Service.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, pp.66-67.

⁸⁷ Jane Rendall, *Women in an Industrializing Society*, p.78.

⁸⁸ Mildred Edwards, *Our City, Our People*, p.60.

To prepare 'for the future' Mildred was able to save much of her wages during the war. She lived with her father who paid her housekeeping money, and she was also paid the army 'separation' allowance.

Strategies for Economic Success

Most of the cohort had achieved economic success in an almost serendipitous fashion: although vaguely wanting a better standard of living, they had tended to advance by making ad hoc short term decisions as chances came up, such as a changing job or taking up an evening class. However, like Mildred Edwards, who had planned 'for the future', one or two others revealed a long-term personal plan or strategy. Their record of this allows an insight into the method by which it was possible for some working-class women to achieve their ambitions.

Mary Luty had formed an ambition to travel in the 1890s when she was in her early teens. It had sprung from a series of revivalist meetings at the chapel she and her mother attended. 'The idea of seeing the world began to take root. I dreamt of being a medical missionary on a foreign field.'⁸⁹ Mary attended the local technical college and eventually was to leave the factory floor to work in a trade union office. Until after the First World War she lived at home to care for her mother, who was failing in health. When her mother died, Mary's ambitions to travel, although not as a missionary, re-surfaced. She met some opposition: 'when one mentioned a world trip alone, and financing myself as I journeyed, the idea was laughed at and ridiculed. A woman could not do that kind of thing; a man might, but a woman – never!'⁹⁰ Mary sailed from Liverpool around 1920 with only £15,

⁸⁹ Mary Luty, *A Penniless Globetrotter*, pp. 39-40.

⁹⁰ Mary Luty, *A Penniless Globetrotter*, p.52.

and for a year travelled around Canada, with a variety of jobs, one of which was a cook on a prairie farm. She recalled her triumph:

What an experience for a factory girl! A fig to those who said "a woman couldn't work her way around the world." I was doing it. I was rising in the world, having got two new dresses and also booked a second-class passage to New Zealand.⁹¹

Mary's economic success was manifested by her ability to finance her travels, and in her progress from factory girl to world-traveller. Success lay also in doing what people said she would not, as a woman, be able to do. Her travels gave her great confidence and having accomplished her world trip she wrote a manuscript of about 1000 words on her travels and sent it to the BBC. Mary was asked to submit more material and to give various talks on *Woman's Hour*, *Slices of Life* and several other programmes. This was followed by a series of paid lectures both home and abroad, visiting several European countries as well as Iceland. The money she earned from these ventures meant her economic success was assured. She was able to buy a house near Cleveleys in Lancashire, which she ran as a guest house.

Mary Gawthorpe was very also clear about her motivation for economic success from her early school years. She expressed her ambition when she was about eleven years old, and decided that she would have achieved it by the time she was twenty-one. Her plan was to succeed in becoming a fully qualified teacher so that she could earn a good salary. She wrote: 'I felt it my duty to come more substantially to the support of Mother'.⁹² She worked hard towards this goal, teaching the boy's classes at St Luke's Roman Catholic School in South Leeds, while still studying for her final examinations at night:

⁹¹ Mary Luty, *A Penniless Globetrotter*, p.97.

⁹² Mary Gawthorpe, *Up Hill To Holloway*, p.105.

It was very hard work which the steady upward surge of youthful energies gladly supported. Nothing seemed impossible. I loved teaching, loved the little lads, raced from one end of the city to another, then down to the certificate classes, coming and going and going and coming, one blessed thing after another.⁹³

Mary finally achieved her long-held ambition in 1902, after she had been working as a probation teacher at St Luke's for two years. With the help of an advance of her salary from her local Vicar, Reverend E.T. Birch-Reynardson, whose approval she appeared to have valued, she moved her mother and younger brother to a new home, leaving her abusive, alcoholic father behind: 'A bell had rung for father though as yet he was unaware.'⁹⁴

Mary rejoiced in the difference the move had made to her mother, who 'became distinctly younger looking'. Her long-held ambition had been achieved. Although it had brought professional success and the attainment of a career, and was also apparent in the material wealth her teacher's salary brought to the family, for Mary the most important aspect of her economic success was manifested in her ability to free her mother by providing her with a home away from her father. It was this that she had planned and worked for. Writing her autobiography in the 1930s, Mary was the only one of the cohort to use the word 'success' when reviewing her progress. Looking back at the pathway she had followed she wrote 'Considered as drive and accomplishment all was success.'⁹⁵

Mary had planned her future from an early age, determined to bring all to fruition before she was 'twenty-one'. From a working-class background, Mary had been bright enough to take advantages of the opportunities open to her in education and the changes in

⁹³ Mary Gawthorpe, *Up Hill To Holloway*, p.148

⁹⁴ Mary Gawthorpe, *Up Hill To Holloway*, p.152.

⁹⁵ Mary Gawthorpe, *Up Hill To Holloway*, p.153.

employment as more women teachers were encouraged into schools.⁹⁶ Most significantly, she had illustrated this progress in her autobiography. This threw light on the attainment of success for herself, and the possibilities available during this period for other women from working-class backgrounds.

Material Wealth

Between the wars life seemed to have become easier for most of the cohort, and many achieved material wealth, sometimes after many years of hard work. Economic success was expressed in home ownership, leisure activities, consumer goods and generally a more comfortable standard of living compared to their childhood. Most of the cohort gave examples of the way their lives were enhanced by economic success. Mildred Edwards listed some of the consumer goods which were beginning to be affordable to her family in Carlisle during the first decades of the twentieth century: best tea, perfumed soaps, tailor-made clothing, pretty hats and all manner of foodstuff – including country butter and eggs, and ‘the weekend joint, a five pound piece of beef three and six, or shoulder of mutton two and six, or a leg about four shillings’.⁹⁷ By the end of the Second World War Mildred Edward and her husband had saved £430, enough to buy their own home. Upward mobility came with home ownership. Their economic success had been assured by a combination of domestic skills, paid employment and careful saving. The couple lived in the same house for fifty years. In 1971, after the death of her husband, Mildred sold the house to Carlisle Corporation for £2,400. Mildred by this time could afford to endorse the cheque ‘to be passed on to three children’s institutions’: a philanthropic gesture indicative of Mildred’s economic success.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ In 1875 women represented just over half of all elementary school teachers, by 1914, twelve years after Mary qualified, three-quarters were women.

⁹⁷ Mildred Edwards, *Our City...Our People*, p.29.

⁹⁸ Mildred Edwards, *Our City...Our People*, p.67.

Leisure and cultural activities became important. A week or even a fortnight's holiday at a seaside resort was becoming possible for all but the poorest, and day excursions were enjoyed as special cut-price trips by the railway and bus companies were offered, especially at Bank Holidays. In 1923 the Southern Railway alone advertised twenty-six day excursions from London over the August Bank Holiday period and the General Omnibus Company offered forty-one different destinations. This company also suggested various 'Honeysuckle By-Ways' to cater for ramblers.⁹⁹ Trips such as these were described by a significant number of the autobiographers, and several went on holidays. In August 1904, Alice Foley was taken on a holiday to Morecambe, by her elder sister Cissy:

My eldest sister and her factory companion, Lizzie, kindly invited me to join them on their four days annual Holiday in August of that year. This caused wild excitement within me, especially the prospect of staying in a boarding house, for I had never left home before.¹⁰⁰

Visits to the theatre, day trips and holidays began to be part of a comfortable lifestyle. Winifred Griffiths continued paid employment after her marriage. Her wages were vital when her husband James attended the Ruskin Labour College in London between 1919-1921. Winifred took on a variety of jobs to supplement his student allowance, including a position as waitress at Lyons Tea Rooms where she worked at branches in Gloucester Road, Waltham Green and Richmond. However, the couple enjoyed leisure time together including visits to London theatres. Winifred recalled:

Although I found this job tiring, Jim and I still managed to live a very full life in our spare time. I have still in my possession a sheaf of 2d and 3d Theatre Programmes of the shows we saw, mainly from seats in the 'gods'. We saw Sybil Thorndike in 'The Trojan Women', Mrs Patrick

⁹⁹ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 1 and 3 August 1923. According to the issue on 7 August 1923, over 2000 of the 'newer' type of buses had operated on country routes over the holiday period, with 3,800 buses of all kinds pressed into service in London. More than 80,000 passengers had been taken to Epping Forest alone.

¹⁰⁰ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.39. Alice is unsure of the year and wrote 'I think it was 1905', but she was in her final year at school when she went on holiday and she left school in 1904, so I have assumed that this was the correct year.

Campbell in 'Pygmalion', William J. Rea in the name part of John Drinkwater's 'Abraham Lincoln', Matheson Lang in 'The Wandering Jew'. There was also the marvellous spectacle of 'Chew Chin Chow', which ran for four years, and there was the great experience of seeing Anna Pavlova dance at Drury Lane.¹⁰¹

In 1925 the couple had moved back to Wales, where James' future lay in Labour politics. Despite the years of depression with miner's strikes and lockouts over the next few years, economic success seemed assured and they no longer needed Winifred's wages to supplement their budget. A daughter and a son were born and Winifred had a succession of girls to look after the children as well as employing a woman to come to do the washing. Later they moved to a house with a garden in the Swansea valley, two more children were born and in 1938 they moved to a larger house in the suburbs and bought a car, which Winifred soon learned to drive. Leisure time was enhanced: 'Now it was wonderful to take the children for rides in the country or to other and better seaside places.'¹⁰² Shortly before the Second World War began Winifred and James were able to take a motoring holiday in Somerset and Devon.

Conclusion

The autobiographies reveal the various changes in social and working conditions of which the cohort were able to take advantage during their lives. Technology had brought advances and opportunities for completely new kinds of work from which they could also benefit. More women gained employment in administrative posts, as office workers, or in new areas in retail or in teaching. Furthermore, with the coming of war, and later, conscription for men, women were enabled to advance in a hierarchy of jobs which

¹⁰¹ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, pp. 87-88.

¹⁰² Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.121.

society had previously assigned to a male work-force. As the century progressed therefore, society saw a wider range of occupations as appropriate for working-class women.

Economic success began with independence as the cohort started paid employment, contributed to the budget and brought a better standard of living to their families. Often the work was dull, arduous and monotonous. But, with confidence gained by their new-found independence and experience in the work-place, came the foresight and ambition to make decisions about themselves and their future: they could set their sights higher and change to new kinds of employment with better pay and prospects.

Better working conditions and shorter hours also gave women the choice of more time away from the work-place. Those with energy and motivation could attend evening classes so that educational success could improve their employment prospects, enabling them to seek more fulfilling or financially rewarding work. Economic success also had an impact on domestic success. While some of the autobiographers sought adventure and new experiences in travel most were happy with a better standard of domestic life. They described improvements in their domestic situation with a greater variety of consumer goods, better living conditions and more opportunities for a variety of leisure activities that a higher income could bring.

The women describe the various routes offered by changes occurring in society. In their autobiographies they described the small steps they took in order to achieve what they wanted in life. They improved their situation little by little as chances occurred, or in some cases saw the fruition of a long-held ambition to change the course of their lives. They were encouraged by family and friends and motivated by one or more of several

ambitions encompassed by economic success: personal independence, acquisition of material goods, social and cultural activities, travel, a higher status job and upward social mobility for themselves or their families. The cohort encompassed women across the disparate divisions within the working-class and across all occupations, educational standards and backgrounds. The different pathways to economic success taken by the autobiographers revealed insights into the possibilities for advancement for working-class women in general during the period.

Chapter 6: Politics

Introduction

The cohort includes some of the first working-class women to hold political or quasi-political public office. The autobiographers describe their sometimes pioneering involvement in Socialism and trades union, or within the local or national activities of the Labour Party and the suffrage movement. Some took part in quasi-political institutions such as the Co-operative Working Women's Guild, which campaigned on women's issues. They joined clubs and societies, and they were elected onto voluntary public offices as magistrate, Justice of the Peace (JP), Poor Law guardians or as members of school boards. By standing for public office or by taking part in a public expression of their feelings on a political issue, women in this period were effectively making a political act: they were striking a blow for women's equality in the broadest sense and their autobiographies give some idea of the pride they felt in moving into the political public sphere.

Of the 26 autobiographers, 12 can broadly be described as politically active in some way, at least for part of their lives. They were: Annie Barnes, Margaret Bondfield, Ada Nield Chew, Alice Foley, Mary Gawthorpe, Winifred Griffiths, Annie Kenney, Mary Luty, Hannah Mitchell, Nellie Scott, Ellen Wilkinson and Mrs Yearn. All saw their political involvement as important. These women gradually recognised that by their own actions they could contribute in some way to the public debate on issues affecting women: issues such as enfranchisement, working conditions, health-care, housing and education. In doing so they could make a difference to their lives. Perceptions of what constituted political action varied from woman to woman: for Annie Barnes, for example, it was secretly escaping from the family home to deliver suffragette literature, while for both

Margaret Bondfield and Ellen Wilkinson, it was a lifelong career which culminated in being appointed as cabinet ministers. For Winifred Griffiths it was working with her husband and supporting his parliamentary career, yet she was also proud of her own role in local politics as a district Councillor, a JP and a Poor Law guardian. For Mrs Yearn it was her election as the first woman director of her local Co-operative Society, and serving as a JP. These women saw political success within an intellectual and moral framework. They justified their actions as having Christian, moral or altruistic motives. Such justification was in some ways a double-edged sword. Already developed in the home, these caring moral attitudes were based on, and helped to reinforce, existing gender divisions; yet they could also motivate, and justify, women's engagement in public life. As Patricia Hollis has argued, women's involvement in local politics has:

Encouraged women to come forward with the confidence that their domestic and family background was as useful and relevant to public service as men's commercial and business experience.¹

This also appeared to be the view of the women autobiographers. They saw their own fight for equality with men as helping other women to have the confidence to campaign for issues of importance to their lives, and to strive for the rights and freedoms to express themselves. The women also took a personal pride in the fact that this had been achieved in a public arena: they had succeeded within a society which primarily valued male public success.

