

"... OUR JOB IS TO FREE WOMEN ..."

THE SEXUAL POLITICS OF FOUR EDWARDIAN FEMINISTS

FROM c. 1910 TO c. 1935.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis studies the work of four Edwardian suffragettes from about 1910 until the mid 1930s. One of the reasons for the British suffrage campaign was an awareness that women's sexual subordination would not be modified until enfranchisement allowed them to participate in democratic government. At the same time many women in the movement recognised that other deep-rooted cultural changes would be required to bring about greater equality. The four subjects of my research were keenly aware of this.

In tracing their careers I show how feminist principles informed their activism through the height of the suffrage campaign and for the following twenty years. Consequently I can argue that feminism did not go into decline after 1918 when suffrage campaigning was scaled down. Furthermore the areas in which they chose to direct their energies indicate their understanding of the ways cultural constructs affected women's freedom. Central to sexual politics, the areas were: violence in the family, sexual abuse and harassment, prostitution and reproductive control.

I show how the networking begun through suffrage campaigning continued to provide a sense of sisterhood through supportive personal communities for many years. Two lifelong dyadic relationships began in suffrage activism.

Although the four women were marginalised in dominant discourses of sexuality they tried a number of strategies to implement their objectives. I consider the ways they negotiated to create sufficient status and power to intervene in the public debate. Originally excluded from participation in democratic government, legislature or the judiciary, the women also suffered cultural exclusion because of the nature of their chosen fields of expertise. I delineate how the four suffragettes helped initiate and responded to the changes which took place during the period thus demonstrating how they promoted feminist principles in the field of sexuality.

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INTRODUCTION: "Our Job Is To Free Women from the Control of Men, Giving Them Rights Over Their Own Bodies . . ."¹

The starting point of my interest in the four women who are the subjects of my research began in my own experiences of sexual politics as a female and as a feminist. I approached the research through my own perceptions of how cultural constructs of masculinity and femininity concretely affect our lives in many ways. I chose the four Edwardian suffragettes² because I was interested in the way their political activism involved questioning the sexual conventions of their day and extended beyond the suffrage campaign. I see my study as relevant to contemporary feminism in such areas as reproductive control, the systematic nature of male power and violence, and the social control of female sexuality. Questions about the relationships between class, ethnocentricity and gender are also involved.

I use the contemporary term, 'sexual politics' because it focuses on the dynamics of the relationships between gender, sexuality and power, emphasising the sexual. As Gayle Rubin points out, "although sex and gender are related, they are not the same thing" and, "like gender, sexuality is political."³

In writing about women's rights in 1855, Lucy Stone identified what she called "the real question", when she wrote:

Has a woman a right to herself? It is very little to me to have the right to vote, to own property, etc., if I may not keep my body, and its uses, in my absolute right.⁴

¹ Nina Boyle, Letter in *Jus Suffragii* (June 1927).

² I use the convention that 'suffragists' describes all campaigners for women's enfranchisement while 'suffragettes' were militant activists. See Chapter Three, pp. 144-149.

³ Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality", in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed., Carole S. Vance (Boston, Mass.: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 308-309.

⁴ Lucy Stone in a letter to Antoinette Brown, 11 July 1855, quoted in Andrea Dworkin, Introduction to *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, (London: The Women's Press, 1981), p.11.

Many aspects of gender relations have changed since then, yet Stone's "real question" is still relevant. While I do not wish to make simplistic comparisons, continued feminist concerns about men's sexual abuse and physical violence are justified, as we can see from contemporary mass media.⁵ Public and governmental response to such issues is significant too. In October 1994 a 'public awareness campaign on domestic violence' was launched by the British government, *nineteen years* (emphasis mine) after such a campaign had been recommended by a House of Commons Select Committee.⁶ Why did it take so long? Inequality in such areas as reproductive control and the negotiation of safer sexual practices continues.⁷

I see the work of my four subjects as being located at the nexus of relations of gender and power; it concerns the female body in a social context. They worked on issues which are central to women's sexual freedom. They were: Nina Boyle, who questioned an ostensibly fair judicial system on behalf of victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse; Edith How Martyn⁸ who campaigned for information about birth control to be made accessible to all women; Alison Neilans who defended the rights of prostitutes before the

⁵ Some examples to hand include: in 1994 more than 80 per cent of female students at Oxford reported sexual harassment; *The Guardian*, 8 November 1994; a survey across the UK of 1,000 married women in 1990 found 28 per cent had been hit by husbands, 33% hit or been threatened with physical violence, a figure which rose to 63 per cent of separated or divorced women; *The Observer*, 25 February 1990; in 1994 one in ten women were victims of domestic violence, and one woman in seventeen was "forced to have sex with her partner". Figures quoted by Emma Brooker in "Mindful of Violence", *The Guardian*, 3 April 1995; between 1983 and 1988 the number of registered cases of sexually abused children increased twelvefold. NSPCC, leaflet (n.d., [c. 1989]); Childline counselled over 22 thousand children in its first year; the largest categories were sexual abuse (5865 cases) and physical abuse (3838 cases). The main perpetrator was the father, the usual location the home. Nigel Parton, *Governing the Family: Child Care, Child Protection and the State* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. 221.

⁶ *The Guardian*, 3 April 1995.

⁷ For examples, see: Celia Roberts, Susan Kippax, Catherine Waldby and June Crawford, "Faking It: The Story of 'Ohh!'", *Women's Studies International Forum* Vol. 18, Nos. 5/6 (1995), pp. 523-532; Lesley Miles, "Women, Aids and Power in Heterosexual Sex", *Women's Studies International Forum* Vol. 16, No. 5 (1993), pp. 497-511; Jalna Hanmer, "Men, Power and the Exploitation of Women", *Women's Studies International Forum* Vol. 13, No. 5 (1990), pp. 443-456.

⁸ Edith How Martyn joined her maiden name and her husband's surname when she married, a common practice among Edwardian feminists. In the printed material it is often hyphenated but Eileen Palmer informed me that Edith herself preferred not to hyphenate her surnames.

law; and Edith Watson, who helped Nina Boyle found the first women's police service. This thesis offers an exploration of their beliefs and work.

I follow their political activism, which began during the Edwardian suffrage campaign, and continued with great commitment through the next thirty years. They were all members of the Women's Freedom League (WFL). As a starting point the WFL seemed interesting because it held a wider view on many issues than other suffrage societies. The women I have chosen were all leaders and while campaigning for suffrage had already begun work to challenge prevailing gender and power relations in other spheres.⁹

The proposed chronology is from about 1910 when the militant campaign was at its height, to the early 1930s. Although my four subjects continued working after 1935, I have chosen to focus on this period because their political work was by then well-established. Space does not permit a full examination of their international work which occurred mainly during the 1930s; this will be sketched only. To study attitudes to sexual politics from the height of suffrage agitation across the 'break' of the First World War through the 1920s may cut across conventional periodisation. Continuities as well as change during social and economic upheavals might be mapped out. The structure of my thesis reflects both the feminist inheritance and new demands. Domestic violence, sexual abuse, prostitution and VD had been part of the mid-nineteenth-century women's movement's agenda, whereas birth control was not a major issue. Thus Edith How Martyn's espousal of birth control may be seen as a fresh impulse in campaigns for women's equality.

In a useful discussion of the origins of modern feminism, Nancy Cott gives 1910 as the time when it came into being. Confusion has arisen because the history of women's

⁹ The development and process in the WFL of a specifically feminist critique of inequalities in gender relations has been traced by Claire Eustance in "A Great and Wonderful Feminist Movement': The Construction of Feminism in the WFL, 1907-1914", Chapter Four in "Daring To Be Free': The Evolution of Women's Political Identities in the Women's Freedom League 1907-1930", D.Phil. Thesis, University of York, 1993, pp. 198-250. I am grateful to her for sharing aspects of her research with me.

rights has been collapsed with the history of suffrage campaigning. Cott suggests that the turn of the century saw concurrent processes - the demand for women's rights and the creation of a women's identity and consciousness. This symbiotic action helped establish modern feminism. Calling attention to the discursive dilemma of feminism, Cott states:

The 1910s and 1920s revealed paradoxes which had hovered around efforts to obtain women's rights earlier but which became *defining elements of feminism* (italics mine) in the twentieth century. Feminism asks for sexual equality that includes sexual difference. It aims for individual freedoms by mobilizing sex solidarity. It posits that women recognize their unity while at stands for diversity among women. It requires gender consciousness for its basis yet calls for the elimination of prescribed gender roles.¹⁰

Yet these elements were present in the nineteenth century, during the first-wave women's movement. Cott's "working definition" of feminism, which is not historically specific, is fairly basic. She sees three essential components: equality of the sexes (or more precisely, opposition to sex hierarchy); the notion that gender relations are socially constructed, not biologically determined; and an understanding of or belief in a group consciousness, that is women perceive themselves as a sex-class, they have an identity as 'women'.¹¹ To this I would add the desire to work to change women's subordinate position and, because it moves on from Cott's definition to include the possibility of such agency, propose that of Rosalind Delmar, as most useful. Delmar defines a feminist as:

... someone who holds that women suffer discrimination because of their sex, that they have specific needs which remain negated and unsatisfied, and that the satisfaction of those needs would require a radical change . . . in the social, economic and political order.¹²

Although it may seem an anachronism to describe suffrage campaigners as feminists, the term was beginning to be used; in 1909, the first edition of *The Vote*, the WFL journal, described the campaign for women's enfranchisement as part of a wider

¹⁰ Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 5.

¹¹ Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, pp. 4-5.

¹² Rosalind Delmar, "What is Feminism?", in *What is Feminism?*, ed., Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 8.

"feminist" movement.¹³ Hence, I think the term applies to the four women who are the subjects of my study.

The Edwardian suffrage campaign provided ideal conditions for the continuation and expansion of a sense of women's consciousness grounded in shared experience, a sense of sisterhood. A feminist identity was created.¹⁴ The four women worked closely together in the WFL and remained in touch for many years. Although I have found some interesting links between them, many gaps remain because of the partial nature of the surviving material.

During my research I was able to meet Edith Watson's son who let me see her unpublished autobiography. I also met a close friend of Edith How Martyn, Eileen Palmer, who gave me some primary source material. This good fortune made me realise how fortuitous the preservation of records can be.¹⁵ Little seems to have survived about Nina Boyle who was a popular speaker in the suffrage campaign.

Besides Edith Watson's autobiography, manuscript sources I have used include the papers from Eileen Palmer, and correspondence between Alison Neilans and Lady Astor in the Astor Papers at Reading University. Eileen Palmer's material covers letters from Margaret Sanger to Edith How Martyn and other colleagues in the birth control movement over a period of twenty-five years. Edith's letters to Margaret Sanger, are in the Sophia

¹³ *The Vote* (30 October 1909).

¹⁴ Relations between individuals in the various organisations was not nearly as fissiparous as has sometimes been claimed and, in contemporary terms, there was a good deal of networking across organisational divides, as for example, Ann Morley and Liz Stanley have shown in their biography of Emily Wilding Davison. Ann Morley and Liz Stanley, *The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison* (London: The Women's Press, 1988).

¹⁵ Eileen Palmer saved Edith How Martyn's papers from her bombed house during the Second World War although Edith herself had told her to destroy them. Towards the end of her life Eileen Palmer spent a great deal of time sorting out all her papers. Much of the material including, for instance, Edith How Martyn's diaries of her birth control propaganda tours of the 1930s, is now in the Eileen Palmer Collection at the London School of Economics. Another batch of material was left in her London house which in 1991 was vandalised. I collected the remaining papers and took them down to Dorset, where she lived. Although there was not anything of great interest she gave it to me later (hereafter described as author's collection); it has not been catalogued but will be deposited in an archive.

Smith Collection and form part of the Margaret Sanger Papers Project,¹⁶ and material such as logbooks of their international tours, held in the Eileen Palmer Collection at the London School of Economics. Published material includes the WFL journal, *The Vote*, The Association for Moral and Social Hygiene's journal, *The Shield*, which Alison Neilans edited for about twenty years, and pamphlets, articles and letters to the national press and feminist journals. Because the topics with which the four women were concerned were considered to be unsavoury by the establishment, the issues were rarely covered fully in the mass media; at times there was little evidence of public opinion in the press.¹⁷

In my thesis my first objective is to recover some women's history; I hope to show how the networking and sense of sisterhood of the suffrage campaign validated and supported my four subjects.¹⁸ Dependent as it is on the availability of manuscript sources, this aspect of the study is also under-theorised, mainly because there has been little research into female networking. My next aim is to show how the four women, who had few material or social advantages, little status or influence, negotiated in the power networks of their day. By tracing the careers of these individuals it is possible to illumine the ways issues were debated. I shall argue that these feminists continued to challenge hierarchical gender systems from their suffrage days right through the subsequent twenty-five years.

Their biographical details conclude this introduction. After briefly discussing contemporary theoretical approaches to friendship and networking in Chapter One, I

¹⁶ I was able to use photostat copies of the letters which were donated to me by Eileen Palmer who had been given them by the Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History Archive, Smith College, Northampton, Mass. via the Margaret Sanger Papers Project, New York University. I was given photocopies of newspaper clippings and document listings by the Margaret Sanger Papers Project Editor/Director, Dr. Esther Katz. The Margaret Sanger Papers Project is producing a microfilm archive for the Library of Congress, Washington.

¹⁷ Eileen Palmer pointed out to me another indication of the suspicion the topic of birth control aroused. Maurice Newfield, a doctor, felt obliged to use a pseudonym to edit the proceedings of the conference on birth control in Asia in 1933. Eileen Palmer, interview by author, 1990-1992, Swanage, Dorset, tape recording. See Chapter Six.

¹⁸ See Chapter One for a discussion of women's friendships and the term 'sisterhood'.

consider current debates surrounding the politics of gender including aspects of deconstructionism which might help illuminate this study. In Chapter Two I present the historical background of their work to show the context in which they developed their ideas. Earlier feminist challenges to prevailing gender relations which were continued by the WFL, are outlined in Chapter Three. Nina Boyle and Edith Watson used the WFL journal, *The Vote*, for their critique of a judicial system which invalidated and discounted female experience of sexual subjugation. In Chapter Four I explore this aspect of their campaign for women's rights and how they began a women's police service. Alison Neilans promoted feminist views on topics where male power elites usually dominated the public discourse, on prostitution and venereal disease; in Chapter Five I describe how she created a role for herself as General Secretary of the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene (AMSH). Edith How Martyn's work to promote birth control and so help women achieve more power at the heart of heterosexual relationships, is the theme of Chapter Six. I suggest she constructed an identity as an 'expert' to press for better recognition of women's contraceptive requirements.

I will show how the activities of the WFL from its beginnings to 1914 were inventive, varied and imaginative. To be actively involved in such a dynamic environment must have given many women personal affirmation and a sense of belonging. Membership of the League fostered the talents of my four subjects, providing practical experience of political organising, resource-sharing, and validation which was empowering. Their life stories, to which I now turn, demonstrate this.

Four Edwardian Feminists

In terms of social structure, aspects of identity of the four individuals varied.¹⁹ Their class background was comparable to that of the leaders of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), middle class or lower middle class, rather than that of the leadership of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) with its aristocratic and/or political connections. Edith How Martyn and Edith Watson attended schools which provided high academic standards for girls. Edith How Martyn was the only one who pursued higher education. In 1910 Nina Boyle was forty-five, Edith How Martyn ten years younger, and Alison Neilans and Edith Watson were twenty-six and twenty-two, respectively. Only one, Edith Watson, had any children, and only one, Edith How Martyn, remained happily married. Of the two who were single, Nina Boyle certainly knew several lesbians. Alison Neilans had a female companion, Ethel M. Turner (Madge). They lived together and Madge Turner was Assistant Secretary and Librarian for AMSH for many years. Their relationship can be seen as epitomising Raymond's 'gyn-affection'.²⁰ On the evidence I have found so far, it is not possible to speculate on the sexual nature of their relationships.

All four received strong emotional support from women, all maintained contact with each other and networked to exchange and promote their views. Edith How Martyn and Alison Neilans were committed to single issues, becoming acknowledged experts in their particular fields, whereas Nina Boyle and Edith Watson adopted several causes in the course of their lives. In terms of which individuals were involved in particular areas of interest, there are no specific class differences. Nina Boyle and Edith Watson represented extremes of wealth and stability in their backgrounds, yet they campaigned together on many issues. A blend of political and personal beliefs was the mainspring of the four

¹⁹ See Chapter One, pp. 40-43.

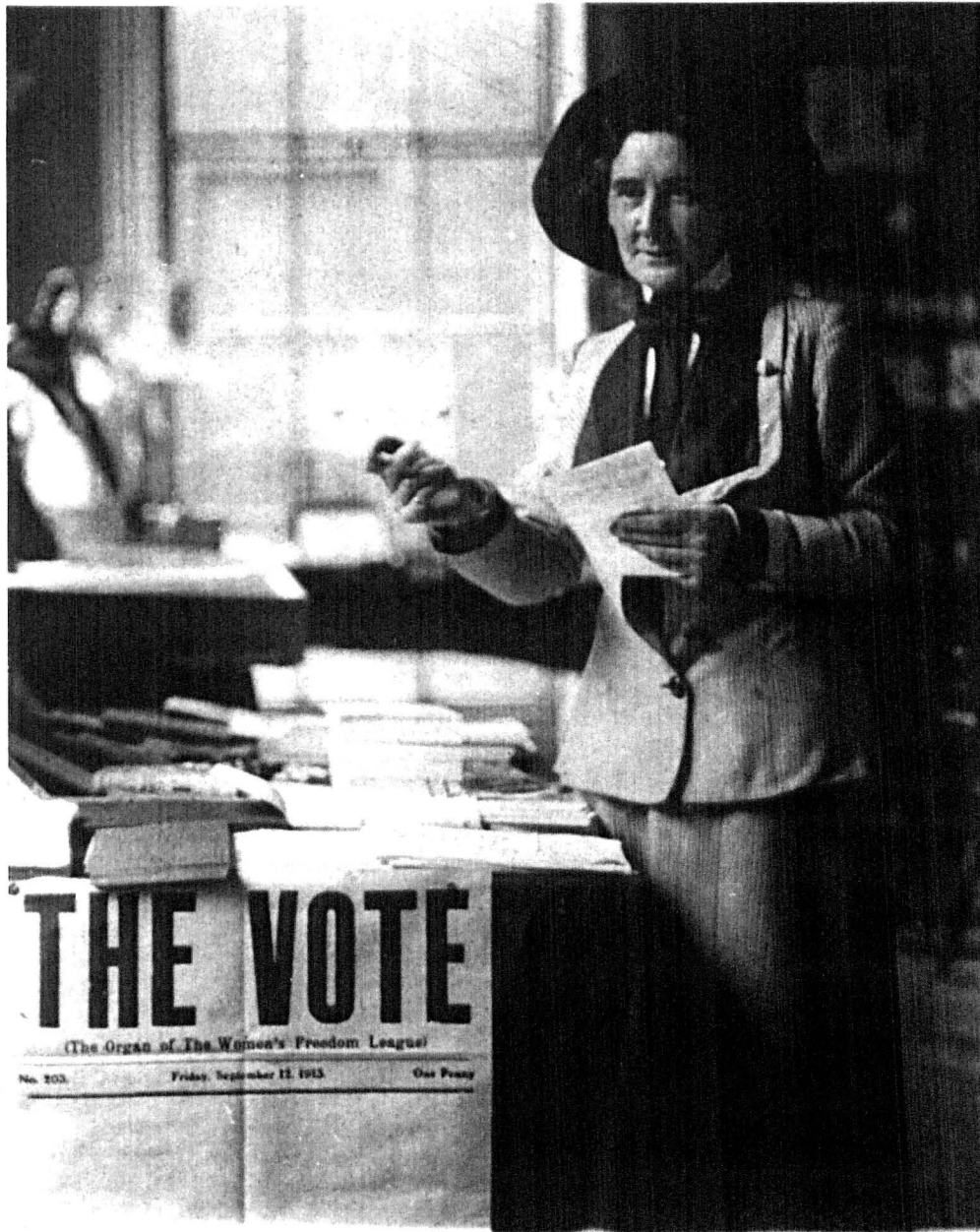
²⁰ See Chapter One, p. 41.

women's motivation. All believed in democratic methods of working. Only one, Edith Watson, belonged to any political party, the Independent Labour Party (ILP).

Active participation in the running of the WFL ceased in 1912 for Edith How Martyn and Alison Neilans, but they kept in touch through the League's committees, publications and the WFL Minerva Club, founded in 1918. In the 1920s connections with the International Woman Suffrage Association (IWSA) and involvement with the League of Nations at Geneva became another shared area of experience. In 1918 Nina Boyle was assisting AMSH to monitor court proceedings; she supported their demands to have women in authority at police courts. As Editor of *The Shield*, Alison Neilans encouraged Nina Boyle to develop her attempts to expose female sexual slavery and child abuse in the early 1930s. Synchronised dates and topics in other feminist journals, for example on child abuse and trafficking in women, suggest networks were used to maximise publicity for their causes.²¹ When Edith How Martyn helped found one of the first birth control clinics for the Neo-Malthusian League (Malthusian League) in 1921, Alison Neilans contributed financially to her work. Both the Suffragette Fellowship and the Lucina lunches which Edith How Martyn started were a way of negotiating space to provide a community for women.²² Their individual life stories are delineated next, beginning with the oldest and continuing in age order.

²¹ Another example shows how Edith How Martyn took up the issue of compulsory detention in institutions for 'wayward' girls as part of her work as a county councillor in 1922 (see Chapter Six, p. 304) while Alison Neilans raised it again, questioning its legality and calling for legal safeguards and adequate control of such hostels, via Lady Astor in parliament in 1924.

²² See Chapter One, pp. 39-40. Alison Neilans and Nina Boyle attended meetings of the Lucina lunches, which will be described in more detail in Chapter Six.



Nina Boyle

Nina Boyle at the Women's Freedom League offices, c. 1913.

Illustration 1.

Nina Boyle (Constance Antonina Boyle)

Nina Boyle was born in 1865, at Bexley, Kent. Her father, Robert, was a Captain in the Royal Artillery; her mother Frances, had the family name Sankey. Her first forty years are obscure. The family background was wealthy with some high-ranking military connections and there were family contacts in South Africa, where Nina Boyle spent some time. One of her brothers was killed in the Boer War.²³ These experiences contributed to her beliefs and description of herself as "an imperialist". She was a journalist and social worker, wrote twelve novels, and has been described as "one of the finest and friendliest figures" of the women's movement and "one of the most vivid and gallant personalities" in the suffrage campaign.²⁴ There were times when she was very poor yet, rather than appeal to her wealthy family for help, she allowed Edith Watson, her landlady at the time, to subsidise her.

A great raconteur, she had an incisive mind and considerable wit. For about five years from 1911 she acted as leading speaker for the WFL, often deputising for Charlotte Despard.²⁵ She was particularly effective in court appearances, defending militant activists and tax resisters. She was imprisoned several times. With her encouragement Edith Watson began reporting cases of domestic violence and sexual abuse in *The Vote*. Together they founded the Women Police Volunteers in 1914, the purpose being to promote women's interests rather than serve as agents of control.

Some time during 1916 Nina Boyle went to Serbia and Macedonia with the Scottish Women's Hospital Unit. In 1918 at a by-election at Keighley, she attempted to become the first woman parliamentary candidate but a technical error in the nomination

²³ Interview with Bernard Watson, Edith Watson's son, interview by author, 29 May 1991, Twickenham, tape recording.

²⁴ Obituary Notices, *International Women's News* (April 1943); *The Manchester Guardian*, 5 March 1943; Fawcett Biography File.

²⁵ Interview with Bernard Watson, Edith Watson's son, interview by author, 29 May 1991, Twickenham, tape recording.

papers meant she could not stand.²⁶ After the Revolution, she travelled in Russia with the former suffragette, Lilian Lenton, as agents of the Save the Children Fund. Nina Boyle was a founder-member of the Fund and on its Council for twenty-two years.

She continued to write about the sexual subjugation of women, which, she held, included questionable customs in British colonies such as child marriage in India and South-East Africa, the *Mui-Tsai* system in Hong Kong (where very young girls were sold into domestic slavery or concubinage), and the practice of female genital mutilation in Africa. Her work on the latter subject encouraged Eleanor Rathbone and the Duchess of Atholl to begin a parliamentary campaign for legislative reform in the early 1930s.

In 1936 former suffrage colleagues joined the chairman of the Save the Children Fund and other public figures in a public tribute to Nina Boyle.²⁷ Crippled in an accident, she spent the last years of her life in poverty and obscurity. She died on 4 March 1943, having asked two WFL members, Eunice Murray and Marion Reeves, to be her executors.

²⁶ Cicely Hamilton, *Nina Boyle (a Memoir)* (London: Nina Boyle Memorial Committee, n.d., c. 1943), p. 5.

²⁷ Cicely Hamilton and other suffragists attempted to set up a Nina Boyle Memorial Fund after her death but this seems to have come to nothing.

VOTES FOR WOMEN.



MRS. E. HOW-MARTYN A.R.C.S. B. S.C.
HON. SEC. WOMEN'S FREEDOM LEAGUE.
19, BUCKINGHAM STREET, STRAND.

PHOTO RIDSDALE CLEARER,
LOWER CLAYTON RD., N.E.

Women's Freedom League publicity material, a postcard of Edith How Martyn.

Illustration 2.

Edith How Martyn

Edith How Martyn was a life-long friend of Teresa Billington-Greig and like her, had been an early member of the WSPU, its Secretary from September 1906. She was born on 4 August 1875, daughter of Edward and Anne How; her father was a grocer. Educated at the North London Collegiate School for Girls where Miss Buss was Principal, she began early to question conventional views, acknowledging Miss Buss as an inspiration and role model. In 1893 she went to University College, Aberystwyth, and received a B.Sc. from London University in 1903.²⁸ She became the first woman Associate in Mathematics and Physics of the Royal College of Science, and taught Mathematics at Westfield College, London, from 1904 to 1906, when she gave up full-time work for suffrage campaigning. In 1899 she married Herbert Martyn and, as was a common practice among suffragists, combined their surnames. They were to be happily married for over fifty years; he supported her work financially and accompanied her on her extensive travels. They did not have any children.

Edith's suffrage interest was sparked off by an advertisement in *The Labour Leader*.²⁹ One of the first women to be imprisoned in 1906 after a mass protest in the House of Commons precincts, she was described as the "gentlest looking rebel".³⁰ She contributed common-sense, efficiency and an incisive mind to the leadership of the WFL. Teresa Billington-Greig described her as: "the queen-pin of our movement" who "carried the heaviest burden with a spirit which never faltered and won admiration from us all".³¹ For five years, until her resignation from the National Executive Committee over a point

²⁸ At Aberystwyth she studied Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Mechanics, Biology and Geology. Andrew Rosen, *Rise Up, Women!: The Militant Campaigning of the Women's Social and Political Union 1903-1914* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 69.

²⁹ According to Rosen, she was a member of the ILP. Rosen, *Rise Up, Women!*, p. 69.

³⁰ *The Vote* (19 March 1910) - an interview with Edith How Martyn.

³¹ Carol McPhee and Ann Fitzgerald, eds., *The Non Violent Militant: Teresa Billington-Greig* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 107.

of principle,³² she was one of the League's foremost activists, its honorary Secretary from 1907 to 1911 and Head of the Political and Militant Department from 1911. Her friendship with Alison Neilans can be traced from as early as 1909 when she suggested a safe chemical to use in the 'ballot box' protest; it lasted until Alison's death thirty-three years later. Edith helped found and was a Director of the Minerva Publishing Company which produced *The Vote*; she also belonged to the Women's Tax Resistance League (WTRL). In 1928 she founded the Suffragette Fellowship with Lilian Lenton, to preserve a sense of community and memories of the suffrage campaign, records which became the unique collection now housed in the London Museum.³³

In 1918 Edith was one of the first women parliamentary candidates, standing as Independent (Liberal) in Hendon, Middlesex. Alison Neilans and Alice Vickery³⁴ were her treasurers. She stood to promote women's and children's interests. She was defeated - it was the 'khaki' election and her opponent was a former army officer. In 1919 she was elected as first woman councillor in Middlesex County Council where she served for three years. These were her only excursions into the party-political system, although she was to write about the need for women members of parliament. When, in 1920 the WFL was demanding that women be appointed Justices of the Peace, her name was proposed but, despite "voluminous" correspondence, nothing came of it, possibly because of her criminal record!³⁵

She laid the foundation of her other major interest in 1910, when she joined the Malthusian League. Although an economist, her beliefs were not primarily motivated by

³² See Chapter Three, p. 142.

³³ Lilian Lenton seems to have been friendly with Edith How Martyn and Nina Boyle but I have not been able to find further evidence of meetings and contacts between them all.

³⁴ Alice Vickery and Charles Drysdale who were opposed to the institution of marriage, were companions for nearly forty years; they had two sons. She gave her name variously as Alice Vickery or Drysdale Vickery. Miriam Benn, *Predicaments of Love* (London: Pluto, 1992), pp. 147-148. See note 36 and Chapter Six, p. 307.

³⁵ Women's Freedom League, National Executive Minutes (17 January 1920)

Malthusian economic doctrine, but arose from her feminism. Through the WFL and Malthusian League, with Bessie Drysdale, she promoted public discussion of contraception, at the time a very contentious issue.³⁶

During Margaret Sanger's first British tour in 1915, Edith offered to help. This was the beginning of a friendship and working relationship which took them all over the world trying to spread knowledge of cheap, reliable methods of contraception. Elected to the Council of the Malthusian League in 1921, Edith helped establish one of the first birth-control clinics and led a national campaign for information to be made available at local authority welfare clinics.³⁷ By 1930, with Margaret Sanger, she had set up the Birth Control International Information Centre and was its honorary Director. In 1933, she helped organise a conference about birth control in Asia, which began the next stage of her work, international propaganda tours. Through her contacts with a former suffragette, Margaret Cousins, then President of the All-India Women's Conference, she arranged for Margaret Sanger to visit India in 1935. They both met Gandhi several times.

At the outbreak of the Second World War, she was visiting Jamaica, from there she went on to New Zealand and Australia. Because of the war and increasing ill-health, she never returned to England. Although living in straitened circumstances, she continued to be active, speaking to Australian women's groups and making camouflage nets as her contribution to the war effort. The asthma from which she had suffered all her life worsened, and she became an invalid for several years before she died on 3 February 1954.

³⁶ Bessie Drysdale, Alice Vickery's daughter-in-law, was married to Dr. C.V. Drysdale. She was a life-long close friend of Edith How Martyn and her colleague in the WFL and Malthusian League.

³⁷ See Chapter Six, Section 6.3.



Alison Neilans shortly after the 'ballot box' protest in 1909.

Alison Neilans (Alison Roberta Noble Neilans)

Alison Neilans was born in East Dulwich on 19 June, 1884, daughter of Robert and Alison Ferguson Noble Neilans. Her father was a commercial traveller and she was educated at a private school, Langley House, in Dulwich. She was in the WFL from the start, having led her WSPU mid-London branch to join the new League. By 1909 she was working for the WFL, earning thirty shillings a week; although her family background does not seem to have been poverty-stricken, she relied on her own earnings. Later on she received financial support from Lady Astor. Her work included touring with the WFL publicity caravan during summer months and organising campaigning at bye-elections. In 1907 she was electioneering with Madge Turner, another WFL member, at Walthamstow. They worked and lived together for many years. After the 'ballot box' incident she went on hunger strike and was forcibly fed, an experience which affected her health.³⁸

Simultaneously she was active in the Ladies National Association for the Abolition of State Regulation of Vice (LNA), particularly from 1913 onwards. In November 1915 at the age of thirty-one she became Assistant Secretary at the inaugural meeting of the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene, then General Secretary, a position she held until her death in 1942.³⁹ Through the Association, she maintained a feminist case in public debates on such topics as prostitution, the international traffic in women, and sexual abuse of children. The suffragist Ray Strachey chose Alison Neilans as an authority on changes in sexual morality for her retrospective critique of the suffrage campaign, *Our Freedom and Its Results*, published in 1936.

³⁸ See Chapter Three, pp. 145-146. She campaigned at the Keighley by-election in 1911 with Nina Boyle and assisted Teresa Billington-Greig and Edith How Martyn in the Political and Militant Department during 1910 to 1911. In 1912 she became critically ill for several months and was confined to a bath chair for a while.

³⁹ See Chapter Five.

Alison Neilans was an internationalist. During the First World War she was among the British women who applied to attend the International Women's Congress to begin seeking an end to hostilities at The Hague in 1915. Prevented from attending by the government, the delegation was vilified in the press. After the war she represented AMSH at many European conferences and meetings, and was British representative to the IWSA Equal Moral Standards Committee.⁴⁰ She also represented a feminist view in League of Nations discussions, helping to reveal the extent of international trafficking in women. She became disappointed that so few women participated at high levels in the League.

Her ability to work positively with people representing a range of opinion was demonstrated in a public tribute to mark twenty-five years as General Secretary of AMSH.⁴¹ Proposing a toast, Lady Astor said Alison Neilans "had changed the lives of thousands" and was in every way a worthy disciple of Josephine Butler.⁴²

Towards the end of her life Alison Neilans suffered from gradual paralysis of the spine; she died aged fifty-eight on 17 July 1942. Although she had expressly requested a simple funeral and no religious service, a memorial service was held at St. Martin-in-the-Fields when Dr. Temple, then Archbishop of Canterbury, gave the address. In a codicil to her will she left a small legacy to Edith How Martyn, and most of her estate to Madge Turner with "All my love and gratitude . . . for her marvellous devotion and loving kindness to me."⁴³

⁴⁰ The WFL supported her nomination to the IWSA.

⁴¹ Organisers included Nina Boyle, Lady Astor, Margery Corbett Ashby, Maude Royden, Lord Balfour, Gilbert Murray, R.A. Butler, Dr. Helen Wilson of AMSH, and Dr. William Temple, the Archbishop of York.

⁴² *The Manchester Guardian*, 16 November 1938.

⁴³ Will of Alison Neilans, 26 July 1937, Codicil 15 December 1941, Family Division, The High Court.



Edith Watson in her policewoman's uniform, outside the Old Bailey in 1914.

Illustration 4.

Edith Watson (Edith Mary Watson)

For Edith Watson suffrage activities were part of a hectic interest in many social and political issues. Her origins provide a contrast to the others' stable middle-class backgrounds. Born in November, 1888, in Hackney Workhouse, she was the illegitimate daughter of a domestic servant, Martha Wall. Life in Marylebone was harsh, with her mother and new step-father, Alfred Willett, a decorator and longshoreman. She helped her mother, a sweated out-worker, sewing buttons on shirts and looked after her three younger step-sisters. After attending a Board school, her fees for a good girls' school, Hampden Gurney, near Edgware Road, were paid by a wealthy woman whose daughter was Edith's Sunday School teacher. Edith's family were keen Salvation Army members.

On leaving school, Edith did office work, then went as a children's nurse with a Jewish family travelling to South Africa. Out there she then decided to become a Salvation Army officer despite being penniless, without even enough money for the uniform. She reached the rank of captain. While working for the Army, she was sexually attacked and nearly raped, by a fellow officer, a decisive factor in her views on sexual violence. Her record of her feelings during the attempted rape provides a poignant justification for her motivation for the work she took up later:

The whole incident was useful to me in later years [when monitoring cases in court] . . . Again and again I heard a girl lose her case because she had not screamed or made an immediate complaint. No man there seemed to understand why she had not done so if her story was true. . . . 'Why didn't you scream?' Because you needed that breath to fight. Because obscurely you don't want to be found in that condition - you want to get out of it cleanly and without embarrassment, and the more people know about it the more you feel soiled. The same reasons go for not telling anyone about it at the time. It is all too shocking, and you are ashamed and embarrassed and want to abolish the very memory of it.⁴⁴

⁴⁴

Edith Watson, unpublished autobiography ([1961]), Private Collection.

By 1910 she had returned to England, had lost her faith and developed an interest in politics. At this time she met her future husband, Ernest Watson. They lived together, maintaining a stormy relationship, and were married in 1912. Their only son, Bernard John, was born in 1919. The marriage was not happy and they were divorced in the mid-1920s. Since women's suffrage was such a topical issue, Edith soon became involved, joining the WFL at about the same time as Nina Boyle in 1911. The two became great friends. She was interested in becoming a journalist and wrote a column "Sketches in Green, Gold and White" (the WFL colours) for *The Daily Herald* for a time but journalism could not provide sufficient money to live on.

In her autobiography, Edith Watson described her indignation at being banned from court hearings when cases of an indecent nature were being heard. Straight away Nina Boyle had challenged her to do something about it. Their campaign to have women admitted to courts on the same terms as men, their exposure of cases of domestic violence and child abuse, and their proposals for women police and court officials to safeguard the interests of women were the result of this. Because of her own experience fighting off a rapist, Edith Watson felt very strongly that women and girls were not believed, that female voices were silenced. In 1914 she became the first policewoman to wear uniform, it was designed by Nina Boyle.

After resigning from the women police in 1916, she spent the war years as a telephonist and a sales girl. During the early 1920s she was an active member of the ILP, a branch secretary in Marylebone, an election agent in a parliamentary election, and stood for the local council unsuccessfully. Always a socialist, her friends in the socialist and trades union movements included Fenner Brockway and his first wife, who fostered her son for a while. After her divorce Edith, true to her unconventional beliefs, had a number of sexual relationships and never re-married. Although she was always poor, she struggled

to pay for her son's education at A.S. Neill's Summerhill. She took part in a union campaign to improve poor working conditions for staff in mental hospitals, at one stage, disguising herself as a nurse while working as an undercover agent to support the union's case. Another campaign was for reform of the divorce laws; she attacked the Marriage Guidance Council because it was far too middle class and church-dominated. Right up to the 1950s she was an organiser and Secretary of the Divorce Law Reform Union - a small but vocal pressure group. One of her last campaigns was to publicise the facts about female genital mutilation in Kenya. She died in 1966.

The lives of the four women spanned a hundred years. Nina Boyle was born in 1865 during the flowering of the first-wave women's movement; when Edith Watson died in 1966, the second-wave feminist movement was just beginning. The Edwardian suffrage campaign gave them a sense of sisterhood, experience of political activism and opportunities to refine their ideas, which helped them carry through challenges to dominant discourses of sexuality for thirty years.

CHAPTER ONE: A CONSIDERATION OF THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO RESEARCHING WOMEN'S HISTORY.

Introduction

To provide a framework for my project I propose to consider how some contemporary analyses might be used in my research on four Edwardian suffrage campaigners. Obviously it would be anachronistic to imply that my four subjects could be placed within the context of the modern women's movement, but I can suggest that their analyses of sexual oppression have contemporary resonances. Their lives spanned a century of campaigning for women's rights - from 1865 to 1966.¹ Some of the campaigns with which they were involved succeeded only within my lifetime, and issues with which they grappled, for instance, violence in the family, sexual abuse, and women's right to reproductive control, have emerged yet again quite recently.

After summarising recent feminist historiography in Section 1.1, I present a brief survey of theoretical approaches to women's friendship and networking to establish a reference point for my findings about the relationships of the four women in Section 1.2. The implications of discursive analysis as a historiographical tool and its problematic nature for feminists are discussed in Section 1.3. The late-nineteenth-century 'woman movement' remained a powerful influence for succeeding generations. Feminist ideals of female solidarity, of a sisterhood which could overcome barriers of class and race, remained when the Edwardian suffrage campaign reached its zenith. Therefore, I trace those features which were significant to my four subjects as well as prevailing gender constructs with which they grappled in Section 1.4. Some discussion of the politics of

¹ Whilst appreciating that there have been women's movements for well over one hundred years, reference to the 'first-wave women's movement' (or 'woman movement' as it was originally named) covers the period up to the Edwardian suffrage campaign; 'second-wave women's movement' refers to the last twenty-five years.

gender and the diversity of feminist strategies which developed after the First World War is also presented in Section 1.4. Section 1.5 concerns the discourses of sexual politics available and accessible to my subjects and I conclude the section with some general reflections on language and the problems of an adequate sexual lexicon for women participating in public debate.

1.1 Recent Feminist Historiography

In this section I give a short outline of the development of recent historiography in order to establish my theoretical position, then comment on particular views about the nature of male sexual power to place my four subjects within a feminist framework.

From the mid-1970s, feminist historiography took as its first major concern the reclamation of women's history. The initial task of simply recovering women and placing them in history had been recognised by 1976, according to Berenice Carroll. Because existing theoretical traditions were problematic and there were difficulties in using 'women' as a category of historical study an underlying conceptual framework was needed.² By insisting on its social construction, feminist historians had come to emphasise gender as a fundamental category of historical analysis by the early 1980s.³ So women's history "began to interrogate and subvert the historical canon" before Foucault and the poststructural approach was fully established.⁴ As Canning suggests:

In dissolving the myth of 'natural' divisions between public and private, between women and men, women's history prepared the way for the shift toward a self-conscious study of gender as a symbolic system or a signifier of relations of power.⁵

² Berenice Carroll, ed., *Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1976), pp. ix-xiv.

³ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Placing Women's History in History", *New Left Review* 133 (1982), pp. 21-22.

⁴ Catherine Hall, "Politics, Post-structuralism and Feminist History", *Gender and History* Vol. 3, No. 2 (Summer 1991), p. 370.

⁵ Kathleen Canning, "Feminist History After the Linguistic Turn: Historicizing Discourse and Experience", *Signs* Vol. 19, No. 2 (Winter 1994), p. 370.

Historical investigations of the interactions of class and gender have been difficult, according to Leonore Davidoff, because what has been handed down was produced by people in powerful positions in any society. Those divisions and hierarchies which made up their world view of society and of sexuality have contributed to the elision of the views of the less powerful, most marginalised in those societies.⁶ Davidoff and Hall began their 1987 study of the English middle class, *Family Fortunes*, with the premise that identity is gendered and the organisation of sexual difference is central to the social world. Assuming that gender and class operate together, they argued that while there was a complex system of social relations organising sexual identity, neither "identities nor institutional practices were fixed or immutable".⁷ By 1988, Joan Wallach Scott had introduced an explicitly poststructuralist form of deconstruction. She argued that if meanings are not fixed, but are relative, then it is possible to analyse how gender hierarchies are constructed, legitimated, challenged and maintained by studying the processes, multiple causes and discourses which contribute to contemporary conceptualisations.⁸ So deconstructionism came to be seen as analytically useful.

In 1989, calling for historiography to be gender-encompassing rather than gender-neutral, Gisela Bock suggested historians abandon the sociocultural category 'biology' and notions attached to it. To do so, she argues, would make visible:

. . . the concrete, manifold and changing forms of women's and men's bodily experience, activity and representation, which is not neatly separable from other kinds of experience, activity and representation.⁹

⁶ Leonore Davidoff, "Class and Gender in Victorian England", in *Sex and Class in Women's History*, ed., Judith L. Newton, M. Ryan, and Judith Walkowitz (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), pp. 19-29.

⁷ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), pp. 29-33.

⁸ Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p.3.

⁹ Gisela Bock, "Women's History and Gender History: Aspects of an International Debate", *Gender and History* Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring 1989), pp. 7-30, especially p. 15.

At this point it might seem a materialist history of the body of the kind envisaged by Lyndal Roper in 1994 might be an appropriate way to approach this study. For, as she argues, bodies are not "merely the creations of discourse". They have "materiality, and this too must have its place in history."¹⁰

Understood as a discursive creation alone, gender is not a category of historical analysis because, lacking an account of the connections between social and psychic, it cannot adequately conceptualize change.¹¹

Furthermore, as Canning points out, once the "unitary category of woman" began to disintegrate, the narrative of feminism was also called into question.¹²

As a basic premise I take the view that my four subjects recognised specific aspects of women's disempowerment and questioned such conditions, so attempting to change the gender hierarchies of their day. Despite some conflict between materialist histories and discursive analysis I hope to use insights gained from both approaches to demonstrate how my four subjects focused their political activism. The priority women's experience is accorded by feminist theory and the emphasis on the fluidity of language and representation given in discursive analysis clash. Since, however, I see the work of my subjects as being at that point where cultural constructs of women impact upon women's physical and sexual freedom, I think both are relevant. Discursive analysis provides a way of examining the power relations within which the four gendered subjects negotiated their lives. It can help open up ways of defining and measuring political action so that seemingly imperceptible social and cultural change in women's lives, rendered invisible by conventional definitions of political success and failure, may be highlighted. The four women sought to change both the dominant representations of women in their culture and

¹⁰ Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and The Devil* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 21.

¹¹ Roper, *Oedipus and The Devil*, p. 26.

¹² Canning, "Feminist History", p. 371.

the concrete effects of those representations. I will examine how they set about this task and to do so I need to establish their historical context and their sense of agency.

Although in the 1990's post-modern feminism has questioned such arbitrary divisions within the spectrum of feminist diversity of theory, in contemporary terms I feel the perspectives of the four women could be described as 'radical'. Radical feminism's basic tenets are that it "is created by women for women" and that women as a social group are oppressed by men as a social group.¹³ The substantive political interests of the four women, their origins in the Women's Freedom League (WFL), their perceptions of gender relations and their activism are open to a radical interpretation. Certainly Nina Boyle expressed this view verbally. Their choice of issues within the broad range of sexual politics is significant too. They campaigned on behalf of the silenced victims of domestic and sexual violence, on behalf of prostitutes, and for women's reproductive rights. Why and how did they decide to focus on these particular issues?

When considering the question of women's sexual subjugation, it is difficult to tease out the various aspects of gendered power relations - economic, social, cultural. Sexual violence and rape have been seen, firstly, as part of a system of control of women by men, secondly, as merely one extreme end of a male sexual continuum, a view which resonates with the influence of the early sexologists, such as Havelock Ellis whose work has been described as "the first modern codification of male sexual values".¹⁴ Prevailing

¹³ Robyn Rowland and Renate D. Klein, "Radical Feminism: Critique and Construct", in *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct*, ed., Sonja Gunew (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 273. Originally, in the early 70s, modern radical feminism saw this oppression as the primary one for women. In a retrospective view of radical feminism published in *Trouble and Strife* in 1993, the Editorial Collective note the notion that other oppressions, specifically race, class and disability, could be added to the primary one has been challenged - these other oppressions were not ungendered or gender neutral. "Radical Feminism. Editorial: Then And Now", Editorial Collective. *Trouble and Strife* No. 27 (Winter 1993), pp. 3-6. See also other essays in Gunew, *Feminist Knowledge*, and Carol Anne Douglas, *Love and Politics: Radical Feminist and Lesbian Theories* (San Francisco: Ism Press, 1990).

¹⁴ Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (London: The Women's Press, 1981), p. 148. Susan Brownmiller was one of the first to posit the systemic nature of male sexual abuse and argue that rape plays a critical function for male power. Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will:*

cultural constructs have been used by sexologists and psychologists to validate their hypotheses.¹⁵ Ellis's views were gaining credibility during the lifetimes of my subjects and I present the case of his influence, both as one example of the cultural milieu in which the four women participated and to point out the connections between Edwardian and contemporary feminists. I propose that my four subjects recognised the ways in which cultural constructions, of femininity, of female sexuality, of motherhood, acted to control and limit women's sexual freedom.¹⁶ Nina Boyle and Edith Watson may not necessarily have been explicit, yet they used radical feminist arguments to critique the judicial system and the ways men treated women. When participating in the dominant discourse on prostitution, Alison Neilans had to combat the perpetual objectification of women involved in it. Edith How Martyn felt that until all women had access to knowledge about effective reproductive control, they would not have equality with men. Where did their views originate? Through their involvement in a flourishing feminist organisation at the height of its activity they had access to a dynamic community in which their ideas could be discussed and developed. I think they contributed to and were nourished by the WFL in several ways. Hence the decision to begin my study with their participation in the suffrage campaign so as to provide a context for their subsequent careers.

Men, Women and Rape (n.p., Martin Secker and Warburg, 1975, Harmondsworth: Penguin, Pelican, 1986). Joan Smith cites representations of women to suggest that western culture is not only sexist but misogynist. Joan Smith, *Misogynies* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989).

¹⁵ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, 2d ed., Themes in British Social History Series (London: Longman, 1989), p. 145.

¹⁶ For a brief if somewhat disparaging survey of feminist attempts to analyse and understand male violence, see Lynn Segal and Mary McIntosh, *Sex Exposed* (London: Virago, 1992), pp. 3-11. See also Catherine Itzin, "Pornography and the Social Construction of Sexual Inequality", in Catherine Itzin, ed., *Pornography, Women, Violence and Civil Liberties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 57-75.

1.2 Friendship and Networking

In this section I propose that the four women gained positive self-images and a personal community from their activities in the WFL. In historical research, while it may be possible to recoup evidence of contacts, acquaintances and friendships, retrospectively it is difficult to know how much weight to place on the dynamics of the relationships.¹⁷ Reflecting on writing feminist biography, Lis Whitelaw stresses the need to take into account the social and political climate, patriarchal and heterosexist, in which the biographical subjects lived and worked. Earlier biographical work on women subjects tended towards polarised versions of women's experience, where personal fulfilment was set against public achievement.¹⁸ More recent work has presented another pattern which shows how women's friendships have provided the energy and nurturing useful for supporting public activity.¹⁹ I wish to stress how crucial such sustenance can be, emphasising Liz Stanley's contention that in sociological and feminist terms, ideas are produced within a particular social milieu.²⁰ Recently, Stanley has developed the notion of an accountable feminist biography which highlights the importance of social networks within which subjects located their activities. They become "a crucial means of enabling us to get a purchase on other lives".²¹

¹⁷ See Introduction, pp. 15-17.

¹⁸ Lis Whitelaw, *The Life and Rebellious Times of Cicely Hamilton* (London: The Women's Press, 1990), p. 2.

¹⁹ These include: Whitelaw, *Cicely Hamilton*; Ann Morley and Liz Stanley, *Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison* (London: The Women's Press, 1988); Lesbian History Group *Not a Passing Phase* (London: The Women's Press, 1989).

²⁰ Liz Stanley, *Feminism and Friendship: Two Essays on Olive Schreiner*, Studies in Sexual Politics Series, No. 8. (Manchester: Sociology Department, University of Manchester, 1985), p. 3.

²¹ Liz Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 10. Material conditions also affect women's friendships; more research is needed into the impact of marginalisation and relative poverty on female friendships. From her study of survival strategies in an American black community, Carol Slack concluded the co-operative lifestyle was a significant dimension of their multivalued cultural system. A 'value-mosaic' was put together from both main-stream, dominant value systems and their own communities. Carol Slack. *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp. 124-126. Generally, more research into women's friendships is needed, for example, Jane Montague and Ali Andrew discussed the dearth of research into the stages and changes which affect women's friendships, in their address, "Friendship, Autobiography and the Academy", at a conference,

I am also aware that the varieties of and differences between friendship and social networks are multifarious. Is it possible to quantify the degrees of intimacy, companionship and support exchanged in friendship ties? What is the difference between friendship and networking? Although this remains an under-researched area, recent sociological and feminist approaches offer some discussion of these themes. By any standards the dyadic relationship between Edith How Martyn and Alison Neilans on the one hand and Nina Boyle and Edith Watson on the other, were examples of an ideal of friendship.²² What of the other, looser connections?

Graham Allan suggests sociological research into friendship has been hampered by the difficulties in definition. Because much research has focused on notions of idealised, one-to-one friendships and their personal and emotional significance, it has failed to locate friendship within broader social structures. Besides the companionship which friends provide, another important constituent of friendship is its social utility. Friendship creates a sense of belonging, provides support and assistance to further interests or handle contingencies and fosters a "sense of personal distinctiveness and worth", reaffirming the significance of an individual's social standing.²³ Since I argue that concepts of networking and of resource-sharing are relevant to my study and the four individuals' identities were partly cemented by friendship, Allan's depiction of relationships embedded in their broader social context provides a fuller, more serviceable approach than other recent models of

"Celebrating Women's Friendship", at York, 8 April 1995.

²² Lillian Faderman traces classical and historical notions of the ideal of friendship, usually between men. Lillian Faderman, "The Enshrinement of Romantic Friendship", Part 1, B, Chapter One in *Surpassing the Love of Men* (New York: William Morrow, 1981, repr., London: Junction Books, n.d.), pp. 65-73. Pat O'Connor critiques recent theoretical accounts of friendships between women including idealised versions. Pat O'Connor, *Friendships Between Women: A Critical Review* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 69.

²³ Allan argues friendship is not merely a voluntary, personal matter, but has socially structured dimensions; it has a social utility central to its character. He advocates research to show how social structures constrain choices and actions in friendships as much as in other areas. Graham Allan, *Friendship: Developing a Sociological Perspective*, Studies in Sociology Series (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), pp. 151-155.

friendship.²⁴ A useful notion of personal communities is proposed by Barry Wellman, Peter Carrington and Alan Hall, who advocate structural analysis to enable the exploration of connections between dyadic ties, networks and social structures. Rather than a conventional sociological definition of communities as "densely knit neighbourhood solidarities filled with mutual aid", they propose communities defined by networks, to bring out those ties and networks which contribute to support, informal social control and a sense of personal identity.²⁵

Other research has shown that there is a qualitative difference between women's and men's friendships.²⁶ Allan suggests the close, personal nature of women's friendships is a function of the female economic role in the domestic sphere where it is part of their job to provide emotional servicing, a contrast with men's less intimate friendships, which reflect the wider social structures, employment and institutional, within which they make their relationships.²⁷ Much contemporary feminist theorising sees women's friendships as the essence of positive self-validation.²⁸ Both Stanley and O'Connor present attributes of friendship which are useful to my study. Stanley critiques an excessively celebratory emphasis on women's friendships, pointing out the highly complex, variegated nature of friendship patterns and their social and temporal locations.²⁹ By mapping out relationships

²⁴ Willmott identifies two major theoretical notions of friendship: one based on social exchange theory, in which decisions to become friends or sustain friendships are based on "more or less conscious balance of advantage or disadvantage"; and one where 'attachment' which is similar to feelings of kinship is the major component. For a discussion of the problems of research and definition, see Peter Willmott, *Friendship Networks and Social Support* (London: Policy Studies Institute, 1987), Chapter One.

²⁵ Barry Wellman, Peter J. Carrington and Alan Hall. "Networks as Personal Communities", in *Social Structures: A Network Approach*, ed., Barry Wellman and S.D. Berkowitz, Structural Analysis in the Social Sciences Series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 130-184, especially pp. 131-133. See also Wellman's Chapter, "Structural Analysis: From Method and Metaphor to Theory and Substance", pp. 19-61, especially pp. 21-37.

²⁶ Willmott, *Friendship Networks*, p. 85; Pat O'Connor, *Friendships Between Women: A Critical Review* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp. 28-31.

²⁷ Allan, *Friendship: Developing a Sociological Perspective*, pp. 67-80. Chapter Five discusses gender and friendship. Factors which contribute to differences include childhood socialisation, men's better access to a more 'public' lifestyle.

²⁸ O'Connor, *Friendships Between Women*, p. 169.

²⁹ Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I*, p. 219.

"which encompass[es] a wide range of different kinds of emotions, involvements, activities and so forth," she attempted to "reinscribe" friendship.³⁰ O'Connor emphasises the ways in which women's friendships play an important part "in creating and/or maintaining women's social worlds and the *moral discourses* within them" (emphasis mine)³¹ But that personal intimacy, which enabled women to be dependent and emotionally vulnerable, could be at the expense of a more outward-looking relationship. It has been argued that such friendships simply reinforce women's subservient social position, only serving to ameliorate women's subjugated condition - they are "palliative coping" mechanisms.³² This argument has been forcefully used by Janice Raymond who highlights the lack of political dimensions in those types of friendship. She preferred to invent the term 'gyn/affection' to suggest relationships in which "women affect, move, stir, and arouse each other to full power"³³ to define her vision where:

The passion of friendship runs deepest where the personal and political dimensions of affection are brought together and inhabit the same sphere. . . A shared passion for women enables women to live in the world as men have created it while creating the world as women imagine it could be.³⁴

To me, the friendships which began for my four subjects in the Women's Freedom League approximate Raymond's vision. In feminist terms, a sense of sisterhood was created; in deconstructionist terms, an oppositional identity was formed. Their activities in the suffrage campaign brought together personal and political dimensions which enabled them to continue working towards creating a better world for women, an essential step in the formation of a concept of sisterhood.³⁵ To enable them to sustain such activity they created

³⁰ Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I*, p. 235.

³¹ O'Connor, *Friendships Between Women*, p. 174.

³² Ibid.

³³ Janice Raymond, *A Passion for Friends* (London: The Women's Press, 1986), p. 9.

³⁴ Raymond, *A Passion for Friends*, pp. 229-230.

³⁵ Haleh Afshar and Mary Maynard illuminate the ways recent theorising about 'difference' has opened up the debate about the illusion of sisterhood, particularly in relation to 'race' and racism. Haleh Afshar and Mary Maynard, "The Dynamics of 'Race' and Gender", in Haleh Afshar and Mary Maynard, ed., *The Dynamics of 'Race' and Gender: Some Feminist Interventions* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1994), pp. 1-2. I refer to Vron Ware and Antoinette Burton's work on the

and maintained a feminist social network. What would be the constituents of such a network?

There are two main sociological uses of the term 'social networks'; as, first, a reference to those people a particular person knows, and, second, in a more complex, metaphorical use, as a net and its connecting links.³⁶ The first meaning could be applied to acquaintances, colleagues and contacts made by my four subjects over a lifetime of public work. With the second model, some concept of density, of loose or close connections can be employed.³⁷ I think the second definition more useful here for the sense it conveys of a web of connections linking women whose interests sprang from the same philosophical and political insights and who worked in areas which were sometimes discrete, sometimes overlapping.

Although this study will not cover all the social identities and networks of my four subjects, I argue that the ties begun in the WFL were sufficiently continuous and close to be defined as a social network. I do not imply that it functioned equally or provided parity of support for all four continuously. Wellman's notion of networks as *personal communities* (emphasis mine), dependent neither on locality nor solidarity, is most apt for my purposes.³⁸ There was a feminist support system which lasted for approximately thirty years. Initially the network was located in London and based on political solidarity, on membership of and active participation in leadership of the WFL. Later it dispersed geographically and structurally, fragmenting as the individuals developed different priorities and political objectives as well as other variations. But enough original cement

ethnocentricity of British feminism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Section 1.4 a).

³⁶ Willmott, *Friendship Networks*, p. 4.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Wellman. "Structural Analysis", pp. 19-61. Wellman discusses the benefits of structural analysis: individual behaviours can be interpreted in terms of structural constraints (rather than psychological), hence norms can be seen as the effects of structural location rather than the causes.

remained to constitute a feminist network system. What socially-structured features were similar or divergent? Obviously gender was the primary classification, and political solidarity the other main bond. They were marginalised in terms of dominant political discourses. All were white, and there were sufficiently homogenous standards of educational attainment and intellect. There were dissimilar cultural backgrounds and disparities in class, wealth and sexual identity. More details of their associations and how the network operated are recorded later in this chapter and elsewhere when relevant.

The boundaries between women's friendships and lesbianism is another aspect of feminist theorising which might be considered here. I think it would be inappropriate to impose on my historical subjects recent conceptualisations such as that of Adrienne Rich's 'compulsory heterosexuality'³⁹ or the extremes of separatism. Any evidence relating to the qualitative nature of their relationships is included in their biographical details in the Introduction. Rather than speculate on the sexual or emotional nature of their friendships, I suggest the four women were largely women-oriented. Certainly in terms of social networks, their primary focus of commitment was to women. The WFL was an all-women organisation but the four were not separatist in their campaigning work generally.

To sum up so far: I have suggested feminist theorising in the area of women's relationships and of sexual politics and contemporary sociological work on friendship could be invoked to study the activities of the four Edwardian suffragists. To help unravel their beliefs and approaches to the issues about which they campaigned, I hope to employ some discursive analysis - tempered by feminist reservations - to which I now turn. Their feminist politics were extended and carried forward into their later work. If

³⁹ Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", in *Desire: the Politics of Sexuality*, ed., Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (London: Virago, 1984), pp. 212-241. Pat O'Connor critiques recent debates on the issue, asking the question, "Is There Something Special About Friendship?" when discussing the political and emotional aspects of lesbian identity and friendship. O'Connor, *Friendships Between Women*, pp. 167-171.

poststructuralism means "the end of grand narratives" ⁴⁰ then the narrative of feminism must be re-examined too. Disruptions, disconnections, and continuities between earlier first-wave women's movements and Edwardian feminists might be mapped out. In the next section I aim to set out some uses of discursive analysis for the historian and the criticisms, particularly of the 'founding father', Michel Foucault, which have been made by feminists. I focus on Foucault because his studies of the creation of discourses on sexuality have been so influential and are germane to my particular topic.

1.3 Deconstruction and Women's History

A major objective of my dissertation is to show how my four subjects negotiated in the power networks of their day. As suffrage campaigners they had had direct experience of discursive institutions of male power - legislature, bureaucracy, the press, the judicial system. All were silenced in the public debate; they had been in the hands of the police, they had been through the courts, they had been imprisoned. What was so threatening about their demands? To help answer this question I next consider aspects of Foucauldian theory most pertinent to historiography and research. The priority given to language and representation in deconstructionism conflicts with that given to women's experience by feminism. Therefore, rather than see it as a world view, I suggest deconstruction can be of service as a methodological tool. I do not think it is trivial to propose that limited efforts to obtain better access for women to information about birth control, to provide female support for sexually-abused women and girls during court procedures, to demand female police and to ensure prostitutes have the same civil rights as all other citizens, are of historical consequence. These small measures comprise negotiations of power which

⁴⁰ Liz Stanley, Review of *Nothing Mat(t)ers* by Somer Brodribb, *Women's Studies International Forum* Vol. 17, Nos. 2/3 (March-June 1994), pp. 316-137.

relate to women's cultural positioning. They provide a demonstration of how Foucauldian theorising in the fields of sexuality applies.

It is difficult to define poststructuralism and deconstructionism adequately for, as Somer Brodribb states astringently, in her refreshing critique, *Nothing Mat(t)ers*:

There is no clear conception of the meanings of poststructuralism and postmodernism, their relation, distinction or significance. Profoundly elusive, purposively ambiguous, these are terms which are not used systematically, and about which there is no consensus.⁴¹

For my purposes, I take Weedon's exposition:

All forms of poststructuralism assume meaning is constituted within language and is not guaranteed by the subject which speaks it . . . deconstruction looks to the relationship between different texts; and Foucauldian theory . . . looks to historically specific discursive relations and social practices,⁴²

Very generally then, poststructuralist analysis seeks to reveal how aspects of society, especially language and social institutions, derive meaning and significance from their context. Consequently, refusal, resistance and reversal of discourses are also revealed.

It is in discourse that power is located, that is, power is "discursively constructed".⁴³ Power and knowledge are joined together in discourse. To Foucault, discourse was:

. . . a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable, . . . we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies. It is this distribution that we must reconstruct with the things said and those concealed, the enunciations required and those forbidden, that it comprises; with the variants and different effects - according to who is speaking, his (sic) position of power, the institutional context in which he happens to be situated - that it implies; and with the shifts and reutilizations of identical formulas for contrary objectives that it also includes.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Somer Brodribb, *Nothing Mat(t)ers* (Melbourne: Spinifex, 1992), p. 8.

⁴² Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructural Theory* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p.13, quoted in Brodribb, *Nothing Mat(t)ers*, p. 7.

⁴³ Susan Kingsley-Kent, "Interrogating Women's Politics", *Gender and History* Vol. 4, No. 2 (Summer 1992), p. 208.

⁴⁴ Michael Foucault, *History of Sexuality* (London: Allen Lane, 1979; Penguin, Peregrine, 1980),

Power is transmitted, produced and reinforced through discourse, but is also undermined and exposed by it; so power can be obstructed and destabilised through discourse.⁴⁵ The implications are: firstly, that one is never outside power, since there are no margins, peripheries, nor centre; secondly, power relations are interwoven with other kinds of relation (production, kinship, family, sexuality) and can be studied through these discourses; and thirdly, the relations of power are interconnected.⁴⁶ While interconnections may "delineate general conditions of domination", dominance is not maintained by restraint and coercion but through "individual self-surveillance and self-correction", through normalisation.⁴⁷ Technical processes, institutions and patterns of general behaviour comprise discursive practices. And Weeks outlines the processes regarding discourses of sexuality:

So the rise of an apparatus of sexuality, a series of practices and institutions defining the domain of the sexual, is located not in any single social necessity but in a host of strategies dealing with relations between parents and pedagogic institutions and children, the relationship of medicine and science to the female body, controversies over birth control and population policies, and the categorisation of perverse sexualities.⁴⁸

There is a risk of slippage here: deconstructionist history might focus extensively on textual evidence overlooking technical processes or institutions. (In Chapters Two and Six I shall refer to this in more detail in relation to contraceptive techniques and in Chapter Four concerning the police service).

Foucault's proposed methodology offers much to historians. Power relations at the micro level of society can be analysed to show how certain effects of domination such as

p. 100.

⁴⁵ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 101.

⁴⁶ Sawicki endorses his theoretical approach somewhat over-enthusiastically. Jana Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 23.

⁴⁷ Patricia O'Brien, "Foucault's History of Culture", in *The New Cultural History*, ed., Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 35-38.

⁴⁸ Jeffrey Weeks, "Foucault for Historians", *History Workshop Journal* No 14, 1982, pp. 110-114.

class and patriarchy are made possible.⁴⁹ Thus, argues Sawicki, Foucault's genealogical method facilitates an "insurrection of subjugated knowledge", that is, naïve knowledges, low on the hierarchy of knowledge, from, for example, the patient, the hysteric, the housewife.⁵⁰ Oppressed groups will contest their subordination through reverse discourses.⁵¹ However, as Soper points out, while any suppressed and marginalised group will seek to contest its 'demonisation' by insisting on its 'naturalness', so it invokes, even as it challenges, the legitimating discourse of the oppressor.⁵² Hence, when the first-wave women's movement attempted to claim rights as 'women', problems were created; these have been discussed by Denise Riley.⁵³

First-wave feminist contestations of femininity were part of ongoing discourses of sexuality. Here I would like to emphasise Foucault's references to "things concealed", the enunciations "required and those forbidden"⁵⁴ because they help reveal where my four subjects were positioned in their contemporary discourses. (I shall return to this point in Section 1.5). Deconstruction assists when studying gender politics because it facilitates detailed examination of the actual mechanics of power.⁵⁵ Gender hierarchy has been sustained by the discursive construction of 'woman' as other and by stress on the

⁴⁹ Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault*, pp. 20-23. For a feminist assessment and critiques of Foucault see essays in Caroline Ramazanoglu, ed., *Up Against Foucault* (London: Routledge, 1993). On the question of resistant subjectivity, Sawicki admits Foucault's inadequacies but offers De Lauretis's perspective which suggests the feminist subject operates from within and outside of traditions and communities. Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault*, p. 107.

⁵⁰ Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault*, p. 26.

⁵¹ Weeks describes these reverse discourses, i.e., radically different definitions, different organisations of power, as 'political struggle'. Weeks, "Foucault for Historians", p. 118.

⁵² Kate Soper, "Productive Contradictions", in Ramazanoglu, ed. *Up Against Foucault*, p. 33. Stanley argues assumptions and silences in poststructuralism which need to be challenged include its failure to see "heterosexuality as a metanarrative" and the negation of the struggle by marginalised women to create an identity, "to name themselves". Liz Stanley, "Recovering Women in History from Feminist Deconstruction", *Women's Studies International Forum* Vol. 13, Nos. 1/2 (1990), p. 151. Ramazanoglu and Holland also point out that a more active conception of resistance linked to empowerment has been maintained by feminism. Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland, "Women's Sexuality and Men's Appropriation of Desire", in Ramazanoglu, ed. *Up Against Foucault*, p. 258.

⁵³ See below, pp. 52-54.

⁵⁴ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 100.

⁵⁵ Weeks, "Foucault for Historians", p. 114.

naturalness of women's subordinate and excluded status.⁵⁶ Noting the "determined anti-feminism" of poststructuralism, Stanley suggests we need to recognise the power and good sense of many of its ideas - "the end of grand narratives, the death of 'authoritative' pronouncements, knowledge as contextual and situated, the fragmentations of identity, the recognition of differences".⁵⁷

Scott has argued that a deconstructionist approach to history can avoid tendencies to naturalisation and reification so often found in alternative histories.⁵⁸ But Soper thinks discursive analysis is inadequate for a full understanding of "forms of feminist resistance or the complex processes whereby the position of marginal and subordinate groups come to be changed". This is because, first, feminist or gay cultures have not always stated their resistance in the oppressor's discourse. Second the "transformative and progressive potential for the dominant culture of the margins it comes to contain" can be overlooked. The fate of oppressed groups is not decided only "at the level of competing discourses"; to focus solely on discourse could mean other factors such as economic conditions are missed.⁵⁹

With a deconstructionist approach, the question of the historian's own role is raised. Histories of difference which take only one unifying aspect of experience as "an over-riding identity" overlook the historian's role in deciding what or whose experience is to be the prevailing feature.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Kate Soper, "Productive Contradictions" in Ramazanoglu, ed., *Up Against Foucault*, p. 34.

⁵⁷ Stanley, "Review of *Nothing Mat(t)ers*", pp. 316-317. See also Kate Nash, "The Feminist Production of Knowledge: Is Deconstruction a Practice for Women?", *Feminist Review* No. 47 (Summer 1994), pp. 66-77. I endorse a common feminist reaction to poststructuralism as being male-centred and elitist. Foucault himself belonged to, and poststructuralist theories emanate from, a well-entrenched patriarchal institution - white, male, academia. Sawicki's subjugated discourses of 'the other' - female, black, uneducated and so on - have been muted. Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault*, p. 105.

⁵⁸ Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience", *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer 1991), pp. 796-797. Kingsley-Kent also speaks of both the 'refusal' of the sexual discourses and resistance to them. Kingsley-Kent, "Interrogating Women's Politics", p. 253.

⁵⁹ Soper, "Productive Contradictions", p. 34.

⁶⁰ Scott, "Evidence of Experience", p. 785. Prasch states deconstructionism enables the historian to

According to Ramazanoglu and Holland, Foucault accepted that in recent Western history men have generally exercised power over women, though he failed to address questions about the origins, consolidation and reproduction of male power. In his theorising there is:

. . . no sense of the radical feminist's judgement of the coercion used by men against women, and the possession and invasion of women's bodies in medicine, domestic and sexual violence, as violent, immoral and needing to be changed.⁶¹

Foucault's crucial assumption that power is neutral does not hold either theoretically or empirically for women.⁶² As Bartky states trenchantly:

To overlook the forms of subjection that engenders the feminine body is to perpetuate the silence and powerlessness of those upon whom these disciplines have been imposed.⁶³

I think this is an important aspect of feminist criticism. It is pertinent to the areas in which my four subjects worked and I hope to bring out the ways in which they struggled with precisely this issue. Women's experience of subordination and marginalisation has helped produce more general knowledge of the ways in which other differences interact with gender.⁶⁴ And, as Soper observes, Foucault overlooks both "those highly specific forms" in which power is exercised in any sexually hierarchical society and "the differential impact on the lives of men and women of the general disciplining procedures to which he does attend."⁶⁵ It is here that the neglect of agency, so marked in Foucault, arises. A

enter the discourse. Being diachronic, history is as much about the present as the past. Thomas Prasch, "Dangerous Sexualities in Victorian England", *Journal of Women's History* Vol. 6, No. 1 (Spring 1994), p. 88. See Section 1.1, p. 34.

⁶¹ Ramazanoglu and Holland, "Women's Sexuality", pp. 240-257.

⁶² D. MacCannell and J.F. MacCannell, "Violence, Power and Pleasure: a Revisionist Reading of Foucault from the Victim Perspective", in Ramazanoglu, ed. *Up Against Foucault*, p. 204.

⁶³ Sandra Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power", paper read at the American Philosophical Association, May 1986, p.4, quoted in Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault*, p. 49.

⁶⁴ Ramazanoglu and Holland, "Women's Sexuality", p. 241.

⁶⁵ Soper, "Productive Contradictions", p. 39.

subject with agency seems to have little place in Foucault's thought, whereas for feminism it is essential.⁶⁶

The relationships between experience, knowledge and identity - the crux of the problem - have been extensively debated.⁶⁷ Referring to theories where women's resistance to men's sexual domination are seen as a form of empowerment, Ramazanoglu and Holland dismiss Foucault's unproblematic assumptions. They point that out he did not speak from women's *experiences* (emphasis mine) of having power exercised over them, nor from women's anger and pain.⁶⁸ The pitfalls of overlooking women's agency are graphically revealed by Alison Mackinnon when criticising the historical analysis of the demographic transition of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries; her critique will be elaborated in Chapter Six.⁶⁹ Canning addresses the problem of agency successfully in her study of gender and work in late nineteenth-century Germany, in which she sets out to untangle the ways in which subjects mediated or transformed discourses. She concludes:

. . . the body, if understood as a complex site of inscription and of subjectivity/resistance, offers an interesting and intricate way of retheorizing agency. Indeed, the notions of bodily inscription and reinscription seem to defy both the illusion of autonomous

⁶⁶ Prasch, "Dangerous Sexualities", p. 88. Prasch argues constructionist histories tend to avoid the problems of agency and audience.

⁶⁷ See for example: Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, which draws together a helpful collection of essays on feminism and post modernism. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, ed., *Feminists Theorize the Political* (London: Routledge, 1992). Particularly useful are Butler's "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism'", pp. 3-21 and Scott's "Evidence of Experience", pp. 22-40. See also Judith Butler, "Subversive Bodily Acts", Chapter Three in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 79-141; Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Denise Riley, 'Am I That Name?': *Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988).

⁶⁸ Ramazanoglu and Holland, "Women's Sexuality", p. 240. Struggles to obtain rights based on concepts of gender and sexuality may be limited by those definitions of sexual identity produced by institutions wanting to regulate and control, (the point emphasised by Riley, Walkowitz and Kingsley-Kent, which I explore later in this section). Sawicki defines this as a 'freedom'. Those marginalised and submerged voices which lie "a little beneath history" can be revealed through the study of reverse discourses; the sources and creative subjects of history. Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault*, pp. 27-28.

⁶⁹ Alison Mackinnon. "Were Women Present at the Demographic Transition? Questions from a Feminist Historian to Historical Demographers", *Gender and History* Vol. 7, No. 2, August 1995, pp. 222-240

agency/subjectivity and the vision of discourse as singularly determinant of subjects and their experiences.⁷⁰

My conclusion then, is that questioning of 'natural' phenomena is useful for feminism because, if gender and sexual categories are historically constructed and the mechanisms of their emergence and reproduction can be understood, it is possible to transform them.⁷¹ But the problems of agency remain.⁷²

To me, Walkowitz's description of the task of the historian - to "track how historic figures mobilize existing cultural tools" - is most useful.⁷³ She sees her examination of narratives of sexual danger, *City of Dreadful Delight*, as a productive dialogue with poststructuralists. As well as using poststructural insights to examine cultural meanings, it addresses the conventional historiographical interests of power, agency and experience.

Walkowitz points out:

... women are bound imaginatively by a limited cultural repertoire, forced to reshape cultural meanings within certain parameters. ... In the simplest sense, women of different classes and races all have to rely on cultural constructs to tell their "truths," but the cultural constructs available in different social situations vary.⁷⁴

She concedes that because women are marginalised it does not mean, as some feminists propose, that women are "free to invent their own texts." She successfully conveys a "sense of the inequality of power". Feminist scholars require a model which gives more attention to the "material context and discursive struggle" or to the specificity of women's experience in these struggles.⁷⁵ Human agency is significant although subjects are

⁷⁰ Canning, "Feminist History", p. 397.

⁷¹ Weeks, "Foucault for Historians", p. 113.

⁷² Nair debates the question of agency in female history. Janaki Nair, "On the Question of Agency in Indian Feminist Historiography" *Gender and History* Vol. 6, No. 1 (April 1994), pp. 82-100. To cater for the feminist appeal to experience in deconstructionist histories, Nash proposes a notion of knowledge as 'rhetoric' as a strategy for justifying belief where language is emphasised over direct experience. Thus the appeal to experience would not necessarily be antipathetic to deconstruction but could be a significant rhetorical device. Nash, "Feminist Production of Knowledge", pp. 66-77.

⁷³ Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight* (London: Virago, 1992), p. 10.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 9.

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 8-9.

culturally determined. I take one of my subjects of research here to provide an example of Walkowitz's point. Born in a Victorian workhouse, the illegitimate daughter of a domestic servant, Edith Watson would not appear as a powerful subject. Yet she used her own experiences of poverty and an attempted rape as a major catalyst for her critique of the British judicial system. These experiences, mediated by other aspects of her identity such as education, social mobility, political awareness, enabled her to use her 'subjugated knowledge' to analyse the inequalities of a system which was ostensibly fair and just.

Before considering the application of deconstruction to feminist traditions, I offer Nair's statement about feminist historiography to emphasise the place of the historian in discourse:

Feminist historiography must elaborate the parameters within which specific historical instances offer potential for and limits to women's power, in order that feminist political practice may develop the strategies and visions appropriate to the thoroughgoing social reconstruction that it envisages.⁷⁶

Imagining such a reconstruction, what would a discursive analysis of the traditions of feminism reveal? I now turn to consider gender constructions and feminist traditions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

1.4 Constructs of Gender

Denise Riley demonstrates how poststructuralism helps to tease out the complexities inherent in reform movements based on the claims of women as 'women'. To advocate women's suffrage, the campaigners had to present the case for enfranchisement as 'women' but needed to avoid or contest conceptualisations of women disadvantageous to their cause: namely that women's and men's interests were separate and distinct, that sexual differences were god-given and immutable, making women physically and psychologically

⁷⁶ Nair, "On the Question of Agency", p. 83.

unfit for political participation. These notions had contributed to the cultural belief in the separation of the spheres.⁷⁷ An "insoluble" and "perennial impasse", Riley reflects:

The winding course of later nineteenth and twentieth-century British feminisms is strewn with its skirmishes with what we would call over-feminisation, as well as under-feminisation. For often, feminists have had to speak in the same breath in and out of the category of 'women', with exhausting results. The drive towards political representation exposes the fluctuations of 'women', philosophically as well as strategically. . . . As always, women are illuminated in certain lights in advance; are already in some alliance with other political and philosophical languages which colour them. That is, feminism never has the option of putting forward its own uncontaminated, self-generated understandings of 'women'; its 'women' too, is always thoroughly implicated in the discursive world.⁷⁸

But as Catherine Hall comments, Riley's analysis remains "exclusively at the level of intellectual history". Hall reminds us that Foucault's discursive practices include technologies of power - "sites, institutions and everyday practices", which Riley overlooks:

Her discourses are those of language at its most abstract level, defined through texts, that presumably we are expected to take as representative, but the texts have to stand alone for they are never placed within a social or political context.⁷⁹

1.4 a) The Early-Twentieth-Century Inheritance.

Riley also delineates how nineteenth-century conceptualisations of 'the social' - with its accompanying associations with women and feminisation - impacted on notions of 'the political' and older distinctions between 'the public' and 'the private'.⁸⁰ Notions of women as the morally purer sex and the family as a metaphor for national life had been part of prevailing cultural ideologies from the eighteenth century. In national life women's

⁷⁷ Riley, *'Am I That Name?'*, pp. 67-93. She uses suffrage campaign rationales to show that women's efforts for advancement must be contextualized, because 'women' in poststructuralist terms, cannot be "completely unshadowed subjects"

⁷⁸ Riley, *'Am I That Name?'*, p. 68.

⁷⁹ Hall, "Politics, Post-structuralism and Feminist History", particularly pp. 206-209. Hall concludes feminism pre-empted Foucault; the feminist awareness that there are many sites of power and that much of history was androcentric existed before poststructuralism.

⁸⁰ Riley, *'Am I that Name?'*, pp. 48-52.

special contribution to the private and the public sphere was posited as maternal, nurturing in nature. Through philanthropy, evangelicalism and moral welfare work, middle-class women could secure a socially-approved area of influence. Part of the nineteenth-century dialectic in which the early feminists sought to contest the dominant discourse which placed women as the 'Other' in binary opposition to men, these conceptualisations enabled feminists to argue that women had a specific contribution to make as women; it was woman's mission to raise the nation's moral standards, to civilise. Much of the effort was to be directed at the lower classes. Thus women's traditional philanthropic contribution to the public sphere could be employed by feminists to justify their participation in public life and the need for their enfranchisement. Such a civilising, 'missionary' metaphor continued to operate forcefully throughout the nineteenth century; it applied to class relationships and the dynamics of imperialism and was intertwined with other national preoccupations, eugenics, anxieties about middle-class and racial superiority, and differential reproductive rates. Another linked discursive image with a powerful legacy was the analogy of political systems with the family, which could also be employed to validate notions of cross-class and international sisterhood.