Previously women born into the working class had been held back by lack of education and low female participation in public and work-place organizations. Both improved over this period. The twelve autobiographers reveal that they took advantage of reforms which occurred as they were growing up. Changes in the political arena facilitated their

¹ Patricia Hollis, 'Women in Council: Separate Spheres, Public Space' in *Equal or Different* ed. J. Rendall, p.210.

achievements. Female ratepayers had the borough vote from 1869; from 1894 women could be elected onto a variety of public bodies – school boards, board of guardians, parish councils and later county councils; and in 1918 the parliamentary franchise was widened to include women aged over thirty. In the workplace, from 1875 and throughout the period, women were becoming accepted as delegates in the previously male bastion of trade unionism.² With additional help and encouragement, and sometimes even the example of family, friends, neighbours or work colleagues, these women were enabled to take up political opportunities denied to working-class women of previous generations.

Furthermore, as Susan Kingsley Kent has observed, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw developments in the public discussion of politics, which ‘acknowledged the voices of working-class women who sought change in the political, public sphere.’³ The autobiographers underline these changes and detail the complex, varied and overlapping routes through which they gained political success - from early awareness in childhood, through periods of rebellion at home or work.

Historical Context

The first forays by women from the domestic into the political sphere occurred in the late eighteenth century, when humanitarian campaigns such as prison reform, protection for children, education for the poor and the move to encourage breast feeding of infants, attracted many middle-class evangelical women.⁴ They included Methodist and Quaker reformers and arguably the most significant and widespread campaigns in which they

² Paula Bartley, *The Changing Role of Women*, pp.133 – 135; Patricia Hollis, *Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government, 1865-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), p. 210.

³ Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain 1860-1914* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.5.

⁴ Susan Kingsley Kent, *Gender and Power in Britain, 1640-1990*, p. 108.

were involved were the anti-slavery societies: by the 1840s women had begun to participate as audience, fund-raisers, and occasionally even as speakers.

The women's movement was therefore wider than just the campaign for female enfranchisement. For instance, the battle against state-regulated prostitution led by Josephine Butler (1828-1906) leading to the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts in 1886, was an integral aspect of a movement that included the other 'decorous struggles,' although perhaps the most notable was the suffrage campaign.⁵ The movement struck at the heart of women's difficulties: their sense of sexual objectification and victimization. The franchise movement - as well as the campaigns for property rights and access to medical training, higher education and the professions generally - all aimed at a redefinition of the roles of women in society. There were male supporters of such campaigns, John Stuart Mill and Sydney Webb, for example, and these have been too well documented elsewhere to require elaboration here, as have the debates over suffrage post-1867, which involved some key women on the anti-suffrage side.⁶ However, the evolution of women's public and political issues encompassed not only middle-class philanthropists, but also working-class altruists, including, by the late nineteenth century, members of the cohort.

Working-class women could be introduced to political ideas in a variety of ways. Clubs and societies were especially important. Reading material was borrowed from fellow members and Socialism, for example, was encouraged during leisure activities arranged for young, single working-class women under the umbrella of the Labour movement. The quasi-political sports and social clubs such as the Clarion Vocal Union and Clarion

⁵ Joan Perkin, *Victorian Women* (London: John Murray, 1993), pp. 232-234.

⁶ For general discussion of the debates and issues surrounding suffrage see, for instance, Martin Pugh *The March of the Women*; Sandra Stanley Holton, *Suffrage Days*; Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain: 1860-1914*.

Cycling Club, added to women's political education as well as their leisure pursuits.⁷ The Clarion Clubs centred around the socialist weekly, *The Clarion*, and were at least broadly political. These clubs and societies were often conducted in the spirit of Victorian enquiry and interest in the natural world, as Nellie Scott recalled, but their activities, and discussions with fellow-members, also set the scene for later public involvement with more overt political institutions.⁸ Such clubs also had practical benefits for working-class girls and young women living away from home, especially in big city centres such as Manchester and London.⁹ They enabled them to have a social life, as well as an introduction to political activities, while maintaining their respectability in the company of like-minded women.

Married women also could also be introduced to political ideas through meeting other women. They shopped at Co-operative Society Stores and joined the Working Women's Co-operative Guild. Later in the period they joined the Women's Institute (WI), which was founded in 1915 and began as a radical organisation campaigning on women's issues: autobiographer Louise Jermy was a member.¹⁰ Such organisations were also a route into the Independent Labour Party, the suffrage movement, or into voluntary public service.

⁷ The Clarion van, like the clubs, was funded by the journalists on the *Clarion*, a Socialist newspaper. The van, staffed by mainly female volunteers, of whom Ada Nield Chew was one, travelled through England carrying the Socialist message. The newspaper also founded several clubs and societies for working-class people.

⁸ Nellie Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p. 89.

⁹ City Centre clubs included the 'Snowdrop Band' members of which carried white flowers to suggest their purity, and the 'Travellers Aid Club' which helped young girls from the country to achieve respectable employment in the city.

¹⁰ Louise Jermy's autobiography, *Memoirs of a Working Woman*, has a 'Foreword' by R. H. Mottram, who claimed it to be 'the first autobiography written by a Women's Institute member.' The first UK Women's Institute (WI) met in Llanfairpwll, Wales, and rapidly spread to rural areas. It aimed to 'turn interests into achievements'. Each Institute was self-governing within the WI Constitution and rules, groups were organised into a committee framework and put forward annual resolutions to form the basis of campaigns.

For women in paid employment there was also the work-based trades union which tackled a variety of work-related and social issues.¹¹ More women became involved in trades union during the period. In 1886 it was estimated that 36,980 women were members: this rose to 142,000 in 1892 and 433,000 in 1913.¹² Although this meant that only 10% of the female work-force was unionised by 1913, compared to 30% of the male work-force; these figures nevertheless reveal a remarkable and dramatic increase of 300 per cent during the years spanning the early working lives of many of the cohort. For the first time, women from the working class gained positions of authority as trade union representatives and officials. The TUC was persuaded to accept women delegates to their conference in 1875, and by 1881 there were ten such members. In addition there was, in 1881, the first appointment of a female factory inspector, which meant further protection for female workers.¹³

In late Victorian and early Edwardian society women began to play an increasingly significant role in extending the social functions of local authorities, especially as Poor Law guardians and on school boards.¹⁴ On the level of national politics, from the first decade of twentieth century the Labour Party, although still in its early stages and facing opposition from radical Liberalism, found and encouraged support among many working-class people. One reason for this was that only a Labour government offered a comprehensive health policy which encompassed issues of housing, healthcare and poverty, all of seminal importance to working-class lives.

¹¹ F. L. M. Thompson, ed., *The Cambridge Social History of Britain*, p.441.

¹² Elizabeth Roberts, *Women's Work*, p.62.

¹³ Elizabeth Roberts, *Women's Work*, p.61.

¹⁴ Patricia Hollis, *Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government*, pp.71-194. See also F. M. L. Thompson, *The Cambridge Social History of Britain*, III, p.44.

Working-class women participated increasingly in the work of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) during the early twentieth century. The ILP was formed in 1893, but unlike the trades union it was not work-centred, so was also open to women based in the home as well as those in paid employment. As Eleanor Gordon has claimed, it emphasised social and political issues, rather than those of an industrial nature.¹⁵ Women were given equal membership rights with men, although there were also in existence women-only branches. The ILP supported woman's role as that of wife and mother, membership being mostly upper working-class and lower middle-class women, a social group which increasingly chose not to work in paid employment. Karen Hunt has argued that the women of the ILP were essential to the financial viability of the party because of their fund-raising activities. They also widened the cultural base of the movement by organising Sunday schools, outings and concerts.¹⁶

All of these routes therefore opened up new ground for the women, as at the end of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century educational opportunities and an increased public awareness at all levels of society paved the route to political activity for women from working class backgrounds. They joined committees and became familiar with processes such as canvassing and voting, public speaking and political organization and administration. In taking even a small part in social or political debates or action, the autobiographers were therefore following a female tradition of public engagement with societal issues. They became used to discussing ideas and forming opinions, and took advantage of opportunities to become involved with the social and political debates of the

¹⁵ Eleanor Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland: 1850-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p.264.

¹⁶ Karen Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists: The Social Democratic Federation and the Woman Question* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p.225

period. In many cases they recalled that the dawning of their political awareness had its roots in childhood.

Political and Social Awareness in Childhood

Interest in social and political questions in many cases came via the tradition of companionship and social awareness instilled by girlhood participation in church-based organizations. During the 1890 and 1900s, when the cohort were growing up, there was what F. M. L. Thompson has called ‘the transformation of formal religious structures’.¹⁷ Dozens of clubs, societies, associations and fellowships, which were held in chapels and church halls, brought the working classes into the environment of the Church by means of leisure activities such as sports and dancing. Grace Foakes and her sister Kathleen joined the Wesleyan Girl’s Guild in the East End of London, Alice Foley joined the Young Socialists and the Clarion cycling club, Mary Gawthorpe was a church service worker, Winifred Griffith’s family belonged to a friendly society, Annie Kenney was a member of the Clarion Vocal Union, Nellie Scott became a member of the Girl’s Friendly Society and Ellen Wilkinson recalled joining the Band of Hope.

Alice Foley, Mary Gawthorpe, Annie Kenney, Nellie Scott and Ellen Wilkinson record specifically that their interest in social questions or the politics of the day began during childhood, when they overheard or participated in discussions within the family, or helped their parents with the distribution of political leaflets or other electioneering work. Nellie Scott, for example, was exposed to a broad range of political ideas during her childhood in the early 1880s. Her father was a Liberal, having refused to turn ‘Conservative and

¹⁷ F. M. L. Thompson, *The Cambridge Social History of Britain*, pp.420-421.

Church' when required to by his employer.¹⁸ Nellie was immersed in political discussion from an early age and was encouraged by her parents to take part:

My father and mother always took a keen interest in politics, also my grandparents on father's side. Grandfather was a real old Tory, Grandmother a Liberal both of old Derbyshire families. Then mother's father was one of the men who came to Stockport (from Holcombe in Lancashire) when the Plug Riots were on. Then one of our visitors was a Bradlaughite, and we children used to look at him with awe because he was an atheist. And the arguments there used to be! I was only very small, very fond of reading, and I could get under the counter with my book and hear all the talk, or sit in a corner of the fender; and even though I had my book all these talks were a great joy to me. Mother was a strict Congregationalist, but she went to hear Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant; also Enid Stacey when she came. Then it all had to be talked over and the impressions received, so that though only a child I was learning and was allowed to speak. Mother used to call me her little Lydia Becker.¹⁹

Nellie's family were exceptional in that they displayed wide-ranging and opposing political interests. Her mother's open-minded and public involvement was especially notable, and it was almost certainly this early introduction to political awareness which led Nellie, as a pioneering female union representative, to fight for better working conditions amongst women felt hat workers.

Winifred Griffiths, who, later in life would become a social worker and the wife of a Labour politician, recalled that an awareness of the political issues during her 1890s rural Hampshire childhood came through her father:

Almost adjoining the Mill was the tiny village of Laverstoke where there was a reading room. A few workers, my father among them, paid a small subscription

¹⁸ Nellie Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p. 81.

¹⁹ Nellie Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', pp. 82-83. Charles Bradlaugh was a radical MP for Northampton in the Liberal Prime Minister Gladstone's second Government, he was famous for refusing to take a religious oath. Lydia Becker was one of the early campaigners in the movement to secure votes for women. Annie Besant was a Fabian who campaigned for birth control, and was also instrumental in supporting the match girls in their strike of 1888.

so that they might go there to eat their lunch and meanwhile read the papers. No daily paper came to our house, but I remember my father made a point at tea-time of relating to us the news he had read at lunch-time. Thus I became familiar at an early age with the names of the politicians of the day, and with phrases such as 'Free Trade', 'Tariff Reform', Home Rule, Welsh Disestablishment etc.²⁰

Ellen Wilkinson also saw the beginnings of her political interests stemming from her childhood. Her father, a staunch Wesleyan, was 'an ardent worker for Mr. Arthur James Balfour in the old north-west division of Manchester at election times.'²¹ Her mother was a Methodist and Ellen was reared in an 'atmosphere of sturdy Non-conformity.' As a small child she was encouraged by her grandmother to repeat the Sunday sermon aloud. Ellen acknowledged that this helped her later political career, as it gave her 'a long and largely unconscious training for complete unselfconsciousness on a public platform.'²²

During her childhood in the 1880s, Mary Gawthorpe had been immersed in Conservative doctrine. Her father, a leather currier in a tanning factory, was an active Conservative and insisted on his family following suit.²³ The owner of the leather factory, was the Right Hon. W. L. Jackson, until 1902 the Conservative MP for North Leeds, and he naturally encouraged his workers to support his party.²⁴ Mary's father was Honorary Secretary for the party and election agent in the North West ward, part of the North Leeds constituency. During election campaigns he received wages as an official worker for the Conservative Party, and, with the rise of the Conservative Working-men's Party sponsored by Lord Randolph Churchill, was even canvassed as a candidate. The whole Gawthorpe family

²⁰ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.19.

²¹ Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, p.401.

²² Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, p. 410-411.

²³ Leather currying is the process by which tanned leather is buffed and rolled to give it suppleness and elasticity.