Ways in which these concepts were mined are suggested by Antoinette Burton, who explores the implications of the belief that woman was a metaphor for social improvement and civilisation in the specific context of British imperialism. She states that since Victorian feminists were conscious of and living in an imperial culture, the imperial burden had featured prominently in feminist thinking about women's public role. Because moral influence rather than military power was what women offered the empire, British colonialism could be perceived as civilising.⁸¹ On the one hand an internationalist feminist vision, of a global sisterhood based on equality and 'womanly values' was created,

⁸¹ Antoinette M. Burton, "The White Woman's Burden", *Women's Studies International Forum* Vol. 13, No. 4 (1990), p. 300.

yet on the other feminists collaborated in the ideological work of empire, what Burton describes as "imperial feminism".⁸² Also discussing nineteenth-century imperialism's influence on British feminism, Vron Ware contends that, "ideas about femininity - what was acceptable, deviant and exotic - were constructed as part of a complex system of control and resistance."⁸³ These models can be applied to analysis of class too.

Used to justify colonialism and middle-class control of the working class those ideas continued to be utilised.⁸⁴ Burton cites the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) anthem, and the views of Christabel Pankhurst and Teresa Billington-Greig, (who proposed a "notion of England as the 'storm-centre' of an international women's movement") to support her argument that Edwardian feminists employed the prevailing national ideology of a natural order in a world where Britain was imperial leader.⁸⁵ It was a short step to suggest that because England was the Mother of Parliaments, 'Mother of Empire', she should be acknowledged as the mother of a new world-wide movement. Also feminists had long used the rhetorical strategy of shaming opponents by arguing that women's suffrage was the logical outcome of English civil liberty. Women's political slavery was therefore evidence of a decaying civilisation. Behind such assertions though, lay a sense of pride in race, nation, empire, and the conviction that British women were crucial in promoting Britain's racial, national, imperial success.⁸⁶ Allied to this was the

⁸² Burton, "The White Woman's Burden", pp. 301-306. Similarly, Mohanty suggests that in any discourse, the point at which power is exercised is when the authorial subject becomes the implicit reference. There are three steps which lead to ethnocentric universalism: i) the assumption of women as an already constituted or coherent group; ii) uncritical acceptance of methodological "proof" of universality or cross-cultural validity; iii) this norm then becomes the yardstick by which the cultural 'others' are encoded and represented. Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses", *Feminist Review* No. 30 (Autumn 1988), p. 64.

⁸³ Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History* (London: Verso, 1992), p. 242.

⁸⁴ See Jean L'Esperance, "Woman's Mission to Women: Explorations in the Operation of the Double Standard and Female Solidarity in Nineteenth-century England", *Social History* Vol. 12 (1979), pp. 316-338 and Burton, "The White Woman's Burden", p. 300.

⁸⁵ Teresa Billington-Greig, "The Storm-Centre of the Woman Suffrage Movement", *The International* (September 1908). Quoted in Burton, "The White Woman's Burden", p. 307.

⁸⁶ Burton, "The White Woman's Burden", pp. 304-5

idea that the position of women in any culture could be read as an index of civilisation. Ware proposes that while feminism gave women concepts of sisterhood and shared experience, progressive or radical outlooks were not necessarily associated. Notions of universal womanhood could form one aspect of imperialistic ideology.⁸⁷ Customs such as purdah, arranged marriages, and the dowry system, might be seen as non-rational, even 'primitive', marking out the societies which practised them as backward, in need of civilising.⁸⁸ From her study of British women activists in India from 1865-1945, Ramusack suggests claims of "fictive kinship" helped integrate British women reformists into Indian culture, a process she terms "maternal imperialism". Once Indian women had more education and political experience by the early 1930s, unequal power relations, as between mother and daughter, led to resentment.⁸⁹ Such employment and manipulation of the ideologies of empire illustrate the diversity of responses to that cultural package. (I shall return to this question when discussing Nina Boyle's imperialism in Chapter Four and Edith How Martyn's first visit to India in Chapter Six).

These complex constructs in political discourse continued into the 1920s and 1930s. For example, the eugenic argument in favour of white racial supremacy keyed into fears of national collapse. Ideals about global sisterhood underlay the agitation of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC)⁹⁰ to reform a number of customs affecting the status of women in the colonies in the mid-twenties. Katherine Mayo's *Mother India*, published in 1927, which refracted Indian marriage and sexual customs through western eyes, contributed to a moral panic. It was this book, and articles

⁸⁷ Ware, *Beyond the Pale*, p. 160.

⁸⁸ Ware, *Beyond the Pale*, p. 250.

⁸⁹ Barbara N. Ramusack, "Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialists, Feminist Allies: British Women Activists in India 1865-1945", *Women's Studies International Forum* Vol. 13, No. 4 (1990), p. 319.

⁹⁰ The National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship was formerly the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies; the name was changed in 1919.

by Nina Boyle in *The Woman's Leader*, which began Eleanor Rathbone's ill-judged crusade to change colonial legislation to improve the position of 'native women' in a number of areas.⁹¹ Nina Boyle used the concept of 'civilisation' in a discursive construction of 'the other', meaning other 'less civilised' cultures, particularly in the British Empire. Perhaps the context of women's oppression, and Bartky's point about women's powerlessness and silence, can be used in partial extenuation of Nina Boyle's reactionary views.⁹²

However, it must be remembered that the initial main priority for my four subjects had been to obtain the vote for women. What happened once that had been partially achieved? In the next section I focus on the context of their work after the First World War.

1.4 b) After the Suffrage Campaign.

The fate of feminism after votes for women over the age of thirty were attained in 1918 has been controversial.⁹³ Some of the problem can be traced to that collapsing of suffrage campaigning with the history of the women's movement which Cott has

⁹¹ See Chapter Four, pp. 222-226 and Chapter Six, pp 337-339.

⁹² See above p. 49 and Chapter Four Section 4.4.

⁹³ Johanna Alberti points to the number of suffragists who continued in wider arenas and debated the implications of claims for reform based on the old/new polarities, in her study of NUSEC and the Six Point Group. Johanna Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage: Feminists in War and Peace 1914-1928* (London: Macmillan, 1987). Claire Eustance's work demonstrates the diversity of feminist activism after 1914 by examining the work of provincial members of the WFL as well as those of the leadership. Claire Eustance, "'Daring To Be Free': The Evolution of Women's Political Identities in the Women's Freedom League", D.Phil. Thesis, University of York, 1993. Martin Pugh focuses mainly on parliamentary political processes. Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959* (London: Macmillan, 1992). Other studies of feminism in the 1920s include: Brian Harrison, *Prudent Revolutionaries: Portraits of British Feminists Between the Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) and Olive Banks, *The Politics of British Feminism 1918-1970* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1993); Susan Kingsley-Kent, "The Politics of Sexual Difference: World War I and the Demise of British Feminism", *Journal of British Studies* 27 (July 1988), pp. 232-253; Jane Lewis, "In Search of Real Equality: Women Between the Wars", in *Class, Culture and Social Change*, F. Gloversmith, ed. (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), pp. 208-239. Reference is made to the topic in Deirdre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women Between the Wars 1918-1939* (London: Pandora, 1989) and Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1984).

identified, as well as to semantic variations in what has been viewed as feminism. Broadly speaking interpretations of feminism cover a narrowly defined political movement to a range of feminist ideas and practices.⁹⁴ If the several stages in the generation of a feminist identity are glossed over, the development of feminism as a conceptual idea *and* (emphasis mine) political movement are obscured, according to Claire Eustance. She identifies those discursive processes in the theorising of women's oppression elaborated by Riley, as being a key to understanding what happened after 1918.⁹⁵ While women who held a range of perceptions about gender inequality could unite to demand women's enfranchisement, once this was partially achieved the different perceptual foundations led to a number of possible political identities for women.⁹⁶ In the 1920s, the differing rationales resulted in dichotomies between 'old', or 'equality' feminism, which demanded women's equal rights with men, and 'new' feminism. My four subjects retained an 'equal rights' perspective, but did not see this as excluding reform based on women's special needs if this could lead to greater equality. Edith How Martyn thought that both the 'old' and the 'new' feminism were needed.⁹⁷ 'New' feminism based its appeal on sexual difference: because women's needs were different, for example, through motherhood, they should seek reform based on women's special concerns, hence calls for the 'endowment of motherhood', (Family Allowances), and for protective legislation in employment.⁹⁸ Harold Smith sees a powerful cultural conservatism after the war in which the conflicting ideologies hampered recruitment of younger women.⁹⁹ Rather than comment on the course of such debates

⁹⁴ See reference to Cott's discussion on feminism. Introduction, pp. 11-12.

⁹⁵ See above, pp. 52-54.

⁹⁶ Eustance, "Daring To Be Free", pp. 22-25.

⁹⁷ Edith How Martyn, Letter to *Time and Tide*, 4 March 1927, quoted in Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage*, p.173.

⁹⁸ See Chapter Three for a brief account of the Women's Freedom League after 1914, p. 150.

⁹⁹ Harold Smith, "British Feminism in the 1920s", Chapter Four in *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1990). It is also true that there were structural changes, and generational shifts. Many suffrage leaders had devoted their full-time energies to campaigning activities whereas in the following generation combining the pursuit of careers with running a household meant little time for unpaid political work.

which have been examined fully elsewhere,¹⁰⁰ I shall focus on Susan Kingsley-Kent's study of public discourses on gender during and after the war, *Making Peace*, because of her argument that feminism died after the war.

In *Sex and Suffrage*, Kingsley-Kent argued that the connections made between women's sexual powerlessness and vulnerability and their exclusion from political power were the foundation of the suffrage movement. The vote symbolised both access to political power and a radical demand for change in all aspects of sexual relationships.¹⁰¹ The subsequent careers of my four subjects demonstrate how conscious they were of these connections. According to Kent, feminists opposed the separate spheres ideology because they suffered from its results: women's economic, social and sexual subordination. Conflict between male and female was thus inevitable, an argument propounded by anti-suffragists. Through patriarchal institutions, women were made vulnerable to sexual oppression. Consequently, first-wave feminism challenged the dominant discourse on sexuality; if masculinity was a cultural construction it could be altered, as could constructs of female sexuality and femininity. In the main I agree with Kent's analysis.¹⁰² The feminist insistence on the elimination of a double standard of sexual morality evinced, for example, through work to reform marriage and divorce laws, and Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts (CD Acts), were all part of that challenge. And, as Lucy Bland and Walkowitz have stated, the earlier campaigns enabled women to speak out on what at the time were taboo subjects.¹⁰³ In Chapter Three I shall present a more detailed examination of Edwardian politics of sexuality.

¹⁰⁰ See note 93.
¹⁰¹ Susan Kingsley-Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Great Britain 1860-1914* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 208.
¹⁰² Claire Eustance draws attention to Kingsley-Kent's elision of the views of a broader constituency of women. Eustance, "Daring To Be Free", p. 23.
¹⁰³ Lucy Bland, "'Cleansing the Portals of Life': the Venereal Disease Campaigns in the Early Twentieth Century", in *Crises in the Modern State*, ed. Mary Langan and Bill Schwarz (London: Hutchinson, 1985), pp. 192-208; Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 7. Walkowitz holds the Victorian debates on sexuality

Male and female antagonism continued through the 1920s and 1930s according to Kent in *Making Peace*. She elaborates what she sees as the demise of British feminism in those decades and it is here I take issue with her. She bases her arguments on an analysis of how experiences of World War I, as they were articulated and represented in "specific languages of gender and sexuality", created very different notions about gender and sexual identity from those prevailing before the war.¹⁰⁴

Firstly I suggest her depiction of feminism as an organised political mass movement unnecessarily restricts the exploration of the ways in which feminists continued to operate. More positively, the methods adopted by former suffragists and the next generation of feminists can be seen as adapted strategical imperatives following the partial victory of enfranchisement for some women. Kent overlooks the trajectory of reform movements. The reverse discourse of feminist knowledge played out in the suffrage campaign did not succeed in a complete revision of the dominant discourse, but it did have several effects. I argue that once the vote was achieved, the second stage of feminist subversion of dominant discourses continued by building on those foundations which had been laid during the suffrage campaign.¹⁰⁵ Also, as Claire Eustance points out, once women's partial enfranchisement had been achieved, women faced pressures from class and other political interests and had the choice of a wider range of demands for reform to achieve equality.¹⁰⁶ Even before 1914 some feminists were changing the focus of their work. Edith How Martyn had joined the Malthusian League in 1910; she organised the first public meeting for Margaret Sanger in 1915. Alison Neilans was active in the Ladies

opened up new, heterosexual expectations for middle-class women, while social purity legacies reinforced women's subordination and led to oppressive public policies aimed for the most part at working-class women on the streets. Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight* (London: Virago, 1992), pp. 82-83.

¹⁰⁴ Susan Kingsley-Kent, *Making Peace* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 4.

¹⁰⁵ Kent bases a fair proportion of her examination on the dynamics of National Union of Women's Suffrage (NUWSS) (subsequently NUSEC) and so emphasises narrowly-defined political aspects of the search for women's equality.

¹⁰⁶ Eustance, "Daring To Be Free", p. 24.

National Association certainly as early as 1913. Nina Boyle and Edith Watson began their critique of the judicial system in 1912. This was partly due to disillusionment with political processes which sprang from repeated rejection of their demand for enfranchisement. Their appeals to rationalism, logic and justice, made in terms of male-dominated political discourse, had failed. They were beginning to re-define the 'political'.

Kent suggests that complex, multiple constructions of gender evolved during and after the war.¹⁰⁷ Endorsing Foucauldian theory and Riley's argument about the double-bind involved in the case for demanding reform as 'women', she states that 'new' feminists used antifeminist rationales to validate their claims, particularly for family endowment and access to birth control. Hence they undermined feminist critiques which, Kent argues, were "anachronistic and irrelevant" to the discourses which predominated in post-war Britain.¹⁰⁸ To me, Kent ignores feminist activities in many areas which had an impact on women's lives. Because it enables a feminist location of the political and personal to be revealed, I prefer to retain a focus on action generated by feminist ideals. I agree with Johanna Alberti's suggestion that attention should be paid to the links between suffrage and feminism and the ways these evolved.¹⁰⁹ Like many suffrage campaigners,

¹⁰⁷ Kent's analysis suggests the "old", i.e. "equality" feminists could continue to hold pre-war notions of masculinity and femininity which, since culturally constructed, were amenable to reason, and could be changed to bring about equality and freedom. Some did perceive the glorification of maternity and domesticity was yet another way of trying to force women back into their separate sphere and warned against accepting this dominant cultural construction. Meanwhile, "new" feminists could propose the notion of male and female as instinctively different - an approach which was supported by sexologists and psychologists. Thus, the social bases of masculinity and femininity gave way to biologically determined ideas of male and female sexuality. However, a major difference between pre- and post-war thinking was how the "separate spheres" were constituted. Since pre-war institutional separation of male and female had been partially dismantled by women's demands, the institutional separate spheres were replaced after the war by psychological separate spheres, legitimated by sexologists and psychologists. This enabled "new" feminists to claim particular rights for women, some of which were quite radical. but, since the claims were predicated on sexual differences, this ultimately placed boundaries on what feminists could achieve. Kingsley-Kent, Conclusion to *Making Peace*, pp. 140-143.

¹⁰⁸ Kingsley-Kent, *Making Peace*, pp. 140-142.

¹⁰⁹ See note 93.

my four subjects constituted their political activism in other ways more appropriate to changed political and social circumstances after 1918. Having developed analyses of sexual politics they could make the connections between women's private and public lives. I argue that feminists continued to face the same problems as previously, although the fields of debate had changed. The reverse discourses of power had to change too. Some of these changes can be attributed to the effects of suffrage campaigning, to the partial success of feminist appropriation of the public discourse of sexuality. Hence the parameters widened, and there was a wider arena in which women's sexual subordination could be contested. In the next section I consider which avenues of influence offered possibilities to my four subjects.

1.5 Discourses of Sexual Politics

I now need to enumerate the variety of discourses of sexuality which offered potential for the four women. There were a number - political, legal, bureaucratic, social, moral - which overlapped yet were also quite distinct at times. As women, the four were marginalised; they did not possess the necessary attributes of wealth, status, or family connections for central positioning in dominant power discourses. Nor were they in possession of those 'superior' forms of knowledge which could make other avenues to power available.¹¹⁰ They did not have qualifications, i.e. professional, mainstream, specialist positions in medicine, science, the law, the church, the press, at a time when there was increasing professionalisation. Although Edith How Martyn was a graduate economist, the highest professional post she obtained was as a lecturer at a women's college. Initially, it is clear they did not have easy access or automatic entry to

¹¹⁰ See above, pp. 46-47.

contemporary fields of debate on sexuality. For these reasons they were required to operate in the interstices of power discourses.

There was one area however, in which they had a great deal of experience and I suggest that this provided the base for their subsequent identities, power relationships and negotiations. As their starting point I take the contested cultural representations of women prevailing during the Edwardian suffrage campaign. Their experience of it was to prove an invaluable asset later. In some senses it positioned them advantageously. It gave them insight into and experience of power relations at their most confrontational.

One of the most marked and remarked upon features of the suffrage campaign was its challenge to contemporary notions of femininity, of what was appropriate womanly behaviour. Rather than upholding the conventional middle-class stereotypes of passivity, respectability and decorum, suffrage campaigners were seen to be capable of organising and administering large-scale political pressure groups; they were directly involved in political action, they took to the streets in vociferous public display; suffragettes engaged in violent militant action. The virulence of the response to these activities was a measure of the threat posed to traditional notions of womanhood by suffrage campaigners. Firstly, female claims for participation in government had been ignored. Secondly, because the four individuals had crashed through the boundaries of convention, they had come up against institutionalised male power. They had suffered some of the worst penalties which could be inflicted by those discursive institutions. I take the occasion when Nina Boyle and Edith Watson with other WFL members chained themselves to the doors of Marylebone Magistrates Court as a representative example. When arrested they gave false names; the trial continued even though the presiding magistrate, Mr. Mead, and the court officials knew well their real identities.¹¹¹ Nevertheless they were found guilty and

¹¹¹ The dealings of the WFL with Mr. Frederick Mead, a London stipendiary magistrate, typifies other aspects of women's exclusion. Initially women were banned from court, except as witnesses or

imprisoned. Here they challenged conventions of ladylike behaviour, of public order, of the police and the judiciary, making a mockery of these discursive constructions, though they still could not subvert them completely. They had been literally excluded; they had been ignored, derided, arrested, tried, imprisoned; they had gone on hunger-strike; they had been physically subjugated and deprived of their liberty. These attempts to silence them had failed. The extent to which power could be negotiated would have been clarified. In the process they helped create an oppositional identity and had actively participated in a reverse discourse of power. The feelings of sisterhood and solidarity which they experienced continued for the rest of their lives.

By 1918, when the first measures enfranchising women were enacted, direct involvement in the political process was theoretically possible. Three of the four did attempt this. None of them was elected. If constitutional campaigning and even militancy had had so little success, they may well have concluded that feminists needed to create other means by which to negotiate power relations.

The challenge that faced them was the manipulation of their own entries into political, legal, medical and social discourses through oblique routes. They did this by constructing identities which empowered and authorised them to participate in a number of ways: via organisations and pressure groups, through the media, by alliances with the few women who had some measure of public validation, via men in powerful positions, and by networking. In two cases, Edith How Martyn and Alison Neilans, their constructs as specialists were successful; they established power bases and became well-known in their

defendants, when cases of an 'indecent' nature were being tried. Mead persistently tried to eject women from his court, long after others had admitted them. Mr. Mead was a familiar antagonist. Years later, in 1927 he caused a stir by objecting to the fact that a policewoman had given evidence in a prostitution case; he felt it was not seemly for women to deal with such cases, a demonstration of traditional limitations on what was permissible for women to speak. The same year, when he was in his 80s, he said prostitution was essential in a *civilised* state (emphasis mine) in his evidence to the Street Offences Inquiry Committee in 1927. See Chapter Five, p. 272-273.

fields of expertise. All four helped to create new, or re-energise existing organisations and pressure groups. Nina Boyle and Edith Watson founded the Women's Police; Nina Boyle was a founder-member of the Save the Children Fund; Edith How Martyn began the Suffragette Fellowship and the Birth Control International Information Centre, which later developed into the Family Planning Association. Margaret Sanger and Lady Astor were the two most notable women with whom Edith How Martyn and Alison Neilans worked. Both were in a sense outsiders and mavericks, but the wealth and influence of the two public figures were used in several symbiotic ways. The surviving correspondence of the four women in their campaigning demonstrates the contacts made with influential male figures, political and religious leaders, members of parliament, local government councillors, officers of health, and medical specialists.

In other discourses, power relations were more fluid, probably because these were newer areas of debate. Sexology and psychology were in comparative states of infancy yet provided increasing authority in the field of sexuality. Medicine too provided a language of sexuality and Edith How Martyn and Alison Neilans made use of networking to build authoritative contacts across the disciplines, with, for instance, Laurence Housman, Havelock Ellis, Janet Chance and Norman Haire.¹¹² Surprisingly, given the development of popular sex and marriage manuals at the time, they did not seek to influence a popular audience through writing directly in the mass media. Sociological discourse was another relatively new area. In this case women's traditional involvement in philanthropy could be deployed to claim some authority. Without professional qualifications, all four nevertheless labelled themselves as 'social workers' on occasion, construing their experience as social work.

¹¹² For details about individuals, see: Chapter Three, pp. 155-156 (Housman); Chapter Two, pp. 96-98 (Ellis); Chapter Six, note 37 (Chance) and note 6 (Haire).

In terms of moral discourse they seem to have been rather ambivalent. None made claim to any personal religious authority though Alison Neilans had close connections with church leaders.¹¹³ She certainly entered the moral debate and derived some support from the social purity movement although this was sometimes more of a burden than a blessing. They may well have been very conscious of the shift away from morality as a basic element in debates about sexuality to a medico-legal discourse - something which I discuss in Chapters Two and Three. Their belief in the feminist moral challenge to the sexual double standard was fundamental. In Chapter Three I explore their involvement in the ongoing debates on sexuality within the women's movement in more detail.

Earlier, in Section 1.3, I referred to the ways discursive analysis reveals the silences and absences of discourse. To conclude the chapter I would like to comment on this problem in relation to women.

Often women's voices have been absent from public debate on sexuality; frequently they have not been heard. Nineteenth-century women used the campaigns to repeal the CD Acts to question prevailing double standards of sexual morality in a successful attempt to articulate women's feelings about sexual mores. Contemporary feminists still point to a biased vocabulary and the lack of a sexual lexicon in which women's sexual experiences can be communicated.¹¹⁴ I also wish to point to the fluidity of language, to a deconstructionist emphasis on the relational construction of meanings. Terms such as 'domestic violence', and 'prostitute' have encompassed a range of meanings; different

¹¹³ See Introduction, p. 27 and Chapter Five, pp. 251-253.

¹¹⁴ One of the original accounts was Dale Spender's "Sexuality: A Case of Compensation", in *Man Made Language*, 2d ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 171-190. Sheila Jeffreys followed her analysis of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century sexual politics, *The Spinster and Her Enemies* with a controversial account of late-twentieth-century 'sexual liberation' in *Anticlimax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution* (London: The Women's Press, 1990). See also Jennifer Coates, "Swearing and Taboo Language", in *Women, Men and Language: A Sociolinguistic Account of Sex Differences in Language*, Studies in Language and Linguistics Series (London: Longman, 1986), pp. 19-22; Deborah Cameron, "Silence, Alienation and Oppression: Feminist Model for Language (I)", in *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1985), pp. 91-113.

constructions have been placed on them at varying times. There have been absences and silences, in the invisibility, for instance, of words such as 'incest' (and whatever that meant), and 'lesbian' (a word not commonly used until fairly recently). Naming is significant. To the Victorians incest was deemed an unmentionable topic, even amongst professionals. Frances Power Cobbe chose to use the word 'torture' to describe the violence perpetrated on women by their husbands. Feminist naming is important too. For example, through identifying, revealing and problematising violence in the family, rape, sexual abuse and harassment, feminists have brought these issues into the public arena. There is also the need to avoid constantly presenting women as victims, as helpless, passive objects of male sexual power. It is a key element in the feminist dilemma when addressing the problem of sexual oppression in all its varied forms.

The ways in which language can affect perceptions of violent interaction can have great influence in both identifying and shaping the problem - and in seeking resolutions to it. From her study of American social work agencies from 1880 to 1960, Linda Gordon concludes that family violence has been historically and politically constructed:

First, the very definition of what constitutes unacceptable domestic violence, an appropriate response to it, developed and then varied according to political moods and the force of certain political movements. Second, violence among family members arises from family conflicts which are not only historically influenced but political in themselves, in the sense of that word having to do with power relations. Family violence usually arises out of power struggles in which individuals are contesting real resources and benefits. These contests arise not only from personal aspirations but also from changing social norms and conditions.¹¹⁵

I shall discuss the question further in Chapter Four, but list a few examples to give some flavour of prevailing notions of the unmentionable during the 1920s - and the fluidity of the language of sexuality.

¹¹⁵ Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives* (London: Virago, 1989), p. 3. See also my reference to Parton on problematising child abuse in Chapter Four, pp. 176-177.

In 1923, *Time and Tide* referred to the "conspiracy of silence" on child abuse.¹¹⁶ Alison Neilans had to contend with the fact that there was no proper legal definition of a prostitute. Since the days of the CD Acts, there had been a class of women excluded from legal protection, because they were "women of immoral character".¹¹⁷ In 1922, a woman could not be convicted for soliciting until she was defined as a "common prostitute". The term served to confuse the legal situation for many women, particularly the working class who were the chief recipients of police attention. Nor was there an adequate word for prostitutes' customers, an indication perhaps of how seldom men have been the target of attempts at legislation or reform. During the 1920s and 30s the word 'lesbian' was not common currency. When the House of Lords debated a clause proposing that homosexual acts between women be made illegal in 1921, fears that the more the question was discussed, the more women would be attracted to lesbianism, were aired. Cicely Hamilton alluded to homosexuality as "the sins we do not speak of" in a series of articles on morality for *Time and Tide* in 1928.¹¹⁸ Cross-culturally the delicate area of vocabulary and meaning was fraught with problems. Nina Boyle employed a long-standing metaphorical use of the term 'slavery' to draw attention to women's oppression through a number of traditional customs practised in British colonies.¹¹⁹ Applying it to customs where women were bought and sold in marriage, concubinage, and so on, she wrote an article, "Have We Abolished Slavery?" in *Time and Tide*. Implicitly appealing to hierarchical concepts of civilisation, she demanded British tolerance of such customs should cease.¹²⁰ Some of her writing is redolent of colonialism; it illustrates the points made by Burton and Ware, yet she was

¹¹⁶ *Time and Tide*, 27 July 1923.

¹¹⁷ C.R. Hewitt, "The Police and the Prostitute", *Fourth Alison Neilans Memorial Lecture* (n.p., 1951), pp. 7-8. The origins of the label are unclear; in the seventeenth century, "common" may have meant "a harlot of the poorer classes".

¹¹⁸ *Time and Tide*, November 1928.

¹¹⁹ Slavery was an issue prominent in the League of Nations debates during the early 1920s.

¹²⁰ *Time and Tide*, 10 June 1927

merely using the cultural constructs of the time. I shall draw attention to the variety of language registers employed by my four subjects in subsequent chapters.

Another consideration of discursive analysis must be the context within which debate takes place. Soper claims that the specific economic and political climate is critical to the success of resistance to oppression.¹²¹ I explore this more fully in Chapter Two but here just indicate some of the circumstances in areas where the four women worked. Women were accepted into the police service after much deliberation by 1923. Increasingly through the 1920s and 30s, they participated in the judicial system as magistrates, lawyers, prison warders. But there is still injustice and inequality in the ways female victims of child abuse, rape and sexual abuse and harassment are perceived and treated today.¹²² Edith How Martyn's activity in promoting birth control can be seen as part of social changes which involved many factors: generally, the social and cultural impact of the First World War, and economic change; more specifically, the development of notions about companionate marriage, the glorification of motherhood, the increase of maternal mortality, the popularity of eugenics and the rise of sexology. Moral panics about VD and prostitution during the war, medical advances in the treatment of VD, the acceptance of contraception and changing sexual attitudes all had an impact on Alison Neilans' work, although economic reasons for prostitution were, and still are, glossed over in the public debate. In both the latter cases, their objectives were not achieved until after their deaths. Contraceptive advice was not made freely available at local authority clinics until the 1960s; the legal inequalities of prostitutes were not removed until 1951. Edith Watson

¹²¹ Soper, "Productive Contradictions", p. 34.

¹²² See for example: Cathy Roberts, *Women and Rape* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989); Jalna Hanmer, Jill Radford and Elizabeth Stanko, *Women, Policing and Male Violence: International Perspectives* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1989); Sandra Walklate, *Gender and Crime: An Introduction* (Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995); Clare Short, *Dear Clare This Is What Women Feel About Page 3*, ed., Kiri Tunks and Diane Hutchinson (London: Radius, 1991).

campaigns for divorce law reform and it took many years before more equitable divorce laws were introduced. Internationally there has been co-operation on a number of levels; the League of Nations reported on trafficking in women in 1927 but even now the proceeds of this multi-million pound business rarely accrue to its women workers; the Save the Children Fund, originally set up to alleviate the aftermath of World War I for children in the defeated powers, is still active.

Conclusion

I hope I have shown that the activities of these Edwardian suffragettes might fruitfully be approached through contemporary theorising. Historiographically, I can reclaim some women's history. Despite discordant elements in feminism and discursive analysis, I think both can illuminate the activities of the four women. The legacy of the first-wave women's movement and membership of a leading suffrage organisation provided a feminist identity and a personal community. From this springboard they chose to make their life's-work around controversial issues such as domestic violence, sexual abuse, prostitution and birth control. Although at times limited by the almost unspeakable nature of the topics, and so being "bound imaginatively by a limited cultural repertoire",¹²³ the four women continued a radical feminist challenge to dominant discourses of sexuality for almost thirty years.

¹²³ Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, p. 8.

CHAPTER TWO: FAMILY, SEXUALITY AND STATE, 1880 - 1930

Introduction

... anyone who looks closely at the social history of late Victorian and Edwardian Britain cannot but be struck by the immensely varied, contradictory, and fissiparous quality of many of the movements, values, and institutions there encountered. Preconceived 'Victorian' and 'Edwardian' archetypes rapidly dissolve in the face of a riotous pluralism of human experience embracing government, religion, work, family, moral attitudes, popular culture, and sexual relationships.¹

Jose Harris' description of the age in which my four subjects were born and grew to womanhood expresses very well the complexities facing the social historian. Remarking on the arbitrary nature of periodisation and the truisms of continuity and change, Harris emphasises the fluidity, indeterminate boundaries, complexities and nuances which contributed to the varied nature of British society in the forty years preceding 1914. I begin with her view because her conclusion, that "many of the major configurations of British social life in the half-century after 1914 were already taking shape over the previous forty years," helps to crystallise the proposals I make about the work of my four subjects.² In this chapter I attempt to grasp those aspects of social history which are particularly significant for the study of the four women. I will present the historical background relevant to their concerns to show the social, political and cultural contexts in which their views and theories were developed.

Between approximately 1880-1930, the changes included significant alterations in family structures and views about female sexuality. Most notably there was a decline in family size and there were moves towards greater female emancipation in a number of spheres. However, at the start of the twentieth century there were still strong social,

¹ Jose Harris. *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914*, The Penguin Social History of Britain Series (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 2. Chapter One, "Themes and Interpretations: An Overview of British Society 1870-1914" is a particularly useful discussion of historiographical accounts of the period. pp. 1-40.

² Harris, *Private Lives*, p. 252.

economic and cultural norms inculcating the belief that women's primary functions were marriage and motherhood. In the realms of public discourse those ideologies which "exalted women's capacity to mother and extended to society as a whole the values of care, nurturance, and morality",³ broadly defined as 'maternalism', remained an over-riding feature in legislation, social and welfare reform, labour relations and education. They were further reinforced by a wave of authoritative assertions by sexologists, eugenicists and psychologists, adding weight to traditional, orthodox sources of opinion such as medicine, the law and the church. The period saw major growth in the role of the state in attempting to manage and direct family relationships in clearly defined ways.

Although not completely ubiquitous, prevailing middle-class beliefs in the early part of the period prescribed the separation of public and private spheres, a double standard of sexual morality, and notions of two types of women, the pure and the impure.⁴ The effects of these were evident in constructs of motherhood, family violence, sexual abuse, prostitution and female access to public space. Such notions also had an impact on women's participation in public life, for example in legitimating voluntary and philanthropic work which, in turn, made possible the promotion of women's influence in welfare reform.

³ A definition by Seth Koven and Sonya Michel. "Womanly Duties: Maternalist Policies and the Origins of Welfare States in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States, 1880-1920". *The American Historical Review* Vol. 95, No. 4, (October 1990), p. 1079. They focus on maternalism as the nexus between the development of welfare policies by the state and women's reform movements, concluding that while welfare state development was influenced by women's movements, it had to be channelled through male policy-makers and was in inverse proportion to the strength of women's organised activism. In a comment on the uses of maternalism as a comparative concept, Lynn Y. Weiner states that the term suggests a kind of "empowered motherhood or public expression of those domestic values associated in some way with motherhood". Lynn Y. Weiner, "Maternalism as a Paradigm: Defining the Issues", *Journal of Women's History* Vol. 5, No. 2 (Fall, 1993), pp. 96-98.

⁴ Roy Porter and Lesley Hall make the point that these ideologies were not universal as does Judith Walkowitz. Roy Porter and Lesley Hall, "The Victorian Polyphony 1850-85", Chapter Six in, *The Facts of Life: The Creation of Sexual Knowledge in Britain 1650-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 132-153, especially pp. 138, 153; Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 5-6.

There was little notion of an active female sexuality, particularly in relation to adolescent girls, as the age of consent debates indicate. Kin and friendship networks within both the domestic sphere and the professional world, which was witnessing women's increasing appearance, were approved. The Edwardian suffrage movement illustrates the trend; personal and public lives were inter-connected. These kin and friendship networks gave women emotional support and, for some, romantic friendships, although subsequently societal approbation was qualified when single women became the focus of anxieties about female sexuality.⁵ Those members of the upper working-classes who aspired to higher social status closely associated chastity and respectability.⁶ Representations of working-class women, which have mostly been refracted through middle-class eyes, perceived them as closer to nature, their physicality and their heavy, often dirty, work as degraded and polluted.⁷ Prostitution, which from a middle-class view helped preserve marriage, might thus be defended as "a giant sewer, drawing away the distasteful but inevitable products of male lustfulness".⁸

From 1900 to 1930, dominating cultural conceptualisations of reproduction and women's sexuality altered. A number of influences were at work, among them maternalism, feminism, and the campaign for women's enfranchisement. What features

⁵ Contemporary feminist historians who have investigated such networks include: Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America", *Signs* Vol. 1, No. 1 (Autumn 1975), pp. 1-29; Ann Morley and Liz Stanley, *The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison* (London: The Women's Press, 1988); Julie Holledge, *Innocent Flowers: Women in Edwardian Theatre* (London: Virago, 1981); Lesbian History Group, *Not a Passing Phase* (London: The Women's Press, 1989); Rose Collis, *Portraits to the Wall: Historic Lesbian Lives Unveiled* (London: Cassell, 1994); Lis Whitelaw, *The Life and Rebellious Times of Cecily Hamilton* (London: The Women's Press, 1990). See below, Section 2.2 d) "Alternative sexualities".

⁶ John R. Gillis, *For Better, For Worse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 238.

⁷ Leonore Davidoff, "Class and Gender in Victorian England", in *Sex and Class in Women's History*, ed. Judith L. Newton, M. Ryan and Judith Walkowitz (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), pp. 19-20.

⁸ Davidoff, "Class and Gender" p. 19. Harris makes the point that ideas about the relationships of dirt, disease and sexuality gave a moral dimension to the growth of medical science. Harris, *Private Lives*, p. 55; See also Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England since 1830* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987)

were acceptable to my four subjects and what did they criticise and wish to alter? What were their hopes for change? How did they set about influencing public opinion? To address these questions it is necessary to ask firstly, how the structures within which they lived and worked affected women and feminists in particular. And secondly, what was the impact of the state on the family and women's lives in those areas of sexual politics of interest to my four subjects?

Nineteenth-century feminists had recognised marriage and the family as sites of women's sexual subordination and oppression. Initially they gave priority to legal reforms, for example for property rights and custody of children. Campaigns to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts (CD Acts) and public debate about prostitution simultaneously provided space to challenge economic and cultural assumptions underlying prevailing discourses of sexuality. Feminist critiques extended to analyses of the sexual double standard, coercion, and reproductive rights. Questions about the nature of female sexuality and the power dynamics inherent in male/female sexual relationships developed from this constellation of issues. By 1910, these were well-established on the feminist agenda.

The first section of this chapter, 2.1, will focus on the family lives of women, the family ideal, attitudes to domestic violence and sexual abuse and legislative changes. The decline in family size is a significant demographic feature of the period yet one which is not fully amenable to analysis. I propose that there was an association between newer ideas about female sexuality and the introduction of contraceptive techniques controlled by women. Section 2.2 looks at changes in attitudes concerning sexual relationships during the first decades of the twentieth century when the use of contraception, at least within marriage, came to be acknowledged, if not fully accepted.

In Section 2.3, the interconnections of state intervention into the family and the beginnings of the welfare state are sketched. A perceived need for moral reform blended

with philanthropic and humanitarian imperatives to ameliorate the harsh living conditions of the urban poor. Beliefs in women's special contribution to national life predicated on notions of public and private spheres, and participation by women in philanthropy and local government legitimated their right to intervene in social reform discourses.⁹ The period 1880 to 1930 witnessed new approaches to collectivist politics. Economic instability and political changes fuelled demands on the state. Attempts by the middle classes to regulate and control the family and sexual lives of the poor proved a recurrent theme. Both the Boer War and the First World War led to demands for better provision for infant and children's welfare in order to produce healthier adult males. The increasing professionalisation of medicine and influence of eugenic theories coalesced in intensified medical inspection, the moralisation of hygiene and the growth of the maternal and child welfare movement. In the process, the potential for women's influence and work at local government levels increased but previous feminist analyses and women's needs, as individuals and mothers, could be obscured. Reforms failed to provide some of the most basic necessities for healthy maternity. Furthermore, female employment patterns did not lend themselves to women's full participation in all social and welfare improvements.

⁹ Jane Lewis argues women's needs were neglected, partly as the result of policy-makers' belief in the ideology of separate spheres. Jane Lewis, "Models of Equality for Women: The Case of State Support for Children in Twentieth Century Britain", in *Maternity and Gender Politics: Women and the Rise of the European Welfare States 1880s-1950s*, ed., Gisela Bock and Pat Thane (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 73-77. Pat Thane discusses the reluctance of central government to become involved in welfare provision and the ways agencies of local government and voluntary organisations were mobilised to establish maternal and child welfare provision. Pat Thane, "Visions of Gender in the Making of the British Welfare State: The Case of Women in the British Labour Party and Social Policy 1906-1945" in Bock and Thane, *Maternity and Gender Politics*, pp. 93-118 especially p. 102.

2.1 Family Lives c. 1870-1910 - "Marriage and Sex Relations Are At the Root of the Women's Movement".¹⁰

This section begins with ideologies associated with marriage, the family and male authority within these institutions, then traces the dismantling of inequalities enshrined in legislation. In order to illuminate the work of Nina Boyle and Edith Watson, I focus particularly on domestic violence, sexual abuse and cruelty to children. I then briefly discuss the declining birth rate, which is relevant to Edith How Martyn's work.

2.1 a) Marriage: Traditional Patterns, Companionate Ideals

Currently there is some debate about the notion of companionate marriage and whether its general acceptance by all classes is artificially teleological. John Gillis suggests that marriage for the upper classes changed from having primarily an economic function to having an affective purpose from the Industrial Revolution onwards, whereas more robust, pragmatic attitudes continued among ordinary people.¹¹ Notions of companionate marriage had been commonplace for some time and began to crystallise in the parliamentary debates during the decade preceding the 1857 Divorce Act.¹² Economic and cultural shifts, legal reform and feminist demands motivated change.

¹⁰ Edith How Martyn, "Birth Control and Child Welfare", *Birth Control Review* (November 1921), p. 5.

¹¹ Besides being a basic unit for sexual and reproductive relations, marriage had served as an institution for economic partnerships and alliances between families and kin groups, creating important social, economic, and political ties. Assumptions that there is something necessarily progressive in the move towards the conjugal at the expense of the communal are criticised by John Gillis, *For Better, For Worse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 4-8. Reviewing the literature on marriage and divorce, Horstman argues that because contemporary histories tend to borrow from social science they follow a theory of modernisation. Allen Horstman, *Victorian Divorce* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), pp. 173-181, especially p. 177.

¹² Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage and the Law in Victorian England* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 45-47. For an interesting discussion about discourses of marriage in the nineteenth century see James Hammerton, *Cruelty and Companionship: Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Married Life* (London: Routledge, 1995; paperback, London: Routledge, 1995).

Customs of patrilineal inheritance and the need for heirs to be legitimate had underlain the belief that a husband had property rights over his wife's body. There was no reciprocal tenet.¹³ The sexual double standard was well-established in legal and popular discourses on marriage. Legally, married women were subsumed under their husbands' protection in the doctrine of 'coverture'.¹⁴ Less enmeshed in property and inheritance considerations, the poor were slower to adopt officially-sanctioned, legally binding, monogamous marriage practices. In this group social regulation of sexual activity operated through cultural mores transmitted through the family and community.¹⁵ Disapproval, for example of men who beat their womenfolk, would be expressed through such mechanisms as 'rough music'.¹⁶ Common-law marriages were accorded varying degrees of social acceptance.¹⁷ Changing beliefs about relationships between the sexes and other economic and cultural features of Victorian England also affected marriage customs.

Firstly, the growth of industrial capitalism and subsequent undermining of the family economy was a major cause of change. New cultural patterns included the creation of a skilled working class whose quest for respectability included prescriptions which perceived men as family breadwinners, women as dependent wives and mothers.¹⁸ Nineteenth-century evangelicalism also played a part, deploying notions about the sanctity of marriage to reassert the moral and social authority of the father¹⁹ and extol chastity and

¹³ Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage and the Law*, p. 25.

¹⁴ Lucy Bland, "The Married Woman, the 'New Woman' and the Feminist: Sexual Politics of the 1890s" in *Equal or Different*, ed., Jane Rendall (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 242.

¹⁵ Gillis, *For Better, For Worse*, pp. 185, 188.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 77-81, 131.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 241-2. Levine argues that the domestic organisation of production and reproduction changed over three or more centuries to promote the proletarianisation of labour; David Levine, ed., *Proletarianization and Family History* (London: Academic Press Inc., 1984), p. 103.

¹⁹ Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, p. 33.

motherhood.²⁰ For the very poor, legally indissoluble marriage often meant intolerable social and financial strains.²¹

Secondly, reform of matrimonial legislation by the legal profession became part of the political agenda. It was one of the main aims of the Law Amendment Society, founded in 1844.²² Before the 1857 Divorce Act, marriage law was a mixture of common and civil law and ecclesiastical legislation which made for anomalies and confusion.²³ The purposes and outcomes of the 1857 Act are disputed.²⁴ In practice, before the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870, 1874 and 1882, many of the wealthy ensured their interests by legal settlements and trusts for female members of their families.²⁵

Thirdly, marriage and property laws were a focus for feminist campaigning. Improvements to some aspects of marriage laws backed by reforming lawyers and feminists were relatively successful but the legal profession did not address other questions, particularly sexual coercion in marriage. Feminist critiques of inequalities reinforced by law increasingly opened up the whole question of sexual oppression in the family. To counter traditional patriarchal stereotypes, they promoted visions of mutual respect and friendship in marriage based on equality, such as that presented in John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869).²⁶ On the whole, campaigns and reforms were not

²⁰ Gillis, *For Better, For Worse*, p. 238.

²¹ Ibid., Chapter Eight, particularly pp. 233-234.

²² Lawrence Stone, *Road to Divorce: England 1530-1987* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 374, 375.

²³ Stone, *Road to Divorce*, p. 136.

²⁴ Stone sees it as significant for divorce law reform, but suggests its effects on the family were minimal. He contends the Married Women's Property Acts had greater influence on many more women's lives, an assertion supported by Shanley. Stone, "The Passage of the Divorce Reform Act, 1850-1857", Chapter XII in *Road to Divorce*, pp. 368-382. Horstman reviews some of the literature of divorce in Horstman, *Victorian Divorce*, pp. 173-181.

²⁵ Stone estimates about 10 per cent of all propertied classes made such arrangements. Stone, *Road to Divorce*, p. 375.

²⁶ John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (1869) quoted in Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage and the Law*, pp. 63-64. Feminists continued to extol monogamy as the ideal basis for sexual relationships. For an account of attempts to debate marriage and monogamy see Carol Dyhouse, "Marital Relationships", Chapter Four in *Feminism and the Family in England 1880-1939* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 145-184.

mobilised around family violence directly, but men's aggression and sexual coercion were topics raised in the public debate about marriage. Jan Lambertz argues that, given late-Victorian feminism's investment in the family as the social unit, campaigning directly about male violence was too radical a prospect. Anxieties about violence directed at women and children in the home were consequently displaced on to other issues such as child prostitution and sexual abuse.²⁷ Elements of the family ideal threatened by challenges to toleration of family violence included the notion of the domestic sphere as separate from the public arena and beliefs that marriage and the family should be maintained at the cost of women's autonomy, women's and children's liberty or even safety.²⁸

2.1 b) Critiques of the Family Ideal: Wife-Beating, Divorce, Cruelty to Children

In the same year as the Divorce Act, the Society for the Protection of Women and Children from Aggravated Assault (SPWCAA) was founded.²⁹ It investigated individual cases and provided information for campaigns against wife-beating and child abuse. The decade 1880-1890 marked a turning-point. Previously any feminists who attempted to challenge Victorian attitudes to wife-beating faced public indifference to and tacit acceptance of the practice, besides the hostility of courts, church and parliament.³⁰ All investigations into domestic violence have been beset by lack of factual evidence and this was immediately apparent to those who wished to change public attitudes, campaigners for

²⁷ Jan Lambertz, "Feminists and the Politics of Wife-beating," in *British Feminists in the Twentieth Century*, ed. H. Smith (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1990), p. 26.

²⁸ Elizabeth Pleck, *Domestic Tyranny: The Making of American Social Policy against Family Violence from Colonial Times to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 9.

²⁹ Margaret May, "Violence in the Family: An Historical Perspective", in *Violence and the Family*, ed. J.P. Martin (Chichester: Wiley & Sons, 1978) pp. 141-147; George Behlmer, *Child Abuse and Moral Reform in England 1870-1908* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1982), p. 15.

³⁰ Carol Bauer and Lawrence Ritt, "'A Husband is a Wife-beating Animal': Frances Power Cobbe confronts the Wife-Abuse Problem in Victorian England", *International Journal of Women's Studies* Vol. 6, Pt. 3 (March/April 1983), p. 110.

women's emancipation and law-enforcement agencies seeking to improve measures to protect women.³¹ Class, regional variations and environmental differences in the incidence of conjugal violence were neither known nor investigated. Linguistic casuistry also helped to obscure empirical and statistical knowledge. Much the same phenomena were described differently, since in the middle class the word 'cruelty', tended to be used, a vaguer, less precise term than 'wife-beating' which was applied to the lower classes, where its preponderance was so much accepted that certain areas of large cities were known as 'kicking' districts.³² One of the first studies of conjugal violence took place in 1856, an outcome of the debate over women's rights.³³

Frances Power Cobbe argued legal reform was not the only way to reduce domestic violence in "Wife Torture in England", published in the *Contemporary Review* in 1878. She said beliefs in women's inferiority, encouraged by the law, lack of political power and poverty exacerbated the problem, but the fundamental cause was unequal power relationships between the sexes.³⁴ Many believed that wife-beating was a husband's prerogative.³⁵ Attitudes were beginning to change, according to James Hammerton, who describes the 1880s as crucial in terms of the public discourse on relationships between the sexes and attributes the changes partly to responses to feminist criticism of male dominance.³⁶ Feminist critiques of marriage will be discussed in more detail later.

³¹ May, "Violence in the Family", pp. 136-143; Bauer and Ritt, "A Husband is", p. 107.

³² Bauer and Ritt, "A Husband is", p. 108. Levels of physical violence among the working class are discussed by Chinn who records many instances where women abused husbands and families. Carl Chinn, *They Worked All Their Lives: Women of the Urban Poor in England 1880-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), pp. 158-64.

³³ May, "Violence in the Family", p. 145

³⁴ Carol Bauer, and Lawrence Ritt, "Wife Abuse, Late-Victorian English Feminists and the Legacy of Frances Power Cobbe", *International Journal of Women's Studies* Vol. 6, Pt. 3 (May/June, 1983), p. 204; Bauer and Ritt, "A Husband is", pp. 106-7.

³⁵ Bauer and Ritt, "Wife Abuse", p. 195.

³⁶ Reforms in matrimonial law had a significant impact too, according to Hammerton who also speculates on the relationships between family structure, conflict and nineteenth century demographic and cultural changes. Hammerton, *Cruelty and Companionship*, pp. 164-169; also Hammerton, "The Limits of Companionate Marriage: Middle-class Husbands and Patriarchal Authority in Victorian England", lecture at York University, 15 November 1990.

Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy founded the Women's Emancipation Union in 1892 to reform some aspects of the laws on marriage. She had campaigned consistently against laws which allowed women no redress against coercive husbands. Before it disbanded in 1899, the Union had helped prepare two petitions urging equality for women.³⁷ When the Appeal Court ruled in 1891 that it was unacceptable for a husband to physically restrain his wife to prevent her leaving him, feminists welcomed the decision.³⁸ The 1895 Summary Jurisdiction (Married Women) Act expanded grounds for separation to include "persistent cruelty and wilful neglect".³⁹ Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy pre-empted Nina Boyle; she said justice for women was problematic in a male-dominated judiciary. Like Frances Power Cobbe she felt women's physical oppression was caused by their unequal power and status.⁴⁰

Hopes of better treatment for women were raised by the 1909 Royal Commission on Divorce and Matrimonial Causes though official participation by women and their organisations was meagre. The Women's Co-operative Guild representative, Eleanor Barton, spoke on behalf of thousands of working-class women: most wanted cheaper, more accessible divorce and additional grounds to include cruelty, which covered "abuse of conjugal rights", insanity, desertion and refusal to maintain. However, even the recommendation to equalise divorce law was not introduced until 1923, and some

³⁷ Numbers of divorces were very small; in the 1890s there were under 650 divorce petitions a year, according to David Rubinstein, *Before the Suffragettes: Women's Emancipation in the 1890s* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986), pp. 43-4. By 1900 there were about 8,000 matrimonial orders in English and Welsh courts annually; in 1914, 1,104 petitions for divorce. May, "Violence in the Family", p. 149. Before 1918, according to Roderick Phillips, there were only three divorce petitions per 10,000 women married annually; by 1920 the rate had reached nine per 10,000. The proportion of women's petitions for divorce fell from 1916 to 1920 from 33 per cent to 29 per cent, although up to 1915 women had filed more than 40 per cent of divorce petitions. He ascribes this fall to the effects of wartime marital infidelity. Roderick Phillips, *Putting Asunder: A History of Divorce in Western Society*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 521.

³⁸ Bland, "The Married Woman", p. 149.

³⁹ Bauer and Ritt, "Wife Abuse", p. 203. Elmy said the requirement that abused women could not apply for relief or a separation order until they had actually left home made practical difficulties for many women.

⁴⁰ Bland, "The Married Woman", pp. 150-156.

advances were undermined during the First World War.⁴¹ Most recommendations were frustrated by opposition from the churches.⁴²

Before the First World War there were fewer than 1,000 divorces a year; afterwards the rate more than doubled. Women's access to divorce was improved by the Matrimonial Causes Amendment Act of 1923 - which had been instigated and contained proposals suggested by the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC). In 1924 women filed over 60 per cent of divorce petitions, the first time that more women than men had filed for divorce.⁴³ Throughout the 1920s the rate continued to climb but statistically the number of divorces was small.⁴⁴

Attitudes to children were also changing. As child psychology developed it contributed to an awareness that abusive childhood experiences might affect adult behaviour. From the mid-nineteenth-century humanitarian impulses and a middle-class desire for social control stimulated public concern.⁴⁵ Cruelty to children tended to be seen largely as a lower class phenomenon associated with urban poverty, yet nevertheless a threat to the prevailing social order. Perceptions about the appropriate treatment of children were refracted through class perspectives. Middle-class philanthropists would attribute domestic violence to intemperance, neglecting the poverty, harsh working conditions and squalid housing from which excessive drinking would seem an escape, however temporary. In particular, incest, when it was mentioned at all, was perceived as the result of overcrowding and poor housing conditions, a moral question perhaps, but not one to which legislation could provide a solution. Hence incest was not criminalised until

⁴¹ Bland, "The Married Woman", pp. 138-9.

⁴² May, "Violence in the Family", p. 150.

⁴³ Phillips, *Putting Asunder*, p. 256.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 526.

⁴⁵ Robert Dingwall, John Eckelaar and Topsy Murray, "Childhood as a Social Problem: A Survey of the History of Legal Regulation", *Journal of Law and Society* Vol. II, No. 2 (Summer 1984), p. 20.

1908. Urban living conditions did contribute to the prevalence of incest but socially sanctioned patterns of domination in family relationships were equally significant.⁴⁶

Campaigning against cruelty to children was more sustained than that against wife-beating.⁴⁷ One of the earliest studies of child cruelty was produced in 1864 by the SPWCAA.⁴⁸ By 1885 a social crusade had begun. About 13 per cent of cases investigated by the London Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in its first year, involved sexual assault or incest which was, significantly, described as "an evil which is altogether unmentionable".⁴⁹ In 1889 the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) was formed. It developed more sophisticated analyses of causal factors in child abuse. Legislative reform, propaganda to alert the public, and practical intervention through means of local inspectors, were the three main objectives.

In 1885 too, the National Vigilance Association (NVA) was founded. It worked with the NSPCC⁵⁰ and with feminist organisations. Often the same people were members of several societies. The alliances - and the differences - between the social purity and women's movement will be discussed in Chapter Three. 'The Children's Charter', the Prevention of Cruelty to and Protection of Children Act of 1889, was a major achievement of the NSPCC. Radical evangelicalism was the inspiration, the aim the moral transformation of society.⁵¹ The major instruments of policy were inspection and control of parents with the possibility of imposing moral reform.⁵² State intervention was

⁴⁶ Anthony S. Wohl, "Sex and the Single Room: Incest Among the Victorian Working-classes", in *The Victorian Family: Structure and Stresses* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), p. 211.

⁴⁷ May, "Violence in the Family", p. 150.

⁴⁸ Despite a precarious existence, it provided legal aid and advice and collected and published information. The study was entitled: *Compassionate Justice*. May, "Violence in the Family", p. 146; Nigel Parton, *The Politics of Child Abuse* (London: Macmillan, 1985), p. 29.

⁴⁹ Behlmer, *Child Abuse*, p. 70.

⁵⁰ Victor Bailey and Sheila Blackburn, "The Punishment of Incest Act 1908: A Case Study of Law Creation", *Criminal Law Review* (November 1979), p. 711.

⁵¹ John Eckelaar, Robert Dingwall and Topsy Murray, "Victims or Threats? Children in Case Proceedings", *Journal of Social Welfare Law* (March 1982), p. 74.

⁵² Parton, *Politics of Child Abuse*, p 35; Dingwall, "Childhood as a Social Problem", p. 218.

justified on the grounds that parental conduct did not match the social and moral codes of society - as perceived by the dominant middle-class culture. Changing beliefs about the nature of childhood, recognition that children were not solely the property of their parents (especially fathers), the needs of abused children and the hope that preventive welfare measures would reduce juvenile delinquency, led to the 1908 Children Act.⁵³

When Nina Boyle and Edith Watson began to analyse how domestic violence and sexual abuse were handled in the judicial system in 1912, they were continuing a feminist tradition. Once they had concluded that the system operated against women's interests, they proposed several solutions. One was simply to have women in the state apparatus, another to establish a women's police service, whose purpose would be manifold. Seemingly another arm of state control, women police would, if they adhered to feminist principles, change the tenor of policing, thus challenging institutionalised male power. These proposals reflected perceptual shifts about women's right to protection in the home and access to public space: that help for abused women should be an officially-recognised public service, rather than provided by women's voluntary social work; and that women should be free to go about unchaperoned and in safety.

2.1 c) Decline in Family Size 1870-1910

While patriarchal power in the family was being analysed and undermined, another major change was under way. From the 1870s there was a marked decline in the birth rate and in family size. Over a period of about fifty years the birth rate fell by more than half.⁵⁴

⁵³ Parton, *Politics of Child Abuse*, p. 58.

⁵⁴ In women of child-bearing age (15-45) the proportion of total births per 1000 fell from 153.7 in 1870-2, to 114.8 in 1900-2. Chinn, *They Worked All Their Lives*, p. 314. Marriages (lasting 20 or more years) in the 1860s averaged 6.16 births, by the 1890s this had been reduced to 4.13 and by 1915 the average was 2.4 births. Angus McLaren, *Birth Control in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Methuen, 1978), p. 11. See also Jose Harris, "Demography, Death, and Disease",

A mono-causal explanation would be simplistic. Explanations of this substantial decline in family size vary. Some demographic factors such as the sex ratio and proportion of women of child-bearing age showed little significant change.⁵⁵ Infertility and low fertility due to poor health and malnutrition may have contributed.⁵⁶ Generalised social and demographic explanations such as significant shifts in the functions of the family or reduced infant mortality rates are criticised by J.A. Banks as being relatively superficial because they do not provide satisfactory accounts of the reasons why the changes took place in that particular historical context; neither do they provide much evidence of the connection between events which are sometimes assumed to be related.⁵⁷ One example is the hypothesis relating to children's chances of survival to adulthood, that parents had large families to ensure that some children survived to be able to take care of parents in old age. It is not borne out when statistics for the Victorian period are examined.⁵⁸ The potential correlation between a cultural change such as the rise of feminism and the falling birth rate bears further analysis and will be examined further in Chapter Six. The declining birth rate cannot be attributed to technological innovation in contraceptive techniques, since the fall began well before the introduction of newer technologies such as the vulcanisation of rubber for mass production of the condom, or the development of the cervical cap or shield. Obviously though, the availability of reliable contraception has some bearing on

Chapter Two in *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914*, pp. 41-60.

⁵⁵ Later age at marriage often correlates with lower birth rates and there was a slight shift upwards in the age at which males married in the latter end of the nineteenth century plus a decline in marriage rates generally, but these were not greatly significant in terms of causes of the fall. Illegitimacy rates also fell. Chinn, *They Worked All Their Lives*, p 134; McLaren *Birth Control*, p. 11. In 1851 12 per cent of women were celibate, by 1911 16 per cent were. Angus McLaren, *A History of Contraception From Antiquity to the Present Day*, Sexuality and Social Relations in Past Times Series, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 186.

⁵⁶ Figures extrapolated from the 1949 Census estimated that 8.2 per cent of women married before 1923 had no children. Childless women's perceptions and attitudes towards them are briefly discussed by Elizabeth Roberts in *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-class Women 1890-1940* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 103.

⁵⁷ J.A. Banks, *Victorian Values: Secularism and the Size of Families* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 5-6.

⁵⁸ Banks, *Victorian Values*, p.123.

control of fertility and my premise in the next section is that contraceptive methods were crucial.⁵⁹

Analysis is difficult because decision-making about reproduction by individuals is neither made public nor is it necessarily rational or explicit. It is also important to remember that between individual couples there can well be different expectations and conflicting views on the subject. Evidence for this can be found, for example, in turn-of-the-century advertisements for contraceptives or abortifacients which proclaimed that they could be used without a husband's knowledge. By 1905, it was acknowledged that the declining birth rate was primarily due to voluntary factors, that is, that over 70 per cent of the fall was because of "deliberate restriction on child-bearing by married people".⁶⁰ The decline was not uniform.⁶¹ The decade from approximately 1910 to 1920 marks a transitional period; after 1920 the debates about birth control became more active and more public.

2.2 New Outlooks in Sexual Relationships - "Where There Is No Freedom There Can Be No Morality".⁶²

In this section I examine some of the features which impinged on Edith How Martyn's promotion of birth control and Alison Neilans' work in relation to prostitution and venereal disease.

⁵⁹ Diana Gittins, "Married Life and Birth Control between the Wars", *Oral History* Vol. 3, No. 2, (1975), p. 60-64.

⁶⁰ Registrar General, quoted in Chinn, *They Worked All Their Lives*, p. 134.

⁶¹ Banks, *Victorian Values*, p. 29. Chinn also gives an example from Birmingham in 1900: middle class 18.6 births per 1000, upper working class 24.3 per 1000, lower working class about 37. Chinn, *They Worked All Their Lives*, p. 134. The 1911 Census showed that, of married men under 55, unskilled labourers had a birth-rate four times that of middle-class doctors and Anglican clergy: Ruth Hall, ed., *Dear Dr. Stopes: Sex in the 1920s: Letters to Marie Stopes* (London: Andre Deutch, 1978), p. 15.

⁶² Alison Neilans, "Changes in Sex Morality", in *Our Freedom and Its Results*, ed. Ray Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1936), p. 186.

By the turn of the century, there was an increasing awareness of psychology, health and hygiene which placed more emphasis on love and emotional involvement in the family. Newer methods of child-rearing developed; attitudes to children changed. The First World War with its social and economic disruption, opportunities for increased social and geographic mobility, and questioning of authority must have had an impact. At the time fears of a break-down in the social order featured prominently in public discussion. Up until about 1920, a powerful combination of patriarchal institutions dominated public discourse on fertility control. Religious disapproval, silence or hypocrisy in the press and the medical profession, government and bureaucratic preoccupation with population statistics and lack of interest or hostility from organised labour had worked to prevent open debate.

2.2 a) Contraceptive Methods

I believe the choice of means to control fertility is significant because contraceptive techniques are implicated in constructs of female sexual pleasure. It has been estimated that only 16 per cent of English couples marrying before 1910 used mechanical means of contraception.⁶³ From the beginning of the nineteenth century, the controversy over fertility control centred on Malthusian economic doctrines and politico-moral questions. Rarely were women's sexual freedom or relief from constant child-bearing discussed. The debates did engender public interest and demand for contraceptive information which was reinforced by the Bradlaugh-Besant trial for publication of the Knowlton pamphlet in 1877.⁶⁴ That same year Charles and George Drysdale and Alice Vickery founded the Neo-Malthusian League and the following year began publishing their journal, *The Malthusian*. Before this, the rise of secularism and ideals of 'free love' had led to some

⁶³ McLaren cites the Royal Commission on Population, 1949, *History of Contraception*, p. 186.

⁶⁴ McLaren, *History of Contraception*, p. 182.

attempts to achieve adequate birth control. One of their methods, 'karezza' or coitus reservatus, had been practised in the nineteenth-century Oneida Colony in America, and was known in England. Edith Watson's autobiography records using this method, and her lack of sexual satisfaction.⁶⁵ Assessing the influence of the Malthusians and secularists is difficult. McLaren notes that although from the 1850s onwards some developments occurred in the technology of contraception, these had limited appeal or were too expensive.⁶⁶ He also argues that since late marriage and celibacy were not uncommon and religious doctrines advocating continence in marriage were the convention, feminist campaigning in the second half of the nineteenth century "in favour of male self-control" would add impetus to already established customs.

As knowledge about the human reproductive systems developed, the 'rhythm method' gained some popularity, particularly among the medical profession, who tended to regard mechanical means as associated with quackery and traditional female means as primitive. In fact initially calculations were erroneous; doctors in both America and England recommended the very times after menstruation when women were most likely to conceive. The method was approved by the feminist, Elizabeth Blackwell, as "confirming women's rightful role as 'regulator of sexual intercourse'."⁶⁷ Traditional means of fertility control were prolonged lactation, coitus interruptus and abortion. McLaren suggests these

⁶⁵ I have discussed the question with Lucy Bland. From the evidence in Edith Watson's autobiography we concluded she was referring to this method when describing her relations with her partner: Edith Watson, unpublished autobiography ([1961]), private collection; see also Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: English Feminism and Sexual Morality 1885-1914* (London: Penguin, 1995), pp. 283-286.

⁶⁶ McLaren, *History of Contraception*, pp. 183-186. In 1886 Dr Mensinga invented the Dutch 'cap'. Dr. Aletta Jacobs and Dr. Rutgers began giving clinical advice on birth control in Holland. Margaret Sanger opened the first "modern" birth control clinic in America in 1916 - it was closed by the police and she was sent to prison. Edith How Martyn's notes for *The Birth Control Movement in England*, Author's Collection. Marie Stopes created a type of cervical cap and Margaret Sanger improved the diaphragm. McLaren, *History of Contraception*, p. 226. Other types of material have, of course, been used throughout history, for example, half lemons, oiled paper domes and moulded cups made out of opium. Eleanor Mills and Lynne Wallis, "If the Cap Fits, Don't Wear It", *The Observer*, 17 December 1995. See Chapter Six, Section 6.2.

⁶⁷ McLaren, *History of Contraception*, pp. 186-187.

were the major methods employed by the working class until well into the 1920s.⁶⁸ He speculates that the advocacy of newer contraceptive methods by a middle-class birth control movement was inappropriate for working-class women. However, in emphasising the class-based dissonance between traditional and newer methods, McLaren largely ignores the drawbacks of the older methods for women. I think it is necessary to ask why, if these methods which had served for so long were satisfactory for females, women's appeals for safer, more reliable methods, increased through the 1920s and 1930s.⁶⁹

Abortion, although dangerous, had long been accepted as a means of contraception, despite disapproval from the church. The view of women, as far as it can be ascertained, was that it was acceptable until 'quickenings', about the third month of pregnancy, and especially if it could be self-administered, i.e. through physical exertion, drugs and potions, rather than procured through implements.⁷⁰ Lactation offered some protection from further pregnancies, but was not very reliable.

'Withdrawal' depended on the male partner.⁷¹ In both the primary sources and secondary material I have seen, heterosexual intercourse is synonymous with penetration. In her history of working-class women's lives, Elizabeth Roberts comments on the lack of sex education or of open discussion of sexual matters which many of her respondents reported.⁷² This aspect of the subject is particularly inaccessible for, as Roberts observes:

⁶⁸ McLaren, *History of Contraception*, p. 232.

⁶⁹ There is evidence for this in the Co-operative Women's Guild's *Maternity*, and from Labour women beginning to campaign for contraceptive advice to be given through local authority clinics from 1923. Margaret Llewelyn Davies, ed., *Maternity: Letters from Working Women (Collected by the Women's Co-operative Guild)* (G. Bell & Sons, 1915; repr., London: Virago, 1978)

⁷⁰ Barbara Brookes, *Abortion in England 1900-1967*, The Wellcome Institute Series in the History of Medicine (London: Croom Helm, 1988), pp. 14-15; McLaren, *History of Contraception*, p. 191.

⁷¹ Working class attitudes are investigated in Chinn and Roberts. Chinn suggests the "poor" were opposed to contraception until the 1920s. Chinn, *They Worked All Their Lives*, pp 141-142; Roberts, *A Woman's Place*, pp. 93-97. Other sources also record working-class views, for example the oral history series, *A Secret World of Sex*, Television producer Steve Humphries, Series Editor Joanna Mack, Domino Films for the British Broadcasting Corporation, 1991.

⁷² Roberts' interviews cover the period approximately 1890 to 1940. Roberts, *A Woman's Place*, pp. 81-95, especially p. 85. See also Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, pp. 312-314.

The whole question of family limitation is formidably complex, bedevilled as it is by inhibitions, ignorance and reticence about sex and sexuality.⁷³

Both Chinn and Roberts provide evidence that for many women sexual intercourse was "something distasteful and unpleasant". Roberts says her respondents gave no hint that women might have enjoyed sex. Sexual intercourse was regarded as necessary for the procreation of children or as an activity indulged in by men for their own pleasure, but it was never discussed in the evidence as something which could give mutual happiness.⁷⁴ Contemporary surveys show that for some women, penetration by itself is an unsatisfactory means of obtaining sexual satisfaction.⁷⁵ By relying on withdrawal, women continued to surrender initiative and control in sexual relationships. As the twentieth century progressed and expectations of companionate marriage were established, notions of more positive, active female sexual roles would, I contend, necessitate safe, reliable contraception controlled by the female partner.

2.2 b) Shifting Attitudes to Birth Control 1908-1922

Birth control was seen as highly controversial by the Christian church.⁷⁶ After World War I, Roman Catholic opposition had become more vocal⁷⁷ and by 1921 denunciation became yet more vehement.⁷⁸ Among Nonconformists there was more latitude. In its formal declarations, the Church of England continued its disapproval, maintaining that the sole purpose of sexual union was procreation.⁷⁹ However, a major

⁷³ Roberts, *A Woman's Place*, p. 85; see also Chinn, *They Worked All Their Lives*, pp. 141-142

⁷⁴ Roberts, *A Woman's Place*, p. 84.

⁷⁵ The Hite Report quoted research from 1971-1976, where two-thirds of women said they did not orgasm from penetrative intercourse and Masters and Johnson defined women who do not orgasm through vaginal penetration as being sexually dysfunctional. Shere Hite, *The Hite Report on Love, Passion and Emotional Violence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), p. 214.

⁷⁶ Edith How Martyn and Mary Breed, *The Birth Control Movement in England* (London: John Bale, 1930), p. 28.

⁷⁷ Roberts, *A Woman's Place*, p. 86.

⁷⁸ June Rose, *Marie Stopes and the Sexual Revolution* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), p. 157.

⁷⁹ Lord Dawson of Penn, *Love - Marriage - Birth Control: Being a Speech Delivered at the Church Congress at Birmingham, October 1921* (London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1922), pp. 16-17.

breakthrough was achieved by Lord Dawson of Penn, the King's Physician and an establishment figure, with an address to the Church Congress in 1921. He believed the War had altered previous patterns of authority. The view that birth control was "physically and morally harmful" had no clear scriptural sanction. Suggestions that unrestricted population growth was an imperial necessity (a popular myth at the time) were discounted by Lord Dawson.⁸⁰ His appeal to the Church created considerable controversy and proved a watershed in the public debate.

Lord Dawson had suggested a more precise definition - 'conception control'. The American birth control advocate, Margaret Sanger, had coined the phrase 'birth control' in 1914 to suggest planning of spaced families rather than use the words 'artificial contraception' which had connotations of irresponsibility. In general, birth control promoters predicated their appeals for the necessity of contraceptive knowledge firmly within the bounds of marriage. At first, the term was given capital letters when it was mentioned in the popular press, prudently connoting the controversial aspect of the topic, rather than the mundane need of many adults. Rather than lead public opinion, the press chose to titillate and obfuscate. In describing an article in *John Bull* in 1922, "The Bunkum of Birth Control", June Rose makes this point. While professing respect for Lord Dawson, the article attacked Marie Stopes for imparting knowledge about contraceptive methods "to people who ought to have no use for them". Its description castigating Stopes as the "high priestess" of birth control whose aim was "profoundly mischievous"⁸¹ indicates the type of hostility vented on women who publicly associated with the subject. By the end of the 1920s the quality newspapers were publishing more informed views, but

⁸⁰ Dawson, *Love - Marriage - Birth Control*, pp. 7-9. Dawson's address was reprinted as a leaflet by Edith How Martyn, as part of a campaign to persuade people that birth control should be made available at local authority clinics.

⁸¹ Rose, *Marie Stopes*, p.157.

earlier it had been left to specialist journals such as the Malthusian League's *New Generation* and the feminist press.⁸²

With the decline in religious observance expectations of female subservience and self-sacrifice may have been modified.⁸³ Commenting on such changes, Patricia Branca observes there is a dearth of quantifiable accounts of women's sexual experiences:

Vital statistics tell us little about the quality of sex a woman experienced which is essential for an overall evaluation of the impact of change . . .⁸⁴

Nevertheless, sex was becoming an important consideration for the modern woman's self-image.⁸⁵ The shift towards expectations of companionate marriage continued, in the prevailing mythology at least. Advice manuals on sex and conjugal love became popular. For example, Marie Stopes' *Married Love* sold over 400,000 hardback copies in the five years between 1918 and 1923.⁸⁶ Simultaneously there was a decline in prostitution and something of a moral panic about 'the amateur prostitute', a reflection of traditional perceptions about female sexuality.⁸⁷ The influence of the mass media and with more leisure time, the popularity of the cinema, popular music and dancing resulted in less dependence on traditional values and pastimes.

Although it is impossible to quantify, the existence of independent, autonomous women as role models may be a factor in stimulating changes in outlook and establishing

⁸² *The Malthusian* was renamed *New Generation* in January 1922 in an attempt to modernise the League's outdated, arid, and anti-labour image. Jane Lewis, *The Politics of Motherhood: Child and Maternal Welfare: England 1900-1939* (London: Croom Helm, 1980), pp. 200-202; Rosanna Ledbetter *A History of the Malthusian League 1877-1927* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1976), pp. 222-224. See also Section 6.3 in Chapter Six.

⁸³ Brookes, *Abortion in England*, p. 13; Banks, *Victorian Values*, p. 10.

⁸⁴ Patricia Branca, *Women in Europe Since 1780* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), p. 12.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁸⁶ Billie Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 3.

⁸⁷ Young women who exchanged sexual favours for presents and treats were described as 'amateur prostitutes'. Alison Neilans discussed the effects of changes in attitudes such as more tolerance towards unmarried mothers and the impact and pressures on women of ostensibly greater equality and sexual freedom. Neilans, "Changes in Sex Morality", pp. 221-225. See my account of the Street Offences Committee hearings. Chapter Five, pp. 270-271.

new frames of reference for many women. It has been demonstrated that in the textile areas, where women were more economically independent, egalitarian marriages and smaller families were the norm.⁸⁸ In a similar fashion, the textile areas differed in their relationship to political conventions of the day. They were in the vanguard of political change to demand women's enfranchisement; at the turn of the century the 'radical suffragists' were precursors of the revived suffrage campaign.⁸⁹ Alison Neilans noted that the suffrage campaign facilitated exchanges of views between women with different backgrounds and experience.⁹⁰ I think it is possible to argue that one of the motives behind the swing towards female-controlled contraceptive techniques was women acting upon their recognition of the right to control their own bodies and their rights to sexual pleasure, features of their emancipation and political rights.

Attempts to find reliable female contraceptives can be associated with the legitimation of female sexual pleasure, new notions of which were being developed at the turn of the century.⁹¹ Edith How Martyn aimed to provide easy access to information about all methods of birth control, but particularly contraceptive techniques which could be controlled by women. By constructing an identity as expert, catalyst and instigator of the public promotion of birth control, she subverted the rhetoric of Malthusianism to the ends of feminism, so helping women find contraceptives which were more beneficial than methods previously employed. In the early years of the century some of the poorest working-class women in London were actively engaged in trying out and adopting newer

⁸⁸ Diana Gittins, *The Fair Sex: Family Size and Structure 1900-1939* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), p. 185.

⁸⁹ For an account of the northern 'radical suffragists' see Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us* (London: Virago, 1985).

⁹⁰ Neilans, "Changes in Sex Morality", pp. 220-221. Edith Watson also demonstrates this in her autobiography. Edith Watson, unpublished autobiography.

⁹¹ Although he feels the "impact of feminism, psychoanalysis or sexology on the mass of the population" should not be exaggerated, McLaren does point to the ways new ideas about female sexuality were developing. For example, he suggests that Havelock Ellis provided support for feminists like Emma Goldman and Ellen Key. McLaren, *History of Contraception*, pp. 222-223. See also Porter and Hall, *The Facts of Life*, pp. 207-211.

methods of contraception. They were among the clients at a clinic set up in Rotherhithe in 1910 by Anna Martin. She and Alice Vickery helped to provide safer, more efficient contraception for women in the locality.⁹² Dr. Vickery, with her daughter-in-law Bessie Drysdale, close friends of Edith How Martyn, may well have been instrumental in interesting her in birth control. Through the Malthusian League these friends established a birth control clinic in 1921, a few months after Marie Stopes began her clinic - generally perceived as the first. Family planning field and clinic workers "attracted to their calling by feminist or political concerns" view their clients differently from the authorities.⁹³ I suggest the pragmatic help given by Anna Martin, Alice Vickery, Bessie Drysdale and Edith How Martyn from 1910 to 1921 could be an early example of this hypothesis.

2.2 c) Sexological Influences

At the same time as the demand for more knowledge about birth control was being made, a brake to the development of more positive concepts of an active female sexuality can be seen, the growth of sexological influence. There is some debate about the public impact of sexology and psychology, but it is likely that sexual reformers would be among the first to accept newer ideas.⁹⁴ A scientific endeavour, sexology could provide additional

⁹² *Malthusian*, 15 October 1920. While compiling *The Birth Control Movement in England* Mary Breed wrote to check the beginnings of the Rotherhithe clinic, to which Anna Martin replied, "We began I think about 1910 or 1911, so that would bring our date to 30 or 35 years after Dr. Jacob's Clinic." Letter Anna Martin, Rotherhithe, to Mary Breed, 29 October 1929, author's collection. Benn points out that McLaren's date of 1908 in *Birth Control in Nineteenth-Century England*, is based on the booklet. Miriam Benn, *Predicaments of Love* (London: Pluto, 1992), p. 276.

⁹³ McLaren, *History of Contraception*, p. 254.

⁹⁴ Edith How Martyn owned copies of Carpenter's works, Mona Caird's *The Morality of Marriage and Other Essays on the Status and Destiny of Women* (London: George Redway, 1897) and Marie Carmichael Stopes, *Married Love: A New Contribution to the Solution of Sex Difficulties* (London: A.C. Fifield, 1918; later edns by G.P. Putnam's Sons). For an account emphasising the antifeminist aspects of sexology see Sheila Jeffreys, "Antifeminism and Sex Reform before the First World War", Chapter Seven in *The Spinster and Her Enemies* (London: Pandora, 1985), pp. 128-146; See Porter and Hall on the influence of sexologists, *The Facts of Life*, Chapter Seven especially pp. 153-198; Margaret Jackson, "Sexology and the Social Construction of Male Sexuality", in *The Sexuality Papers*, ed. Lal Coveney, Margaret Jackson, Sheila Jeffreys, Lesley Kay and Pat Mahoney (London: Hutchinson, 1984), p 49; Margaret Jackson, "Eroticizing Women's Oppression", Chapter Five in *The Real Facts of Life* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1994), p. 101-103; Bland,

reinforcement to stereotypical views about male and female roles. In particular, the relationship between female sexuality and motherhood continued to be close, if not inextricably entangled, in the public mind.

Initially sexology originated in scientific and sociological research which assisted its validation but ensured women's exclusion from professional debate. Early works, such as Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* were produced in Britain for specialist consumption.⁹⁵ Later, notoriety and adverse reaction from professionals and social purity campaigners meant that luminaries such as Ellis and Freud published outside Britain.⁹⁶ The public debates about issues like prostitution, the white slave trade, venereal disease, homosexuality, and racial supremacy do however show the fertile ground awaiting the spread of sexological influence. Sex research and theorisation did not take place in a vacuum. Its concerns were dictated by wider social anxieties or aims. Correspondingly, its conceptualisations were shaped by prevailing power relations. Important advances in theorisation were often integrated into pre-existing assumptions.⁹⁷ Scientific discoveries, for example of cell metabolism and knowledge about hormones, were used as biological justifications of conventional behaviours, male as 'active', female as 'passive'.⁹⁸ Such advances thus helped support the work of sexologists whose theories were used to buttress the inherited status quo of sexual difference.

When Edward Carpenter first published *Love's Coming-of-Age* in 1896, he welcomed the emergence of the 'New Woman' and supported the women's movement but retained other traditional notions. Generally, he said: "Man has developed the more active,

⁹⁵ *Banishing the Beast*, pp. 256-265.

Porter and Hall delineate the development of such scientific and medical publications in "From the Primeval Protozoa to the Laboratory: The Evolution of Sexual Science from 1889 to the 1930's", Chapter Seven in *The Facts of Life*, pp. 155-177.

⁹⁶ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, 2d ed., Themes in British Social History Series (London: Longman, 1989), p. 142.

⁹⁷ Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, p. 145; Sheila Rowbotham and Jeffrey Weeks, *Socialism and the New Life* (London: Pluto, 1977), p. 170.

⁹⁸ Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, pp. 146-7.