²⁴ Before this time Jackson had been Financial Secretary to the Treasury and Chief Secretary for Ireland. He was a member for North Leeds until 1902 when he became Lord Allerton.

was involved on election nights. Mary's 'vigorous flowing legible handwriting', was used to good effect in her later journalism for the suffrage movement. It was, she claimed, attributable to the many copies of the voters' list that she helped to prepare.²⁵

Familiarity with the issues and debates of the day, and observation of discussion, public speaking and electioneering, was therefore a part of childhood for these women. Although it may not have been recognised until later in life, this political awareness gave impetus to their political involvement as adults. Examples from parents or other authority figures in their childhood made it easier for them to validate their own actions. Certainly none of the ten autobiographers who centred their success solely in domesticity mentioned discussions of politics taking place during their childhood, whereas the five who do recall childhood involvement all proceeded to realize political success as adults.

Rebellion

Although political discussion and participation was clearly a formative influence on some of the cohort, parental beliefs were often also questioned as the women established their own independence from the family home. Not all of the autobiographers continued to think along the same lines as their parents as they grew up. Those who did not described a stepping outside, or rebellion from, familial political or religious beliefs as they reached young adulthood. Their rebellion allowed them to espouse new ideas and a different political ethos. Margaret Bondfield, Alice Foley, Mary Gawthorpe, Winifred Griffiths and Ellen Wilkinson, for example, were all introduced to socialism by an older sibling, colleague or friend.

²⁵ Mary Gawthorpe, *Up Hill to Holloway*, p.32.

In her autobiography, written in the early 1970s, Alice Foley chronicled a ‘crisis of faith’, that she underwent as she was growing up, and which caused her to leave the Catholic religion in which she had been brought up and educated. Her self-styled ‘rebellion’ enabled Alice to declare publicly her growing interest in the politics of socialism. Alice’s older sister Cissy, a suffragist and socialist, was already active in her section of the Weaver’s Union and was a member of the local Labour Church. However, Alice was not merely imitating an older and much admired sibling, for although she embraced socialism, she did not blindly follow Cissy in her involvement with the suffragist movement.

Nevertheless, encouraged by the discussions of Cissy and her friends, and by readings of Robert Blatchford’s writings, Alice joined a group of young socialists. She also joined the Clarion Cycling Club. Unable to reconcile socialism with the family-held Catholicism, Alice began to question its doctrines and described her rejection of the faith:

The foundation of my childhood’s faith trembled and crumbled before the onslaught of a new and challenging Socialist philosophy. In its complete rejection of what then seemed to be religious shackles the new-born idealism was healthy and intoxicating.²⁶

For Alice the politics of Socialism were bound up with philanthropy and religious experience, and she appeared to have transferred her Catholic sense of duty to the church to more community-based social values in a secular realm. Her Socialism, fuelled by her new political convictions was later to lead her to political success.

Mary Gawthorpe also underwent a thoughtful rebellion and turned from her family’s Conservative convictions as she reached adulthood. In 1901 she was twenty years old, and had finished training as a teacher. Encouraged by a close friend, the journalist Tom Garrs,

²⁶ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p. 66-67.

Mary began to think about her beliefs and question the Conservative values which her family espoused:

I began a determined self-analysis, examining to the best of my ability the basic influences of my life. Instead of being the conservative I had imagined myself to be, I discovered I was not basically conservative but leaned to Labour. More than leaned so that I was compelled to think of it as Labour with the capital. As a matter of growth, the discovery was pure velvet, not a hardship. I seemed to be all set that way. The Labour Movement, it now seemed to me, was in aim and method all I had hitherto known as practical Christianity. I took to the new ethics like a duck to water.²⁷

Politics and Married Women

The politically active among the cohort did not give up their interest in politics after marriage. Their familiarity with public issues manifested itself in choosing to shop at the socialist-based Co-operative Stores as housewives and through trade union membership as working women. As married women, Annie Barnes, Ada Nield Chew, Mary Gawthorpe, Winifred Griffiths, Louise Jermy, Hannah Mitchell, Nellie Scott, and Mrs Yearn continued to participate in clubs and societies or follow interests in political parties or women's movements during the period. Historians have not always accepted this trend. Brian Harrison, for instance, has indicated that domesticity affected the political outlook of women and shaped them into a politically passive mould.²⁸ However, this was not the case among all of the autobiographers. Annie Barnes, Winifred Griffiths, Hannah Mitchell, Nellie Scott and Mrs Yearn for instance all valued their domestic success, particularly while their children were young, yet they were radical in that they also rebelled against the confines of a home life. By becoming involved in domestically orientated institutions, such as the Women's Co-operative Guild, the Women's Institute

²⁷ Mary Gawthorpe, *Up Hill to Holloway*, p. 173.

²⁸ Brian Harrison 'Class and Gender in Modern British Labour History' in *Past and Present*, issue 124 (1989), pp.121-158.

and the Women's Labour League, the women were enabled to find a voice outside the home without compromising their domestic roles.

Nellie Scott and Mrs Yearn were members of the Co-operative Women's Guild in the North of England. Mrs Yearn was a mill-worker in Oldham, and joined the Guild after her marriage around 1910. She attended her first conference in Liverpool in 1915, where the work of children in the factory under the half-time system was debated. Mrs Yearn recounted her feelings on this issue and underlined her motivation to improve working conditions, especially for children: 'The half-time question came to the front. That made me a real rebel, and helped me to work wholeheartedly for a better state of existence.'²⁹ She even canvassed for a place on the all-male Co-operative Committee. This was not easy and she recalled 'many a rough word' directed her way, as she was roundly abused by men when canvassing among the farms on the outskirts of Oldham. Nevertheless she was elected in 1924. Her claim to want to help others was more than just an excuse for stepping outside traditional female roles: her work for children continued. In 1928 she was one of the founders of a Maternity and Child Welfare Centre in Oldham and she also served on the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC).

Despite the difficulties she had encountered, Mrs Yearn was proud of her achievements within the Co-operative movement and beyond. Her list is well worth quoting here as it illustrates the breadth of this married working-class woman's activities. It also serves to emphasize the importance she placed on traditional male value systems in that she placed public service above, or at least equal with, her domestic role.

I may claim to be a pioneer of women in Oldham as far as the Co-operative and Labour women are concerned. The

²⁹ Mrs Yearn, 'A Public-Spirited Rebel', p.103.

following is a record of my work done since entering the Guild Movement:

1924. Elected a director of the Oldham Equitable Co-operative Society – the first and only woman to date, of any society in the District.

1925. First working-woman candidate for Oldham Poor Law Guardians. I was also a candidate for the Town Council, and failed by a small number.

1927. Made a member of the Court of Referees, Oldham Unemployment Exchange.

1928. Made a member of Oldham National Health Insurance Committee. Also made a Justice of the Peace for Oldham Borough. Assisted in forming a Maternity and Child Welfare Centre, now making splendid progress.

Served on the Local Committee of the N.S.P.C.C. Served on the Tenants' Defence League – the only woman.³⁰

Mrs Yearn's election as director of the Oldham Co-operative Society in 1924, really was the pioneering political success she claimed it to be. She was many years ahead of any other women in her area and remained the only female director in the Oldham district at the time she wrote her autobiography in 1931. While this adds to her achievement, it also underlines the slowness of change affecting women. Mrs Yearn's emphasis on her ground-breaking activities in public life in Oldham reflected her spirit, exemplified in the very title of her autobiography: *A Public-Spirited Rebel*. But there was, too, a keen altruism about her activities, again suggested in her choice of title: she worked on behalf of others, not for self-aggrandisement, and this is underlined by the welfare nature of the activities in which she was engaged. She took a great pride in the fact that her efforts were publicly honoured:

I gained honours for services rendered on behalf of the Sick and Wounded during the War. I received an illuminated address from Dame Sarah Lees, O.B.E., and also a Certificate of Merit from the British Red Cross and the Order of Saint John's.

³⁰ Mrs Yearn, 'A Public-Spirited Rebel', p.105.

She was unpaid for her work as a guardian, a magistrate and a Justice of the Peace, and acknowledged that she could not have achieved so much without the encouragement of her financially supportive husband:

I have the best husband in the world. He allowed me to leave my home many times without a grumble. He is a great believer in women, and says, given their opportunity, things will soon right themselves.³¹

The Co-operative Society was allied politically to the Labour Party and the Women's Co-operative Guild. The Guild was an overt instance of an institutionalised network of women, mostly married, who encouraged each other to achieve both individual and corporate success. It was founded in 1883 and by the early 1930s had 1,400 branches and 67,000 members.³² Nevertheless, the Board of Directors of the Co-operative Society were, at the time Mrs Yearn was elected, mostly men. As the long-serving General Secretary of the Guild, Margaret Llewelyn Davies, noted in 1920, two years after women aged over thirty gained the vote in Britain, 'It is always said that there is equality for men and women in the movement. Certainly most of the doors are open. But the seats are full and possession is nine-tenths of the law so in reality the opportunity is not equal and seats are hard to win.'³³ The Co-operatives in the North-west of England were more likely than those in the south to deny women access to the management committees and national offices. B. Blaszak has argued that this was because in the north-west Co-operatives were prosperous and well-established, unlike those in the south. Northern branches had no need to curry favour with working-class housewives to guarantee the success of their

³¹ Mrs Yearn 'A Public-Spirited Rebel' p.105.

³² Margaret Llewelyn Davies, ed., *Life As We Have Known It*, pp.xii - xiii.

³³ P. Graves, *Labour Women 1918-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.27.

establishments, and countered women's demands for public roles with an increased insistence on domesticity for wives.³⁴

Nellie Scott joined the Co-operative Society just before her marriage in 1900, when her mother died and Nellie took over management of her Co-operative Society book. In 1907 she became the secretary of the newly formed Stockport Co-operative Guild. The gendered political aspect of the Guild, and the achievement it was for women members to gain some equality with the men, is illustrated by the following extract from Nellie Scott's autobiography:

When the Guild was formed there was not a women in any position, but we now have six women delegates to the Co-operative Wholesale Society, four scrutineers, two on the Management Committee and three on the Educational Committee. I was the first woman delegate to the C.W.S., first members' delegate to Conferences and Congress, and was delegate to the International Conference.³⁵

Nellie, a pioneer like Mrs Yearn, saw political success in becoming the first women delegate for the Co-operative Women's Society, a step towards female equality with men in the hierarchy of the society. Before her election in 1907, the committee for the Women's branch of the Co-operative Society had been all male. She described the difficulties she had faced and the opportunities which the Guild had opened up to her and others. She wrote proudly of her achievements while still acknowledging the importance of her home life and the support of her husband and friends:

When a woman stood for any position in those days the abuse they met with was awful. I stood for Management Committee and my husband and the wife of the man who proposed me had some dreadful postcards sent to them. Now women take their place alongside the men, but there still remains much to be done. I think sometimes, when I

³⁴ B.J. Blaszk, 'The Gendered Geography of the English Co-operative Movement at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century', in *Women's History Review*, no.37.

³⁵ Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.95-96.

hear the women speaking of the influence of the Guild,
what a wonderful organization it is, and what it has meant
to so many women.³⁶

Nellie also took the advantage of openings which presented themselves for involvement in politics. She became one of the first women magistrates for the Stockport area. She was appointed to the national executive of the Labour Church, where she 'tried to make it a living force and thought we had failed'. However, she lived by the moral principles laid down by the Guild, which, she claimed had given her the 'strength and courage to fight' she commended the good work it had done, and also the work for women achieved by 'women's suffrage, internationalism, and many others'³⁷. At the end of her autobiography she once again referred to the Women's Co-operative Guild and its support of the wider enfranchisement, and her own success in learning to speak for what she believed in:

It has taught us to become articulate and able to ask for the things we need. For so many, although they have known the needs and desired a better system of society, have not been able to express themselves. But I do think that, in the coming years, with the greater freedom given to women, and also the vote (the key to so many doors), we shall reap the harvest of the years of sowing the good seed.³⁸

The women therefore placed their political activities within an intellectual and moral framework. They justified their actions as having Christian, moral or altruistic motives: they were helping others. They were gaining the confidence to express themselves on issues of importance to their lives and encouraged others to do likewise. The women also took a personal pride in their success, and the fact that this had been achieved in a public arena: they had succeeded within a society which valued male public success. Pioneers such as Nellie Scott and Mrs Yearn, although they may be exceptions, remind us that not all married women were made passive by domesticity, as Harrison described; rather,

³⁶ Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.96.

³⁷ Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.100.

³⁸ Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.101.

marriage provided a platform for political activity for some of these women. Far from constraining them within an institution that was generally seen as reinforcing their domestic role, marriage provided an emotional and even financial base. This was not always the case, though: others hid their activities from their families and relied on the support of fellow-activists; moreover some of the cohort were unmarried and relied on colleagues and friends for support. Striving for what they believed was right was the motivation behind the women, and similar support and motivation was described by the women pioneers in the trades union movement.

Trades Union Pioneers

For those women who remained in paid employment the routes to political activism was often opened by membership of trades union. By the end of the nineteenth century there were increasing opportunities for women in occupations such as factory workers and shop assistants to become members of trades union. It was also through this route that Margaret Bondfield, Ada Nield Chew, Alice Foley, Annie Kenney, Hannah Mitchell and Ellen Wilkinson, as well as Co-operative Guild members Nellie Scott and Mrs Yearn, gained political success in the form of some control over their working lives and a degree of equality with male colleagues. For these women involvement in trades union brought social status, financial, personal, and political success: yet they all stressed in their writing that financial gain was not their prime objective, but rather, a moral duty, an altruistic wish to help others.

In this they were echoing the Christian ethos behind trade unionism, to which they had pledged allegiance and from which their political involvement evolved. While not overtly church- or chapel-based, trades union often sprang out of church societies and drew

heavily on traditional Christian doctrine and morality.³⁹ Explicit moral values and social attitudes were portrayed in the membership certificates and advertised on the banners carried at meetings and marches: illustrations often stressed themes of unity, hard work and peaceful industrial production. With a mixture of classical and Christian imagery they embodied a vision of the worker in the ideal world. They presented, in words and pictures, a sense of pride in work, collective responsibility and also offered a statement to a wider audience of the respectable and skilled workers' claim to a place in society. These sentiments, displayed iconographically, on Trades Union banners, were echoed in the autobiographies of those of the cohort who achieved success in the industrial world of trades union.

From the 1880s and 1890s broad-based industrial unions, organized by industry instead of the individual skilled craftsmen, had begun to gain membership numbering in the thousands. Where the craft unions had generally avoided unrest, the trades union took action on behalf of their members. The textile trade had more women members than any other union and 80% of the increase in female trade union membership between the late 1880s and 1910 was drawn from the textile industries.⁴⁰ Although at the national level women were greatly under-represented and rarely had a voice in the Trades Union Congress, there were success stories of pioneering women.

Nellie Scott became a member of the Felt Hatters' Trade Union when she worked as a trimmer at Lees and Hatconk's factory in the early 1900s. All the men at the factory were

³⁹ An early and famous example of the relationship between trade and church was that of the Tolpuddle Martyrs. They were led by George Lovelace, a lay preacher and deacon in the little chapel at Tolpuddle. Lovelace became the leader of the Tolpuddle martyrs, a group of working men who attended the same chapel. He was transported for life in 1833 for trying to organize the men to protest against their low wages and the high cost of bread.

⁴⁰ Barbara Drake, *Women in Trade Unions* (London: Virago, 1884, first published 1920), p.30.

in the Union, but none of the women. In 1904 Nellie together with one of her workmates joined the Union. Nellie recalled: 'I worked with a Conservative, an Irish girl, and some Radicals and Socialists and we used to discuss everything'.⁴¹ They began to persuade the other girl trimmers to join and soon had them all involved in strike action. When all was resolved and the trimmers went back to work, the fore-mistress refused to let Nellie, whom she saw as an instigator of the union action, have materials for her work. Nellie Scott saw success in standing up for what she believed in, and was supported by the loyalty of her work-mates:

I went back and told the girls and everyone put down their work and two of those who had been worst against the Union went down to see the head of the firm. They all sat there until I was sent for and told it was a mistake. I always feel proud of the way they stood by me.⁴²

Nellie used her position in the Trade Union to agitate for improved conditions for herself and her fellow workers. She felt that she and her fellow workers were treated unfairly. They worked long hours at the factory but were also forced to take work home.

In our work we had to bring work home sometimes sitting up until twelve o' clock making linings. When we joined the Union that was one of the first things stopped. We ought to earn a decent wage without working meal times and taking work home; it was a hard struggle; but it was stopped and we had the nights to ourselves, though in those days there was housework to be done, baking at night and cleaning.⁴³

Nellie's words illustrate the double burden that was the lot of most married working-class women who continued in paid employment: after working all day they had to come home to domestic chores. However, her successful campaign meant that taking factory work

⁴¹ Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.88.

⁴² Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', pp.90-91.

⁴³ Mrs Scott, 'A Felt Hat Worker', p.92.

home had come to an end, and the women appeared to have been happy to have the extra time for caring for their families.

Alice Foley was also a pioneer for female equality in her union and was also driven by an altruistic ideal of helping her fellow workers. She recalled her first introduction to the power of the trades union as she witnessed the great Daubhill strike of 1905, which took place in a near-by mill:

The conflict grew out of the firm's action in applying a mechanical gadget to looms in the form of a warp-stop motion. In return for this technical innovation management claimed a substantial reduction in wage rates and this was stoutly resisted by both the trade union and the weavers concerned.⁴⁴

The outcome was favourable to the workers and it could have well been this early introduction to the successful outcome of an industrial dispute which raised Alice's awareness of the way unions could change conditions for the better. Alice recalled that as the weeks and months passed by she became used to the noise and machinery, but became more aware of the care-worn faces of her elderly workmates:

Trapped on a treadmill of monotony, I wondered vaguely must the years go on and on until I, too, became just such another faded figure. I increasingly rebelled against the injustice of a factory system that could not even offer a degree of security to its toilers.⁴⁵

Alice determined not to become such a 'faded figure'. She began to attend night school and worked hard enough to be given a free pass to secondary school evening classes.⁴⁶

Alice had been encouraged by her older sister Cissy and her friends to join in their debates and readings of socialist material at home. The rebellious nature which she had shown as a

⁴⁴ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.57.

⁴⁵ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.60.

⁴⁶ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.62

child against her Catholic upbringing re-surfaced, fuelled by her resentment against her employer's attitudes and the low workers' wages and poor working conditions. Alice justified her step outside the familial framework of Catholic beliefs by claiming that as a Socialist she could help her fellow-workers. She described:

An exhilarating experience of deeper awareness with which came an easing of the burden of guilt and a release from the passivity; I longed to transform an inborn humility into some kind of achievement, however insignificant it might prove, in the all pervading glow of Socialist idealism.⁴⁷

At fifteen she was chosen as 'spokeswoman' for a small deputation of workers presenting an outstanding grievance to the head manager. The realization of her fellow-workers' trust in her, together with the Socialist doctrines 'imbibed out of discussion of the weekly *Clarion* and Robert Blatchford's *Merry England* and *God and My Neighbour*' persuaded Alice to become more and more involved with the union.⁴⁸ She recalled:

It was, therefore, almost inevitable that under industrial pressures I should become official spokeswoman for other fellow-workers, in endeavours to steer immediate discontents into more manoeuvrable channels. This activity brought closer contact with the Weaver's Union and broadened attention to the wider issues of collective solidarity.⁴⁹

Alice encouraged women workers in her factory to participate in the union and to rebel against the conditions in the mill, and in particular the disparity between the way in which men and women workers were treated. This was a pioneering step, as the Weaver's Union had for many years had only men members, in common with the 'closed shop' unions of much of the textile trade.

⁴⁷ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p. 75.

⁴⁸ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.63.

⁴⁹ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.63.

Political success in the Trade Union gave Alice Foley public recognition and a rise in social status. Alice achieved her ambitions to escape from the monotony of factory life when she was appointed as an official by the Weaver's Trade Union Association in Bolton. She was able to leave the factory floor in 1912 when she became a sick-visitor for the supervision of scheduled benefit under Lloyd George's National Insurance Act. Alice wrote of her joy and relief at being free of the compulsory bell and buzzer which felt like 'the shedding of captive chains'. She acknowledged her success and saw it as opening up new opportunities for herself. Yet although she saw personal success in these 'new horizons', she also expressed her continuing socialist ambitions to help others in the future: 'It was a modest post, but at least an opening to wider horizons of new experience and human service.'⁵⁰ Alice's autobiography records that she did not desert her fellow-workers, when she left the factory floor:

Passing through that grim, impersonal watch-house for the last time, and fretted with disturbed emotions, there mingled a hope that sometime I might be permitted to plead, or battle, for my less articulate companions who, left behind in the weaving sheds, seemed to be destined to measure out their lives in shuttle changing.⁵¹

Alice's altruistic feelings towards others less fortunate than herself may be looked upon sceptically: she was a woman of working-class origin justifying her upward social mobility. However, as Alice remained a spinster and gave all of her time to the 'human service' she spoke of when first given the 'one small opening' of a job away from the factory floor, it is hard not to think that her sentiments were genuine. Alice became successful both personally and, on a local scale, publicly. During her life-time she was a respected local figure, well-known in the Bolton area, and, judging from letters in

⁵⁰ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.75.

⁵¹ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.76.

newspaper articles printed after her death, well-loved.⁵² She was successful in helping others through her political work. As well as caring for her invalid mother, she spent the rest of her working days in trade unionism, and also helped others to gain success by becoming involved with the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) from 1923 until her death in 1973. Alice gained public recognition for her union work when she was awarded the MBE. Her work in the WEA and on the Manchester University Joint Committee for Adult Education was recognised by the award of an honorary MA in 1962.⁵³

Alice described her first contact with the WEA, which came in the form of a holiday given to her in lieu of extra days on war work for the Trade Union, as 'a new and undreamt-of experience.' The happiness she felt, 'a pinnacle of joy' as she described it when she wrote her autobiography in 1949 'was to sustain and accompany me through long years of humble toil.'⁵⁴ Alice saw her WEA work as the epitome of her success and it is possible that this was why she ended her account at that point. She kept a scrapbook of her newspaper cuttings amongst her papers, as well as the letter announcing the award of the MBE, which suggests her pride in the public, as well as private, recognition of her achievements.⁵⁵

Political success for Alice Foley, Nellie Scott, and Mrs Yearn had come through union involvement. Their autobiographies illustrate this important route by which working-class women could have a significant role in changing social and working conditions for

⁵² The Foley Papers, in Bolton Library archives, include a scrapbook which, amongst other memorabilia, contains newspaper cuttings with several articles on Alice. Unfortunately these are not dated and no note has been made of the newspaper from which they are taken, but it is obviously a local paper.

⁵³ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p. 92.

⁵⁴ Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*, p.92.

⁵⁵ For newspaper cuttings and other papers on Alice Foley see Bolton Archives, Foley Collection.

themselves and others. Margaret Bondfield, born in 1873, and Ada Nield Chew, born in 1870, expressed the same sort of desire to help their fellow-workers. Ada was a tailor in the 1890s in a Crewe factory where uniforms were made on contract for policemen, soldiers and railway workers. She thought that one escape route from the factory floor would be education. But, she reflected, when did women like herself and her fellow-workers have the time or energy to attend evening classes? The only way Ada could see to improve conditions was to make it a matter of public awareness. She expressed her feelings on the 'impossibility' of self-improvement, because of the exhausting and long hours spent at work, in a letter to the *Crewe Chronicle* which was signed anonymously, 'Crewe Factory Girl'.⁵⁶ She admitted to being the sole author of the letter in further correspondence written shortly afterwards, on 6 October 1894. There followed a series, 'Letters of a 'Crewe Factory Girl''.⁵⁷ They gave critical detail about conditions and practices in the factory, providing a cumulative argument, expressed with more and more strength, about the need to organize and force changes upon the employers, and for change in the wider social structure. After publication of the letters her notoriety as a troublemaker meant that she was dismissed from the factory. For Ada, an opportunity came from an unexpected quarter: her local prominence as the writer of the 'Factory Girl' letters led to her election to the Nantwich board of guardians as Trades Council Representative in 1895. She also became a member of the Crewe ILP and was one of the first four women to travel in the Clarion Van which travelled around Durham and Northumberland to introduce Socialism to the miners.⁵⁸ Ada met George Chew through the ILP and the couple married in 1897.⁵⁹ In July 1900 she spoke to cotton operatives at

⁵⁶ On her marriage she became Ada Nield Chew.

⁵⁷ It is not known if she intended a series or if the editor encouraged her to continue.

⁵⁸ Ada Nield Chew, *The Life and Writings of a Working Woman* ed. Doris Nield Chew (London: Virago, 1982), p.20.

⁵⁹ One daughter was born to their marriage, in 1898. This was Doris, who was later to be instrumental in the editing and publication of her mother's autobiographical work.

Wigan who were striking for the increase in wages which had been granted by employees in other districts of Lancashire. In the first decade of the twentieth century Ada worked in the Women's Trade Union League with Mary MacArthur.⁶⁰ Political success for Ada came with raising awareness of the conditions under which women like herself were working in the factories and mills, and in her ability, as a working-class activist, to campaign and help to achieve improvements. She was to continue campaigning, as a pacifist and a member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom during the First World War.

Conditions of employment for Margaret Bondfield and her fellow shop assistants in the 1890s were also difficult. They seemed never to escape from their work environment; shop hours were long and one criterion for employment for many shop assistants, especially in larger stores, was that they 'lived in' in one of the several big drapery houses. In this period not one of these had bathrooms for the assistants. Some housekeepers allowed a jug of hot water and a footbath once a week. Usually rooms were shared with two or three other people, not necessarily room mates of one's own choosing.⁶¹

After five years of hard work and economies, Margaret finished her apprenticeship and had saved five pounds. She travelled to London for work and gained employment in a shop in the Tottenham Court Road. Here she found that conditions which she had thought peculiar to the Brighton shop 'were almost universal'.⁶² Margaret joined the National Union of Shop Assistants, Warehousemen and Clerks, which was urging shop assistants to

⁶⁰ Mary MacArthur is perhaps best known for her part as one of the main organizers of the famous 'Sweated Industries Exhibition' on June 2nd 1906. Held in the Queen's Hall, Langham Place, London, the exhibition was sponsored by the *Daily News*. Details of home-workers rates of pay were given to visitors, and similar exhibitions were organized throughout 1906 all over the country. See, for example, Shelley Pennington and Belinda Westover, *A Hidden Workforce*.

⁶¹ Margaret Bondfield, *A Life's Work*, p. 32.

⁶² Margaret Bondfield, *A Life's Work*, p.27.

join together to fight against the wretched conditions of employment. At that time, in 1894, Margaret was working about 65 hours a week for about £20 a year, living in. She saw that change could only come with trade union activities. Like Ada Nield Chew and Alice Foley, she wanted better working conditions for herself and her fellow-workers. She also sought equality of pay and conditions with male workers. Margaret was encouraged in her union activities by her brother Frank, and other male union members. Underlining the importance of this male support network, which validated her actions, Margaret wrote:

This was a happy time for me.
My Union Officers gave me all the work I could do in my scant leisure, and every kind of encouragement. They elected me on to the district council, and once I attended a national conference. For the next two years the Union utilized me for platform work in an ever increasing degree.