Woman the more passive qualities". Centuries of social inequality had contributed, but the basic reason was the respective sexual functions:

That there are permanent complementary distinctions between male and female, dating first perhaps from sex, and thence spreading over the whole natures, physical, mental, moral, of each, no one can reasonably doubt.⁹⁹

Carpenter was influential until the First World War. His more radical contribution to the public discourse was his validation of homosexuality, based on the work of Karl Ulrichs, a German pioneer sexologist working from the 1860s onwards.¹⁰⁰

Havelock Ellis's influence over British sex reform movements was widespread by the beginning of the twentieth century. He was hostile to militant feminists and linked the women's movement with an increase in lesbianism. Legitimated by its 'scientific nature' and reflecting its social context, his work, particularly, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* has had a profound effect on social thought. Ellis's biographer, Phyllis Grosskurth, describes him as:

. . . the major transitional figure in establishing the preoccupations and methodology of later sexual investigation.¹⁰¹

She estimates his outstanding contributions to the rationalisation and categorising of sexual theory were to provide a broader range of what could be considered as legitimate sexual behaviour and to recognise women's right to sexual fulfilment.¹⁰² Ellis's explanation of women's sexual needs was innovative but carried with it constructs, based loosely on animal behaviour, of predatory males and submissive females. His two main hypotheses substantiated beliefs which were and can be detrimental to women. They were that sexual

⁹⁹ Edward Carpenter, *Love's Coming-of-Age*, 11th Edition (London: George Allen & Co., 1911), p. 532. The chapter on the "intermediate sex" was not included until 1906.

¹⁰⁰ Ulrichs devised the term 'Urnings', to categorise homosexuals; he theorised them as being products of aberrant development, a female mind in a male body or the opposite. Carpenter felt society had a duty to understand such people who had an important part to play in the evolution of the race; their function was to act as reconcilers and interpreters in the conflict of the sexes. Carpenter, *Love's Coming-of-Age*, p. 134. See also Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out* (London: Quartet Books, 1983), p. 104.

¹⁰¹ Phyllis Grosskurth, *Havelock Ellis* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), p. 219.

¹⁰² Grosskurth, *Havelock Ellis*, p. 230.

pleasure in normal heterosexual relationships is based on biologically determined power relations and that abnormal sexual practices are simply extensions of the normal, rooted in "innocent and instinctive impulses".¹⁰³ From this it can and has been inferred that male pursuit of a reluctant female is appropriate, giving credence to the belief that women's refusals are merely part of the mating 'game' and that for women pain is an acceptable constituent of sexual relationships. The other endorsement is to a belief that any kind of sexual perversion is harmless.¹⁰⁴ Feminists have therefore often seen Ellis's work as helping to legitimate male sexual violence and as affirming prevailing notions of uncontrollable male sexuality, the very beliefs which his *fin de siècle* contemporaries were challenging.¹⁰⁵

His methods, though seen as scientific at the time, were limited. He often collected data quite uncritically. The resulting evidence was mostly descriptive and statistically inadequate.¹⁰⁶ The constant synthesis of women's sexuality with maternity was endorsed by Havelock Ellis whose most notorious statement regarding women was, "In a certain sense their brains are in their wombs".¹⁰⁷ He was influenced by the pro-motherhood feminist, Ellen Key, who said women should not compete with men in the public arena but make their contribution through specifically female creativity. Motherhood was women's supreme function; every healthy woman should be a mother at least once "in the interests of the race".¹⁰⁸ Ellis opposed the endowment of motherhood but welcomed interventionist social policies of the time as providing support for infant welfare and care of children, the

¹⁰³ Jackson, *The Real Facts of Life*, p. 110.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-67.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53; Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, pp. 130-134; Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (London: The Women's Press, 1981), pp. 148-149.

¹⁰⁶ For his initial work on homosexuality, he made thirty-three case studies of male homosexuals, only six of lesbians, including an account from his wife, Edith, of her lesbianism. Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, Vols. 1-6, (1913), quoted in Grosskurth, *Havelock Ellis*, pp. 186-189.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted Grosskurth, *Havelock Ellis*, p. 230.

¹⁰⁸ Rowbotham and Weeks, *Socialism and the New Life*, p. 172.

future of the race.¹⁰⁹ Increasingly, by the late 1920s Ellis endorsed eugenic notions, seeing them as "the ultimate stage of the movement for social reform".¹¹⁰ Espousing negative eugenics, that is, the elimination of the 'unfit', he preferred persuasion rather than legislation.¹¹¹

Ellis believed the birth rate would decrease as successive generations raised genetic standards. He saw birth control as "dull and commonplace and best left to dull and commonplace people".¹¹² On the advice of Stella Browne, he refused the invitation of Charles and Bessie Drysdale to become vice-president of the Malthusian League.¹¹³ He worked, and had a somewhat tangled emotional relationship, with Margaret Sanger, when she was beginning her work in Britain, about the time when she and Edith How Martyn began their association. By the end of the 1920s, sexological influence and the behavioural aspects of sexuality were being overtaken by more research-based scientific inquiry.¹¹⁴ Other changes in public perceptions about women's emotional relationships were also taking place.

2.2 d) Alternative Sexualities

So far I have focused very much on heterosexual relationships. In my introduction I referred to the rich sub-culture of emotional support and friendship which has been the subject of feminist historical research. During the period under review among the changes in assumptions and attitudes about sexual relationships, the issue of women's romantic

¹⁰⁹ Ellis approved the legislation requiring registration of births in 1908. Grosskurth, *Havelock Ellis*, p. 411. Deborah Dwork, *War is Good for Babies and Other Young Children* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1987), pp. 155-158. Originally 'the endowment of motherhood', family endowment or mothers' pensions were the terms used for what became known as the family allowance, a cash payment to mothers of young children made by the state. See below, pp. 110-112.

¹¹⁰ Rowbotham and Weeks, *Socialism and the New Life*, p. 175.

¹¹¹ Grosskurth, *Havelock Ellis*, p. 378.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 410-11.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

¹¹⁴ Porter and Hall, *The Facts of Life*, p. 175

friendships with each other surfaced. As the Victorian legacy of women's passionlessness began to dissipate, lesbianism became more generally recognised; the earlier tolerance and approval given to women who lived and worked together was qualified.¹¹⁵ The British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology (BSSSP) was founded in 1914 by Carpenter, Housman and others,¹¹⁶ who hoped to provide a meeting place to discuss many aspects of sexuality with the aim of reducing public ignorance and bigotry.¹¹⁷ Small, but influential among progressive intellectuals particularly during the 1920s, the society was dominated by homosexuals, whose interests formed the core of the society's programme.¹¹⁸ One of Ellis' main contributions to sexual reform was to remove from homosexuality the stigma of sin and immorality with which it had been imbued. However, his exposition of lesbianism remained constricted by cultural conditioning, especially by general notions of women's sexual passivity. He divided lesbians into two groups - the 'true invert' and women who might be susceptible to lesbian feeling. While lesbians such as Radclyffe Hall perceived the benefits of an interpretation of their sexuality as inborn, in other respects Ellis' influence was malign, for example in the notion that lesbians would taint 'normal' girls and women, which became prevalent in the 1920s and after. Ellis popularised the theories of Freud.¹¹⁹ Where Ellis saw homosexuality as congenital, Freud saw it as a result of sexual development influenced by social forces. Reflecting on Freud's impact in 1935, the feminist Irene Clephane felt he had been gaining influence from about 1910. Despite not being generally read, his understanding of human consciousness and insight into "the

¹¹⁵ McLaren, *History of Contraception*, p. 193; Nancy Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology 1790-1850", *Signs* Vol. 4, No. 2 (1978). See also Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (New York: William Morrow, 1981, repr., London: Junction Books, n.d.) especially Part III, Chapter One, "The Last Breath of Innocence", pp 297-313; Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual"; Jackson, "The Unhappy Marriage of Feminism and Sexology", Chapter Six in *The Real Facts of Life*, pp. 129-158.

¹¹⁶ Havelock Ellis was an ex officio member who gave three contributory papers.

¹¹⁷ Grosskurth, *Havelock Ellis*, p. 371; Weeks, *Sex Politics and Society*, pp. 182-4.

¹¹⁸ Weeks, *Sex Politics and Society*, pp. 181-184.

¹¹⁹ Ellis was to become eclipsed by Freud following the surge of public interest in many aspects of sexuality after the First World War. Grosskurth, *Havelock Ellis*, p. 359.

immense unhappiness due to sex hunger and sex repression" had helped break down older taboos.¹²⁰ However, there were also negative effects for women in popularising psychological and sexual theory; suspicion of single, independent women and their friendships has already been mentioned. Women's sexuality was conscripted overwhelmingly into a heterosexual ideal reinforcing the ideology of companionate marriage. A concept of sexual 'frigidity' had evolved by the mid-1920s and some more radical feminists espoused it enthusiastically. Alongside these changes in attitudes to sexuality and marriage was the impact of legislation on women's family lives, and I now turn to this aspect of the historical background to sketch in the context of the activities of my four subjects.

2.3 Women, the State and Intervention in the Family - "Is 'the Fate of Women' To Be Decided By Men Alone?"¹²¹

By the turn of the century, changes in family structures and expectations about women's sexual subordination were underway. The period saw fears of social and political unrest following a growing awareness of the harsh effects of urbanisation, the consequence of industrial change and economic instability.¹²² In this section I hope to map out political and cultural processes to demonstrate how the state attempted to manage and define the family. State intervention and voluntary philanthropic and charitable efforts to alleviate social problems were limited. Narrowly-defined and class-bound, they proved inadequate. Social and welfare provision by the state and voluntary agencies continued to be mediated by pressure groups. I suggest that the complex balance of state, local authority and voluntary agencies and pressure groups provided spaces in which my four subjects, who

¹²⁰ Irene Cleophane, *Towards Sex Freedom* (London: John Lane, 1935), pp. 182-184.
¹²¹ Edith How Martyn, *Parliamentary Election Leaflet* (1918), Imperial War Museum, Women at Work Collection, Part 5.
¹²² See Behlmer, *Child Abuse*, p. 78; Parton, *Politics of Child Abuse*, pp. 20-28.

had little access to formal political power, were able to operate. They drew on philanthropic traditions of women's public service in voluntary and local government capacities and suffrage campaign methods. Ideological continuity and change co-existed.

I begin with the replacement of voluntary philanthropic involvement in the lives of the poor by legislation affecting the family, then present a brief overview of the political situation in order to contextualise the suffrage campaign and later activities of my subjects. Then I discuss an example of gendered responses to social problems which shows how women's needs can become peripheral, even on a subject like maternity. To indicate some links between cultural, economic and political issues, I will also discuss the growth of medical professionalisation, the influence of eugenics and aspects of women's employment.

2.3 a) Solving Social Problems Through the Family

Since the early years of the nineteenth century the moral and economic obligations of the family had been under discussion. Public debate over the best means to overcome social problems turned on whether philanthropic and charitable methods, voluntary effort or legal enforcement of family responsibility strengthened family ties or, by relieving members of their obligations, undermined them.

In the Victorian era the alleviation of the effects of poverty had depended on two main impulses, government and private philanthropy. The former was effected through the Poor Law, Local Government Boards and Boards of Guardians, locally administered welfare often associated with the stigma and shame of pauperism,¹²³ which had become entrenched following the 1834 Poor Law. The previous system of out-relief was then

¹²³

Greta Jones, *Social Hygiene in the Twentieth Century* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), pp. 12-13.

frequently replaced by admission to the workhouse. For married women and unmarried mothers the Poor Law often meant further relegation into dependency.¹²⁴

The second avenue was through voluntary philanthropic agencies, such as the Charity Organisation Society (COS), founded in 1869, whose aim was to administer charity and relief in an ordered, methodical way to engender independence and avoid pauperism. A central tenet was acceptance of the notion of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. Thus, charity often carried with it moral connotations and was resented by the poor. "The COS . . . was seldom spoken about without a stream of invective," wrote Edith Watson, reminiscing about her childhood poverty. It was:

. . . the bugbear of the poor. . . . There may have been good points about the COS - it was run by undoubtedly well-meaning people - but in all my childhood I never heard one good word said for it. . . . such was the reputation of the COS that Dad would have quietly and proudly starved rather than submit to their questioning.¹²⁵

For middle-class women, charity and good works provided a field of activity in keeping with the prescribed roles of domestic influence and moral and spiritual uplift. Philanthropic work and service in local government, public health, education, and similar areas provided a range of experience and knowledge and an entry into the public world. Patricia Hollis has argued that though the notion of separate spheres has been disparaged, within the context of the time it gave credibility to women wishing to move outside the private and domestic realm.¹²⁶

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Victorian methods were increasingly being seen as inefficient and unscientific and, as eugenic ideas fed into the discourse, fundamentally flawed. Political motives, besides humanitarian considerations, required

¹²⁴ Gillis, *For Better, For Worse*, p. 239.
¹²⁵ Watson, unpublished autobiography, p. 61.
¹²⁶ Patricia Hollis, *Ladies Elect: Women in Local Government 1865-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 471. Pat Thane outlines the implementation of provision for mothers and children through the blending of voluntary and local authority assistance to create 'health visitors' and maternity and child welfare centres. Thane, "Visions of Gender", p. 102.

large-scale intervention to improve the living standards of the poor. In tandem with these developments, reliance on the efficacy of charity gave way to the beginning of a concept of welfare benefits as part of a citizen's rights. Far too often a qualifying rider of 'male' was silently added, for example, when benefits were tied to participation in the labour market, since the norm was perceived as a male breadwinner in full time employment.¹²⁷ Policy-makers neglected the needs of mothers (and of women in general).¹²⁸

2.3 b) The Political Context

In this section, I sketch the political background to the life and work of my four subjects and their direct involvement in political processes.

Politically the period saw a decline in traditional elitist patterns of government, and the growth of collectivist politics. Hall and Schwarz identify three main collectivist forces. These were the traditional right - authoritarian, conservative and imperialist - new liberalism, and Fabian socialism.¹²⁹ These influences dominated political and economic interaction. The Hall and Schwarz hypothesis is useful because it provides a context for the power struggles taking place; it also indicates why contestants could be concurrently in conflict yet seeking the same ends, for instance in accepting certain social and welfare reforms or in promoting eugenic principles as a solution to poverty. Moreover, there was a "distinctive passive transformation" in political terms. Constitutionalism, compromise and the growth of a centralised bureaucracy were the methods by which conflicts were

¹²⁷ Gisela Bock and Pat Thane discuss the connections between welfare provision and women's needs in the Introduction to *Maternity and Gender Politics*, pp. 4-9.

¹²⁸ Jane Lewis concludes that more attention should be paid to the gender distribution of benefits, work and welfare if real equality of opportunity is to be achieved. Lewis, "Models of Equality for Women", pp. 73-92.

¹²⁹ Stuart Hall and Bill Schwarz, "State and Society, 1880-1930", in *Crises in the British State 1880-1930*, ed. Mary Langan and Bill Schwarz (London: Hutchinson, 1985), pp. 21-24.

resolved or defused. So, for example, the feminist case for equality was transmitted through demands for electoral participation.¹³⁰

This background also offers an explanation of how my subjects were able to retain what are apparently conflicting theoretical perspectives. Nina Boyle was a feminist yet described herself as an "imperialist"; she did not (as far as I know) associate formally with any eugenic organisation. Her reactionary views on race were predicated on basic beliefs about racial hierarchies. Edith How Martyn based her work for birth control solely on women's needs, yet worked with the Malthusian League and in the late 1930s was a member of the Eugenics Society.¹³¹ Born out of wedlock and as a poverty-stricken member of the working class, that group so frequently the target of eugenic exhortations, Edith Watson might have taken issue in ongoing eugenic debates. There is no evidence that she was publicly involved. Like Nina Boyle she referred to an implicit hierarchy of civilisations when discussing the vexed question of female genital mutilation.¹³² Alison Neilans worked through an apparently morally conservative organisation like the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene.

Following the 1906 Liberal election landslide the pace of legislative reform quickened. Reasons included humanitarianism, a politically expedient antidote to socialism, the need to accommodate the move from traditional Liberalism to new liberalism, and demands for national efficiency from the conservative imperialist traditionalists and capitalist classes. Because competitive international trade was threatening, the need for welfare provision to produce a healthy labour force began to be

¹³⁰ Hall and Schwarz, "State and Society", pp. 21-28.

¹³¹ See Chapter Six, p. 302. She was made a life-member and a Fellow of the Eugenics Society. Letters C.P. Blacker to Edith How Martyn, London, 27 September 1949 and Edith How Martyn to Miss Shenk, Sydney, Australia, 21 July 1950, Wellcome Institute, London, SA/EUG/C.176.

¹³² In the 1950s, reflecting that a western education did not "civilise" an African or Jamaican, she said to believe otherwise was a "tragic error" which had bedevilled colonial administrators. She cited Jomo Kenyatta's case after he had described the practice of female circumcision as a beautiful custom. Watson, unpublished autobiography.

accepted.¹³³ Many were seduced by the attraction of eugenic ideas. If the Liberals were to continue in power and political stability be maintained, then the amelioration of the worst misery and degradation suffered by the poor would have to be addressed. Other issues with which the Liberal government had to contend were reducing the influence of the House of Lords, Welsh disestablishment and the question of Irish Home Rule.

These dynamics provided the context for the suffrage campaign which was seen by Edith How Martyn, Nina Boyle, Alison Neilans and Edith Watson as having far wider implications than simply obtaining the vote. As with most suffrage campaigners, they felt society as a whole would benefit from women's active participation in government. Through enfranchisement, women's views would be acknowledged, and women might influence legislation and policy. In the next section I outline the political and legislative history of the Edwardian suffrage campaign to emphasise how the high hopes which fuelled the energy and activism of the four women came to be rebuffed by the compromises and machinations of *realpolitik*.

2.3 c) The Suffrage Campaign

Historically there were two main strands in the demand for women's enfranchisement: the argument upholding the concept of equal rights and the rationale that women's participation in political processes would improve government and legislation.¹³⁴ To anti-suffragists, the notion of women's full participation in political life was anathema although other forms of equality, for example in higher education or more equitable marriage and divorce laws, were acceptable. It struck at what they saw as fundamental

¹³³ Derek Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State*, 2d ed. (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 174.

¹³⁴ See Chapter One, pp. 52-53; also Claire Eustance's point about old and new feminisms, referred to in Chapter One, p. 58.

differences, innate, probably god-given, between male and female and their appropriate, allotted spheres of influence.

Some measure of the pace of the demand for women's enfranchisement is shown by the fact that while between 1897 and 1904 the House of Commons had not discussed any measures concerning votes for women, every year between 1906 and 1913 there was either a Resolution or a Bill before the House.¹³⁵ In 1906, the suffrage campaign reached a turning point when a deputation on women's suffrage from all parliamentary supporters and representatives of twenty-five women's organisations met the Prime Minister, Henry Campbell-Bannerman.¹³⁶ His recommendation, that they practise "the virtue of patience", created despair throughout the movement.¹³⁷ From that point the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) militancy increased. The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) activity revived as they began to devise sponsorship of their own parliamentary candidates and promote campaigns at by-elections nationally.

The next six years after April, 1908, when Herbert Henry Asquith, a confirmed anti-suffragist, became Prime Minister, saw women's suffrage enmeshed with Liberal party machinations and competition from other important political and constitutional issues. Hence, not only did the suffrage movement have to provide proof many of the electorate and most women were in favour of women's enfranchisement, but constitutionalists and militants had to manoeuvre within this political context. At most, Asquith was prepared to consider women's suffrage as an inclusive feature of electoral reform where the main priorities would be the question of adult male suffrage and the abolition of plural voting.

¹³⁵ Leslie Parker Hume, *The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies 1897-1914* (London: Garland, 1982), p. 20.

¹³⁶ These included the NUWSS, WSPU, the Women's Co-operative Guild, socialist, Liberal and temperance organisations, women "wage-earners", the textile workers and radical suffragists.

¹³⁷ Eva Gore-Booth, one of the leaders of the textile workers wrote two poems recording their disillusionment. Eva Gore-Booth, "Women's Trades on the Embankment" and "A Lost Opportunity", *Poems of Eva Gore-Booth*, ed. Esther Roper (London: Longman & Co., 1929).

The 1909 Adult Suffrage Bill included some women's suffrage proposals, but gained little government or Conservative support. After the House of Lords rejected Lloyd George's 'People's Budget' the next two years saw an on-going constitutional crisis. When the Liberals went to the country in January 1910, the election was remarkable for the intense activity of a variety of pressure groups who spent large sums of money on propaganda, a reflection both of the conflicts endemic in the political situation of the time and an exposure of the limits to which party and ideological conflict could be contained within the parliamentary arena.¹³⁸

H. N. Brailsford's proposal of a women's suffrage measure, a non-partisan, all-party Conciliation Bill in January 1910 was a breakthrough because M.P.s from all parties joined the Conciliation Committee; it was followed by a truce when the suffrage organisations worked together.¹³⁹ (At a Trafalgar Square demonstration Edith How Martyn was a principal speaker, Alison Neilans acted as her chairperson.¹⁴⁰) The Conciliation Bill, a compromise measure, was abandoned in November 1910, so ensuring one of the best opportunities for women's enfranchisement had been lost. The consequences for the whole suffrage movement were crucial. Militancy began again, NUWSS faith in Liberal support began to fade. From then on the split between militant and constitutionalist was exacerbated. "Black Friday", 18 November, became a landmark in the suffrage campaign. Militants stormed Parliament Square and a six-hour battle with the police aided by hostile onlookers took place. Many women were hurt, some seriously, and the deaths of two women were attributed to the injuries they sustained in the fracas.

¹³⁸ There was little change in the composition of the House of Commons. Bill Schwarz, "Conservatism and 'Caesarism', 1903-1922" in Mary Langan and Bill Schwarz, eds., *Crises in the British State 1880-1930* (London: Hutchinson, 1985), pp. 42-46.

¹³⁹ Sandra Holton, *Feminism and Democracy: Women's Suffrage and Reform Politics 1900-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 69-70.

¹⁴⁰ Based on a municipal qualification, the Bill aimed to enfranchise all householders, so ostensibly ensuring working-class as well as upper and middle-class women would have the vote, an attempt to subdue party-political fears.

Hopes of Liberal support decreased and in May a Second Conciliation Bill was refused more time in that parliamentary session. Again, despite misgivings about Lloyd George's commitment, the suffrage movement united to demonstrate the strength of public feeling for their cause by a massive popular demonstration, a five-mile long procession through London.¹⁴¹

At a women's suffrage deputation on 17 November 1911, which included leaders of the NUWSS, WSPU, and the Women's Freedom League (WFL), Asquith promised that women's suffrage amendments to the government's proposed Reform Bill would be added to the Bill which would go through in 1912. Lloyd George also promised to support the amendments.¹⁴² Within the suffrage movement there were different opinions about appropriate tactics; although the NUWSS felt optimistic, the militants were not.¹⁴³ The militant campaign was resumed and a few days later, when heckled by militant supporters, Lloyd George revealed his real attitude. He hoped the Reform Bill would "torpedo" the Conciliation Bill.¹⁴⁴ By 1 March, 1912, suffragette actions were becoming more hostile; the WSPU began attacking private property, starting with breaking windows of many west end stores.¹⁴⁵ Such violence was inopportune because it led to the revival of the National League for Opposition to Women's Suffrage - in the doldrums at the time.¹⁴⁶ The fate of the Third Conciliation Bill¹⁴⁷ on 28 March 1912 exemplified the problems faced by

¹⁴¹ Hume, *NUWSS*, p. 109.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 118.

¹⁴³ At this juncture there is evidence of the suffrage movement working together still, for example the NUWSS joined with the WFL in a public meeting about a child abuse case at Godalming; the WFL criticised Mrs. Pankhurst's iniquitous prison sentence; they reviewed and sold Mrs. Fawcett's recent book. *The Vote* Vol. V, No. 120 (10 February 1912), Nos. 125-127 (16 March 1912, 23 March 1912, 30 March 1912).

¹⁴⁴ Holton, *Feminism and Democracy*, pp. 70-72, 170.

¹⁴⁵ There is debate about the effects of the resumption of militancy at the time. On 12 March the *Manchester Guardian* said the goodwill of M.P.s had been jeopardised and years of NUWSS work overturned, see Hume, *NUWSS*, pp. 132-137.

¹⁴⁶ See *The Vote* Vol. V, No. 124 (9 March 1912) for WFL reasons for restraint and reports of an 'Indignation' meeting, 22 March 1912; Alison Neilans reflected on WSPU activity which was designed to wreck the Bill and also on the effects of militancy - she felt it made women's suffrage a serious issue. *The Vote* Vol. V, No. 127 (30 March 1912).

¹⁴⁷ The Third Conciliation Bill was essentially the same format as the Second.

proponents of women's suffrage in their reliance on cross-party support. The Bill was killed by 222 to 208 votes.¹⁴⁸ Chances for a non-party solution to legislation for women's enfranchisement ended with the failure of the Conciliation Bill, as did the constitutionalists' hopes of a Liberal measure.¹⁴⁹ Disillusioned by the Liberals, the NUWSS focused their hopes on parliamentary support from Labour members and established an Election Fighting Fund to raise money for individual Labour candidates in constituencies where the Liberal was anti-suffrage. The Fund provided a recognition of Labour party support, a means of undermining the Liberal anti-suffrage wing, and a method of goading the Irish Nationalists into firmer support since it was likely that the prospects for Home Rule would decline along with Liberal fortunes in the House of Commons.¹⁵⁰

In January 1913, a parliamentary debacle occurred with the withdrawal of the Government's Reform Bill at the Committee Stage, a humiliating rejection for the Liberal government.¹⁵¹ Meanwhile, Labour party support for women's enfranchisement had been growing.

¹⁴⁸ Fearing that their best hope for Home Rule would be quashed if the Liberals were reduced to chaos leading to Asquith's resignation, the Irish Nationalists had withdrawn their support. (Note the betrayal by Liberals of their own women's organisation). Although the Labour party had officially approved the Bill, many Labour M.P.s had been absent from the House because of the on-going miners' strike. Furthermore, the renewal of violence by suffragettes who had had little faith in the Conciliation Bill anyway, did seem to have had some effect on voting patterns. See Holton, *Feminism and Democracy*, p. 167; Hume, *NUWSS*, pp. 137-8, and Constance Rover, *Women's Suffrage and Party Politics 1866-1914* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 95. The WSPU had been convinced the Bill would fail and continued militancy. Parker Hume indicates that adverse reactions were strongly felt in Liberal and Conservative quarters. Hume, *NUWSS*, pp. 137-8. Rover states that militancy was the single most important factor in the Bill's failure but points out that the Irish Nationalist defection alone was enough to turn the balance. Rover, *Women's Suffrage*, p. 95.

¹⁴⁹ Hume, *NUWSS*, p. 139-141.

¹⁵⁰ Hume, *NUWSS*, p. 146, 182.

¹⁵¹ The Speaker ruled that the nature of the Bill would be so changed by the women's amendments, that it would have to be withdrawn and another Bill introduced. Despite Asquith's protestations of surprise at the Speaker's decision, there is evidence that this was an inevitable outcome. The drafters of the Bill had advised on the possibility of the women's amendments affecting it in this way and the Conservatives, who applauded the decision since it was to their advantage, had previously discussed the problematic nature of the amendments.

To counter public perceptions of ever more violent militancy, the NUWSS organised a mass demonstration - a six-week pilgrimage to London from all over Britain, a propaganda victory for constitutionalism - and law and order - it went some way to providing evidence of popular support for women's enfranchisement.

The WSPU had been openly determined to destroy public and private property since the start of the year.¹⁵² In April 1913 the infamous 'Cat and Mouse' Act - the Prisoner's Temporary Discharge for Ill Health Act - was introduced. Hunger-strikers were not to be force-fed; when their health had deteriorated sufficiently, they were to be released on special licence, to be re-arrested and imprisoned later. Within six months the Act proved a failure, the "mice" avoided re-arrest and often committed more crimes while out on licence; frequently they avoided arrest.

In May 1913 a Private Members Bill to enfranchise women householders and wives of householders over the age of twenty-five was introduced but was lost. Up to the beginning of the First World War the only other legislative measure was the Second Reading in the House of Lords of Lord Selborne's Women's Enfranchisement Bill; this also failed.

At the beginning of this chapter, I referred to the constellation of sexual issues already on the feminist agenda by 1910. To many feminists the multiple forms of male sexual power were instrumental in maintaining women's and girls' inferior status. The tangential impact of these multiple forms are illustrated next through an example from the dynamics of public debate about improving the nation's health. It shows how women's real needs could be overlooked.

¹⁵²

There is some question about whether in fact at this point the Union was beginning to disintegrate. Holton, *Feminism and Democracy*, p. 95.

2.3 d) Women and Reproduction

Public discourses on maternity demonstrated mythologies of motherhood in a still-familiar mixture of praise, blame and distortion by the dominant male elites. Rarely were the voices of mothers themselves heard. At the turn of the century one of the most pressing reasons for welfare improvements had been recruitment for the Boer War.¹⁵³ Many of the recruits were found to be physically unfit for military service. This event can be viewed as the epitome of how a gendered response powerfully structures and influences subsequent outcomes. My case is that the phenomenon illustrates how important attributes in the construction of gender and the ways gender conflate with class form a prominent and potent component of public discourse. Masculinity was conceptualised as the ability to be strong, to fight, to defend one's country; femininity or womanhood was constructed as being capable of and responsible for the maternal functions of birth and nurturing. The recruits' unhealthiness was attributed to poor living conditions and family backgrounds.¹⁵⁴ Government and middle-class attention focused very much on the failings of mothers. For some time solutions emphasised the need to educate future mothers in their responsibility for the health of the race. The education syllabus for girls in state schools was quite drastically affected, so limiting opportunities for girls to train for careers in 'male-oriented' occupations.¹⁵⁵ The idea that domestic service was excellent training for motherhood was promulgated. Later the endowment of motherhood debate helped perpetuate similar mythologies.

¹⁵³ As many as about 40 per cent, rising to 60 per cent in industrial areas, of the recruits had been found to be unfit for military service. John Stevenson, *British Society 1914-45*, Pelican Social History of Britain Series (London: Penguin, 1984), pp. 42-43.

¹⁵⁴ Stevenson, *British Society 1914-45*, pp. 42-43.

¹⁵⁵ Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing up in Late-Victorian and Edwardian England* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 46-51.

A key factor in the production of healthy children, the health and well-being of individual mothers themselves, tended to be overlooked or obscured.¹⁵⁶ Two directly related constituents in the public debate, which continued through the 1920s and 30s, were the questions of nutrition and birth control. These were inextricably bound into the daily lives of many women, particularly in the working-classes, yet often they were addressed obliquely. Documentation about feeding a family on inadequate means and the debilitating effects of constant child-bearing in poverty provided by women themselves was in existence. The household budgets and housekeeping of "respectable" (i.e. not the poorest of the poor) working-class families of Lambeth were recorded for Maud Pember Reeves and the Fabian Women's Group who published *Round About A Pound A Week* in 1913.¹⁵⁷ The Co-operative Women's Guild members' accounts of their experiences of sexual relationships, childbirth and motherhood in *Maternity* had been published in 1915.

Yet infant welfare received more attention. In 1900 the infant mortality rate was almost as high as it had been fifty years previously; by 1930 it had nearly halved.¹⁵⁸ Death in childbirth was not the main cause of women's death but it was the only major cause to increase in the inter-war years. From 1924 the rate never fell below five per 1,000 births, until 1936 when death due to sepsis was significantly reduced.¹⁵⁹ Between 1918 and 1937 there were five official reports on maternal mortality but birth control and abortion were rarely mentioned:

¹⁵⁶ Jane Lewis, *The Politics of Motherhood: Child and Maternal Welfare: England 1900-1939* (London: Croom Helm, 1980), p. 77.

¹⁵⁷ Maud Pember Reeves, *Round About a Pound a Week* (George Bell & Sons, 1913; repr., London: Virago, 1979), p. 2. See Thane on the Women's Co-operative Guild and Women's Labour League campaigns. Thane, "Visions of Gender", pp. 93-118.

¹⁵⁸ Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, p. 125; Stevenson gives these figures: 1900 - 142 deaths per 1,000 live births; 1910 110; 1920 82 per 1,000, and 1930 67 per 1,000 - Stevenson, *British Society 1914-45* p. 204.

¹⁵⁹ Lewis, *Politics of Motherhood*, pp. 219-220.

[T]he subject of birth control was completely avoided, and . . . although most people knew the secret history taking place, the terrible word 'abortion' was never even uttered.¹⁶⁰

The medical profession's defensive response to the problem tended to see hospitalisation and further medicalisation of childbirth as the best solutions.¹⁶¹

Another factor related to the exclusion of women from the public discourse on maternity, was the growth of scientific and medical authority. Gradually, increased professionalisation of medicine had marginalised women.¹⁶² For example, women who had acted as neighbourhood wise women, found themselves disadvantaged by moves to establish qualifications for midwives, such as the Midwives Act of 1902.¹⁶³ The failure of doctors to advise on, let alone prescribe, mechanical contraception for poor women has been remarked on previously. The system of 'health visitors', of providing assistance and advice in the home, developed from philanthropic and local community services.¹⁶⁴ It provided employment for many women: the Notification of Births Act 1908 created many jobs all over the country;¹⁶⁵ often female sanitary inspectors became health visitors. From her study of social work agencies from 1880 to 1960, Linda Gordon notes changing patterns where social workers' status altered, from a philanthropic style maintained by middle-class amateurs to professionalisation where men dominated the leadership.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁰ Alice Jenkins, "Abortion and Maternal Mortality", ALRA Archives, fo 2/1/25 quoted in Brookes, *Abortion in England*, p. 88. Alice Jenkins (1887-1967) came from a family of suffrage campaigners. She worked at clinics and through the National Council of Women. A founder member of the Abortion Law Reform Association (ALRA), she was the only one of its founders to live to see David Steel's 1966 Abortion Bill become law. Brookes, *Abortion in England*, p. 154; Olive Banks, *Biographical Dictionary of British Feminists* (New York: V.P., 1985), pp. 117-118.

¹⁶¹ Brookes, *Abortion in England*, p. 14; Lewis, *Politics of Motherhood*, pp. 120-122, p. 125.

¹⁶² Dwork, *War is Good*, pp. 156-164; Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives* (London: Virago, 1989), pp. 21, 65-67; Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (Newhaven: Yale University Press 1987), p. 223.

¹⁶³ Chinn and Roberts present alternative views about such women. By the middle classes they were seen as dirty and dangerous to mothers. Chinn, *They Worked All Their Lives*, pp. 36, 139-141; Roberts records how grateful her respondents were for their ministrations. Roberts, *A Woman's Place*, p. 106-7.

¹⁶⁴ Thane, *Visions of Gender*, pp. 101-104.

¹⁶⁵ Dwork, *War is Good*, pp. 156-164.

¹⁶⁶ Gordon, *Heroes*, pp. 21, 65-67. Although her conclusions were reached from a study of Boston, U.S.A., a similar pattern occurred in England. For a discussion of the medicalisation of childbirth,

Nancy Cott discusses how the growth of belief in science had both positive and negative effects for women. As scientific and sociological professions expanded so there were opportunities for women, but professionalisation also meant "forms of occupational regulation" - other mechanisms kept women to the lower ranks:

Perhaps it was where women made most headway and made most substantial numerical impact that the professional backlash against feminisation was most visible, for example, in medicine." ¹⁶⁷

Thus, professionalisation both diminished yet allowed women's participation.

Until women's organisations began to demand access to information in the early 1920s, women's own opinions about birth control were ignored. When the birth control clinics of Stopes and the Malthusian League began their work in 1921 they provided substantial evidence of women's suffering and ill-health through excessive child-bearing and abortions. ¹⁶⁸

A more rational, scientific approach to social and medical questions had been in evidence since the turn of the century. ¹⁶⁹ Feminists had exploited the resurgence of suffrage activity to engage in the medico-moral discourse, but birth control was not a priority. Alison Neilans summed up changes in outlook in 1913 when she predicted that the Ladies National Association for the Abolition of State Regulation of Vice (LNA), and their "former antagonists", the medical profession, could work cordially together. ¹⁷⁰ The

the development of hospitalisation, midwifery and domiciliary practice see Lewis, *Politics of Motherhood*, Part III, pp. 117-161, especially pp. 143-145.

¹⁶⁷ Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, p. 223.

¹⁶⁸ Marie Carmichael Stopes, *The Trial of Marie Stopes*, ed. Muriel Box (London: Femina, 1967), see also Rose, *Marie Stopes*, pp. 198-199; Lewis, *Politics of Motherhood*, pp. 205-208. The despair and ill-health of poor mothers at finding themselves pregnant again was the reason for Eileen Palmer's initial interest in promoting safe contraception for all who wanted it. Her work in a children's nursery in Paddington brought her into contact with many women who requested advice. Eileen Palmer, interview by author, 22 August 1990, Swanage, Dorset, tape recording.

¹⁶⁹ Lucy Bland, "Cleansing the Portals of Life": the Venereal Disease Campaign in the Early Twentieth Century", in *Crises in the Modern State*, ed. Mary Langan and Bill Schwarz (London: Hutchinson, 1985), pp. 192-208. On the question of the deployment of scientific languages in a number of discourses see Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, pp. 166, 175-179; Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, pp. 254-255.

¹⁷⁰ Alison Neilans in *The Shield* Vol. XIV, No. 145, n.s. (October 1913), p. 69, quoted in Mort,

amalgamation of the British branch of the International Abolitionist Association, which opposed state regulation of vice, and the LNA to form the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene (AMSH) in 1915, was one event which marked the reconciliation. Neither Edith How Martyn nor Alison Neilans were medically qualified but they were able to construct identities as experts in their respective fields. Alison Neilans' strategy was to remain within the tradition of the LNA, entering the public discourse to represent women's interests in the role of lobbyist and watchdog. Through AMSH the domain of public and private sexual interaction, prostitution, trafficking in women, venereal disease, child abuse and sexual crime and harassment and the treatment of sex offenders, was investigated. The Association endeavoured to provide factual evidence to counteract official sexism and popular mythology. Alison Neilans felt the society was indispensable, otherwise officialdom and social-moralists together would collude to deny all types of women their legal, social and basic human rights.¹⁷¹ Edith How Martyn constructed an identity as a co-ordinator for people interested in birth control, including the medical profession. Her handling of the campaign for birth control advice in local authority welfare clinics shows her prudence in working through the medical profession.

I turn now to another aspect of reproduction which was pre-eminent at the time. The influence of eugenic theories on early twentieth-century social thought, is a good example of the expectation that science would solve political, social and moral problems. The scientific nature of eugenics was part of its attraction. The term was created by Francis Galton who described eugenics as:

... the study of those agencies under social control, which may improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations.¹⁷²

Dangerous Sexualities, p. 180.

¹⁷¹ Her rationale for maintaining AMSH in 1922 sets this out clearly. She made the point too, in a letter about Lady Astor's Public Places (Order) Bill to *Time and Tide* asking for help to monitor public places for evidence of prostitution causing problems - she wanted to know to what extent "if any" pedestrians were being accosted. *Time and Tide*, 6 November 1925. See Chapter Five.

¹⁷² Francis Galton quoted in Karl Pearson, *Darwinism, Medical Progress and Eugenics* (1912),

Social Darwinism was a collection of ideas applying evolutionary concepts to society's historical development, emphasising the struggle for existence and survival of the fittest. From the start the question of who were the 'fittest' and who the 'unfit' was controversial and highly political. For example, given eugenic objectives for a fitter, healthier race, some argued that to intervene with palliative mechanisms to save infant life would interfere with the processes of natural selection. Since more working-class than middle-class infants died, if these were saved it would weaken the overall health of the nation and alter class differentials.¹⁷³

Social Darwinism underpinned imperialism, capitalism and racism. Right-wing political preoccupations with racial supremacy infiltrated into anxieties about a healthy workforce.¹⁷⁴ Prospects of racial degeneration were predicated on differential reproduction rates between the classes, particularly over the imagery of the 'residuum', the lowest echelons of the population, who might outstrip the middle-classes, thus weakening Britain's competitive edge in world domination and trade. As it came to be exemplified in British eugenics and social hygiene movements, it was:

. . . an ideology with both 'radical' and 'conservative' implications, promising a true meritocracy but usually equating social worth with social class.¹⁷⁵

The theories appealed to a range of political and professional predilections.¹⁷⁶ Imperialists, industrialists, doctors, lawyers, charitable and religious organisations, social workers and social hygienists saw Social Darwinism as offering 'scientific' solutions to poverty and other social evils which transcended partisan political conflict.¹⁷⁷ Given that

pp. 4-5, quoted in Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, p. 170.

¹⁷³ Lewis, *Politics of Motherhood*, pp. 29-30.

¹⁷⁴ See Chapter One, pp. 54-55.

¹⁷⁵ John Macnicol, "The Voluntary Sterilization Campaign in Britain 1918-1939", *Journal of the History of Sexuality* Vol. 2, No. 3 (January 1992), p. 423.

¹⁷⁶ Macnicol, "Voluntary Sterilization", p. 423; Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, pp. 169-173; Lucy Bland "Eugenics, and the Politics of Selective Breeding and Feminist Appropriation", Chapter Six in *Banishing the Beast*, pp. 222-249

¹⁷⁷ Jones, *Social Hygiene*, p. 26.

at the time, conditions such as epilepsy, insanity, mental deficiency, and even alcoholism, vagrancy, and unemployment were frequently attributed to the influences of inferior heredity, the elimination of such traits by regulation of reproduction seemed appropriate to many.¹⁷⁸ Tacit acceptance of medical expertise and the potency of eugenics was reflected in the parliamentary debates of 1913, when enforced detention of the 'feeble-minded' (to prevent their unchecked reproduction) was authorised in the Mental Deficiency Act of 1913.¹⁷⁹ In practice the eugenics movement was yet another means by which the middle classes tried to exercise control over the lives of the poor. The main targets of admonition were women and working-class men. Despite its popular adoption by a range of political agencies, eugenics was not easily convertible into government policy.¹⁸⁰ It offered:

. . . the possibility of forging a strategy of antisocialist reformism that would achieve social betterment without altering the existing ownership and distribution of wealth. . . .¹⁸¹

Ultimately the eugenics movement failed. In the debate about compulsory sterilisation of the feeble-minded which developed from 1918 to 1939, the balance of existing political forces - those collectivist perspectives identified by Hall and Schwarz - prevented full manifestation of the theories through legal means.¹⁸² Macnicol points to:

. . . the impossibility of reconciling the coercive policies required if eugenic social engineering was to be effective within the framework of legal checks and balances that protected the liberty of the individual and contributed to the stability of British society."¹⁸³

¹⁷⁸ Jones, *Social Hygiene*, p. 11.

¹⁷⁹ The 'feeble-minded' were those people perceived as being incapable of looking after themselves adequately, not certifiable 'lunatics'. If such females, who also lived on Poor Law relief, became pregnant, they could be detained permanently. Harris, *Private Lives*, pp. 29, 208. Jayne Woodhouse argues that the debates saw the emergence of unquestioned medical expertise offering a 'scientific' basis for government intervention. Jayne Woodhouse, "Eugenics and the Feeble-Minded: the Parliamentary Debates of 1912-14", *History of Education* Vol. II, No. 2 (1982), p. 136-7. See also Lucy Bland for a discussion of the effects of this legislation on women; Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, pp. 239-242. For Edith How Martyn's views on the subject see Chapter 6, pp. 301-302.

¹⁸⁰ Mort describes it as patriarchal, "a means . . . of managing the health, moral and social condition of the poor". Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, p. 21.

¹⁸¹ Macnicol, "Voluntary Sterilisation", p. 423.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 434-437.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 434. He argues that the equilibrium of the political system prevented the development of a

Debate about the relationship between the state, family and individual responsibility continued. Reforms included a schools medical inspection service and free meals.¹⁸⁴ Voluntary organisations assisted in the growth of the maternal and child welfare movement and in 1914 government grants for these endeavours were provided. The Maternal and Child Welfare Act of 1918 empowered local authorities to provide a range of services including health visitors and midwives, day nurseries and infant welfare centres.¹⁸⁵ It would be another decade before even a token gesture was made to women's contraceptive requirements. The 1918 Education Act established the principle that inability to pay should not debar any child from an appropriate education; it introduced free education and raised the school-leaving age to fourteen years, a measure which could be seen as further encroachment into the rights of parents to expect financial help from their children. Old age pensions were first introduced in 1908. Initially they were paid at the rate of five shillings a week to those aged seventy and over, another loosening of ties with the Poor Law.

2.3 e) Women and Employment

The case of national insurance provides another illustration of the ways in which women's particular needs were overlooked or subsumed through the fusion of a number of political and economic factors. Lloyd George introduced national insurance in 1911, partly for strategic political reasons, partly because the provision of welfare would aid social progress, and to make a placatory gesture to foil the burgeoning socialist movement.

situation analogous to Germany in the 1930s. Macnicol, "Voluntary Sterilisation", p. 437. See also Lewis, *Politics of Motherhood*, pp. 205-207, for the eugenics and birth-control debate.

¹⁸⁴ By empowering local authorities to provide food for needy children the 1906 Education (Provision of Meals) Act officially acknowledged that some parents were unable to provide fully for their children. The 1908 Children's Act was another blow to parental autonomy.

¹⁸⁵ Brookes, *Abortion in England*, p. 13. For the reactions of midwives, and others in the medical profession see Lewis, *Politics of Motherhood*, pp. 151-152.

A substantial factor in undermining the Victorian concept of 'deserving and undeserving' poor, the proposals were firmly based on actuarial principles.¹⁸⁶ Literally an insurance proposal, the rationale was that contributions made in times of prosperity and full employment would insure workers against times of ill-health and short-term unemployment. This pivotal feature modified women's participation and reduced their benefits because the scheme was aimed at 'workers'. Cover was not provided for workers' dependants, consequently the health of mothers during and after pregnancy was not included. Lloyd George's original hope to include widows and orphans was abandoned in order to reach political compromises, and this gap in the provision of social welfare continued until the 1930s.¹⁸⁷

Women workers were not excluded from the scheme. Patterns of occupational experience for women inhibited their inclusion because much of women's work was part-time, episodic and dependent on family commitments.¹⁸⁸ The types of work open to women reflected societal assumptions about appropriate employment for women. Some of the changes in the First World War were transitory.¹⁸⁹ The belief that domestic servants flocked to work in factories, especially munitions, never returning to domestic service, is inaccurate.¹⁹⁰ Domestic service was unpopular with many women. Comparing it with the economic attractions of prostitution, Edith Watson asked:

¹⁸⁶ Derek Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State*, 2d. ed. (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 154,162.

¹⁸⁷ Fraser, *Welfare State*, p. 206.

¹⁸⁸ Stevenson does not fully acknowledge the unrecorded, unseen character of women's work. He estimates that in 1921 5,701,000 women were in employment. From 1911 to 1921 the numbers of women and girls in "gainful employment" rose by 234,000, and by a further half-million by 1930. Stevenson, *British Society 1914-45*, p. 170.

¹⁸⁹ See Lewis for an outline of female employment in the early twentieth century; Jane Lewis, "Patterns of Employment", Chapter 4 in *Women in England 1870-1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1984), pp. 145-161; also Stevenson, *British Society 1914-45*, p. 185.

¹⁹⁰ In 1911 - 32.5 per cent of female workforce were in domestic service; by 1921 this was reduced to 1,845,000. By 1931 the figure was 2,129,000, a higher percentage, 34 per cent of the female workforce than in 1911. For the occupational distribution of women workers see Lewis, *Women in England*, pp. 156-158.

What had virtue to offer? Nothing but laborious domestic work, poorly paid, treatment as inferior beings in for the most part cheerless and lonely conditions. No one outside my generation and class can have any conception of what domestic servants of that time had to endure, . . . the employment of a female slave.¹⁹¹

Throughout the 1920s there was great pressure on women to take up domestic service. The perceived need for servants was so entrenched that when women's unemployment was being discussed in 1921, it was held to be "impossible" for domestic servants ever to be rendered unemployed.¹⁹² Trades unionists, anxious to prevent women encroaching on their preserves, and the middle class combined to preserve the notion that domestic service was ideal women's work - another example of the continuing effects of the ideology of domesticity. Again, when in 1917 the National Government set up a Ministry of Reconstruction with the aim of improving post-war conditions, it contained a Women's Housing Sub-Committee,¹⁹³ a recognition that women's input in decision-making was necessary, yet another demonstration of the continuing potency of the belief that the home was women's sphere.

Despite gains to higher education and the opening of professions to women in previous decades, there were few women at the top in all areas of employment. One permanent change was the number of women in clerical work.¹⁹⁴ By the early 1920s, marriage bars were being introduced; there were prohibitions on married women in the Civil Service and in teaching - a reaction to the equal pay campaign by women teachers. Attempts were made to bar married women in medicine.¹⁹⁵ National insurance schemes, the glorification of domestic service and marriage bars continued to reinforce traditional

¹⁹¹ Watson, unpublished autobiography, p. 73.

¹⁹² Jane Lewis, "In Search of a Real Equality: Women Between the Wars", in *Class Culture and Social Change*, ed. F. Groversmith (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), pp. 212-214.

¹⁹³ Fraser, *Welfare State*, p. 178.

¹⁹⁴ From 1911 to 1921 the figures doubled from 590,000 to over one million; by 1931 there were over 1½ million, mostly concentrated in lower grades. Stevenson, *British Society 1914-45*, p. 170; see also Lewis, *Women in England*, p. 158.

¹⁹⁵ Lewis, "In Search of a Real Equality", p. 214.

ideologies and further inculcate the belief that women's primary function was marriage and motherhood.¹⁹⁶

Conclusion

As I have shown, by the first decades of the twentieth century the patterns which emerged were of conflict and contradiction. The period saw the beginning of new constructs of women's sexuality although they continued to be very much predicated on heterosexual relationships. Late-Victorian doctrines of passionlessness came under scrutiny by sexologists and psychologists whose work had beneficial and negative potential. Women's friendships and support networks, previously not seen as any threat to male sexual domination, began to be perceived in a different light. Changes in family structures included an emphasis on companionate marriage and smaller families. Some of the new thinking about contraception seemed promising for women's sexual freedom, but it also had the effect of engendering anxieties about female sexual pleasure which were restrictively embedded within a framework of monogamous marriage. The idealisation of motherhood added to dominant beliefs that marriage and motherhood were still women's chief vocation, despite some changes in employment. Marriage bars, continued middle-class and trades union pressure on working-class women to become domestic servants and educational prescriptions encouraged the ideologies of domesticity and maternalism.

State intervention in the family had increased though, at times, aspects of motherhood were ignored. Emphasis on healthy infants helped some mothers, but

¹⁹⁶ An example of how patriarchal precepts could over-ride capitalist imperatives can be seen in efforts by the Bank of England to shed its women workers after the First World War. During the War the Bank had relied on women to provide an efficient, cheap labour force, but, contrary to the capitalist doctrine of employing the cheapest source of labour, from 1920 it tried to remove women despite their proven efficiency. M. Badley and P. Summerfield, discussion, *Women's History Network Conference*, University of Nottingham, 1-2 October 1994.

overlooked the needs of mothers as individuals, for adequate nutrition, for health care, for relief from excessive childbearing. On mothers was placed the responsibility of the future welfare of the race.

All these discourses helped to sharpen the feminist political consciousness of my four subjects who gained experience and confidence from the suffrage campaign, but were also disillusioned by the *realpolitik*. At the same time their interest in imperialism and eugenics held them within contemporary discursive parameters. What options were open to advocate further emancipation for women and work towards feminist solutions to some social problems within this context?

Full participation in political life was augured in 1918 when women over thirty obtained the vote. Efforts to return to traditional gender roles were made under the name of returning to normality after the war. For Edith How Martyn, Nina Boyle, Edith Watson and Alison Neilans, the experiences of suffrage campaigning were to prove essential then. In the next chapter I delineate their activism in the Women's Freedom League to demonstrate that major benefits of suffrage work were the creation of a sense of identity and agency and the establishment of a network of friends and colleagues who continued to support each other in public and private.

CHAPTER THREE: FEMINISM, SUFFRAGE AND SEXUAL POLITICS

Introduction

In this chapter I aim to set out the challenges made by feminists in those areas of women's sexual oppression relevant to Edith How Martyn, Nina Boyle, Alison Neilans and Edith Watson. Then, focusing on the Women's Freedom League (WFL), I show how experience of women's political culture created a supportive and enriching environment for the development of their philosophies and practical ways in which they could move forward. After tracing the historical background of feminist campaigning on gender politics, I attempt to disentangle the connections and differences between feminism and the social purity movement from about 1870 through the first decades of the twentieth century in Section 3.1. The activities of the WFL are outlined in Section 3.2, to show which influences converged to give it a specific identity in the struggle to create discourses of resistance. The hopes invested by my four subjects in the ballot box's ability to change ways of thinking and the League's debates about sexuality are summarised in order to ground their subsequent work within the framework of demands for women's equality. To conclude, Section 3.3 explores the legacy of League membership.

According to Weeks, the early 1900s saw a "deflection of real, and urgent, anxieties, the product of major social disruptions, on to the sphere of sexuality".¹ With Foucault's proposal that 'sexuality' is a social construct employed to dominate and control in mind, the pronouncements of sexologists and the responses of the political and cultural elite to the Edwardian suffrage and social purity campaigns can be seen in context more clearly. Examining the relationship between a formal political discourse and sexual politics, Mort notes a reluctance by government to intervene during the first two decades of the century.² In some respects this is true, for instance if the criminalisation of incest or

¹ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, 2d. ed. (London: Longman, 1989), p. 92.

² Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England since 1830* (London,

campaigns about the white slave trade are examined.³ However, in some areas, the flurry of action and legislation - the Royal Commissions on Divorce in 1912, on Venereal Disease (1913),⁴ the 1912 Criminal Law Amendment Act (the 'White Slave Act'), the proposals in the Defence of the Realm Act (DoRA) in 1918, the 1923 Divorce Reform Act - would support Weeks' contention. The proliferation of new organisations such as the Divorce Law Reform Union (1906), the Eugenics Education Society (1907, later the Eugenics Society), the British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology (1914), the National Council for Combatting Venereal Disease (NCCVD), which became the British Social Hygiene Council in 1925, the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and Her Child (1918), and the growth of the various groups advocating birth control and better sex education in the early 1920s, also reflect societal anxieties.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth-century debates on sexual morality were complex. Polarisation along class and gender lines or between repressive and libertarian positions would be too simplistic and it is essential to take into account the context within which early twentieth-century feminists were working.⁵ Issues like prostitution, venereal

Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 201.

³ Kathleen Barry has rightly drawn attention to the racist implications of the term, white slave trade. Kathleen Barry, *Female Sexual Slavery*. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1979), p. 27. Along with 'abolition', it drew on nineteenth-century rhetoric of the campaign to repeal the CD Acts and the analogy with the earlier campaign to abolish slavery. For Nina Boyle's use of the term see Chapter Four, Section 4.4.

⁴ A magnet for social purity activity, according to Weeks; when the Royal Commission's Report was published in 1916 the subject became the focus of a moral panic with significant implications for women, particularly through Regulation 40D, The Defence of the Realm Act (DoRA), March 1918. For an account of the WFL opposition to the Regulation, see Margaret Jackson, *The Real Facts of Life* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1994), pp. 52-56. Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, pp. 215-216. See also Chapter Five, Section 5.2 a). Davenport-Hines records the long-running debates between social purity activists, medical and scientific opinion and pragmatists on prophylaxis and availability of treatment. He outlines the Royal Commission on VD membership and their Report, the early days of the NCCVD and the formation of the Society for the Prevention of VD in 1919. Richard Davenport-Hines, *Sex Death and Punishment: Attitudes to Sex and Sexuality in Britain Since the Renaissance* (Glasgow: William Collins, 1990, Fontana Paperbacks, 1991), pp. 213-237. See also Roy Porter and Lesley Hall, *The Facts of Life: The Creation of Sexual Knowledge in Britain 1650-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 230-236.

⁵ Lucy Bland, letter in *Feminist Review*, No 36, (Autumn 1990), pp. 138-139. Bland's letter was a contribution to the debate about radical feminist interpretations of social purity between Sheila Jeffreys in *The Spinster and Her Enemies* (London: Pandora, 1985) and *The Sexuality Papers*, ed.,

disease and the white slave trade provided an entry into public discourse for debate about the sexual double standard; of necessity though, challenges to prevailing ideologies tended to be couched through religious, moralistic or medical discourses. In relationships between men and women, many feminists emphasised the unity of body and spirit, rather than acquiesce in men's reduction of all women to mere physical beings.⁶ Edwardian women lacked a sexual lexicon to articulate their feelings and needs; the problems of campaigning about incest and domestic violence illustrate their predicament.⁷

3.1 The Politics of Gender: Feminist Critiques

As the late nineteenth century ended and the next century began there were three main stages of feminist activity to demand an end to sexual double standards: the Campaign for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts (CD Campaign), the rise and hegemony of social purity, and continued feminist critiques of dominant discourses during the suffrage campaign.

3.1 a) Analyses of Sexual Oppression: The Nineteenth Century

Judith Walkowitz describes the CD Campaign as an "explicit political precedent" in the sex war of early twentieth-century feminism. Its leader, Josephine Butler, was a

Lal Coveney, Margaret Jackson, Sheila Jeffreys, Lesley Kay and Pat Mahoney (London: Hutchinson, 1984) and Margaret Hunt in "The De-Eroticization of Women's Liberation: Social Purity Movements and the Revolutionary Feminism of Sheila Jeffreys", in *Feminist Review*, No. 34, (Spring 1990), pp. 23-46. See also Maki Kazama, "Seeking After the New Morality: *The Freewoman*, a Radical Feminist Journal, November 1911-October 1912", M.A. Thesis, University of York, 1988, pp. 16-19. Lucy Bland reviews the historiography and different interpretations of relationships between feminism and social purity. Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: English Feminism and Sexual Morality 1885-1914* (London: Penguin, 1995), pp. xviii - xx, and Chapter Three, "Purifying the Public World: Feminist Vigilantes, Prostitution and 'Protective Surveillance'", pp. 95-123. Porter and Hall point to the complexities of sexual discourses, for example, in relation to the interpretation and effects of sex advice manuals, in "Histories of Sex", Introduction to *The Facts of Life*, pp. 3 - 13.

⁶ Bland, letter in *Feminist Review* No. 36 (Autumn 1990), pp. 138-139.

⁷ See Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies* (London: Pandora, 1985), p. 32; Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, p. 148; Judith Walkowitz, "Science, Feminism and Romance: The Men's and Women's Club 1885-1889", *History Workshop Journal* 21 (Spring 1986), pp. 36-59.

feminist role model. Inspired either by religious and moral motives or by libertarian principles, activists assumed philanthropic methods but this was to become problematic. When it began in 1869, the National Association (National Association) for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases (CD) Acts excluded women.⁸ The Ladies National Association for the Abolition of State Regulation of Vice (LNA), founded the same year, had strong feminist links. It formed a parallel organisation but was less elitist. The priority given to women's rights rather than regulation was to be its distinguishing feature for the next forty years. Feminist opposition to the CD Acts was based on the belief that by legislating for the inspection and control of prostitutes to prevent the spread of venereal diseases (VD), the government was legally discriminating against a class of women, so creating an under-class without rights, whose function was to service the sexual appetites of men, thereby perpetuating the double standard of sexual morality. Opposition to discriminatory legislation was a primary objective. By co-opting working-class men into their campaign, the LNA was able to critique male power monopolies in legislature and medicine. They also stressed economic causes of prostitution.⁹ Josephine Butler's particular contribution was to link moral reform and female emancipation.¹⁰

To reduce tension between the limited objectives of repeal and the wider range of feminist aims, the LNA and National Association founded the Vigilance Association in 1871, which focused on women's rights issues. For the next two decades it countered demands from the emergent social purity movement to curtail women's freedom in the interests of public morality. However, within feminist approaches there were ambiguities. Aspirations to rescue 'fallen women' and the need to defend women from brutalising aspects of male sexuality could slip into a desire to control, particularly when class

⁸ Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 255.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

prejudice coupled with religious strictures were motives for involvement, a tendency prevalent among provincial grass-roots of the LNA.¹¹ At this point, the theoretical ambiguities in the feminist case become apparent.¹² In the introduction to Chapter Two, I referred to some middle-class perceptions of working-class women and prostitutes. By using the ideals of sisterhood and female solidarity, feminists presented a more positive alternative, at the price of emphasising female victimisation. Barriers of class and respectability were transcended, so undermining the belief that purity (or ignorance) were determinants of middle-class womanhood.¹³ And while the view that prostitutes were not 'polluters' of men was revolutionary, the presentation of them as victims inhibited exploration both of causes of prostitution and the production of more robust, positive notions of female sexuality.

3.1 b) Social Purity and Feminism c. 1885-1914

The late-Victorian sexual orthodoxy of women as sexually passive and 'purer' than men was a basic tenet for many in the social purity movement, to which I now turn. The combination of feminist and social purity movements could have been a very basic threat to male sexual supremacy.¹⁴ Their relationship is complex. They would debate public issues of the day in a variety of contexts and form coalitions for particular campaigns such as those about the age of consent or incest. Membership of particular societies does not necessarily indicate certain views; often individuals would be active in several organisations.¹⁵

¹¹ Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, pp. 135, 166.

¹² Edward J. Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance: Purity Movements in Britain since 1700* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1977), p. 117; Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, p. 256.

¹³ Jean L'Esperance, "Woman's Mission to Woman: Explorations in the Operation of the Double Standard and Female Solidarity in Nineteenth Century England", *Social History* Vol. 12 (1979), pp. 316-338.

¹⁴ Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, p. 132.

¹⁵ Suffragists active in social purity networks and organisations c. 1906-10, included: Millicent Garrett Fawcett, a member of the NVA Rescue and Prevention Committee; Charlotte Despard;

Emerging from a longer tradition of religious and regulatory objectives, for example, the foundation of charitable and rescue institutions, the social purity movement co-opted religious and moral organisations.¹⁶ It blossomed in the late 1870s, largely in response to W.T. Stead's revelations about child prostitution in *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon*. A crusade against immorality was launched. It aimed to harness the 'respectable' working class to its cause while controlling the vast underclass in a more coercive manner.¹⁷ The movement tended to be anti-aristocratic in outlook, adopting a populist approach employing techniques derived from mass political movements and militant evangelism to advocate chastity and purity in sexual matters. Moral education was provided through a proliferation of clubs and organisations for the young, and public moral outrage was to be mobilised to press for legislation, for example, by galvanising the Liberal party through its nonconformist adherents.¹⁸

After the National Vigilance Association (NVA) was founded in 1885 to campaign for the Criminal Law Amendment Bill, the social purity movement's scope widened to include campaigns against obscenity in public life, in literature, music halls and the

Chrystal Macmillan; Constance Tite, later the WFL Treasurer; Maude Royden; Mrs Pethick-Lawrence; Mrs Percy Bigland, a Quaker, Honorary Secretary of the Criminal Law Amendment Committee in 1913 and a member of the LNA (later AMSH); Miss Sarah Jane Tanner, LNA, AMSH, and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF); Edith Picton-Turbervill, later a Labour MP.; Mrs. Elizabeth Spence Watson, a Quaker who had worked with Josephine Butler.

¹⁶ These included, for example, the Salvation Army, nonconformists, temperance associations, and prevention and rescue organisations, some prominent liberals and some trades union leaders, socialists and feminists. Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, p 104

¹⁷ Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, p. 97. For an account of the development and relationships between feminism and social purity see Bland, "Purifying the Public World: Feminist Vigilantes, Prostitutes and 'Protective Surveillance'", Chapter Three in *Banishing the Beast*, pp. 95-123. See also Mort, "Feminism and Social Purity", Part III, 6, in *Dangerous Sexualities*, pp. 117-119, and Mort, "Purity, Feminism and the Reluctant State", Part III, 8, in *Dangerous Sexualities* pp. 126-130; Walkowitz, "Class and Gender Conflict Within the Repeal Movement", Chapter Seven in *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, pp. 137-146. Sheila Jeffreys presents a more positive view than Mort's of the alliance between feminism and social purity in "Feminism and Social-Purity", Chapter One in *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, pp. 6-26, as does Margaret Jackson in "Sex, Class and Hetero-Relations: Feminism and the Politicization of Sexuality in Victorian and Edwardian England", Chapter One in *The Real Facts of Life*, pp. 6-33. See also note 5 above.

¹⁸ Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, p. 112.

theatre. Curbing prostitution was a major objective. Initially the NVA reflected feminist views; it recognised women's economic exploitation and the need to reform male sexuality but its purient attitudes and increasingly repressive solutions disturbed many feminists.¹⁹ The more feminist Vigilance Association condemned the NVA for persecuting the "most helpless of women"²⁰ and in 1897 Josephine Butler warned against the fallacy of believing that "coercion and degrading treatment" could lead to improved moral standards. By then she was too late. After the CD Acts were abolished in 1886, a substantial proportion of repeal leaders and rank-and-file members, particularly in the provinces, joined the NVA.²¹

Some aspects of the NVA's work owed a great deal to feminist initiatives and support. With the Moral Reform Union, a feminist social purity organisation, it called for women magistrates, matrons and wardens in police stations and courts, an idea adopted and extended by the Women's Freedom League later.²² The NVA intervened in cases where women and girls were suffering from sexual harassment and continued to agitate around the age of consent, action which, as Sheila Jeffreys rightly contends, represent a feminist approach.²³

The workings of the social purity/feminist alliance are illustrated through the debates about incest and demands to raise the age of consent. Control of male sexuality, abolition of the sexual double standard, and the need to eliminate the damaging effects for women of men's lack of sexual control were central to both social purity campaigners and

¹⁹ Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, p. 104; Sheila Jeffreys, "Free From All Uninvited Touch of Man: Women's Campaigns Around Sexuality, 1880-1914", in *The Sexuality Papers*, pp. 22-44. In "Henpecking: Women's Campaigns to Gain Legislation Against Sexual Abuse of Girls", Chapter Four in *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, pp. 72-85, Jeffreys gives an account which emphasises the similarities between social purity and feminist campaigns.

²⁰ Their change of name by the 1890s to the Vigilance Association for the Defence of Personal Rights was indicative of their concerns. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, p. 252; Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, p. 100.

²¹ Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, p. 72; Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, p. 252; Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, p. 104.

²² Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, pp. 61-2.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp 22-25.

feminists.²⁴ Divergent means to achieve these ends were proposed. A crucial distinction was that feminists rejected legislation which discriminated against certain types of women. Victorian cultural ambiguities which conflated innocence and sexual accessibility tended to mean feminist concern about the age of consent constructed females as victims. Among some dominant sections of society, a tacit acceptance that young men were entitled to sow a few wild oats co-existed with the conviction that they were liable to be tempted and blackmailed by predatory teen aged girls. For young women there was little leeway. There was no generalised concept of female adolescent sexuality; sexually-experienced or abused girls were perceived by many social workers and purity activists as 'tainted', better kept isolated from their fellows, and in need of rescue.

Most feminists could approve chastity for men but notions of an active female sexuality created division. In the feminist canon, independence and autonomy for women did include sexual self-determination but some could not visualise women as anything other than asexualised or passive. The lack of consensus on an appropriate age of consent (it was variously suggested as sixteen, eighteen and twenty-one) demonstrates this ambivalence. Although the language of social purity offered women opportunities to define their own images of female sexuality, it meant their case had to be presented through a moralistic vocabulary.²⁵ Philanthropic traditions, such as women's mission to reform and elevate public and private morality underlay both feminism and social purity.²⁶ The cultural context was significant because as Lucy Bland argues, women's greater public visibility in many roles had an impact on the debate. "Women were demanding that it was *their* interests and *their* freedom which needed guaranteeing in the streets". (Italics hers)²⁷

²⁴ Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, p. 120.

²⁵ Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, p. 116.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 122.

²⁷ Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, p. 120.

The protection of children was ostensibly a major priority of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885. For girls, the age of consent was raised from thirteen to sixteen years of age. This made it possible, although difficult, to prosecute fathers and other male relatives for unlawful sexual intercourse in cases of incest.²⁸ Convictions depending on the evidence of young children in the formal atmosphere of courts were difficult to secure. Hence the NSPCC thought children should be excused the oath-taking requirements.²⁹ Other clauses proved more successful in enforcing control of adult behaviour, particularly middle-class attempts to impose restrictions on the working-class.³⁰ These included attempts to suppress prostitution and brothels and the Labouchère Amendment which outlawed homosexual acts between men.³¹ Housing difficulties were created for prostitutes and many working-class women. Feminist objections were raised by Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, who demanded to know whether *men's* privacy would have been invaded in order to control *their* conduct (emphasis mine).³² The 1885 Act began the shift away from traditional philanthropic methods of prevention and rescue towards legislation on and enforcement of public moral standards, a strategy which was to continue until after the First World War.³³

Before 1908, incest had been seen primarily as an ecclesiastical matter, not a secular crime. Historically, concern had focused on incestuous marriages and adult relationships, a side-effect of the marriage and property laws and patriarchal obsessions

²⁸ The 'reasonable cause to believe' clause - a defence often used where men would declare they had thought their partner was sixteen (for cases of indecent assault the age of consent was still thirteen) and the 'time limit' clause which gave only three months between the committing of an offence and expiration of time for prosecution, caused problems. The time limit was extended to six months in 1904. Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, p. 76.

²⁹ This was finally approved in the Children's Act 1913. Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, p. 77.

³⁰ For example, between 1885 and 1914 the prosecution of brothels per annum in England and Wales was fourteen times the annual average in the ten years preceding the Act. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, p. 252.

³¹ Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, p. 102.

³² Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, p. 97.

³³ Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, p. 105.

with inheritance and legitimacy.³⁴ Speaking on behalf of the NVA's Rescue and Preventive Committee in 1892, Millicent Garrett Fawcett attributed the lack of preventive legislation or even of concern about incest, to the survival of:

... the old evil doctrine of the subjection of women and the absolute supremacy of the head of the family . . .³⁵

By the turn of the century, the NVA, NSPCC and LNA had begun to raise public awareness on sexual abuse in the home, but rather than maximising moral outrage they aimed for legal reform. It was difficult to bring the topic of incest into the public arena.

Experts avoided discussion too:

Euphemism was the order of the day even when reference was made to the subject. Medical journals like *The Lancet* spoke of 'things done in secret' which ought never to be publicised; parliamentary proceedings were subject to the same taboos.³⁶

Anthony Wohl suggests the lack of evidence about incest was significant. Because incest was so hidden, its main victims the most powerless in society, evidence was minimal. Consequently it never became a focus for a Victorian social crusade in the way that concerns like prostitution, gambling and drunkenness did.³⁷

Other than feminist analyses suggesting sexual abuse resulted from misuse of adult male authority, there were few attempts to investigate its real causes. Many social reformers attributed it to overcrowded housing conditions or drunkenness.³⁸ Because

³⁴ Victor Bailey and Sheila Blackburn, "The Punishment of Incest Act 1908: A Case Study of Law Creation", *Criminal Law Review* (November 1979), p. 708.

³⁵ Millicent Garrett Fawcett, *On the Amendments Required in the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885*. (London: The Women's Press, 1892), quoted in Jeffreys, "Campaigns Around Sexuality", p. 31.

³⁶ *The Lancet*, (22 August 1885) P. 350, quoted in Bailey and Blackburn, "The Punishment of Incest Act", p. 709; the conspiracy of silence continued - when J. Arthur Thompson and Patrick Geddes, both professors, published *Problems of Sex* in 1912, they referred to overcrowding as a factor in "rapes, incests, horrors beyond name". J.A. Thompson and Patrick Geddes, *Problems of Sex* (New York: Moffat, Yard & Co., 1912), pp. 22-44.

³⁷ Anthony S. Wohl, "Sex and the Single Room: Incest Among the Victorian Working-classes", in *The Victorian Family: Structure and Stresses* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), pp. 211-213.

³⁸ Contemporary perceptions of the causes of incest and child abuse are discussed in George Behlmer, *Child Abuse and Moral Reform in England 1870-1908* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1982), pp. 71-74. Its prevalence was noted by William Booth who commented in 1890:

overcrowding was so widespread, would-be reformers faced another dilemma besides revealing the hypocrisy behind the idealised home and family - the prospect of admitting that the abysmal living conditions of the poor were a major contributory factor to immorality.³⁹

By 1903 when a Bill to criminalise incest reached its second reading, it was still necessary to explain its general prevalence to parliament.⁴⁰ In a typical example of the silencing of women's sexual experiences, many politicians concurred with the Lord Chancellor, the Earl of Halsbury, who argued that merely to speak about this kind of sexual abuse was to encourage it, an argument used years later when lesbianism was discussed in parliament in 1921.⁴¹ Incest was made a crime punishable by a minimum of three years' imprisonment in the 1908 Act, a rather diminished piece of legislation as far as feminists were concerned.⁴²

Social purity campaigners, some of whom were feminists, and suffrage organisations did continue to co-operate up until the First World War, for instance, when attention to the white slave trade was renewed in 1912, following W.T. Stead's death in the sinking of the 'Titanic'. That was the occasion of intensive debate in the WFL and Teresa Billington-Greig's criticism of the women's movement's acquiescence in social purity

"Incest is so familiar as hardly to call for remark", *In Darkest England and the Way Out*, (1890); and Rev. Andrew Mearns, in his influential work, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*, (1883) both quoted in Bailey and Blackburn, "The Punishment of Incest Act", p. 710; and Mearns' evidence to the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes in 1884 quoted in Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, p. 105.

³⁹ Wohl, "Sex and the Single Room", pp. 210-213. From the evidence acquired in his oral surveys, Chinn concludes that incest was a serious contravention of the moral code of the poor. Restricted living conditions only provided better opportunities for those who were already immoral. A more likely result of overcrowding was sexual segregation leading to "innocence" and the cessation of sexual relations between husband and wife. Carl Chinn, *They Worked All Their Lives: Women of the Urban Poor in England 1880-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 151. Elizabeth Roberts also discusses the question and provides interesting insights into attitudes to physical aspects of family life in *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-class Women 1890-1940* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 15-16, p. 95.

⁴⁰ Bailey and Blackburn, "The Punishment of Incest Act", p. 710.

⁴¹ Ann Faraday, "Social Definitions of Lesbians in Britain, 1914-1939" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Essex, 1986); see pages 221-225 for a discussion of reactions to the debate.

⁴² Wohl, "Sex and the Single Room", p. 211, and Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, p. 79.

moral panics.⁴³ At the time Alison Neilans was a prominent member of the LNA; when the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene was created, she was able to steer the society towards feminist principles rather than repressive social purity beliefs, for the following twenty-five years.

During the early years of the twentieth century, social purity was a potent force, supported by a mass constituency and working through "well-organised pressure groups, friends in high places". As Weeks argues, it became something of a victim of its own success by the mid-1920s, yet its popularity ensured public immorality remained a consideration for authorities concerned with public spaces, censorship of literature, the stage and cinema.⁴⁴

3.1 c) Alternatives to Patterns of Domination and Submission 1888-1917

A feminist critique of male violence and sexual colonisation had been established through public debates on marriage and the popular media construct of the 'New Woman' by the turn of the century. Mona Caird launched a well-publicised attack on marriage in 1888. She described prostitutes and married women as being dependent on men for their bread and butter; they were supported on one condition: "the subjection of body and soul".⁴⁵ Much of the discussion centred on twin features, a woman's right to her own body and the inequalities of power and status arising from economic dependence. The issue of sexual coercion extended the debates.

⁴³ See below, pp. 156-157.

⁴⁴ Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, pp. 216-218. One influential member of the social purity movement was William Joynson-Hicks, Home Secretary between 1924 and 1929. A proponent of the radical right, during the First World War he was implicated in moves to ban German shops and restaurants in Britain and for whipping up hatred of all things German through the British Empire Union. Panikos Panayi, "The British Empire Union in the First World War", in *The Politics of Marginality: Race, the Radical Right and Minorities in Twentieth Century Britain*, ed., Tony Kusher and Kenneth Lunn (London: Frank Cass, 1990), pp. 113-129. For an account of Joynson-Hicks' views on prostitution, See Chapter Five, pp. 266-268.

⁴⁵ Mona Caird, "The Morality of Marriage", *Fortnightly Review*, 47, NS (March 1890), p. 323.

As attitudes to relations between the sexes shifted, the idea that sexual intercourse in marriage was not a duty and should not be forced on women was examined more openly. To the query in the women's magazine *Shafts* in 1893, "What Do Women Want?"

Alma Gillen replied:

They want to own themselves, to dispose of their bodies as seems to them best, not to have maternity forced upon them.⁴⁶

A factor in the discussion about women's rights to their own bodies was, of course, the question of reproductive control. Sexual abuse of women in marriage and fears about pregnancy and the debilitating effects of perpetual childbearing were inextricably linked. Some feminists opposed contraception, partly because it was associated in the public mind with prostitution, partly because they felt that men would use contraception for their own benefit increasing "domestic powers and sexual powers".⁴⁷ It was for the latter reason that Alison Neilans opposed contraception initially but she changed her mind and later supported Edith How Martyn's work.

Whether or not they supported the institution, and most of them did, feminists explicitly criticised sexual oppression in marriage. For example, sentimental depictions of married life, a feature of the wider public discourse, were condemned by Millicent Garrett Fawcett, who wrote:

It is not women who have no husbands, but the women who have bad husbands, who are most deserving of compassion - women, whose stories appear week by week in the newspapers, who are driven to suicide by the nameless and hideous brutalities to which they have been subjected; women are driven on the streets that their husbands may loaf in idleness on their earnings; women who live in daily and hourly terror of their lives from their husband's personal violence . . .⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Alma Gillen, "What Do Women Want", *Shafts*, Vol. II (March 1894), p. 229.

⁴⁷ Angus McLaren, *Birth Control in Nineteenth Century England* (London: Methuen, 1978), p. 202.

⁴⁸ Millicent Garrett Fawcett, "The Emancipation of Women", *Fortnightly Review*, Vol. 50, NS, (November, 1891), p. 680.

Mona Caird acknowledged her survey of marriage had not dwelt on the "terrible sufferings" of women:

Suffice it to say that the cruelties, indignities, and insults to which women are exposed are . . . hideous beyond description.⁴⁹

Here, the language used by two articulate, competent writers, "nameless and hideous brutalities", "hideous beyond description", demonstrates the difficulties women faced when discussing abuse publicly.

Cicely Hamilton's *Marriage as a Trade*, published in 1909, argued women's economic subordination in marriage often reduced the institution to an economic transaction denying women self-determination or any separate identity. Even the falling birth rate was seen as a reflection of women's unwillingness to conform any longer to old oppressive traditions, a view aired in 1914 when the WFL debated birth control.⁵⁰ By 1917, the Christian feminist Maude Royden was still hoping that the "old idea" that women wished to be mastered would die out:

The man in whom the desire for mastery expresses itself in brutal sex-selfishness may be condemned, but the desire to conquer the woman's spirit is also indefensible.⁵¹

These critiques of marriage were contemporaneous with the beginnings of sexology and the emergence of the newly-emancipated, independent woman which also presented possibilities for renegotiating gender politics.

⁴⁹ Mona Caird, "Marriage", *Westminster Review* Vol. 130 (1888), p. 194.

⁵⁰ This arose from a tactic of refusing to become mothers, suggested by Lucy Re-Bartlett, *Sex and Sanctity* (London: Longmans, 1912), p.25.

⁵¹ Maude Royden. "Modern Love", in *The Making of Women: Oxford Essays on Feminism*, ed. Victor Gollancz (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1917). For further details of Royden's views, see Chapter Five, notes 15 and 80.

3.1 d) From the 'New Woman' to the Sex War

Created in response to first-wave feminism and female emancipation, the late-Victorian cultural construct of the 'New Woman' had revealed fears of sexual revolution which, by the Edwardian era, was popularly designated the 'sex war'.⁵² Refuting the argument that the 'sex war' was caused by the suffrage campaign, Laurence Housman, a prominent WFL speaker, also provided an example of the ways in which female sexuality was collapsed into motherhood. In 1912 he said society was involved in a "horribly oversexed life". Male threats to proper conditions for maternity had resulted in conflict.⁵³ Such antagonism towards men was criticised by Mrs Creighton, the social purity campaigner, who by arguing that chastity was more difficult for men, like many in the movement continued to place the burden of morality on women.⁵⁴ Christabel Pankhurst suggested women's violence (for example Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) activities) was more disturbing to many people than men's because it threatened the existing social order.⁵⁵

Christabel Pankhurst's *The Great Scourge and How to End It* (1913) provides another example of how feminists entered the public discourse on sexuality through taking up scientific rationales. As medical knowledge improved, the subject of venereal disease again became prominent. *The Great Scourge*, was (and is) often derided as hyperbolic

⁵² See Lucy Bland, on fictional interpretations of the 'New Woman' and differences between men and women writers. Lucy Bland, "Marriage Laid Bare: Middle-class Women and Marital Sex 1880s-1914", in *Labour and Love*, ed. Jane Lewis (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 133.