Encouraged by T. Spencer Jones, the editor of our little Union paper, I ventured first to undertake reports of meetings, and later to write a few short stories under the pen-name of Grace Dare.⁶³

To help improve conditions for her fellow-workers Margaret undertook a two-year investigation of shop conditions, which Mrs Gilchrist Thompson, a member of the Women's Industrial Council, described as 'in the highest degree self-sacrificing [as it was] ruining her future in her own profession for the sake of the well-being and safety of girls unknown to her.'⁶⁴ Margaret's reports were the basis of a series of articles written by Vaughan Nash in the *Daily Chronicle* and in turn used by Sir John Lubbock as material for the 1896 Shop Assistants Act, which made stringent alterations in 'living-in' conditions. This success gave Margaret the impetus to set her sights higher. She declared that her ambitions now lay, not in shop work, nor in domesticity, but in public service:

⁶³ Margaret Bondfield, *A Life's Work*, p.28.

⁶⁴ Margaret Bondfield, *A Life's Work*, p.32.

I had no vocation for wifehood and motherhood, but an urge to serve the Union – an urge which developed into ‘a sense of oneness with our kind.’⁶⁵

Margaret’s ‘sense of oneness’ with fellow-workers was the key to her successful union career. It may have had its roots in her childhood: she had been born into a working-class Methodist family and had been brought up in an atmosphere where respectable honest labour, a sober and earnest commitment to Chapel, and responsibility towards the family were expected. Her dedication to this wider family of fellow-workers helped her achieve success. In 1898 the Shop Assistants’ Union asked her to be their assistant secretary at a salary of £2 per week. She achieved a move towards the political equality she sought when in 1899 she was the first woman delegate at the Trades Union Congress in Plymouth. Her union career continued until in 1923: although she resigned from her position as union secretary owing to ill-health in 1908, she continued in union work to 1938. Her wider activities included becoming the founder member and organising secretary of Women’s Labour League and chief women’s officer of National Union of General and Municipal Workers from 1921. She was also a member of the Women’s Trade Union League. As a tribute to her energy and devotion to the union movement, she was made the first woman chairman of the General Council of the TUC.

Margaret’s autobiography also underlines that for her political success was entwined with idealism. She stressed the personal ethos behind her work with the trades union, which she envisaged as a ‘Christian society’ of people working together and doing the best they could with their lives:

Our task is to conserve the nobility of character and devotion which has been a feature of the working woman of the past, with a clear conception of shared responsibility, which for the working girl is best expressed

⁶⁵ Margaret Bondfield, *A Life’s Work*, p.37.

through active Trade Union membership. Each is capable of making an individual contribution to a Christian society of men and women, from whom the economic contribution may be large or small, but whose really important gift to the world will be that of living the best life of which they are capable.⁶⁶

And describing the religious ideology which underpinned the history of the trades union, she demonstrated that her motivation for union work sprang from her Christian upbringing:

From most points of view the Movement in Britain was inspired by religion, sometimes unorthodox, but was never anti-religious. There have always been ministers and clergy ready to stand by the worker, as far back as the seventeenth century and before with figures such as William Langland and John Ball.

Early Trade Union executive members worked for the Union after sixty or eighty hours a week in paid employment. Sacrificing nights' sleep and Sundays to attend meetings and help fellow-workers – continued patient effort with no immediate tangible results. To be as unselfish a human being must be sustained by faith and hope and helping others. The satisfaction of such sustained selflessness must be the very love of one's neighbours so emphasized in the New Testament. Workers have evolved a whole series of methods for interpreting the principles of Christianity so that they make sense of what could be a bleak workaday world – a social habit of caring for others.⁶⁷

Margaret's words were not just empty rhetoric. She never married, but remained in the Labour movement, the history of which, she claimed when writing her autobiography, was difficult to separate from her own. She continued to be both teetotal, and deeply religious. The strong Methodist tradition in which she had been raised strengthened her beliefs in doing what she felt was right. That this also brought success was something which she put into context as a practicing Christian.

⁶⁶ Margaret Bondfield, *A Life's Work*, p.330.

⁶⁷ Margaret Bondfield, *A Life's Work*, p.149.

When Annie Kenney left school at thirteen, in 1893, she began work at Wood End cotton mill, in Lees, Lancashire. After a few years in the mill, Annie became, with many of her fellow-workers, a member of the Cardroom Association Union. When she was twenty, Annie recalled a widening of political interests:

Life wore a still more serious aspect. I became interested in Labour, or I should say in Robert Blatchford's articles appearing in the *Clarion*. His writings on Nature, Poetry, Philosophy, Life, were my great weekly treat. Thousands of men and women in the Lancashire factories owe their education to Robert Blatchford.⁶⁸

In the early 1890s Annie was offered a job as Union organizer, persuading factory girls to join. She made a good recruiter, and was encouraged by the Union official who praised her success at bringing in more members than the male recruiters. Annie therefore had the support of at least one male colleague. Her union involvement made her aware of the inequalities between the treatment of men and women workers, and of the fact that women were under-represented in the trades union hierarchy:

I went to Blackburn and held meetings among the women and girls of the factories. When my two weeks were finished the Trade-Union Official informed me that I had made more members during my visit than they had made in a year. The news of this success pleased and encouraged me.

It was not until I had worked among them that I had fully realized the necessity of having women on the local committees. There were 96,000 women members of the Trade Union, and yet there was not one woman official.⁶⁹

In an attempt to improve this situation for the women Trade Union members, Annie put her name down for election on the local committee in Lees and began to canvass for votes. She was successful, and became the first woman in any of the textile unions to be elected to the district committee. She had got more votes than either of the two men candidates. Like Alice Foley and Nellie Scott, Annie saw this pioneering victory as a successful step

⁶⁸ Annie Kenney, *Memories of a Militant*, p.23.

⁶⁹ Annie Kenney, *Memories of a Militant*, p.31.

in her fight for equality: her fellow women workers now had some equity with men workers, and an officially elected spokeswoman to air their grievances at Union meetings. Annie Kenney's success in the work-place gave her the courage to broaden her campaigning and to confront the inequalities mirrored in society at large. A friend in the Union invited her to attend a meeting at the Oldham Trades Council in 1905, at which Christabel Pankhurst was to speak. Later that year Annie left for London to join the Pankhursts and was to come to the forefront of the suffragette movement.

The Suffrage Movement

Eight of the autobiographers describe their support of the suffrage movement. Of these Margaret Bondfield was a member of the Adult Suffrage Movement, Winifred Griffiths spoke at Labour meetings in support of women's suffrage, Ada Nield Chew and Mary Luty were members of the NUWSS, and Hannah Mitchell, Annie Kenney, Mary Gawthorpe and Annie Barnes were militant suffragettes for the WSPU.

Among the mass of women who worked, as Annie did, in the industrial north, there was a mostly untapped source of support for the suffrage cause, although the Special Appeal managed by Esther Roper between 1894-1896 had prompted her focus on women textile workers in the Manchester area as potential members of the NUWSS.⁷⁰ However Annie saw that middle-class political organizers were too removed from working-class lives; to encourage and recruit potential working-class support, organisers with an understanding of working-class lives were required.⁷¹ Yet Annie Kenney and other working-class women, could not, like their middle-class counterparts, afford to work voluntarily.⁷² This raised an obvious issue for working-class women activists for whom earning their own living could

⁷⁰ Sandra Stanley Holton, *Suffrage Days*, p.100.

⁷¹ See for instance, Sandra Stanley Holton, *Suffrage Days*, pp.49-52.

⁷² Martin Pugh, *The March of the Women*, pp.213-214.

be a double-edged sword. In some respects they already had many social freedoms denied to those middle class women without an income – not least that they could go out to work and earn a living. The drawback for many working-class women, however motivated, was that lack of spare time and money precluded them from offering to support the Suffrage Societies on a voluntary basis ⁷³. On the other hand, working-class women could be of immense use to the movement. As working women they were already in the public sphere, and often they were already involved with politics. As trade union members, for instance, they were used to attending meetings, speaking publicly, canvassing and casting votes, all of which could be useful skills to the suffrage movement.

By the first decades of the twentieth century the situation had changed. The WSPU began to encourage political actions by working-class supporters, using some of its funding to pay a salary to some working-class organizers for performing duties which middle-class suffragettes performed voluntarily.⁷⁴ Of the cohort, Ada Nield Chew, Mary Gawthorpe and Annie Kenney were all paid by the NUWSS or the WSPU.⁷⁵

Aware of the impact large organized groups of working-class women would make, in 1906 Annie brought 300 women from the East End of London to a meeting in Caxton Hall.⁷⁶ She later ensured that groups of women from the Lancashire mills would be conspicuously represented at the London rallies: as she insisted that they came to London dressed in ‘clogs and shawls’ to proclaim their working-class status.⁷⁷ One particular protest, when she persuaded a large deputation of Lancashire and Yorkshire factory

⁷³ Sandra Stanley Holton, *Suffrage Days*, p.121 described Mary Gawthorpe speaking to meetings in Leeds including local branches of teachers’ organizations and trades union as well as socialist and suffrage societies.

⁷⁴ Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, p.229.

⁷⁵ Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, p.232.

⁷⁶ Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, pp.204-205.

⁷⁷ Annie Kenney, *Memories of a Militant*, p.113.

women to come to London, was, for Annie, a 'supreme' measure of her political and personal success, as it epitomised all she had been working for. Political success for Annie had come in her ability to organise working-class women to help themselves, and to take pride in doing so:

No deputation that I had helped to work up gave me such supreme joy, satisfaction and happiness, as did the deputation of March 20th 1907.⁷⁸

In spite of their belief in the fight for equal rights and women's suffrage, many of the cohort perceived a need to justify their actions. Annie Kenney, for example, gave a religious underpinning to her work for the suffragette movement. In emotive terms she expressed the force and depth of her feelings when she wrote in her autobiography:

The Militant Movement was more like a religious revival than a political movement. It stirred the emotions, it aroused passions, it awakened the human chord which responds to the battle-cry of freedom. It was a genuine reform for emancipation, led by earnest, unselfish, self-sacrificing women.

All women were appealed to. Class barriers were broken down; political distinctions swept away; religious differences forgotten. All women were as one.⁷⁹

Annie appeared to be making little of class differences here, although she was by then a friend and colleague of the middle-class Pankhursts, so was one of the 'earnest, unselfish, self-sacrificing' leaders. She claimed that all women had a right to equality whatever their origins – there should be no differences. This was not just a retrospective viewpoint aired in 1924 when Annie wrote her autobiography: for in 1906 she had written an article encouraging support for the 'votes for women' campaign in the *Labour Record* on this very theme. Appealing to working women she called for unity:

For the love of Justice, home and the little ones, working women of England, I ask you to stand shoulder to shoulder

⁷⁸ Annie Kenney, *Memories of a Militant*, p.115.

⁷⁹ Annie Kenney, *Memories of a Militant*, p.298.

with us in demanding our Political Freedom. Remember,
“Those who would be free themselves must strike the first
blow.” *We have asked, pleaded, and prayed for over sixty
years: now we must fight.*⁸⁰

Autobiographer Hannah Mitchell also saw religion as the basis for her political involvement. When she was aged thirty-three, in 1905, she began to work for the Pankhursts, in Manchester sharing in ‘the intense propaganda which preceded the outbreak of militancy in October 1905.’⁸¹ She met Annie Kenney during this time, and in her autobiography Hannah described Annie as a ‘fine example of the self-respecting Lancashire mill girl, intellectual and independent. All the Kenney girls became active in the WSPU but Annie flung herself into the struggle with all the fervour of a religious crusader.’⁸² Hannah continued:

From every part of Britain, women began to respond,
everywhere we went women of all classes rallied to the
militant banner. Indeed the struggle of the women seemed
like the quest of the Holy Grail.⁸³

Hannah’s notion of a religious crusade and a search for the holy grail echoes the tone of Annie Kenney’s ‘religious revival’ simile quoted above, and illustrates the religious underpinning to the actions of women involved in the suffrage struggle.⁸⁴ In using such motifs they were drawing on religion and religious or moral ideology to explain or justify their actions. By doing so these women were putting up a protective barrier against accusations that could be levelled at them. Susan Kingsley Kent has argued that anti-suffrage supporters saw the entry of women into the public sphere as undermining the

⁸⁰ Annie Kenney, ‘Votes for Women: Stirring Scenes in London During the Month, A Message from Miss Annie Kenney’, in *The Labour Record*, March 1906.

⁸¹ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.127.

⁸² Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p. 127.

⁸³ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.135.

⁸⁴ Annie Kenney *Memories of a Militant*, p. 72.

security of women in general.⁸⁵ She cites the *Anti-Suffrage Review* of August 1909 which insists that the militants would undermine law and order.⁸⁶ Hannah and Annie's words reveal a gulf, and also a way of bridging the gulf, between prescription and practice in working class women's lives. By invoking religious ideology in their political activism they showed that they were conforming to the broadly accepted social conventions. And by adhering to family values of respectability, family and orthodox religion, they retained the womanly ideal while justifying their adoption of less womanly behaviour - such as public speaking, marching in demonstrations, and agitating for equality.

In stressing equality and unity of all women under the militant banner Annie and Hannah challenged the view that the suffrage movement was middle-class in perspective. Their autobiographies reveal that they saw their involvement as important as that of the middle-class and also that their union activities had given them confidence in their own abilities. They held the conviction that the small steps achieved towards equality with men in the work-place should be echoed in the wider society. There were many more working-class women involved in the movement than historians have generally acknowledged.⁸⁷ In 1901, for instance, a women's suffrage petition had been signed by as many as 29,359 Lancashire women textile workers.⁸⁸ However, in 1970 the seminal work, *One Hand Tied Behind Us* was published by the feminist historians Jill Liddington and Jill Norris. They brought together for the first time the scattered evidence of working women in the mill towns and other industrial areas of North east England.⁸⁹ The authors describe a network

⁸⁵ Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain*, pp. 180-183.

⁸⁶ Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain*, p. 181.

⁸⁷ See for instance, Ray Strachey, *The Cause* (London: G. Bell, 1928); Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain*; although Pugh has since acknowledged, to a certain extent, the input from working-class women in what he calls 'a revisionist analysis of the campaign for women's suffrage', Martin Pugh, *The March of the Women*.