⁵³ Laurence Housman. *The Vote* Vol. VI, No. 134, (18 May, 1912). The WFL produced a leaflet from a speech by Housman, "Sex War and Women's Suffrage" (London: WFL, 1912).

⁵⁴ Lucy Bland, "Cleansing the Portals of Life: the Venereal Disease Campaign in the Early Twentieth Century", in *Crises in the Modern State*, ed. Mary Langan and Bill Schwarz (London: Hutchinson, 1985), pp. 192-208, especially p. 197. Mrs. Louise Creighton, widow of the Bishop of London, was the first president of the National Union of Women Workers (later the National Council of Women) in 1895 and again during the First World War. The Union was largely upper and middle class, not a trades union. An anti-suffragist initially, during the war Mrs Creighton led the movement to 'rescue' girls and patrol the streets. See Daphne Glick, *The National Council of Women of Great Britain: The First One Hundred Years* (London: National Council of Women of Great Britain, 1995), p. 245; and Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, p 175.

⁵⁵ Dale Spender, *Women of Ideas and What Men Have Done to Them* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Arc Paperbacks, 1983), p. 589.

rhetoric. It was however, based on some medical opinion of the period. Feminists presented the spread of VD as a classic case of how women suffered for men's immorality. Pankhurst proposed the slogan: "Votes for Women, Chastity for Men", maintaining that men - doctors and husbands - had conspired to hide the facts.⁵⁶ Faith in the ability of science to deliver solutions to many social problems continued to grow. Consequently, a more scientific, objective approach to social questions became obligatory. Alison Neilans and Edith How Martyn adopted appropriate discursive strategies to present their views in a range of discourses. Alison Neilans wrote quite explicitly about prostitutes servicing men; Edith How Martyn used a medical vocabulary where necessary and her public speeches, logical and well-argued, were inside medical and eugenic parameters.⁵⁷ I shall explore these more fully in Chapters Five and Six.

I hope I have demonstrated the links between late-Victorian and Edwardian feminist attitudes to sexual politics sufficiently to suggest the milieu within which my four subjects were initially positioned. With the outbreak of the First World War, many of these issues reared up again as part of the hysteria engendered by the general social upheaval. Feminists continued to expose the double-thinking which blamed females and exonerated males. Nina Boyle laughed at moralising by the popular press over the highly visible sexual encounters which so dismayed some members of the middle class. She claimed newspapers perpetuated the myth of men as "unworldly, helpless lambs who require shielding from the world".⁵⁸ When licensed brothels for servicemen were suggested as a solution, Alison Neilans scoffed at the idea of soldiers being incapable of protecting

⁵⁶ Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, pp. 46-47; Bland, "Cleansing the Portals", pp. 196-197.

⁵⁷ Eileen Palmer interviewed by author, tape recording, Swanage, Dorset. 22 August 1990. We discussed Edith How Martyn's obituary notices and Eileen Palmer was at pains to modify a notice in *The Times* which hinted at a rather pedestrian public-speaking manner.

⁵⁸ Nina Boyle, quoted, without details of source, in Andro Linklater, *An Unhusbanded Life: Charlotte Despard, Suffragette, Socialist and Sinn Feiner* (London: Hutchinson, 1980), p. 186.

themselves against solicitation. She commented ". . . when a woman solicits a man it is depravity, but when a man yields to the solicitation it is merely human nature."⁵⁹

Lack of space prevents detailed analysis of the full range of the debates about gender politics during the war, but I shall return to some features, for example of attempts to control women's access to public space, in Chapter Four. Next I turn to the WFL, its beliefs, its comradeship and members' views on sexual politics.

3.2 The Women's Freedom League 1907-1914

The distinguishing features of the WFL were an emphasis on democratic structures, a search for alternative strategies of resistance, and explicit acknowledgement that the suffrage campaign involved fundamental questioning of relationships between the sexes. Rather than recount in detail the League's origins, I shall focus on two particular aspects which are germane to my study: militancy, because it exemplifies an engagement in reverse discourses of power, and the League's function as a forum for discussion to illustrate one facet of the formation of the concept of sisterhood.

3.2 a) The League's Origins 1907-1910

The Women's Freedom League emerged from several sources in British politics: the reformist, Liberal tradition typified by conventional suffrage societies such as the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS); the popular campaigning of the 'radical' suffragists of northern England, and the socialist movement, which had been the breeding-ground of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). The equal rights traditions of the early women's movement, in marriage, property, and divorce legislation

⁵⁹ Alison Neilans. "The Protection of Soldiers". *The Shield* Third Series, I, 1916-1917. pp. 257-65, quoted in Lesley A. Hall, *Hidden Anxieties: Male Sexuality 1900-1950* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 50.

and for equal access to education, allied to a belief in political reform achieved by constitutional methods (of the kind sought by the NUWSS) were to be part of the WFL programme. Another of the League's features was the use of propaganda tactics derived from mass political movements. Continuity of suffrage campaigning from the nineteenth to the twentieth century had been sustained by the mainly working-class northern 'radical suffragists'.⁶⁰ However, hostility from male trades unionists, who feared politicised women workers would weaken their bargaining power, made for an uneasy relationship with many male socialist and union organisations. Effective co-operation between feminists and the nascent Labour party in the first decade of the twentieth century was compromised by conflict over such basic objectives as complete adult or manhood suffrage without property qualifications or women's enfranchisement on the prevailing terms of a property qualification. The founding members of the WSPU (begun in Manchester in 1903), especially the Pankhurst family, had long connections with the Independent Labour Party (ILP). Within a decade leaders of the WSPU were to move further to the political right, abandoning democratic structures in the process.

To the concern of several leading activists, by 1907 the organisation of the WSPU was becoming much less democratic, Mrs. Pankhurst and Christabel in particular adopting very autocratic methods.⁶¹ When WSPU members were forbidden to co-operate with the Labour Party, dissent was inevitable. For several of the leading members, socialist and feminist principles were inextricable. Besides Richard Cobden's daughter, Mrs. Cobden Sanderson, there was Charlotte Despard; Teresa Billington-Greig, the first woman

⁶⁰ For an account of the continuities in suffrage campaigning, see Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us* (London: Virago, 1985). Eva Gore-Booth, one of the leaders of the campaign, set out the connections between women's need for enfranchisement and employment. Eva Gore-Booth, "Women's Right to Work", pamphlet, Manchester and Salford Women's Trades and Labour Council, (Manchester: n.d.), p. 5.

⁶¹ Les Garner suggests a military model for their behaviour, democratic deliberations being incompatible with the successful conduct of battle. Les Garner, *Stepping Stones to Women's Liberty: Feminist Ideas in the Women's Suffrage Movement 1900-1918* (London: Heinemann, 1984), pp. 28-29.

organiser for the ILP in 1904;⁶² and Irene Fenwick Miller, an ILP member and the first woman arrested for militancy in London.⁶³ Matters came to a head in September 1907 when Mrs Pankhurst vetoed arrangements for the annual conference. In response, Teresa Billington-Greig argued persuasively to keep democratic procedures. It was useless to demand democratic rights to participate in government if their own system was undemocratic.⁶⁴ A hastily-formed provisional committee decided to hold the conference and representatives from thirty-one out of fifty-two WSPU branches attended. Edith How Martyn supported Teresa Billington-Greig; a democratic structure was needed as a machine of organisation but above all for "the spirit of independence, and of equal human right."⁶⁵

Generously, the new society relinquished their claims to existing WSPU funds, documents and other assets. Keeping the WSPU's original constitution, the Women's Freedom League began. Funds were low, since initially they had just £2. 2s. 1d., but within two weeks they had established an office in London. They were to be, "another militant body pledged to work heart and soul for Votes for Women."⁶⁶ Before discussing militancy, I summarise those features which my four subjects helped develop as they gave their skills and energy to make the League an effective source of political challenge.

The new suffrage organisation blended a reformist constitutional approach, northern radical suffragism, socialism, and the kind of militancy evolving in the WSPU.

The League kept its links with the socialist movement and maintained a focus on women's

⁶² Garner, *Stepping Stones*, p. 35.

⁶³ Stella Newsome, *The Women's Freedom League 1907-1957* (London: Women's Freedom League pamphlet, n.d.), Fawcett Library, 324.62306041, a rather celebratory account of the WFL's early years.

⁶⁴ Teresa Billington-Greig, *The Militant Suffrage Movement: Emancipation in a Hurry* (London: Frank Palmer, 1911), pp. 87-88.

⁶⁵ Edith How Martyn writing in *The Vote* Vol. I, No. 7 (9 December 1910). A full discussion of the WFL origins is to be found in Claire Eustance's "'Daring To Be Free': The Evolution of Women's Political Identities in the Women's Freedom League 1907-1930", D.Phil. Thesis, University of York, 1993, pp. 53-64.

⁶⁶ Edith How Martyn in *The Vote* Vol. I, No. 7 (9 December 1910).

economic position, both in the workplace and in the home.⁶⁷ By 1908 there were fifty-three branches in England, Scotland and Wales and by 1914 membership was estimated at about 4,000.⁶⁸ Although the smallest of the three main women's suffrage organisations, the WFL retained its democratic structure, a formally elected National Executive Committee, honorary and paid officials and annual conferences.

Another feature was their readiness to examine new ideas and processes, to think about developing methods by which women could work in non-hierarchical ways and co-operate to achieve political ends. These were always live issues in the League and some of their discussions foreshadow the debates of late twentieth-century feminism.⁶⁹ Charlotte Despard, a highly popular figure, continued as President until 1926, although her idiosyncratic, at times autocratic, style of leadership caused friction and contributed to the resignation of seven members, including Alison Neilans and Edith How Martyn, from the National Executive Committee, in 1912. At that point Alison Neilans re-affirmed her view that suffrage activism helped women to develop a sense of agency, that sisterhood and power-sharing were inextricable. She proclaimed:

It is conceivable that those claiming autocratic power might be a body of geniuses; they might even be angels from heaven, still their claim would be evil and harmful to the Cause; for it would rid the average woman of average parts of all opportunity for self-development and self-government; and no angel from heaven, even, was ever good enough, strong enough, capable and far-seeing enough to be entitled to govern others; and those of us who have respect for ourselves and for our sisters, cannot continue to work in such a society.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Garner, *Stepping Stones*, pp. 34-5. Eustance, "Daring To Be Free", pp. 56-60.

⁶⁸ Garner, *Stepping Stones*, p. 292. For a discussion of the size of the WFL, I have referred to Garner, and Eustance. Garner questions David Rosen's estimate that only 20 per cent of the WSPU left to join the League, *Stepping Stones*, p. 29. Teresa Billington-Greig thought that half the WSPU branches attended the break-away conference. See Eustance for a description of evolution of WFL regional branches. Eustance, "Daring To Be Free", pp. 67-70.

⁶⁹ The WFL Annual Conference reports illustrate the range of topics discussed: for example, democratic decision making, the problems of creating non-hierarchical ways of working, motherhood, reproductive control and women's economic subordination.

⁷⁰ Verbatim Minutes, WFL Special Conference, 27/28 April 1912. (Alison Neilans' name is recorded as Miss Alison Neilson in the minutes but from internal evidence, I think the speaker was Alison Neilans). See also Eustance, "Daring To Be Free", pp. 82-86.

In the beginning, the League contributed a page to the weekly journal *Women's Franchise*, produced by the Men's League for Women's Suffrage (MLWS).⁷¹ Through the efforts of Marion Lawson, a National Executive Committee member, the WFL launched its own weekly paper, *The Vote* in 1909.⁷² Often in a financially precarious position, *The Vote's* circulation peaked at over 13,000 in November, 1913, slumping to 400 a week in 1919.⁷³ As well as full reports of suffrage events, news from branches, commentaries from leading members, and critiques of political campaigning, *The Vote* included the column 'How Men Protect Women', short stories, plays, poetry, and book and theatre reviews. It presented a range of views and while, as was pointed out on the front page, the Editor was responsible for unsigned articles, a by-line indicated that the writer's own opinion was being expressed. Consequently, while the views printed in *The Vote* did not necessarily represent those of the League as a whole, they indicated the interests and priorities of many members. It provided a channel of information, contained news from other associations such as the NSPCC, Association for Moral and Social Hygiene (AMSII), the LNA, and the Criminal Law Amendment Committee, and acted as a forum for members to debate social issues.

As the League began to create a political community, they evolved other strategies of resistance. Their development of militancy and other tactics are considered next.

⁷¹ Members included Laurence Housman; H.N. Brailsford, a journalist and Secretary of the Conciliation Committee 1910-12; Alice Drysdale Vickery's son, Dr. C.V. Drysdale; and the journalist, Henry Wood Nevinson, husband of Margaret Wynne Nevinson, a writer and WFL member.

⁷² Marion Holmes and Mrs. T.P. O'Connor were the first editors. Cicely Hamilton was proposed as editor, but did not take up the post, probably because the WFL was unable to offer a salary. Lis Whitelaw, *The Life and Rebellious Times of Cicely Hamilton* (London: The Women's Press, 1990), p. 103. The League founded its own publishing company, the Minerva, and its shares were offered to members; Marion Lawson became the company's Managing Director. Edith How Martyn was a shareholder. For many years *The Vote* was financially supported by the WFL Treasurer (from 1913 onwards), Dr. Elizabeth Knight, of the Knight's Castile Soap family, until her death in 1933. Newsome, *The Women's Freedom League* p 15; obituary notices, *Daily Telegraph*, 1 November, 1933; *Manchester Guardian*, 1 November 1933.

⁷³ Garner, *Stepping Stones*, p. 29. Marion Lawson continued campaigning, joined the WTRL, had her household goods sold after she refused to pay income tax, and in the early 1940s acted as Treasurer for the Nina Boyle Memorial Appeal.

3.2 b) Alternative Strategies of Resistance 1909-1914

Although at first both the constitutional and militant societies collaborated in campaigns, the question of militancy had become divisive by 1907. While suffragette activities brought the movement to public prominence after 1905, they led to fragmentation of the women's movement, and to the deflection of attention from broader, substantive demands based on much more fundamental questioning of the relationships between men and women. Through non-violent, militant means the powers of the state and the law themselves became open to question. Public and media attention were constantly being drawn to the logic of suffrage claims and the anomalous position of women as citizens, processes which had considerable bearing on the politicisation of my four subjects.⁷⁴ Non-violent militancy was the League's distinguishing characteristic; it may be seen as a reverse discourse of power.⁷⁵ Edith How Martyn defined it as:

... the spirit of self-sacrifice which leads its members to protest against the exclusion of women from citizenship even when the result of that protest is the prison cell."⁷⁶

Legitimacy for militancy was claimed by Teresa Billington-Greig who cited other historical resistances such as the Non-Conformist Tax Resistance League, the Chartists and the Corn Law League as influences.⁷⁷ Mrs. Cobden Sanderson probably expressed a common feeling of impatience with constitutional methods when she exclaimed to Edith How Martyn: "We have talked so much for the Cause; now let us suffer for it!", as they were arrested for the first time at a mass demonstration at the House of Commons in October in 1906.⁷⁸ With many other demonstrators, Edith How Martyn was sentenced to

⁷⁴ *The Vote* Vol. X, No. 247 (17 July 1914); see Chapter One, pp. 63-64. Edith Watson's collection contains her Holloway prison label in the false name of Edith Smyth.

⁷⁵ See Chapter One, note 51. See also Eustance, "The Meaning of Militancy", Chapter Three in "Daring To Be Free", pp. 147-196.

⁷⁶ Edith How Martyn, *The Vote* Vol. I, No. 7 (9 December, 1909).

⁷⁷ Teresa Billington-Greig, Notes on women's suffrage, miscellaneous, Teresa Billington-Greig Papers, Box 399; Fawcett Library, London.

⁷⁸ Recorded by Edith How Martyn, 24 October 1937. Reel 1, Group C 57.116, Suffragette Fellowship Collection, London Museum.

prison; on their release a banquet in their honour was given by the non-militant suffrage societies.⁷⁹ There was though, some consternation among the leaders of the NUWSS, and by 1908 the NUWSS protested against the inclusion of WFL news in *Women's Franchise*, publicly severing their connections.⁸⁰ The prospect of women stepping so far outside their ascribed role as to participate in violent, noisy public demonstrations also alienated many radical suffragists, whose working-class sensibilities were vulnerable to charges of lack of respectability and who had more to lose than middle-class activists.⁸¹

Militancy was controversial within the Women's Freedom League too. There may well have been dissonance between the outlook of provincial members and a more cosmopolitan approach favoured by London-based activists.⁸² Driving the argument forward, Edith How Martyn proposed an attitude of "passive resistance" towards all government business, in November 1908, and her resolution that "we do not set out to damage persons or property" was supported unanimously by the National Executive Committee.⁸³

Controversy flared up again in 1909 after the 'ballot box' protest by Alison Neilans and Margaret Chapin, a working-class member of the League. It was intended to be a symbolic action directly disrupting a highly significant discursive institution of male power and it proved a significant experience in the creation of a sense of women's collectivity. After consulting Edith How Martyn about a suitably harmless chemical, they

⁷⁹ Carol McPhee and Ann Fitzgerald, eds., *The Non-Violent Militant: Teresa Billington-Greig* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 6.

⁸⁰ Sandra Holton, *Feminism and Democracy: Women's Suffrage and Reform Politics 1900-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 48.

⁸¹ Letter to Millicent Garrett Fawcett from Eva Gore-Booth and Esther Roper, 25 October 1906, Millicent Garrett Fawcett Collection, M50/2, Manchester Public Library archives.

⁸² For a discussion of the contributions and differences between local branches and national, London-based leadership of the WFL, see Eustance, "Daring To Be Free". On defining militants and constitutionalists, see Holton, "Militants and Constitutionalists", Chapter Two in *Feminism and Democracy*, pp. 29-52.

⁸³ Women's Freedom League, National Executive Minutes, November 1908.

poured an inky substance into a ballot box at the Bermondsey bye-election.⁸⁴ They were arrested, charged with interfering with a ballot box and attempting to destroy ballot papers.⁸⁵ Both were found guilty and imprisoned. During her three months in prison, Alison Neilans went on hunger-strike and was forcibly-fed by stomach tube. She deliberately chose the most painful of the methods of force-feeding.⁸⁶ Her health deteriorated considerably. What was learned from the experience?

Through her resistance, Alison Neilans crystallised her own views on militancy; she gained feelings of solidarity from League members' support. The gender and class bias of the judicial system had been fully demonstrated. At the court hearings their supporters had been refused entry, an early catalyst for the WFL campaign for women's rights to admittance to courts. Despite ill-health, Mrs Chapin, "a poor working woman", had been forcibly-fed, unlike upper-class prisoners who had actually been released on the grounds of ill-health. New rules had been invented by the Home Office to prevent the prisoners receiving support.⁸⁷ Contrary to officialdom's hopes, Mrs Chapin's resistance had been strengthened; "I went in a militant, but I am coming out a raging fire", she told the

⁸⁴ As election officials ran to stop them, some of the liquid splashed into the eye of the returning officer, George Thorley. In the ensuing panic, one of his colleagues dabbed ammonia in the eye, mistakenly thinking it was an antidote, so Mrs Chapin was charged with assault and grievous bodily harm.

⁸⁵ *The Vote* Vol. I, No. 6 (2 December 1909).

⁸⁶ *The Vote* Vol. I, No. 6 (2 December 1909); *The Vote* Vol. I, No. 10 (30 December 1909); *The Vote* Vol. I, No. 16 (12 February 1910).

⁸⁷ Alison Neilans went on hunger strike to protest at suffrage campaigners being treated as ordinary criminals, not political prisoners who would have been placed in First Division accommodation. She petitioned the Home Secretary and, when the stomach-tube was withdrawn after the first forcible-feeding, said that it was "the most unspeakable outrage" that could be offered to anyone. She was fed like this about twenty times, then decided it was an ineffective protest and began a secret hunger-strike which lasted for eight days. *The Vote* Vol. I, No. 16 (12 February 1912). As Second Division prisoners they were allowed visitors after a month inside. They had obviously discussed contingencies. Alison Neilans requested to have Edith How Martyn, whose application was refused by the Prison Commissioners because she was an ex-prisoner and someone "known to have instigated the offence for which the person receiving the visit is imprisoned", a new rule, according to *The Vote* Vol. I, No. 10 (30 December 1909). Alison wrote a letter to Edith on lavatory paper informing her of her secret hunger strike. Letter from Alison Neilans to Edith How Martyn, 27 December 1909, Fawcett Library Autograph Collection, quoted in June Purvis, "The Prison Experiences of the Suffragettes in Edwardian Britain", *Women's History Review* Vol. 4, No. 1 (1995), pp. 103-132.

League.⁸⁸ Although Alison Neilans felt the protest was misunderstood by some League members who had "reviled" her, such actions generated a sense of sisterhood.⁸⁹

Though tensions continued within the League, democratic decision-making was maintained. Opinions varied: activists, whose experience of hostility on many occasions had inured them to caution, were in favour of militancy but others thought any possibility of injury to innocent by-standers should limit it. Not least were the practicalities of co-ordinating militant acts.⁹⁰ Charlotte Despard accused Alison Neilans of "cowardliness" for failing to take "spontaneous" action in the Parliament Square demonstrations after the failure of the Conciliation Bill in 1912. But as Alison Neilans pointed out, such action was contrary to democratic decisions made by the League.⁹¹ By 1912 strategy had become embedded and the Executive proposed a definition of militancy for the League's Annual Conference:

Militancy is any kind of protest involving the risk of imprisonment, excluding resistance to taxation and similar protests."⁹²

Flair and imagination were shown in other tactics to raise the profile of their cause.

The League organised a massive picket of House of Commons sittings which lasted from 5 July to 28 October 1909, an aggregated total of 14,000 hours,⁹³ described by H.G. Wells as:

. . . extraordinarily impressive - infinitely more impressive than the feeble-forcible 'ragging' of the more militant section . . .⁹⁴

⁸⁸ *The Vote* Vol. I, No. 16 (12 February 1910).

⁸⁹ Analysing suffragette accounts of imprisonment, June Purvis points to the range of backgrounds and differences of the imprisoned women, not all of whom were middle class or single, as has often been supposed. Purvis, "Prison Experiences of Suffragettes", pp. 103-132. See also Laura E. Nym Mayhall, who suggests later versions of their experiences, produced for the Suffragette Fellowship, created stylised narratives. "Creating the 'Suffragette Spirit': British Feminism and the Historical Imagination", *Women's History Review* Vol. 4, No. 3, 1995, pp. 319-344..

⁹⁰ Verbatim Minutes, WFL Fifth Annual Conference, 29 January 1910, pp. 9-17.

⁹¹ Verbatim Minutes, WFL Special Conference, 27-28 April 1912, pp. 19-22.

⁹² WFL Executive Minutes, 19-20 April 1912; WFL, "Manifesto Militant Action" (n.p., WFL pamphlet, 9 March 1912).

⁹³ See Laurence Housman, *The Unexpected Years* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1937), p. 267.

⁹⁴ H.G. Wells, *The New Machiavelli* (London: Odhams Press, n.d.), p. 251.

In 1912 Nina Boyle and Edith Watson harangued Members of Parliament taking tea on the terrace from a boat on the Thames, an incident described by Mary Richardson, the suffragette who slashed the Rokeby Venus, as "the neatest, the smoothest working and the gayest" of all the demonstrations she had seen. It was an effective propaganda exercise which was admired even by political opponents.⁹⁵ Another discursive resistance to unrepresentative government, a boycott of the 1911 Census, was taken up by both the WSPU and conventional suffrage societies, once they had realised that the form of the protest would appeal to many rank and file members. It gave a feeling of solidarity across the movement and was a rare instance of effective militant protest which did not result in confrontation, physical abuse from crowds or police, or imprisonment. "It remains," said Housman:

. . . one of the happiest memories of the Suffrage Movement; it gave all concerned in it a good time and a good laugh.⁹⁶

Through the Women's Tax Resistance League (WTRL) the political principle of 'No Taxation Without Representation' was incorporated into the WFL strategies.⁹⁷ Isolated attempts to resist taxation for the cause of women's franchise had been made by individuals before, and by 1908 some members of the WFL had adopted the tactic of tax refusal.⁹⁸ For the next six years there were regular reports in *The Vote* about the resistance processes, of bailiffs entering homes, seizing and selling property at public auction, court appearances and penalties. Charlotte Despard's distrained piano and Dr. Elizabeth Knight's

⁹⁵ Mary Richardson, *Laugh a Defiance* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1953), p. 66. Edith Watson's newspaper cuttings collection.

⁹⁶ Housman, *The Unexpected Years*, pp. 286-290.

⁹⁷ Attempts at tax refusal by Anne and Mary Priestman in 1870 and Henrietta Müller in 1884 had been foiled when their taxes were paid or distrained goods bought back for them by well-meaning friends. Dora Montefiore, refused to pay her taxes and barricaded her house against tax officials and bailiffs during 1904-5. She was a friend of Charlotte Despard so may have had an influence; her methods were subsequently adopted.

⁹⁸ Edith How Martyn belonged to the Women's Tax Resistance League (WTRL) and forfeited a gold bracelet.

dog-licence became running jokes.⁹⁹ Publicity could be maximised at the culmination of the legal processes. Over 220 women undertook tax resistance and in many cases no action, distraint, fine or imprisonment occurred.¹⁰⁰

As a means of protest, tax refusal had nuisance value but was available only to those who had property or incomes of their own. Its immediate impact was vitiated because the process whereby individual acts of resistance developed into effective public protest took such a long time (usually about eighteen months). Laurence Housman felt it had arrived too late in the suffrage campaign to develop its full potential as propaganda.¹⁰¹ Had it not been for the outbreak of the First World War it might have become a major form of protest. Some individuals did continue their protests right up to 1918. Evelyn Sharp was forced into bankruptcy by the accumulation of legal costs after failing to declare Income Tax:

. . . the last tax resister to suffer persecution at the hands of unrepresentative government in the women's long struggle for citizenship.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ The Women's Tax Resistance League itself began in October 1909 with a meeting at the home of Louisa Garrett Anderson and, despite strong feelings in favour of it being a branch of the WFL, it was established as a separate organisation. Committee members included the artist, Mary Sargent Florence, Mrs. Cobden Sanderson, Clemence Housman, Cicely Hamilton and Dr. Elizabeth Wilks who caused her husband's imprisonment through his failure to pay her income tax in 1912. Margaret Kinton Parkes was the Secretary. Ethel Ayres Purdie, an accountant and expert on income tax, advised both the WTRL and WFL on legal niceties; she conducted a test case over the legality of deducting Income Tax from a married woman's dividends. She also acted as Auditor for the Malthusian League. Margaret Kinton Parkes, *The Tax Resistance Movement in Great Britain*, Published by members of the late Women's Tax Resistance League: WFL (n.p., n.d.), pp. 42-43, Fawcett Library 396.11:336.

¹⁰⁰ There was some class discrimination in the judiciary's response. A Miss Andrews of Ipswich was gaoled in the First Division for one week for non-payment of dog tax in 1911, yet Mrs Emma Sproson, a WFL Executive Committee member with a working-class background, was imprisoned at Stafford twice for the same offence for six weeks, in the Third Division until by hunger-striking she was transferred to the First Division. Her dog was shot by the police. Clemence Housman evolved a system which finally led to her imprisonment after refusing to pay Inhabited House Duty. The taxi which took her to Holloway cost the government four shillings and two pence, exactly the amount of the original debt. Kinton Parkes, *Tax Resistance*, pp. 42-43.

¹⁰¹ Housman, *The Unexpected Years*, pp. 284-285.

¹⁰² Kinton Parkes, *Tax Resistance*, pp. 37-41. Seven new members were enrolled at a meeting in Barnstaple where Nina Boyle was speaking on the day war broke out, the last propaganda meeting before a controversial decision by the WTRL on 26 August 1914 to suspend resistance "temporarily".

When the First World War broke out, the WFL managed to maintain aspects of feminist activism, much of it in the equal rights tradition. They under-wrote a varied programme of work to assist women whose lives had been over-turned by the effects of the war and continued to promote connections with the socialist movement and trades unionism. Occasions when women broke through the barriers of convention and restriction were celebrated in *The Vote* in the format of 'the first woman to . . . ' and this approach continued through the 1920s. In the 'equality/difference' debates of that decade they continued to emphasise the equal rights philosophy. This was a view which had always been important to my four subjects who felt women would not obtain equality until those disabilities and impediments placed on women because of their sex were removed.¹⁰³

Edith How Martyn and Alison Neilans had been actively involved from the beginnings of the Edwardian suffrage campaign. Nina Boyle and Edith Watson threw themselves into it at the height of its political intensity. What had they brought to the WFL? What were their hopes from the parliamentary system? How did they envisage women's participation in political life? Before moving on to their wider aspirations, I outline, in chronological order, their expectations for women's contribution to national life through enfranchisement. With hindsight we can see how the crystallisation of feminist demands around the single issue of women's enfranchisement tended to obscure much wider visions. Teresa Billington-Greig was correct in her analysis that the priority

¹⁰³

Claire Eustance provides a useful account of WFL activities during the war. Eustance, "Keeping the Suffrage Flag Flying", Chapter Five in "Daring To Be Free", pp. 252-298. Her last two chapters describe the WFL from 1920 to 1930 and provide an invaluable insight into developments of feminist activism during the period. She gives a detailed account of how the League handled contradictions and divisions in "Daring To Be Free". See also Johanna Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage: Feminists in War and Peace 1914-28* (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 186, 237. According to Doughan and Sanchez, the WFL's appearance of focusing on "achievement" feminism in the 1920s is partly because they avoided potentially divisive issues. Their concern for wider features continued, for example in opposition to marriage bars and support for women police. D. Doughan and Denise Sanchez, *Feminist Periodicals 1855-1984* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987).

accorded the vote deflected from other important issues. The four women also had always known that political reform alone was inadequate for the complexities of gender politics.

3.2 c) Looking Forward: Women's Voices in Government

Alison Neilans explicitly linked women's suffrage with the power to influence sexual morality when the Third Conciliation Bill was defeated in 1912. She said the perpetrators of the anti-suffrage campaign were in the same company as "traffickers in women's bodies the world over".¹⁰⁴ This may have been the point at which disillusion with parliamentary political processes set in; by 1913 she was active in the LNA. She held a view of women as peacemakers, nurturers rather than destroyers of life, another instance of a radical, if essentialist, perspective. Thus, she recognised sexual difference but thought it should not be a reason for political, legal or economic injustice. Consistently she displayed an international frame of reference in her work. Her views were grounded in the belief that women's moral influence at all levels would ensure equal treatment for all women, hence her later work in the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) and hopes for women's full participation in the League of Nations. Besides her involvement in international movements concerning prostitution, in 1915 she had applied to attend the Women's International Congress at The Hague, which had been an attempt to secure peace by cutting across bellicose, nationalistic boundaries through appeals to common womanhood.

Farsightedly, Edith Watson also envisaged a still unrealised effect that women's impact on economic and industrial spheres might have. In the *Daily Herald* in 1914 she enumerated issues on which women needed a voice. She remarked on women's lack of

¹⁰⁴ *The Vote* Vol. V, No. 127 (30 March 1912).

representation in trades union political life, and predicted suffrage organisations would turn into women's political organisations:

. . . the whole of the Suffrage movement is honeycombed with women who are red-hot rebels and who will be the backbone of the women's political life".¹⁰⁵

Edith How Martyn clarified the differences between conventional suffragism and feminism in a letter to Margaret Sanger in 1916. The former was too timid. She was impatient with the limitations of "the respectable suffrage papers", which were:

. . . afraid to touch the questions which are vital to feminism. They may be wise for I often think in the words of Oliver Cromwell, 'He goes furthest who does not know where he is going'. - could most suffragists see clearly the feminist goal they would recoil in fear from the strife but will work energetically for this or that piecemeal reform.¹⁰⁶

Her only attempt to enter parliament was propelled by a vision of women's views being articulated in the House of Commons by a woman.¹⁰⁷ At the 1918 election, her manifesto focused on child welfare and "Equal Justice and Consideration" between nations, classes, and men and women. She asked:

Is the 'fate of women' to be decided by men alone? Are the fathers alone to be consulted on the 'health and lives of the children?'

She wanted mothers to be represented in parliament. Claiming to stand for "the protection of children" she asked:

Do you want the age of consent raised? . . . do you consider that a child of 16 ought to be allowed to become an unmarried mother?¹⁰⁸

Referring to the newly-enfranchised women voter in 1922, Nina Boyle had said that the most effective use of the women's vote would be to secure equality with men "for

¹⁰⁵ From a newspaper cutting in Edith Watson's collection - *Daily Herald* 1914.

¹⁰⁶ Letter Edith How Martyn, London, to Margaret Sanger, 15 June 1916. SSC.

¹⁰⁷ Among the donations to Edith How Martyn's Election Fund, gifts came from: Mrs. Pethick-Lawrence, Mr. and Mrs. Billington-Grieg, Alison Neilans, Alice Vickery, Mrs. Vulliamy (WFL), Miss. Tite (WFL), Miss. M. Reeves (WFL), Mrs. Amy Sanderson, Dr. Helen Wilson, Ellen Terry and Edie Craig, who designed her posters

¹⁰⁸ Edith How Martyn's parliamentary election material, SUF 148/10, Part 5, Reel 83, Suffrage and Politics III, Women at Work Collection, Imperial War Museum.

our sex".¹⁰⁹ She reiterated this point in 1927 when she criticised the feminist movement for dissipating its energies in socialism and pacifism, stating:

. . . our own job is to free women from the control of men giving them rights over their own bodies".¹¹⁰

These were their hopes for women's direct impact on the parliamentary system. Yet, after devoting years of their lives to women's enfranchisement, after 1918 they appeared unwilling to sustain involvement in the political structures to which they had so assiduously demanded access. None of the four pursued party or parliamentary careers for long. None had the financial or practical support which established political parties provided, albeit meagrely, to women candidates.

They did recognise hidden forms of discrimination which operated against women candidates. In 1924 Edith How Martyn wrote to *Time and Tide* on behalf of the Women's Election Committee asking for donations because they felt the expenses of electioneering debarred women.¹¹¹

After Edith How Martyn's and Nina Boyle's attempts to become members of parliament in 1918, their associations with political parties were tenuous. Edith Watson, who wrote for the *Daily Herald*, was secretary and prospective councillor for the ILP in St. Marylebone but never gained elected office. She remained a member of the Labour Party all her life.

At a time when social and welfare reforms were high on the national agenda they occupied peripheral positions. Rather than choosing to work through political parties, they became active in single-issue organisations working through liaison with government and bureaucracy or articulating their views through the press. Their experience of party political machinations and government resistance to women's demands for the vote must

¹⁰⁹ Nina Boyle, letter to *Jus Suffragii* (June 1922), p. 132.

¹¹⁰ Nina Boyle, letter to *Jus Suffragii* (June 1927), p. 137.

¹¹¹ *Time and Tide*, 4 October 1924.

have led to disillusionment as the suffrage campaign progressed. Women's enfranchisement was only one way of defusing male power.

From its inception the League recognised that the suffrage campaign meant more than enfranchisement. In 1908, a statement in the WFL section of *Women's Franchise* drew attention to the death sentence given a nineteen-year-old unmarried mother, Daisy Lord, for the murder of her new-born baby, while the father escaped "in reputation and pocket". The League's correspondent made the connection explicit:

This is one of the questions that make women demand political power. Only when women are valued equally with men, will it be possible to find a solution to the problems of modern life, without any kind of unequal law for the two sexes.¹¹²

An editorial statement in the first edition of *The Vote* in October 1909 endorsed this view:

We do not intend to confine ourselves solely to news of suffrage activities. The feminist movement has a wider scope than that, and we hope, in time, as the paper grows in size and circulation, to deal with different phases of it.¹¹³

Women's participation in government would change priorities and decisions. Conventionally, many also felt that women's contribution to political debate would improve moral values in national life.¹¹⁴

My four subjects knew broader, alternative strategies to challenge women's sexual oppression were needed. They had to move forward. During their time in the WFL they evolved critiques of those cultural constructs which had detrimental effects for women. From 1912 to 1914 Nina Boyle and Edith Watson had taken up the issue of physical violence and sexual abuse directed by men at women; Edith How Martyn had joined the Malthusian League in 1910 and had begun working for birth control before the war. Alison Neilans gave priority to the LNA and AMSII from 1913 onwards.

¹¹² *Women's Franchise*, 10 September 1908.

¹¹³ *The Vote* Vol. I, No. 1 (30 October 1909).

¹¹⁴ Garner, *Stepping Stones*, p. 30.

As a prelude to the next three chapters, in the next section I present some of the ongoing debates within the WFL to show how it provided a forum for candid, safe discussion on contentious sexual issues. A range of views was recognised and accepted.

3.2 d) The Women's Freedom League and Sexual Politics 1910-1914

Generally, the Edwardian period saw the breaking-up of very traditional attitudes towards sexual matters. Identifying a distinctive WFL voice in the public debates on sexuality is problematic. Like most of the suffrage organisations, they responded to contemporary events; issues of concern were aired in *The Vote*. Overall, the WFL's awareness of and interest in sexual politics was more sustained, in that the League contained individuals with a wider range of opinion than the NUWSS and WSPU, and that there was some attempt to examine issues in relation to class, and a strong nucleus of radicalism on sexual issues.¹¹⁵ The social purity perception of female sexuality was present, purity and women's sexual passivity were emphasised. But notions of a more active female sexuality, together with the view that men should exercise more self-control, also existed.

One of the WFL's most popular speakers and writers was the dramatist Laurence Housman. On occasion the League had debated whether to allow men to join but this was never permitted. Housman, whose feminism had been inspired by his sister Clemence, had helped to found the Men's League for Women's Suffrage. His presence and purpose so close to the centre of the League's work from about 1910 to 1914 is, I think, intriguing. He wrote for *The Vote* frequently - often about relationships between the sexes and about

¹¹⁵ Examining the images of women presented in WFL debates about sexuality, Claire Eustance indicates the varieties of feminisms in the League, as well as the shifts and conflicts in their discussions. She points to the class distinctions which operated around sexual politics and which were not successfully overcome. Eustance, "Daring To Be Free", pp. 237-240.

the warping effects of power and subordination.¹¹⁶ I speculate that his function with the League was to act as a kite-flyer. As a man he could speak authoritatively or present radical opinions in the debate on sexual politics at a time when it was expedient for women demanding the vote to conform to conventional notions of womanhood.

Les Garner argues that the League failed to challenge sexual stereotypes. They were careful to extol women's place in the home.¹¹⁷ To some extent this is true. For example, in 1910, *The Vote* carried a series of articles and photographs of suffrage leaders at home, depicting Mrs. Despard knitting, Edith How Martyn making jam and Alison Neilans cleaning a stove, among other, somewhat lyrical, descriptions of feminists enjoying domesticity.¹¹⁸ This may have been something of a propaganda exercise intended to reassure members and the public anxious about anti-feminists' accusations of lack of femininity in women who demanded the vote.

On the whole, the League's public stance on controversial topics tended to be similar to that of other suffrage organisations. Unlike Mrs. Fawcett though, Charlotte Despard was not afraid to be seen with sexual radicals - she shared the same platform with Edward Carpenter several times.¹¹⁹ At no point did controversy on sexual politics create serious rifts, apart from Teresa Billington-Greig's resignation in 1911. By 1910 she had expressed her discontent with the pusillanimity of the women's movement's narrow focus on the vote. Very critical of conventional morality, especially the insistence on

¹¹⁶ In 1914 he founded the British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology with Edward Carpenter. Both homosexuals, their aims were to promote more open discussion about sexuality and to abolish the stigma associated with homosexuality. As yet I have not found any evidence that Housman used the Women's Freedom League to promote his views on homosexuality but otherwise he seemed to be in the vanguard of the public debate.

¹¹⁷ Garner, *Stepping Stones*, p. 29.

¹¹⁸ The picture of the jam-making was greeted with some incredulity and hilarity by some of Edith's colleagues, which supports the idea of a public relations gesture. *The Vote* Vol. I, No. 28 (26 March 1910).

¹¹⁹ Patricia Ryan, "The Ideology of Feminism in Britain 1900-1920: An Analysis of Feminist Ideas on Motherhood, Birth Control and Sexuality", M.Sc. Econ. Thesis, University of Wales, 1978, p. 173; Edward Carpenter, *My Days and Dreams* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1916), p. 263.

monogamy, Teresa Billington-Greig had begun advocating 'free love' in her Manchester Settlement days in the early 1900s. Her own marriage included a nuptial agreement neutralising marriage and property laws.¹²⁰ She wrote on "Women and Government" in *The Freewoman*, expressing the view that women's emancipation from "sex-servitude" and the creation of a new spirit were becoming obscured by the suffrage movement's obsession with the vote.¹²¹ Her article criticising the social purity and feminist alliance in engendering the moral panic about the 'white slave trade' (which culminated in the passing of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1912), *The Truth About the White Slave Trade*, created a furore in both camps.¹²²

By 1911 *The Vote* was expounding the post-Victorian belief that adequate information on sexual matters would protect girls and women more than a spurious 'innocence'. It reprinted Laurence Housman's address to a WFL meeting on *The Immoral Effects of Ignorance in Sex Education*, though the given context was heterosexual, emphasising marriage.¹²³ He did question also whether the public was as ignorant about incest as was generally believed. *The Vote* carried articles critical of the social purity movement's obsession with 'rescue' rather than prevention of prostitution; it endorsed decent wages for girls and women, to remove economic necessity as a major cause. It reported successes of the campaign for lodging houses for women, commenting that in one district there were thirteen 'rescue' homes for prostitutes but no decent lodging houses for working women.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ McPhee and Fitzgerald, *Teresa Billington-Greig*, p. 7.

¹²¹ Teresa Billington-Greig, "Women and Government", *The Freewoman*, 21 December 1911.

¹²² *The Shield* NS, Vol. XIV, No. 145 (October 1913), p. 96; *The Vote* Vol. III, No. 190 (13 June 1913). The editor described it as an "extraordinary article" and took "strong objection" to her criticisms of the suffrage movement's support of the Act. See also Eustance, "Daring To Be Free", pp. 243-244. Teresa Billington-Greig also advocated contraception and wrote a pamphlet for the Malthusian League, *Commonsense on the Population Question* in 1915.

¹²³ Laurence Housman, *The Immoral Effects of Ignorance in Sex Education*, pamphlet (published by the WFL, n.d. [c 1911]), pp. 29, 41-42; as the title suggests this was an ironic response to the view that sex education would lead to greater immorality in the young.

¹²⁴ *The Vote* Vol. III, No. 88 (17 June 1911).

The Vote provides an illustration of changing attitudes between generations. In her review of Lady Bell's treatise on women factory workers, *At the Works: A Study of a Manufacturing Town (1911)*, Leah Anson questioned the assertion that some of the women's experiences were "unrelatable". She felt in 1912 women wanted to protect younger women through providing them with knowledge:

We no longer regard them (the experiences) as 'unspeakable', but we owe it to the younger women . . . to warn them against these conditions . . . this can only be done by women, especially in the class concerned, finding the courage to speak out to other women."¹²⁵

The founding of *The Freewoman* in 1911 by Dora Marsden,¹²⁶ illustrates something of the desires and boundaries to this aim.

Originally Dora Marsden hoped the WFL would sponsor her plans to produce an independent journal to provide an intellectual, wide-ranging forum for the women's movement as a whole. Edith How Martyn responded enthusiastically:

. . . it would be a joy to me to work to make the WFL the intellectual leader of the Suffrage Societies . . .¹²⁷

The timing is relevant here, a year after Edith had joined the Malthusian League. Obviously, she too would have preferred a wider ranging analysis, especially of female sexuality and gender relations. However, because Dora Marsden required complete editorial control and a salary (similar to one provided by the WSPU),¹²⁸ and possibly because the WFL was anxious to avoid controversy which would reflect badly on the suffrage campaign, the suggestion was dropped.

¹²⁵ *The Vote* Vol. VI, No. 150 (7 September 1912).

¹²⁶ Olive Banks states that Marsden was a member of the WFL, Olive Banks, *Biographical Dictionary of British Feminists* (New York: V.P., 1985) pp. 120-121; however, Garner implies she applied to join when considering writing for them, Les Garner, *A Brave and Beautiful Spirit: Dora Marsden 1882-1960* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1990), p. 52.

¹²⁷ Letter Edith How Martyn to Dora Marsden, 26 March 1911, quoted in Garner, *Dora Marsden*, p. 52.

¹²⁸ Garner, *Dora Marsden*, pp. 51-52.

For a short time *The Freewoman* provided a space to debate political, economic and sexual issues; it presented radical critiques of contemporary society. Dora Marsden called for a 'new morality' - "monogamous relationships freely entered, freely left", and a positive affirmation of female sexuality.¹²⁹ Candid discussions about sexuality were featured and it provided women with an arena to debate on more equal terms with men. As Lesley Hall points out, the debates in the columns of *The Freewoman* may not have been so acrimonious as has sometimes been perceived. As an example, Hall cites the rancorous arguments between Stella Browne and Kathryn Oliver on women's sexual needs, whether chastity and female sexual control had damaging or beneficial effects, an early twentieth-century variation of earlier debates about spinsterhood and women's independence. I concur with Hall's view and feel this 'bouncing off ideas' in the pages of available journals was quite common at a time when women were struggling to articulate alternatives to dominant cultural constructs through a limited and male-biased sexual lexicon.¹³⁰

The Oliver-Browne debate in *The Freewoman* is intriguing because it involved another protagonist, E. M. Watson. This might well have been Edith Watson. In a lively debate on chastity and celibacy, E. M. Watson contributed two letters arguing women had more sexual control than men and it was to their benefit to teach men "the restraint that Nature has taught her to impose upon herself".¹³¹ Nina Boyle read and wrote to the

¹²⁹ Bland, "Marriage Laid Bare", p. 141.

¹³⁰ See, for example, the earlier debates on marriage in Section 3.1 c). I am grateful to Lesley Hall for pointing this out in a discussion at the Conference on Women's Friendships, York, 1995. For a survey of the debates about spinsterhood and the value of chastity, see Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, pp. 281-286 and Maki Kazami, "Seeking After the New Morality: *The Freewoman*, a Radical Feminist Journal, November 1911-October 1912" (M.A. Thesis, University of York, 1988).

¹³¹ Edith M. Watson, *The Freewoman*, 8 February 1912, quoted in Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, p. 283. See also pp. 280-286. I have discussed this possibility with Lucy Bland. It is possible that E. M. Watson and Edith Watson are one and the same, although there may have been another E.M. Watson, from Montreux, Switzerland, a correspondent of Dora Marsden. Lucy Bland and Lesley Hall have pursued this investigation, but further research is needed here. I am grateful to Lucy Bland and Lesley Hall for their help in this speculation. Edith Watson loved to fire off salvoes of letters to newspapers and journals and enjoyed discussing contentious issues in this way. Bernard

journal.¹³² Several other WFL members wrote for *The Freewoman*, including the Treasurer, Constance Tite,¹³³ Katharine Vulliamy, a National Executive member and Bessie Drysdale of the Malthusian League.

Initially supported by the main stream suffrage movement, *The Freewoman* provoked strong reaction by expounding its limitations, the emphasis on political equality at the expense of other avenues to freedom. Many suffrage activists also reacted vehemently to the magazine's attack on Christabel Pankhurst and the WSPU.¹³⁴ Additionally, the espousal of revolutionary moral as well as political systems meant *The Freewoman* had limited appeal to many in the movement as a whole.¹³⁵

There is little evidence in *The Vote* of much support for the sexual radicalism of *The Freewoman*, though topics such as marriage, sexual subordination and love were discussed in its pages. Both Charlotte Despard and Edith How Martyn worked on behalf of unmarried mothers; they took up individual cases and attempted to expose society's hypocrisy about illegitimacy. The League agitated for changes in the bastardy laws.¹³⁶

The WFL debate on birth control in 1914 also reveals a range of opinion. It originated in an idea, extrapolated from the falling birth rate, that women were withdrawing from motherhood as a protest at their oppression.¹³⁷ Charlotte Despard, a

Watson, interview by author, 29 May 1991 and 22 October 1991, Twickenham, tape recording. She mentions corresponding in the Social Democratic Federation journal. Edith Watson, unpublished autobiography ([1961]), private collection.

¹³² Nina Boyle said (presumably ironically) how hilarious she found *The Freewoman*, 12 December 1911.

¹³³ Constance Tite was a member of the Criminal Law Amendment Committee. She advocated women police after having travelled abroad investigating policewomen's work.

¹³⁴ Kazama, "Seeking After the New Morality", p. 25.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹³⁶ They organised a demonstration in the case (see above p. 154) of Daisy Lord in 1908, demanding her immediate release from prison. In the case of Daisy Turner in 1911, provincial members established a local committee to protest at her treatment. This young woman had been raped by a married man, given birth to his illegitimate child, then killed it. Less than three weeks after the birth she had been sentenced to gaol. The committee complained about the handling of the case, sending a memorial to the Home Secretary and the WFL led a national campaign co-ordinated by Edith How Martyn. *The Vote* Vol. V, No. 105 (28 October 1911).

¹³⁷ A suggestion of the feminist, Lucy Re-Bartlett, *Sex and Sanctity* (London: Longmans, 1912), p. 25, quoted in Jackson, *The Real Facts of Life*, p. 20.

Roman Catholic, then aged seventy and possibly out of touch with changing attitudes, believed sexual abstinence was the only safe method. She was greatly disturbed by the prospect of artificial birth-control which she unquestionably assumed included abortion - as did other members.¹³⁸ Eunice Murray, then aged thirty-five, brought up the question of class: she believed as many working-class people were in favour of limiting their families as in the upper and middle classes.¹³⁹

Such a wide range of opinion implies considerable tolerance. Membership in the League of the prominent Malthusians, Alice Vickery and Bessie Drysdale, and other women who were prepared to defy convention to practise their moral and political convictions, suggests acceptance and no great tension.¹⁴⁰ At an individual level it seems they were prepared to subsume personal differences in the cause of their priority, women's enfranchisement.¹⁴¹ While privately members supported greater sexual freedom for women, it may be that public espousal of controversial views equated with lack of respectability restricted their freedom to speak out.¹⁴²

¹³⁸ By 1921 Charlotte Despard was prepared to act as patron of Marie Stopes' first birth control clinic, Ryan, "Ideology of Feminism", p.125. This is an example, perhaps, of the ways in which younger women influenced the older generations.

¹³⁹ Eunice Murray, Nina Boyle's executor, was President of the Scottish WFL. Verbatim Minutes WFL Ninth Annual Conference, 28 March 1914, p. 66.

¹⁴⁰ These included Teresa Billington-Greig and Edith Watson, who lived with her lover before they were married. Edith How Martyn might have felt the League failed to appreciate Alice Vickery fully because of her unConventionality. Of Alice Vickery she wrote: "I do wish she had had the recognition she deserved from feminists in this country but petty jealousies spoil much in life." Letter Edith How Martyn to Margaret Sanger, London, 31 January 1929. SSC. She thought Alice Vickery's "50 years spadework" for "the women's side" of birth control issues went unrecognised by Marie Stopes and British feminists, From a note on Stopes/Sanger conflicts, Wellcome, SA/FPA A23/58.7. Letters to Margaret Sanger commenting on Alice Vickery's obituary notices, during 1929. SSC.

¹⁴¹ For a discussion of varying attitudes to sexuality and the avoidance of conflict in the WFL, see Eustance, "Daring To Be Free", pp. 232-240

¹⁴² Eustance, "Daring To Be Free", pp. 392-393.

3.3 The Legacy of the Suffrage Campaign

In Chapter One I discussed the question of agency. I also suggested membership of the League contributed to the discursive creation of an oppositional identity. In this chapter I have described the formation and activities of the WFL, the outlooks and allegiances of its members. What did Edith How Martyn, Nina Boyle, Alison Neilans and Edith Watson draw from the organisation? First, the ideals of sisterhood and comradeship begun in the League fostered and helped to sustain a sense of agency for the four women for many years after the suffrage campaign itself was over. The networking and contacts made during the years 1906 to 1914 could be put to use in other fields. Second, their original willingness to discuss ideas would be enhanced by the wide-ranging debates and a commitment to democratic decision-making in the League. Thirdly, the experience of running a political campaign, at a time when women were often relegated to marginal support work in many political party organisations, provided skills useful for political activism. Finally a notion of female community, of women-oriented culture, must have contributed to their self-images. A concomitant of such benefits could have been impatience with entrenched sexism in political parties, a disillusionment with parliamentary power; ultimately this was to be detrimental to their complete success in conventional terms. Nevertheless, I argue membership of the WFL provided a world-view not dominated by patriarchal institutions.

"Dare to be free" was the WFL motto. The suffrage campaign had been a baptism of fire. Something of the excitement of being actively involved at the dawn of a new political era fed into the optimism and energy found in the fight for women's enfranchisement. It permeated the characters of the four women and helped sustain their vision of a better world for women. Despite naïveté, mis-placed hopes and the setbacks and disappointments of the suffrage campaign, its legacy continued in their impetus to

work for change, their will to challenge prevailing conventions and restrictions, their tenacity of purpose.

3.3 a) The Personal and the Political

This chapter concludes with some evidence I have gleaned of the support, networking and resource-sharing by suffrage friends and colleagues which continued after 1914. My comments in the Introduction on the problems of eliciting a sufficiently complete picture from the available sources are relevant here. In presenting my evidence I have taken liberties with the chronological account because I think it is important to note the longitudinal networking which occurred over several decades to illustrate how their political activism ebbed, flowed and endured.

With Lilian Lenton,¹⁴³ Edith How Martyn founded the Suffragette Fellowship in 1928, the year when female suffrage on the same terms as male voters was gained. The fact that it was for suffragettes rather than suffrage campaigners suggests that the recollection of militancy and common suffering was important, a common bond. It demonstrates their view of the importance of shared experience in shaping people's identities. They hoped to produce a Book of Suffragette Prisoners, with personal stories, motives for joining the movement and accounts of prison experiences to produce 'a human document'. Edith Mansell-Moullin, another colleague from the WFL, recognised the Fellowship's significance. She wrote to Edith How Martyn:

And you dear friend, I think of as one of the greatest of all, for you have done a unique work in gathering together the scattered fragments and have given anew to many the joy of reunion . . . ¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Lilian Lenton was a suffragette famous for outwitting the police during the 'Cat-and-Mouse' episodes. She was known as the "tiny, wily, elusive Pimpernel". *The Times*, obituary, 4 November 1972. In one escape she hid in the coal cellar of a house in Harrogate, then left the house dressed as a delivery boy. Notes Group B 61.218/2, Suffragette Collection, Museum of London.

¹⁴⁴ Letter Edith Mansell-Moullin to Edith How Martyn, 2 February 1931, Group C 57.116/78, Suffragette Collection, Museum of London.

Not all was sweetness and light. Edith Mansell-Moullin reported she had received "sheets of irate explosion from Sylvia [Pankhurst]" ¹⁴⁵ There is not space here to detail much about the Fellowship; its records illustrate the catalysts, motives and activities of many suffragettes, and show how their recognition of injustice fuelled beliefs that participation in the system of government could bring about equality for women.¹⁴⁶ These accounts form a unique record of the campaign - some women's history.

Lilian Lenton had travelled in Russia with Nina Boyle in 1921; both worked for the Save the Children Fund for many years. Charlotte Despard had introduced Nina Boyle to those people who later founded the Fund.

Together Edith How Martyn and Teresa Billington-Greig helped found the WFL. Their closeness is illustrated by a legend from their days in the WSPU in 1906 when Teresa was imprisoned in Holloway and was visited by Frederick Greig. Edith How Martyn advised him to marry Teresa "before the movement absorbed her totally". He followed her suggestion and the wedding reception was held at the WSPU headquarters.¹⁴⁷ Thirty years later, Teresa Billington-Greig was at the dockside to wave farewell to Edith How Martyn setting sail on one of her Indian trips.

My four subjects remained in contact with other suffrage workers in addition to the Suffragette Fellowship. Some worked together for the campaign to have birth control information at local authority clinics in the late 1920s (see Chapter Six). Kitty Marion's work for birth control in America is mentioned in Chapter Six, as is Margaret Cousins' Indian work. Mrs Pethick-Lawrence, WFL President from 1926-1935, and Edith How Martyn kept in touch. In 1938 they corresponded about what they correctly perceived as

¹⁴⁵ Letter Edith Mansell-Moullin to Edith How Martyn, 2 February 1930, Group C 57.116/77, Suffragette Collection, Museum of London.

¹⁴⁶ The Suffragette Collection, Museum of London, contains a number of letters referring to the suffragettes' motivation. See also June Purvis, "The Prison Experiences of the Suffragettes in Edwardian Britain", *Women's History Review* Vol. 4, No. 1 (1995), pp. 103-132.

¹⁴⁷ Anecdote from McPhee and Fitzgerald, *Teresa Billington-Greig*, p. 7.

the threat to women's freedom in fascist and reactionary calls for women to 'return to the home'.¹⁴⁸

3.3 b) Lucina luncheons and Birth Control Worldwide 1930-1936

Another innovation by Edith How Martyn was the series of 'Lucina' lunches she and Eileen Palmer inaugurated for the Birth Control Worldwide group in 1936.¹⁴⁹ The Birth Control Worldwide (BCW) was an offshoot of the Birth Control International Information Centre (BCIIC), an inner circle of Edith How Martyn's coterie, who felt it was essential to continue foreign tours promoting birth control, regardless of those more orthodox formal structures which by the mid-1930s were beginning to replace the ad hoc system of earlier contraceptive provision. The importance of women's involvement at grass-roots birth control work was emphasised by BCW, who continued attempts to provide a clearing-house for knowledge for specialists, medical and social workers, experts and interested amateurs from many countries.

Some examples of their activities and events can be gleaned from the record book of the Lucina lunches kept by Edith How Martyn and Eileen Palmer from October 1936 to November 1938, one of their busiest periods. Although this actual evidence is from slightly later than the period of my study, and represents only a short time in Edith How Martyn's life, I feel it is representative of the kind of networking and informal resource-sharing which ebbed and flowed through the lives of my four subjects after 1914.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Letter, Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, London to Edith How Martyn, 4 February 1938, author's collection.

¹⁴⁹ The lunches were named after the Roman goddess Lucina; according to the Journal, "goddess of light or rather the goddess who brings to light presiding over the birth of children". Edith How Martyn and Eileen Palmer, "Lucina Journal", hand-written, unpublished journal (October 1936 - November 1938), front page, author's collection (hereafter called "Lucina Journal")

¹⁵⁰ The record book was given to me by Eileen Palmer, who felt that Edith How Martyn's pioneering work for birth control had been overlooked.

The lunches were held at restaurants in central London and were followed by meetings at Women's Service House. A typical programme would be a meal attended by members, their guests and overseas visitors especially contacts made from foreign tours, then a meeting with a speaker. Fund-raising events such as tea or sherry parties were held to honour distinguished guests or mark particular occasions.¹⁵¹ The 'Lucina' journal records many overseas visitors and a range of discussion topics reflecting cultural issues and the progress of feminist hopes:

Plenty of talk. Everyone seemed to enjoy it. . . . Meeting most interesting and a very good discussion. . . . A real interchange of views. . . . Plenty of talk, interest and jollity. . . . Lively discussions. . . . Very jolly.¹⁵²

were some of the comments recorded.

Visitors were taken to see the Walworth Road Clinic and other centres to give them direct insight into this type of facility. Women who could give the opinions of recipients of advisory and medical services were welcomed; these included members of the Women's Co-operative Guild, and twenty-three Indian women students. Of the informal, relaxed atmosphere at that meeting, Mrs. Datta, the tour organiser wrote, ". . . it was so much alive and so interesting . . . it meant a good deal to the girls . . ." ¹⁵³ Odette Keun, visiting from Paris, had "looked at Mrs. Pankhurst's statue but did not find it very inspiring".¹⁵⁴ Ray Strachey's, *Our Freedom and Its Results*, the book to which Alison Neilans had contributed, was studied. Alison Neilans reported on her visits to the League of Nations in Geneva.¹⁵⁵ She and her companion, Madge Turner attended frequently. They would meet visitors from abroad and take them along to the AMSII library. A refugee

¹⁵¹ Guests included Margaret Sanger, Dr. Elkan (inventor of the Elkan shield), Lady Jehangir, an Indian birth control leader, Jawaharlal Nehru, Mrs Pethick-Lawrence and Teresa Billington-Greig, "Lucina Journal".

¹⁵² The "Lucina Journal" was written by Edith How Martyn and Eileen Palmer.

¹⁵³ "Lucina Journal", 11 April 1938.

¹⁵⁴ A writer; she lived in Paris and was formerly H. G. Wells' wife. "Lucina Journal", 10 November 1938.

¹⁵⁵ "Lucina Journal", 24 September 1937.

from Nazi Germany described her experiences.¹⁵⁶ Rose Lamartine Yates¹⁵⁷ also went, as did Nina Boyle.¹⁵⁸

Alice Vickery, Anna Martin, Bessie Drysdale and Nurse Daniels, who had been sacked for promoting birth control literature in 1922, were another group with whom there were long-standing connections. A few weeks before she died in 1937 Anna Martin gave money to Edith How Martyn for her Indian tour. Writing about the malnutrition and famine endemic in China and Japan, Anna Martin commented:

I can see no hope for either Japan or China till they consent to control their birth rate and I'm proud that its women like you and Margaret Sanger who are tackling the evil at its source.¹⁵⁹

3.2 c) Networking Continued.

The networking continued elsewhere. For instance, the four women would meet if they attended IWSA conferences or on platforms for public meetings, and they would lobby prominent public figures to promote their views. All were in contact with Lady Astor for example. Although I have found little evidence of communications between Nina Boyle and Edith How Martyn, for Cicely Hamilton's 'Suffragette Lecture' of 1934 Nina Boyle took the chair and Edith How Martyn helped with organisation. Their common contact may have been Lilian Lenton.

Alison Neilans and Edith How Martyn remained friends for the rest of their lives, as did Nina Boyle and Edith Watson. Besides acting as Treasurer for her parliamentary

¹⁵⁶ "Lucina Journal", 30 September 1937.

¹⁵⁷ Rose Lamartine Yates' reaction to being present and unable to help when prostitutes were in court was recorded in *The Vote* Vol. V, No. 127 (30 March 1912). See Chapter Four, p. 191. Ann Morley and Liz Stanley traced her life in *The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison* (London: The Women's Press, 1988).

¹⁵⁸ Nina Boyle attended occasionally according to Eileen Palmer, interview by author, 22 August 1990, Swanage, tape recording.

¹⁵⁹ Letter Anna Martin to Edith How Martyn, Rotherhithe, 26 October 1937, author's collection.

election campaign in 1918, Alison Neilans advised Edith How Martyn on the subject of prostitution before she left for India in 1938 and left £100 to her in a codicil to her will.¹⁶⁰

Nina Boyle's and Alison Neilans' co-operation extended from 1911 to 1940. These two seem to have co-ordinated their publicity work particularly. Both wrote about the need for women police and in 1926, about the time when AMSH was conducting its campaign to prevent child abuse, Nina Boyle wrote to *Time and Tide* on the subject. In 1931 and 1932, *The Shield*, under Alison Neilans' editorship, published Nina Boyle's articles on women's sexual slavery. Nina Boyle helped organise a tribute to mark Alison Neilans' twenty-five years as General Secretary of AMSH and was present at her memorial service in 1942.¹⁶¹ In the Malthusian League, Edith How Martyn worked with Mrs Seaton Tiedeman who, with Edith Watson, was the mainstay of the Divorce Law Reform Union. When the WFL discussed divorce law reform at their Annual Conference in 1918, Nina Boyle advocated the Union as the best channel for co-operation. It was a "recognised and honest and clean-dealing body" whose one concern was the public welfare.¹⁶² Mrs. Seaton Tiedeman also worked with Alison Neilans and AMSH on solicitation laws. Edith Watson helped arrange Mrs Teideman's memorial service in 1948. I speculate this type of ceremonial recognition served to celebrate sisterhood, as well as to mark the long-term public achievements of a colleague in what must at times have seemed like a very hostile world.

¹⁶⁰ Letter Alison Neilans to Edith How Martyn, London, 11 January 1938, author's collection. Will of Alison Neilans, 26 July 1937, Codicil 15 December 1941, Family Division, The High Court.

¹⁶¹ Cuttings from *Manchester Guardian*, 16 November 1938; *The Times*, 3 November 1938. "In Memory of Alison Neilans", obituary in *Manchester Guardian*, 26 September 1942, Fawcett Library, Biography File.

¹⁶² Nina Boyle, minutes of the Women's Freedom League, Eleventh Annual Conference, 1918.

In Chapter One I discussed the discursive construction of a feminist sisterhood which crossed class barriers. I conclude this account of networking with examples at a personal level which show Raymond's 'gyn/affection' in process.¹⁶³

Edith Watson was Nina Boyle's landlady for some years; they were both poor and although her family was wealthy, Nina Boyle rented two rooms in the attic of the house; sometimes she was unable to pay her rent so Edith helped her out financially. It seems unlikely there was any sexual relationship between them; Edith Watson recalled confiding in Nina Boyle over problems with a partner and from Nina's response, she felt Nina had no inkling of such emotional feelings. She described Nina Boyle as her "lifelong friend and of great influence".¹⁶⁴

Eileen Palmer's reminiscences of her work with Edith How Martyn and Margaret Sanger were regaled to me over fifty years after the events, yet she recalled in detail their Indian tour. On one occasion they enjoyed a magnificent sunset when she and Edith, Margaret Sanger and Margaret Cousins sat on a river-bank discussing their hopes of helping Indian women have access to effective contraception. Another evening, the visitors had been invited to a grand reception at the Governor's Residence. Ready to set off, Eileen came downstairs in her best outfit, a dark green taffeta dress borrowed from her sister. Immediately Margaret Sanger complimented her, then demanded to wear the dress. It would go with her red hair! So Eileen took off her only suitable garment and lent it to Margaret Sanger, a very wealthy woman, an example of Sanger's imperious and egocentric nature as Eileen pointed out with great amusement!

Alison Neilans compared Lady Astor to a fairy godmother. She often visited Cliveden, the Astor home, to talk over plans; she helped campaign for Lady Astor at parliamentary elections, although some members of the AMSII Executive Committee

¹⁶³ See Chapter One, p. 41, for Raymond's discussion of women's friendships.

¹⁶⁴ Watson, unpublished autobiography.

disapproved. Besides presents and money for holidays, Lady Astor saw to it that Alison could convalesce after periods of anxiety and arduous work, which she found very stressful. Desperate to provide some comfort as Alison Neilans' terminal illness progressed, Lady Astor tried to interest her in Christian Science, a gesture which was politely rejected. Finally, in 1942, Alison was compelled to refuse Lady Astor's offer of a stay at Cliveden, since her near-paralysis meant eating in public had become a humiliating experience. In a poignant note, Lady Astor, a very rich and influential woman, begged to be allowed to help:

Could you let me know if there is any single thing on earth I can do for you: if there is any material comfort I can send you, as you know I would like to do anything I could for you.¹⁶⁵

Fragmentary and tenuous as the evidence is, I feel it represents a substantial amount of cross-fertilisation, of communication and support which grew out of the common bond of feminist ideals and friendship.

Conclusion

I have outlined the connections between traditional feminist analyses of sexual oppression and their continuation through the early years of the century. The suffrage campaign presented an opportunity for my four subjects to develop and refine their views on gender relations in an empowering environment. Despite its disappointments, organising a political campaign, conducting meetings, arranging mass demonstrations and deputations to government in a women-only organisation gave them essential experience. They also recognised women's enfranchisement could not guarantee equality in the realm of sexual relationships. The issues they selected as priorities demonstrate this insight.

¹⁶⁵ Letter Lady Astor to Alison Neilans, 25 February, 1942. Astor Papers MS 1416/1/2/232.

In Chapters Four, Five and Six, the activities of my four subjects up to approximately 1935 are described. Because of space limitations I set 1935 as a cut-off point. I focus mainly on work associated with the politics of gender and so, for example, Nina Boyle's work with the Save the Children Fund and her novel-writing fall outside the scope of this thesis, as does Edith Watson's trades union activity. The format is not intended to exclude links between individuals or issues. By imposing a structure where each chapter is devoted to one individual I might seem to limit the study of connections between individuals and broader political and national issues. My justification is that by doing this I can concentrate on the development of a theory and practice which had an impact on discourses of sexual politics. Membership of a distinctive organisation in the suffrage campaign gave them a sense of agency, a springboard to further political activism. What steps began the process?

They took three routes as they moved out from suffrage to a wider arena of sexual politics. Nina Boyle and Edith Watson began their campaign as part of their suffrage work in 1912, having been made aware of what happened in the courts to girls and women who suffered sexual abuse or domestic violence. That led them to analyse the whole process of the law and a patriarchal judicial system. Therefore I decided to present their story first, in Chapter Four. Like many suffrage activists in 1913, Alison Neilans belonged to organisations which had grown out of the first-wave women's movement. Her continuation of a traditional feminist challenge is described in Chapter Five. At the same time as she was campaigning for women's enfranchisement, Edith How Martyn concluded women's access to adequate information about contraception was a very basic right, a newer interpretation of women's emancipation. An account of her work as birth control propagandist follows in Chapter Six. While still active in the suffrage campaign, these four

women began to adopt alternative strategies to contest women's sexual exploitation and work towards a broader definition of freedom.

CHAPTER FOUR. "SURELY WOMEN'S RIGHTS SHOULD INCLUDE . . . HELPING AND PLEADING FOR WOMEN'S WRONGS?" : THE WORK OF NINA BOYLE AND EDITH WATSON

Introduction

In this chapter I examine the work of Nina Boyle and Edith Watson who attempted to change the ways in which family violence and sexual abuse and harassment were perceived, particularly by law enforcement agencies. In Chapter One I referred to Linda Gordon's argument that family violence has been historically and politically constituted.¹ Because contemporary theorising helps to illuminate the topic historically, in Section 4.1 I begin by a brief discussion of the problematising of family violence in the late twentieth century.

As I commented in Chapter Two, nineteenth-century feminists had raised the topics of wife-beating and incest in their critiques of the family ideal and marriage and property laws. Subsequently these issues had been addressed obliquely rather than forming a consistently salient feature of major feminist campaigns.² The right to inhabit public space free from molestation was an issue in the debates about the repeal of the Contagious Diseases (CD) Acts. In Section 4.2 I outline how Nina Boyle and Edith Watson continued these endeavours by initiating another way to challenge patriarchal values. It sprang from their monitoring of the daily business of police courts, where they saw how violence in the family and sexual harassment and abuse blighted the lives of many women and girls. So two nineteenth-century campaigns were given fresh impetus; one, in another attempt to expose the myth of the home as a safe haven, the other to defend the principle of women's right to free access to public spaces.

¹ See Chapter One, p.67.

² See Chapter Two, p.78.

One of their solutions to the problems was to found a women's police service which would act in the interests of all women; those efforts are discussed in Section 4.3. The final Section, 4.4, covers some of Nina Boyle's later work in order to consider the extent to which she theorised institutionalised male violence.

4.1 Problematising Family Violence and Sexual Abuse

Analyses focusing on patterns of domination and submission in the family and society at large provide the link between contemporary and historical feminist critiques of family violence and sexual abuse. The terms 'domestic' or 'family' violence describe aggressive interaction in the home. They are not quite synonymous; 'domestic' violence suggests associations of the domestic with private space, that the setting is the most significant feature, whereas 'family' violence has connotations of socially-sanctioned hierarchical patterns in the family. Family violence takes place in the home, in the 'private' sphere. It is at the heart of male sexual dominance and exposes as fallacious the myth of the family as a haven. For women and girls there are many ambiguities around the 'family'; for those who suffer physical violence and sexual abuse from the men with whom they live the family is not a refuge. Since the late-Victorian era one constant element in prevailing ideologies about family life has been the persistence of the notion of the family as the locus of security, a legacy of the mythology of domesticity, the separation of public and private spheres. Any challenge to the ideal through attempts to reveal the realities in terms of female subjection was and is made doubly difficult by attachment to this myth.

Breines and Gordon point out the distinction between the widespread practice of abuse and its labelling as a social problem. While the actual incidence of violence may not change, public attention fluctuates. Emergent concern during the 1960s and 1970s was a

response to several factors, particularly to the perceived decline of the family. The feminist contribution here was to identify the gendered nature of abuse in the family; problems which previously had been constructed as personal were revealed as part of a system of oppression.³ The term 'family violence' was not used until the 1970s when sociologists began to question the construct of the family as a unitary, harmonious entity where aggression occurred as an individual aberration. There are problems with such an encompassing term; by aggregating woman battering, child abuse and incest, differences are obscured.⁴

In her historical study, *Domestic Tyranny*, Elizabeth Pleck defines family violence as "sexual coercion or threats or the use of intentional physical force with the aim of causing injury". It ranges from infanticide and murder to marital rape, spousal abuse, sibling violence, incest and sexual molestation of children but does not include spanking, slapping or emotional neglect.⁵ I think her definition is useful, but I focus next particularly on wife-beating and child abuse since they were the topics with which Nina Boyle and Edith Watson were most concerned.⁶ Dobash and Dobash examine the social context of

³ Wini Breines and Linda Gordon, "The New Scholarship on Family Violence", *Signs* Vol. 8, No. 3 (Spring 1983), pp. 491-3. In considering the question of violence and sexual abuse I focus on family violence here, yet I do not think the various aspects can be seen as separate, discrete elements; violence in the home is one end of the spectrum, constraints on women's public behaviour and movement are the other. I discuss this in more detail in Chapter One. An early study influenced by feminist analysis was made by Gelles and Straus in 1972. Straus identified the mechanisms by which family violence comes to be recognised as a serious social problem. Discussing perceptions of what constitutes violence, he argues that because the social definition of the family is of a non-violent institution, there is a perceptual "black-out" of the aggression occurring daily in 'normal' families. When perceptions change, behaviour which previously had not been seen as violent, might be re-defined as "the illegitimate use of force". Murray Straus, Foreword in R.J. Gelles, *The Violent Home* (London: Sage Publications, 1972), pp. 13-17.

⁴ Breines and Gordon, "The New Scholarship", pp. 490-492. Dobash and Dobash also argue the term can be misleading because it glosses over power differentials. For discussion of these issues see R.E. Dobash and R. Dobash, *Violence Against Wives: A Case Against Patriarchy* (New York: Open Books, Macmillan, 1979), pp. 7-12.

⁵ Elizabeth Pleck, *Domestic Tyranny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 4.

⁶ In Chapter Two I gave brief details of earlier feminist questioning of sexual coercion in marriage, as well as concern about incest. Pleck's description of the full range of physical abuses within the family is helpful because it enumerates those many dysfunctional aspects of family life often glossed over when issues about the safety of women and girls are aired. It covers all those features which Nina Boyle and Edith Watson sought to highlight. Other major aspects of female sexual

family violence. Comparing violence towards children and wives, they suggest the concept of parental authority is often used to justify the "casual or legitimate application of physical force". Only if a parent oversteps generally accepted limits would intervention to protect the child be appropriate. Because, historically, the relationship between husbands and wives has also been hierarchical in structure, the use of physical force against wives was, and often still is, similarly deemed appropriate.⁷

There are parallels in late-nineteenth and twentieth-century attitudes surrounding sexual abuse and wife-beating, the latter a term devised during the campaigns for divorce reform in 1856. Evidence is still problematic in the 1990s; historically it is "tentative and fragmentary".⁸ There has been a general failure to address the two issues, which has often resulted in lack of statistical information. Other problems include a limited vocabulary, the silencing or denial of women and girls' experiences. As so often, the unheard voices are those of the victims.

The most striking historical feature of wife-beating is the spasmodic nature of public interest according to Margaret May.⁹ Why is this so? A common-sense approach might suggest that greater concern is in evidence because abuse is on the increase. Pleck discounts this, attributing increased interest in reform to "*dedicated individuals and small organisations*", (emphasis mine):

... a response to social and political conditions, or social movements, rather than to worsening conditions in the home.¹⁰

subjection which they raised were the treatment of unmarried mothers, child molestation and sexual harassment in public places.

⁷ Dobash and Dobash, *Violence Against Wives*, p. 10. Martin also emphasised historical influences on current attitudes. Unwillingness to recognise the existence of violence in the family often locks into memories of older, more violent traditions, which contribute towards rationalisations for refusing to intervene with palliative measures. J.P. Martin, ed., *Violence and the Family* (Chichester: Wiley and Sons, 1978), p. 3.

⁸ Margaret May, "Violence in the Family: An Historical Perspective" in Martin, *Violence and the Family*, pp. 135-136.

⁹ May, "Violence in the Family", p. 135.

¹⁰ Prevailing economic situations, demographic factors, the ebb and flow of politics, for example, the fortunes of Liberalism, the emergence of socialism, and government policies affecting family life, would also affect public consciousness of domestic violence. Pleck, *Domestic Tyranny*, pp. 5-7

Reversals of the phenomenon - reduced levels of interest - she warns, are easy to detect. They consist of calls for less intervention and more privacy in family life and lessening of interest or support for social policies against family violence.

Nigel Parton offers a helpful model when discussing how child abuse came to be defined as a problem. First "some putative condition" is identified, and sufficient people see it as a problem requiring action. Then it becomes a public issue, a social problem, involving different value systems and conflicting perspectives.¹¹ As well as being crucial in "whether and how" a situation is defined, values also contribute to views about the solutions, a point which is relevant to the feminist alliance with the social purity movement.¹² Some calls for social change are mainly symbolic in that the primary aim of legislation is to affirm certain values. Symbolic action has connotations beyond the immediate issue:

Thus, 'disinterested reform' occurs when an issue appears as a moral one, divorced from any direct economic interests of the reformers. It symbolically enhances the prestige and self-esteem of the victors and degrades the culture, values and life-style of the losers.¹³

This suggestion may reveal why campaigning around wife-beating, the far end of a spectrum of men's social and economic control of women through marriage, was not as sustained as that concerning cruelty to children. The model could be applied to those feminist campaigns which foundered. Changes in the social structure required by some demands for equal rights have been so fundamental and antipathetic to male power systems, and moreover would have denied men any symbolic satisfaction, that the campaigns were doomed to failure. To question aspects of marriage and family life, whether the issue is a husband's legal property rights, the assumption that husbands are entitled to physical and sexual coercion or a father's power over his children, is to begin to

¹¹ Nigel Parton, *The Politics of Child Abuse* (London: Macmillan, 1985), p. 6.

¹² See Chapter Five for the problems which Alison Neilans faced in this area.

¹³ Parton, *Politics of Child Abuse*, p. 7.

dismantle deeply-embedded features of patriarchal culture.¹⁴ While campaigns and reforms may not have been mobilised around family violence directly, they had an impact on public discourse on the subject.

Both Pleck's and Parton's models are useful when examining how feminist campaigns helped raise public awareness of the widespread nature of family violence and sexual abuse. They can also be applied to the case of women's right of access to public space. Exposure of the issues was a prerequisite of action to alleviate the suffering and subordination. I argue that this is what Nina Boyle and Edith Watson attempted in their work with the Women's Freedom League, to which I now turn.

4.2 "In . . . the Whole Machinery of the Law Woman Has No Part" 1912-1914

As I mentioned in Chapter Three, the Women's Freedom League (WFL) was not the only suffrage organisation to discuss family violence and sexual harassment. The National Vigilance Association (NVA), Ladies National Association for the Abolition of State Regulation of Vice (LNA) and other societies ran some small-scale experiments with patrols of women in public spaces, partly to provide safety but also as a means of controlling what was perceived as unacceptable behaviour by women and girls.¹⁵ The League sustained the critique, although initially physical violence was not a priority. Their public work on sexual politics took the form of organising propaganda, of drawing public attention to particular issues, and of educating WFL members through their journal. *The*

¹⁴ Reform against family violence is an implicit critique of each element in the 'Family Ideal'. It challenges the notion of the domestic sphere as separate from the public arena; the belief, sanctified by religion, that marriage and the family should be maintained at the cost of women's personal autonomy; that women's and children's rights and liberties as individuals should be subsumed under those of the head of the household, the husband and father. Pleck, *Domestic Tyranny*, p 9.

¹⁵ See Jayne Woodhouse, "Eugenics and the Feeble-minded: The Parliamentary Debates of 1912-1914", *History of Education* Vol. II, No. 2 (1982), pp. 127-137 and Jill Radford, "Women Policing: Contradictions Old and New", in Jalna Hanmer, Jill Radford and Elizabeth Stanko, eds., *Women, Policing and Male Violence: International Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 13-45.

Vote covered many topics, presenting opportunities to discuss and analyse the relationship of gender and power. From 1912 to early 1915, the issues of violence against women and girls, sexual harassment and abuse were examined regularly.

4.2 a) Revealing the Truth: The Connections between Women's Suffrage and the Judicial System.

By their systematic collation, examination and interpretation of information collected through reporting proceedings in police courts over three years, Nina Boyle and Edith Watson presented a significant critique of one area of social control. Their methods and data would be judged inadequate by current standards, yet their work was an early attempt to analyse an intractable social problem. I speculate that Nina Boyle and Edith Watson were working towards a theory about incipient male power which approaches a radical feminist philosophy because of their stress on male violence as a cause of women's subordination.¹⁶ The view that the female body is a site of oppression is a radical tenet. In the context of violence this is quite literally the case at a personal level; women's bodies also become the nexus for gender and power relations at a social level because the subjection of women and girls is reinforced by power structures in the social system. (This issue will be explored further in relation to Nina Boyle in Section 4.4 which ends the chapter.)

In 1912 the economic structure offered few alternatives for battered women or sexually-abused girls wishing to escape economic dependence on violent, abusive men. Women's independence was inhibited by social and cultural patterns, authoritarian relationships in the family and paternalistic religious precepts requiring women's submission. Intermittently the issues of violence, incest and child abuse were featured in

¹⁶

I refer to the definitions of radical feminism in Chapter One, p.36.

the public debate, though were usually refracted through a masculine prism and limited by linguistic inhibitions. Women were excluded from power networks in several ways: by not having access to information about the issues; by having little power to change the situation; by being literally excluded from the arena, when women were expelled from courts when criminal offences involving violence and sexual behaviour were being heard. On several occasions in 1913, grand juries had called for child abusers to be flogged, a proposal which was supported by many in the church.¹⁷ Without enfranchisement women had little access to political structures where they might effect legislative change to improve their or their children's position. Additionally, the sex-bias of the judicial system meant women's experiences were marginalised and dismissed. Powerlessness at an individual level interlocked with male-dominated power structures. To seek to reveal and quantify this kind of oppression, then to extrapolate and demonstrate from the meagre palliative measures which society offered male indifference to women's suffering, was a radical feminist undertaking.

Nina Boyle and Edith Watson hoped to alert other women to what was happening, in itself a revolutionary act. They would tell readers of *The Vote* about some of the worst cases of family violence and sexual abuse. Avenues to public sources of information, the press, the pulpit, parliament and the judicial process, were mainly controlled by men, who had concealed what evidence there was. Having little access to this knowledge, women had been precluded from realising the extent of abuse or the scale of the threat. By revealing what was hidden, their explicit intention was that women "should know the extent of the danger with which they are threatened."¹⁸ Physical aggression, molestation

¹⁷ The Upper House of the Convocation of Canterbury had unanimously resolved to support legislation to deal with "these evils" (incest and child abuse), and called for remedies to conditions which led to immorality, "ignorance and overcrowding" in 1914. The Bishops also expressed support for judges and magistrates who had attempted to "put down" crimes against children. *The Times*, (5 July 1912, 15 July 1912, 21 January 1913, 9 July 1914).

¹⁸ *The Vote* Vol. V, No. 120 (10 February 1912).

and sexual intimidation would then be seen as unacceptable manifestations of gender relations. The middle-class mythology of men's chivalrous protection of women would be challenged. They aimed to monitor and criticise the daily practices and language of police and court procedures. Through the medium of their column, Nina Boyle and Edith Watson hoped society's marginalised victims could bear witness to the ways cultural constructs advocating women's submission and passivity legitimised male violence. They claimed gender-bias in an ostensibly fair system penalised females through prejudice, bigotry and maladministration. They did not condone class-based views which perceived cruelty to women as a lower-class phenomenon beyond the control of law-enforcement agencies or sexual abuse simply as an attribute of inadequate housing, or harassment to be the result of females going about unchaperoned.

Once they had raised awareness, the solutions they offered ranged from the immediate and practical to the long-term re-ordering of social values. They demonstrated that the double standard of sexual morality which underpinned male domination in society at large existed, and went unremarked, in the judicial system, a significant domain of social control. Although resources were limited, they persevered to ensure that family violence and sexual abuse continued to be legitimate concerns for women in the suffrage movement. With WFL support, their efforts helped to increase public sensitivity to women's needs. The spasmodic work by some women's and social purity organisations to establish 'purity patrols' during the first decade has been mentioned in Chapter Three. One proposal which had gained ground by 1914 was to ameliorate conditions for women involved in the judicial process simply by increasing women's presence and influence at all levels. To have women as matrons and nurses in prison hospitals and as court officials to accompany and support female witnesses and defendants would help humanise an alien environment and dispel the effects of a traumatic experience. Women's active participation

in the system would not only reform it, but transform it into a much fairer process altogether.¹⁹ Their contention that crimes against women and girls should receive greater condemnation and punishment than crimes against property challenged patriarchal social values. Their short-term aims to improve the system were realised. But in the subsequent history of the women's police they paid a price for their radicalism.²⁰

In nearly every issue of *The Vote* for three years, Nina Boyle and Edith Watson itemised daily occurrences in law courts. Other members of the WFL also contributed. Correspondents from all over the country monitored proceedings locally, an example of provincial and national co-operation in the League.²¹ Extracts from newspapers and periodicals were reprinted. Contingent as it was on volunteers, coverage tended to be inconsistent and patchy. Sometimes it is not possible to identify precisely whose opinions were being presented in the journal. For example, an instance of cruelty or maladministration of justice listed in the column would be highlighted in an unattributed leading article or used to explore wider issues, such as the economic circumstances behind charges of neglect, an attempt to convey to mainly middle-class readers the problems of family life on inadequate means.²² Where individuals' names are attributed to articles, I have recorded this.²³

¹⁹ A WFL member, Helena Normanton, eventually became the first woman King's Counsel; her application to be a student at the Middle Temple had to be deferred until January 1920, when she applied within twenty-four hours of the passing of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act. Stella Newsome, *The Women's Freedom League 1907-1957*, pamphlet (WFL, n.d. [c. 1957]), Fawcett Library, 324.62306041.

²⁰ Radford, "Women Policing", p. 35.

²¹ Claire Eustance's study of the relationships between provincial members and the national leadership of the WFL shows it to have been a democratic organisation which contained a range of views. Claire Eustance, "'Daring To Be Free': The Evolution of Women's Political Identities in the Women's Freedom League 1907-1930" (Ph. D Thesis, University of York, 1993).

²² *The Vote* Vol. V, No. 121 (17 February 1912).

²³ During much of the period under review, Charlotte Despard was officially editor, but her deputy, Annie A Smith, presumably did much of the work as Charlotte Despard travelled a great deal and there were times when she was ill; often she would write a leading article.

Initially issues were taken up in *The Vote* to further the suffrage debate. Anti-suffragists who had used their professional expertise to deny women's right to vote were challenged. Sir Almroth Wright, one of the country's foremost medical experts, had made a notorious statement that women's physical nature rendered them unfit to vote: "the mind of woman is always threatened with danger from the reverberations of her physiological emergencies".²⁴ Following a case where a man had stabbed his wife five times, *The Vote* suggested that Wright might explain the "physiological emergencies which induce so many male persons to commit murderous assault on wives and sweethearts."²⁵ They critiqued masculine constructs of relations between the sexes. When a bad-tempered husband battered and threatened to murder his wife the Divorce Court judge, Sir Samuel Evans, decreed this was not 'cruelty', because a woman marrying a man of violent temper must take the consequences. The League responded with a call for state intervention to provide Crown prosecutions when a woman could prove a long series of cruelties.²⁶

A notorious case in 1913, with which Sir Samuel was personally connected, illustrates many of the features of inequality and injustice which so concerned Nina Boyle and Edith Watson. Horace Evans, Sir Samuel's son, had been charged with indecent assault. All women, including relatives and friends of the victim, Mary Davies, were ordered out of court except the wife of the accused. Subjected to relentless cross-examination, Mary Davies had broken down, whereupon she was described by the magistrate, who had participated in the harsh questioning, as: "an excitable woman, on whose evidence no jury would convict". Because her evidence was uncorroborated, there was no conviction. Later that day Horace Evans assaulted another young girl. When he came up for trial again, the court was cleared once more, although the girl's counsel

²⁴ Almroth Wright, Letter to *The Times* (28 March 1912) quoted in Susan Kingsley-Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Great Britain 1860-1914* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 203.

²⁵ *The Vote* Vol. VII, No. 179 (28 March 1913).

²⁶ *The Vote* Vol. X, No. 279 (26 February 1915).

appealed that her mother be allowed to stay for a "special favour". Evans was acquitted; he did not deny his actions, merely saying his intention was only "to give the girl a rough kiss". Received with laughter and cheers in court, this interpretation was accepted by the all-male, "friendly and discreditable Bench" and described in *The Vote* as a "perversion of justice".²⁷

Connections between suffrage and women's sexual oppression were made explicit. In 1912 the League President, Charlotte Despard, told the annual conference, that women knew sexual abuse was widespread and the laws meant to deal with it were inadequate. This knowledge was "one of the reasons for the impelling force, the deathless energy behind the women's movement".²⁸ Hitherto, everything had been seen from a male viewpoint.²⁹ Edith Watson argued that the extent of the problem was suppressed by lenient magistrates and a press which shied from reporting rape, incest, domestic violence and similar offences. The public was unaware of the high percentage of crimes of indecency committed. She suspected half such crimes were not discovered anyway. Yet the perpetrators of these crimes were entitled to vote; sunk below the level of any animal such men were held, "more fit than the noblest, wisest women in the land".³⁰

To a large extent the initial impetus for demanding reform of the judicial system arose directly from the suffragettes' own experience of the police and courts. Militants were probably very much more aware of the realities of the legal underworld than women who had never been in trouble with the law.³¹ Referring to the 'ballot box' case, in 1909, an editorial comment in *The Vote*, observed:

²⁷ *The Vote* Vol. VIII, No. 194 (11 July 1913).

²⁸ *The Vote* Vol. V, No. 119 (3 February 1912).

²⁹ *The Vote* Vol. V, No. 119 (3 February 1912), Report of the President's Address to WFL Annual Conference. See Alison Neilans on the Conciliation Bill 1912, Chapter Three, p. 151.

³⁰ *The Vote* Vol. VIII, No. 198 (8 August 1913).

³¹ *The Vote* Vol. IX, No. 242 (12 June 1914).

In framing and the administration of the whole machinery of the law woman has no part. She is only graciously allowed to foot the bill or to stand in the dock or witness box.³²

Suffragettes had attended courts - as defendants, as witnesses, to stand bail, to record what happened to their friends. When they were in court or visiting police stations they had seen how women criminals and witnesses were treated, how women were excluded when cases of an 'indecent' nature were heard. Previous notions of justice and equality before the law were re-evaluated. Consequently, dissatisfaction with the workings of the judicial system began to crystallise in the WFL. It gathered round two main issues: the injustices suffered by females in the system as a whole and women's exclusion from law courts when indecent cases were being heard.

In the next section, the origins of the column in *The Vote* are presented, followed by discussion of the development of WFL tactics, and campaigns on specific issues.

4.2 b) "How Men Protect Women": the Column in *The Vote*

Early in 1912 Edith Watson appealed in *The Vote* for League members to monitor what was happening in the courts throughout the country:

A member of the League who on a recent occasion had to wait two or three days about a court of justice, heard a large number of cases tried; of which nearly a third were criminal or indecent assaults on women and children. The cross-examining counsel, in their efforts to shake the evidence of these forlorn victims of male bestiality, frequently ask questions of brutal indecency; and details are extracted and commented on that one shrinks from contemplating. It is from such scenes as these that women are excluded; one hopes in shame that they should know the extent of the danger with which they are threatened. Common sense and humanity would exclude the men.³³

³²

The Vote Vol. I, No. 3 (11 November 1909). See Chapter Three, pp. 145-146.

³³

The Vote Vol. V, No. 120 (10 February 1912).

The title of the column in *The Vote* which Edith Watson inaugurated in February 1912 was variously "How Some Men Protect Women", "How Men Protect Women" or "The Protected Sex". Its object was:

. . . to show not only how women suffer from acts of violence, but how slight a penalty the law exacts for such violence in comparison with crimes against property. ³⁴

As an example, Emily Wilding Davison's sentence of six months' imprisonment for attempting to burn letters was compared with a four month sentence for a man's "abominable and atrocious" repeated criminal assaults on a little girl of seven. ³⁵ The ironic title was intended to expose the flaws in the mythology of men's protection of women, a response to the anti-suffragists' claim that women did not need the vote because they were under the protection of men. This was not an original approach; a similar rhetorical response to rejections of women's emancipation on the grounds that men's chivalric protection of women was sufficient had been made years earlier. ³⁶ Nina Boyle fired another salvo with an article savaging the 'protection' argument in *The Vote* a month later. Men's protection had invariably meant a deprivation of liberty and personal rights. The most favoured social conventions the world over and through all the ages had been subjection, seclusion or restriction of freedom for women. Women's rights to their own persons had never been respected:

The overwhelming majority of crimes of violence, from murder to common assault, are committed by men on women. No crime is so lightly punished in 'civilised' countries as violence on the persons of women. ³⁷

³⁴ *The Vote* Vol. V, No. 120 (10 February 1912).

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ As part of nineteenth-century campaigns to reform married women's property law, campaigners drew attention to the physical violence perpetrated on wives by their husbands. Cases where courts had treated brutal men leniently were listed by *The Englishwomen's Suffrage Journal* and the *Englishwoman's Review*. One article in the *Journal* had the title "How Men Protect Women". See Jane Rendall, "Citizenship, Culture and Civilisation: The Languages of British Suffragists 1866-1874" In *Suffrage and Beyond: International Feminist Perspectives*, ed., Caroline Daley and Melanie Nolan (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1994), pp. 127-150. I am very grateful to Jane Rendall for letting me see this article prior to publication.

³⁷ "How Men Protect Women", *The Vote* Vol. V, No. 125 (16 March 1912).

Originally Edith Watson had not intended to do anything other than record cases without comment, simply comparing the heavy sentences "inflicted for lesser crimes by women and the lighter ones for all crimes by men".³⁸ As the evidence mounted a critique informed by feminism began to emerge. The tone of the columns and articles seems patronising or shrill and overly-indignant at times, yet Bartky's reminder about the silence and powerlessness of those who have been subjected to disciplines engendering the female body is significant here.³⁹ The feature was an attempt to speak out on behalf of the least powerful; the whole endeavour can be seen in that light. It was designed to show a mainly middle-class audience the bewilderment and injustice felt by people caught up in an inhumane, hierarchical legal system. Within a few months of the column's inception, an analysis covering many aspects of policing and the legal system was developed. They opened up and explored many issues at the interface of sexual politics. These included conceptualisations about two kinds of women - the 'pure' and 'impure'; the deleterious effects of male control of the judicial system, along with the almost complete lack of women participating anywhere in it; the impact of sexual double standards on the law and its administration; the way legal jargon neutralised the sufferings of women and girls; problems of corroborative evidence in cases of sexual abuse and the difficulties and traumas for women and children giving evidence; the inhumanity of the system for battered women, and particularly for the very poor, for unmarried mothers, for ignorant or 'mentally-handicapped' girls.

In a 1914 article, "Judicial Barbarity", Nina Boyle recommended a few days in court with Edith Watson to throw a "vivid light" on how the system operated. Endeavouring to stir a response from readers, she painted a picture of victimised women,

³⁸ *The Vote* Vol. V, No. 120 (10 February 1912).

³⁹ Sandra Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power", paper read at the American Philosophical Association, May 1986; quoted in Jana Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 49. See Chapter One, p. 49.

and used emotive language to unpick and convey the theatricality of court proceedings. Of prostitutes in court, she said it was a "distressing and pitiable spectacle" to see how girls and women, "labelled unfortunate", were:

. . . badgered and browbeaten by the trained intellects of men whose business it is to protect the vile privileges of their sex.

It was common for the Bench to convert itself into "an additional assistant to the male cause", so reinforcing prejudice. Questions would be put to a witness; they involved details of "such filthiness, the soul sickens". Then the subject matter was used "unscrupulously", to "discredit" the witness who "shrank" from the counsel's bullying.⁴⁰ Here, emotive imagery, alliteration and repetition enhance the melodramatic effect of the title which resonates with associations of brutish force. The writing can be seen as an attempt to harness the repugnance conventionally associated with prostitution, then deflect readers' horror on to the court, the patriarchal agent of control.

The column's value was enhanced because on those rare occasions when women did voice their feelings in court, *The Vote* gave full coverage. A girl called Annie whose step-father had been sexually abusing her and her sister for years, was reported:

'He has ruined my sister who had two children by him. One of them is dead, and he has been trying to ruin me. I won't have it' she declared emphatically. 'This is what I have to put up with because I won't let men do as they wish'⁴¹

Edith Melville "gave a few home truths" when she appeared in the witness box at Marylebone Police Court in 1914. Charged with perjury for saying her sister's child was hers in order to obtain an affiliation order, she told the court:

We stoop to satisfy these men . . . and when we are left in trouble they cut us off and we are left to support their children in the only way open to us - by immorality. . . . You are all here, all men, with your lies and your laws to fight against one poor girl . . . I think all girls ought to worry such men

⁴⁰ Nina Boyle, *The Vote* Vol. X, No. 245 (3 July 1914).

⁴¹ *The Vote* Vol. VI, No. 146 (10 August 1912).

and get them into trouble and worry and perhaps this sort of thing would stop . . . it's the children who suffer and the woman who pays.⁴²

When appearing as a defendant herself, Nina Boyle used the occasions to highlight the sexual double standard endemic in legislative and judicial systems. As I pointed out in Chapter One, she was very well aware of the institutionalised power manifested in the courts regarding both gender and class bias. After defying a ban on suffrage meetings in Hyde Park in April 1913, she and Anna Munro, a WFL member, were arrested for obstructing the police.⁴³ The day she appeared in court, several prostitutes were also there for soliciting. In what must have been a dramatic instance of her talent for maximising publicity, Nina Boyle openly dissected the gendered class prejudice lurking in the systems. She told the presiding Magistrate:

You gentlemen are totally incapable of administering justice with decency and fairness without the help of women."⁴⁴

Earlier the prostitutes had faced "an array of brute force"; the system ought to be reformed or abolished:

It is the fault of the social conditions, and you gentlemen are content to take salaries to keep this state of things going. . . . In our eyes that makes it totally impossible . . . I am glad and proud that I have had the opportunity to defy the law, the administration and the administrators of the law.⁴⁵

Revealing his bigotry and class prejudice, the magistrate said the offences committed by Nina Boyle and Anna Munro were serious because they were "in an altogether different station of life" from the other women.

⁴² *The Vote* Vol. X, No. 245 (3 July 1914).

⁴³ Newsome, *The Women's Freedom League*, p. 9.

⁴⁴ *The Vote* Vol. VIII, No. 185 (9 May 1913).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

4.2 c) " . . . the Sex Bias, the Tenderness to Male Ruffians . . . the Wholesale Perjury, the Complacent Bench, the Bar"

A special edition of *The Vote* was devoted to the question of justice in September 1913. It featured the problems of failures to convict because of lack of corroborative evidence, public prosecutors who did not prosecute, possibly from misplaced male sympathy for the male defendants, and inequitable inquiries into the morals or sexual experience of women and girls whether as defendants or witnesses. As the monitoring and analysis developed, 1913 saw Nina Boyle and Edith Watson challenging women's inadequate representation in law-enforcement systems as a whole.

At the time, women could not officiate in any way. There were no women in the police system except for the occasional 'matron' in police cells.⁴⁶ Women as barristers and defending counsel were needed because, "Surely Women's Rights should include the woman's right of helping and pleading for women's wrongs?"⁴⁷ Nina Boyle cited the 'Piccadilly Flat' case, a scandal involving a prostitution ring in 1913, as a demonstration that exclusively male administration led to "treachery, dishonesty and the abuse of the system". Quenie Gerald, the procuress, had been given three months in prison, but the names of clients were withheld - probably because they were eminent or well-connected.⁴⁸ Collusion by all the *men* (italics mine) involved, the police, lawyers and the Bench, ensured those who created the demand for prostitutes escaped censure. Legislation was ineffective; at times the new Criminal Law Amendment Act, had been reduced to "waste paper". Suffrage campaigners had long protested about the "sex bias, the tenderness to male ruffians . . . the wholesale perjury, the complacent Bench, the Bar .."⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Radford, "Women Policing", p 16.

⁴⁷ *The Vote* Vol. VIII, No. 194 (11 July 1913).

⁴⁸ Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out* (London: Quartet Books, 1983), p. 97.

⁴⁹ *The Vote* Vol. VII, No. 208 (12 October 1913).

Through attacking the practice of banning 'respectable' women from attending indecent court cases the WFL critiqued prevailing constructs of two types of women. At the time it was usual for magistrates to order courts to be cleared of women when offences such as soliciting, incest, rape and indecent assault were to be heard. Edith Watson's questioning of this practice helped to mobilise demands to involve women in most aspects of the judicial system. In *The Vote*, Rose Lamartine Yates had deconstructed this way of giving credence to the sexual double standard. She had been monitoring a London court. When solicitation offences were to be tried, "in mock modesty" the magistrate had asked her to leave. Yates agreed with him she herself might be termed 'respectable' but admitted feeling deep shame at this description. To her prostitutes were "scapegoats of our Respectability".⁵⁰ To authorise and validate her work, Edith Watson announced that the WFL would have its own Special Correspondent for the Old Bailey (herself, though she did not give her name) and other London courts. Here she constructed an image of an authentic journalistic enterprise, which enhanced her status as a court reporter who might be exempted, should the call for women to be banned be made.⁵¹ The irrationality of the ban was illustrated by an incident at Bow Street in August 1912, when a woman (probably Edith Watson) tried to protest when the court was cleared. Immediately she was charged with 'conduct likely to cause a breach of the peace' and bound over. "She must be a woman with quite extraordinary taste" commented the magistrate maliciously. His accusations of prurience as well as the decision's legality were contested by the League.⁵²

⁵⁰ *The Vote* Vol. V, No. 127 (30 March 1912).

⁵¹ This kind of tactic seems typical of Edith Watson. Her son fondly remembers his mother writing numerous letters to *The Times* on the living-room table. She wrote ostensibly under the auspices of the Divorce Law Reform Union which was a very small-scale group at the time. Bernard Watson, interview by author, 29 May 1991 and 22 October 1991, Twickenham, tape recording.

⁵² *The Vote* Vol. VI, No. 147 (17 August 1912). It seems likely that this was Edith Watson herself, but the outcome of the case was not reported.

Nina Boyle corresponded with the Home Secretary about women's right to attend court hearings.⁵³ The WFL brought a test case against Frederick Mead, the Marlborough Street Metropolitan Police Court Magistrate, whose path they had crossed as arrested militants and whose patriarchal and authoritarian views they opposed.⁵⁴ A decision by the Law Lords, the Scott judgement of 1913, confirmed that the banning of women was illegal.⁵⁵ In establishing the right of women to be admitted to courts on the same basis as men, the League felt they had achieved a reform, although the principle was not always observed in practice. They produced a pamphlet setting out the legal position for distribution to women visitors to court.⁵⁶ Both the WFL and the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene (AMSH) continued to protest about individual cases of exclusion for several years.

Other changes to improve procedures were made after the League had made several protests. These included better treatment of women in police cells and prisons, segregation of male and female in police vans and 'black Marias', trained nurses to attend women prisoners and more consideration for sick prisoners who were too ill to attend court hearings. By having monitors in courts throughout the country and, as their experience and knowledge increased, Edith Watson and Nina Boyle could expose cases of sloppy administration, as did others in the WFL.⁵⁷ When Edith How Martyn appeared as a

⁵³ *The Vote* Vol. VII, No. 175 (28 February 1913).

⁵⁴ Frederick Mead was to continue his opposition to women in court; in 1927 when he was 82 he overstepped the mark by objecting to a policewoman giving evidence "of a disagreeable nature". See also Chapters Five and One. For a discussion of the opposition to policewomen and their appropriate duties see Joan Lock, *The British Policewoman: Her Story* (London: Robert Hale, 1979), especially pp. 40-46, p. 163.

⁵⁵ Association for Moral and Social Hygiene, Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, 16 May 1919. Fawcett Library, AMSH 42. The decision in the Scott (otherwise Morgan) v. Scott case was significant because it established that courts of justice had "no power to hear cases in camera, even by consent". Thus a decision that a hearing should take place in private could not rest "merely on the discretion of the judge or on his individual view" that it was desirable for the sake of public decency or morality. *The Law Times Reports* Vol. 9 (September 1913-February 1914), pp. 1-22.

⁵⁶ *The Vote* Vol. III, No. 204 (19 September 1913).

⁵⁷ *The Vote* Vol. X, No. 260 (16 October 1914).

witness in a case of petty theft, she used the chance to make a point about equal rights. She had been told that if she did not appear she would be subpoenaed, but argued in court that since in the eyes of the law she was "not considered a person", she should not be asked to help administer it. At that, the Magistrate "became hysterical" and shouted "Send that woman about her business!" and Edith was forcibly ejected from the court.⁵⁸

Members of the League co-ordinated and supported campaigns by raising topics in other organisations to which they belonged. *The Vote* used information garnered from various sources besides their own correspondents in the "How Men Protect Women" column. Often societies like the LNA, the NVA, the National Union of Women Workers (NUWW) and the NSPCC would co-ordinate their publicity. For example, Kathleen Tanner, a member of the WFL executive, raised the question of women's access to the legal professions at a Conference of the National Union of Women Workers, a social purity organisation, in October 1913. She reported the meeting in *The Vote*, estimating that there was a ground-swell of public opinion in favour of women's admission to the legal profession.⁵⁹

The 'Violet Parrott' case, a *cause célèbre* for the League in 1913, concerned two police constables who appeared to have colluded in a cover-up. P.C. Wetherall who was lodging with another constable, Riley, at the Parrott home in Homerton, was charged with criminal assault on 14 year-old Violet, who became pregnant. To the jury's obvious surprise, the judge stopped the case on the grounds that there was no corroborative evidence.⁶⁰ The WFL organised a protest which lasted for several months, sending a

⁵⁸ *The Vote* Vol. VIII, No. 210 (31 October 1913).

⁵⁹ The paucity of adequate statistics meant that data was used and re-cycled several times. An example of this is the NSPCC statistical evidence of the extent of incest from 1910. They estimated that in cases of criminal assault on children under sixteen, over 37% included incest, but were well aware that only a proportion of cases were reported. A report from their Director to a NUWW Conference in 1910 was used to substantiate the WFL arguments three years later. *The Vote* Vol. III, No. 192 (27 June 1913).

⁶⁰ *The Vote* Vol. VIII, No. 204 (19 September 1913).

Memorial to the Home Office,⁶¹ picketing Scotland Yard⁶² and finally sending an ironic 'Roll of Honour' to the police in 'J' Division (Wetherall's and Riley's) because the police constables had been allowed to continue working and were still unpunished.⁶³ For distributing leaflets about the case, WFL pickets were fined £1, the same amount as the fine handed down to a man who had brutally assaulted his blind wife.⁶⁴

Through examining judicial discursive practices, Nina Boyle and Edith Watson could make explicit the ways bias and prejudice operated through hidden agendas. They criticised male camaraderie in court because it engendered a hostile atmosphere for women, a point previously made by Frances Power Cobbe and Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy. Edith Watson described an occasion during a break in court proceedings when the evidence in a procurement case, indecent pictures and material from a brothel described by the judge as being "horrible and disgusting", were eagerly scanned and laughed over by eight counsel, several clerks, detectives and other male officials. When she had objected to a fellow journalist, a detective had "insolently bullied" her.⁶⁵ She identified what would now be defined as sexual harassment endemic in the daily practice of the law courts. For instance, there had been laughter in court when a man was charged with throwing a missile and being a danger to the public; he explained that he had thrown half a brick at his wife, not from ill-will but because she had been following him.⁶⁶ A gardener had been charged with indecently assaulting a servant in their workplace. The girl said he had pushed her against a wall, ripping off her apron and blouse, but the case was dismissed and the man was told he had behaved indiscreetly and "run it rather fine".⁶⁷

⁶¹ *The Vote* Vol. VIII, No. 209 (24 October 1913).

⁶² *The Vote* Vol. IX, No. 231 (27 March 1914).

⁶³ *The Vote* Vol. X, No. 240 (29 July 1914).

⁶⁴ *The Vote* Vol. IX, No. 233 (8 April 1914).

⁶⁵ *The Vote* Vol. VIII, No. 209 (24 October 1913).

⁶⁶ *The Vote* Vol. VI, No. 146 (10 August 1912).

⁶⁷ *The Vote* Vol. VI, No. 140 (29 June 1912).

As the evidence accumulated, Nina Boyle and Edith Watson uncovered the dissonance between male and female interpretation of sexual crimes. They argued that the course of justice was obstructed because men were unable to understand women's feelings or accept what victims said. Male and female linguistic practices were so dissimilar and the lexicons available to women so limited, fair hearings were impeded. For example, on one occasion, the Bench had decided to treat as a case of common assault, a situation where a twenty-one year-old and her sixty-six year-old mother were stabbed with an awl, after the offender had pursued the girl, sending her offensive correspondence at work. When her parents had remonstrated with him, he had threatened to kill her. The defendant was merely bound over. Often the actual practice of proceedings were then, as now, inimical to a fair hearing. Females were disadvantaged. Small children were asked to give evidence standing on chairs or tables so that they could be seen; frequently there was no woman present in court, let alone the comforting presence of a mother or familiar adult. In one instance in May 1914, a six year-old girl, standing on a chair in court, identified the man who had assaulted her (and several other girls). Her evidence was supported by another child, but the Worthing bench refused to commit the man for trial, "on the evidence of such young children".⁶⁸ *The Vote* reprinted a report from the *Irish Citizen*, in July the same year, describing how a seven year-old girl had given evidence while standing on a table. A man with venereal disease had raped her in the mistaken superstition that he would be cured by having intercourse with an 'untainted child'. The little girl had contracted venereal disease.⁶⁹

Nina Boyle deconstructed the discursive positioning of a thirteen year-old girl who appeared in court, the victim and chief witness in a criminal assault case, early in 1914.

⁶⁸ *The Vote* Vol. X, No. 236 (1 May 1914).

⁶⁹ *The Vote* Vol. X, No. 247 (17 July 1914). This was a common myth at the time. For folk remedies see Roy Porter and Lesley Hall, *The Facts of Life: The Creation of Sexual Knowledge in Britain 1650-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 225-227.

The girl had been medically examined twice, but because she had initially confided in a friend, her 'moral character' was criticised, presumably because simply speaking about the incident was tantamount to showing no shame. Neither the proceedings nor the evidence were objective. Although the men involved had been well-meaning, through their "abominable indecency, cruelty and ignorance" they had shown no understanding of women's "thoughts and feelings in these matters".⁷⁰

Then, as now, whenever a woman appeared in court her moral character or previous sexual experience might be called into question. It was common practice to defame a woman's moral character to reduce the value of her evidence.⁷¹ When two men were charged with raping a Mrs. Hilburn of Plaistow, she was closely cross-examined about her 'moral character'; similar questions were not put to the men. Both were discharged although the presiding judge made one comment with which Edith Watson concurred: "Because a woman may not be chaste is no reason why she should be ravished."⁷² A defendant being tried for a criminal assault on a fourteen year-old girl was allowed to reveal her "immoral" relations with her father and two other men. Consequently protection had been denied "because she had had the desperate ill-luck to fall into evil hands" commented *The Vote*.⁷³ Women and girls should not be subjected to gross allegations which had nothing to do with the particular case under consideration. A woman's 'character' could be used to excuse an offender's behaviour, while evidence of a man's 'good character' would be used to extenuate his crime. A nineteen year-old youth who had pursued two young women and committed an indecent offence was bound over for twelve months by the Bench Chairman, who told him:

⁷⁰ *The Vote* Vol. IX, No. 224 (6 February 1914).

⁷¹ *The Vote* Vol. VIII, No. 204 (19 September 1913).

⁷² *The Vote* Vol. VIII, No. 196 (25 July 1913).

⁷³ *The Vote* Vol. VIII, No. 204 (19 September 1913).

I am afraid this is a class of offence which sometimes people of good character are liable to fall into.⁷⁴

A sixteen year-old girl who had been sacked "for immoral conduct and improper behaviour" with another employee in the same company brought an action for wrongful dismissal, in November 1913. The male employee, a foreman, was not dismissed and had been allowed to remain as a supervisor of young women. With the help of the Working Women's Legal Advice Bureau, the girl proved her good character and the charge of misconduct was dropped; she received £15 compensation.⁷⁵ Some months later, a divorcee living with her lover was a prosecution witness in a case where her maidservant had stolen some clothes. According to Edith Watson, the case was remarkable for the bad jokes and provocative speech of the defending counsel:

This practice of vilifying a woman's reputation whenever she comes into contact with the law, whether as prisoner, witness, or prosecutor, has continued too long. Even a prostitute has a right to expect justice.⁷⁶

Because they collected records nationally, anomalies and disparities in sentencing could be shown. Often male and female offenders were treated differently. Crimes against women were punished less severely than crimes against property. Instances in the same court were also compared. A man was imprisoned for forty days for stealing two pounds of sugar, another given merely fourteen days for indecently assaulting a little girl.⁷⁷ At Clerkenwell Sessions in June 1914, a seventy year-old man was bound over after being found guilty of indecently assaulting a five year-old girl, whereas a fifty-four year-old woman found guilty of soliciting was given four months hard labour.⁷⁸ A week later, a woman was given four months for soliciting, yet the Reverend John Couland, charged with "offences to ladies" at Bow Street, was bound over despite a previous conviction. His

⁷⁴ *The Vote* Vol. VII, No. 194 (11 July 1913).

⁷⁵ *The Vote* Vol. IX, No. 211 (7 November 1913).

⁷⁶ *The Vote* Vol. X, No. 253 (28 August 1914).

⁷⁷ *The Vote* Vol. IX, No. 212 (14 November 1913).

⁷⁸ *The Vote* Vol. X, No. 241 (5 June 1914).

offences, fondling and chatting-up women, were as much a nuisance to a woman as a soliciting prostitute might be to a man.⁷⁹

Cases were deconstructed to show how gendered behavioural expectations had an impact on the outcome. For instance, in the 'Crozier' case of 1913, a sixteen year-old boy had been neglected and starved to death; his father, an ex-High Sheriff and a JP, and his step-mother, a farm servant, had tied the boy in his room at night. It was hard to differentiate criminality, said the judge, but he thought the wife was the principal offender so made her sentence twice as long as that handed down to the father. "Why, in the name of justice, didn't they both receive the same sentence?" asked *The Vote*. In addition, evidence of 'cruelty' to the boy was that he had been compelled to do domestic chores!:

Do judges live in a region of machine-made bliss that they can regard as a serious part of atrocious cruelty towards a boy the performance of duties calmly recognised as the daily work of a girl?⁸⁰

Nina Boyle drew attention to the disparities in children's treatment in indecent assault cases. She cited one where a ten year-old girl's physical injuries were compounded by her distress at having to appear in court. In another, the prosecution did not call an eight year-old boy to the witness stand because they did not want "his little mind further corrupted by having to go through it again". She asked:

What kind of reception would such a plea would get in the case of a little girl? We have yet to find counsel who would dream of spoiling his case by so sparing the tender feelings of a girl child!⁸¹

Increasingly the column drew attention to the conflation of gender and class. It highlighted cases of harsh treatment of the young, poor, ill-educated and marginalised.

Drunken behaviour was interpreted differently according to gender. For example, drink was used to excuse one man beating up his eighty-one year-old mother or for men

⁷⁹ *The Vote* Vol. X, No. 242 (12 June 1914).

⁸⁰ *The Vote* Vol. VII, No. 167 (3 January 1913).

⁸¹ *The Vote* Vol. X, No. 245 (3 July 1914).

committing rape. Differential sentences on male and female drunkards were highlighted; a charlady guilty of being "disorderly and annoying male passengers" was given a ten shilling fine or a month's imprisonment, whereas for being drunk and disorderly and using foul language a man was fined only half a crown.⁸² Frequently men were let off with minimal fines and no rebuke, while women up for drunken behaviour were "addressed with the utmost contempt and insolence" and threatened with high penalties.⁸³ Six months' hard labour was handed down to a twenty-four year-old waitress who had pawned stolen clothes to get money "for her baby".⁸⁴ Some soldiers who had been drinking, smashed shop windows and stolen jewellery were told they were "foolish". The only other people who had committed similar offences said the Recorder, were the suffragettes; he was sure "they would not like to be classed with them".⁸⁵

The position of unmarried mothers and the question of responsibility for children were important issues for the WFL.⁸⁶ The legal anomaly of a wife being held responsible for her children's welfare while not being the legal parent was remarked upon.⁸⁷ In court proceedings, fathers' obligations towards their children tended to be overlooked. Often the male parent was allowed "to go free from all responsibility for safety and welfare".⁸⁸ One case concerned a woman in labour who had appealed to the baby's father for help. It was night but he had rejected her pleas for assistance. She had given birth to a still-born child in the road, then thrown its body into a nearby pond. Why, asked Edith Watson, was the girl punished instead of the ruffian being tried for the murder of his baby?⁸⁹ Where men refused to support wives and children, the only recourse was a maintenance order, often

⁸² *The Vote* Vol. VI, No. 131 (27 April 1912).

⁸³ *The Vote* Vol. IX, No. 214 (28 November 1913).

⁸⁴ *The Vote* Vol. VI, No. 134 (18 May 1912).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ See Claire Eustance's comments about class distinctions in WFL debates about sexual politics.

⁸⁷ Eustance, "Daring To Be Free", pp. 237-240.

⁸⁸ *The Vote* Vol. VII, No. 168 (10 January 1913).

⁸⁹ *The Vote* Vol. VIII, No. 187 (11 July 1913).

The Vote Vol. X, No. 236 (1 May 1914).

unenforceable.⁹⁰ This could result in beggary, an arrest for "wandering without visible means of subsistence", and mother and children being separated at the workhouse. Under the heading "Who is Responsible?", *The Vote* drew attention to a case of neglect: the mother had been given the maximum sentence, sixty days, the father was given only three weeks' in prison - the judge had not wanted to damage his reputation.⁹¹ In another, despite being gaoled two months beforehand, a pregnant woman had struggled to keep her home going but had had to give up work when her baby was due; there was nothing in the house but straw and an old quilt, her youngest child slept on a potato sack. The husband was finally summoned for neglecting his children but the mother and children were sent to the workhouse.⁹²

When the courts seemed swayed by idealised versions of maternity, *The Vote* drew attention to the gap between myth and reality, and the injustice of pressing criminal charges on women whose acts showed them to be ill rather than criminal. A young woman was charged with 'wilful murder' in 1912. She had given birth, then, obviously in distress, had escaped from supervision and jumped into a lake to drown herself and the baby. She was rescued unconscious, the baby's body was found later. Plainly the circumstances showed the girl was in no condition to be responsible for her actions; the circumstances "spoke for themselves" (emphasis mine). The charge of infanticide was: "a piece of unwarrantable brutality which nothing can excuse".⁹³ A servant, a mentally-defective "girl-mother", had given birth, then totally ignored the baby until setting fire to its cot. Rather than charge her with infanticide, commented *The Vote*, a more compassionate course on seeing her abnormal behaviour would have been to have her mental state

⁹⁰ *The Vote* Vol. X, No. 254 (4 September 1914).

⁹¹ *The Vote* Vol. IX, No. 220 (9 January 1914).

⁹² *The Vote* Vol. VI, No. 154 (5 October 1912).

⁹³ *The Vote* Vol. VI, No. 148 (24 August 1912).

examined and provide the care and support she needed. And, as ever, commented *The Vote*, the old cry went unanswered:

Where is the villain who has taken advantage of the girl's weakness and inexperience? He escapes scot free. ⁹⁴

Common-sense solutions were suggested, for example, to have defence counsels as well as prosecuting counsels.

Having been in court and prison herself, Nina Boyle was able to identify the manifestations of class prejudice. She knew social standing and influential friends impressed the Bench. When middle-class suffragettes went on hunger-strike their sanity was not questioned, whereas a woman prisoner in the Third Division who tried to hunger-strike had been forcibly fed and threatened with removal to a lunatic asylum. ⁹⁵

Two incidents concerning police raids - on a gambling den and a brothel - were compared by Nina Boyle. In the gambling den case, the "fashionably dressed" clients, including two women, were merely bound over; no names appeared in the press. It was obvious that the brothel had been raided specifically when men were not present, nor were men charged with 'frequenting'. No man's name was mentioned in the case which, in view of the inability of a brothel to survive without men's patronage, was odd. As long as only the "demoralised victims of the traffic in women" were made responsible and held punishable for this "protected vice", and as long as the law's administration aided, abetted and protected the real criminals, legislation aimed at curbing the traffic in women would continue to be "a sham and a farce", she said, labelling the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1912 as the depths of hypocrisy. ⁹⁶

⁹⁴

The Vote Vol. VII, No. 182 (18 April 1913).

⁹⁵

The Vote Vol. VIII, No. 187 (23 May 1913).

⁹⁶

The Vote Vol. IX, No. 220 (9 January 1914).

4.2 d) "No Crime So Lightly Punished as Violence on the Persons of Women":

Wife-beating

The scale and extent of murder and violence perpetrated on women, especially by conjugal partners, had been a major reason for beginning "How Men Protect Women". Nina Boyle and Edith Watson felt it important to give precise details of offences because legal jargon tended to sanitise conjugal violence. The column reported explicitly the various forms of violent aggression suffered by women in order to expose the sordid realities behind legal euphemisms such as the word 'assault'. With sexual violations such as rape, child abuse and incest, however, they resorted to legal language or veiled references. They were circumscribed, possibly by the bounds of taste, possibly through the availability of an adequate lexicon.

As a variation on the emotive language they often used, they produced a list of "Murders and Murderous Assaults" on women by men over the months previous to March 1912. It was an attempt to present objective, statistical data. The word 'murdered' appears fifteen times. Other descriptions are more detailed:

. . . blown up by husband who placed lighted fuse under the bed and left the house; . . . burned to death, drunken husband throwing lighted lamp at her brother; . . . brutally killed with knife; . . . murderously assaulted by husband who committed suicide; . . . shot at by husband; . . . attacked in shop by strange man; . . . disgracefully assaulted by seven soldiers; . . . unconscious and bleeding; . . . burnt, stripped, and left for dead by paramour.⁹⁷

Of the twenty-six cases listed, sixteen involved women being attacked by conjugal partners or lovers. In several of the cases, the perpetrator had been insane. The cumulative effect of the list is telling. And, as the authors coolly observed:

⁹⁷ Edith Watson presented the list of "Murders and Murderous Assaults" from the middle of 1911 to March 1912. *The Vote* Vol. V, No. 125 (16 March 1912).

The percentage of crimes of violence committed by men on women would appear to be far in excess of such crimes committed by men on men, women on men and women on women, all put together.⁹⁸

A jury had recommended leniency for an old soldier who had assaulted his common-law wife. He had thrown her down, pulled and dragged her about, hit and kicked her until she was bleeding profusely, fractured four ribs and nearly murdered her.⁹⁹ James Bird had assaulted his wife - he had kicked her several times and swore to break her neck.¹⁰⁰ A Mrs. Mainwaring had been 'assaulted' by her husband for years. The most recent outbreak in April 1914 had resulted in lacerated hands when she had tried to ward off blows from a heavy-knobbed stick; she had black eyes, cuts, bruises and swellings on her body. The husband was given four months' imprisonment, a sentence compared by the column with the six months handed down to suffragettes for breaking windows.¹⁰¹

Economic and social problems faced by battered women, their demoralisation and the negation of their suffering through court practices were also described for *The Vote's* readers. Using irony with the title, "How Some Men Protect Women", the writers described a case where a man had assaulted his wife, left her for two weeks, met her in the street, kicked and hit her, and called her "filthy names". In court, the young woman was asked if she was going to make a wreck of her life and told to "go home and be a good wife", while her mother was told to "keep out" of the couple's married life. The husband was reprimanded for acting in an "unmanly manner".¹⁰² *The Vote* discussed the difficulties of leaving a violent marriage. A man had frequently hit his wife, had tried to strangle and threatened to shoot her; she left home. The magistrate thought that because she had threatened her husband with a razor at one point, she might be afraid of returning. At the

98

Ibid.

99

The Vote Vol. VI, No. 132 (4 May 1912).

100

The Vote Vol. VI, No. 134 (18 May 1912).

101

The Vote Vol. IX, No. 234 (17 April 1914).

102

The Vote Vol. VI, No. 154 (5 October 1912).

husband's request the case was adjourned, "to see if they could agree to live together".¹⁰³ A Mrs. Lawrence who had been forced to leave home with her children for the workhouse when her husband had removed all the furniture, was charged with stabbing him. When he had attacked her she attempted to defend herself and snatched the knife away. Despite all the evidence of Mr. Lawrence's dangerous and brutal nature, nothing had been done to protect her from fresh attacks.¹⁰⁴ The column exposed the patriarchal and systematic failure to understand the feelings of battered women. To magistrates, it seemed a small thing, "that women should be coerced and brow-beaten into taking these risks at the hands of husbands!"¹⁰⁵

4.2 e) "... the Grossest of all Offences": Sexual Abuse of Children

As I said earlier, the question of what language is permissible when speaking about sexual abuse remained unresolved in the pages of *The Vote*. Frequently terms like 'unspeakable', 'indescribable', and 'unmentionable' were used, as was the term 'violation'. In June, 1913, a high profile was given to child abuse, with a cover emblazoned "Human Sacrifice Today. A Victim. She Is Five Years Old. She Is One Of Many. Should These Things Be?" Four extra pages were devoted to what were described as "facts concerning cruel outrages on little children". An article by Annie Smith on the work of the London Lock Hospital whose Matron was a League member, proposed to present "plain, unvarnished facts" yet it used a somewhat histrionic vocabulary. It was an attempt to reveal both the nature and effects of men's misuse of sexual power, the traumatic consequences for the victims and how these were often trivialised by the judiciary. Although the language may appear sentimental to contemporary readers, it demonstrates a

¹⁰³ *The Vote* Vol. X, No. 235 (24 April 1914).

¹⁰⁴ *The Vote* Vol. X, No. 238 (15 May 1914).

¹⁰⁵ *The Vote* Vol. X, No. 235 (24 April 1914).

sense of moral outrage as well as the empathy which existed. Would the eleven year-old with the sweet smile "forget her hideous experience when she was the innocent victim of a man's mad lust?", asked Annie Smith. What would happen to the five year-old who was going to have to give evidence in court; the sixteen year-old who was nearly blind as a result of syphilis? Criminals often escaped because their young victims became distressed when giving evidence; in "their terror and childish inexperience" the girls were at the mercy of the wiles of expert lawyers trying to save a client. Men guilty of these atrocious crimes against little children were moral lepers; segregation should be their punishment yet:

. . . magistrates condone the offence on the ground that any respectable man might fall in the moment of sudden temptation." ¹⁰⁶

By comparison, Nina Boyle's and Edith Watson's descriptions of sexual offences in their column were more measured. Terms such as 'rape' and 'gross indecency' were used; the word 'outrage' was used as a verb in an elliptical allusion which presumably the readers understood. They did not give accounts of the actual evidence produced in court. Despite the linguistic reticence, they did try to dismantle what was happening to victims of abuse.

Edith Watson provided statistical information, partial and limited as it was, to give readers some idea of the volume of sexual offences in 1913. Numbers of cases tried at the Old Bailey "for the last three months" were given. They included five rape cases, some involving more than one offence; five cases of 'immoral relations' with under-age girls', three involving indecency with males; and eight cases of gross indecency. ¹⁰⁷ Often such cases were not reported in the press. The WFL generally seems to have thought public awareness of the extent of incest was limited, despite the 1908 Punishment of Incest Act. Public indifference and ignorance were factors which the League hoped to change. Even

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The Vote Vol. VIII, No. 192 (27 June 1913).

¹⁰⁷

The Vote Vol. VIII, No. 198 (8 August 1913).

where incidents were known, the problems of obtaining a fair hearing were considerable. Frequently incest cases were heard in closed court; Nina Boyle felt this only gave protection and secrecy to this "grossest of all offences". Short sentences were handed down, yet no-one would know how bad such cases could be, she said, citing an incest trial where two daughters had endured fifteen court hearings.¹⁰⁸

The suggestion that women's evidence is seen as lies and fantasy is not new. The topic was discussed in "How Men Protect Women". Solutions ranged from abolishing the need for corroborative evidence to a demand that men change their perceptions drastically. Pointing out that the detection of sexual abuse often depends, "more than any other crime, on the solitary testimony of the survivor", in 1988 Beatrix Campbell argued that the world of sexual abuse is quintessentially secret:

Women, like children, have been treated like children, as congenital fibbers, fakers and fantasiers.¹⁰⁹

In 1913, a doctor was accused of indecently assaulting a girl; the girl's mother had been so incensed that she took a horse whip to him. According to the presiding judge, Mr. Justice Lawrence, this incident might have led the girl to "wild and fantastic imaginings". Nina Boyle was quick to point out that men protected and defended themselves by launching unfounded charges against women and girls. Until women were on the Bench, at the Bar and freely admitted to courts, the courts would:

. . . continue to be disgraced by these exhibitions of sex malice and intolerance, which have become so frequent and so much a matter of concern as to pass almost unnoticed, save by the evergrowing indignation of the slandered and maligned women citizens of the nation.¹¹⁰

In sexual cases, even the most "unshakeable evidence given by the women complainants" was not accepted unless there was another witness.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ *The Vote* Vol. IX, No. 229 (13 March 1914).

¹⁰⁹ Beatrix Campbell, *Unofficial Secrets* (London: Virago, 1988), p. 69.

¹¹⁰ *The Vote* Vol. IX, No. 217 (19 December 1913).

¹¹¹ *The Vote* Vol. VII, No. 204 (19 September 1913).

Edith Watson continued to record the problems with corroborative evidence after this had emerged as a significant feature in the justice issue of September, 1913. For example, masculine constructions placed on abuse were illustrated by a case early in the war. A mother had hidden under her nine year-old daughter's bed in order to prove incest. Because it was wartime the father had been allowed to enlist in the army, so escaping punishment. This method of encouraging army recruitment, which became accepted as the war continued, provoked Edith Watson's anger:

I wonder how many more of these criminals are to be let loose as soldiers, and are to be included in the 'flower of British manhood' and to be spoken of as heroes. If many more are to swell the ranks then outrage and rapine will not be all on the part of the enemy.¹¹²

The cumulative effect of monitoring so much sexism, of the accretion of evidence that the system worked against the fair representation of women, was to emphasise the common oppression across class and background suffered by all women who came into contact with any aspect of the legal system. Appeals based on common sisterhood could then be made.¹¹³

By 1914 there was a more general public awareness of the benefits that women officials could bring to the system. Edith Watson recorded satisfaction over some progress; simply having a woman's watchful eye on proceedings had made a difference at the Old Bailey. One result of her work as the WFL Special Correspondent was the "distinctly improved treatment" of girl witnesses. The trauma engendered by giving evidence in front of the perpetrator of abuse in an all-male court was beginning to be recognised. "Minute details, repeated and reiterated, are in many instances not now demanded" she wrote. In her first case, she had been disturbed to see a twelve year-old take the witness stand in a

¹¹² *The Vote* Vol. X, No. 258 (2 October 1914).

¹¹³ Another correspondent in *The Vote*, E. M. Francis, was ordered to leave the court when a victim of assault was about to be heard; she felt appalled: "I, her sister, was 'not admitted'." *The Vote* Vol. IX, No. 218 (24 December 1913).

room full of men. Gradually the presence of a police matron to help and console child witnesses was becoming more accepted.¹¹⁴ Sentencing was more in accordance with the gravity of the offence. That year, a man who had raped a four year-old was given seven years' imprisonment the "longest sentence" for rape she had witnessed.¹¹⁵

Another tangible result of their work was the attempt to set up a women's police organisation to ensure more equitable treatment and to protect women's access to public space. The beginnings of what led to women's entry into the police service are outlined in the next section.

4.3 The Women Police

Women's demands for admittance to the courts contributed to the development of the women's police. Nina Boyle estimated Edith Watson's contribution was significant and "of incalculable value" in raising the issue to public attention.¹¹⁶ The column, "How Some Men Protect Women" was running strongly when the First World War began. As the war progressed, its focus changed slightly. The courts were still monitored and their consistently male bias was documented. The column also began to record injustices heaped on women through wartime contingencies.

4.3 a) Seizing an Opportunity: 1914

Within three weeks of the war beginning, Nina Boyle and Edith Watson turned their attention to the prospects of women police and to articulating a feminist viewpoint on

¹¹⁴ *The Vote* Vol. X, No. 258 (2 October 1914).

¹¹⁵ *The Vote* Vol. X, No. 250 (7 August 1914).

¹¹⁶ [Nina Boyle], "Personal Account of the Beginning of the Women's Police Volunteers", Women's Work Collection, Imperial War Museum, London, Ref. EMP 41/2. Although this is not attributed in the archive, I think it was written by Nina Boyle, because I have compared the handwriting on this account with several examples of her handwriting in other archives. The account seems to have been written about 1918 when the War Museum was collecting records of women's activities during the First World War.

the whole issue. Prior to 1914 there had been spasmodic interest and discussion about the value of women serving at police stations. Some social purity and philanthropic societies had tried a few very small-scale experiments of having women volunteers patrol in public places. They perceived this as guarding the moral welfare of girls, part of the campaign against the white slave traffic which led to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1912. That same year, Alison Neilans used the occasion of an LNA Conference to call for women police with powers to arrest men or women for annoyance and molestation; this was supported by the conference and *The Vote* recorded the Association's discussion.¹¹⁷ The Criminal Law Amendment Committee had organised a conference in 1913;¹¹⁸ they emphasised protection, for example, by patrolling streets near schools.¹¹⁹ Articles about women police in *The Vote* show attempts to deconstruct dominant discursive images based on virile notions of physical force, power and authoritarian control, as well as the ambiguities in the concept of a women's police force. They drew on traditional conceptualisations of women's nurturing, protective roles implying moral guidance.

Opposition to women police seems to have been cast in the same bigoted mould as that produced by anti-suffragists. Such stereotypical images, for example of "stalwart amazons in blue serge hauling drunken navvies to prison" were derided by Mrs. Nott-Bower who outlined the need for police women in an article in *The Vote* in June

¹¹⁷ *The Vote* Vol. VI, No. 132 (4 May 1912).

¹¹⁸ The Criminal Law Amendment Committee was a pressure group which contained members of several denominations and representatives of social purity as well as feminists. In 1913 its aims were: to raise the age of consent to eighteen; to extend the time under which prosecutions in assault cases could be brought; to call for women police and court assistants; and to reform affiliation orders procedures. *The Shield* n.s., Vol XIV No 144, (July 1913), p. 58. See Chapter Five, pp. 240-242.

¹¹⁹ Women's Work Collection, Imperial War Museum, EMP 424/35. This is mentioned in an account of a deputation by the National Council of Women of Great Britain and Ireland to Major Baird, Under-Secretary to the Home Office, on 8 August, 1919, to discuss the future of women police. Mrs. Percy Bigland (a member of AMSH), of the Criminal Law Amendment Committee was describing her view of the beginnings of the demand for women police. She estimated it to be in 1913, mentioning that a member of the Committee had travelled abroad to investigate the work of women police - this was probably Constance Tite, the WFL Treasurer.

1914. In cases of incest, rape, and criminal assault women and girls were often left alone, their suffering was increased by their experiences in the hands of the police or in court. Society should seek to ameliorate their situation. Women were often deterred from reporting sexual offences because they knew they would have to tell men about what had happened; and in cases of indecency, concealment of birth and abortion which involved intimate personal investigation, young male officers were not necessarily competent to do the work.¹²⁰

When the war started, there was a call for volunteers to act as Special Constables. Nina Boyle was quick to respond.¹²¹ Although subsequently women were not allowed to be Special Constables, Nina Boyle went ahead and organised a volunteer force under WFL auspices, the Women Police Volunteers (WPV)¹²². She designed a uniform and she and Edith Watson were the first to wear it. It consisted of:

. . . a useful blue serge skirt, blue serge Norfolk jacket with pockets, straw Panama hat with blue ribbon and white armband with 'WVP' in bold,

and was deliberately unlike any "imitation of man's attire",¹²³ an interesting indication of notions of difference between the functions of male and female police. When Edith Watson, whose title was Investigations Chief, appeared at the Old Bailey for her usual monitoring duties her outfit created quite a stir.¹²⁴ Their view that women should be very much involved in court and police business at ground level was based on their experience of watching and reporting in court and of going through the processes of arrest and imprisonment. Reminding *The Vote* readers of the ways in which women prisoners were treated, Nina Boyle said:

¹²⁰ *The Vote* Vol. X, No. 243 (19 June 1914).

¹²¹ [Boyle], "Women's Police Volunteers".

¹²² In the various records the group is called either the Women Volunteer Police or Women Police Volunteers. To simplify I have called them the Women Police Volunteers, except in quotation.

¹²³ *The Vote* Vol. X, No. 252 (21 August 1914).

¹²⁴ [Boyle], "Women's Police Volunteers". Edith Watson newspaper cuttings, private collection. See illustration, p. 28. I have been unable to trace the original photograph.

We want women police, women gaolers, women inspectors, and women in more and more departments of police life.¹²⁵

It was also a strategic issue: if women could prove their usefulness for policing during wartime, their credibility would then be established, the authorities would have less reason to object to women in the regular police force.¹²⁶ They developed a much more radical philosophy than some feminists. Theirs was not a middle-class anxiety to clean up the streets, to prevent prostitutes soliciting in public or to control the sexual activity of working-class women and girls, as was very much the case with many in the social purity movement. These varied perceptions and different solutions proposed during and after the war will be further discussed in Chapter Five.

As the war progressed, the separate strands which had constituted the basis for feminist agitation on sexual issues became conspicuously divergent. Partly this was simply a reflection of changing pressures owing to the war. When the Defence of the Realm Act (DoRA) was introduced,¹²⁷ the sweeping powers given to the military and the police were recognised by many feminists as a threat to women's freedom. Over a few months there were proposals which seemed to herald the reintroduction of the CD Acts and to impose draconian supervision on women and girls in the interests of public order. It was here that the consensus began to break down.

The rationale for the Women Police Volunteers, to protect the interests of women, was stated explicitly in *The Vote*. Nina Boyle outlined for readers why she felt women police were necessary, and absolutely essential in war-time, when many households were without men and when inexperienced and amateur policing was occurring. Among the bulk of special constables would be men:

¹²⁵ Nina Boyle, *The Vote* Vol. X, No. 314 (29 November 1915).
¹²⁶ *The Vote* Vol. X, No. 252 (21 August 1914).
¹²⁷ See Chapter Five, p. 243.

... from whom women and girls are at all times in danger and for whose presence the streets would be none the safer.¹²⁸

In November 1915, when it seemed that European civilisation itself was under threat, Nina Boyle made explicit a connection between the humane treatment of prisoners, particularly females, and the value system of a society:

The community cannot sanction and permit gross abuses of decency and all that we hold to be civilised and humane, without the morale of the whole being in danger of deterioration.¹²⁹

Meanwhile, the women's patrols organised by philanthropic and social purity societies were continuing in an ad hoc manner. For example, as well as patrolling railway stations and city streets, they helped escort Belgian refugees through London. Among the leaders was Margaret Damer Dawson, a member of the NVA and the Criminal Law Amendment Committee. She also wanted to form a women's police organisation. Realising that there was a danger of duplication, Nina Boyle and Miss Dawson amalgamated their groups. Whereas Miss Dawson's group comprised mostly upper and middle-class women who saw the patrols as an extension of their philanthropic activities, members of the WPV were drawn from all social classes. The WFL emphasised the need to recruit from "all classes" and to give much more specialist training to volunteers.¹³⁰ Contributions to help provide uniform jackets for "women in necessitous circumstances" were requested. Even in minor matters, for example in their rejection of the "plethora of badges and rank signs" favoured by Miss Dawson, Nina Boyle and Edith Watson aimed to be egalitarian.¹³¹ Primarily because she was unpopular with the authorities over her militant suffrage activities, Nina Boyle agreed to become Miss Dawson's deputy. Miss Dawson concentrated on recruitment and negotiating a role for the WPV with government,

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The Vote Vol. X, No. 285 (9 April 1915).

¹²⁹

Nina Boyle, *The Vote* Vol. X, No. 314 (29 November 1915).

¹³⁰

Radford, "Women Policing", p. 29; see also Alison Woodeson, "The First Women Police: A Force for Equality or Infringement?", *Women's History Review* Vol. 2, No. 2 (1993), pp. 217-232.

¹³¹

[Boyle], "Women's Police Volunteers"

police and military officials, while Nina Boyle toured the country, speaking, organising and raising funds for the new association.

In communities where large concentrations of servicemen disrupted civilian life, the spectre of public disorder was raised quite quickly. Not unnaturally, army camps attracted considerable attention from young women in the locality, among them prostitutes. The subsequent activities of young people were perceived as a menace by many in the middle classes. Several organisations ranging from the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), the Young Women's Christian Association, and the Mothers Union to the Girls Friendly Society and the NUWW joined to express their alarm. In October 1914 they called for patrols of women to influence and, if necessary, restrain the women who thronged the vicinity of the camps. Their objective was "to safeguard our girls from the results of the very natural excitement produced by the abnormal conditions now prevailing".¹³² Their leader was Mrs. Creighton, a member of the International Bureau for the Suppression of the White Slave Traffic.¹³³

4.3 b) Differences of Opinion: 1915

At this stage, Nina Boyle was preoccupied with promoting the WPV. She was not prepared to see it manipulated into the control and coercion of women for the benefit and convenience of military authorities or mealy-mouthed moralists. She suggested that the authorities, rather than harping on control of women, request some elementary self-control from the soldiers.¹³⁴ Some suffrage organisations, the WFL and Sylvia Pankhurst's East London Federation of the Suffragettes among them, had protested vigorously at the curfews and at the surveillance of women.¹³⁵ Feminist organisations co-operated in

¹³² Letter to *The Times*, 13 October, 1914, quoted by Lock, *British Policewoman*, p. 22.

¹³³ See Chapter Three, note 54.

¹³⁴ Lock, *British Policewoman*, p. 23.

¹³⁵ Lock, *British Policewoman*, p. 28; *The Vote* Vol. X, No. 272 (8 January 1915).

reaction to the proposed re-introduction of the CD Acts - Charlotte Despard and Nina Boyle led a deputation to the Prime Minister in protest; they were reassured but still remained wary. When two members of the WPV acquiesced in a curfew order made under DoRA by authorities in Grantham, early in 1915, the situation reached a crisis. There was open conflict between Miss Dawson whose wish for official acceptance of the women police volunteers led her into collusion with male-dominated authorities, and Nina Boyle and Edith Watson, who felt their feminist principles were being undermined.¹³⁶ Nina Boyle demanded Miss Dawson's resignation, but on the ballot which followed, only two - Edith Watson and Eva Christy, another WFL member - supported her.¹³⁷ Even Mary Allen, a former Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) activist, later a Commandant in the police, failed to see the significance of their argument.¹³⁸

Edith Watson did continue as a policewoman. Apart from a few small provincial remnants, the WPV ceased to exist; Miss Dawson re-named the association the Women Police Service.¹³⁹ Official ambivalence about policing by women continued; often they served in fairly limited areas. As the war progressed, women's police patrols were not necessarily appreciated by the young women they were supposedly protecting.¹⁴⁰

Retrospectively, Nina Boyle expressed her views in *The Vote* in her usual cogent manner:

... conniving at or submitting to improper political measures and methods damaged the possibilities from the Suffrage point of view.

The founders of the WPV:

¹³⁶ In her autobiography, Edith Watson says she was not as concerned about adhering to the letter of principle as Nina Boyle, but she voted with her because she understood how keenly she felt about the issue.

¹³⁷ Lock, *British Policewoman*, p. 29.

¹³⁸ Radford, "Women Policing", p. 33. See below, p. 227.

¹³⁹ Lock, *British Policewoman*, p. 28.

¹⁴⁰ For a general discussion of the early days of women police, see Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement 1914-1959* (London: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 32-34; Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women's Experience in Two World Wars* (London: Pandora, 1987), pp. 45, 108-110.

. . . felt it was impossible to be associated with any work, no matter how useful, which meant the coercion of women and girls and the depriving them of their liberty . . . ¹⁴¹

As feminists, they had endeavoured to introduce into discursive practices a concept of power employed to ensure women's rights - to freedom from violence and harassment, of freedom to inhabit public space on the same terms as men. They had tried to demolish the construct of women as victims in need of protection and control 'for their own good', but the attempt had failed.

Examining the history and contradictions of policing by women, Jill Radford points out the principles involved in the conflict between Nina Boyle and Miss Dawson were fundamental, and as significant to contemporary concerns as they were then. Those who followed Miss Dawson were willing to subordinate women's rights to male interests, particularly in efforts to seek men's approval. Radford asserts the WFL position was highly significant in political terms. It indicated their recognition that autonomy was the only strategy that did not compromise women's interests, and that if this was unobtainable withdrawal was the only political stance open to them.¹⁴² Warning contemporary feminists to be wary of reforms granted by patriarchal institutions concerning the policing of men's sexual violence, Radford concludes:

Reforms, which assist men in cleaning up the face of hetero-patriarchy by making it easier for white, middle-class, 'virtuous', heterosexual women to complain only of the most obvious and excessive forms of men's violence, are not simply divisive, but by upholding the white patriarchal status quo cannot ultimately be in the interests of any women.¹⁴³

Another consequence of the break-up of the consensus between feminists and social purity activists was the WFL's exclusion from a Committee for the Prevention of Criminal Assault on Children in July 1914. The founders, Mrs. Creighton and others with

¹⁴¹ *The Vote* Vol. X, No. 285 (9 April 1915).

¹⁴² Radford, "Women Policing", pp. 34 - 35.

¹⁴³ Radford, "Women Policing", p. 45.

similar views, were galvanised in part by the 'Violet Parrott' case, but neither Nina Boyle nor Edith Watson who had inaugurated that campaign were invited to join. *The Vote* recorded the League's indignation at the new committee's ingratitude and lack of generosity. Even suffrage contemporaries had failed to notice the League's contribution to rousing public opinion. And again, the old explanations were being trotted out "with complacency" - these crimes against children and the light penalties attached to them were "due to 'bad housing' and 'the ignorance of the public'".¹⁴⁴ It must have been galling for women who had spent several years recording and analysing a basic cause of child sexual abuse, the subordination and lack of power of women and girls, to have had their work so contemptuously overlooked. *The Vote* suggested if assaults on little boys by women had occurred, nothing would protect women from savage sentencing, yet mothers had been deprived of the most elementary facilities for protecting their children. The new Committee could:

. . . take it from us . . . the root of evil is not bad housing or public ignorance of facts, but the subjection and inferior status of women which makes crimes against female persons the most easily condoned in the calendar.¹⁴⁵

Here the WFL's radical position is unequivocal.

During 1915 the energy focused on the column in *The Vote* and the Women's Police Volunteers was diverted. Under the heading "How Women Are Protected", Edith Watson recorded the plight of munitions girls who had left their jobs because their foreman sexually harassed them. The girls were "too shy to state plainly to the tribunal", which was "excessively masculine", what the foreman had done. How many similar cases were there? she asked. The year finished on a note of despair from Nina Boyle in a

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The Vote Vol. X, No. 274 (22 January 1915).

¹⁴⁵

The Vote Vol. X, No. 274 (22 January 1915).

Christmas message. A survey of court cases revealed continued injustices and unfair treatment. There had been:

. . . no change of heart towards women on the part of men. Peace and goodwill are empty words where we are concerned.¹⁴⁶

Edith Watson became a full-time policewoman - and did not report regularly for *The Vote* any more. Nina Boyle remained active in the WFL, helping to organise its activities assisting women whose lives were disrupted by the war. By 1916 she was working with the Scottish Women's Hospital in Serbia and Macedonia.¹⁴⁷

Without Nina Boyle and Edith Watson, the radical critique on family violence and women's sexual subjugation seems to have dissipated within the WFL, although elements were retained and emerged in different forms over the next twenty years. The League continued to support women in the police after the war, when there was disagreement about women's ability to serve in the same ways as male police. A Home Office Enquiry in August 1919 approved women police but many local authorities dragged their feet and in 1922, the Geddes Committee's financial squeeze nearly caused the end of women police. (The public outcry which followed is described in Chapter Five.¹⁴⁸) The WFL gave evidence to the 1928 Royal Commission on Police Powers and Procedures.

Shortly after the war, Nina Boyle worked with what became the Save the Children Fund (SCF). In Serbia in 1916 she had worked with Evalina Haverfield, one of the leaders of the Scottish Women's Hospitals service; she retained contact with members of the Serbian community for some time, liaising with Haverfield's Mission to Serbian children for the SCF. She spent some time in Russia on the SCF's behalf, learning about conditions during the post-Revolutionary struggles and famines in 1922.¹⁴⁹ I speculate her

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The Vote Vol. X No. 323 (31 December 1915).

¹⁴⁷

International Women's News, Obituary, (April 1943).

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See Chapter Five, pp. 276-277. See also Lock, *British Policewoman*, especially the Chapter, "The Geddes Axe", pp. 135-146; and Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement*, pp. 117-119.

¹⁴⁹

I have found a discrepancy in dates; the *SCF Record* gives 9 December 1922 as the date she and

experiences in Serbia and in Russia led to a shift in focus for her energies. The alleviation of children's suffering from war and famine became priorities. Although these aspects of her political life involve a chronological leap, I propose to discuss them next in Section 4.4 because I wish to consider whether she created an explicit theory about the institutionalisation of male violence. As evidence, I follow her writings from 1912 to the 1930s and cite her work on behalf of children, her continued concern about trafficking in women and her exposure of women's sexual oppression internationally, to suggest she developed the view that men's aggression at individual and structural levels led to the institutionalisation of violence in a systemic way.

4.4 "Man Is the Prevailing Danger": Nina Boyle, Feminism and Male Violence

In Chapter One I referred to the examination by Antoinette Burton and Vron Ware of discursive constructs inherited from nineteenth-century imperialism by the Edwardian suffrage movement.¹⁵⁰ Nina Boyle represents one facet of the legacy. She combined an egalitarian feminism with quite rigid views on the supremacy of British culture: it was the height of civilisation to her. The hallmark of any ethnic group or 'racial' culture, was its treatment of women. 'Did women have the same rights as men?' was the defining question for her. At times this simplistic perspective threw up useful analyses, on other occasions it

Lilian Lenton set off, Cicely Hamilton in *Nina Boyle, A Memoir* (for the Nina Boyle Memorial Fund, n.d.), p.5, gives 1921. Evelina Haverfield (1867-1920) was a suffrage activist who later became Commandant-in-Chief of the Women's Reserve Ambulance service. Nina Boyle wrote an account of Haverfield's life (which is now in the Imperial War Museum). She worked with Haverfield at the Scottish Women's Hospital Unit in Serbia. Haverfield worked with Dr. Elsie Inglis and in 1917 went to Russia. She organised a Fund for Serbian soldiers which continued after the war, for disabled soldiers and their families; she established an orphanage on the borders of Serbia and Bosnia. Earlier, Haverfield had been in South Africa and in the Boer War had spent some time rescuing disabled horses abandoned in the veldt. She was fond of hunting and sport and lived with Vera Holme, the first professional woman chauffeur, who worked for Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence. She was a friend of Edie Craig so, with Nina Boyle, may have had connections with the circle of lesbians surrounding Craig, Christopher St. John and Cicely Hamilton. Haverfield was the daughter of the third Lord Abinger; was married twice and had two sons. Nina Boyle, "An Account of the Life of the Hon. Evelina Haverfield", hand-written and typescript, Women At War Collection, The Imperial War Museum, Reel 81, Part 5, Serbia 11/20 and 11/21.

See Chapter One, pp.54-56.

led to racism. I suggest Nina Boyle exemplifies Ware's hypothesis that concepts of sisterhood and shared experience do not necessarily imply a progressive outlook. In Nina Boyle's case this is especially so in respect of her racism.¹⁵¹ She made little attempt to view different customs involving a variety of sexual practices from any cultural perspective other than her own.

Generally Nina Boyle's written style tended to be passionate, emotive and charged with her powerful feelings of injustice. She was a popular speaker for the WFL and SCF and was widely known for her debating skills and wit.¹⁵² These did not always readily translate into print where her rhetorical style can seem overblown and too rumbustious. She coined the word "feminophobia" to describe what she saw as men's inability to acknowledge women's rights to freedom, "a spirit of intolerant interference with the liberties of other people".¹⁵³ There was some fairly mundane journalism in *The Vote*, for example, bread-and-butter articles produced in reaction to current events or incidents. They were often ironic in tone and sometimes show evidence of having been hurriedly written; at times the context was inadequately sketched, factual details not included; she made generalisations or racist points. For instance, in 1912, irritated by a national outcry about the horrors of colonial treatment of native peoples in the Putomayo massacre, she compared the atrocities with those being perpetrated on women. She thought the "negrophile philanthropists" who were making such a clamour ignored similar revelations if the victims were "only women and girls".¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ See Chapter One, p. 55.

¹⁵² Bernard Watson, interview by author, 29 May 1991 and 22 October 1991, Twickenham, tape recording.

¹⁵³ Nina Boyle, *The Vote* Vol. IX, No. 234 (7 April 1914).

¹⁵⁴ Nina Boyle, *The Vote* Vol. VI, No. 148 (24 August 1912). The Putomayo Massacre was an example of some of the worst excesses of British economic imperialism. In 1910, Roger Casement, then a British Consul, exposed atrocities carried out on the native peoples in Putomayo Territory, (the Amazonian jungle region of Brazil, Peru and Columbia) by a British concern, the Peruvian Amazon Company. A public outcry about the revelations of slave labour and cruelties followed.

The 1912 Criminal Law Amendment Act had been criticised by Nina Boyle because, in the case of prostitution, it was being applied only to the working class, not "those who cater for rich and influential clients".¹⁵⁵ She wrote a pamphlet for the WFL, *The Traffic in Women: Unchallenged Facts and Figures*, in 1913. In November that year *The Vote* recorded the pamphlet had sold out and a second edition was being prepared; obviously it had proved to be popular with League members in the ongoing debate on the issue.¹⁵⁶ Recognising that the term 'white slavery' had connotations which could exclude women from other cultures, Nina Boyle made the point that women of "all colours" were being exploited.¹⁵⁷ She listed three forms of trafficking which functioned in the sexual oppression of women of all colours: the elementary one where a brutalised man drove a woman (often wife, mistress or daughter) on to the streets to earn him a living; concubinage, where girls were sold or contracted for, which was perfectly legal in some countries; and the third, "the most revolting", where girls were duped into prostitution. In her description of the latter, she blamed the girls themselves to some extent for their:

... love of amusement, foolishness, frivolity, flightiness, vice, ignorance and misplaced affection.¹⁵⁸

Here her depiction of prostitutes was similar to that of victimised womanhood constructed by the social purity movement:

It is the trapping, tricking, cheating, luring away of girls through false advertisement, false marriages, false friends, false pretences of all sorts, to imprisonment from which there is no escape.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵ Nina Boyle, *The Traffic in Women: Unchallenged Facts and Figures* (London: Women's Freedom League, n.d. [1913]), p. 4.

¹⁵⁶ See Chapter Three, p. 157.

¹⁵⁷ The term 'white slavery' was in vogue at the turn of the century but by 1921 the use of the term was declining. As Kathleen Barry has pointed out, 'white slavery' carries racist, classist associations in addition to sexist implications. Kathleen Barry, *Female Sexual Slavery* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1979), p. 27.

¹⁵⁸ Boyle, *Traffic in Women*, p. 6.

¹⁵⁹ Boyle, *Traffic in Women*, p. 5.

She painted a picture of the traffic supplying demands from men in the "highest, and wealthiest circles" but, besides the rhetoric, gave more objective evidence about the mechanics of the trade, prices paid, profits made and the numbers of customers served. It seems likely that this information was provided by Alison Neilans.

Was Nina Boyle's suggestion that women's sufferings were always ignored relative to men's, part of a coherent theory proposing that male violence was embedded in many cultural structures? Her strategy, which was sustained from early on in the suffrage campaign, was to compare and contrast women's position, rights, and place within a particular culture with those of the men. In any society, at any period, she argued, women had less freedom, and were under the threat of male "passion". By this she seemed to propose a notion of uncontrolled feeling. It included lust and also strength, the power of men to enforce their wishes and desires at both individual and political levels. Explaining reasons for introducing the column in *The Vote*, "How Men Protect Women", in March, 1912, she listed historical instances, for example Norman *droits de seigneur*, the persecution of witches, the mobbing of suffragettes, which she attributed to "the same tendency", the view that a woman had no right to her own person.¹⁶⁰ She extended the critique in an article, "Who Pays?" later that year, using cross-cultural examples, from atrocities in China to Boer women incarcerated in concentration camps in South Africa, in order to emphasise a long history of women paying the price of men's belligerence. Reflecting on the march of military technology in the Europe of her day, she drew attention to the impact of new inventions, such as long-range guns, on women. Contemplating twentieth-century warfare, she asked presciently:

What will women be called upon to pay when aeroplanes empty their streams of explosives upon the smiling lands above which they hover? . . . For men's privileges, men's plans, men's ambitions, women pay; and there is

¹⁶⁰

Nina Boyle, Report of a speech, *The Vote* Vol. V, No. 125 (16 March 1912).

neither justice nor mercy in shutting them out from joint authority and responsibility. . . .¹⁶¹

By 1915, her premonitions were being realised. She constructed war as "The Male Peril". It was a "purely masculine device". The "dark shadows over Europe" were not being cast by women. Her impassioned style is no different from the bellicose rhetoric of the popular press of the time. However, rather than castigate a national enemy in lurid terms, she directed her anger at a generalised, unbridled masculinity. She linked the violence of war with the violence perpetrated by individual males. Women were in danger from this threat, whether from men as soldiers:

. . . crying women's place was in the home, yet destroying that home in war, . . . or whether he be the unknown element every woman is afraid to meet in a lonely lane or in the dark; man is the prevailing danger. . . . It is not armies of marching women whose tramp echoes through the desolate homesteads and whose tread crushes the still-breathing bodies of the sons of women into blood-soaked soil.¹⁶²

The connections between personal, physical acts and the systematised nature of men's brutality were made explicit here. She concluded this article by warning that women's needs were being ignored, referring to the 1915 International Women's Congress at The Hague. She felt that for International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) members to divert their energies away from the cause of women's rights was a mistake. Already they were seeing how the suffrage movement had suffered "because of circumstances over which it has no control". It needed all the concentrated loyalty possible. Many causes would seek to harness the energy, ability and organisation of suffrage women; if that happened the movement would suffer.¹⁶³ Nina Boyle was to return to this theme in the mid-twenties. During the war, like others, and disregarding her own advice, she was caught up in the national crisis. There was something of a lull in her campaigning until

¹⁶¹ Nina Boyle, *The Vote* Vol. VI, No. 135 (25 May 1912).

¹⁶² Nina Boyle, *The Vote* Vol. X, No. 305 (27 August 1915).

¹⁶³ Ibid..

after the war years. Immediately after the war Nina Boyle was busy with the beginnings of the Save the Children Fund and with writing fiction. The first of her twelve novels, *Out of the Frying Pan*, was published in 1920.

She had proposed to the IWSA in 1919, an international charter for women's liberties which concerned women being bought and sold in marriage, particularly in countries under colonial rule. This had received some sympathy from French delegates, but little from British representatives. As well as requesting the Paris Peace Congress establish a system to trace and rescue missing women, "captured, stolen, or deported" during the war, give disenfranchised women some political power and give women the same nationality rights as men, she wanted the Congress to outlaw:

... all customs, whether social, religious, or domestic, which entail the sale, barter, or disposal of women and girls - in marriage or otherwise - without their consent . . . ¹⁶⁴

As Chairman of the Women Voters' Council, Nina Boyle, along with Edith How Martyn, Florence Underwood of the WFL, and many others, formed a British Special Congress for the IWSA Eighth International Congress in Geneva in 1920. At the Congress, Alison Neilans was a fraternal delegate representing AMSII, but Nina Boyle does not appear to have attended and her proposals were not adopted.