⁸⁸ Kathryn Geadle, *British Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p.115.

⁸⁹ Liddington and Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*.

of Labour-orientated and mostly working-class 'radical suffragists' one of whom was Ada Nield Chew.

Ada Nield Chew was able to support the suffragette movement because, from 1911, the NUWSS paid her wages as full-time organizer, out of union funds. However, she was very sensitive about being paid for her suffrage work, as her daughter, Doris, recalled:

You have to remember that my mother was doing this work, not only because she believed in it, but because she wanted the money. She was an introvert and she was a very proud woman. I told you, the National Union was run mostly by women – well, it was run by - full stop - middle class women. And she liked them, and she admired them, and she respected them. But she thought that a few of them looked down on her because she had to be paid for what she did and she resented that very much.⁹⁰

Like Annie Kenney, Ada had become aware of suffrage issues through employment in the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL)⁹¹. In 1911 she started a series of articles to be published in the suffrage publication *The Common Cause*. To raise public awareness outside the suffrage movement Ada also wrote many letters, articles, sketches and stories, which were published in magazines and newspapers of the time, including *Freewoman* and *The Clarion*. These were controversial, and her article 'The Problem of the Married Woman', calling for equality within marriage, which was published on 6 March 1914, was prefaced by a disclaimer from the editors to distance themselves from her views.⁹² Nevertheless they continued to publish her articles, so Ada's controversial stance must have helped to sell the paper, and suggests growing support for her views.

⁹⁰ From an interview with Ada Nield Chew's daughter in 1976, recorded by Liddington and Norris in *One Hand Tied Behind Us* p. 232.

⁹¹ Ada was a WTUL organizer 1900-1908. See Ada Nield Chew, *The Life and Writings of a Working Woman*, p. 27.

⁹² See pp.230-234 in *Ada Nield Chew: The Life and Writings of a Working Woman*, for the full text of this article.

Political activism was sometimes difficult for those women who were not earning their own wage, but were at home with family duties, and dependent on husband or father who held different political views. Annie Barnes illustrated the difficulties for those with no income, who wanted to take part in the women's movement but to do so would go against the wishes of the male members of the family. On leaving school Annie had worked as a shop assistant in her father's grocery shop, and after the death of her mother around 1910 she ran the family home and brought up her younger brothers and sisters. Annie, however, remained dependent economically on her father, since she still lived in the family home and earned no money. However, that year Annie joined the East End London Federation of Suffragettes after talking to Sylvia Pankhurst at a meeting for new recruits. She had lively recollections of the 'adventures' that support for the suffrage movement entailed.⁹³ Annie's involvement at this stage was limited. She recalled a call for suffragettes to disrupt parliamentary proceedings by throwing bags of flour from the gallery:

I couldn't volunteer for that because I knew whoever did would get caught. I had commitments at home looking after all my brothers and sisters. I couldn't chance imprisonment. But I did volunteer for other things that were less risky.⁹⁴

Despite joining in some of the activities of the suffragettes, Annie was still under the jurisdiction of her father within the home where a patriarchal rule obviously held. The political activity she undertook was hidden from the rest of her family. Her father, Annie revealed, would not have looked favourably on her suffragette activities:

There was always a risk but I just had to accept that. I couldn't attend meetings regularly. I went now and again when I could slip out without my father noticing. The children didn't know, and goodness knows what the old man would have said if he'd ever found out what I was up to. I seem to have been very lucky to get away with it.⁹⁵

⁹³ Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie*, pp. 14-15.

⁹⁴ Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie*, p.15.

⁹⁵ Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie*, p.16.

Annie's strict moral upbringing and her mother's insistence on telling the truth seemed to have been forgotten. Her active support of the suffragettes gave Annie a sense of purpose outside her domestic duties: 'The East End had seemed so quiet, and all at once it became tense with excitement. Meetings here, meetings there. It was marvellous.'⁹⁶

Socialism and the Labour Movement

Suffrage activities or trade union participation often led to membership of a political party – usually the Labour Party, since this supported the trades union and a wider franchise.

Autobiographers Annie Barnes, Margaret Bondfield, Mary Gawthorpe, Hannah Mitchell and Ellen Wilkinson, who achieved success within an active political framework, were all members of the Labour movement. Changes were beginning to happen which encouraged an interest in political events, as feminist efforts to improve women's education and ensure more property rights for women had a knock-on effect for working-class women. As early as 1895 the property qualification for membership of, and voting rights for, local government office had been opened to all householders, increasing the number of women, as well as working men, eligible to stand. Mary Gawthorpe realised the irony that women could vote as householders in local government elections, but were still excluded from the national parliamentary electorate:

And I was the householder, the rent payer, thus qualified for the municipal vote. This experience became an asset when later I became a suffragist, demanding a real vote instead of what we called a property vote, a differentiation which had aspects of humour, considering. But as of the period of which I am writing, I had a vote as a householder yet could not vote for a parliamentary candidate. The practical illustration was potent.⁹⁷

Most of the politically active autobiographers came to Socialism with the encouragement of friends who lent them reading material. The writings of Robert Blatchford appeared

⁹⁶ Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie*, pp. 15-16.

⁹⁷ Mary Gawthorpe, *Up Hill to Holloway*, p.157.

seminal. Annie Barnes, Alice Foley, Winifred Griffiths, Annie Kenney and Ellen Wilkinson all mention his work. Socialism, and the political party which represented its beliefs, the ILP, thus facilitated women's involvement in political activism. A range of organizations which covered almost all social and economic life were developed by the labour movement from the 1890s.⁹⁸ By dealing with issues that most women felt strongly about and with which they could identify, their involvement with the ILP was encouraged. The passing or implementation of policies to do with housing, welfare, health and childcare was of major importance to the day to day life of women. Favourable outcomes, such as the setting up of child welfare clinics, as Alice Foley's sister Cissy had done, where organizational skills were utilized were therefore seen as political success.

In 1917 Annie Barnes founded a Co-operative Women's Guild in Stepney, and became a member of the Stepney Labour Party. She married Albert Barnes after the War in 1919, both had been members of the ILP before their marriage. Albert also became a Labour Party member after their marriage but, Annie wrote, 'he was never very active'. However, unlike Annie's father, Albert provides another example of male support for women's public achievement as Annie recalled his encouragement of her socialist activities. Annie worked to help build up the Labour Party in Stepney and laboured tirelessly for social causes. She attributed her confidence and success down to her early years as a suffragette:

It was all so exciting. We were going to change the world. Being a suffragette had started me off fighting and given me the training, as it were. Now that women had the vote (or some of them at any rate), it was time to start fighting for better conditions for ordinary people. The Labour Party really cared about the people.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ This is the labour movement rather than the Labour Party, which did not surface until 1900, winning 29 seats in the 1906 election. For a history of the British Labour Party, see, for instance, Henry Pelling, *A Short History of the Labour Party* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1961, republished in ten editions until 1993); Andrew Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997).

⁹⁹ Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie*, p.30.

The title of Annie Barnes' autobiography *From Suffragette to Stepney Councillor* reflects the importance she placed on her progress from the suffrage movement to taking public office, where she could continue her fight for equality on a wider front. Several of the women came to Socialism through suffrage. Although the Pankhursts were later to split from the ILP, 'Sylvia Pankhurst', Annie wrote, 'had us all join the ILP.'¹⁰⁰ She added, 'I never said anything if I wasn't sure I was right. Sylvia had taught me that. I got all that courage from the suffragettes.'¹⁰¹ Annie was elected a Councillor in the 1934 local elections when the Labour Party gained control of 24 out of the 28 London Boroughs. '1934 was a great victory' she claimed.¹⁰² Annie Barnes was to serve as Councillor until 1949. As she retired, her political success was acknowledged publicly. When it was announced that she would not be standing for the 1949 borough election, one of the male members of the Council gave a valedictory address in which he stated that Annie Barnes would always be 'remembered with pride and affection.'¹⁰³

In 1906, Sir Charles Dilke introduced the 'Franchise and Removal of Women's Disabilities Bill' to parliament.¹⁰⁴ Clause four of the Bill finally enabled women to stand for local election:

No person shall be disqualified by sex or marriage from being elected or being a member of either House of Parliament, or of a Borough or County Council, or from exercising any public function whatever.¹⁰⁵

The bill was to be instrumental in opening up a whole new range of careers in local government to women. The papers were quick to publicize this entrée for working-class

¹⁰⁰ Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie*, p.15.

¹⁰¹ Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie*, p.32.

¹⁰² Annie Barnes, *Tough Annie*, p. 40.

¹⁰³ *The East End News*, 5 March 1948.

¹⁰⁴ For more details on this bill see the British Library's holding of the pamphlet by Sir Charles W. Dilke, *Woman Suffrage and Electoral Reform*, published in London, 1906, by The People's Suffrage Federation it was sold at two pence a copy.

¹⁰⁵ The Franchise and Removal of Women's Disabilities Bill, Clause Four, Parliamentary Papers for 1906.

women, citing as their example Margaret Bondfield. *The Tribune* for example, that week described Margaret as ‘a hearty supporter of the woman MP.’ Margaret took advantage of the new legislation, and it set her on a political pathway, which after women were given the national franchise in 1918 eventually led her to a parliamentary career. This included her becoming Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Labour and MP for Northampton between 1923-4 and Walsend in 1926-31. Her career culminated in her becoming the first woman to attain Ministerial rank, she was in a cabinet post as Minister of Labour in 1929, and the first woman to become a member of the Privy Council. When she became a Cabinet Minister, Margaret expressed her ‘deep satisfaction’, and explained the religious basis for the idealism behind her feelings:

This ‘satisfaction’ when the work causing it is directed to the benefit of other people, is that very same love of one’s neighbour which is so emphasized in the New Testament. It is itself a religious experience.¹⁰⁶

Margaret helped to found the Women’s Group on Public Welfare; her life was continued in dedication to the Labour Movement, women and family issues and social service.

Towards the end of her autobiography, which she wrote between 1941 and its publication in 1950 Margaret again drew out the thread between her work in the Labour movement and the religious justification behind it:

I have staked my life upon the truth of certain principles which I believe experience has taught me; that no improvement improves unless reached through inward conviction. The great Movement to which I have given all my life holds by these principles.

To find out how to do it takes a long time, and may involve many errors and much going back to retrieve them. It is the long years, the constant attempt, gradually becoming successful, to interpret principle in practice, the continual study to improve – all this that makes it so important.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Margaret Bondfield, *A Life’s Work*, p.354.

¹⁰⁷ Margaret Bondfield, *A Life’s Work*, pp. 355-356.

Women's entry to political office meant that domestic policies were generally given a higher profile in the public domain as the twentieth century progressed. Margaret Bondfield, for instance, was involved in the series of measures which resulted finally in 1934 in an extension of unemployment insurance, enabling unemployed wage-earners to continue to provide for their families. Awareness of such issues, in part, came with feminist articles and periodicals, which were increasingly available to an expanding audience. Autobiographer Mary Gawthorpe, for example, was co-editor, with Dora Marsden, of *Freewoman* a short-lived 'radical weekly feminist review' which was published between November 1911 and October 1912. Both women were ex-WSPU activists and other contributors included Rebecca West, H.G.Wells, and Ada Nield Chew, all writers who by their ideas and in their lives were then challenging society. They discussed women's role, motherhood, reproduction and sexuality, and testified to the breadth of contemporary feminist debate.¹⁰⁸

Ellen Wilkinson joined the ILP at sixteen in 1897 when at the Pupil Teacher Centre in Manchester. Here she was encouraged by one of her lecturers Mr W. E. Elliot, to write articles and stories, and to stand for election to the school council.¹⁰⁹ Ellen, as the only girl who had spoken at school debates, was suggested as the socialist candidate. A senior pupil lent her Robert Blatchford's books *Britain for the British* and *Merry England*, and Mr Elliot suggested some further reading:

It was all very elementary, but Blatchford made Socialists in those days by the sheer simplicity of his argument. I went into that election an ardent, in fact a flaming, Socialist...I won by four.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Sandra Stanley Holton, *Suffrage Days*, pp. 156-158.

¹⁰⁹ Elliot was later to serve on the Board of Education for Manchester.

¹¹⁰ Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, pp. 406-7.

The ILP meetings were held on Sunday evenings and in order to attend her first socialist meeting in 1907, at which Katharine Bruce Glasier was to be the speaker, Ellen had to 'plan how I was to go to a political meeting instead of Chapel on a Sunday night.'¹¹¹ To miss Chapel was a rebellion from her strict upbringing:

All our social life, and that of nearly everyone we knew centred round the Wesleyan Chapel. In my younger days I thoroughly enjoyed it. But to my father, who started to preach at the age of fifteen as a "local preacher", chapel meant everything.¹¹²

However, Ellen's determination resulted in her father agreeing to her going. She found in the Socialist movement an assertion of an equality of the Wesleyan 'doctrine of the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of man'.¹¹³ Despite her rebellion Ellen could therefore justify her new faith in Socialism within the boundaries of family tradition. Later Ellen was to become an important figure in national politics. Ellen finished her training as a teacher, and taught for the required two years' as a probationer. But politics, and the Labour Party, were her first love and she continued her interest in Socialism throughout university and as a successful working politician. She became an organizer for the Amalgamated Union of Co-operative Employees, was appointed a school manager, and served on the Elementary Education Committee of Manchester City Council. Her political career began in earnest as she became active on unemployment demonstrations: she was one of those leading the Jarrow March in 1936. Ellen Wilkinson was elected as a Labour MP for Middlesbrough East and Jarrow between 1935-47. In 1940 she became Parliamentary Secretary to Susan Lawrence, the then Minister of Pensions. In 1940. Ellen

¹¹¹ Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, p.413.

¹¹² Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, p.401.