An international framework in the analysis of women's subjugation had begun in 1904 in the IWSA and it continued in tune with post-war hopes for an international community, for example through the League of Nations. Nina Boyle felt women could lose out. To her, the only purpose of feminism was "the securing of equality with men for our sex". In a letter to *Jus Suffragii* in 1922, she criticised the international feminist movement for dissipating its energies on support for other movements rather than feminism. To campaign for the League of Nations and internationalism, Labour relations,

¹⁶⁴ Nina Boyle, Letter to *Jus Suffragii* Vol. 13, No. 5 (February, 1919).

the wrongs of Ireland or the self-determination of small nations, or provision of birth control clinics would mean little progress towards women's "real" freedom:

We want less unction, more crusading. Until the last disability riveted on women because of their sex has disappeared from the last, least island the world over, our task remains uncompleted, our triumph still to seek.¹⁶⁵

She felt that if female inequality, in whatever form or culture it existed, was not targeted exclusively, then the rights of women and girls would always be the last to be remedied. It was an essentialist critique and when she brought it to bear on an international stage, her arguments are certainly ethnocentric, sometimes racist. Her views were based on her early life in South Africa. Her premise revealed conflicting elements; an imperialist ideology predicated on notions of hierarchical civilisations which coexisted with a concept of international sisterhood equated with feminism.¹⁶⁶ Inherent in imperialism was the idea that one of the duties of empire was to bring civilisation to subject peoples. In mitigation, I think her concern for the rights of women over their own bodies was paramount. Nina Boyle attempted to analyse cultural, social and economic factors which contributed to women's sexual exploitation and to question cultural customs in sexual relationships which hitherto had been seen simply as "native customs", hence outside colonial jurisdiction.

Her case was to propose the definition of 'slavery' be extended by applying the term to marriage customs, such as forced or child marriage, and the ownership of women, for example by selling or bartering girls and women as prostitutes or concubines. Thus she linked a traditional rhetorical device which presented women's sexual subservience as slavery, with men's need for protection from exploitation of their labour. She attempted to use the emergent League of Nations to substantiate the claim that slavery would not be abolished until such customs ceased to exist. In 1925 members of the League of Nations had ratified an agreement to abolish slavery which was defined as:

¹⁶⁵

Nina Boyle, Letter to *Jus Suffragii* Vol. 16, No. 9 (June 1922).

¹⁶⁶

See Chapter One, pp. 54-55.

... the status of a person over whom all or any of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised.¹⁶⁷

She argued that female slavery:

... masqueraded as 'domestic and social custom', which would be dangerous to interfere with - such an easy and time-honoured way of disposing of women's liberties.¹⁶⁸

She was particularly disappointed that, while children and workers possessed effective representation at the League of Nations, women's needs were marginalised. By 1927 she was again criticising feminists for spending their energies on socialism and pacifism. To readers of *Jus Suffragii*, she said:

... our job is to free women from the control of men, giving them rights over their own bodies...¹⁶⁹

Through her journalism she tried to expose and explore those African and Asian customs which she thought degraded women. A series of articles in *The Woman's Leader* in Autumn 1929 drew Eleanor Rathbone's attention to the issues and led to questions in parliament from Rathbone and the Duchess of Atholl, formerly an anti-suffragist, with whom Nina Boyle shared a public platform to try to raise public awareness.

In 1927, with the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC) and other organisations, Eleanor Rathbone had instigated an ill-founded campaign to reform Indian customs such as child marriage. She compounded her mistake by planning a conference on the subject in London in 1929, overlooking much of the work and campaigning done by many Indian women in India, who resented this slight. Consequently a leading representative group, the All-India Women's Conference, refused to co-operate.¹⁷⁰ When, in 1929, the House of Commons debated the rights of native peoples,

¹⁶⁷ Nina Boyle, "What Is Slavery?", *The Shield*, Vol. VII, No. 3. (July 1931).

¹⁶⁸ Nina Boyle, Letter to *Jus Suffragii* (June 1922).

¹⁶⁹ Nina Boyle, Letter to *Jus Suffragii* (June 1927).

¹⁷⁰ See Barbara N. Ramusack, "Embattled Advocates: The Debate over Birth Control in India 1920-40", *Journal of Women's History* Vol. 1, No. 2 (Fall 1989), pp. 48-59; Mary Stocks, *Eleanor Rathbone* (London: Gollancz, 1949), pp. 134-140. See also Chapter Six, pp. 338-339.

Rathbone demanded the same legal rights for women as for men. The Duchess of Atholl raised the question of female genital mutilation in countries under British rule.¹⁷¹ The Colonial Office response was vague, suggesting that in their opinion it was inadvisable to interfere with native tradition.¹⁷² Nina Boyle continued her crusade. An article, *What Is Slavery? An Appeal to Women*, published as a pamphlet in the early 1930s, and reprinted in *The Shield*, set out her case unequivocally.¹⁷³ In it she followed a similar format to that of her 1913 article on the white slave trade. Her case was based on the premise that the ongoing League of Nations deliberations on slavery overlooked certain "forms" of slavery and that, while the principle that no-one may own or dispose of the person of a man:

. . . the person of a woman may be lawfully and properly owned and disposed of so long as she be not a recognised wage-earner.¹⁷⁴

Two forms of slavery of which women alone were the victims existed, trafficking for immoral purposes and traffic for the purposes of marriage. Here she used a traditional feminist argument, pointing out the similarities between 'marriage' and prostitution. The main plank of her argument was the breach of fundamental human rights; also many of the customs involved motherhood at an early age which had disastrous effects on the health of young women. No-one, not the Anti-Slavery Society, the League of Nations, the Institute of International Affairs nor the Archbishop of Canterbury seemed interested. She reiterated her fifteen-year-old argument that women's rights to their own bodies were not perceived

¹⁷¹ *The Times* (12/13 December 1929); Stocks, *Eleanor Rathbone*, pp. 198-207.

¹⁷² Josiah Wedgwood, MP for Newcastle-under-Lyme, called together an unofficial, all-party committee of Members of Parliament who took part in a deputation to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Passfield, and Lord Cecil, who represented Britain at the League of Nations Slavery Convention at Geneva. Lord Passfield set up enquiries but, as Nina Boyle pointed out, most of the evidence and opinion came from government and administrators. No efforts were made to ascertain the views of the women themselves. The results of Lord Passfield's enquiries were published in 1931.

¹⁷³ A copy of the pamphlet was in Edith How Martyn's papers. In the acknowledgements Nina Boyle thanks the Committee and Editors of *The Shield* for their "encouragement, sympathy and publicity", and the Executive of the WFL "who gave me my first opportunities of placing the facts before the public". Nina Boyle, *What Is Slavery?, An Appeal to Women*. The pamphlet is not dated but I estimate it to have been printed about 1931. Author's collection.

¹⁷⁴ Boyle, *What Is Slavery?*, p 3.

in the same light as men's rights. She concluded that the revival of the anti-slavery propaganda then in vogue was:

. . . in its inception and its action a political and economic campaign aimed at those forms of Slavery which supply cheap and unpaid labour - labour which cuts across industry and wages.¹⁷⁵

She presented comparative detailed information on the various customs which ought to be abolished: child marriage in India, the notion of women as "property" to be purchased, bartered and inherited, the *lobolo* custom of a bride price in parts of Africa. The position of women caught between two cultures, that is women westernised by education and religion but still subject to their ethnic marriage and sexual customs seemed to have aroused her particular sympathy, a framework which suggests a referent to the duties of empire and missions to less civilised cultures. Her "Appeal to Women" was predicated on a cross-cultural notion of international sisterhood. It summed up her highest aspirations yet revealed a marked ethnocentrism. The women of Britain had a responsibility to other women. If they responded there could be a great triumph, if they failed, it would be "a great betrayal". Her sources were varied and included material from *The Shield*, Katherine Mayo's *Mother India*, reports from missionaries, government reports on native women, marriage and administration and infant mortality. She used an impassioned rhetorical style to make her point:

Do the Slavery Convention's signatories know of any worse form of slavery? . . . The blood of the child wives, and their dead babies, and their mutilated bodies, cry from the ground. The agony of the *lobolo* slave, thrashed or murdered because her confinement is difficult and painful, calls to us across the dividing seas. The screams of little girls, mad with terror at the approach of their torturers, echo from the imprisoning walls. What are we going to do about it? Are we going to establish, as our contribution to the world's history in this century of our emancipation, that none may own nor dispose of the person of a woman and that they shall go free as men? Are we going to insist that the Slavery Convention . . . shall ban Slavery "in all its forms," without discrimination of sex or kind, custom or creed?¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁷⁶ Boyle, *What Is Slavery?*, p. 15.

Nina Boyle's other major concern was for children's welfare. Her most substantial work was for the Save the Children Fund; she was a founder member and on the Executive Committee from 1921 until her death in 1943. From her travels in Russia she brought back first-hand accounts of the deprivation and suffering caused by the civil wars, assisting the SCF endeavour to pressurise the British government into sending aid. They were not successful.

Through the SCF she formed Young England, a young people's group and, as the 1930s progressed, may well have become increasingly reactionary. She appeared as a speaker for the British Union of Fascists but does not seem to have actually belonged to the organisation.¹⁷⁷ There is not space, nor do I have sufficient information about her declining years, to consider this aspect of her life in detail. But by 1930 Nina Boyle was sixty-five; financially she was insecure, her health poor although her effervescent spirit was undiminished. I suggest her collusion with British fascism in the early 1930's came from two sources. One, she had always been an "imperialist" and British world decline was seen by reactionary elements as a crisis of Empire; ¹⁷⁸ two, fascism's exaltation of women might have appealed when she confronted post-enfranchisement complacency that women's equality with men had been achieved. She was crucially aware that legislation itself could not bring about real equality.

¹⁷⁷ Martin Durham, "Women in the British Union of Fascists 1932-1940", in *This Working-Day World*, ed., Sybil Oldfield (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994), pp. 101-110; Johanna Alberti, "British Feminists and Anti-Fascism in the 1930s" In *This Working-Day World*, ed., Oldfield, p.103. Mary Allen, Commandant in the women's police, and former WSPU member, became a leading speaker for the British Union; see above, p. 214.

¹⁷⁸ Examining perceptions about the reasons for the sharp decline in British power in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Richard Thurlow argues that the radical right attributed it to the failure of the political system. They felt the Empire had been betrayed by the liberal consensus, and small-minded and puritanical elements of government. Richard Thurlow, "The Twilight of the Gods", Chapter One in *Fascism in Britain: A History 1918-1985* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 1-21, especially pp. 9-10.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the chapter I said that public awareness of the issues and tolerance of family violence, sexual abuse and harassment has varied. Naming and problematising them has been a feminist undertaking. It is a prerequisite to "righting the wrongs" suffered by women and children. The work of Nina Boyle and Edith Watson to define, quantify, and expose the prevalence of these forms of female sexual oppression was based on feminist traditions, yet pre-dated contemporary radical feminism by nearly seventy years. Their methodology was haphazard. They were unable to sustain the analysis for very long. But through the medium of a suffrage journal they firmly tied women's enfranchisement and access to political power to the larger question of women's sexual subordination. Nina Boyle's attempt to theorise male violence predestined modern feminist theorising by decades.

The demand for more female involvement in the judicial system saw a relatively swift result. Within two years, Nina Boyle and Edith Watson themselves took practical steps to begin a uniformed women's policing organisation which aimed to support women and girls, especially victims of male violence, through judicial processes and to ensure public space was accessible and safe for women. Of great potential significance, the founding of a women's police service can be seen as a successful inclusion of women into a powerful discursive institution. However, dominant discourses which constructed female sexuality in terms of control and protection proved too strong for such a revolutionary measure. Within a short time Nina Boyle's initiative was overwhelmed by more conventional views which limited women's liberty in the name of protection and subsumed female needs under the cloak of judicial impartiality. Had Nina Boyle's and Edith Watson's work to establish a feminist input into police and judicial systems been sustained and

extended, the history of the treatment of victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse over the last seventy years might have been very different.

CHAPTER FIVE: " . . . FREEING THE OUTCAST WOMEN . . . " : THE WORK OF ALISON NEILANS 1913 - 1935

Introduction

Chapter Five focuses mainly on one aspect of women's public sexual identity, that of women as providers of sexual services, an under-class supporting the double standard of sexual morality. It sketches feminist concerns about prostitution which continued from the nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. It is given specificity through the work of Alison Neilans, who undertook a sustained campaign to ensure equality of treatment for all women at a time when a number of contested representations were emerging. The period saw medical improvements in the treatment of VD and a decline in prostitution. Public concern about what was seen as the rise of the 'amateur' prostitute accompanied these changes. I shall also glance at some of Alison Neilans' later campaigning around child abuse because of the links between this and Nina Boyle's and Edith Watson's work.

In Section 5.1 I outline the theoretical basis to Alison Neilans' work. In Section 5.2 I trace the debate about criminal law amendment from 1917 to 1922, then summarise the development of the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene (AMSII) to show how it positioned itself as a pressure group during the 1920s and 30s. Prevailing attitudes to female sexuality are presented in Section 5.3, before I take the Association's work surrounding legislation on prostitution and solicitation as a case study to illuminate the possibilities and limitations of their discursive strategies. Alison Neilans' close working relationship with Lady Astor is also outlined. Following the case study, in Section 5.4 I present an outline of some AMSII work on child abuse and sexual offences to demonstrate how feminist concerns here continued. As medicalisation of these issues occurred, previous feminist analysis of their systemic nature could be obscured, though attempts

were made to understand the underlying causes. For instance, by the beginning of the 1930s, persistent child abusers began to be seen as sick and in need of psychological treatment, rather than evil and in need of punishment. An earlier feminist focus on the fact that men were the chief perpetrators and that unequal sexual power relationships may have been a contributory factor, was obscured.¹ The chapter concludes with a brief overview of Alison Neilans' international work in Section 5.5, to indicate those wider spheres where she had an influence.

5.1 The Continuation of a Feminist Philosophy

Through the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts (CD Acts), the Ladies National Association for the Abolition of State Regulation of Vice (LNA) and the British branch of the Association for the Abolition of the State Regulation of Vice (the Abolitionists)² had carved out a position for themselves in the late nineteenth century. By the early twentieth century they had to some extent been hijacked by the more extreme wing of the social purity movement. After a period of relative inaction, by 1913 they were beginning to re-emerge with a newly-formulated feminist position through the support of many suffrage campaigners. The organisations amalgamated in 1915, becoming the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene (AMSH or the Association). Feminists among

¹ Beatrix Campbell has argued that the Victorian ideology of men's sexuality as rampant, and difficult to control, made possible a feminist analysis of sexual abuse through perceptions of the dangers of masculinity. When the ideology began to be dismantled, key terms in the analysis were lost, for example, attention on masculinity as the problem was realigned, 'father' became 'parent' or 'the family', There was a transition from victim to culprit; victim-blaming or perceptions of the typical abuser as "a stranger in the park" prevailed. Thus the family was no longer a site of danger. Beatrix Campbell. Lecture to the British Association for the Study and Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, York, 1990. (The informal lecture was part of a response by the Association to the Cleveland child abuse case). For an analysis of the implications of linguistic interpretations and difficulties of evidence in child sexual abuse, see the chapter "Sex Crime: The Politics of Policing", in Beatrix Campbell, *Unofficial Secrets* (London: Virago, 1988), pp. 69-111. See also Estelle Freedman, "Uncontrolled Desires: The Response to the Sexual Psychopath, 1920-1960". *The Journal of American History* Vol. 74, No. 1 (June 1987) pp. 83-106.

² It was the custom to use a capital letter for Regulation and I shall follow that rule here. Regulation meant instances where legislation to prevent the spread of VD through compulsory examination or control of brothels established a formal acknowledgement of systematic prostitution.

its Vice-Presidents included Millicent Garrett Fawcett, Maude Royden and Mrs Saul Soloman (of the Women's Freedom League), and on the Executive Committee, Chrystal Macmillan, Bertha Mason and Frances Melville. The main aims were:

To raise the standard of character and conduct in sexual relations, to secure the recognition of an equal standard of morals for men and women, and to eradicate prostitution and kindred evils.³

The Association organised deputations to the government, lobbied Members of Parliament, orchestrated publicity campaigns and became a specialist organisation. Alison Neilans' work was at the heart of these campaigns; she initiated and masterminded many of them. Beginning at its inauguration as an assistant secretary in November 1915 when she was thirty-one, she went on to become General Secretary in 1917, when she also assumed editorship of *The Shield*, the society's journal. She was able to use *The Shield* as a vehicle to raise particular issues and give them prominence. The Association had a mixed and potentially divisive membership. Religious, legal, medical and philanthropic perspectives were represented; in Section 5.2 c). the ramifications of its factional nature are explored. Membership was never large; in 1926 there were between six and eight hundred subscribers.⁴ Further exploration of the Association's activities will be found in Section 5.2.

5.1 a) Alison Neilans on the Inheritance of the Women's Movement

Alison Neilans exemplifies earlier feminist traditions carried on into the 1920s and 1930s. The major principles which underlay the campaign for the Repeal of the CD Acts in

³ Association for Moral and Social Hygiene (AMSH) Executive Committee minutes, notes, 11 December 1914, Fawcett Library, London, LNA Box 68, p. 3. Frances Melville was a pioneer of university education for women in Scotland. She also had been on the International Women's Congress Committee in 1915.

⁴ AMSH minutes, 16 July 1926, Fawcett Library, AMSH Box 42..

the 1870s continued to frame her work through the suffrage campaign and after. So the feminist challenge to a double standard of sexual morality was perpetuated.

The original Abolitionist and LNA campaigners held firstly that the state had no right to provide facilities for debauchery. To do so, that is to attempt to regulate prostitution in any way, for example by medical inspection of prostitutes or by licensing brothels, undermined the "whole idea of personal responsibility which is the basis of all morality".⁵ Legally, to create a separate class of citizens, 'common prostitutes', whose rights were diminished and different from those of other citizens, was untenable. A code of sexual morality which demanded different standards for women and men was indefensible.⁶ These principles sustained Alison Neilans' activism.

Her analyses of moral and sexual discourses show she had grasped the significance of the ways cultural constructs affect the physical reality of women's lives. At the outset of her career she had been able to reveal those relational constructs which operate in such discourses. In 1915, she had exposed the relationships between social constructs and language when writing about rape, long a concomitant of warfare and a powerful discursive image at the time. She commented on the notion that the violation of a woman's body signified the victim herself was 'dishonoured'. Attitudes which saw a raped woman as debased and spoiled were "cruel and shallow". Violation did not dishonour a woman:

We shall not really establish the equal moral standard till we banish from our thought and language certain expressions which put a woman's honour and a woman's personality on a different plane from a man's.⁷

⁵ "Principles of the International Federation for the Abolition of State Regulation of Prostitution" in AMSH, Seventh Annual Report (1 April 1921 - 31 March 1922), Fawcett Library, AMSH Box 42. 352 . 9364. (Hereafter referred to as: AMSH Seventh Annual Report. Note that most of the AMSH documents referred to are deposited in the Fawcett Library in AMSH Boxes 42 and 43; hereafter location of AMSH documents will be omitted unless deposited elsewhere.)

⁶ Alison Neilans, "Changes in Sex Morality", in *Our Freedom and Its Results*, ed., Ray Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1936), p. 178-181, and other articles.

⁷ *The Shield* NS Vol. XV, No. 152 (April 1915), p. 2.

I have elected to summarise Alison Neilans' retrospective analysis because it demonstrates the insight gained by over twenty years' experience negotiating in complex discourses of sexuality.

She believed the nineteenth-century women's movement had persistently challenged dominant discourses on sexuality in specific ways. Her assessment of the movement's impact was summed up in "Changes in Sex Morality", which she contributed to Ray Strachey's evaluation of women's enfranchisement, *Our Freedom and Its Results*, published in 1936. In the chapter, Alison Neilans gave examples of nineteenth-century interventions in public debates to make the point that the women's movement fights against child prostitution, state Regulation and the CD Acts, had broken the conspiracy of silence. A more open dialogue between the sexes had been made feasible. Men's conception of "solving the sex problem" had been to promote those inequalities and injustices which formed the main obstacle in the path to women's freedom. Public and philanthropic work, for example as Poor Law Guardians, had also provided women with the chance to debate on equal terms with men; they had changed "the whole atmosphere in regard to sex questions". Previously, when men's theories and prejudices had predominated, "the feminine" had been discounted. "In the world as men had made it", women had been brought up to ignore the uglier aspects of sex. The sex question was dealt with by men in what seemed to them the appropriate way and without regard to what women thought about it.⁸

Similarly, the suffrage campaign had had:

. . . the effect of rousing the whole country to a passionate and most controversial discussion of every aspect of the equality demands and of women's status in the community.⁹

⁸ Neilans, "Changes in Sex Morality", p. 199.

⁹ Ibid., p. 220.

By dissenting from the status quo, the women's movement had raised issues and promoted debate. Female views of relationships between men and women had been voiced. Women's emancipation in political, educational, and economic as well as sexual spheres, meant the "masculine conception of life" had become:

. . . permeated with the feminine point of view. . . . the women's movement had to fight every inch of the way towards the recognition of the value of the feminine principle in life.¹⁰

She did not define what she meant by "the feminine principle", but implies a collection of female views about heterosexual relationships which counterpointed predominating male constructs. Feminists would not accept the traditional division of women into 'good' and 'bad' categories. ¹¹ Women's views had brought a more "balanced world instead of a one-sided one". Consequently, by the mid 1930s, there was:

. . . less artificial romanticism and more reality; less brutality and more understanding, less prejudice and more knowledge. ¹²

Hence men and women, especially the young, enjoyed a valuable freedom of companionship which promoted better understanding and greater interests ranging beyond the merely sexual. She enumerated improvements: in changing attitudes to illegitimacy and divorce, a reduction in cases of VD, greater protection of children, raising the minimum age of marriage.

She developed the implication that male and female sexual priorities were not necessarily identical when discussing the constituents of sexual morality. The sexual double standard had been an "irresponsible one for men, heavily weighted with responsibility and punishment for women". Originally the women's movement had assumed the aim was not just an equal but a high standard, to raise men's behavioural patterns to those expected of women. These included a belief in chastity and monogamous

¹⁰ Neilans, "Changes in Sex Morality", p. 200.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 216.

¹² Ibid., p. 200.

relationships sanctified by marriage. A new factor, the prospect of open sexual relationships outside marriage, was evident by the mid 1930s. It was bringing the women's movement to a parting of the ways. Some feminists saw this as greater freedom, the "ultimate triumph" of the movement. While welcoming less censorious attitudes, Alison Neilans suggested that sexual freedom could lead to women's exploitation. She identified the power of social discourses to construct sexual behaviour and some of the potential dangers for women, especially the young and inexperienced. Birth control was "pushed without regard to consequences" by companies keen to make a profit; there was a tendency for women to be regarded as "fair game for sexual pursuit", more chance of young people's exploitation by older, unscrupulous, experienced seducers and prospects of shallow and unsatisfactory sexual relations as a result of peer group pressure. None of the contracts and responsibilities of marriage, only its privileges, would be recognised. In a world where women had not yet attained real economic independence, men's jealousy and possessiveness could lead to the serious curtailment of freedom for women and girls.¹³ She acknowledged that marriage was "not altogether satisfactory either to men or women" except a few, and adduced economic poverty as a major cause of difficulty.

She concluded her chapter with some observations about prevailing features of the public discourse on sexuality in 1936, the 'right to abortion' and 'voluntary sterilisation of the unfit'. She used a class analysis to argue that abortion and sterilisation might be used as "a weapon against the poor", rather than a solution to their difficulties. While birth control had been a palliative, it was not always successful in preventing unwanted births, as the demand for legalised abortion was revealing. Economic factors were relevant; many parents prevented conception and many mothers resorted to abortion, "because they dare

¹³ Ibid., p. 227.

not bring children into a life of semi-starvation". Suggestions of compulsion were being aired, she stated, referring to a recent conference of Labour women who called for:

. . . voluntary sterilization of the feeble-minded and other unfit people who might transmit their defect to offspring. It is curious to begin a demand for *voluntary* (italics hers) sterilization by applying it to a class in the community which is incapable of giving legal consent.

The women might not have been so enthusiastic, had they seen suggestions for compulsory sterilisation "as a *punishment* (emphasis hers) for parents who have to resort to public assistance in order to support their children." ¹⁴

5.1 b) Carrying a Feminist Analysis Forward

Alison Neilans' beliefs were humane and clear-sighted in other areas too. For example, like the CD campaigners, she always insisted that medical examination and treatment of VD should be voluntary rather than compulsory. Compulsion would stigmatise infected people and deter them from seeking help.

By 1917 she was beginning to be recognised as a specialist on prostitution. She worked with Maude Royden and contributed anonymously to a book which attempted to investigate the reason why women entered prostitution, *Downward Paths: An Enquiry Into the Causes Which Contribute to the Making of a Prostitute*.¹⁵ I illustrate her views on prostitution with four examples which also demonstrate her use of several language registers to inform a variety of audiences.

¹⁴ Neilans, "Changes in Sex Morality", pp. 228-230.

¹⁵ *Downward Paths: An Enquiry Into the Causes Which Contribute to the Making of a Prostitute* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1916). AMSH Executive Committee Minutes, 15 June 1917, 19 October 1917. In a Foreword to *Downward Paths*, Maude Royden stated the book was produced by anonymous women who, "realising that knowledge is the first need of the reformer", had begun to study "the conditions of a great and terrible problem". Foreword, *Downward Paths*, pp. xi-xii. An attempt to counteract the hysteria induced by social purity campaigners and the popular press, it is, nevertheless, an example of Davidoff's point about representations of working-class women seen through the perspectives of the middle classes. See Chapter Two, p. 73.

With a feminist audience in mind she could express her anger about women's oppression. Writing to *Time and Tide*, in October, 1922, she said few people really cared whether prostitutes were treated justly or not. Prostitutes were the scapegoat for everyone's sins. Thousands of pounds had been spent trying to reform the prostitute; poets, writers and orators had made her the subject of striking rhetoric:

Perhaps no class of people has been so much abused, persecuted, hated or, alternatively, sentimentalised over as prostitutes have been, but one thing they have never had yet, and that is simple legal justice. They are slaves and outcasts, despised and rejected by all respectable people. They are used, not as though they were women but as though they were 'things'.¹⁶

To Edith How Martyn, who had asked her advice on the topic before an Indian tour in 1938, she observed realistically that legislation and ordinances to outlaw prostitution were ineffective. It had been accepted for thousands of years:

. . . no social reformer believes prostitution *in the individual* can be abolished by any particular law or form of suppression. . . but the point is that if we disapprove of it, now that we are all more civilized (at least I hope so), efforts should be made to begin a sound character education which will gradually diminish this social evil. (Emphasis hers.)¹⁷

In some instances, the language here bears similarities with that of her contemporary moral and religious reformers. 'Scapegoats for everyone's sins', 'despised and rejected', 'social evil' and 'sound character education' draw on this tradition. But she used discursive analysis to contrast the public rhetoric with the actuality of prostitutes' lives.

During the summer of 1927, there was correspondence in *The New Generation* about legalised brothels, typical of those economic, rational views so often espoused by the Malthusian League, which ignored the emotional wellsprings of human behaviour.¹⁸ The

¹⁶ *Time and Tide* 13 October 1922, p. 995.

¹⁷ Letter, Alison Neilans, London, to Edith How Martyn, 11 January 1938, author's collection.

¹⁸ Rupert L. Humphris advocated the "maison publique", suggesting it was an institution which had avoided more misery than it had caused. "La Maison Tolérée", *New Generation* Vol. VI, No. 6 (June 1927), p. 69.

practicalities involved in running these institutions were pointed out by Alison Neilans, who tried to show what it was like for a woman to be 'worked' too hard in a public brothel. Girls were exploited; they were required to cater for every kind of sex perversity and had no freedom to select or submit to patrons.¹⁹ It was inappropriate to compare exploitation and overwork of women in public brothels with industrial exploitation or sexual relations in marriage. In poorer brothels, women might have to receive:

. . . say ten to thirty different men in a day, some at least of them being dirty, diseased or repulsive. . . . Sex goes deep, and few acts have so brutalising effect, both on men and the women concerned, as to use a woman as if she were merely a sort of public convenience common to all.²⁰

Taking the metaphorical device of comparison - women being used as 'things' or as a "sort of public convenience common to all" - she articulates a core feature of feminist revulsion at men's objectification of women.

When the League of Nations Committee on Trafficking in Women and Children published a report in 1927, she criticised its failure to expose the root cause of prostitution, men's economic power. While it had exposed the mechanisms of the traffic, the Report had avoided one essential fact:

Where does the money come from which makes it worth while to take girls long journeys over oceans and continents and to organize bribery, corruption and forgery in order to cross frontiers with impunity? . . . *Why is it profitable to traffic in women?* Because all over the world there are thousands of otherwise decent and kindly men who are willing to pay their 5s., 10s., or 20s. for casual sexual gratification. *It is for them the traffic is run.* (Italics hers.)²¹

Here she avoids the prurient distaste so often evinced by social purity activists yet identifies the basis of prostitution. She highlights the indifference and exploitation tolerated by a patriarchal social order content to maintain a class of women to engage in men's sexual servicing in a business highly profitable to those who ran it.

¹⁹ Alison Neilans, letter, *New Generation* 6 July 1927, p. 94.

²⁰ Alison Neilans, letter, *New Generation* October 1927, p. 119.

²¹ *Woman's Leader* 25 March 1927, p. 55.

Her own personal conviction was to committed, monogamous relationships and to "teaching on the *real* meaning of love and on the rightful position of women" (emphasis hers) through "education on character, self-control and exercise of the will". She saw a reduction in prostitution to be a civilising process, feeling that men were doped and duped by being told their needs could be satisfied by prostitution:

It is really nonsense because men and women are not merely animals, and they have to satisfy many other needs than a physical one. Men and women both need someone who will love them, believe in them, help them in their depression and who will regard each others well-being as their first interests in life (sic). It is notorious that people who seek release along the lines of promiscuity are very rarely at all happy or satisfied with the results, especially as they get a little older.²²

She emphasised that although prostitution itself was not a crime, a great deal hinged upon whether a woman who was brought before the courts was described as a 'common prostitute'. This was tantamount to saying she was guilty before the case was heard, as though someone charged with thieving would be termed a 'thief' as a description of his occupation. This disparaging label perpetuated a woman's denigration and contributed to women's objectification. These were the attitudes Alison Neilans sought to change through her work in AMSII. She wanted to humanise the treatment of prostitutes, to ensure they had the same rights as other people before the law. In the next section I begin by summarising the debates around criminal law amendment before outlining the Association's activities.

5.2 Post-War Strategies

How did Alison Neilans implement a feminist philosophy? What were her main strategies and methods? She did not seek to enter parliament herself. For some time she worked closely with Lady Astor although the limitations of this approach became

²² Letter, Alison Neilans, London, to Edith How Martyn, 11 January 1938, author's collection.

apparent, for example, when Lady Astor's volatile enthusiasm lapsed. The parliamentary aspect of Alison Neilans work is outlined in a case study later in this chapter. Since the other early women members of parliament were perceived as representing women's interests too, Alison Neilans was able to use them as a channel for her concerns.²³

Some of the women parliamentarians had connections with AMSH which was Alison Neilans' main power base. To retain a position as instigator of crusades to claim women's rights in her particular area of sexual politics, she needed to create an identity as a specialist, to develop expertise, to speak in the language of the 'experts' - of medicine, legislature, and social work - and still have access to feminist support and the philanthropic and religious network established by the social purity movement. So we find her speaking at a national conference on social hygiene, giving evidence to parliamentary committees, creating draft bills, liaising with social workers and missionaries, employing the mass media and conducting a voluminous correspondence as part of the process of promulgating her views and linking pressure groups, negotiating in the interstices of dominant discourses of sexuality. Within AMSH she seems to have been able to initiate action and guide the Association, harnessing members' commitment to causes close to her heart, despite being a paid employee.

5.2 a) Criminal Law Amendment 1917-1922

At the point when Alison Neilans was beginning to establish herself at AMSH, the Home Office introduced a new Criminal Law Amendment Bill in 1917. During the war public agitation over VD had reached new heights. Conflicts engendered during the five years prior to the 1922 altered Criminal Law Amendment Act reflected society's

²³ For an examination of women MP's interests, see Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959* (London: Macmillan, 1992).

ambiguities over sexual morality. Increasingly, it was becoming obvious that repressive legislation in practice led to further attempts to control women's sexual behaviour.²⁴

The differences between feminists and extreme social purity groups (who thought the best method of regulating morality was through restricting women's freedom) was exposed through the 1917 Bill's provisions to make it a criminal offence for anyone with communicable VD to solicit, invite or have sexual intercourse and which allowed magistrates to order women under eighteen to be detained if convicted of soliciting.²⁵ Many feminists reacted strongly to the punitive clauses in the Bill, particularly to those measures which added further obloquy on women. In unison, the Women's Freedom League (WFL) and AMSH responded quickly; Alison Neilans shuttled between a number of organisations; the WFL initiated a public campaign against it.²⁶ Although the Bill was abandoned because of insufficient parliamentary time, further measures, including a Sexual Offences Bill in 1918, continued to be controversial. Attempting to quell the moral panic about VD, at Easter 1918 the government side-stepped by creating Regulation 40D in the Defence of the Realm Act (DoRA), whereby it became an offence for any woman infected with VD to have intercourse with members of the armed forces.²⁷ During its six months' operation, the effects of Regulation 40D were monitored by AMSH. Half the women denounced by soldiers were found to have no signs of VD.²⁸ Of the over 300 women prosecuted by the end of the war, only one-third of them were found guilty.²⁹

²⁴ Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 207.

²⁵ Following the Royal Commission's 1916 Report, the government had provided medical facilities such as pathology laboratories, free Salvarsan for treatment, and 75% grants to local authorities to establish free special clinics. Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, 2d. ed. (London: Longman, 1981), pp. 215-216.

²⁶ By mid-April thirty-three societies joined to demand the immediate withdrawal of the Regulation. AMSH Executive Committee Minutes, 28 March 1918, 19 April 1918.

²⁷ AMSH Executive Committee Minutes of an Informal Urgency Meeting, 8 March 1918. Alison Neilans acted as AMSH delegate to a National Conference of Women held under Labour auspices, and to the National Council for Combatting Venereal Disease. She also helped draw up a manifesto on behalf of medical women and proposed a resolution at a mass protest meeting.

²⁸ AMSH Seventh Annual Report, p. 8.

²⁹ Andro Linklater, *An Unhusbanded Life: Charlotte Despard* (London: Hutchinson, 1980), p. 187.

Meanwhile, Alison Neilans hoped to mobilise women's newly-established political power. AMSH produced their own manifesto to promote a Criminal Law Amendment Bill in 1921. After organising a private conference where nearly sixty national organisations were represented, they drew up a list of demands. These included: extending the age at which a girl or boy could consent to indecent assault and raising the age of consent to criminal assault for girls and extending this to apply to boys; abolishing the 'reasonable cause to believe' defence; extending the time limit under which a prosecution for criminal assault could be instituted; increased penalties for brothel-keeping.³⁰ Their strongly feminist rationale bears Alison Neilans' hallmarks. Women were sick and tired of Government Criminal Law Amendment Bills, she wrote in a letter to *Time and Tide*, presenting a scenario of harmony between the social purity and the women's movement. The government's main idea seemed to be the protection of men of all ages from seduction by girls under eighteen:

The proposals . . . have been advocated and strenuously agitated for by voteless women for more than twenty-five years, and have the support of practically every women's and religious organisation in the country. Now that women know their political force, they are determined to make the effective protection of the sexual immaturity of young people one of the chief planks in their programme of necessary reforms.³¹

Known as the Bishop of London's Criminal Law Amendment Bill,³² it was introduced into the House of Lords in February 1921. However, at the Third Reading, a clause advocating Section 11 (the Labouchère Amendment) of 1885 be applied to women was inserted.³³ Although AMSH protests about technical irregularities were successful, the Bill was defeated on its return to the Commons. To Alison Neilans:

³⁰ Alison Neilans, letter to *Time and Tide* 18 February 1921, p. 165.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Dale Spender, *Time and Tide Wait for No Man* (London, Pandora, 1984), p. 178.

³³ The Labouchère Amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 made acts of gross indecency between men a punishable offence, so outlawing male homosexual acts. In 1921 the attempt was made to criminalise homosexual acts between women. For a discussion of the construction of homosexuality, see Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, pp. 104-108.

The Bill was deliberately wrecked by those in the Commons who are determined not to give girls under sixteen effective protection against seduction . . . ³⁴

Finally, in the 1922 Criminal Law Amendment Act, the two 1917 clauses concerning VD were dropped. The age of consent to indecent assault was raised from thirteen to sixteen; the 'reasonable cause to believe' clause was removed; there were increased penalties for brothel-keeping, and Section V of the 1908 Punishment of Incest Act, which required all proceedings under the Act to be held in camera, was repealed.³⁵ The campaigners had succeeded in achieving some of what they wanted.

Homosexuality, especially lesbianism, remained covert, another indication of the prevailing refusal to countenance an active female sexuality. In the Lords debate on the 1921 clause, fears were expressed that by giving any publicity to the topic, there would be an outburst of lesbianism.³⁶ AMSH recommended legalising homosexual acts between consenting adults in 1921 although they felt the issue needed more discussion.³⁷ The mass media only hinted at such topics. Prosecutions were rarely reported and the *Evening News* spoke of crimes of which "most decent women are ignorant and would prefer to remain ignorant."³⁸ Proposals to end any aspect of women's sexual subjugation needed to be promoted with care in such a climate.

³⁴ The clause had not been before any Parliamentary Standing Committee nor discussed by any of the supporting organisations. AMSH Seventh Annual Report, pp. 20-23.

³⁵ Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, p. 251; Spender, *Time and Tide Wait for No Man*, pp. 178-9.

³⁶ For a discussion of the backlash to single women during the period, I have referred to Ann Faraday, "Social Definitions of Lesbians in Britain 1914-1939" (Ph. D. Thesis, University of Essex, 1986), and Patricia Ryan, "The Ideology of Feminism in Britain 1900-1920: An Analysis of Feminist Ideas on Motherhood, Birth Control and Sexuality" (M.Sc. Thesis, University of Wales, 1978).

³⁷ AMSH Executive Committee Minutes, 21 October 1921. See also Weeks, *Sex Politics and Society* p. 221. Homosexuality and male prostitution were rarely mentioned in AMSH discussion. See below, p. 257.

³⁸ Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, p. 200.

5.2 b) The Development of the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene 1918 - 1922

By 1922, the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene lacked direction, its activities circumscribed by falling income and declining membership.³⁹ They lacked a focus after the Criminal Law Amendment Act. At the end of the war, AMSH was in a similar position to the Malthusian League.⁴⁰ If their fates are compared, we can see how Alison Neilans' strategy of appropriating and re-vitalising a nationally-known, well-established pressure group to further her feminist objectives was successful. As Mort suggests, after 1922 pressure for social control via legislation was displaced; there was a concomitant decline in the social purity movement and, increasingly, the "field of sexuality" was constructed as outside politics.⁴¹ In keeping with trends towards ideas about companionate marriage and women's sexual fulfilment, many specialists saw education to be a more effective method of improving sexual relationships than legislation. The Malthusian League did not adapt to the changed situation; it retained its original emphasis on economic analysis and theory and failed to capitalise on the ongoing social changes or the innovatory work of Marie Stopes and Margaret Sanger. It was unwilling to popularise or participate in international debate on any other than its own terms. By contrast AMSH was pro-active. It initiated debate on the rights of prostitutes, solicitation laws, the treatment of sexual offenders, and continued the work around state regulation and VD. It seized the opportunities offered by moves to international co-operation after the First World War, using the League of Nations and other international organisations to intervene over trafficking in women and other problems.

In 1922, Alison Neilans had prepared a discussion paper for the AMSH Executive Committee to justify the Association's continued existence. It was, she said, a nationally

³⁹ AMSH Seventh Annual Report, p. 36.

⁴⁰ See Chapter Six, note 21, pp. 300, 326.

⁴¹ Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, pp. 198-203.

recognised body, which had been the only society able to keep track of events, parliamentary occurrences and debates and to make a special study of prostitution and moral legislation during the preceding debates on criminal law amendment. She was quite explicit about the follies of middle-class prescriptions for controlling working-class sexual behaviour and over-reaction to changing sexual customs and manners. When the nation was seized with moral panic, other organisations could be swayed into calling for repressive and punitive measures such as compulsory 'Rescue' and other regulatory practices, whereas AMSH had provided a more objective view based on well-formulated principles. At that point, the Association was involved with the 1922 Criminal Law Amendment Bill. Once that campaigning was over, their energies should not aim at punitive legislation. Educational and non-coercive methods were more appropriate. The Association's discussions reveal those contemporary discursive changes when socio-medical discourse began to supersede religious and moral argument.⁴²

Alison Neilans revived the Association by reinvigorating its members, re-defining the aims to recognise changing social conditions after the war, and marking out the specific territory where such an organisation could have an impact. Her arguments analysed the structures of public discourse, observed the matrix, and noted the silences. Then she proposed the junctures in which AMSH could establish a place. It was needed to act as a co-ordinating body for moral, medical, legislative and administrative aspects of the debate. Thus she claimed a place in the public arena to advocate a rational, practical approach to sexual and moral issues in preference to the biased, moralistic stance of the social purity movement, yet still question the double standards of dominant male discourses.

⁴²

See Chapter Two, pp. 113-114, and Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, pp. 175-179.

Alison Neilans used the case of prostitution and VD to illustrate her points. Summing up her case to the Executive Committee, she argued that whereas medical treatment of VD and prophylaxis had failed, scaremongering was ineffectual and counter-productive too.⁴³

The statistics and prevalence of VD had been "enormously and ridiculously exaggerated". More thoughtful members of the medical profession were:

. . . becoming alarmed at the dangerous and depressing psychological effect on the public mind of intensive advertisement and propaganda concerning the alleged prevalence and horrors of venereal disease.

It should be the aim of AMSH:

. . . to dissipate all this fog of fear foolish credulity (sic), wrong thinking, and morbid imaginings, and to proclaim constantly and insistently the truth that the only real remedy, *and the most practically effective one* (emphasis hers) is along moral and spiritual lines, i.e. by direct common-sense, non-rhetorical appeals to parents and to young men and women as actual or potential lovers, parents, citizens and spiritual beings."⁴⁴

Here she harnesses expert medical opinion to rebut the doom-laden propaganda of social purity campaigners while still taking a moral stand which accorded with contemporary feminism. Through monitoring events and collecting and disseminating objective evidence from many sources, the Association would be in a position to influence public debate.⁴⁵ The Executive Committee agreed to continue and supported a shift in tactics.

⁴³ Weeks outlines the dichotomy facing the authorities - the provision of adequate preventive and treatment measures seemed to condone immorality, but to maintain that restraint alone was the best method of prevention risked increasing the diseases. An experiment with ablution centres in Manchester in 1920, supported by the National Council for Combatting Venereal Disease, was opposed by most social purity activists and some feminists. Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, p. 216. Davenport-Hines traces the history of government ambivalence over VD. Richard Davenport-Hines, "Packets and Fanatics", Chapter Six in *Sex, Death and Punishment: Attitudes to Sex and Sexuality in Britain Since the Renaissance* (Fontana Paperbacks, 1991), pp. 210-244. See also Roy Porter and Lesley Hall, *The Facts of Life: The Creation of Sexual Knowledge in Britain 1650-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 134-138, 231-239. AMSH disliked the notion of chemical prophylaxis or ablution centres because they felt such provision helped promote vice; also, self-medication could be ineffectual. AMSH 1922 report, pp. 12-13.

⁴⁴ Alison Neilans, AMSH memo 1922.

⁴⁵ Addendum by the Honorary Secretary, Dr. Helen Wilson, who endorsed Alison Neilans. The

5.2 c) The Association's Methods

Alison Neilans drew on the experiences of abolitionists and repeal campaigners of the previous sixty years to insist on the continuing need for propaganda to ensure oppressive measures, "neo-regulationism", were not brought in through the back door. She also made plain her view that altered cultural expectations and social circumstances meant new methods of campaigning. Increasingly AMSH attempted to reach medical, legal and bureaucratic constituencies which were not necessarily discrete.⁴⁶ Before I turn to enumerate those discourses, I consider some of the tactics the Association employed to show what was involved in achieving their objectives.

One of the Association's functions was to act as a clearing house between a number of factions. It aimed to receive and disseminate objective information to inform official decision-making and assist public debate. A key role was to mediate between the pragmatism of science and medicine and the purulent histrionics of social purity extremists.⁴⁷ They hoped to influence political and legislative discourses directly and indirectly.

They could claim credibility and authority through direct contact with government.

Leading members such as Alison Neilans and Mrs. Percy Bigland⁴⁸ gave evidence before

daughter of the anti-slavery, temperance and repeal campaigner, Henry Wilson, a Sheffield industrialist, Helen Wilson was Editor of *The Shield* before Alison Neilans. She resigned as Secretary and Editor in 1917, as a Christian Scientist she felt she could not advocate VD treatment centres or the use of Salvarsan, a drug which could cure syphilis. AMSH Executive Committee Minutes (7 January 1917).

⁴⁶ Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, pp. 216-220; Davenport-Hines, *Sex, Death and Punishment*, pp. 212-244.

⁴⁷ See list of participants in the *Committee of Inquiry into Sexual Morality* pamphlet, (London: AMSH, n.d. [1918]) Fawcett Library, (P) 176. The AMSH representation on various bodies in 1930 included the Mothers' Union Watch Committee, Equal Political Rights Campaign Committee, Sectional Committees of the National Council of Women, NUSEC, Women's Advisory Committee, League of Nations Union, British National Committee for the Suppression of Traffic in Women and Children, the British Commonwealth League, and the National Central Library. AMSH Executive Committee Minutes, 18 November 1930. See below p.280.

⁴⁸ Mrs. Percy Bigland, a Quaker, was Honorary Secretary of the Criminal Law Amendment Committee in 1913; on the Executive Committee of AMSH for many years, and later Honorary Treasurer for the Council of Representation of Women at the League of Nations. See Chapter Four, note 119.

the Joint Select Committee on Criminal Law Amendment and the Sexual Offences Bills of 1918⁴⁹ and later, the Street Offences Committee for which AMSH had orchestrated a demand. This was a favoured tactic. The Association would draw together a number of organisations and pressure groups, purity activists, religious groups, feminists, to form coalitions to promote particular campaigns. They organised memorials, appeals and deputations to government ministers, for example the deputation to the Prime Minister with WFL, on DoRA in 1918, and to the Home Secretary on Street Offences in 1925. Since Alison Neilans was meticulous in the collection of evidence and detailed analysis, her major contribution to the coalitions would be to provide them with the necessary armoury to fight their campaign. By the end of her life it was recognised that although working in "a narrow field",⁵⁰ her ability to co-operate with and maximise support from a range of opinions had been instrumental in raising the issue of women's sexual subordination and promoting a feminist viewpoint in the area of sexual politics. The method did have drawbacks. Such coalitions were difficult to sustain, as the case study will demonstrate. Compromises had to be made and I return to this at the close of the section.

Besides demanding official inquiries, another tactic was to institute their own investigations. Throughout the period, the Association's work was hampered by inadequate statistical information and government secrecy. For example, the Association's 1918 Committee of Inquiry into Sexual Morality had aimed to:

. . . inquire into the laws and their administration and other methods for dealing with sexual promiscuity, and to make recommendations thereon.⁵¹

⁴⁹ AMSH Executive Committee minutes, 3 May 1918.

⁵⁰ Obituary notice, *The Times*, 13 August 1942.

⁵¹ *Committee of Inquiry into Sexual Morality*, pamphlet published by AMSH, n.d. [1918], Fawcett Library, (P) 176.

While it was established under a moral framework, the Committee illustrates the move towards sociological discourse in its endeavours to collect evidence of actual sexual practices from a range of sources.⁵² Members sat as individuals nominated by organisations of which eleven were religious, covering most denominations; others included the women's organisations from the three main political parties, five women's societies and two social purity associations. By comparison, the AMSII Joint Committee on Sexual Offences in 1932 included only two representatives of religious bodies,⁵³ several social purity groups, and a high proportion of professional bodies.⁵⁴

Though still focusing mainly on the moral arena, the Association itself also reflected the wider cultural changes and in 1925 *The Shield* remarked on the transition. Alison Neilans admitted to having had problems deciding which of the changes were beneficial. Men were becoming more sensitive to the brutality and cruelty involved in prostitution and were seeking relationships and companionship with women of their own class. But the tendency for more women to have promiscuous and illicit sexual relationships, (presumably predicated on the trend towards more egalitarian sexual relationships), was "a serious thing socially".⁵⁵ AMSII did not waver from its stance against the sexual double standard of morality, explicitly and implicitly suggesting men's standards should be elevated to those expected of women.

Many of its members were clergy or associated with religious organisations who were always well-represented at conferences and on AMSII committees. Working closely with mission and rescue organisations such as the Salvation Army, AMSII provided a two-way exchange. Religious groups would rely on them for information, while they

⁵² See Porter and Hall, *The Facts of Life*, pp. 187.

⁵³ They were Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls, Women and Children and the Salvation Army.

⁵⁴ See below, Section 5.4.

⁵⁵ Alison Neilans, "The Equal Moral Standard in the British Empire", *The Shield* Vol. IV (August-September 1925), p. 248.

would utilise the practical experience of the missions.⁵⁶ If she was to retain the support of the religious constituency within AMSH, Alison Neilans needed to address their concerns as well as cater for other interest groups. The pages of *The Shield* reveal her handling of the situation. The Association's material frequently contained biblical quotations; Alison Neilans was quite at home using a religious language register, although her own religious beliefs seem to have gradually diminished and may have been relinquished as she observed the narrowness of outlook demonstrated by colleagues in the social purity movement. By the mid-1920s some of her comments indicate this.⁵⁷ She used the Bible and quotations from Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* to discuss personal, social and spiritual reasons to propose a new moral appeal which proffered a more compassionate, generous framework than a traditional religious one. A widespread hunger for goodness and beauty and an "almost pathetic groping after order and dignity in the sex relation" existed. It was better to admit doubt than take refuge behind the dicta of authority.⁵⁸ By the mid-1930s she was strongly critical, at least in private. Eileen Palmer recorded a Lucina lunch meeting after a Memorial Service for Chrystal Macmillan when Alison Neilans expressed her indignation about one of the prayers which had gone:

'We give thee hearty thanks for that it hath pleased thee to deliver this our sister, Chrystal Macmillan, out of the miseries of this sinful world;' we agreed with her and no-one seemed in a hurry to 'be delivered'.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Mrs. Bramwell Booth seems to have been close to Alison Neilans who mentioned her as a source of information about the lives of prostitutes gathered through Salvation Army missions. Mrs. Bramwell Booth was present at the public tribute to Alison Neilans to mark her twenty five years as Secretary of AMSH, and at her Memorial Service. See Introduction, p. 27.

⁵⁷ In 1939 Alison Neilans gave an address, *Are Moral Standards Necessary?* at Christ Church, Westminster; when this was printed as a pamphlet a quotation from Havelock Ellis about personal responsibility headed the leaflet, a nice example of combining traditional and contemporary appeals. See also: Letter to Miss Matheson, see below, page 266; Letter to Lady Astor, 25 February 1942, Chapter Three, p. 170; and Alison Neilans' request for a memorial meeting not a service in her will, Introduction, p. 27.

⁵⁸ Alison Neilans, "Has Moral Teaching Failed?", *The Shield* Vol. III (May/June 1922), pp. 255 -265.
⁵⁹ "Lucina Journal", 1 October 1937.

She attempted to assess the post-war climate and nudge religious traditionalists into a reappraisal of their stance in an article in *The Shield* in 1922 entitled "Has Moral Teaching Failed?" Old formulas were being challenged, she said, and appeals to morality were not acceptable or even intelligible to most people. Moral precepts referring to unchastity as a sin and God's punishment, carried little weight with:

. . . people who have seen the temple of the body ruthlessly mutilated and destroyed by Christian nations engaged in war, who feel there are many worse sins than unchastity to whom such words as God's anger and retribution have very little meaning.⁶⁰

When an inter-denominational conference, the Conference on Christian Politics, Economics and Citizenship (COPEC), was called in 1924 to discuss the perceived national religious decline, Alison Neilans was asked to give a paper on prostitution, evidence that her position as an expert on the subject was becoming well-established.⁶¹ Her notes prepared for the COPEC Commission on "The Relation of the Sexes", reprinted in *The Shield* in 1924, warned Christian church members that fear and prohibitions were inadequate defences of a moral case which condemned all sexual connection outside marriage. Spiritual and social reasons should be differentiated. In the article she made attempts to employ fashionable notions about male and female sexual impulses in a scientific manner but admitted to difficulties. Objective evidence was minimal; there was a problem in comparing male and female sexual experiences:

Even women who have had sexual experience are not easily comparable with men, as a man can generally obtain a partner in the sex-act who will adapt herself to his needs whereas the sex relation is not infrequently made

⁶⁰ Alison Neilans, "Has Moral Teaching Failed?", *The Shield* Vol. III (May/June 1922), p. 258.

⁶¹ The Conference, chaired by Dr. A.E. Garvie, Bishop of Manchester, was held at Birmingham in April. Well over a thousand delegates and representatives from all denominations (except the Roman Catholics who had withdrawn), mainly from Christian social movements, attended. It was an attempt to promote a more modern image for the Church in "the bewilderment and chaos of our time". *The Times*, 8 April 1924. Although supported by the establishment, the discussions on imperialism, pacifism and capital punishment provoked anxieties about its radical nature. *The Times*, 14 April 1924. *The Times'* reports of the Conference illustrate how the press tended to avoid topics relating to sexual matters; very little about the Commission on sexual relations or prostitution was printed.

repugnant to women, and sometimes induces quite unnatural frigidity in them, by the fact that their needs and desires may be neither understood nor respected by their partners.⁶²

Attempts were made to provide AMSH members with information which would be useful in professional capacities, a response to the trend towards more objective, scientific discourses. For example, medical statistics were interpreted in *The Shield*. The enormous reduction in the numbers of VD cases in the British Army from 267.1 per 1,000 in 1886 to 50.9 per 1,000 in 1913 was not solely due to moral teaching; attempts to improve the social environment, a spin-off of the campaigns to repeal the CD Acts, had also had an impact.⁶³

What other discourses were available? In an attempt to enter directly into relevant power networks, AMSH produced numerous pamphlets to disseminate information. Sometimes these were simply articles reprinted from *The Shield*. Some were targeted at specific audiences. Two on sexual offenders in 1935 were directed at magistrates and doctors and a pamphlet, *Liberty of the Subject: How 'Prostitutes' are Treated* (1937) was aimed at Members of Parliament.⁶⁴

Since the removal of legal discrimination against prostitutes was a main objective, AMSH needed to have an impact on legislative negotiations. Representations to government and official inquiries have already been mentioned. The drafting of Lady Astor's Public Places (Order) Bill of 1925 was Alison Neilans' work. The premise that prostitution was a vice rather than a legal offence was presented frequently. Responding to a proposal from the National Vigilance Association (NVA) Chairman, W.A. Coote, "to prohibit by law the sale and purchase of a woman's honour", Alison Neilans demolished

⁶² Alison Neilans, "Some Notes on Prostitution", prepared for the COPEC Commission on 'The Relation of the Sexes', *The Shield*, Third Series, Vol. IV (August/September 1925), p. 157-166

⁶³ Alison Neilans, "Some Points Concerning the Medical Control of Venereal Diseases in Great Britain", *The Shield*, Third Series, Vol. IV, (January/February 1925), pp. 226-227.

⁶⁴ *Liberty of the Subject: How 'Prostitutes' are Treated* (London: AMSH, 1937). A copy of the pamphlet was in Edith How Martyn's papers.

his case pointing to its unsound assumptions and the prevalence of "unpaid promiscuity" where hotel expenses, entertainment, food, taxis and gifts ranging from fur coats to chocolates were exchanged.⁶⁵ The Association had to demonstrate that Regulation was ineffective, they had to monitor and evaluate government proposals and pre-empt suggestions, such as allowing tolerated brothels. The Executive Committee Minutes show Alison Neilans regularly picking up and responding to relevant initiatives or discussion. She hoped to influence legal and bureaucratic opinion with facts rather than prejudices. An article about the medical control of VD in Britain published in *The Shield* in 1925 made statistical comparisons between the periods when the CD Acts were in force and later, then looked at statistics between 1917 and 1923 to argue Regulation was ineffective. Its only "good feature" was that it provided free hospital treatment.⁶⁶

In the wider public domain AMSH hoped to influence informed opinion both by their publications and through presenting their views in appropriate journals, such as *The Malthusian*, *The New Generation*, *Time and Tide*, and *The Woman's Leader*. What audiences did they reach? Overwhelmingly middle class, the readership, which included feminists and intellectuals, was mostly outside the establishment but did give a space where it was possible to have open discussion on sexual matters.⁶⁷ The rumbling debate about tolerated brothels provided a chance to argue through research-backed evidence. *The Shield* reprinted Alison Neilans' address to the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) Conference in Berlin in 1929 which gave comparative data about Regulation in over sixty countries. Dame Rachel Crowdy's work on the trafficking in women at the

⁶⁵ Alison Neilans, "Prostitution is not a Legal Offence", *The Shield*, Third Series, Vol. II (July 1918), p. 128-134.

⁶⁶ Neilans, "Medical Control of Venereal Diseases", pp. 221-228

⁶⁷ Prevailing attitudes to the publication of material on sexual matters are described fully in Porter and Hall. Many felt such information was acceptable for the educated classes whereas, if low cost made it available, it would be dangerous for the poor or less-educated. Porter and Hall, *The Facts of Life*, pp. 162; also Chapter Eleven, "Silent Stares, Smut, Censorship and Surgical Stores: The Making of Popular Sexual Knowledges". pp. 247-270. See above, Chapter Two, Section 2.2b.

League of Nations was often mentioned and praised.⁶⁸ Alison Neilans picked apart elements in popular discourses on the white slave trade to point out that though the traffic in women and children engendered greater public interest, the question of Regulation was more important. It structured the traffic. It was useless for governments to draw up conventions and multiply treaties against the traffic until Regulation was abolished.⁶⁹

It is difficult to tease out sexological and psychological influences on the Association's thinking. Those theories buttressed by notions of an insistent male sexuality may well have had little appeal to AMSH members generally. In debates about the merits of prophylaxis, AMSH continued to believe continence was the best means of avoiding VD.⁷⁰ In 1918 AMSH asked Havelock Ellis to give evidence for their Inquiry into Sexual Morality. He refused although help from the British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology (BSSSP) was offered; two members gave evidence.⁷¹ Occasionally, Ellis was quoted approvingly by Alison Neilans.⁷² Freud's work was quoted in *The Shield* at times. In *Changes in Sex Morality*, Alison Neilans presented a psychological explanation for male objectification of women. Men's unyielding opposition to treating a prostitute as a human being was probably psychological in origin. Men's contempt and the fact they regarded themselves as superior to a prostitute, even when using her, suggested attempts to rationalise the situation:

. . . it might be explained as an unconscious transference to the woman of the shame they feel for themselves in these relations.⁷³

⁶⁸ Dame Rachel Crowdy (1884-1964) was the only woman to head a section at the League of Nations when she became Chief of the Social Questions and Opium Traffic Section in 1919. She held office for twelve years but was replaced by a man, to the anger of many in the feminist movement. During the First World War she helped establish the Voluntary Aid Detachments with Katharine Furse.

⁶⁹ Alison Neilans, "Towards Moral Equality: Twenty-Five Years' Work and Progress", *The Shield*, Third Series, Vol. V (September 1929), pp. 257-263.

⁷⁰ AMSH Seventh Annual Report, pp. 7-14. See above, note 43.

⁷¹ Porter and Hall, *The Facts of Life*, p. 188, who note the contributions from Jessie Murray, an early exponent of psychoanalysis and Norah March. See above, Chapter Two, Section 2.2c.

⁷² Neilans, "Changes in Sex Morality", p. 219.

⁷³ Neilans, "Changes in Sex Morality", p. 214.

At times the juxtaposition of such a range of ideologies and perspectives within AMSH created tensions. Some of this dissension culminated in open hostility to the NVA by the end of the 1920s.⁷⁴ Alison Neilans' position as a paid employee of AMSH who acted as an instigator of activity was not without conflict. Some members of the Executive Committee objected to her helping Lady Astor with campaigning at parliamentary elections. I conclude this section by presenting two examples of the divisions, partly to show the dichotomous nature of the society and also to illuminate the thin line Alison Neilans had to tread to maintain her authority in the Association.

Links with National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC) were threatened after the Union led a deputation to party leaders to demand equal rights during the 1929 election campaign. The NUSEC's espousal of birth control and family allowances was too political for some members of the AMSH Executive. Alison Neilans had to argue that since shared policies about the subjugation of women remained a common ground, the connections should continue.⁷⁵ She received criticism for her editorial work in 1930. Part of the criticism sprang from the fact that at this stage *The Shield* was being produced irregularly; it would carry apologies for gaps in production, attributed usually to pressures on the editor's time. Some Executive Committee members felt it was exceeding its brief by featuring topics such as 'free love' and homosexuality.⁷⁶ In a debate about censorship, after D.H. Lawrence's pamphlet, *Pornography and Obscenity* had been reviewed in the journal, some members said they felt that *The Shield* should not have even mentioned the work because "of its dirty character". Since it had been mentioned, the review should have contained "strong disapprobation" of the views it carried. The discussion reflected two positions, that of the extremes of the social purity movement and that of libertarians who

⁷⁴ See below, p. 273.

⁷⁵ AMSH Executive Committee minutes, 12 March 1929, 9 April 1929.

⁷⁶ AMSH Executive Committee minutes, Extraordinary Meeting, 1 July 1930, Fawcett Library, AMSH Box 43.

thought AMSH should give a lead and open up *The Shield's* pages to debate topical issues of sexual morality. Its editor said *The Shield* was trying to widen the Association's views but conceded such a course would split the Association.⁷⁷

5.3 Prostitution

Since its beginning, one of the Association's main aims had been to end the stigmatisation of prostitutes. In the next section I present a case study of one of their major campaigns of the 1920s which endeavoured to bring this about.

5.3 a) Changing Attitudes to Female Sexuality and Prostitution.

Prostitution was a topic where hypocrisy, prurience, and moral indignation co-existed with casual tolerance. Over the first decades of the century, changes had occurred concurrently with altered expectations of marriage, the increasing acceptability of contraception and possibly through sexological influence.⁷⁸ There were two major traditional perceptions of prostitutes in the dominant culture, one suggesting prostitutes were temptresses of young men but a necessary outlet for male sexual urges and the view, frequently presented by moral crusaders and some feminists, who saw them as victims of male lust and power. State regulation of brothels, particularly in parts of the British empire, continued to be an issue. In Britain during and after the First World War, notions of adopting a continental system of legalising and controlling prostitution were in vogue.

Also as the war progressed - and subsequently - the concept of 'amateur' prostitutes was given currency. The notion of an 'amateur' marks a transition from Victorian ideals of chastity and purity for some women and prostitution for an under-class, to a more realistic recognition that not all women were sexually inert. Conceptualisations of a healthy, active

⁷⁷ AMSH Executive Committee minutes, Extraordinary Meeting, 1 July 1930.
⁷⁸ The impact of sexological influence is discussed by Porter and Hall, *The Facts of Life*, pp. 166-168.

female adolescent sexuality tended to be incipient at most. Here we have an example of Leonore Davidoff's point that, historically speaking, views of sexuality handed down are those of people in power.⁷⁹ Glimpses of the attitudes of working-class girls themselves are rare.⁸⁰ Middle-class anxieties about the growth of the 'amateur' prostitute were evident in the public debate on sexual matters, a reflection of heightened anxieties about the increasing independence, freedom - and therefore visibility - of working-class girls. Usually the expression described those women who were sexually active or promiscuous who did not trade for money but who might receive favours, nights out, meals, and gifts.

No legal definition of a prostitute existed. Nor for that matter was there a term for prostitutes' customers. In 1922, English law on solicitation and indecent behaviour in public was muddled, ineffectual and unjust.⁸¹ Loitering or soliciting were not offences for anyone except a 'common prostitute'. Although it was assumed women 'practised immorality for gain', evidence of receiving money was never demanded. There were two major impediments to equal justice: the labelling of a woman as a 'common prostitute' and the custom of convicting on police evidence alone.⁸² The debate was not only over legal niceties; it involved issues about women's freedom and access to public space and

⁷⁹ See Chapter One, p. 34.

⁸⁰ Alison Neilans frequently pointed out that wages for young women were so low that prostitution offered much better remuneration. Maude Royden also saw the attractions of money for new clothes and a more exciting lifestyle as an inducement to prostitution for many young girls. See also Edith Watson's comment comparing the financial rewards of prostitution with domestic service, Chapter Two, p.120.

⁸¹ Three different parliamentary acts dealt with three sets of people - men, women in London and women in the rest of England and Wales. Under the 1898 Vagrancy Act a "male person who in any public place persistently solicits or importunes for immoral purposes shall be deemed a rogue and vagabond" faced fines of up to £25 or three months imprisonment. In London, the Metropolitan Police Act of 1839 provided a £2 fine on "every common prostitute or night-walker loitering or being in any thoroughfare or public place for the purpose of prostitution or solicitation to the annoyance of the inhabitant". Many women were convicted, most of the cases resting on police evidence alone since it was deemed impossible to obtain evidence from the "annoyed" persons. There were few prosecutions of men for soliciting women. Outside London, the Towns Police Clauses Act of 1847 provided that "every common prostitute or night-walker, loitering and importuning passengers for the purpose of prostitution in any street to the obstruction, annoyance or danger of the residents or passengers" could be fined £2 or imprisoned for two weeks. AMSH Seventh Annual Report, 1922.

⁸² AMSH Seventh Annual Report 1922, pp. 14-17.

perceptions of appropriate womanly behaviour in terms of class and changing sexual mores.

The AMSH campaign from 1922 to 1928 to repeal this legislation is examined in the next two sections, to show how the Association acted as a pressure group and to examine the range of discourses within which Alison Neilans operated. The first part concerns the creation of the Public Places (Order) Bill, from approximately 1922 to 1925, the second, the official inquiry into solicitation laws which culminated in the publication of the Street Offences Committee Report in 1928. We see Alison Neilans driving the campaign forward, and recognising in Lady Astor an ally but one whose commitment needed reinforcement from time to time.

5.3 b) Unjust Laws on Solicitation: The Public Places (Order) Bill; 1922-1925

In 1922 about three thousand women were imprisoned and another three thousand fined, on charges of "soliciting for immoral purposes".⁸³ Proof of 'annoyance' was required; the men who had been accosted were usually unwilling to give evidence.⁸⁴ This was significant because it meant a steady supply of guilty women legally identified as prostitutes on police evidence alone, an effective way of controlling women's behaviour in the streets. In practice, the laws led to abuse and blackmail; local police were often implicated.⁸⁵ Cases where people had been wrongfully arrested became *causes célèbres* in the popular press. The Home Secretary himself admitted that the way the police contrived

⁸³ Alison Neilans letter, *Time and Tide*, 13 October 1922, p. 995.

⁸⁴ C. R. Hewitt, "The Police and the Prostitute", *Fourth Alison Neilans Memorial Lecture* (n.p., 1951), p.8. Hewitt was formerly a Chief Inspector, City of London Police. He began his career as a young policeman in London in 1921.

⁸⁵ The case of Nora O'Malley, a still-room maid arrested as a common prostitute then subsequently found to be a virgin, was taken up by AMSH. AMSH Executive Committee Minutes, 12 June 1928, Fawcett Library, AMSH Box 43. Instances where mistakes were made and a public outcry in the mass media about 'innocent' women being mistaken for prostitutes proved double-edged for AMSH. Although it highlighted the issues, the concern was often predicated on the respectability or sexual inexperience of the victims.

to provide evidence of 'annoyance' was a "legal fiction".⁸⁶ Moreover, a convicted woman was liable to be arrested at any time with no chance of redress or acquittal.⁸⁷ At an AMSH conference on order in the streets in 1925, Alison Neilans said there were no legal, social or moral grounds for treating the alleged prostitute differently from other people. It was not what a woman was but what she did which should be the sole criterion of police intervention.⁸⁸ Realistically however, it was difficult to convey to people engaged in "moral work" to see that labelling a woman a prostitute, then penalising her on that basis, was unjust.⁸⁹ She used her own research and contact with prostitutes, to point out the 'professional' prostitute usually conducted herself in a "quiet and non-aggressive manner".⁹⁰ And, as for complaints about annoyance, one woman had told her these were usually from prospective clients annoyed at the prices!⁹¹

The initiative for the AMSH decision to focus on solicitation laws may well have originated with an Executive Committee member, G. W. Johnson; it was a ready-made crusade for Alison Neilans, since it concerned the perpetuation of a class of outcast women. I have chosen to cover the campaign in detail because it lays open the debate and shows Alison Neilans at the centre of negotiations.

The campaign began in 1923 with publicity about the need for repeal of the Solicitation Laws and a conference to propose a Street Order Bill (drafted by AMSH) organised by AMSH and affiliated societies.⁹² For those who saw it simply as a moral

⁸⁶ Alison Neilan's report of the lunch on 10 December 1925, given by Lady Astor where she met Joyson-Hicks informally. "Confidential Report of a Meeting with the Home Secretary by Alison Neilans for the AMSH Executive Committee", 18 December 1925. Fawcett Library, AMSH Box 43.

⁸⁷ Alison Neilans, letter, *Time and Tide*, 13 October 1922, p. 995.

⁸⁸ AMSH, "Report of Conference on Solicitation Laws and Public Order", proof copy, 30 November 1925, Astor Papers, MS 1416/1/1/558. University of Reading.

⁸⁹ Conference of Women Magistrates, *The Magistrate* (n.d. [probably October/November 1926]).

⁹⁰ Alison Neilans, Letter, *Time and Tide*, 13 October 1922 p. 995.

⁹¹ Alison Neilans, "Street Annoyances and Solicitation II", *Time and Tide*, (29 December 1922).

⁹² A former militant Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) suffragette who had opposed Nina Boyle's feminist women's police service, Mary Allen, now a Commandant of Women police, was present at the conference - evidence that despite conflicts over philosophies, feminists continued to

issue, the ideal was complete elimination of prostitution. There was disagreement. On the one hand, the churches and social purity activists colluded in hypocrisy by seeking merely to protect the general public from any visible signs of the business, scapegoating the prostitute through criminalisation. People preoccupied with redeeming 'fallen women' had, in a sense, a vested interest in making sure that such women could be identified. Social purity rhetoric, redolent with the notion of sexual activity 'tainting' a woman, posited a progression from wayward girls to hardened professionals, all victims of male lust. Redemption could be achieved through penitence via Christian influence and the medium of Rescue Homes, a feature of religious philanthropy in most cities and towns. As had been pointed out in *The Vote* years earlier, economic factors which induced many women into prostitution were glossed over. The feminist argument, which was, of course, part of a coherent philosophy with adequate wages for women as a substantial plank, maintained the demand for equal treatment of men and women under the law.

Within AMSII divisions crystallised along these lines. The social purity wing argued for legislation which attempted to abolish prostitution from public places. They were also often concerned about the 'amateurs', those girls and women whose moral laxity and lack of chastity created a danger both to themselves and weak-willed men. Libertarians pointed out social change had contributed to the moral panic - it was the custom for many more women to be out and about at all hours than in years gone by, though they did see "flighty" girls as part of the problem. They also recognised that many women who were promiscuous did not take money.⁹³ Nor did they overlook the role of prostitutes' customers. Men loitering in the hope of being solicited, or soliciting, caused much of the trouble.⁹⁴ This point, that sexual preliminaries and contacts were increasingly

work together. See Chapter Four, p. 214.

⁹³ Conference on Street Order Bill, 13 March 1923, AMSH Executive Committee Minutes.

⁹⁴ AMSH Seventh Annual Report, p. 17.

visible because women were less restricted than in the pre-war era, was often made by feminist and women's organisations.⁹⁵

With the help of the Salvation Army, the AMSH members monitored the streets and courts, finding less overt evidence of prostitution but that women were still being convicted on police evidence alone.⁹⁶ In July 1924, representatives from AMSH met fourteen Members of Parliament at the House of Commons. They agreed to work together.⁹⁷ They would collaborate on a parliamentary Bill, find Members willing to introduce it, and aim for a First Reading that year. AMSH would co-ordinate the work and produce publicity material for the campaign.

Alison Neilans then made contacts to maximise support for the Bill.⁹⁸ Lady Astor agreed to bring the Bill in under the Ten-Minute Rule. Much of her House of Commons speech was written by Alison Neilans; the Astor papers show how they drafted and revised it together.

The objectives of the Bill were to remove those major injustices which so disturbed Alison Neilans - the inequality enshrined in legislation and the hypocrisy engendered by having the police as sole arbiters of the state of the streets. It proposed to repeal existing provisions on prostitution in Clause I; Clause II sought to apply the same law to "all persons alike" who wilfully caused annoyance in public places. The third, and most contentious clause laid down the principle that nobody could be taken into custody for

⁹⁵ Frances Balfour, Florence E. Booth, Edith Picton-Turbervill, and Eleanor Rathbone. Letter to *The Times* (25 November 1925).

⁹⁶ Street Bill subcommittee proposal, AMSH Executive Committee Minutes, 15 February 1924.

⁹⁷ Lady Astor, Mrs. Wintringham, Susan Lawrence, and Dorothy Jewson were the four women Members of Parliament present. Sir Robert Newman (MP for Exeter) was chairman and the delegation included G.W. Johnson and Alison Neilans for AMSH, Chrystal Macmillan and Eva Hubback, at that point secretary of NUSEC parliamentary bureau. AMSH Executive Committee minutes, 15 July 1924. See Johanna Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage: Feminists in War and Peace 1914-28* (London: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 135-136, for details of Eva Hubback's career.

⁹⁸ Correspondence shows how she attempted to find backers, among them Sir Robert Newman, Frederick Pethick-Lawrence and Colonel Wedgwood. Astor Papers. University of Reading. MS 1416/1/156.

causing annoyance, except "upon complaint by or on behalf of the person who is annoyed." ⁹⁹ It was this clause which disturbed the social purity workers. It meant convictions on police evidence alone would be impossible and that, since few ostensibly aggrieved parties were willing to pursue complaints, there would be little chance of being able to corral prostitutes into reform. Therefore they saw that their mission to 'rescue' fallen women might dwindle. The Rescue Homes would be empty! ¹⁰⁰ The National Vigilance Association opposed the Bill and began a public protest once it had had its First Reading.

When Lady Astor presented the Bill on 8 July 1925, according to *The Western Morning News* she completed the "difficult task" with "dignity and statesmanship".¹⁰¹ Although the Bill itself had little hope of success and was later dropped, the demand for a government inquiry gained momentum. Alison Neilans felt that even if the Bill itself was not a success:

... we shall have taken a step towards freeing the outcast women all over the world from the injustice which has always been piled upon them. ¹⁰²

Lady Astor acknowledged Alison Neilans' assistance and the two continued to work closely together.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 5th ser., vol. 186 (1924-25), col. 425.

¹⁰⁰ Lady Astor's political secretary to Miss West, 22 June 1925. Astor Papers. MS 1416/1/1/555.

¹⁰¹ *Western Morning News*, Plymouth, 9 July 1925. Existing records also illustrate one of the ways in which "truth" can be subjective. Referring to the muddled and arcane legal situation, Lady Astor told the House of Commons that the Bill's promoters were hoping for a government Select Committee to inquire into solicitation in the streets. At this Committee, she said, they hoped to get evidence from Chief Constables, magistrates and social workers. According to Hansard, here, she was interrupted by a Member, who asked: "And prostitutes?"; "yes and prostitutes," replied Lady Astor. *Hansard Parliamentary Debates* 5th ser., vol. 186 (1924-25), cols. 425-427. But when the debate was reported in *The Police Review*, the interjection was transcribed as: "And constables?"; "yes and constables," *Police Review and Parade Gossip* (17 July 1925), p. 392. The interruption had come from J. H. Hayes, Labour MP. for Edge Hill, Liverpool (1923-1931) a Labour whip from 1925-1931.

¹⁰² Letter, Alison Neilans, London to Lady Astor, 11 July 1925. Astor Papers MS1 416/1/1/555.

¹⁰³ Letter, Lady Astor to Alison Neilans, 17 July 1925. Astor Papers MS1 416/1/1/555. Because Lady Astor's letters were typewritten and the archive holds carbon copies, very often there is no indication of an address from which the letters were sent.

The next tasks were to request a Joint Select Committee from a Home Secretary who was preoccupied by the miners' disputes and to lobby for maximum influence for sympathetic viewpoints on a Select Committee, if one was established.¹⁰⁴ Someone to introduce the Bill into the House of Lords was required and with Lord Astor's help they enlisted Lord Balfour of Burleigh.

5.3 c) The Street Offences Committee 1925-1928

With AMSH and Lady Astor, Alison Neilans had to steer a course between several conflicting opinions, one of the major disadvantages of creating coalitions, and a consequence of marginalisation. It was necessary to maintain the impetus for reform with those men such as Lord Balfour, who, though sympathetic, saw prostitutes as a separate class of women, yet curb over-enthusiastic social purity extremists who had their own agenda. The NVA, still perpetuating the notion of prostitutes as a class apart, denied that the existing laws were unfair. Men were reluctant to press charges against women who had accosted them, the NVA argued, because they pitied the unfortunate outcast woman. This position accorded with the official police view which held that prostitution would increase if prosecution were to be dependent upon evidence from the offended person. Rank-and-file police and magistrates, whose daily task was to interpret the legislation, tended to support the Bill.¹⁰⁵ Fortunately, both Alison Neilans and Lady Astor's political secretary, Miss Matheson, were well aware of the pitfalls in trying to co-ordinate a campaign on such a sensitive issue; they shared a similar outlook. When the Home Secretary met a deputation from the Associated Societies for the Care of Women and

¹⁰⁴ A Joint Committee was required, partly because the Home Office would be in an awkward position if it had to criticise police and magistrates operating the existing system which was open to abuse; furthermore, Lords of Appeal as Committee members would clarify and facilitate legal aspects of the inquiry.

¹⁰⁵ Letter, J.H. Hayes, Westminster, to Lady Astor, (20 July 1925). He wrote on behalf of the police. Letters from other stipendiary magistrate are also in the archive. Astor Papers, MS 1416/1/1/556.

Children, they knew a counter-deputation would be necessary. Miss Matheson told Lady Astor, "These are the people who want to shove prostitutes into rescue homes . . . they are terrified" of your Bill. ¹⁰⁶ In October 1925, the Archbishop of Canterbury expressed support and agreed to lead a deputation - he preferred a "quiet" investigation. ¹⁰⁷ Women's organisations, including NUSEC, the WFL, the National Council of Women lent support. To them, a public hearing at a Parliamentary Committee would open up the topic and produce objective evidence rather than hot air, ¹⁰⁸ a demand which appears apposite if somewhat optimistic in view of what transpired later.

Unfortunately, the campaign was set back by a muddled deputation to the Home Secretary, on 13 November 1925. Led by AMSII, the deputation included representatives of forty societies, including "every religious organisation". ¹⁰⁹ It was an illustration of how the multiplicity of agendas created confusion. Those who simply wanted to clean up the streets were at odds with those whose main priority was equality before the law. ¹¹⁰ Even the Home Secretary, William Joynson-Hicks, a social purity stalwart, seemed muddled about the facts. ¹¹¹ He said the nexus of solicitation legislation was the concept of a woman

¹⁰⁶ Note from Miss Matheson on Home Secretary's letter to Lady Astor, 21 July 1925, Astor Papers, MS 1416/1/1/556. Hilda Matheson (1888-1940), was Lady Astor's political secretary from 1919-1926, when she went to work for John Reith at the BBC, where she pioneered BBC news bulletins. For an account of her time at the BBC see Fred Hunter, "Hilda Matheson and the BBC 1926-1940", *This Working-Day World*, ed. Sybil Oldfield (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994), pp. 169-174. She was a friend of Ethel Smyth, and a lover of Vita Sackville-West.

¹⁰⁷ AMSH Executive Committee minutes, 20 November 1925, Letter, Lady Astor, to Archbishop of Canterbury, 6 August 1925, Astor Papers, MS 1416/1/1/556.

¹⁰⁸ Draft letter, Dr. Helen Wilson, President of AMSII, to the Home Secretary, (n.d.) Fawcett Library, AMSII Box 43.

¹⁰⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 14 November 1925.

¹¹⁰ Draft letter, Dr. Helen Wilson, President of AMSII, to the Home Secretary, (n.d.) Fawcett Library, AMSH Box 43. Alison Neilans did not speak, Dr. Helen Wilson, AMSII President was not present and G. W. Johnson, on behalf of AMSII did not pursue their case strongly enough. Other speakers seemed confused and ill-briefed. For the Young Women's Christian Association, Edith Picton-Turbervill, a Labour MP, admitted that she had no evidence to support her view that the streets were becoming worse, while Mrs. Becton Baker of NUSEC made the point that no woman could have proper status, however many votes she had, as long as prostitutes were treated so unfairly.

¹¹¹ William Joynson-Hicks was a strong social purity supporter. See *Weeks Sex, Politics and Society*, pp. 21. For details of some of his activities, see Chapter Two, note 44.

selling her body. The difference between female and male roles in the transaction was the man "was not making a trade of it". While prostitution itself was not a crime, he said:

... it is a crime for a woman to persistently sell herself in the streets in any town. That is a crime.¹¹²

The NVA used the fiasco to criticise AMSH, who held an extraordinary meeting to repair the damage.¹¹³ A Memorandum to the Home Secretary was drafted.¹¹⁴ In it, Alison Neilans corrected the Home Secretary, and dismissed his analogy with 'trade':

We cannot agree that men who solicit women and who pay either in money or kind for sexual connection are not prostituting their own bodies in the same way as the alleged 'prostitutes' are doing. *Morally*, their position is precisely the same. (Italics hers)¹¹⁵

The AMSH hierarchy was anxious to have a private interview with the Home Secretary to respond to his arguments. With characteristic sanguinity, Lady Astor came to the rescue and arranged for a luncheon meeting early in December. The incident illustrates the differences between Alison Neilans' limited access to officialdom and Lady Astor's modus operandi in the spheres of political power. Despite disliking such socialising, as the one with "all the facts at her fingertips", Alison Neilans felt her presence was essential.¹¹⁶ She and Dr. Wilson attended the lunch and through Lady Astor they had access to some influential politicians.¹¹⁷

At the lunch there was a major clash of opinion with the Home Secretary. Sitting opposite, Alison Neilans told him that AMSH wanted a Committee of Inquiry or even a Royal Commission. Joynson-Hicks, irritated by press reports on his "extempore" speech,

¹¹² Draft letter, Alison Neilans on behalf of AMSH, to the Home Secretary, November 1925, Fawcett Library, AMSH Box 43.

¹¹³ AMSH Executive Committee Minutes, 20 November 1925.

¹¹⁴ I have not been able to ascertain whether this was sent to him. It was circulated to the AMSH Executive Committee.

¹¹⁵ Draft letter, Alison Neilans on behalf of AMSH, to the Home Secretary, November 1925.

¹¹⁶ Letter, Alison Neilans, to Lady Astor, London, 25 November 1925, Astor Papers, MS 1416/1/1/555.

¹¹⁷ These included: Lord Balfour; the Earl and Countess of Clarendon, Hugh Macmillan and Sir Robert Newman. Macmillan was a Kings Counsel and Lord Advocate for Scotland in the Labour government. He was made a Privy Councillor in 1924 and created life peer 1930.

where he had been unsure of his facts, admitted that though the assertion of annoyance was "a legal fiction", it enabled the police to maintain some order and decorum.¹¹⁸ Unable to comprehend the AMSH proposition that spasmodic arrests through the solicitation laws in actuality meant prostitution was controlled by the whims of the police, he told them:

'I thought before that you were wrong-headed, but I am now convinced that you are more wrong-headed than I had imagined. Do you actually mean to say that women are to be allowed to use the streets and to stand in doorways and to beckon and accost men and that the police are to stand by helpless and take no action. You forget', he continued, 'that I have also to deal with sodomy, do you say too that the painted boy should be free to solicit in the streets?' He then turned to Dr. Wilson and said 'What you want in effect is free prostitution. How can you expect me to agree with that when all the Christian Churches are calling upon me to reduce this evil.' (sic)¹¹⁹

Despite his annoyance, Joynson-Hicks agreed to an inquiry and promised AMSH he would accept two of their nominations, if they would propose four people, "not too wild".¹²⁰

So the next step was to try to influence the inquiry's outcome. Again the limits of influence became apparent. AMSH needed to ensure the Committee sat in public. Publicity was essential because it brought realism to a topic so often shrouded in bigotry or swept under the carpet. They compared the situation to the League of Nations Committee on the Trafficking of Women and Children, sitting at the same time, which was investigating prostitution internationally (and which reported in 1927). It had found there was "nothing to be lost and everything to be gained" by working in public.¹²¹ Lady Astor's interest had to be sustained and the drive to press for a bill maintained, whatever the outcome of an inquiry. Correspondence between Alison Neilans and Lady Astor reveals how Alison Neilans persistently assisted, reminded, and even chivvied Lady Astor into commitment.¹²²

¹¹⁸ Alison Neilans, Confidential Report of Meeting with the Home Secretary. AMSH Executive Committee Minutes, 25 November 1925.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Letter, Lady Astor to Joynson-Hicks, 10 November 1925, Astor Papers, MS 1416/1/1/556.

¹²² The Astor papers contain many notes, requests and reminders. Astor Papers, MS 1416/1/1/556.

Hard evidence about the state of the streets from an unbiased public was required.¹²³ Requesting help from readers of *Time and Tide*, Alison Neilans warned that prurient observation from "deliberate loitering in doubtful streets" was no use, an indication of her growing impatience with social purity watch-dogs. In a letter to *The Times* in December 1925, the National Vigilance Association had denied the Solicitation Laws were unfair; they thought few 'innocent' girls were ever mistaken for prostitutes, an example of the continuing power of the mythology of two kinds of women. AMSH supporters did not want the Inquiry Committee packed with moralists and bigots. As Alison Neilans expressed it:

... someone with a lifelong connection with religious or rescue work seems exactly the kind of person who should not be put on.¹²⁴

Joynson-Hicks kept his promise to AMSH.¹²⁵ Lord and Lady Astor set about some judicious deployment of influence. Lord Astor felt it was important to have people whose names would carry weight and who could master details thoroughly. He recommended Lord Balfour as an excellent chairman - he would not be distracted by moralists and, through his wife, would be in touch with feminist and women's opinions. Alison Neilans was not so sure. She felt Balfour was neither sufficiently familiar with the subject nor fully conversant with the feminist view - he had referred to the "theoretical injustices" of prostitutes.¹²⁶ Here is an example of the parameters which limited Alison Neilans' work. Since she was outside government and establishment circles, she had to acquiesce in the politicking of more influential figures. Lady Astor hosted an AMSH conference in November 1926, when representatives of forty-five organisations met. It was an attempt to

¹²³ Alison Neilans. Letter, *Time and Tide*, 6 November 1925, p. 1099.

¹²⁴ Letter, Alison Neilans, to Miss Matheson, London, 4 November 1925, Astor Papers, MS 1416/1/1/555.

¹²⁵ They suggested Lady Astor, Lord Balfour, Major Hills (an MP), Chrystal Macmillan, Dr. Douglas White and G. W. Johnson of AMSH for the Committee.

¹²⁶ Correspondence between Alison Neilans and Hilda Matheson, December 1925 - February 1926, Astor Papers. Lady Balfour of Burleigh resigned from NUSEC over the birth control controversy.

reconcile the differences with the social purity movement but again divisions emerged. Professionals with experience of working with prostitutes, such as prison visitors and medical officers, dissented from the social purity view that special laws were needed to control such women.¹²⁷

One fresh opening in the channels of power was the appointment of female justices. Alison Neilans took the opportunity to explain her views on solicitation laws to the Conference of Women Magistrates.¹²⁸

Although Lady Astor's Bill did not go beyond its First Reading,¹²⁹ the long-awaited Committee was established in October 1927. Its chairman was Hugh Macmillan, a Lord Advocate for Scotland. It included five women but not one member had been recommended by AMSH. So, despite instigating the demand and organising a coalition of pressure groups to press for an inquiry, AMSH had been cold-shouldered. To some extent, the very fact that they had performed the function of co-ordinating the campaign may have told against a society like AMSH. The church, law and judiciary were well-represented; and presumably both a military and masculine point of view were represented by a Major Fairfax-Lucy.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Report on Conference on Solicitation Laws and Public Order, proof copy, Astor Papers, MS 1416/1/1/558.

¹²⁸ *Daily News*, 10 December 1926. Lord Balfour had introduced the Bill in the House of Lords and at its Second Reading in December, Lord Desborough, for the Home Office, simply repeated the view that solicitation would greatly increase and order on the streets could not be maintained if evidence from complainants was required.

¹²⁹ Olive Banks, *Politics of British Feminism 1918-1970*, (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1993), p. 61.

¹³⁰ Two represented the church (the Bishop of Durham and Rev. R. C. Gillie, a Presbyterian Minister). Sir Joseph Priestly and W.A. Jowitt were Kings Counsellors, Sir Chartres Biron was Chief Magistrate at Bow Street and W. W. Wilberforce a former Metropolitan police magistrate, then deputy-chairman of County Sessions of London; Sir Leonard Dunning, a Home Office Inspector of Constabulary, and Major Sir H. Fairfax-Lucy who had "much administrative experience in the Army". (*The Times*, 15 October 1927). The women were Margery Fry, then Principal of Somerville College, Miss E. H. Kelly, a magistrate, Mrs. Ella Morrison Millar, an Edinburgh Baillie, Mrs. Wilson-Fox, widow of Henry Wilson-Fox, an MP who had worked in pensions administration during the war; and the Home Secretary's wife, Lady Joynson-Hicks. The women seemed to offer no particularly relevant expertise, and certainly Lady Joynson-Hicks would seem a biased choice.

The Committee was much concerned with statistical evidence attempting to compare pre- and post-war conditions.¹³¹ Cultural changes were remarked on. Increased promiscuity was attributed by some witnesses to greater freedom of movement brought about by bicycles and cars. Kerb-crawling was a new feature; no-one was quite sure whether this constituted real prostitution or was just a novel way for men and women to meet.¹³²

The AMSH chairman, the Rev. W. C. Roberts, told the Committee that in keeping the streets clean, police jurisdiction should not be used to decide who was "clean" or who was not. Alison Neilans spent four hours before the Committee; she also represented the WFL, NUSEC and St. Joan's Social and Political Alliance. She struck a realistic note; it was not the function of criminal law to protect people from things they morally disliked. Sometimes as many as 12,000 women were arrested in a year.¹³³ The net result of a fine, an irregular tax on prostitution, was that a woman had to "apply herself more assiduously to prostitution to pay it". Here she displays insight into the workings of the Committee, its Home Office context, and the need to manipulate and appeal to the interests of the members, who seemed to her to have closed minds. Later she told the AMSH Committee:

The members were obviously prejudiced and appeared to have already decided on their verdict. Mrs. Bramwell Booth and other persons who had taken the AMSH point of view had been almost bullied by the Committee, and Mr. Roberts in particular had been treated with marked discourtesy.¹³⁴

Meanwhile, perhaps conscious of which way the wind was blowing, Lady Astor was having doubts about appearing before the Committee. For several weeks she prevaricated. Her busy schedule was one excuse, another was that much of what she could

¹³¹ *The Times*, 14 January 1928; 16 January 1928. They heard there was less solicitation - in Manchester the number of prosecutions had fallen from 1,299 in 1911 to 148 in 1927; in Liverpool the number of women arrested fell from 1,772 to 316 over a period of twenty years.

¹³² *The Times*, 14 January 1928; 16 January 1928

¹³³ These statistics differ from those she quoted previously. It maybe the difference between women arrested and those found guilty.

¹³⁴ AMSH Executive Committee Minutes, 13 March 1928.

say had already been presented. But, although it is not spelt out, the available correspondence suggests she sensed that the AMSH view did not appeal to the majority of interested parties. In her limited way Lady Astor did try to garner useful material; she had wanted to meet prostitutes and proposed some incognito visits but this idea came to nothing. She and Alison Neilans had considered asking prostitutes to give evidence, but felt this was impractical. The women, said Alison Neilans, were "apt to romance about themselves" and might be afraid to say anything critical of the police. In the last resort it would be a case of a prostitute's word against that of some official.¹³⁵ The Astor family solicitor advised Lady Astor not to appear before the Committee, casting around for plausible excuses. It would be better for her if she was "out of it altogether", a comment which reveals how the Committee's subject was generally perceived, an unsavoury business and one in which her involvement did little for Lady Astor's prestige. The solicitor thought a written statement, in Lady Astor's absence, would seem "suspicious"; it would attract attention and, "anything of that sort is to be deplored."¹³⁶ He was unhappy about Alison Neilans' position. In this, the only critical comment about Alison Neilans which I have found, he stated he trusted her good will but felt some doubt "as to the balance of her judgement."¹³⁷ In the end, Lady Astor submitted a written statement which repeated the AMSH case.

Feminist equal moral standards were discounted during the Committee hearings. Several members felt such standards were unattainable. When Mr. Frederick Mead, the Marlborough Street Court magistrate and an old enemy from the suffrage campaign, by

¹³⁵ Lady Astor wrote to Margery Fry speculating that there would be a Minority Report against establishing solicitation as an offence, but Margery Fry refused to reveal the inner workings of the Committee and advised her that well-documented written evidence was most useful. Letter, Alison Neilans to Miss Jackson, Lady Astor's Secretary, 28 March 1928, Astor Papers, MS 1416/1/1/559.

¹³⁶ Letter, R.W. Poole, Lord Astor's Solicitor, London, to Lord Astor, 23 March 1928, Astor Papers MSA 1416/1/1/559

¹³⁷ Letter, R.W. Poole, Lord Astor's Solicitor, London, to Lord Astor, 29 March 1928, Astor Papers. MS 1416/1/1/559.

then an octogenarian, told the Committee: "Prostitution is a necessity in every civilised country", Major Fairfax-Lucy had heartily concurred.¹³⁸

Alison Neilans' misgivings about the intentions of the Committee proved well-founded. Reporting in 1928, the Committee recommended existing laws on street offences be repealed and suggested one law making it "an offence for any person to importune another of the opposite sex for immoral purposes in a street or public place".¹³⁹ AMSH described the Report as "a curious mixture of progressive and retrograde recommendations". (Their response was probably Alison Neilans' work.) While welcoming the proposed abolition of special laws against "the common prostitute", AMSH regretted other proposals which omitted significant safeguards and could make it harder for the accused to obtain justice.¹⁴⁰ It could become an "unprovable" offence.¹⁴¹ As Alison Neilans told readers of *Time and Tide*, the law:

. . . will either be a dead letter, or will be applied by the police in a discretionary manner to a few known women, or it will be a public danger with possibilities of great injustice to innocent persons. . . . This proposed new section simply places all men and women in the dangerous legal position hitherto reserved for the 'prostitute' . . . Instead of bringing the woman of the streets within the protection of the ordinary law it is proposed to drag down all citizens to the legal level of the 'prostitute'. This may be retribution, but it is neither justice nor sound law.¹⁴²

The publication of the Report also marked the nadir of relations between AMSH and the NVA. Alison Neilans suggested to the Executive they should publicly disassociate themselves from the NVA. That the NVA was reactionary the Committee agreed, but they were not prepared to sever all links. They retained a connection with the NVA's

¹³⁸ Letter, Dame Katharine Furse, to Lord Astor, London, 18 April 1928, Astor Papers MS 1416/1/1/559. For details of Mr. Mead's views, see Chapter One, note 111.

¹³⁹ Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, p. 218.

¹⁴⁰ AMSH response to the Street Offences Report, in the form of a letter, probably sent out as a press release, signed by Helen Wilson (President), W.C. Roberts (Chairman), and Alison Neilans (Secretary), 11 December 1928.

¹⁴¹ Alison Neilans. Letter to *Time and Tide*, 2 December 1927.

¹⁴² *Time and Tide*, 14 December 1928.

international committee, the Bureau for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women, but resolved to oppose the NVA in public when necessary.¹⁴³ Ultimately the solicitation laws were not changed and the campaign petered out. Protection under the law for prostitutes was not provided until 1951 when AMSH with the help of Barbara Castle successfully fought for a new Criminal Law Amendment Bill.¹⁴⁴ Only a few years later discrimination was reintroduced with the Street Offences Act of 1959, which followed the Wolfenden Report. In an effort to 'clean up' the streets, prostitutes were harassed, thus sexual double standards were once more enshrined in law.¹⁴⁵

5:4 Protecting children from sexual abuse 1925-1935

The earlier work of feminists and social purity activists concerning incest and the age of consent has been outlined in Chapter Three. There were times when the NVA and AMSH worked together - and the fact that they were able to do so points to Alison Neilans' ability to negotiate harmoniously with a number of interests. The Dowager Lady Nunburnholme, a leading figure in the NVA, and Mrs Bramwell Booth of the Salvation Army, were close colleagues of Alison Neilans. They co-operated on campaigns to raise concern about sexual offences, particularly child abuse, but these coalitions also illustrate the limits within which Alison Neilans was ultimately confined. Alison Neilans does not appear to have played a very active part in the work of Nina Boyle and Edith Watson in *The Vote*, (see Chapter Four) yet protection of children from sexual abuse was obviously important in her theorising about sexual oppression.

¹⁴³ AMSH Executive Committee Minutes, 13 March 1928, Fawcett Library, AMSH Box 43. *The Shield* published a series of correspondence from the NVA and British Social Hygiene Council arguing about the finer points of the campaign. *The Shield* Vol. VI (January 1930)

¹⁴⁴ Banks, *Politics of British Feminism*, p. 61. See also Porter and Hall, *The Facts of Life*, p. 245.

¹⁴⁵ Porter and Hall, *The Facts of Life*, p. 245.

A cluster of moral and social issues arising from relatively recent changes from just before the First World War was evident by the early 1920s. The debate was marked by several national preoccupations: the perceived effects of rapid social change, the spread of VD, eugenics, the treatment of 'mentally deficient' offenders and the gradual shift from punishment to remedial measures for criminals. Traditional attitudes also persisted: sexual abuse was not an acceptable topic for public discussion; child abuse, poverty and poor housing were associated, and corporal punishment for offenders was advocated. Public awareness about sexual abuse had been raised through feminist articulation of the issue. A solution long advocated by feminism, the demand for more women police, had by the early 1920s permeated national consciousness. I now take an article published in an early issue of *Time and Tide* in 1920 and a House of Commons debate in 1923 as starting points to indicate features which predominated in the public debate for some time.

Problems with inadequate factual information which *The Vote* had attempted to redress years earlier, continued. When the Six Point Group came into being in 1921, it listed better legislation on child assault as one of its six objectives.¹⁴⁶ Many women hoped the appointment of women police, women doctors and jurors would result from the 1918 Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act which was "gradually leavening the dough" of custom. Raising of the age of consent to eighteen and other changes to the law were discussed.¹⁴⁷

In 1923 an attempt to estimate the numbers of child abuse cases was made by Margaret Wintringham, Labour MP for Louth and a social purity campaigner. She

¹⁴⁶ Spender, *Time and Tide Wait for No Man*, p. 170; *Time and Tide*, 5 November 1920, p. 520.

¹⁴⁷ The law ruled that an assault committed on a child under sixteen but over thirteen was a 'misdemeanour' (punishable by imprisonment for not over two years with or without hard labour), on a child under thirteen it was a 'felony' (punishable by penal servitude for life or not less than three years). Heavier sentences could be imposed if the age at which an 'assault' became a misdemeanour was raised. This might also have a deterrent effect. *Time and Tide*, 5 November 1920.

estimated nearly half the NSPCC's case-load arose from criminal or indecent assault.¹⁴⁸

The public's most characteristic attitudes were graphically described by George Bernard Shaw in the same issue of *Time and Tide*:

Either they are psychopathically excited by psychopathic outrages, and frankly demand that the offenders be flogged or emasculated, or they regard the offence as an amiable weakness, and the notion that its consequences to the victim are necessarily serious as sentimental nonsense.¹⁴⁹

In other discourses, class issues, eugenic disquiet and melodramatic revulsion were displayed. Child abuse was raised in the House of Commons that year as an issue in the debate about the necessity for women police.¹⁵⁰ An AMSH supporter, Frank Briant, Labour Member for North Lambeth, used a feminist rhetorical practice and compared the sentences imposed on criminals: for stealing a Pckinese dog a man received a sentence of five months imprisonment, for "ruining a child, body and soul", the same Bench imposed a penalty of four months imprisonment. Lady Astor melodramatically asserted:

A father and mother would far rather that their child was murdered outright than ruined morally and physically in this way.¹⁵¹

Mrs. Wintringham spoke about the inadequacy of treatment for offenders, demanding an official investigation by experts and more women police. Although the Home Office reply was non-committal, public opinion in favour of women police was demonstrated by a leading article in *The Times* that same day. Still perpetuating the notion of sexual abuse tainting the victim, as well as the association of child abuse and poverty, the article claimed:

¹⁴⁸ Mrs. Wintringham presented NSPCC figures from the previous fourteen years - more than 11,000 cases had been investigated, and of these 1,997 were of "criminal assault", and 2,532 were classed as "indecent assault". *Time and Tide*, 23 February 1923.

¹⁴⁹ *Time And Tide*, 23 February 1923.

¹⁵⁰ In 1923 The Geddes Committee reduced the number of women in the Metropolitan Police from over one hundred to twenty. Accounts of the public controversy and efforts by women's organisations to retain women in the police service are in the Imperial War Museum, Women at Work Collection, EMP42. See also Joan Lock, "The Geddes Axe", Chapter Sixteen in *The British Policewoman: Her Story*, (London: Robert Hale, 1979), pp. 135-146

¹⁵¹ *The Times*, 13 July 1923.

It is the universal testimony of those whose work brings them into personal contact with the child-life of the poorer classes that the evil and corruption which springs from it, are a festering sore in the streets and parks, and sometimes in the congested homes, of our great cities.¹⁵²

The Geddes Committee decision to reduce the number of women in the Metropolitan Police was criticised. Women could protect children more effectively than any man. This was precisely the point Nina Boyle had been making a decade earlier and which she had continued to pursue. Women could:

. . . talk to these children, boys as well as girls, with a womanly wisdom and tenderness and understanding which - if anything can - will save them from the moral degradation which must infallibly follow if the first ignorant lapse becomes a conscious and vicious habit and obsession.¹⁵³

The Home Office took the view that if administration was improved, existing legislation on abuse of children was adequate.¹⁵⁴ In 1924 they appointed a Departmental Committee to collect information and take evidence about sexual offences against young persons. A parliamentary question from Lady Astor in the House of Commons revealed that the evidence would not be published on the grounds of economy and because some witnesses appeared only on condition that their evidence would be regarded as "private". Alison Neilans' frustrations at her limited access to the corridors of power flared up. She objected. Any advantage of bringing the topic into the open which a government inquiry would have, would be completely nullified by secrecy. Without proper access to information, societies such as AMSII were working in the dark.¹⁵⁵

In their Report of 1925, the Committee speculated that many more sexual offences against young people than were reported took place. Even when proceedings were taken, the proportion of acquittals was high. Crimes accompanied by sexual violence had decreased, but, according to official statistics, there had been a distinct increase in indecent

¹⁵² *The Times*, 13 July 1923.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ *The Times*, 12 March 1924.

¹⁵⁵ *Time And Tide* 4 December 1925, p. 1198.

assaults on boys and girls under sixteen. Did this mean a genuine increase or greater reporting? They concluded a definite increase was more likely. Also, serious charges were often reduced to 'indecent assault' in the "interests of the victim".¹⁵⁶ Recognising the problems with official statistics, the Committee recommended that in cases of rape, indecent assault, unnatural offences, gross indecency and indecent exposure the returns for England and Wales should separate out those involving offences against young people. To have women participating at every stage would reduce the strain on children. Other recommendations included fewer delays, better legal advice for the prosecution, and that all offenders should be medically examined. Their point that absence of corroboration should not be a complete bar to securing conviction was a contentious issue legally.¹⁵⁷ In September 1926, a Home Office Memorandum called the Committee's recommendations to the attention of magistrates and the police, an indication of their lack of impact.¹⁵⁸ Otherwise little was done directly. Methods of dealing with persistent offenders were the subject of a Departmental Committee in 1931. Sexual offenders with numerous convictions were referred to in its 1932 Report, when an "abnormal mental condition" was perceived as "the essential causative factor".¹⁵⁹

The view that crime might be the result of mental disorder shows how attitudes were changing, as does the Committee's recommendation that some persistent offenders might be amenable to psychological treatment. These and other attitudinal changes, for instance on adolescent sexuality, affected thinking in AMSII too. The Association was becoming impatient with the government's inaction. By 1932, a change in tactics suggests

¹⁵⁶ *Report of the Home Office Committee on Sexual Offences Against Young Persons* (1925) quoted in *The Shield* Vol. 1, No 1 (April 1932), pp. 12-24.

¹⁵⁷ *Sexual Offences Against Young Persons*, Memorandum for Magistrates, Issued by the Joint Committee on Sexual Offences (n.p., December 1935), Fawcett Library.

¹⁵⁸ *The Times*, 18 August 1926.

¹⁵⁹ Quote from the Report of the Departmental Committee, 1931, *The Shield*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1932). Two new forms of sentence to replace ineffectual imprisonment for persistent offenders were recommended - a period of detention of between two and four years and a sentence of prolonged detention of not less than five and not more than ten years.

lessons learned in suffrage and the Street Offences campaigns had had an impact. They narrowed their demands. Rather than continue to encompass wider issues such as the age of consent, AMSII focused on better protection for younger children. In April *The Shield* carried "A Call to Action". Although there is no by-line, the style - presentation of facts in an almost laconic tone - suggests its author was Alison Neilans; certainly it was under her editorial jurisdiction. Yet again attention was drawn to the inadequacy of official statistics:

These cases are far more prevalent than people imagine. . . . probably not one case in twenty, if so many, is ever reported to the police. . . . there is no doubt that hundreds of children suffer mental distress and nervous shock occasioned by being the subject of some indecent attack without saying a single word to any other person about their experience. ¹⁶⁰

There were few means of knowing whether the victim was older or a very young child.

Better statistics might reveal the number of offences against children under sixteen.

The age is of considerable importance; an indecent act committed upon a child of, say, three to twelve years of age is an act suggesting abnormality of mind in the offender, whereas a similar act committed upon a young person who has reached puberty and who may have been a consenting party (consent by a young person is no defence) while rightly constituting a legal offence, does not necessarily suggest abnormality. . . . The general public scarcely realises the extreme youth of some of these assaulted children. ¹⁶¹

Convictions were hard to obtain because a child who was too young to be sworn on oath must have its evidence corroborated "by some other material evidence", otherwise the case would be dismissed. Since offences were mostly committed when a child was alone and unprotected, this was rarely available. Thus children who were too young to give evidence on oath remained almost unprotected by law. Imprisonment or corporal punishment had little effect on habitual offenders, whose motives were discussed using newer psychological explanations:

Such people obtain a perverse pleasure in deliberately exhibiting their reproductive organs to females, and it is thought by many who have studied

¹⁶⁰ *The Shield*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (April 1932), p. 12.

¹⁶¹ *The Shield*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (April 1932), p. 13.

these perversities that the visible shock and distress occasioned to a girl or woman by such an action is in itself pleasurable to the exhibitionist.¹⁶²

The next step in the campaign was a conference of nearly fifty welfare organisations under AMSH auspices in November 1932. It attempted to create a more coherent, collective voice from specialists who dealt with the results of sexual abuse daily. Practical proposals were made. A Joint Committee on Sexual Offences (the Joint Committee) was established with Alison Neilans as Secretary.¹⁶³ The Association drew up a draft Bill to recommend medical treatment for men convicted of child abuse and indecent exposure and longer periods of detention for persistent offenders. Further delays were feared if the age of consent issue was resurrected.¹⁶⁴ If their brief was limited they might achieve success. Alison Neilans told a meeting of the National Council of Women that such offences were committed on children under thirteen, and in some cases on much younger children. Here was no question of "normal sex passion"; the offences indicated "abnormality on the part of the offender".¹⁶⁵ A medical examination was needed the very first time a man was convicted.

In July 1934 several members of parliament requested a meeting with the Home Secretary; this was delayed until February, when John Buchan, (later Lord Tweedsmuir) introduced the deputation. Alison Neilans again acted as Secretary. They urged improved statistical analyses; better estimates of those offenders who, "while being neither certifiably insane nor certifiably mental defectives" were mentally abnormal; medical

¹⁶² *The Shield*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (April 1932), p. 16.

¹⁶³ The Dowager Lady Nunburnholme of the NVA was Chairman and Mrs. Neville Rolfe, Vice-chairman. Earlier I referred to this Committee to show there was increasing professionalisation of the debate. The members show the range of organisations with which Alison Neilans worked. They included: the British Social Hygiene Council and National Council of Mental Hygiene, Central Association for Mental Welfare, Children's Welfare Associations, the Howard League for Penal Reform, National Association of Probation Officers, the London County Council Children's Care Committees, The National Council of Women and NVA, the National Union of Teachers and the Salvation Army. See above, note 47.

¹⁶⁴ *The Shield* Vol. 1, No. 3 (October 1932), p. 104.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

examinations; that Home Office circulars should reach every magistrate and that the recommendations of the Departmental Committee on Persistent Offenders should be acted upon.¹⁶⁶ The deputation was fobbed off; the Home Secretary said the government was too busy for further legislation but would see whether tightening-up administration would meet requirements.¹⁶⁷ Two memos to target particular audiences were produced by the Joint Committee in 1935. One discussed the problems of defining abnormality and the best form of detention or treatment; it stressed the need for medical examination; written by Dr. R.D. Gillespie, and was aimed at doctors and social workers. The other, for magistrates, drew attention to the 1926 Home Office Memorandum, which suggests little notice had been taken of the 1925 Departmental Committee's Report.¹⁶⁸ The Joint Committee concluded that it was not practicable to demand special provisions for offenders who were not certifiable. They reiterated their demands for better collection of data and implementation of the various recommendations and urged voluntary societies to continue the campaigning and then dissolved. A ten-year campaign to protect children had ground to a halt in the face of government inertia.

Before I evaluate the success of Alison Neilans' work through AMSII in these two campaigns, I now turn to the international arena where there were parallels with the British situation.

5.5 International Work

On the international stage, Alison Neilans faced a familiar problem, the creation of an authoritative voice in the public deliberations on sexually-transmitted diseases and

¹⁶⁶ Report of the Joint Committee on Sexual Offences, (London: AMSII, 1935), Fawcett Library.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ *Sexual Offences Against Young Persons*, Memorandum for Magistrates; R.D. Gillespie, "The Need for a Medical Mental Examination of Persistent Sexual Offenders.", Memorandum, Issued by the Joint Committee on Sexual Offences (n.p., December 1935). Fawcett Library.

prostitution, without official backing of government, medical or legal expertise. In this section, after indicating the type and nature of AMSII work, I touch on activity connected with imperial and colonial issues, and the League of Nations, and, finally, on efforts to liaise with the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA). Owing to lack of space, I merely select several incidents or issues which reflect or compare with similar situations in Britain to show the range of concerns which occupied Alison Neilans. The international dynamics replicated the typical patterns of AMSII activity in Britain.

The Association adopted similar strategies to those of its domestic campaigns, establishing coalitions and working with international organisations such as the League of Nations and IWSA, with pressure groups like the International Abolitionist Federation, the churches, through missionaries particularly, and with government departments, for example, the Colonial Office. The Association acted as a communication channel, particularly for missionaries, social and medical workers out in the field who could supply the government with useful information and local knowledge while simultaneously making their own views known.

Channels established by the British Branch of the Association for the Abolition of State Regulation of Vice which had merged with the LNA to become AMSII, were already in existence. The original activity continued, focusing chiefly on state Regulation of prostitution, and what had once been called the white slave trade, which by the 1920s, was more usually known as trafficking in women. Different cultural, religious and social customs meant a far greater range of attitudes. In many countries, including parts of the British Empire, state Regulation was well-established. In other areas, police forces operated informal control systems which opened the way to abuse and blackmail.

In a sense there was one significant difference in international work compared with that in Britain. Instead of a pro-active stance, AMSII tended to be reactive, responding to

international events. In those areas where democracy had not imbued some notions of equality, methods of attempting to control prostitution or the spread of VD could be repressive, especially for women.

At the forty-first International Abolitionist Federation in Rome in 1921, a major part of the discussion focused on VD, whether "self-disinfection" was effective and whether support by public authorities reduced its incidence. ¹⁶⁹ Alison Neilans spoke on "The Compulsory Rescue of Young Prostitutes", warning about the dangers of what she termed "neo-regulation" - i.e., strict health laws for the prevention and compulsory treatment of VD. Once again she used a feminist framework to analyse well-meaning attempts to control the spread of sexually-transmitted diseases as being detrimental to women's freedom and personal rights. Legislation which appeared gender-neutral tended to be practised on women, often those convicted of solicitation, found in police raids or denounced by men. It was women who faced compulsory examination, quarantine and detention without any proper legal process. Public propaganda at public expense to provide disinfection or knowledge was usually directed at and for the benefit of men. Regulation and the position of women were related. Equality was desirable because it enabled women to "fight effectively against the regulation system". ¹⁷⁰

When questions about sexually-transmitted diseases arose in the empire, a racist dimension could be added to the cavalier attitude shown VD suspects by officialdom in Britain. One of the Association's main hopes was to alert the British public to what was happening in British territories in their name. If this could be done, then the weight of public opinion could be used to advocate reform. Regulation had been abolished in Singapore in 1886, but thirty-five years later, in 1921, a Medical Commission had

¹⁶⁹ Dr. White and Dr. Helen Wilson, AMSH delegates gave papers on these topics. AMSH Executive Committee Minutes, 18 November 1921; AMSH Seventh Annual Report.

¹⁷⁰ AMSH Seventh Annual Report 1922, AMSH Annual General Meeting, (26 April 1923), p. 32.

demanded the immediate re-introduction of the Contagious Diseases Ordinance in a stricter form. The local government had passed the Ordinance. Hoping "public controversy" would show what was happening, the Bishop of Singapore asked for AMSH help.¹⁷¹ They provided him with facts and figures and continued efforts to prevent the implementation of Regulation. In 1924 Alison Neilans, on behalf of AMSH, attended a meeting with the Colonial Secretary to discuss social hygiene in Singapore. She also prepared briefing material for Lady Astor and Dr. Douglas White of AMSH, and the following year, 1925, deputised for him at a Colonial Office Committee on Social Hygiene, an indication of the specialist status which she was accorded by this stage.

By the early 1920s, the *Mui-Tsai* system in Hong Kong was creating concern.¹⁷² The issue illustrates both AMSH methods and the difficulties in negotiating across different cultures. Press and public opinion were mobilised but initially the Colonial Office denied allegations of slavery in Hong Kong until Winston Churchill, then Colonial Secretary, had ordered a full investigation. A scheme for the elimination of the *Mui-Tsai* system was drawn up by the Governor of Hong Kong. At the AMSH 1923 annual meeting the AMSH contacts in Singapore, Commander and Mrs. Haslewood of the Salvation Army, had lectured on their work which, so the Association believed, had stopped this form of child-slavery. Later the Haslewoods reported problems with the Governor's scheme. Girls leaving the homes where they were employed, albeit in lowly positions, had nowhere to turn; some were going into prostitution. It was recognised that old established customs could not be altered at a moment's notice.¹⁷³ Legislation to sweep away indigenous customs could be counter-productive. Despite a co-ordinated campaign involving about two hundred societies and pressure groups, letters to the Colonial

¹⁷¹ AMSH Seventh Annual Report 1922, AMSH Annual General Meeting, (26 April 1923), p. 34.

¹⁷² This was a custom where young girls were sold into domestic slavery for a number of years, then resold as wives or concubines. See Introduction, p. 20.

¹⁷³ AMSH Seventh Annual Report 1922; AMSH Annual General Meeting, (26 April 1923), p. 35.

Secretary and Members of Parliament and appeals to the British government, the situation worsened. By 1929 the *Mui-Tsai* system was flourishing more than ever. The Association had to recognise its limits.

They could though, act on behalf of native peoples to defend them from some of the more arrogant aspects of colonial rule. The AMSII response to a Colonial Office campaign to eradicate VD in Uganda in 1921 provides an example. Firstly, they challenged the government's statistics on which precipitous action had been based. Reports from field workers about the harsh, insensitive methods employed by Colonial Office officials were acted on. Whole villages of men and women had been rounded up "like cattle" to be examined by doctors at a rate of about fifty to sixty an hour. A woman doctor, employed to examine the women, who had protested at the inadequate, impersonal nature of the arrangements, had been dismissed. Together with the Catholic Women's Society and the National Council for Combatting VD, AMSII successfully demanded an end to the compulsory examinations not simply on the grounds of inhumanity but also because the hasty, improvised nature of the examinations would probably increase infection.¹⁷⁴

Campaigning about the unjust treatment of prostitutes was also maintained. In the international deliberations about trafficking in women which continued after the establishment of the League of Nations, Alison Neilans used the factual evidence obtained through medical research to highlight the close association between licensed brothels and the maintenance of the trafficking networks. In 1923 in Britain, some women's organisations had made resolutions to the League of Nations calling for the prohibition of foreign women in licensed brothels. AMSII had opposed these demands, arguing that it was better to campaign to abolish such brothels, because their existence helped underpin the whole trade in women. Recognising the diversity of opinion and lack of objective

¹⁷⁴ AMSII Seventh Annual Report 1922; AMSII Annual General Meeting, (26 April 1923), pp. 34-35.

information, the League of Nations subsequently set up a world-wide investigation into the traffic.¹⁷⁵ When Part I of the Report was published in 1927 the investigation revealed a thriving trade where hundreds of women, many of them young, were circulated from one country to another. To a feminist audience in *The Women's Leader*, Alison Neilans expressed the hope that the Report would be a "death-blow" to the licensed house system which was shown as being at the "very heart and centre of this vile traffic."¹⁷⁶ Male collusion, customers as well as profit-makers, underpinned the whole exploitative system, which rested on men's power to purchase sexual services.

There were some minor successes in the League of Nations. Early in 1924 in the League's Fourth Assembly, Cuba had proposed to restrict the movements of young women travelling alone in order to prevent trafficking in women. AMSH opposed the resolution saying it was "unpracticable and unjust to subject women to a form of morals inquisition" which was not imposed on men.¹⁷⁷ The protest was sent to the General Secretary, the League of Nations Union and the Women's Advisory Committee but even at this point, the potential for promoting a feminist view was diminishing. In July 1923 the Council of the League had decided to accept only communications sent by a government of a member state which meant that unofficial communication channels would be closed.

Given the nature of AMSH interests and of previous feminist involvement in action to demand the end of a double standard of sexual morality, what weight could be given to an international network of women's organisations? Could they co-ordinate campaigns about sexual politics? It seems that, for Alison Neilans at least, there were well-defined boundaries to what could be achieved through women's organisations alone. Her faith in international feminism was evident from 1915 when she had applied to be a delegate to the

¹⁷⁵ See my point about Nina Boyle's appropriation of the debate, Chapter Four, pp. 223-226.

¹⁷⁶ *Woman's Leader*, 25 March 1927, p. 55.

¹⁷⁷ AMSH Executive Committee minutes, 18 January 1924.

Women's International Congress at The Hague.¹⁷⁸ In the international women's community her work was widely known and respected. She was invited to be a member of the IWSA Equal Moral Standards Committee in 1924¹⁷⁹ and attended IWSA conferences, worked on resolutions and agendas and wrote pamphlets for them. But in the AMSH records there are several references to inappropriate resolutions which suggest she saw their efforts as rather faint-hearted. For instance, when the move to outlaw 'foreign' women in brothels took place, she described the IWSA approach as "weak".¹⁸⁰ Quite possibly the presence of social purity extremists in women's organisations like IWSA proved a deterrent to any really hard-hitting feminist proposals. Was the attempt to fuse feminist principles with a moral critique on issues like prostitution doomed to failure? To conclude the chapter, I assess the successes and failures of Alison Neilans' work.

Conclusion

What conclusions can be drawn from the two British campaigns to obtain more equality for women and girls in the specific areas of sexual politics of prostitution and child abuse? In one sense they failed, since neither campaign led to significant changes in legislation. Both dealt with features of sexual behaviour at its most hidden, furtive and unrespectable and they did bring the issues to public attention. There were limits to how much could be expressed. Lady Astor's balking at appearing before the Street Offences Committee shows how the nature of the topics inhibited full and free discussion, as does the fact that some witnesses appeared in private sessions only and some of the evidence was not published.

¹⁷⁸ See Introduction, p. 27.

¹⁷⁹ AMSH Executive Committee minutes, 20 June 1924.

¹⁸⁰ AMSH Executive Committee minutes, 14 June 1923.

Sixty years earlier, Josephine Butler had managed to harness a moral constituency through feminists, the churches and philanthropic agencies, but, as she had warned, the social purity extremists had annexed this territory by the turn of the century. Into this situation, Alison Neilans had injected a feminist presence and had had some success. The method worked best where there was a limited objective or a single issue. Often there were too many different agendas to maintain a concerted, coherent campaign over the broad spectrum of sexual politics. The activity concerning prostitution is an example of this tendency - many agreed that prostitution was a problem yet favoured varying solutions, an example of Parton's model of problematising.¹⁸¹ Male-dominated legislative and bureaucratic opinion favoured criminalisation and punitive or compulsive measures while those who focused on moral issues saw the rescue of fallen women, again a process likely to involve punishment and compulsion, as the best way of alleviating or eliminating the problem. They were unable to understand or appreciate the feminist critique. Customer demand from men tended to be ignored. A double standard of sexual morality was either accepted or seen as the price for control of women's sexual behaviour. So the impact of the work was negated. Orthodox opinions were not swayed sufficiently to effect significant legislative change.

Alison Neilans' deployment of AMSII was partially successful. It established a feminist voice in the public debate. Through networking with a range of organisations with varying opinions and objectives, Alison Neilans was able to keep sexual politics in the open. She articulated a female perspective on the rights of prostitutes, of girls and women suffering from sexual abuse and sustained the questioning of the sexual double standard.

¹⁸¹ Parton used the issue of child abuse to illustrate how a 'problem' becomes defined as a public issue and a range of different values lead to differing solutions. See Chapter Four, p.177.

In the deliberations of nations and governments, women continued to be very marginal. They had limited access to power and then only through conventional channels. But this does not imply that Alison Neilans' international work was ineffective. Her arguments have a contemporary resonance. At her death, her obituary notices stressed the impact of her efforts on behalf of women all over the world. After she died in 1942, AMSH itself continued and in 1963 was re-named the Josephine Butler Society. It still exists. A series of Alison Neilans Memorial Lectures was held annually for some years. If the criteria for success are widened to include entering the public debate despite overwhelming disadvantages and power imbalances, to influencing opinion or presenting an alternative challenge on a number of issues where women's voices were not heard, and to changing women's lives by articulating the needs of those most oppressed, then Alison Neilans' work should not be counted a failure.

CHAPTER SIX: " . . . A STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM OF PECULIAR INTEREST TO WOMEN . . . ": EDITH HOW MARTYN'S WORK TO PROMOTE BIRTH CONTROL

Introduction

My premise in this chapter is that access to effective contraceptive techniques gives women the possibility of controlling reproduction, an issue at the centre of heterosexual behaviour. Without knowledge and access to such techniques, women are not free to explore fully their sexuality in male/female relationships. With reproductive control more egalitarian sexual relationships are possible, a feminist proposition which Edith How Martyn recognised. Many traditional contraceptive methods have been unsatisfactory and dangerous to women's health. During the post-war period, public debate and acceptance of 'artificial' methods became more open, although class and gender power dynamics in Britain proved enduring limits on public discourse. Edith How Martyn had to negotiate within these boundaries to establish women's claims. How did she locate feminism within the parameters of a public debate where stereotypes about maternity and women's sexuality fed into, for example, the cult of motherhood and eugenic priorities? What were her strategies?

Before I suggest answers to these questions, a short discussion of accounts of the history of birth control is essential because of the frequent elision of women's agency found in much demographic and historiographical material. Interpretations of the ways and means by which the falling British birth-rate of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was brought about vary, yet a crucial feature of fertility decline, the nature of relationships between men and women, has been overlooked. There has been little sense of

female agency or consideration of means of contraception in the historiography of the demographic transition.¹

Some previous interpretations of economic and regional variations in family size and fertility rates are now seen as rather simplistic and narrow.² State intervention in family life had a part in establishing the necessary conditions for restricting family size, as did the activity of trades unions through their efforts to restrict women's and children's labour and their focus on a 'family wage', a by-product of which could be increasing economic dependency on a male bread-winner.³

Class variations in the rate at which the falling birth rate occurred led to Banks' suggestion that changes in family size began in the middle class, then appeared in the working class because middle-class influence percolated down. This influential, Whiggish hypothesis has been questioned by Gittins and McLaren, as has the conventional view that

¹ Alison Mackinnon, "Were Women Present at the Demographic Transition? Questions from a Feminist Historian to Historical Demographers", *Gender and History* Vol. 7, No. 2 (August 1995), pp. 223-240, especially pp. 223-224.

² Gittins argues rates are affected by much broader social, political and ideological trends than male relationship to the labour market, frequently a defining feature. Variations in fertility rates were influenced by features such as migration trends, local occupational patterns, the maintenance of strong community networks by women, and male unemployment. For example, areas which were substantially dependent on one industry mainly employing men, such as mining, tended to retain a higher birth rate than average, large families being more frequent. Diana Gittins, *The Fair Sex: Family Size and Structure 1900-1939* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), pp. 181-187. From his study of women of the urban poor from 1880 to 1939, Chinn suggests that because in mining regions there was relatively little paid employment for women, a woman's employment prospects would be discounted in reproductive decision-making. Moreover, men could maximise earnings potential early, which led to earlier marrying and larger families. Carl Chinn, *They Worked All Their Lives: Women of the Urban Poor in England 1880-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), pp. 134-137. Simple economic explanations have been criticised by McLaren, who observes that the birth rate would be expected to oscillate with trade cycles whereas there was a continual decline. Angus McLaren, *A History of Contraception from Antiquity to the Present Day*, Sexuality and Social Relations in Past Times Series (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 201-202. From evidence that upper-middle and middle-class families were limiting fertility earlier (possibly before the 1860s) Banks speculated that the rise of the 'meritocratic career' for men meant families restricted reproduction in order to finance and support sons in the expectation of social betterment. He also conjectured that the later growth of universal education and the examination system, an externalised performance indicator, would enhance career prospects for the lower classes and so lead to family limitation in a similar way, but concluded that this was not the case. J.A. Banks, *Victorian Values: Secularism and the Size of Families* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 137.

³ Gittins, *The Fair Sex*, p. 186.

changes in attitudes have been imposed from outside by birth control organisations.⁴ One potential avenue for disseminating information was the medical profession, but in the main doctors persistently refused their working-class patients contraceptive advice or access to safe, reliable methods of birth control, even when a woman's life was at risk.⁵

The sexologist, Norman Haire, who was a colleague and friend of Edith How Martyn, recorded his early efforts to advocate contraception in the obstetric hospital where he worked:

Neither damage to the mother's health nor eugenic considerations concerning the offspring were considered sufficient to justify any advice about birth control, beyond the occasional suggestion of complete abstinence from sexual intercourse . . .⁶

Despite such attitudes, norms of small families came to be accepted rapidly.⁷ The 'rising standard of living hypothesis', where rising living standards are linked with changes in fertility control, might be relevant when examining the spread of technological contraceptive techniques among the working class in the 1920s and 1930s.⁸ Local cultural

⁴ The respondents in Gittins' oral survey rarely mentioned exchanges of information between employer and employees such as domestic servants, her reason for refuting the Banks' suggestion of a downward drift of knowledge. Diana Gittins, "Married Life and Birth Control Between the Wars", *Oral History* Vol. 3, No. 2 (1975), p. 55. See McLaren, *History of Contraception*, pp. 179-182. McLaren glances at the possibility of an upward exchange but cites only one example. *Ibid.*, pp. 203, 254; also see Jose Harris, "Demography, Death and Disease", Chapter Two in *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914*, The Penguin Social History of Britain Series (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), pp. 41-60; John Stevenson, "Population, Household and Family", Chapter Five in *British Society 1914-45*, Pelican Social History of Britain Series (London: Penguin, 1984), pp. 143-181.

⁵ Barbara Brookes, *Abortion in England 1900-1967*, The Wellcome Institute Series in the History of Medicine (London: Croom Helm, 1988), p. 14; McLaren, *History of Contraception*, pp. 187, 207; Gittins, "Married Life", p. 64. The 'first' generation of women doctors found their patients thought they would have advice on contraception and abortion to offer. McLaren, *History of Contraception*, p. 198.

⁶ Norman Haire, *Birth-Control Methods*, Revised Edition, 1937 (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1937), p. 27. Norman Haire, (1892-1952) sexologist, gynaecologist, obstetrician. Born in Australia, he settled in England after the First World War. He was active in the sex reform and birth control movements throughout the 1920s and 30s, a member of the BSSSP and one of the founders of the Walworth Road Clinic in 1921. A leader of the British section of, and prominent in the WLSR, he published numerous books on birth control, sex reform and sex education. During the Second World War he returned to Australia where he and Edith How Martyn attempted to promote birth control.

⁷ McLaren, *History of Contraception*, p. 207.

⁸ Banks emphasises that improved living standards do not necessarily mean a reduction in family size. But a rising standard of living is: ". . . a necessary condition for the adoption of family

mores, including features of fertility control, also seem to be associated. Gittins emphasises the emergence of new values and general social and cultural changes, leading to "a new interpretation" of working-class family life, as one underlying reason for the declining birth rate. Her conclusion that a woman's occupational experiences before marriage were a very important factor because they entailed access to information about sexual matters seems highly significant when the question of female agency is incorporated in explanations about fertility rates.⁹ Where women worked in factories or industries employing large amounts of female labour, informal social networks provided channels for the exchange and spread of knowledge on all kinds of sexual matters.¹⁰

Moreover, as Mackinnon points out in a trenchant critique of demographic assumptions, too often the term 'fertility decline' itself is "strangely disembodied"; it has masked the social and sexual relationships of men and women.¹¹ The work of J. V. Banks and Olive Banks, the social historians, has been influential on historiography of the demographic transition itself.¹² Their study, *Feminism and Family Planning in Victorian England*, concluded that "the feminist movement as such (emphasis mine) was not a causal factor in the advent of family planning". A falling birth rate as one of the consequences of feminist campaigning was not only not anticipated but would have been regretted.¹³ As

planning ideas. Without a rising standard of living, birth-control propaganda will fail to have any marked effect on social habits." J.A. Banks and Olive Banks, *Feminism and Family Planning in Victorian England* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1964), pp. 3 - 7. Discussion supporting the hypothesis is found in McLaren, *History of Contraception*, pp. 180-207, and Gittins, "Married Life", p. 64; though there are different emphases. See also J. A. Banks, *Victorian Values*, pp. 6-11, where he discusses several hypotheses from his own 1954 study, *Prosperity and Parenthood* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954).

⁹ Gittins contrasts such women whose economic independence meant more egalitarian marital relationships with those young women who were isolated from peer groups, for example in domestic service. See Gittins, *The Fair Sex*, pp. 184-186; also McLaren, *History of Contraception*, pp. 202-203.

¹⁰ Women's informal social networks have, of course, always existed. The ways in which working-class women shared information about abortion as a means of fertility control are discussed by Barbara Brookes, *Abortion in England*, Chapter One, "Abortion in the Early Twentieth Century", pp. 1-20.

¹¹ Mackinnon, "Were Women Present?", p. 224.

¹² Mackinnon, "Were Women Present?", p.229.

¹³ Banks and Banks also claimed that all Victorian feminists "hoped by their efforts to promote sexual

Mackinnon points out, it has been left to feminist historians to recoup a sense of women as active agents of fertility decline.¹⁴ Edith How Martyn's work provides a good example of an attempt to obtain greater reproductive control for females. Her work gave centrality to women and their needs. She sought to inject a sense of women's agency into the prevailing discourses, a feminist enterprise. Those aspects of the public debate about birth control which preoccupied so many: eugenic ideas and differential fertility rates between classes, the morality of artificial contraception, the niceties of marital monogamy or sexual freedom, were of peripheral significance for her. She identified reproduction and motherhood as the sites of women's oppression. Throughout all her campaigning, women's health and freedom were her persistent priorities. How could she insert a female-oriented, needs-based realism into the public debate? To achieve her objectives she needed to work with varied constituent elements in the dominant discourses on reproduction. She drew on the nineteenth-century feminist concept of sisterhood and deployed popular discourses such as the ideology of motherhood and eugenic notions about 'the survival of the fittest' to further her objectives.

Her attempts to link feminist ideals with birth control propaganda are presented first in Section 6.1. Then in Section 6.2 I outline her networking and methods from 1915 to 1925, followed by the British campaign for information to be given at local authority welfare centres from about 1920 to 1930 in Section 6.3. Her work to co-ordinate international efforts to provide birth control information is presented in Section 6.4, and her international promotional tours are delineated in Section 6.5.

abstinence both outside and within marriage". Banks and Banks, *Feminism and Family Planning*, p. 128.

¹⁴ Mackinnon, "Were Women Present?", p. 232.

6.1 A Feminist Philosophy: Putting Theory into Practice

The period from 1915 to the late 1930s saw a marked shift in attitudes towards the topic of fertility control. In 1910 there was one small clinic attempting to give practical information to poor women through a self-help system.¹⁵ By 1939 there were over sixty voluntary birth control clinics and over eighty municipal centres providing advice in Britain.

Feminist intervention in public discourse retained its traditional style during and immediately after the First World War. For example, suffrage societies had lobbied against an amendment to a Parliamentary Bill of March 1917, which sought to make it an offence to sell or advertise information on contraceptive methods.¹⁶ By then, Edith How Martyn felt the war had convinced many people that birth control was necessary "in all *civilised* countries" (italics mine).¹⁷ A notion of efficient contraception as a civilising force became a recurring theme for Edith How Martyn; it is significant when discussing her international work. In the immediate post-war period, she found a different climate to that prevailing five years earlier. Attitudes were changing yet many obstacles remained. Officially the women's movement was reluctant to give the issue priority. While as individuals they espoused the cause, leaders of opinion tended to be unwilling to advocate birth control openly.¹⁸ As late as 1931, Mr. Justice McCardie (a friend of Edith How Martyn) made

¹⁵ Letter, Anna Martin, Rotherhithe, to Mary Breed, 29 October [1929], author's collection.

¹⁶ Letter, Edith How Martyn, London, to Margaret Sanger, 14 April 1917. (Hereafter, unless a location is given, letters from Edith How Martyn are from London.) The correspondence between Edith How Martyn and Margaret Sanger lasted from 1915 when they first met until 1944. There are some gaps, particularly from 1917 to 1926. (Hereafter, unless otherwise stated, the letters from Margaret Sanger to Edith How Martyn are in the author's collection. Those from Edith How Martyn to Margaret Sanger are in the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass. hereafter SSC. Other correspondence and notes and drafts made by Edith How Martyn, given to me by Eileen Palmer, are in the author's collection, unless otherwise stated.) The difficulties of finding evidence about feminists' attitudes towards birth control are discussed by Carol Dyhouse, *Feminism and the Family in England: 1880-1939* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989) pp. 172-174.

¹⁷ Letter, Edith How Martyn, to Margaret Sanger, 14 March 1917, SSC.

¹⁸ Letter, Hon. Mrs Graham Murray OBE., Chairman of Committee of SPBCC, London, to Edith How Martyn, 24 July 1929, author's collection.

front page news when he advocated birth control as a solution to the high rate of illegal abortion.¹⁹

An acute awareness of audience is shown in Edith How Martyn's propaganda. She addressed a range of constituencies in Britain and abroad: government, bureaucrats and economists, the medical profession, sexologists and social workers, the various factions of the birth control movement and feminist and non-feminist women. When necessary, she was prepared to employ the rhetoric of the dominant discourse, to use Malthusian economic arguments or eugenic ideology. At other times she emphasised the welfare of children to capitalise on early twentieth-century social and welfare reforms which, she argued, demonstrated increased public interest in children's well-being.²⁰

Her impatience with the sterile discourse over birth rates, Malthusianism and statistical estimates of class differentials surfaced occasionally. In one of her few overt references to contraception giving women freedom to fulfil their own potential, she disagreed with the Malthusian League President, C.V. Drysdale, who continued to focus on the economic case for birth control.²¹ Regardless of the population question, the birth control movement was of supreme importance to women as a means of giving them leisure and opportunities for self-development, as well as an escape from the misery of perpetual child-bearing. Moreover, she was interested less in seeing more produced, than in seeing a fairer division between men and women of what was actually produced.²² When necessary

¹⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 12 December 1931. Mr. McCardie was a member of the Malthusian League.

²⁰ Edith How Martyn, "Help for the Helpless", *The New Generation*, February 1922, pp. 7-8.

²¹ Although the Malthusian League disbanded in 1927, its journal *The Malthusian* or *The New Generation*, continued until 1952. For a period in the 1920s the League changed its name to The New Generation League. From January 1922 to October 1949 the journal was named *The New Generation*. Rosanna Ledbetter, *A History of the Malthusian League 1877-1927* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1976), p. viii. To simplify, I shall refer to the Malthusian League/New Generation League as the Malthusian League, but denote the journal's different names when necessary.

²² "Report of Annual Meeting", *The New Generation*, January 1927.

however, for example with international issues, she would deploy Malthusian-style arguments.²³ To her though, statistics failed to take individual misery into account:

What consolation is it to a poor mother who has lost the ardently desired baby to know that the infant death-rate is lower than ever, if through ignorance on her part her particular baby has died? What consolation can it be to a young man or woman, blind from birth, to learn that the parents, through lack of knowledge and mental vision, thoughtlessly contracted one of the venereal diseases which caused blindness in their child?²⁴

A concept of children's rights was proposed when discussing child welfare. She contended that the declining birth rate in Britain had propelled moves towards better conditions for all children. If the rate declined still further, all might obtain their birth-right, to be "wanted", to have healthy, loving parents with adequate homes, nurturing and education. Prudent, wealthier people who limited their own fertility had a duty to extend ideals for children's welfare to "those less fortunately placed". She asked:

How can society fail to see that our workhouses, reformatory schools, prisons, hospitals, and slums, are filled mostly by people who never enjoyed the rights of children ? . . .²⁵

Her rationale for women's reproductive rights was embedded in feminism. The next quotations sum up her views which remained consistent. In the first from 1921, she recognises that female sexual subordination underlay mechanisms of women's oppression:

Marriage and sex relations are at the root of the woman's movement, and until we find courage to deal with them frankly, fully and openly, 'the world's attitude towards sex relations' will continue to be 'wrong'. Until women face the problems involved, and solve them, we shall only be tinkering with the problems of how to establish 'a real equality of liberties, status and opportunities between men and women'.²⁶

²³ The BCIC-organised Conference on Asia 1933 was established with an economic and demographic framework but practical questions were discussed, particularly by women speakers. Edith How Martyn raised the question of training medical personnel to advise on birth control techniques. Michael Fielding, ed., *Birth Control in Asia* (London: BCIC, 1935) p. 73. See Section 6.4.

²⁴ Edith How Martyn, "Birth Control and Child Welfare", *Birth Control Review*, (November 1921), p. 5.

²⁵ How Martyn, "Help for the Helpless", p. 7-8.

²⁶ How Martyn, "Birth Control and Child Welfare", p. 5.

If she thought it to be appropriate, she appealed to the contemporary faith in the efficacy of science to overcome social problems. In Alice Vickery's obituary notice in 1929 Edith How Martyn summed up the life-work of the birth control pioneer by referring to the "scientific control" of motherhood by women themselves; it was "fundamental to their personal freedom and the keynote of women's emancipation".²⁷ A decade later, in an implicit reference to a notion of international womanhood, she extended this to include women all over the world:

Women are essentially the same everywhere, our skins may be a different colour, our tongues may use different languages but a bad maternity risk, a mother unfit to undertake a pregnancy whether she is in India, China, America or Europe needs medical advice on birth control in order to preserve her life. . . . Women are claiming the right to decide when and how often they will become mothers and with the advance of *civilisation* that right must be granted.²⁸ (Italics mine.)

Early on, Edith How Martyn had been impatient with the timidity and narrowness of feminist thinking about women's sexual rights and this critique persisted. The "respectable suffrage papers" were afraid to touch "questions which are vital to feminism", she complained to Sanger in 1916.²⁹ In 1930, replying to criticism from St. Joan's Social and Political Alliance, "a feminist organisation of Catholic women", which opposed the promotion of birth control on feminist as well as religious grounds, she said:

As a feminist I cannot see how any woman can be considered enfranchised unless she has this knowledge . . .³⁰

At this point some discussion of Edith How Martyn's theoretical approach is necessary to see where she positioned herself at the nexus of gender, race and class. What

²⁷ Edith How Martyn, "Alice Drysdale Vickery" obituary notice, *Woman's Leader*, 25 January 1929.
²⁸ Edith How Martyn, draft of a speech to the Second All-India Population and First Family Hygiene Conference, Bombay, 17 April 1938, (hereafter referred to as Speech to Second All-India Population Conference), notes in Edith How Martyn's handwriting, author's collection.
²⁹ Letter, Edith How Martyn to Margaret Sanger, 15 June 1916. She also criticised the National Council of Women, the WFL and the Six Point Group for failing to discuss birth control, much less join in the demand for advice at welfare centres. *Birth Control Review*, (December 1928).
³⁰ Correspondence between Florence Barry, Honorary Secretary, St. Joan's Social and Political Alliance and Edith How Martyn, June/July 1930, author's collection.

was her attitude to class? Did she subscribe to an ethnocentric world view, to what Vron Ware describes as an ideological framework in which there are hierarchies of cultures? ³¹

Firstly, Edith How Martyn held that in a social context, women's bodies were contested sites of political discourse. Birth control would thus contribute to women's emancipation. Regarding class, her demand that poorer women have the same rights as middle-class women was explicit: *An Appeal for Equality of Knowledge* and *Community of Knowledge*, were the titles of pamphlets produced for the campaign to provide birth control information at local authority clinics. The rationale offered certainly illustrates Edith How Martyn's sense that women's needs cut across the boundaries of class. Written at the time of the 1929 general election, *Community of Knowledge* made the point that some of the most important factors of social life were "not necessarily those to which most importance is attached by political disputants". For the first time, all women over the age of twenty-one would have a vote and women voters included the "mothers of the new generation". There were few problems before the electors as serious as the one presented by the fact that wealthier classes could obtain "scientific knowledge" of birth control denied to "working-class wives by their poverty"; hence the claim for a community of knowledge. Besides the implicit notion of a cross-class women's community, there are appeals to national pride and eugenic nuances here:

The Ministry of Health, by a stock letter forbidding the Welfare Centres to impart scientific information on this point, shuts in the face of working-class wives the door between ignorance and knowledge, while it leaves open to them the highway between despair and quackery. . . . The fact is that knowledge of methods of birth control cannot be shut out from special circles by ostracism, or banned for one class by those of another who practise it themselves. . . . Knowledge is the birthright of the sons and daughters of our land. . . . in the vital matter of birth control, equality of knowledge as between rich and poor shall be the rule and custom of our country. ³²

³¹ Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale* (London: Verso, 1992), p. xii.
³² Eleanor Acland et. al. *Community of Knowledge*. n.p. [1929] Wellcome Institute SA/FPA/A23/58/4.

Edith How Martyn's views contain some essentialist elements in that they are predicated on the belief that control of their reproductive system was a matter of concern to all women. She provided little account of why women 'needed' birth control other than maternal health and occasional references to individual freedom, so tended to gloss over class and cultural differences, for example, where large families could provide a source of economic support or be a survival mechanism.³³

In much of Edith How Martyn's writing there is an implicit recognition that although women wanted more control of reproduction, their ability to express that need or take initiative to fulfil it was socially proscribed. This was particularly the case for the very poor, the uneducated, the oppressed. The first priority was to make the poor aware that safe fertility control was available, particularly in those countries where technological progress had been slow to capitalise on advances in materials and manufacture of contraceptive techniques. In 1936 she wrote to Sanger, ". . . so much work needs to be done to make poor Chinese families realise the help that is waiting for them."³⁴ Commenting on the Indian situation, she attributed relatively slow progress to women's low standards of living and education, the minute number of women professionals as well as the nation's absorption in other political priorities and lack of support or practical encouragement from government or voluntary agencies:

The experience of clinics already established is a clear proof that it is as important to organise an effective demand for clinics as it is to organise clinical facilities. . . . The demand for birth control undoubtedly exists, but to focus this demand and make it effective requires the services of many good speakers and propagandists . . . ³⁵

³³ Barbara Ramusack asserts that both western and Indian birth control advocates ignored class. "Embattled Advocates: The Debate over Birth Control in India 1920-1940", *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 1 No 2 (Fall 1989), pp. 34-64.

³⁴ Letter, Edith How Martyn, on the way to Tientsin, China, to Margaret Sanger, 18 April 1936.

³⁵ Edith How Martyn, *A Brief Survey of the Birth Control Movement in India for the Second All-India Population and First Family Hygiene Conference*, India Office Library, London, MSS EUR D 1182/4.

However, the battle for birth control would not be won on public platforms nor by well-intentioned people passing resolutions:

. . . no rapid progress can be expected until women take up the leadership of this aspect of the birth control movement . . . ³⁶

Through her practice, Edith How Martyn undercut both class and imperial power dynamics. She retained the notion of birth control as a civilising force because it would give women control over their bodies, the site of gender power-struggles. She based her theories on women's biologically determined function of child-bearing. Essentialist as this may be, whatever the contesting theoretical representations of women there might have been in the discourses of power, Edith How Martyn's objective was to have birth control available to all women, regardless of class or race.

When she began campaigning in Britain, Edith How Martyn faced tactical dilemmas. Suffrage organisations had proved unwilling to promote birth control publicly. She had no independent financial means nor backing from any substantial political or socio-medical grouping. Practically she had several options. One, to draw on the radical feminism typified by *The Freewoman*, meant the risk of alienating those substantial, more conservative bodies of opinion whose influence was crucial to success. The same applied to working through the nascent sexual reform movement with former colleague, Laurence Housman and the British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology (BSSSP), or friends like Norman Haire and Janet Chance.³⁷ Thirdly, she could deploy the efforts of individuals such as Marie Stopes and Margaret Sanger who harnessed popular themes of eugenic

³⁶ Edith How Martyn, *A Brief Survey of the Birth Control Movement in India*.

³⁷ Janet Chance, (1885-1953) initially a socialist-feminist, helped start the WBGC in 1926. She ran one of the first sex education centres in London and reported on this at the WLSR Third Congress (which was organised by Haire and Dora Russell) in London in 1929. She criticised British sexual hypocrisy in *The Cost of English Morals*, (London: Noel Douglas, 1932) and was a founder-member of the Abortion Law Reform Association. She married Clinton Chance, a wealthy businessman. See Olive Banks, *Biographical Dictionary of British Feminists* (New York: V.P., 1985), pp. 42-45, and the *Abortion Law Reform Association Journal*, "Breaking Chains", Fiftieth Anniversary issue (Summer 1986).

imperatives and middle-class expectations of companionate marriage. Their energy, drive and financial independence meant they could be single-minded and over-ride many obstacles to promote birth control. But both women were, as Bacchi argues, individualistic, wealthy and socially conservative. Theoretically, and in practice, they reinforced the middle-class connection between heterosexual pleasure and marriage, so placing ostensibly liberating demands for women's sexual fulfilment within conventional boundaries.³⁸ A fourth option was to help further the burgeoning demands of working-class women for better conditions for maternity and improved reproductive control, through organisations such as the Co-operative Women's Guild, though male opposition in the labour movement was a formidable hurdle.³⁹ Another choice was to continue working in the Malthusian League mode, focusing solely on economic aspects. But that was already anachronistic. Increasingly, Malthusianism was being perceived as a millstone, especially by women more interested in practicalities than in theory.⁴⁰ The avenue via the medical profession, particularly through local authority health officers, offered dubious prospects of success.

Ultimately, Edith How Martyn chose to work with individuals in all these spheres and drew on all approaches to achieve her goals. Through her experiences in suffrage

³⁸ Carol Bacchi, "Feminism and the 'Eroticization' of Middle class Women: the Intersection of Class and Gender Attitudes", *Women's Studies International Forum* Vol. 11, No. 1 (1988), pp. 43-53. Lesley Hall discusses this view in her examination of the ambivalence of sex manuals, referring particularly to Sheila Jeffreys' arguments - in "Free From All Uninvited Touch of Man" and *Anti-Climax* - that in general marriage advice aimed to eroticize women for men's benefit. Hall suggests Stopes and Sanger in particular saw their work as liberating; their outlook may have fostered more positive approaches to marriage at a time when many people were generally sexually inhibited. See Lesley A. Hall, *Hidden Anxieties: Male Sexuality 1900-1950* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), pp. 82-87 and Sheila Jeffreys, "Free From All Uninvited Touch of Man" in *The Sexuality Papers*, ed. Lal Coveney et al. (London: Hutchinson, 1984) and *Anti-Climax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution* (London: The Women's Press, 1990) pp. 19-30.

³⁹ Within the socialist movement opinion between men and women diverged. The Labour Party full Conference repeatedly rejected Women's Sections resolutions requesting local authority provision of contraceptive advice in 1923, 1925 and 1927. Men tended to see Malthusianism as a ruling class measure to divert attention from economic inequality; the Malthusian League was often anti-labour.

⁴⁰ Letter, Nurse Daniels, London, to Edith How Martyn, 27 January 1927; author's collection; see below p. 307. See also Brookes, *Abortion in England*, p. 85.

campaigning she was well-placed to construct herself as an expert in propaganda for birth control, a co-ordinator, a facilitator. Using her connections with feminists, birth control advocates and political organisations, she networked backwards and forwards between individuals and groups to create a web of connections between seemingly irreconcilable factions. By exploiting this matrix, she helped open up the public debate and bring about change.

To us, the word 'propaganda' has negative connotations, but she was happy to describe herself as a 'propagandist' for birth control - what she meant by this will become apparent in the description of her activities which are the subject of this chapter. For over thirty years, she engaged in an assiduous public relations campaign. Her main strategies were: to obtain access to parliament and so influence legislature directly; to rouse public opinion and win over expert opinion; to provide contacts and networks to disseminate up-to-date knowledge; to establish and employ pressure groups and lobby on particular issues. She attempted to channel women's demands to government and those in authority, mainly men, who were in a position to control access to knowledge. She emphasised that attractive, accessible premises disseminating knowledge about birth control should be available for all women. Possibly because of her liminal position, she saw the advantages of advocating medical supervision of fertility control to give it credence and respectability. Although such medicalisation might seem at odds with her advocacy of women's control over their own reproductive patterns, the help she received from women who were gaining access to the public domain through official participation in national and local government and medical professionalisation must be borne in mind.

She was the first woman county councillor for Middlesex, serving for three years from 1919. Her duties included visiting schools, mental asylums, workhouses and other institutions, as she was on committees of Public Health; Maternity and Child Welfare;

Mental Hospitals; Education and Finance, and was chairman of the local mental hospital. As well as providing experience of public health provision, her county council activity seems to have crystallised her attitude in terms of the eugenic aspects of birth control.⁴¹ While undoubtedly possessing middle-class assumptions, she tried to address questions involving freedom and rights for the poorest, least powerful members of society. In an article entitled *Help for the Helpless* in 1922, she wrote:

In the course of my public work I am continually surprised and discouraged at the apathy of the public with regard to the amount of preventable misery which is allowed to exist.⁴²

Gendered solutions to these problems concerned her. Excessive powers of Poor Law Guardians to detain working-class girls who were considered "weak-minded or weak-willed", that is, sexually active or promiscuous, had been raised by one of the first women JPs, Margaret Nevinson, a Women's Freedom League (WFL) member. Edith How Martyn described the incarceration of unmarried mothers as a "terrible fate", and one which was never visited on feeble-minded men who had fathered illegitimate children.⁴³ She dismissed as "absurd, useless and cruel", suggestions that the diseased, mentally deficient and the insane could take responsibility for handling their own contraceptive needs. Rather than deprive people of their liberty, preventive measures against "unfit parentage", i.e. sterilisation with patients' or their guardians' consent, could be offered.⁴⁴ A rare instance of unequivocal support for eugenic principles, this statement is tempered by her long-standing libertarian concerns. She had left the Women's Social and Political

⁴¹ Edith How Martyn, *Middlesex County Council Election leaflet*, n.d. [c 1923], author's collection. It was probably at about this time she established one of the first play centres for children in Hampstead.

⁴² Edith How Martyn, "Help for the Helpless", pp. 7-8.

⁴³ For an account of the Mental Deficiency Act see Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit*, p. 208. See my comments Chapter Two, p. 116 and note 179.

⁴⁴ I am aware that these terms are offensive but use them here because they were current and used by Edith How Martyn. Edith How Martyn, "Help for the Helpless", pp. 7-8.

Union (WSPU) in 1907 and the WFL Executive Committee in 1912 because of her belief in democracy. What else had she learned from those early experiences?

The Edwardian suffrage campaign had provided experience in a range of political activities and skills in networking but also a wariness about the kind of total commitment demonstrated in militancy. She warned Margaret Sanger, awaiting her trial in 1915, that causes could be "merciless things"; many fine workers had been ruined in health quite uselessly for a cause:

It is so difficult to find the right point where sacrifice is furthering the propaganda and beyond which it becomes useless.⁴⁵

Referring to the suffrage campaign she said:

I know how we partly wasted much of our human material in laying too much stress on going to prison though alas! we wasted much more on overwork and overstrain - it is grievous to remember and our progress is the slower for it now.⁴⁶

From these comments we may speculate that a residual, post-suffrage campaign disillusionment led her to adopt conventional tactics as she moved towards her next major cause.

6.2 Methods and Networking 1915 - 1925

Edith How Martyn's first initiative typified her approach and methods. In 1915, with a friend, Louise Thompson,⁴⁷ she arranged a women's meeting at the Fabian Society Hall, London, inviting Margaret Sanger to speak. At the time Sanger was travelling round

⁴⁵ Letter, Edith How Martyn to Margaret Sanger, 19 July 1915, SSC.

⁴⁶ Letter, Edith How Martyn to Margaret Sanger, 27 July 1915, SSC.

⁴⁷ Louise (Lulu) Thompson was a close friend of Edith How Martyn for many years; they worked together from 1915 (if not earlier). They may have met through Alice Vickery of whom Louise Thompson "saw a great deal". Letter, Edith How Martyn, London, to Olive M. Johnson, 16 January 1937. Frequent references to Louise Thompson's help are contained in Edith How Martyn's correspondence with Sanger, Eileen Palmer and Olive Johnson (C.V. Drysdale's secretary and a stalwart of the Malthusian League). Both seem to have given each other unconditional support and affection, an example of the strength of networking in private and public spheres. In August 1992, when I asked Eileen Palmer about the two, she was rather guarded and would not write anything down, but made a special phone call to say Louise was "absolutely devoted" to Edith How Martyn.

Europe awaiting trial for sending obscene literature (that is, information about preventing conception) through the mail in contradiction to the Comstock laws and publishing a leaflet on birth control, *Family Limitation*.⁴⁸ Whether or not they agreed with Sanger's action, Edith How Martyn felt women should hear Sanger's case because it was "a struggle for freedom of peculiar interest to women . . ." ⁴⁹ She invited personal friends, former suffrage colleagues and other interested parties, among them Marie Stopes. It was the first time Sanger and Stopes had met; at first their relationship was cordial although later they quarrelled.⁵⁰ Shortly after the meeting, Stopes invited Sanger to dinner where they discussed contraceptive methods and the forthcoming prosecution. Stopes was among the many supporters who petitioned President Woodrow Wilson asking for the charges to be dropped.⁵¹ Edith How Martyn organised a fund towards Sanger's legal expenses and donations and messages of support came from a number of progressives, including Edward Carpenter, H.G. Wells, and Arnold Bennett.

By 1920, Stopes, Sanger, Stella Browne and Edith How Martyn were co-operating, working jointly to raise the profile of birth control in public estimation. Somewhat impatiently, Sanger castigated the "advanced and intelligent" women of England for

⁴⁸ The case came to trial in 1916 and Sanger was imprisoned. See Margaret Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1931), pp. 79-80, 161-176.

⁴⁹ Printed invitation from Edith How Martyn, dated June 1915, written from her home address, author's collection.

⁵⁰ Both Margaret Sanger and Marie Stopes were charismatic, egocentric women whose animosity hindered yet acted as a catalyst in the movement. The quarrel arose from Sanger's disapproval of Stopes' actions in October 1920 during a visit to America. Stopes had arranged speaking engagements through the Voluntary Parenthood League (a rival to Sanger's American Birth Control League) which campaigned for changes in the law rather than adopt Sanger's confrontational tactics. See June Rose, *Marie Stopes and the Sexual Revolution* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), pp. 90-92, 153-154. Benn suggests Sanger's recollections suffer from inaccuracy at times. Miriam Benn, *Predicaments of Love* (London: Pluto, 1992), p. 204.

⁵¹ Rose, *Marie Stopes*, p. 91. Rose quotes Stopes' letter to Wilson and also lists Arnold Bennett, H. G. Wells and Prof. Gilbert Murray as signatories. Since they also subscribed towards Sanger's legal and other expenses through Edith How Martyn, it is difficult to verify who actually organised the support. Stopes' claim of 'ownership' of the appeal to President Wilson may be a case of her self-aggrandisement. *The New Generation*, July 1924, p. 79, records amusement at her suggestion that she instigated the support.

failing to set up birth control clinics.⁵² She addressed over one hundred women at Anna Martin's Rotherhithe Welfare Centre, and was very impressed with their practical support for each other.⁵³ Through Edith How Martyn, Sanger drew on Anna Martin's experience to explore different possibilities for a contraceptive to meet the requirements of the poorest of women.⁵⁴ Their ultimate aim was a safe, low-cost, reliable method which could be used all over the world, in homes without basic sanitation, water or privacy, or where females had little control over sexual initiative. A cervical cap (designed by Sanger) and a spermicidal powder called Duo-Foam⁵⁵ were the main methods they promoted. Their correspondence illustrates a constant search for better methods; they investigated herbal mixtures, once becoming excited by a leaf-based concoction from Honolulu, and had hopes of finding a "magic pill".⁵⁶

Edith How Martyn's British network which linked women in the vanguard of government and public health service careers, helped to change the climate of opinion. It illustrates a lesson learned from the suffrage campaign about the possibilities of creating a coalition of women across a range of political persuasions to press for change on a single issue. An example of the networking which took place is the case of Malthusian League member, Nurse E. S. Daniels, who was dismissed from her post as Health Visitor for the Borough of Edmonton for recommending mothers to attend Marie Stopes' clinic in 1922.⁵⁷ It became a *cause célèbre*. Five hundred women signed a petition demanding her reinstatement. The well-known suffrage leader, Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence publicly

⁵² *Malthusian*, 15 June 1920 p. 1.

⁵³ *Malthusian*, 15 October 1920, p. 74. Details about the work of Anna Martin and Alice Vickery with working-class women in Rotherhithe are found in Chapter Two, pp. 93-94.

⁵⁴ Correspondence between Edith How Martyn and Margaret Sanger, 1927. They were trying to collate evidence about the relationship between women's attitudes to contraception and consequent health and well-being.

⁵⁵ Duo-Foam was a powder which produced spermicidal foam when applied with a damp sponge.

⁵⁶ Letter, Margaret Sanger, Washington, to Edith How Martyn, 10 January 1932.

⁵⁷ Subsequently, Nurse Daniels set up a private consultancy of her own, which was frequently advertised in *The New Generation*. She and Edith How Martyn remained in touch.

advocated birth control for the first time at one of a number of public meetings. Mrs. Thurtle, a Shoreditch councillor who had helped establish provision for contraceptive advice in the borough, together with her husband Ernest Thurtle, Labour MP for Shoreditch, called for public authority provision of birth control advice.⁵⁸ Another Labour MP, Dorothy Jewson, the second woman member of the House of Commons, supported the protest; later she led a Labour women's deputation to the Labour Minister of Health in 1924 demanding provision. This was rejected by the Minister, John Wheatley, a Roman Catholic. Edith How Martyn networked with all four women in what soon became a coherent national campaign for provision of birth control facilities by local health authorities.

Why did so many birth control advocates reinforce medicalisation of fertility control? To some extent, the answer lies in the question of which contraceptive method was most efficacious, cheapest and easiest to use. In Chapter Two I discussed McLaren's view that traditional methods were favoured by working-class women because newer methods, such as the Dutch and cervical caps, were expensive and required fitting by a medical specialist. Poorer women's financial problems were recognised by campaigners, but, without substantial outside funding, were difficult to resolve.⁵⁹ Therefore, while the

⁵⁸ Dorothy Thurtle, (1890 - ?) was a founder-member of the Abortion Law Reform Association. She served on the governing body of the National Birth Control Council from 1930. A member of the 1937 Birkett Committee on abortion law reform, her minority report in 1939 disputed official estimates of criminal abortion as too low. A member of Shoreditch Borough Council, she became leader of the council's Labour group. Banks, *Biographical Dictionary*, pp. 204-5. Dorothy Jewson, a former suffragette, was Labour MP for Norwich from 1923-1924. She stood as a candidate from 1923-1929. See Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959* (London: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 163-168.