¹¹³ Ellen Wilkinson, *Myself When Young*, p.401.

was made Minister of Education, and in 1946 she received an honorary degree from Manchester University.¹¹⁴

Hannah Mitchell also became interested in Socialism after reading the work of Robert Blatchford. Hannah particularly recalled reading *Nunquam*, in which Blatchford dealt with slums and sweated industries, as at the time she was working as a dressmaker, and lodging in a small and crowded house in Bolton. Here she was introduced to the socialist ideals of a richer communal life by her fiancé, Gibbon Mitchell, whom she married in 1895. Both had grown up in poor families and were used to the rigours of working-class life. Possessing intelligence and a strong independent character, both were determined to improve their lot in life. Hannah read the socialist theories put forward in *The Clarion*, and began to attend socialist meetings and to speak publicly 'on street corners'.¹¹⁵ Although married life at first 'had no attraction' for Hannah, the ideas promulgated by Socialists saw marriage as a partnership, and this influenced her, she wrote, 'the idea of a newer, freer partnership appealed to me, and a home of my own seemed well worth working for.'¹¹⁶

The couple continued their socialist interests when in May 1900 they moved to Ashton-Under-Lyne. Despite being at home caring for her family Hannah still had the ambition to fight for the equalities she had been denied as a child. She had never given up her love of books and her intellectual questioning and interest in politics. Soon after moving to Ashton she was drawn into the local Socialist group, a branch of the Independent Labour Party. From an early age Hannah had resented the inequalities between the sexes, and

¹¹⁴ For a biography of Ellen Wilkinson see, Betty Vernon, *Ellen Wilkinson: 1891-1947* (London: Croom Helm, 1982).

¹¹⁵ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.86.

¹¹⁶ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.88.

since her marriage her interest in politics had grown. Both these threads were to come together now as an impetus to her political activities:

This disability of women grew into a real grievance in my mind when I began to take a keener interest in politics. I saw there were no women in Parliament, no women councillors, no women Guardians or Magistrates, few women doctors – indeed few women in any well-paid work at all.¹¹⁷

These grievances were to fuel Hannah's political development when the family moved back to Lancashire. Hannah took over from her husband as lecture secretary and agreed to speak at the Labour Church, taking as her subject '“The Women's Cause”: the inequalities between the sexes'. Later Hannah gained some public recognition as she was invited to speak to Hyde and Stockport Labour Churches on the same subject.

Hannah worked for the ILP in Lancashire, and then in Newhall, Derbyshire. Her involvement with the ILP provided Hannah with opportunities and experiences: she was able to travel, attending mass rallies in the country and meet national political figures such as Tom Fox, Bruce and Katharine Glasier, Keir Hardie, Ramsay MacDonald, and Philip Snowden. Later in Manchester Hannah met Mrs Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel and joined the suffragettes in 1905. Hannah had therefore already been a member of the ILP when she joined the suffrage movement, whereas other women describe suffrage leading them to Socialism. However, this two-way overlap between the movements was not really surprising, since in 1905 suffragettes and ILP speakers were working closely together as Annie Barnes underlined earlier. Hannah was on a team of speakers, working closely with Annie Kenney and Teresa Billington a Manchester teacher, whom Hannah described as a 'brilliant speaker'. Here the local ILP provided a bodyguard for the

¹¹⁷ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.115.

suffragettes: 'as Socialists they had some experience of the hooligan, and came to see that the women got a fair hearing'.¹¹⁸

In 1904, Hannah was elected to the board of guardians and she soon acquired knowledge of the Poor Law, often speaking publicly on the subject for the Board. Hannah was a pacifist and when the First World War began in 1914 she supported the anti-war organizations, the ILP No-Conscription Fellowship and the Women's International League.¹¹⁹ At the end of the war Hannah put all of her energies into Socialism. Hannah successfully re-founded a local branch of the ILP and her career in the next twenty years seemed to follow the fortunes of the ILP nationally. In 1924 Hannah was elected to Manchester City Council as a Labour-ILP member, retaining the seat with increasing majorities. In common with several of the autobiographers, Hannah justified her belief in Socialism by confirming the ideology behind it when she described a neighbour who helped with looking after her son, as: 'not a Socialist, although she possessed the breadth of mind and love of beauty which characterized the early Socialists.'¹²⁰

Winifred Griffiths became involved in local politics in 1920. While working at the Co-operative Stores during the First World War, her love of reading prompted her conversion to Socialism and she met a Welsh miner, James Griffiths, who became a trade unionist, a Labour MP, and in 1950, Secretary of State for the Colonies and Cabinet Minister.

Winifred supported her husband's parliamentary career while remaining very active on her own behalf in local politics and social work in addition to bringing up her four children.

¹¹⁸ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.128.

¹¹⁹ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.185.

¹²⁰ Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p.125.

In 1928, as a member of the Women's section of the local Labour Party in the Yniscedwyn Ward, Llanelli, South Wales, Winifred was elected District Councillor and Member of the board of guardians for Pontardawe. She also began writing articles for publication in the *Social Democrat* and in 1942, was appointed a JP. Winifred recorded her awareness of the distance they had come in their working life together, on the occasion of her husband's first becoming Secretary of State:

I must confess to a thrill as we rode from the station in the official car with the pennant of the Secretary of State on the bonnet. I thought back to the time when I had married a young collier from the Anthracite coalfield, who, although beginning to make a name for himself in his own valley, was hardly known outside. Since then he had given a full life of service to the miners, to Wales, and to the whole country. This was a proud day for Jim and for me.¹²¹

As the couple retired from public life, Winifred looked back and highlighted the altruistic ideals behind her life as a Socialist, and her own achievements:

At times I think back to the years before the First World War, when I was still in my teens, and the idea of 'From each according to his ability, and to each according to his need' excited my imagination and made me a Socialist. The idea became a guiding light by which I hoped to shape my life. Since then I have tried to do so with success.¹²²

Winifred had enjoyed the public acknowledgement of her success, yet she also accepted the rules laid down by society about women's place, and also valued economic and domestic success; she and her husband brought up their four children in relative comfort, domestic fulfilment and happiness in their married life. However, Winifred also negotiated societal rules, and gained public success and recognition by concentrating her campaigning on domestic issues. In doing so she lived up to the accepted ideology of respectability, yet also demonstrated values important to herself, and to her success.

¹²¹ Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, p.161.

¹²² Winifred Griffiths, *One Woman's Story*, pp. 163-64.

Perhaps more than any of the twenty-six autobiographers, Winifred Griffiths epitomised the experiences of women who were born into the working class, took opportunities offered by changes in society to achieve success in both the domestic and public sphere of their lives, and who reveal the nature of that success in their autobiographies.

Conclusion

The ability to have a measure of control of their own lives was a major part of how the women perceived themselves as politically successful. In taking part in activities outside the home women were making a political statement about their place in society, their rights, and their freedoms. In general, the societal upsurge of political activity which was taking place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was reflected in a greater political awareness for women. The autobiographers show that this process extended to those from the working class.

The twelve members of the cohort who became politically active in some cases ascribe their awareness of politics to their childhood home environment: politically aware parents or siblings fostered expectations in the women's lives which made them see political activism for social change as part of striving for success. Activities in politically-orientated clubs and organizations as they were growing up also played their part in the process. As adults, work-place experiences and poor conditions for fellow-workers motivated their ambitions for bringing about change. Institutions such as the Women's Guild, trades union, socialist groups, and the labour movement, which the women joined as adults, gave impetus to their campaigns for reform. The women reveal that it was by participation in these institutions that they were enabled to find the confidence to speak publicly, and become familiar with voting and organizing themselves and others. These

skills facilitated participation as activists in the campaigns for wider franchise or else led to involvement in a more formal way with party politics. Local politics were also important in bringing about changes in society. Women used to using support networks in bringing up children, caring for elderly relatives, and generally running the home, took naturally to the communal ethos of Socialism. Local politics were seen as an extension of the home, charity and philanthropic work, and had a history of women's participation. Yet while adult women aged over twenty-one were able to vote from 1928, relatively few women of any class became representative at either national or local level in the succeeding years.¹²³ This makes the public activism and political success of the women autobiographers even more remarkable.

The women reconciled their potentially rebellious or unwomanly behaviour while engaged in political activism, with their need to be respectable by invoking religion and the scriptures to sanctify their political and public activities. Political success meant that the women could be perceived as stepping outside traditional female roles of modesty, subservience and self-effacement. This opened up a gulf between prescription – how they *should* behave as respectable women within proscribed spheres - and perception - how they *actually* behaved as campaigners, public speakers and successful socially mobile members of a new society. The justification they give in their autobiographies is their way of bridging this gap. They may have had selfish motivations for their ambitions – fame, fortune or glory, but they do not admit to this. Instead they retained their femininity by couching their writing in moral or religious terms, or suggesting an altruistic motivation for helping others. While these motifs were based on, and help to reinforce, existing gender roles, they also provide the women with a justification of their actions.

¹²³ For discussion of this topic see, for example, Ruth Henig and Simon Henig, *Women and Political Power*, pp. 1-22; Andrew Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, pp.175-176.

Childhood experiences and family background, the interests of friends in politically-orientated clubs and societies, or campaigning for work-place equality which translated to the wider society, all gave women the confidence to exert their own freedom to become engaged in public life. Some of the cohort were helped in their political activities by the support of their husbands or with encouragement of male colleagues or friends. Others were paid by the political institutions. The public recognition of their achievements in the form of awards and positions in government meant that social attitudes had changed regarding these women and their part in politics. Political reforms were the most important change possible in these women's lifetimes. By the early decades of the twentieth century their political power had been formalized. They encompassed the ideology of respectability and idealism while moving firmly onto the public stage, and achieved success in what was ostensibly a male sphere of action.

Thesis Conclusion

Preliminary research began with an interest in the autobiographies of working-class women born in England between 1790 and 1900, of which there are 136 extant examples. Before this period, inability to write, lack of time, or inclination, may have precluded autobiographies from such women. A difference in tone and content was noted in all of the 26 published autobiographies from a generation, or cohort, of women born between 1870 and 1900 when for the first time working-class women began to describe themselves as having successful lives. The thesis turns on why this should be so, and explores the nature of success described by the women.

The thesis opened with a brief introduction to recent publications about success, and present-day celebrity autobiographies, in which stories of success from humble beginnings abound. It continued by drawing attention to the difference in the perceptions of success of these modern success stories in comparison with nineteenth century writings. Success in the nineteenth century was achieved by men, and in a few cases, and in proscribed areas, by elite women. Working class women may have achieved success, but they left no record of it. This situation changed as the cohort wrote their autobiographies. These women describe success variously: learning to read and write; gaining scholarships and formal qualifications; acquiring domestic skills which gave them better job prospects or enabled them to care for their own home and family; gaining independence from their parents; the ability to buy a wide range of consumer goods; promotion to a better paid or more prestigious job; a better home; access to leisure pursuits and generally a more comfortable and upwardly-mobile life-style. Most significantly, they also describe success in terms of striving towards, and gaining, a measure of status, in society, in the workplace and in politics.

Although rarely using the word ‘success’ the women defined their achievements in life and described the routes they had taken to achieve their ambitions. Their progress was made possible because over the period the role of working-class women in society had begun to change. The cohort chose to describe these changes in the areas of education, domesticity, economics and politics. Led by the women’s texts, each of these areas has been the subject of a chapter of this thesis, for which, therefore, a thematic approach was adopted.

The importance of these texts in the wider sweep of working-class history is that they partly fill the transition between late nineteenth and late twentieth century perceptions of success. Although the autobiographies are few in number they reflect considerable diversity in the lives of the writers: the strata of working-class society into which they were born – from itinerant beggar to relatively affluent shop-keeper’s daughter; where they lived – from a remote hillside farm in Derbyshire to inner-city London; their education – from two weeks of formal schooling to a university education, and occupation – from seamstress to Cabinet Minister. Inevitably each account is highly individual; but taken together they contribute to the sum of historical knowledge by giving broad insights into the diverse gendered and class-specific experiences of a generation of working-class women during a seminal period in English history.

The cohort did not accept the lives they were born into. They displayed a contrast with the lives of previous generations of their families, as incrementally, and by a combination of serendipity and planned action, they found pathways to better themselves. Their writing showed an awareness of the constraints imposed by the gendered patriarchal society in which they lived. Yet, during the period studied, extensive political and social

changes took place which enabled them to improve their lives within a working-class culture which they perceived as changing and dynamic rather than static and repressive.

As a result of new legislation arising from the 1870 Education Acts most of the women were enabled to attend school for a significant part of their childhood. Furthermore, openings for secondary education, and institutional help in the form of scholarships created new opportunities that were changing educational outcomes for some women: those with the personal drive and ability to overcome the gender and class bias at home and school could achieve a place in further education. Yet a significant number of the cohort conformed to societal constraints: they welcomed the learning of domestic skills, but as a path to advancement rather than as a top-down method of social control for working-class girls. For all or part of their lives they were happy to adhere to their proscribed female role and took pride in the care of family and home, or a good position as a domestic servant in a large household, thus conforming to notions of respectability valued both by themselves and by society.

A fundamental difference between these women and preceding generations was that as they moved from childhood to adulthood, they had greater freedom to make decisions about their own lives. Although still limited by their class and gender, opportunities in a widening range of occupations enabled them to seek economic success. This was illustrated in as the women improved their standard of living, material wealth and social mobility: they took control of family income from their husbands and older children, and became one of a new generation of working-class consumer. They were helped by various factors: institutional reform in education; the workplace; and, most importantly, in politics; together with the encouragement and support of networks of family, friends,

neighbours, teachers, and work-colleagues, reinforced the motivation of these women to expand the boundaries of what working-class women could do or become.

Support networks were important for these women, and particularly for those rebels among them who defied social conventions that traditionally confined women's aspirations to the home. Male perceptions of women's gender and class roles began to change and as a result family dynamics altered so that some women during this period had the emotional and financial support of their husbands, or male colleagues as they took advantage of parliamentary reforms to succeed in the political arena. The cohort included some of the first pioneering women to take public office both locally and nationally. Many had important roles in campaigns for equality in the work-place and in the wider social and political sphere. It was in these areas that they were able to benefit not just themselves and their immediate family, but other women like themselves who lacked the opportunities, impetus or ability to succeed.

The cohort has revealed that during the period women of their class had new choices in their lives. No longer completely constrained by prescribed gendered roles, they could choose to conform to their traditional place in the private domestic sphere, to succeed in the public sphere of work or politics, or to achieve a balance of both public and private. They could change direction during their lives and were no longer limited to one set course. As a result of societal and political changes, in education, employment, and most significantly, the wider enfranchisement which opened up opportunities in politics, women born into the working class could now take their place on the public stage in what was previously an exclusively male arena.

The women's perceptions of success were as diverse as their experiences. The importance of their achievements was in the change not only within individual lives but in the contrast with the lives of previous generations of women born into the working-class. Working class women in general from this period have left scant evidence of their experiences and their thoughts. These autobiographies remain as a window into the lives of the cohort and other women like them. They have an emotional power: at one level they are a record of personal struggle and achievement: at another they are important social documents that chart the lives of working-class women at a time of profound social and political development. As a result, the success of working-class women, once neglected or discounted, has become the record of a changing society.

Last Name	First	DOB	Family	Place of Birth	Father's Job	Education	occupation	Faith	Marriage
Barnes	Annie	1887	1st of 3	East End, London	shop manager	local school to 15	shop assistant	C of E	married 1919
Bondfield	Margaret	1873	10th of 11	Chard, Somerset	lacemaker	local school to 14	shop assistant	Wesleyan	spinster
Chew (nee Neild)	Ada	1870	12th of 12	Crewe	brick setter	local school to 11	factory worker	u/k	married 1897
Cooke (nee Smith)	Isabella	1890	1st of 8	Grt Strickland, Westmorland	farm labourer	local school to 13	domestic service	u/k	married 1916
Cowper	Agnes	1874	2nd of 9	Liverpool	seaman	local school to 11	domestic duties	C of E	no record
Edwards (nee Cutis)	Mildred	1889	3rd of 7	Carlisle	railwayman	local school to 13	domestic duties	R C	married 1915
Foakes	Grace	1900	1 of 5	Stepney, London	dockworker	local school to 14	waitress	C of E	married 1920
Foley	Alice	1891	6th of 6	Bolton, Lancs	mill worker	Catholic School to 12	factory worker	R C	spinster
Gawthorpe	Mary	1881	3rd of 5	Meanwood, Leeds	tanner	trained as teacher	teacher	C of E	married 1921
Gibbs	Rose	1892	3rd of 3	East End, London	soldier	Local school to 13	domestic service	u/k	married 1915
Griffiths (nee Rutley)	Winifred	1895	2nd of 4	Overton, Hants	mill worker	Church school 4-14	factory worker	C of E	Married 1918
Harvey	Bessie	1874	u/k	Newton-Le-Willows	horse keeper	local school to 12	domestic service	u/k	Married 1896
Hills	Daisy	1899	1 of 2	Old Frimley, Surrey	Farm bailiff	local school 8-12	farm worker	C of E	spinster
Hills	u/k	1893	u/k	Leighton Bromswold, Cambs	horse keeper	Local school 3-12	domestic service	C of E	Married 1916
Hull (nee Payne)	Maria	1881	u/k	Derbyshire	barman	local school 3-12	domestic service	u/k	married 1906
Jerry (nee Withers)	Louise	1877	2nd of 2	Dalson, London	stonemason	Local school to 12	seamstress	Chapel	married 1911
Kenney	Annie	1879	5th of 11	Springhead, Lancs	textile worker	local school to 12	factory worker	C of E	married 1920
Luty	Mary	1875	1 of 2	Rossendale, Lancs	tenant farmer	local school 7-11	factory worker	C of E	spinster
May	Betty	c.1890	1 of 4	London	mechanic	local school 9-12	dancer	u/k	married u/k
Mitchell (nee Webster)	Hannah	1871	4th of 6	Alport Dale, Derbyshire	tenant farmer	local school fortnight	seamstress	u/k	married 1895
Scott	Nellie	c.1890	u/k	Stockport	shop assistant	local school to 12	factory worker	C of E	married 1910
Silvester	Susan	1878	2nd of 4	Minworth, Warwickshire	farm labourer	local school 5-12	domestic service	Chapel	married 1902
Smith (nee Murphy)	Emma	1894	1st of 2	Redruth, Cornwall	fisherman	little schooling	domestic service	C of E	married 1920
Wilkinson	Ellen	1891	3rd of 4	Chorlton on Medlock, Lancs	mill worker	university degree	teacher	u/k	spinster
Woodward	Kathleen	1896	1 of 6	London	printer	local school to 13	factory worker	u/k	no record
Yearn	u/k	c.1890	1 of 14	Oldham, Lancs	brick-setter	local school to 12	factory worker	u/k	married u/k
				Key: u/k = unknown information					
				C of E = Church of England					
				R C = Roman Catholic					

Appendix I Biographical Details of Cohort

Name	Autobiography Title	Written	Length	Where Published	Publisher	Date	Location
Barnes, A.	Tough Annie: From Suffragette to Stepney Councillor	1979	69 pages	London	Stepney Books	1979	Bodleian library
Bondfield, M	A Life's Work	c1947	359 pages	London	Hutchinson	1948	Bodleian library
Chew, A. N.	The Life and Writings of a Working Woman	1930	69 pages	London	Virago	1982	Bodleian
Cooke, I	A Hired Lass In Westmorland	1982	20 pages	Penrith	Cumberland Herald	1982	Carlisle library
Cowper, A	A backward Glance at Merseyside	1944-48	114 pages	Birkenhead	Willmer Brothers	1948	Brunel University
Edwards, M.	Our City, Our People 1889-1978: Memories	1977	73 pages	Carlisle	Private printers	1978	Carlisle library
Foakes, G.	Between High Walls/My Part of the River/Reuben	1960-70	3 volumes	London	Walwyn Shepherd	1972	British Library
Foley, A.	A Bolton Childhood	1972	92 pages	Manchester	Manchester University	1973	Bodleian
Gawthorpe, M.	Up Hill To Holloway	c1932	254 pages	Penobscot, USA	Traversity Press	1962	Oxford Law Library
Gibbs, R.	In Service: Rose Gibbs Remembers	c1979	18 pages	Cambridge	Elison's Editions	1981	Bodleian
Griffiths, W.	One Woman's Story	1979	169 pages	Rhondda	Ron Davis	1979	West Glamorgan
Harvey, B.	Youthful Memories of Life in a Suffolk Village	c.1975	500 words	Ipswich	Goodwin and Baxter	1976	Bodleian library
Hills, D.	Old Frimley	c1976	180 pages	Surrey	Kestrel Graphics	1978	Bodleian library
Hills, Mrs.	Reminiscences of Mrs. Hills, of Leighton Bromswold	c1970	2 pages	Huntingdon	Huntingdon History Soc.	1977	Huntingdon
Hull, M.	A Derbyshire Schooling: 1884-1893	1985	4 pages	London	Hogarth Press	1988	History Workshop
Jermy, L.	The Memories of a Working Woman	c1932	188 pages	Norwich	Goose & Sons	1934	Bodleian library
Kenney, A.	Memories of a Militant	1924	308 pages	London	Edward Arnold	1924	Bodleian
Luty, M.	A Peniless Globetrotter	c1937	147 pages	Accrington	Wardleworth	1937	Rawtenstall library
May, B.	Tiger Woman: My Story	c1928	232 pages	London	Duckworth	1929	Bodleian library
Mitchell, H.	The Hard Way Up	1940-46	260 pages	London	Faber and Faber	1968	Bodleian library
Scott, N.	A Felt Hat Worker	c1930	20 pages	London	Hogarth Press	1931	reprinted Virago
Sylvester, S.	In a World that has Gone	1968	31 pages	Loughborough	Private Printed	1968	Brunel University
Smith, E.	A Cornish Waif's Story	c 1924	188 pages	London	Odhams Press	1954	Bodleian library
Wilkinson, E.	untitled in Myself When Young	c. 1938	16 pages	London	Frederick Muller	1938	Bodleian library
Woodward, K.	Jipping Street: Childhood in a London Slum	1928	150 pages	London	Harper & Brothers	1928	Bodlian library
Yearn, Mrs.	A Public Spirited Rebel	1931	6 pages	London	Hogarth Press	1931	reprinted Virago

Appendix III: Chronological Table

Date	Cohort Birthdates and biographical events	National Events Relevant to the Cohort
1870	Ada Nield Chew born	Forster's Education Act established school boards on which women are given the right to vote. Married Women's Property Act
1871	Hannah Mitchell born	Women's Suffrage Bill lost in Commons
1872		Public Health Act Women employed in Post Office Savings Bank
1873	Margaret Bondfield born	Infant Custody Act Girton College, Cambridge founded
1874	Bessie Harvey born Agnes Cowper born	Public Health Act Factory Act limited working hours to 10 a day First woman appointed to workhouse inspectorate
1875		Public Health Act First woman Poor Law guardian elected Sankey and Moody Evangelical Revival Age of sexual consent raised to 13
1876		Women clerks employed at Post Office
1877	Louise Jermy born	Start of Besant/Bradlaugh trial
1878	Susan Sylvester born	Factory Act improved working conditions Matrimonial Causes Act: maintenance and separation could now be granted to women whose husbands had been convicted of assault. London University admits women Domestic economy established as compulsory for girls in Board Schools
1879	Annie Kenney born	
		Industrial Schools Act: children in moral danger could be removed from parents by local authorities.
1881	Maria Hull born Mary Gawthorpe born	New Civil Service grade of women clerk introduced
1882		Rate paying Spinsters allowed to vote for town councils Grants given to schools to teach cookery Married Women's property Act
1883		Women's Co-operative Guild formed Royal Holloway College, London, founded

1884		Amalgamated Association of Weavers formed 3 rd Reform Bill defeated by 136 votes Franchise Reforms gave Universal Suffrage to men Sankey and Moody Second Evangelical Revival Socialist League founded by William Morris
1885	Mary Luty born	ILP gives votes to men and women Redistribution Act Exhibition held in London Age of consent raised to 16
1886		Contagious Diseases Act repealed
1887	Annie Barnes born	NUWSS formed
1888		First women elected to London County Council
1889	Mildred Edwards born	
1890	Isabella Cooke born Nellie Scott born Betty May born Mrs Yearn born	Grants given to schools for teaching laundry
1891	Alice Foley born Ellen Wilkinson born	School fees abolished First publication of Blatchford's <i>Clarion</i> First Labour Church formed, in Manchester
1892	Rose Gibbs born	
1893	Mrs Hills born	School leaving age raised to 11 ILP founded locally in Manchester First woman factory inspector appointed
1894	Emma Smith born Ada Nield's 'Factory Girl' campaign	Women allowed to participate in parish, district and church councils Property qualifications abolished for Poor Law guardians
1895	Winifred Griffiths born	Summary Jurisdiction Act: battered women could obtain divorce
1896	Kathleen Woodward born Bessie Harvey married	
1897		Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee NUWSS founded
1898		
1899	Daisy Hills born	School leaving age raised to 12 Margaret Llewelyn Davies made general secretary of the Women's Co-operative Guild
1900	Grace Foakes born	
1901		January Queen Victoria Dies

1902		Education Act set up LEA's to provide state-run secondary education. Board Schools become council schools.
1903		WSPU founded
1904	Annie Kenney first woman elected to district committee from textile unions.	
1905	Mary Gawthorpe and Annie Kenney join WSPU.	
1906	Annie Kenney imprisoned for first time	Sweated Industries Exhibition Liberals win landslide election Labour Party created
1907		'Ladder of Opportunity' free secondary school places established Pupil-teacher scheme abandoned Women admitted to all aspects of local government
1908		Asquith becomes Prime Minister First Suffragette hunger strike
1909	Mary Luty embarks on her world tour	Forcible feeding begins of hunger strikers
1910		Year of truce by militant suffragettes
1911		East London Federation of Suffragettes founded by Sylvia Pankhurst
1912	Maria Hull married	Christabel Pankhurst flees to Paris
1913		'Cat and Mouse' act introduced Death of Emily Wilding Davidson Private members bill for votes for women defeated
1914		Outbreak of World War I ILP oppose war policy
1915	Winifred Griffiths took 'man's job' at Co-op Rose Gibbs married	
1916	Mrs Hills married	
1917	Agnes Cowper made librarian at Lever Library, Port Sunlight. Alice Foley left factory floor to become a sick visitor for Weaver's Union.	

1918	Winifred Rutley married James Griffiths, later an MP.	End of WWI Universal Suffrage for Men over 21 and Women over 30 Health Act provided Health visitors and Baby Welfare Clinics
1919	Annie Barnes Married	
1920	Annie Kenney married	
1921		
1922		First woman barrister
1923		
1924	Hannah Mitchell elected to Manchester City Council. Margaret Bondfield made Parliamentary Secretary. Annie Kenney's autobiography published.	First Labour Government MacDonald Prime Minister
1925		
1926		
1927		
1928		Women over the age of 21 obtain the vote.
1929	Margaret Bondfield becomes first woman to hold a cabinet post.	Second Labour Government
1930		
1931	Alice Foley appointed a JP. Autobiographies of Nellie Scott and Mrs Yearn published in 'Life As We Have Known It'.	ILP disaffiliates from Labour Party
1932		
1933		Women's Health Enquiry into the deaths of working-class women in childbirth
1934	Louise Jermy's autobiography published	
1935		
1936		
1937	Mary Luty's autobiography published	
1938		
1939-1945		World War II

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