⁵⁹ See Chapter Two, p.88. Walworth Road and Stopes' clinics gave services free or for a nominal charge. Many of the voluntary clinics attempted to target their services by limiting them to women whose income was less than £5 a week. At the Rotherhithe centre Alice Vickery had given money to buy appliances which the women purchased through loans and instalments. Edith How Martyn and Mary Breed, *The Birth Control Movement in England* (London: John Bale, Sons and Danielsson Ltd., 1930), p.13. Various drafts were prepared for this booklet (hereafter called *Birth Control Movement* draft). During writing and editing *The Birth Control Movement in England* Edith How Martyn and Mary Breed took care to check the accuracy of their work by sending relevant sections to specialists in particular areas, for instance, Janet Chance and the Eugenics Society. Ultimately, some proposed sections were not printed in the booklet, probably because of

early 1920s saw the establishment of voluntary clinics, the last five years of the decade witnessed a growing demand for local authority provision with concomitant reliable financing.

When Stopes began her Mothers' Clinic in Holloway in March, 1921, she and her husband financed the whole operation. Women staff and a qualified midwife administered the clinic; a woman doctor acted as consultant. Stopes' own invention, a small rubber check pessary (cervical cap) was the main device employed.⁶⁰ In August, Stopes founded the Society for Constructive Birth Control and Racial Progress (CBC), whose emphasis on improving the racial stock struck a contemporary chord; it was supported by the Malthusian League.⁶¹ Along with Bessie Drysdale, Janet Chance and others, Edith How Martyn took part in the Malthusian League's outdoor campaigns in South London in summer 1921. They opened the Walworth Women's Centre in November 1921.⁶² The Malthusian League intended the clinic to provide a model of how state-run maternity and child welfare centres could co-exist with birth control clinics. It also provided Edith How Martyn with one of her most effective means of propaganda for the next twenty years. Frequently she took visitors, many of them from overseas, (medical professionals, social workers, prospective benefactors) to see the clinic, demonstrating how it worked and the way doctors and nurses were taught about contraceptive methods, at a time when medical schools generally ignored the subject.⁶³ But the Malthusian League could not afford to run the clinic for long, so it was taken over by a new organisation, the Society for the

space restrictions. Drafts in author's collection.

⁶⁰ Rose, *Marie Stopes*, pp. 142-145.

⁶¹ For a short account of the impact of eugenic beliefs, see Chapter Two, pp. 116-117.

⁶² Two main benefactors, Sir John Sumner of Ty-Phoo tea, and A.K. Bulley, provided finance, as did members of the Drysdale family. It opened two afternoons a week for child, maternity welfare and birth control advice. Every patient was seen by a doctor and registered nurses staffed the clinic. Norman Haire was the Medical Officer for two years. However, by 1923, the welfare aspects had to be phased out and the League withdrew support through lack of funds. Ledbetter, *Malthusian League*, pp. 220-222.

⁶³ How Martyn and Breed, *Birth Control Movement*, draft.

Provision of Birth Control Centres (SPBCC) in 1923, who established a further twelve clinics in Britain in the following five years, all maintained by voluntary contributions.⁶⁴

Friction between Stopes and the Malthusian League soon accelerated: she disapproved of their secular traditions, while her exposition of the value of harmonious sexual relationships and women's right to happy motherhood had a much wider appeal than Malthusianism.⁶⁵ It says much for Edith How Martyn's tact and organising ability that she was able to manoeuvre in the hostile currents which then prevailed in the British birth control movement.⁶⁶ Edith How Martyn worked with Stopes and remained active in the Malthusian League; she was a close friend of Olive Johnson, C.V. Drysdale's secretary.⁶⁷ The SPBCC Secretary, Mrs. Evelyn Fuller, a friend of Edith How Martyn, later became a casualty of the acrimonious nature of the British birth controllers.⁶⁸ Subsequently there were to be claims and counter-claims - about the necessity for consultation with a doctor or nurse, and the efficacy of types of contraception, particularly among the very poor or the less intelligent.

Notwithstanding these conflicts, by the mid-1920s some important innovations towards meeting women's real needs had begun. Welcoming, accessible centres which

⁶⁴ Stopes had nothing to do with founding the SPBCC and was jealous of the other clinics. Rose, *Marie Stopes*, p. 184.

⁶⁵ Ledbetter, *Malthusian League*, p. 219; How Martyn and Breed, *Birth Control Movement* draft.

⁶⁶ Vera Brittain was dismayed to hear Stopes' husband, H.V. Roe, criticise the National Birth Control Association for stealing the credit from Stopes, "because I know and like Mrs. How Martyn and the rest . . . I have no patience with societies which are working for the same objects continually quarrelling with each other . . ." Alan Bishop, ed. Vera Brittain, *Chronicle of Friendship, Diaries of the Thirties, 1932 - 1939* (London: Gollancz, 1986), p. 57. Edith How Martyn felt that, "Like Mrs. Pankhurst, Dr. Stopes is best left to work alone. She enjoys the spells of martyrdom and is constitutionally unable to do 'team work'". She thought Stopes had ignored the fifty years' spadework by Alice Vickery and the Malthusian League. Note in Edith How Martyn's handwriting, Wellcome Institute (hereafter Wellcome) SA/FPA A23/58.7. See also Helena Wright on Stopes, quoted in Rose, *Marie Stopes*, pp. 205-206.

⁶⁷ Lewis states that Edith How Martyn left the Malthusian League to join the CBC. Jane Lewis, *The Politics of Motherhood: Child and Maternal Welfare: England 1900-1939* (London: Croom Helm, 1980), p. 205, but she was elected a member of the League Annual Council in 1921, certainly continued to write for the them and chaired some of their public meetings. *New Generation*, March 1926, December 1926.

⁶⁸ I refer to the dispute between Edith How Martyn and BCIC officials on pp. 347-348. Evelyn Fuller committed suicide after the SPBCC was taken over by the NBCA. See below, p. 347.

working-class women could attend, staffed mainly by women and offering safe contraceptives controlled by the female partner, were in existence. They also provided another reason why fertility control came to be located within medical jurisdiction. For the first time it was possible to quantify the toll on women's health of inadequate diets, frequent pregnancies, childbirth under difficult and dangerous conditions and, for many women, abortion.⁶⁹ Here was a substantive case for better public provision of women's health care which should include proper post-natal attention and efficient, safe contraception.

6.3 Public Provision in Britain 1920 - 1930

Since the Boer War there had been flurries of public concern about the health of babies and children. High infant mortality rates and ill-nourished children came to be seen as the consequence of the ignorance of mothers, rather than the results of material poverty. Therefore the new public Maternity and Child Welfare Centres had been established as part of the range of interventionist policies. A locus for educating mothers, they became an extension to the cult of motherhood which continued to maintain its power in public discourse.⁷⁰ In Chapter Two I pointed to the disparities between concern for infant welfare

⁶⁹ The clinics did provide evidence of maternal morbidity and this was acknowledged at the 1930 Conference on Public Health. Lewis, *Politics of Motherhood*, pp. 207, 217. Stopes published analyses of her clinic's findings, of the first five thousand cases in 1925. In 1930, *Preliminary Notes on Various Technical Aspects of the Control of Conception Based on the Analytical Data for Ten Thousand Cases attending the Pioneer Mothers' Clinic*, was published by the Mothers' Clinic for Constructive Birth Control, (London: March 1930); this claimed few failures. Stopes estimated that of the 10,000 women examined, over 3,000 were 'deformed or injured', that is, had abnormalities, prolapses, lacerated cervixes. The results were criticised as probably exaggerated by C.P. Blacker of the Eugenics Society. Rose, *Marie Stopes*, pp. 198-199. A Cambridge clinic followed up three hundred cases and recorded a much greater failure rate, "Review of Birth Control on Trial, 1930", *Woman's Leader*, 23 April 1930, p. 89. Their report analysing the first three hundred cases at the Cambridge Women's Welfare Association was praised by the *British Medical Journal* for its dispassionate tone which compared with the "large number of confident and wild statements made by less competent and scientific observers", (presumably a reference to Marie Stopes). "Control of Conception", *British Medical Journal* (5 April 1930), p. 658.

⁷⁰ Lewis, *Politics of Motherhood*, pp. 89-109. Also see my comments on maternalism, Chapter Two, p. 72.

and the lack of attention given to maternal welfare. Eugenists favoured birth control for the poor, fearing that the greater decline in middle-class birth rates meant class differentials would be eroded.⁷¹ In 1918 healthy mothers had been acknowledged as a "national asset"; by 1924, the rising maternal mortality rate was causing concern.⁷² Clinical causes of maternal mortality became the focal point of anxiety because official attention was focused on population statistics and mortality rates. The health, nutrition and emotional well-being of mothers were neglected by government.⁷³ Women's organisations worked to redress the balance and place a wider definition of mothers' needs on the public agenda. Pragmatically, they stressed the realities and dangers.⁷⁴

In her 1917 presidential address to the Malthusian League, Alice Vickery had advocated that the Maternity and Child Welfare clinics then being established by local authorities should also provide advice on contraception. After a slow start this demand gained momentum. By the mid-1920s it coalesced into a campaign orchestrated by socialist and Labour women and other women's organisations to advocate that working-class women be given the same access to birth control information as their middle-class counterparts. As an attempt to cross class divisions it was comparable to the Campaign to Repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts. *The Woman's Leader* celebrated the co-operation:

... not since the fiery days of the suffrage movement have the women of all parties and no party been so firmly united in a demand which though essentially *political* concerns the policy of a Government Department, is essentially *non-party*, (sic) because it finds support in all sections of the community ...⁷⁵

⁷¹ Susan Bruley, *Leninism, Stalinism and the Women's Movement in Britain 1920-1939* (London: Garland, 1986), p. 7.

⁷² Lewis, *Politics of Motherhood*, p. 38.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁷⁴ Brookes, *Abortion in England*, p. 88.

⁷⁵ *Woman's Leader*, 13 May 1927.

Under the auspices of the Worker's Birth Control Group, (WBCG), the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC), the SPBCC and the Women's National Liberal Federation, a Joint Committee was established in 1928. Eva Hubback was Chairman, Edith How Martyn the Treasurer. Committee members included Frida Laski, Evelyn Fuller and Mrs. Thurtle.⁷⁶ Before I describe the culmination of the campaign, its two major sources in socialism and feminism are outlined.

The views of many working-class women had been made explicit by Rose Witcop in 1923, who described Sanger's *Family Limitation* as a "Handbook for Working Mothers":

It is wrong to think that ignorance and fear act as checks to immorality, or that enlightenment will be more dangerous to the working woman than it is to the woman of the upper classes.⁷⁷

In 1923 the Women's Co-operative Guild (WCG) became the first women's organisation to support birth control as integral to maternal and child welfare policies.⁷⁸ The information in their collection of working-class women's experiences, *Maternity*, published in 1915, was the lodestone of their case. Local WCG branches discussed the topic extensively; Edith How Martyn, Bessie Drysdale and other Malthusian League members were frequent speakers at branch meetings. The annual conference of Labour women of

⁷⁶ Eva Hubback (1886-1949) was NUSEC Parliamentary Secretary and on the National Council for Equal Citizenship. She worked closely with Eleanor Rathbone to demand family allowances. She helped found the Family Endowment Society and, with Margery Corbett-Ashby, the Townswomen's Guilds. She was a Principal of Morley College, London. Brian Harrison, *Prudent Revolutionaries: Portraits of British Feminists Between the Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987); Johanna Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage: Feminists in War and Peace 1914-28* (London: Macmillan, 1987). Frida Laski, (1885 - ?), was active in the pre-war suffrage campaign. A socialist and active in the Fabian Women's Group, she helped found the WBCG and was a founder-member of the Abortion Law Reform Association (ALRA) in 1936. A friend of Dora Russell, she was married to Harold J. Laski. *Abortion Law Reform Association Journal*, "Breaking Chains", Fiftieth Anniversary issue (Summer 1986).

⁷⁷ Rose Witcop, in her introduction to Sanger's *Family Limitation*, p 4. Margaret Sanger. *Family Limitation*, pamphlet (London: The People's Clinic, n.d. [1923]). Rose Witcop (1890-1932) and her partner Guy Aldred, both anarchists, were prosecuted for selling *Family Limitation* as "an obscene publication calculated to corrupt the morals of society" because it contained a picture of a cervical cap being fitted. *New Generation* 23 March 1923. Brookes, *Abortion in England*, p 85. It was the last British prosecution for the publication of birth control material. Banks, *Biographical Dictionary*, p. 222.

⁷⁸ Lewis, *Politics of Motherhood*, p. 197.

1924 adopted a resolution in favour of birth control.⁷⁹ From this base, the Workers' Birth Control Group was established. They rejected Malthusianism and the eugenic taint associating poverty with lack of fitness to survive. Some socialist women, among them Stella Browne and Dora Russell, argued that because reproduction was women's work, women were entitled to control their own conditions of labour.⁸⁰ Following a delegation by Labour women to the Ministry of Health in 1924 and the subsequent ban on local authority birth control provision, other official women's organisations joined forces.⁸¹

It was well-known that the middle class were using birth control.⁸² To many women, what rankled was the secrecy and furtiveness surrounding the topic and the fact that poor women were denied access to information about safe, reliable methods. Throughout the 1920s *Time and Tide* and *The Woman's Leader* carried long-running debates which gave many women a chance to air their views covering many aspects of birth control.⁸³ At their 1923 annual meeting, NUSEC suggested women's societies should study the question and the same year *The Woman's Leader* presented opposing views from Bessie Drysdale and Dr. Mary Scharlieb.⁸⁴ *Time and Tide* located birth control in the contemporary debate about 'old' (equality) and the 'new' feminism which advanced policies highlighting sexual difference. While neither birth control nor family endowment were part of the official programme, in 1925 NUSEC announced support for both.⁸⁵ In the

⁷⁹ Brookes, *Abortion in England*, p. 86; Edith How Martyn and Mary Breed, *Birth Control Movement*, draft.

⁸⁰ Bruley, *Leninism, Stalinism*, p. 78; Brookes, *Abortion in England*, pp. 86-87.

⁸¹ How Martyn and Breed, *Birth Control Movement*, draft.

⁸² Dale Spender, *Time and Tide Wait for No Man* (London: Pandora, 1984), p. 266.

⁸³ Spender, *Time and Tide Wait for No Man*, p. 266.

⁸⁴ *Woman's Leader*, 16 March 1923. Mary Scharlieb was a well-known doctor who campaigned for more women doctors early in the twentieth-century, wrote popular advice manuals on health, etc., including *The Bachelor Woman and Her Problems*. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1928). Influential as a social purity eugenicist, she saw women's unique reproductive capacity as a central concern for the education and training of future generations.

⁸⁵ Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage*, p. 166.

debate, Edith How Martyn rejected criticisms of NUSEC's involvement in activities not considered feminist:

This is especially regrettable in the case of Birth Control, which is the one thing which puts women on a real sex equality with men.⁸⁶

Her view on the old/new debate was that both were needed, an implicit acknowledgement of a variety of feminisms. Societies could specialise and individuals could choose which approach they preferred.⁸⁷ An older feminist tradition which equated birth control with increased sexual oppression for women was also given rein in the debate. It was expressed in the shrill tones of the social purity movement:

Birth control, like all lapses from virtue, is particularly degrading to the wife; it puts her in the position of a prostitute, the passive object of a man's lust, a thing of pleasure to be thrown aside when pleasure is exhausted.⁸⁸

By the time the Women's Liberal Federation discussed the issue in 1927, contraception was part of a cluster of contemporary anxieties. Margery Spring-Rice called for a national policy on "such matters as birth control and emigration" to include provision at health centres, "so enabling the poorest members of the community to obtain the information to which the wealthier classes already have access."⁸⁹ Lady Acland referred to the war, saying:

There are people who are shocked that mothers should be able to choose how many people should be brought into this world. We can leave that to the generation who look upon population as cannon fodder.⁹⁰

At the National Council of Women Conference in 1929, the only serious opposition came from Roman Catholics.⁹¹ Those changes in outlook to which Edith How Martyn had

⁸⁶ Letter to *Time and Tide*, November 1926, quoted in Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage*, p. 168.

⁸⁷ Letter to *Time and Tide*, 4 March 1927, quoted in Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage*, p. 173.

⁸⁸ *Women's Leader*, 27 May 1927.

⁸⁹ How Martyn and Breed, *Birth Control Movement*, draft.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

referred, were demonstrated by a young member of the council executive who dismissed opposition to "scientific birth control":

To us . . . it is an accepted thing which we discuss freely and frankly. . . . Poorer women should be able to obtain information in the same clean way that we do and to attain a similar spirit of companionship on a high ethical plane.⁹²

Here, the demand was expressed as part of contemporary hopes for more egalitarian sexual relationships between men and women.

These last examples illustrate opinion within the women's movement. I now turn to the issues which led to the focus on local authorities as the best means of providing information about birth control. Why were they pinpointed, rather than general practitioners, hospitals or alternative structures outside mainstream establishments? Voluntary clinics depended on philanthropic sources and individual subscribers for their funding, an unreliable method which dissipated energy. The medical profession was still ambivalent and it was not the practice to teach medical students much about contraceptive methods. Hospitals would advise patients not to have more children for their health's sake, but failed to provide contraceptive advice; out-patients' departments were too busy and were a hostile environment for women seeking privacy and sensitivity.⁹³ Giving advice, fitting birth control devices and following-up patients were costly and time-consuming. High maternal mortality rates continued. For Edith How Martyn and others in the birth control movement, the creation of publicly-funded birth control centres allied to maternity and child welfare centres already in existence was a logical step.⁹⁴ The facilities were already in place; the time was ripe for a final push to their campaign. Their persistence in

⁹² How Martyn and Breed, *Birth Control Movement*, draft.

⁹³ Frida Laski, *Report of the Conference on the Giving of Information on Birth Control by Public Health Authorities*, 2d. ed. (n.p., [Conference held 4 April 1930]), p. 25.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.25

the face of official obduracy meant they came to be regarded as "a difficult lot" by Ministry of Health bureaucrats.⁹⁵

The Joint Committee soft-pedalled on moral questions concerning birth control. The major argument was the demand that poor women should have the same rights as wealthier women.⁹⁶ Pointing out that poor women were the most liable to be exploited by commercial agencies and quacks, the Joint Committee emphasised that they wanted married women to have access to information, "assuming on this important matter equality of knowledge for poor mothers with rich mothers."⁹⁷ Other than moral objections and government reluctance to finance expansion, some opposition came from public health officials who felt the new welfare centres had inadequate facilities and too few specialists to provide a proper service, or that mothers using the infant welfare centres would be either forced into using birth control or put off attending altogether.⁹⁸

In 1926 a House of Commons motion permitting local authorities to incur expenditure to provide contraceptive advice to married women was defeated but the same year the House of Lords passed a resolution in favour. A NUSEC deputation to leaders of all three political parties was told there was little public support - as expressed through the House of Commons. Hence the 1928 general election provided the Joint Committee with an opportunity to challenge this assumption. Edith How Martyn organised an extensive campaign of letter-writing and public debate with parliamentary candidates, suggesting that provision of birth control information was "a legitimate and natural extension" of the work of Maternity and Child Welfare Centres.⁹⁹ Although only a fraction of her

⁹⁵ Harold Smith, *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1990), p. 57.

⁹⁶ See above, p. 291.

⁹⁷ *Maternity Centres and Birth Control Information*, Leaflet (published by the Joint Committee on Birth Control at Maternity Centres, n.d.), author's collection.

⁹⁸ *Report of the Proceedings of the Fourth English Speaking Conference on Maternity and Child Welfare*, Caxton Hall, Westminster, 1926 (n.p.), p. 183.

⁹⁹ Edith How Martyn, *An Appeal for Equality of Knowledge*, issued by BCIC under Edith How Martyn's name (London: Birth Control Movement Information Centre, n.d), author's collection. Sanger and Edith How Martyn were dismayed when the British Maternal Mortality Committee

correspondence remains, it shows how she appealed to local government councillors and officials, health authorities and prospective parliamentary candidates. Over 570 parliamentary constituencies were canvassed; many candidates came out in favour. With Mary Breed, she produced a booklet, *The Birth Control Movement in England*.¹⁰⁰ Designed to be cheap and accessible, its aim was to present fairly objectively both the background to past controversies and the case for provision of information. As a follow-up to the election work, the Joint Committee organised a conference for public health authorities in April 1930, chaired by Eva Hubback and Killick Millard, the Medical Officer of Health for Leicester. By then, Labour-controlled city councils had added their weight to the campaign. Faced with evidence from health officials, midwives and women local councillors, and from women running voluntary clinics, such as Helena Wright and Frida Laski, the government gave in.¹⁰¹ In July the Ministry of Health issued a Memorandum relaxing the prohibition. Advice on contraception would be permitted where there were medical grounds, in "cases where further pregnancy would be detrimental to health".¹⁰² Successive directives gradually allowed more leniency on health grounds, but it was not until 1967 that local authorities were permitted to provide birth control advice on social grounds and regardless of the client's marital status.¹⁰³

neglected birth control in its studies. Letters, Edith How Martyn to Margaret Sanger, 31 October 1928, SSC. Margaret Sanger, Fishkill, New York, to Edith How Martyn, 4 November 1928.

¹⁰⁰ How Martyn and Breed, *Birth Control Movement*. The booklet was described as "an attractive little pamphlet" by the *British Medical Journal*, who disapproved of the campaign itself. There were "weighty reasons" for not disseminating contraceptive information through welfare centres, said the *Journal*, without specifying what those reasons were. Even at that date, many in the medical profession were content to advocate contraception only for the avoidance of pregnancy on medical grounds. "Control of Conception", *British Medical Journal*, 5 April 1930, p. 658. *The Medical Times* praised the booklet's accuracy and conciseness. "Miscellaneous Publications", *The Medical Times*, February 1930, p. 29.

¹⁰¹ Smith, *British Feminism*, pp. 56-57; also Jane Lewis, "Birth Control", in *The Politics of Motherhood*, pp. 196-218; Rose, *Marie Stopes*, p. 205.

¹⁰² *The Ministry of Health and Birth Control Leaflet* published by BCIC, n.d. [probably 1930].

¹⁰³ Lewis, *The Politics of Motherhood*, p. 214.

6.4 International Links 1920-1930

By 1929 the maternity centres and birth control information campaign was nearing completion. Edith How Martyn still hoped for a direct influence in parliament, working through women members. She had given up ideas about entering parliament herself, although in the late 1920s there was a rumour that she would stand on the single-issue of birth control. With Margaret Sanger she fostered Lady Astor's interest in birth control. "Lady Astor thinks we are in for a big fight over it [birth control] in this country", she wrote to Sanger. She planned to look after the propaganda work to give Lady Astor the necessary backing to be successful in parliament; an "immense amount of spade work and patient routine and drudgery work" was needed. She thought this could be financed on about £1,000 to £1,500 a year.¹⁰⁴ She also helped to mobilise other influential women in England, including Mrs. Hubback, Lady Rhondda and Mrs. Graham Murray, to bring the topic into sharper focus. In respect of the drudgery and work required, she was right. Eva Hubback said that without the efforts of Edith How Martyn's Birth Control Information Centre, "the work could never have been done".¹⁰⁵

Together, Edith How Martyn and Margaret Sanger attempted to give voice to female concerns in the developing international dialogue on population and birth control. At the level of popular debate they were effective; they kept the subject high on the public agenda. Because birth control remained controversial, they could exploit the developing mass media by using press releases, photographs, radio interviews and newsreels to promote interest wherever they went. Margaret Sanger was an effective manipulator of

¹⁰⁴ Letter, Edith How Martyn to Margaret Sanger, 28 April 1929. A year earlier, Margaret Sanger had found herself staying at the same hotel as Lady Astor in St. Moritz. She wrote to Edith How Martyn asking advice about English protocol in order to meet her. By 1 February 1928 they had met, talked for hours and Lady Astor "confessed ignorance" about birth control to Sanger. Letters, Margaret Sanger, St. Moritz, to Edith How Martyn, 25 January 1928, 1 February 1928.

¹⁰⁵ Letter, Eva Hubback, London, to Mrs. Gerda Guy, 26 September 1930. Wellcome Institute SA/FPA/A 23/58.

publicity, and Edith How Martyn capitalised on her suffrage experience to gain attention.¹⁰⁶

In terms of dominant discourses, there was the familiar matrix of interlocking interests and organisations which had an investment in birth control. These included scientific, medical and eugenic concerns, sexual reformism, legal and moral elements, as well as the traditional politico-economic debate about population control. Lack of interest or sponsorship at government or official levels provided another parallel with the British situation in the 1920s. Isolated individuals or groups in most countries endeavoured to meet the demands for practical knowledge which was developing by then. The task of establishing channels of communication was not easy. The letters between Margaret Sanger and Edith How Martyn reveal their difficulties. To promote modern contraceptive methods, they needed to obtain support from eminent experts and to steer through the political and moral sensibilities surrounding birth control on the international scene. All the while, inadequate resourcing constrained their plans. Having located the silences where female experience was involved, they had to bring women's needs in to the specialist domain. Edith How Martyn wanted to speak out on behalf of "the voiceless millions".¹⁰⁷

In 1904 Alice Vickery had started a Women's Branch of the International Malthusian League but despite the feminist basis of her argument, her initiative had been shunned by the British suffrage movement.¹⁰⁸ Edith How Martyn also found that while individual feminists espoused the cause of birth control, the women's movement in Britain was dilatory in its support. It failed to take advantage of the opportunities offered by

¹⁰⁶ For example, Sanger appeared bound and gagged for news photographers before her American trial. When Canadian customs confiscated her suitcase full of birth control material in 1938, Edith issued press handouts to maximise her protest. Newspaper cuttings in Margaret Sanger Papers Project, New York University.

¹⁰⁷ Letter, Edith How Martyn, Hyderabad, Sind, to Margaret Sanger, 23 January 1935. SSC.

¹⁰⁸ Ledbetter, *Malthusian League*, pp. 193-4.

Stopes or Sanger; NUSEC began to give support only when the bandwagon of demand for freely-available information had begun to roll.¹⁰⁹

Similarly, the international women's movement of the inter-war period might have been more supportive, but, in fact, failed to help establish birth control as a priority in many countries. Edith How Martyn's experiences were an illustration of this. Had the formal structures in the international women's movement lent their weight to her initiatives on an issue so central to women's concerns, a more vocal network might have been created. The movement could have intervened in discourses on population and contraception much more powerfully.

I shall first outline Edith How Martyn's hopes there, then I shall discuss other efforts to co-ordinate established groups and interests, especially in India and China; the former because it was a key objective, and China will serve as an example of one of Edith How Martyn's brief visits.

Edith How Martyn had suggested that Sanger visit Geneva during the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) Congress in 1920 to hold a few meetings about birth control "on the side" but nothing came of this.¹¹⁰ When Sanger's book *Motherhood in Bondage*, a collection of letters articulating women's actual experience of sexual relationships and maternity, was published in 1928, Edith wrote to her:

It will do an immense amount of good. The Roman Catholics and mugwumps all over the world want to keep it in bondage they dread and distrust the revolutionary changes a free motherhood will bring to humanity.¹¹¹

The suffrage contacts might have been useful. Although she never gave up hope of the women's movement at home or abroad, Edith How Martyn came to hold reservations

¹⁰⁹ See, for example, Sanger's comments on the failure to take a lead, above, p. 307.

¹¹⁰ Letter, Margaret Sanger, London, to Edith How Martyn, May 1920.

¹¹¹ Letter, Edith How Martyn to Margaret Sanger, 2 October 1928. SSC.

about the priorities and policies which were being adopted.¹¹² She had always feared the movement was tepid about birth control and, after attending an IWSA Conference for Peace in Amsterdam in 1927, which she found too orthodox and conservative, she concluded women were not thinking independently. Like Nina Boyle at the same time, Edith How Martyn identified the dangers of coalition politics. Both she and Boyle feared that feminism would be submerged in international *realpolitik* or diminished in socialist or pacifist movements. Edith How Martyn felt that the underlying causes of international friction, such as economic instability and demographic change, were being ignored. Efforts to insinuate the international women's movement into an influential position at the League of Nations might be double-edged. Women's organisations should concentrate on women's issues; they needed to be "permeated with" birth control.¹¹³ Moreover, it seems likely in view of her own suffrage encounters and the experiences of Stopes and Sanger in Britain and the USA, that Edith How Martyn reasoned that approaches through official and governmental structures would make the work overly dependent on the whims of bureaucrats or subject to political chicanery. Birth control would be given low priority. Her assessment was correct. By 1936, she saw that governments were preoccupied "trying to keep the peace":

... they have no inclination to take up a controversial question like B.C.
(sic) All the more reason that unofficial efforts should be strengthened.¹¹⁴

The League of Nations did, however, provide one avenue for propaganda work which might have made a marked difference to the international climate on birth control had it succeeded. It arose from Sanger's and Edith How Martyn's proposals for the Seventh International Population Conference in Geneva in 1927. With Sanger's funding,

¹¹² Letter, Margaret Sanger, New York, to Edith How Martyn, 26 March 1929. *Ibid.*, 4 July 1926. The possibilities offered by international feminism convinced Sanger, who offered to pay Edith How Martyn's expenses to an IWSA Congress in Germany in 1929.

¹¹³ Edith How Martyn, hand-written notes, November 1927, author's collection.

¹¹⁴ Letter, Edith How Martyn, on board RMS Empress of Canada, to Margaret Sanger, 10 June 1936.

Edith How Martyn set up an office in Geneva to oversee conference arrangements. She hoped to permanently establish a small bureau of information in Geneva, readily accessible to anyone with business at the League of Nations. Through this centre, contacts and knowledge would be exchanged via government officials, politicians, medical and health workers, research scientists and contraceptive manufacturers. The dream was never realised, largely because funds were inadequate.

At the same time, in England, Edith How Martyn was beginning a prototype of such a centre, a bureau to provide information to anyone interested in birth control. Initially the Birth Control Information Centre, it became the Birth Control International Information Centre (BCIIC or the Centre) in 1930 with Margaret Sanger as President, and Edith How Martyn as the Director. Numerous references to financial insecurity are contained in the correspondence between Edith How Martyn and Margaret Sanger. Ultimately, by 1935, the difficulties seem to have caused a chill in their relationship.¹¹⁵ They deplored the time and energy spent on trying to raise funds and the frustrations of working with and placating individuals sponsoring their work. No government aid or help from welfare agencies was given, nor was there assistance from the medical profession. Margaret Sanger co-operated with contraceptive manufacturers and drug companies, for example in researching the foam powder contraceptive, but both were very cautious in

¹¹⁵ Margaret Sanger could be cavalier towards colleagues. Edith How Martyn requested financial help from the Eugenics Society for the Indian Tour of 1935, emphasising the coup of Margaret Sanger's attendance at the All India Women's Conference. Letter, Edith How Martyn to Dr. C. P. Blacker, Eugenics Society, London, 22 August 1935, Wellcome SA/EUG/C.176. Three months later Sanger wrote to Dr. Blacker, repudiating Edith How Martyn's claim to speak on behalf of BCIIC, saying that her request had been "purely personal". Though still a member of the Council, Edith How Martyn "had resigned her position as Honorary Director". Letter, Margaret Sanger, on headed writing paper, BCIIC, giving London and New York addresses, to Dr. C. P. Blacker, 14 November, 1935, Wellcome SA/EUG/D.14. Edith How Martyn continued to describe herself as the Director of BCIIC. After the dissension within BCIIC, referred to in Section 6.5, when Edith How Martyn was making another trip to India without BCIIC's backing, Margaret Sanger had the gall to write praising her efforts, saying " ... but it is almost a miracle that you can do it without any financial backing or support". Recorded in Edith How Martyn's India Tour Diary (1936-37) on 30 November 1936. Eileen Palmer Collection COLL.MISC.639. British Library of Political and Economic Science, London.

their association with profit-making companies, mainly because at the time and in the public mind birth control was associated with quackery and misleading advertising.

Neither Edith How Martyn nor her husband, Herbert, had much in the way of independent means. When Sanger had asked her to supervise the Geneva Conference in 1927, she had felt obliged to ask for a small salary, about £5 or £6 a week.¹¹⁶ For her propaganda work she relied chiefly on donations from a few wealthy individuals. Sanger's husband was a millionaire but after the US stock market crash and during the economic slump of the 1930s, his financial backing became less reliable. Clinton Chance, husband of Janet, became wealthy through stock market dealing and was another source, as were Gerda Guy and her husband, Harry. But the funding was spasmodic and subject to the whims of individuals. For example A.R. Kaufman, President of the Canadian Parents Information Bureau and Parents Clinic in Toronto, substantially underwrote Edith How Martyn's major tour. Norman Haire contributed, as did John Maynard Keynes whom she described as a good vice-president but no use financially.¹¹⁷ The Drysdale continued their support and Sir Julien Cahn, whom Edith How Martyn met in Toronto in 1933, was another benefactor, providing sums of £50 or £100 for overseas tours. Although her tour diaries and accounts show conscientious attempts to record the minutiae of income and spending, Edith How Martyn's casual approach to finance did not sit well with having to be accountable to committees and patrons. She admitted as much to Eileen Palmer.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Letter Edith How Martyn to Margaret Sanger, n.d.; a note by Eileen Palmer dates this at December 1925.

¹¹⁷ Kaufman was another idiosyncratic birth control advocate. During the world-wide tour of 1935-36 he threatened to withdraw some of the \$500 he had committed, apparently taking umbrage at Edith How Martyn's independent attitude which he felt did not square with her representing the BCIIC. Kaufman thought birth control clinics were a very expensive way of providing contraception for poorer mothers and sponsored a programme of nurses' visits to their homes, the cause of a legal trial in Canada in 1936-37. *Birth Control Trial*, pamphlet (n.p.), Wellcome SA/FPA/SR.16/13. This was a pamphlet giving details of the trial of Dorothy Palmer, a nurse working for Kaufman, arrested for disseminating birth control information, in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada in September 1936. After a nineteen day trial she was acquitted in March 1937; her defence was that she had acted for the "public good".

¹¹⁸ Edith How Martyn admitted to Eileen Palmer, "... reluctantly I must recognise that our free and

Apart from this help, Edith How Martyn and other supporters of BCIC raised much of the finance themselves. Existing accounts list individual subscribers, many of whom gave very small amounts. These included Edith's family and friends, among them former suffrage colleagues, Mr. and Mrs. Pethick-Lawrence, Alison Neilans and her companion, Madge Turner; Helen Atkinson and Janie Allen, and the militant suffragette, Kitty Marion, who lived in New York and worked for Margaret Sanger. Other feminists who donated funds included Winifred Holtby, Maude Royden, Margery Spring-Rice and Edith Summerskill. Anna Martin also contributed, writing:

I feel no scruple of conscience in diverting a little cash from other ameliorative efforts, good and necessary as they are, and adding it to my subscription for your India tour.¹¹⁹

The other main sources were fund-raising events like their weekly 'Lucina' lunches and associated events, talks by visitors from overseas, and cocktail parties. These social events had two objectives. They had been inaugurated by Edith How Martyn to raise funds and to provide a supportive network for isolated workers from many countries. Eventually internal squabbles about these methods, which some officials considered too informal and unstructured, led to Edith How Martyn's disenchantment with BCIC. Disliking the "hand to mouth" anxiety about funds, she hoped to build up a reserve, with about 75 per cent of the Centre's funds to be ear-marked for foreign work, the remainder going to underwrite the London Centre overheads.¹²⁰ This was never achieved. In 1934 on the eve of her first Indian tour, the BCIC Special Efforts Group organised a farewell dinner, at which Eleanor Rathbone and Percy Dearmer, Canon of Westminster, were speakers. Lord

easy methods did not result in the financial support we ought to have received." Letter Edith How Martyn to Eileen Palmer, 4 April 1936, author's collection.

¹¹⁹ Letter, Anna Martin, Rotherhithe, to Edith How Martyn, 26 October 1937, author's collection.

¹²⁰ Letter, Edith How Martyn, on board SS. Mantua, to Margaret Sanger, 4 December 1934. SSC. Some dissension in BCIC ranks occurred because of conflicting views over financial organisation. Eileen Palmer was worried that this might reflect badly on Edith How Martyn and asked that some letters detailing the quarrel should not be published.

Horder, Physician to the Prince of Wales and one of Britain's most eminent doctors, attended and Mrs. Rama Rau, wife of the Indian Deputy High Commissioner, presided. The event exemplified, as the *New Generation* fulsomely expressed it, contributions to the creation of a sane outlook on birth control, from religion, medicine, legislation and social reform.¹²¹ Besides the feminists mentioned above, patrons included Lady Denman, the scientist, Julian Huxley, the writer, Kingsley Martin and Norman Haire.

The Centre organised lectures to specialists; a panel of speakers addressed a variety of meetings, particularly those held by the Women's Co-operative Guild and other women's groups. Some of the publicity material shows the range of audiences reached by BCIC. Cheap, simple flyers and leaflets for handing out at meetings and in places like welfare clinics were addressed directly to women. Some - *Practical Advice on Birth Control* by Michael Fielding (the pen-name of Maurice Newfield) and *Birth Control: The Midwife's Responsibility* (a reprint from *The Nursing Times*) - were directed at specialist workers. *Population, Eugenics and Birth Control* (from a sermon preached by Percy Dearmer), and *The Roman Catholic Church and Birth Control* by Edith How Martyn, were part of the continuing propaganda exercise.¹²² They issued newsletters and general appeals often listing leaders of opinion to substantiate their case for freely-available contraceptive knowledge. Among these were eminent doctors, scientists, academics and authors, including Laurence Housman, Vera Brittain, Rebecca West, H.G. Wells, Cicely Hamilton, and other 'distinguished people', among whom were included well-known feminists such as Margery Corbett Ashley, Mrs. Pethick-Lawrence, Maude Royden and Lady Denman.¹²³

¹²¹ *New Generation*, December 1934.

¹²² Pamphlets in author's collection.

¹²³ Lady Denman, (1884-1954), a supporter of birth control since the early 1920s, gave financial help to birth control clinics; in 1930 she was on the National Birth Control Council. In 1908 a member of the Women's Liberal Federation, in 1916 she was chair of a sub-committee of the Agricultural Organisation Society. From her work here arose the National Federation of Women's Institutes. In the Second World War she was Chairman of the Women's Land Army. In 1952 she resigned from the Liberal Party. Banks, *Biographical Dictionary*, pp. 61-65.

Another function was to provide a resource for health workers at a time when access to specialist books and information was difficult. The Centre also provided Edith How Martyn with a base from which to expand her international work.

Next, after sketching in potential avenues to enhanced support for birth control offered by the sex reform and birth control movements, I outline attempts to harness scientific specialists to the international cause of birth control to demonstrate Edith How Martyn's options. While establishing financial backing and the mechanisms to serve her campaigns, she faced, as she had done in Britain, several prospective communication channels. Internationally, the 1920s saw both the development of co-operation to strengthen international links in birth control and sexual reform movements, and a shift from attempted coalitions of established pressure groups to broader, more clearly-defined objectives.¹²⁴

During the decade, Edith How Martyn and Margaret Sanger employed their contacts with members of the sexual reform movement, particularly Havelock Ellis and Norman Haire. Established in 1928, the World League for Sexual Reform (WLSR) aimed to create better legal and social attitudes towards sexual relations based on scientific knowledge. This encompassed revision of marriage, divorce and abortion laws, improving sex education and birth control and reform of attitudes to homosexuality, illegitimacy, venereal disease and prostitution. Havelock Ellis was a joint president. Norman Haire was closely connected, becoming President of the British Section of the World League; Dora Russell was the Secretary. It was supported by members of the British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology (BSSSP).¹²⁵ Haire subsequently became President of the Sex

¹²⁴ In 1919 Hirschfeld had established the Institute for Sexual Science in Germany and in 1921 he inaugurated the first of a number of World Congresses for Sexual Reform. Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, 2d. ed., Themes in British Social History Series (London: Longman, 1989), pp. 184-186.

¹²⁵ In the 1920s this became the British Sexological Society. Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, p. 184-6.

Education Society (an organisation to which Edith How Martyn also belonged), when it grew from the defunct British Section of the WLSR in 1935. But, never an orthodox participant in mainstream international affairs, the WLSR could not provide a substantial base from which birth control advocates could enter public debate.

Nor, ultimately, could the traditional groups associated with population control. Since the turn of the century there had been a number of international meetings under the umbrella of the International Federation of Neo-Malthusian Leagues. Most participants had disbanded during the First World War; by 1920 interest was being revived but it had a different focus. The primacy of Malthusian economics was giving way to notions that birth control was in itself a reasonable reform.¹²⁶ In Britain, the Malthusian League wound up in 1927, its final meeting "rather a melancholy pathetic affair" according to Edith How Martyn, who thought the Drysdales deserved more recognition.¹²⁷

Part of the reason for its demise can be seen through an examination of the Sixth International Neo-Malthusian and Birth Control Conference in 1925. This marked a discursive transition from birth control as a mainly theoretical or moral question to its perception as a scientific or medical issue, a reflection of prevailing trends in discourses of sexuality. When the conference was held in New York, Sanger had become, "the undisputed leader of the world-wide birth control movement"¹²⁸ Her conference address stamped the eugenic argument for contraception on the international public agenda.¹²⁹ At the same time Sanger wanted to co-opt the resources and influence of science:

The propaganda aspect of the problem was in all countries far more advanced than the scientific or the medical development. Without the latter, no long-range program was possible. My aim was to establish an

¹²⁶ Ledbetter, *Malthusian League*, p. 195.

¹²⁷ Letter Edith How Martyn to Margaret Sanger, 19 December 1927. Other campaigners also felt the Drysdales' pioneering work had been overlooked. Nurse Daniels thought that if the Drysdales had had "some of Marie's [Stopes] impudence they would have had a hearing long ago ...". Letter, E.S. Daniels to Edith How Martyn, 27 January 1927, author's collection.

¹²⁸ Ledbetter, *Malthusian League*, p. 195.

¹²⁹ Sanger, *My Fight*, pp. 289-293.

international movement which, through its findings, its precise researches, thoroughly correlated and coordinated, would help in the solution of political, industrial, and racial problems which everywhere in the world today are causing grave concern.¹³⁰

She summed up the functions of such international conferences: to elevate the topic and gain the attention of "scientists, sociologists, geneticists and statesmen".¹³¹ Additionally, they could become a resource for other more isolated birth control pioneers.

Events at the Conference illustrated the continuing controversy aroused by the subject. Police acting for the Roman Catholic Archbishop of New York tried to close a crowded public meeting.¹³² Sanger was arrested but charges were later dismissed. Consequent publicity fuelled debate and support. An International Birth Control League was formed with the intent to hold a World Population Conference.

Struggles to bridge the gaps between a number of discourses on population were very marked at this point. By the second decade of the century the influence of sexologists had been overtaken by a more "scientific" study of sex and reproduction, based on the laboratory, experiment and clinical observation. In research, there was to be greater emphasis on reproductive biology, less on behavioural and social factors.¹³³ Neither elitist, scientific deliberations nor economic or moralistic wrangling met the practical contraceptive needs of ordinary people, according to Edith How Martyn. Attempting to forge the links between popular and elitist discourses, that is the demand for better contraceptives and the potential of science to fulfil those needs, she adopted a rational,

¹³⁰ Sanger, *My Fight*, p. 300.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Harold Cox, "Birth Control in the United States", *New Generation*, January [1922]. This was the first issue of *The New Generation*.

¹³³ Porter and Hall outline the progress of the scientific study of sex and reproduction during the 1920s and 1930s, and the tendency to see this as a depoliticising process, which they describe as an inaccurate perception. See Roy Porter and Lesley Hall, *The Facts of Life: The Creation of Sexual Knowledge in Britain 1650-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 168-177. Dr. Hertha Riese, made one isolated attempt to make sure women's opinions were taken into account in the scientific deliberations of the World Population Conference. Alison Mackinnon, "Were Women Present?", p. 230; see also pp. 225-226.

scientific mode. The logical, practical result of a strictly scientific approach would be to see that "conscious control of population or birth control" was "desirable and *in accord with the most advanced civilisation.*" (Italics mine) Instead of theories, what was required was informed opinion, "in not too technical language", from technical experts on many aspects of population. ¹³⁴

The difficulties experienced by Margaret Sanger and Edith How Martyn are illustrated in the outcome of the first World Population Conference in Geneva in August 1927. When they proposed it, they had hoped for a breakthrough into the dominant discourse through scientific channels. These hopes were not fully realised and ten years later they regretted the lack of help given to the birth control movement by academics. ¹³⁵ To avoid controversy at the conference, they had agreed to keep a low profile, but when the Proceedings were published, the propagandists were excluded from any acknowledgement of their work. Unwilling to risk public censure, especially from opponents in Roman Catholic countries, the 'distinguished scientists' had refused to espouse birth control unequivocally. At the conference, a pioneer population scientist, Raymond Pearl, had described his "experimental model of population change". It involved populations of flies, measuring bottles, food supplies and census counts of the fly population. ¹³⁶ After this experience, both Sanger and Edith How Martyn became somewhat disillusioned:

. . . we will be even with the 'distinguished scientists' yet and send them back to their flies and mice having been taught how unwise it is to deal unjustly - or to scorn a beloved woman . . . ¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Letter, Edith How Martyn, Paris, to Margaret Sanger/Clinton Chance, 28 September 1926. SSC.

¹³⁵ Letter Edith How Martyn to Margaret Sanger, 10 May 1937. SSC.

¹³⁶ For an account of his work, see Mackinnon, "Were Women Present?", pp. 225-226.

¹³⁷ Letter Edith How Martyn to Margaret Sanger, written at 3.45 A.M., (at some point during the conference) n.d., note in Eileen Palmer's hand dating it as August 1927. In the letter, Edith How Martyn describes her dismay that Margaret Sanger had been "stabbed in the back". Although Margaret Sanger continued, Edith How Martyn resigned and advised Margaret Sanger to keep her name "off every bit of printed trash" associated with the conference. Sanger edited the conference Proceedings.

wrote Edith to Margaret. Sanger felt she had been given a glimpse of the pitfalls and stumbling blocks that impeded even men of science as well as statesmen and legislators when it came to advocating contraception.¹³⁸ Officially, the outcome of the conference was the formation of a permanent organisation to study population problems under the presidency of Raymond Pearl.¹³⁹

Another result was an attempt made by the Eugenics Society in Britain to create an international network, the International Medical Group for the Investigation of Birth Control, in 1927. Composed exclusively of medical professionals, its aim was to co-ordinate and disseminate bio-chemical, physiological and statistical research in an objective manner. By May 1928, C.P. Blacker, the Society President, recognised they were having problems. He took the view that birth control was dysgenic since available methods were too complicated and elaborate to be used by "those improvident and intellectually subnormal persons whose fertility it is most desirable to limit".¹⁴⁰

On occasion Sanger and Edith How Martyn spent unofficial time together, reconsidering their approaches and making plans for the future. When Edith How Martyn had visited Sanger at her home at Fishkill, New York, they developed the custom of exchanging views and confidences which continued to exist for some time. At this point the relationship was close; there is ample evidence of the support they gave each other.

Sanger wrote to Edith How Martyn:

We miss you all the time!! You have a way of winning all hearts and its really dangerous! . . . I love the notes you send and the interesting reports and everything you do is just like I like it done. We must have ruled a world together once Edith.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Sanger, *My Fight*, p. 303.

¹³⁹ Pearl was President of the American Birth Control League (ABCL). Mackinnon, "Were Women Present?", p. 225.

¹⁴⁰ C. P. Blacker, Proposed Circular to the International Medical Group for the Investigation of Birth Control (29 May 1928). Wellcome SA/EUG/D.15.

¹⁴¹ Letter, Margaret Sanger to Edith How Martyn, 4 July 1926. SSC.

Describing her feelings, Edith wrote of their:

Calm, intimate, frank talk such as is a real refreshment of mind and spirit with the little germ of an idea coming out of it all - that the message of sex freedom the basis of all freedoms for women shall be carried to the women who need it most all the world over.¹⁴²

The years 1927 to 1929 were frustrating for Edith How Martyn. It was at this time that she founded the Suffragette Fellowship, perhaps partly from nostalgic motives, possibly as a recognition of how quickly women's achievements could be lost to history. It marked the attainment of their original objectives and was also a way of recreating a political community for women. She pushed through the local authority birth control campaign in England, still endeavoured to work through the women's movement and deployed her contacts with sexologists and birth control organisations.

Internationally, scientific and medical research was patchy and uncoordinated. The search for effective, cheap contraception and factual evidence continued. Edith How Martyn knew that extreme poverty would be one factor militating against effective contraception. What she and Sanger wanted was, "a cheap reliable method".¹⁴³ For women who were poor and without access to adequate medical supervision, as in rural America and India, Sanger helped develop Dua-foam, a contraceptive powder applied with a vaginal sponge. In an effort to produce sociological evidence in keeping with scientific methods, they tried to analyse how far the practice of contraception was controlling the working-class birth rate in England, enlisting Anna Martin's help to elicit women's actual experiences. Martin recommended the use of a pessary with quinine powder.¹⁴⁴

Presumably this was to prepare evidence for inquiries in Britain by the National Birth Rate Commission Medical Committee, which had called for more research into contraceptive methods in 1927, the same year as a Birth Control Investigation Committee,

¹⁴² Letter, Edith How Martyn, Montreux, to Margaret Sanger, 26 September 1927. SSC.

¹⁴³ Letter, Edith How Martyn, en route to India, to Margaret Sanger, 20 December 1934. SSC.

¹⁴⁴ Edith How Martyn, hand-written notes, October 1927, author's collection.

funded by the Eugenics Society, was also established.¹⁴⁵ Sanger's own clinic had nearly completed 10,000 records and she hoped a research analyst would produce an evaluation for a proposed international Birth Control Conference in 1930.¹⁴⁶ Harnessing propaganda with practical initiatives, Edith How Martyn set up a Margaret Sanger Foundation to attract funding. Medical specialists or 'Margaret Sanger Nurses' might be trained for their propaganda tours to demonstrate how to fit contraceptive devices, and help professionals already in the field to provide better advice. This attempt to promote better access to birth control by entering and working through medical discourses petered out through lack of financial and other resources.

In *My Fight for Birth Control*, Sanger pinpoints 1930 as the time when in Britain and parts of Europe the tide began to turn. The demand for artificial contraception was obvious. Limited as it was, the removal of the ban on contraceptive advice at British welfare centres, was one sign of change. Helena Wright addressed the 1930 Lambeth Conference which somewhat grudgingly sanctioned birth control in marriage; almost immediately a papal Encyclical condemning contraception followed.¹⁴⁷ The Seventh International Birth Control Conference in Zurich also marked a new stage. Propaganda was to give way to practicalities. Popular demand for reliable methods of contraception had been greater than either knowledge or supply. Despite many political and social differences, the conference delegates, mainly physicians and directors of birth control clinics from all over the world, agreed on the need for concrete, pragmatic work, for study and research.¹⁴⁸ The Birth Control International Information Centre was one result.

¹⁴⁵ The aim was to make an "impartial and scientific study" of methods and possible effects of contraception". Rose, *Marie Stopes*, p. 204. Porter and Hall, *The Facts of Life*, pp. 176, 192.

¹⁴⁶ Letter, Margaret Sanger, Fishkill, New York, to Edith How Martyn, 4 November 1928.

¹⁴⁷ Sanger, *My Fight*, p. 337.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 342-3.

6.5 International Networking 1930-1938

With Sanger in America as the inspiration, the BCIIC, a "permanent nucleus for international work" developed under Edith How Martyn's control in London.¹⁴⁹ Its aim was "to spread knowledge of birth control throughout the world".¹⁵⁰ The Centre operated through correspondents who reported on birth control work in their own countries, discussed problems of organisation, contraceptive methods and research and correlated findings. The London headquarters received visitors from many countries, provided information and contacts and arranged for demonstration visits to birth control clinics, among them the Walworth Road Clinic. It also provided a base for Edith How Martyn's numerous overseas tours.

As already mentioned, it was hoped that a Centre would ultimately be established in Geneva, close to the League of Nations headquarters, where "the greatest number of useful channels" could be reached.¹⁵¹ Initially other plans included an up-to-date reference library, a 'museum' of contraceptive appliances with evaluations of their efficacy, data on organisation and procedures for birth control clinics, information about legislation affecting birth control, and a regular news bulletin. Finally, the Centre would take over the work of organising international conferences, which were seen as the best and most economical way of "stimulating active interest in every aspect of birth control over the widest possible field."¹⁵² Within five years the Birth Control International Information Centre had set up links with organisations and clinics in Europe, America and Asia.

¹⁴⁹ How Martyn, *An Appeal for Equality of Knowledge*, p. 5.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁵¹ *BCIIC Statement of Policy* (London: Printed by Utopia Press, n.d.). Eileen Palmer noted this was the first printed appeal for a centre at Geneva.

¹⁵² *BCIIC Statement of Policy*.

In retrospect, the international Centre may seem an amateur measure, crippled by inadequate funding and status. But at the time, given the fissiparous state of the world-wide birth control movement, the still-marginalised position of its promoters in most European countries, and the conflict engendered by the topic, such a centre could well have seemed a positive way through a minefield. Previous progress had occurred mainly through voluntary work and with influential advocates like Marie Stopes and Margaret Sanger, rather than via conventional channels. Their work had been underwritten by the fortunes of their respective husbands, H. V. Roe and J. Noah Slee. In the United States Sanger was still struggling to secure an amendment to the Federal Penal Code to allow contraceptive material to be sent through the mails. As has been shown earlier in this chapter, the British medical profession perceived disseminating contraceptive knowledge to be of little importance. Beyond Europe provision varied, although for example, in India, there were some centres where practical if limited attempts had been made.¹⁵³ Margaret Sanger's and Edith How Martyn's tours were an especially important form of networking.

Margaret Sanger had visited China and Japan in the early 1920s but had not been allowed in to India. In 1932 Edith How Martyn visited Russia, which in the 1920s provided many sexual reformers with a model for innovation following the Revolution.¹⁵⁴

After this, Edith How Martyn's first major BCIC initiative and catalyst for expansion in the 1930s was a conference on Birth Control in Asia in November 1933. Though the fact that this took place in London is an indication of western ethnocentrism, it was a diplomatic triumph because experts from countries then hostile to each other, for example Japan and China, gathered together to exchange views. Cultural differences were

¹⁵³ When Edith How Martyn visited Mysore in 1935 she described the clinics as, "nothing that you would call a clinic" to Sanger. Instruction consisted of a brief demonstration through photographs, then the men would fit their wives. Letter, Edith How Martyn, Mysore, to Margaret Sanger, 23 February 1935. SSC.

¹⁵⁴ Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, p. 184.

acknowledged. Common denominators such as the relationship between 'over-population', distribution of economic resources, impediments to the practice of birth control, the poverty factor in the use of contraceptives and whether contraceptive techniques suitable for western women would be appropriate for large-scale use in the east were discussed. Edith How Martyn had persuaded Lord Horder to be President of the Conference. In his description of the Information Centre's objectives as in the "widest and best sense - missionary", that is to make known as widely as possible "in as many countries and languages as possible, the gospel of birth control"¹⁵⁵ he revealed his insularity. The Conference did attempt to address significant questions about population control through practical measures and international co-operation. The *British Medical Journal* summed up the event:

Even if birth control alone would not serve as a complete remedy for the economic problems of Asia, granted even that the difficulties in the way of its dissemination were created by the very miseries it aimed at relieving, it yet offered, all speakers were agreed, a contribution to the solution of these problems; and they differed only in their estimates of how important (in relation to other measures) this contribution might be.¹⁵⁶

One outcome of the Conference was that "leading social workers" invited a representative of the BCIIC to the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) which had already expressed support for birth control.¹⁵⁷ Edith How Martyn accepted this offer and began the next phase of her campaigning. She visited Margaret Sanger in New York and together they discussed tactics and made plans.

¹⁵⁵ Lord Horder, "Population Problems in the East", Speech to the conference on Birth Control in Asia, printed in *Birth Control in Asia*, ed., Michael Fielding (London: BCIIC, 1935).

¹⁵⁶ *Birth Control in Asia*. Leaflet, reprint of article from the *British Medical Journal*, 2 December 1933 (London: BCIIC n.d.) It was at this Conference that Edith How Martyn first worked with Eileen Palmer, with whom I made contact in 1990. In 1933 Eileen Palmer, a socialist who had recently toured Russia, was working at a children's nursery in one of the poorest areas of London. She had come to the conclusion that one of the most important needs of the poorer mothers she met at the nursery was for adequate access to contraception. She offered secretarial help at the Conference.

¹⁵⁷ Fielding, *Birth Control in Asia*, preface.

Their tours to promote birth control had to cover several fronts. Firstly, the tours were a public relations exercise; they tried to influence the general public and specialists through the press, radio, lectures and talks. They needed to seek out and reach potential supporters, benefactors, government and health officials, social workers and the medical profession, who had to be convinced that there was a demand for birth control and that an adequate infrastructure was necessary, all in the face of lack of interest or opposition from a variety of sources, particularly religion or medicine. Training for women doctors, nurses, accessible clinics and financial support were crucial if an effective birth control programme was to be established. On the tours they used a number of visual aids and films, such as *The Biology of Conception* and *The Mechanism of Contraception*. Models of Sanger's Gynaepaque were used to demonstrate to students how contraceptives should be fitted.¹⁵⁸ One of the most arduous and potentially controversial aspects of the work was collecting and collating statistics on population growth, infant and maternal mortality and morbidity rates. In India, for example, there had been political and cultural disputes over the custom of 'child marriage',¹⁵⁹ the average age at which girls became pregnant and the detrimental effects of early pregnancies, all of which had a bearing on demographic analysis and the marshalling of their arguments.

¹⁵⁸ The Gynaepaque consisted of a cervical cap inserted into a sponge model of female sexual organs to replicate fitting a contraceptive cap.

¹⁵⁹ During the nineteenth century reformists began to campaign against the practice of child marriage or consummation of marriage before the onset of puberty. In 1891 the age of consent to marriage was raised to twelve and the debate continued. The Hindu Child Marriage Bill introduced in 1927 by Rai Saheb Har Bilas Sarada was supported by the AIWC. By 1930 the Sarada Act, under which the age was raised to fourteen for girls and eighteen for boys, became law. Because there was a six-month delay before it came into effect, there was an immediate rush of child marriages. Ultimately the Act was ineffective because it could not be enforced adequately. See Barbara Ramusack, "Catalysts or Helpers? British Feminists, Indian Women's Rights and Indian Independence", in *The Extended Family*, ed., Gail Minault (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1981), pp. 116-7; Aparna Basu and Ray Bharati, *Women's Struggle, A History of the All India Women's Conference 1927-1990* (Manohar: n.p., 1990), pp. 42-43; and Geraldine H. Forbes, "From Purdah to Politics: The Social Feminism of the All-India Women's Organisations", in *Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia*, ed., Hannah Papanek and Gail Minault (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1982), p. 233.

The other major thrust of their campaign was the feminist task of translating the personal into the political, to expose the gap between women's desire for some measure of reproductive control and the adequate provision of birth control facilities. This was an ideal. Edith How Martyn's tour diaries show both her gruelling schedules and numerous attempts to reconcile the gap between theory and practice. Using the BCIC network, she would arrange visits in as many places as possible. Many of the contacts were women working in health services because she felt that this was the most promising avenue; women doctors, medical administrators and trainers, nurses, midwives and social workers would be able to identify with the needs of their patients. The patterns of the tours were established in 1934 when she visited Egypt and the Middle East.

Edith How Martyn had stressed the importance of India to Margaret Sanger. For several years some sections of the British women's movements had organised efforts to extend feminist principles cross-culturally, especially in parts of the empire. As I showed in Chapter Four, Nina Boyle was a passionate advocate in this campaign which comprised a mixture of attitudes: guilt, imperialism, idealism and humanitarian concern.¹⁶⁰ Edith How Martyn would have been well aware of these moves and of Eleanor Rathbone's unfortunate campaign to reform Indian child marriage and other customs in 1927, when the AIWC had refused to co-operate. As Mary Stocks, Rathbone's biographer, comments:

There was the whole blazing background of Indian political unrest, with women playing their part as never before in the nationalist movement. Leading Indians, women as well as men, were disinclined to dissociate the cause of social reform from that of political freedom and co-operate amicably with pitying representatives of the obnoxious master-race.¹⁶¹

However, Edith How Martyn was prepared to plunge into the maelstrom to offer contraceptive control to India's women. In the process, at least initially, she generated some hostility.

¹⁶⁰ See Chapter Four, pp. 223-226.

¹⁶¹ Mary Stocks, *Eleanor Rathbone* (London: Gollancz, 1949), p. 137.

She saw the first Indian tour as a preliminary exercise, herself as John the Baptist to Sanger's Messiah. ¹⁶² As India struggled out of the grip of colonialism, there was a possibility of integrating women's reproductive needs into programmes for social and health reform. It was important to reach "leaders of thought" during the period when the Indian constitution was being worked out - "to urge them to get a move on and get B.C. in all their health work . . . before things settle down into a rut." ¹⁶³ Her first visit to India took place at the end of 1934, and the beginning of 1935. In twelve weeks she travelled about 5,000 miles, visited twenty towns and addressed nearly eighty meetings, of which twenty-eight were under medical auspices. ¹⁶⁴ Her reception at the AIWC in December 1934 was "relatively frosty" compared with the welcome given Maude Royden and Margery Corbett-Ashby, the official British representatives. ¹⁶⁵ She wrote to Sanger:

The Conference treated me very scurvily. They sent me an invitation (very late) to go as a guest and then practically ignored me and I was only given about 10 mins. Very much was made of Maude Royden and Mrs. Corbett Ashby in public and my name not even mentioned and not a word of thanks thrown to me by the officials. However apart from its reflection on B.C. I am not worried & of course not making it public. ¹⁶⁶

She concluded that the AIWC would not make India birth control "conscious":

. . . they are too respectable run I imagine by a small clique who are thinking more of the political plans of Nationalism along Congress lines than of the voiceless millions of India's women. ¹⁶⁷

It took her a little time to understand the complexities of Indian politics. Imperialism and notions of missionary propagandising were ill-suited to the situation. However, with the Eleanor Rathbone debacle in mind and aided by her well-established contacts with

¹⁶² Letter, Edith How Martyn, Hyderabad, Sind, to Margaret Sanger, 23 January 1935. SSC.

¹⁶³ Letter, Edith How Martyn, en route to India, to Margaret Sanger, 20 December 1934. SSC.

¹⁶⁴ *BCIIC newsletter* No. 4 (June 1935) author's collection.

¹⁶⁵ Barbara Ramusack, "Edith How Martyn: Propagandist for Birth Control in India", unpublished paper, given at American Historical Association Conference, Washington D.C. 28 December 1987, p. 4. I am grateful for her permission to quote from this paper.

¹⁶⁶ Letter Edith How Martyn, Hyderabad, Sind, to Margaret Sanger, 23 January 1935. SSC. Edith How Martyn was "cordially invited" to the December 1936 AIWC meeting at Ahmedabad, so the ill-feeling seems to have been transitory.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

indigenous birth control advocates, she avoided close identification with British colonial structures. Instead she chose to work through local workers and the auspices of Margaret Cousins, a prime mover in the formation of the AIWC and a former suffragette.¹⁶⁸ Ramusack suggests the reasons for Edith How Martyn's poor reception in 1934 were internal difficulties within the AIWC in Karachi and local hostility to the establishment of birth control clinics. In addition she highlights Edith How Martyn's naïveté about India. Margaret Cousins was better able to synthesise feminism with greater sensitivity to the dilemmas of Indian women, partly because of her long familiarity with the Indian way of life.¹⁶⁹ Although at the Birth Control in Asia Conference in 1933 Edith How Martyn had expressly emphasised the aim to co-operate with work already established, her first responses in India were insensitive to cross-cultural differences. Colonial rule polarised the priorities of women's needs and nationalism.¹⁷⁰ Ramusack suggests Edith How Martyn failed to understand this:

Although she supported the nationalist cause in India, she was unable to understand how elite Indian women might be divided in their loyalties between the struggle for independence and the struggle for greater autonomy. That was not a choice Edith How Martyn had to face. Thus How Martyn seemed unable to establish an easy rapport with many of the leading officers of the AIWC who were dedicated to the freedom struggle, to franchise issues, to education, and to reform of the civil code. How Martyn was dedicated to one issue and was impatient with those who did not give their all for it.¹⁷¹

Given Edith How Martyn's passionate involvement with the British suffrage campaign and her understanding of the mechanisms of women's sexual oppression, I think Ramusack's conclusion emphasises the colonial context at the expense of the feminist case

¹⁶⁸ Margaret Gillespie Cousins, (1878-1954) an Irish suffragette, became a Theosophist and, with her husband, James, went to India in 1915 at the invitation of Annie Besant. See Barbara Ramusack, "Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialists, Feminist Allies: British Women Activists in India 1865-1945", *Women's Studies International Forum* Vol. 13, No. 4 (1990), pp. 314-315.

¹⁶⁹ Ramusack, "Cultural Missionaries", p. 4.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 10.

¹⁷¹ Ramusack, "Edith How Martyn", p. 10.

on which Edith How Martyn predicated her activity. That was that if women had access to birth control information and cheap, reliable, safe contraception, they would be able to make independent decisions about child-bearing. From greater reproductive control would come more equality in sexual relations. As Ramusack points out, as outsiders, Edith How Martyn and Sanger could stimulate interest and provoke debate on birth control, then move on, without having to endure any ensuing social obloquy which might be meted out to inhabitants.¹⁷² Yet Edith How Martyn had adopted the contentious cause of birth control in Britain in 1910, at a time when its advocates received public opprobium. Once she had appreciated the need for Indian leadership and control, she was able to serve as propagandist more effectively, particularly with the medical profession, many of whom opposed birth control. At the end of her first tour she wrote:

For the spread of birth control in India the greatest need is for social workers who will go into the poor districts of the towns and into the villages as friends of the mothers. . . . I should like to emphasise that any help given from outside should be given through Indian associations, Medical unions and Indian workers for birth control.¹⁷³

She could offer links to the outside world for many isolated field workers who were trying to make information accessible.¹⁷⁴

The other significant event of Edith How Martyn's first Indian tour was her meeting twice with Mahatma Gandhi. He opposed all forms of birth control - a view which ignored both women's sexual needs and cultural power dynamics. He had already corresponded with Sanger but, as Ramusack points out, Edith How Martyn was the first "to tackle Gandhi personally". Indian women would have found it difficult to confront him publicly on birth control because of his efforts to bring women into the public arena.¹⁷⁵ In the early 1920s Gandhi had begun to promulgate his views on birth control. As part of the

¹⁷² Ramusack, "Edith How Martyn", p. 10.

¹⁷³ *BCIIC Newsletter*, No. 4 (June 1935).

¹⁷⁴ Ramusack, "Edith How Martyn", p. 10.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

doctrine of *satyagraha*, he advocated control of bodily passions. Thus reproduction was to be controlled by abstinence. Women should refuse sexual demands as part of the "primary right of resistance".¹⁷⁶ Gandhi also raised the issue of whether the elite, the educated, had the authority to speak on behalf of "their unsophisticated sisters".¹⁷⁷ Margaret Sanger had taken up the debate on Gandhi's terms which saw sexual expression as a spiritual act, to refute his advocacy of abstinence. Their discussions through the media and in person continued for several years until Gandhi recognised the rhythm method as a possible solution, since it involved an element of self-control.¹⁷⁸ Edith How Martyn's reflections on her meetings with Gandhi demonstrate the quandary. Optimistic about publicity obtained during the tour, she planned to bring secretarial help to manage media publicity and a woman doctor to give lectures and clinical demonstrations at the most important medical schools. The enormity of the task of reaching India's women dismayed her.¹⁷⁹ Despite her despondency, she told Sanger it would be worthwhile to maintain a dialogue with Gandhi:

... because of his immense influence and because if he would combine BC in his work for the villages it would be fine for the women.¹⁸⁰

Through Margaret Cousins, Edith How Martyn negotiated to have Sanger invited to the Tenth All India Women's Conference¹⁸¹ at Travancore and proposed a conference on

¹⁷⁶ Barbara Ramusack, "Embattled Advocates: The Debate over Birth Control in India 1920-40", *Journal of Women's History* Vol. 1, No. 2 (Fall 1989), p. 50-55.

¹⁷⁷ Quoted in Ramusack, "Embattled Advocates", p. 50.

¹⁷⁸ Ramusack, "Embattled Advocates", p. 51.

¹⁷⁹ She approached Helena Wright requesting she apply her expertise in birth control work to India but Wright could spare neither time nor money. Letter, Helena Wright to Edith How Martyn, 20 November 1935, author's collection. At the time Wright was a medical officer at the North Kensington Women's Welfare Centre which had been set up by the SPBCC. Margery Spring Rice was the Centre's chairwoman. Letter, Edith How Martyn, Madras, to Margaret Sanger, 6 February 1935.

¹⁸⁰ Edith How Martyn to Margaret Sanger, 14 February 1935. SSC.

¹⁸¹ In How Martyn and Sanger, *Round the World for Birth Control* the date of the Conference is given as December 1935 (p. 7) and 1936 in a message from the AIWC President, Margaret Cousins (p. 11). The Conferences were usually held in late December. Margaret Sanger and Edith How Martyn, *Round the World for Birth Control with Margaret Sanger and Edith How Martyn* (London: Under the auspices of BCIIC, n.d. [c. 1937]).

birth control to follow it almost immediately. The major "world-wide" tour for birth control took place from November 1935 to March 1936. Edith How Martyn, as Director of BCIIC, took Eileen Palmer as secretary, and Margaret Sanger went as President of the American National Committee on Federal Legislation for Birth Control and Director of the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau. The tour's main objectives were:

. . . to arouse public interest in the establishment of birth control centres, to focus attention on the relation of population control to national welfare and international peace, and to encourage public health agencies and officials to include contraceptive information in all health programs.¹⁸²

At a farewell dinner in London, given in Sanger's honour, H.G Wells compared the work with military campaigns whose effects on civilisation were few compared with Sanger's:

This courageous woman has given women freedom; she has given them the freedom of their own bodies. They need no longer think of themselves as merely instruments for breeding.¹⁸³

Between them Margaret Sanger and Edith How Martyn visited India, Ceylon, Burma, Malay, China, the Philippines, Japan, Hawaii, Canada and the west coast of the United States of America.

In India they travelled independently, covering 105 meetings including thirty-two with medical organisations. Sanger travelled over 10,000 miles, Edith How Martyn spoke in seventeen cities and towns, travelling over 6,500 miles. Besides Gandhi, they met many eminent Indian women and the poet Rabindranath Tagore who supported their work. Eileen Palmer became ill in Ceylon and had to return home. Sanger addressed the AIWC in Travancore where a resolution on birth control was passed by a large majority.¹⁸⁴ Sanger visited Gandhi at the Wardha ashram and, while they continued to disagree, there was some rapport and the meetings generated press publicity and public interest.¹⁸⁵ Edith

¹⁸² Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁸³ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 23-24. Newspaper cuttings from Tour Diaries. British Library of Political and Economic Science, London. Eileen Palmer Collection COLL.MISC. 639.

How Martyn lectured and showed films at the All India Medical Conference in Nagpur, which passed its first resolution on contraception, recommending that "instruction in conception control methods" should be taught in medical schools and to health visitors, nurses and midwives.¹⁸⁶

On reaching Hong Kong in February 1936, Sanger became ill and returned to America, leaving Edith How Martyn to visit China and the Philippines. In Canton Edith How Martyn addressed the first public meeting about birth control ever held there. She visited Nanking, Shanghai and Peiping, speaking to medical and other professionals and officials in the National Health Administration. At the opening of a birth control clinic in Shanghai she found an audience of fathers rather than mothers. At their request she gave them a talk on contraceptive methods "as they wanted to know exactly what the clinic proposed to recommend to their wives."¹⁸⁷ A number of clinics were in operation already and birth control workers wanted more practical help. Contraceptives were imported from America but the Chinese recommended sponges and cotton tampons with lactic jelly.¹⁸⁸ She told Sanger that if the foam powder came up to expectations and was promoted in China, ideally by Sanger herself, then China would make much greater and faster progress than India.¹⁸⁹

Towards the end of her arduous tour and using her own criteria, Edith How Martyn compared the cultures of India, China and Japan. She regarded the Chinese mentality as being immeasurably nearer to 'European' than the Indian mentality.¹⁹⁰ In Japan she perceived "almost a reign of mental terror and suspicion" and felt the birth control movement would not get far before being classed as "dangerous thought".¹⁹¹ She wrote:

¹⁸⁶ Sanger and How Martyn, *Round the World for Birth Control*, p. 21.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁸⁸ Letter, Edith How Martyn, en route to Tientsin, to Margaret Sanger, 18 April 1936. SSC.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ Letter, Edith How Martyn, on RMS *Empress of Canada*, to Margaret Sanger, 10 June 1936. SSC.

China is ready to listen to new ideas, to discuss them possibly smile at the enthusiasm of their advocates while Japan is nervous and suspicious and ready to pounce on any manifestations of 'dangerous thought' or as an Editor of a daily paper said to me the dangerous is being dropped and "thought" is to be regarded as a forbidden import.¹⁹²

She deconstructed the way in which westerners saw Japan and China. Japan was seen as a Great Power, while China was perceived as "being helpless not to say hopelessly inadequate in world affairs". Yet China was discussing a constitution and Chinese women had political equality, whereas in Japan women were struggling to obtain women's suffrage with no immediate prospect of success.¹⁹³

Two more tours of India by Edith How Martyn and Eileen Palmer followed in 1936-1937 and 1938 when they were able to work more closely with the medical profession.¹⁹⁴ When the Second Population and First Family Hygiene Conference was held in Bombay in April 1938, Edith How Martyn was invited to preside over the birth control section but she declined, thinking it "much wiser" for an Indian doctor to head it. She was the only non-Indian representative of the birth control movement present. Her keynote address was well-received, one sign of the gradual opening-up of the public debate, as was a call by the newly-elected President of the Indian National Congress, Subhas Chandra Bose, for India's increasing population problem to be tackled as a first priority in a free India.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² Edith How Martyn, notes in Edith How Martyn's handwriting, for an article on China and Japan, dated by Eileen Palmer as about March 1936, author's collection.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Eileen Palmer established contact with members of the Congress governments in United and Central provinces and Behar and met Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru, then Indian National Congress President, as well as India's first woman cabinet minister, Mrs Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit. Edith How Martyn spent two months touring rural areas in Bombay Province at the request of Lady Jehangir, of the Bombay Maternity, Child Welfare and Health Council which, in 1936 recommended trained workers at Centres to supply information and contraceptives to mothers on medical grounds. The Duo-Foam powder was reckoned to be successful with about 84 per cent effectiveness, its simple technique working well for health visitors teaching mothers in their own homes. *Birth Control Worldwide Report*, Pamphlet (London: BCIIC, n.d.) October 1937 - September 1938, author's collection.

¹⁹⁵ *Birth Control Worldwide Report*, October 1937 - September 1938.

What was the net result of such promotional activity? Certainly the birth control propagandists stimulated interest as well as arousing controversy wherever they went. They were front page news in local and national newspapers in many places. The press-cuttings they preserved show the publicity gained. They gave interviews, distributed press releases and tried to raise the profile of local birth control work. They established contacts, helped put isolated workers in touch and placed the question of women's reproductive rights on both the public and medical agendas.

From her survey of the birth control movement in India from 1920 to 1940, Ramusack concludes that Sanger and Edith How Martyn could become catalysts because they were foreigners. This may well have been their main function in many of the places they visited. For example, in the Philippines, Edith How Martyn arrived to find that her meeting with physicians, social workers and scientists at the University School of Hygiene and Public Health was so popular she was asked to repeat it. But the Dean of the Medical School, afraid of opposition, withdrew permission to hold the event. The meeting went ahead at the home of a supporter and repercussions in the local press created considerable interest, the overall result being "a militant and effective attack" on the opposition forces.¹⁹⁶

Regarding India, Ramusack concludes class divisions and women's social and cultural subordination hampered success on a national scale. Opponents of birth control could claim support from the influential Gandhi. Birth control promotion was accepted by the elite; there seemed to have been little recognition of differential outlooks in relation to class. For the very poor, a high fertility rate was essential as a method of providing some insurance for old age because of the high infant mortality rate.¹⁹⁷ Similar circumstances

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Sanger and How Martyn, *Round the World for Birth Control*, p. 43.

¹⁹⁷

Ramusack suggests that although Indian men and women had instigated the debate in the 1920s, cultural convention meant that equal involvement in the public discourse was problematic. A reduced birth rate to improve economic conditions and the population's health became the

have prevailed in other countries and are still features of the contemporary debate about fertility and reproductive rights.

At the point when Sanger cut short her schedule of the 'world-wide' tour, in 1936, a disagreement with Edith How Martyn's sponsor, Kaufman, and BCIIC officials erupted. At the London headquarters Gerda Guy and Janet Chance were among those who sided with Maurice Newfield; possibly they recognised that increasingly, the field of birth control required professional, well-funded organisations, rather than the amateur, piecemeal endeavours of former times.¹⁹⁸ Edith How Martyn was very hurt at suggestions that she had been behaving autocratically; she resigned as Director and was succeeded by Maurice Newfield. Olive Johnson of the Malthusian League and Evelyn Fuller of the SPBCC were similarly ostracised by erstwhile colleagues. Fuller committed suicide in 1938. After 1936, Edith How Martyn, Olive Johnson and Eileen Palmer maintained a loosely-organised group, Birth Control World-wide, under whose auspices the two later Indian tours were made. Again a small group raised all the necessary funds.

In Britain, in 1930, the National Birth Control Association (NBCA; it changed its name from Council to Association in 1931) had begun to co-ordinate all the various birth control groups which coalesced and amalgamated over a number of years.¹⁹⁹ Losing its

established goals. Whereas men, who led the demand initially, focused on economic and eugenic reasons, women, through organisations such as the AIWC, cited health and family welfare as their priorities. Ramusack, "Embattled Advocates", pp. 56-57.

¹⁹⁸ Gerda Guy complained to Margaret Sanger that Edith How Martyn, while "good at rousing enthusiasm and getting things started", was less good at consolidating work. Letter, Gerda Guy to Margaret Sanger, November 1936, Margaret Sanger Papers Project, quoted in a letter, Lesley Hall, London, to the author, 26 November 1995. Lesley Hall has speculated that some of the tensions may have arisen from differences between those women who had helped to pioneer the birth control work, such as Edith How Martyn, and those, particularly doctors like Gerda Guy and Helena Wright, who took up the cause later, in the 1930s. I am grateful to Lesley Hall at the Wellcome Institute for this information. By August 1937, the BCIIC had made additions with eugenic overtones to their original objectives: "a) To interest the people of Britain in the welfare of the mothers and children of the Empire, and especially of those in the tropical dependencies. b) To co-operate with all social workers, philanthropic and administrative, in the study of the conditions and problems of parenthood in these countries." BCIIC Newsletter, No. 8, (London: BCIIC, May/August 1937) p 15.

¹⁹⁹ Records show that the NBCA had to tread carefully in the take-over. After taking legal advice they resolved to "amalgamate" with BCIIC and maintain international work to provide continuity and

interventionist, incisive edge given by Edith How Martyn, the BCIIC later merged with other pressure groups including the NBCA. The SPBCC was taken over by the NBCA in 1937. From these beginnings came the International Planned Parenthood Association and the Family Planning Association.

Conclusion

Edith How Martyn was active during the time when the topic of contraception moved from being a private matter rarely discussed in public to one acknowledged to be significant at national and international levels because of the implications for demography, economics and ideas about racial supremacy and political struggle. In the transitional period from 1915 to the late 1920s her work helped to bring practical issues into the public domain. She consistently and tirelessly interceded on behalf of women for effective, safe reproductive control.

In Britain she achieved her objectives of intervening in the public discourse at a time when there was religious opposition and the medical profession was either overtly hostile or indifferent to the practicalities by which women could obtain adequate contraception. She co-ordinated and led the demand for access to birth control through the public health service. Partly as a result of her work, birth control became a more open topic and information became more readily available. She raised the profile of mothers'

facilitate financial arrangements. They simply agreed to "take over" the SPBCC, agreeing to continue to run the two clinics, to be known as The Walworth and East London Women's Welfare Centres. Their new title was designed to cover any contingency. Letter from the Secretary of the Executive Committee to Lord Horder, President of NBCA, 28 March 1938. By June, Lord Horder produced a general letter to bring interested parties up-to-date. On NBCA headed paper, with the new title, Lord Horder asked for continued support of "members of the medical profession or the general public" but said information would be sent only to Association members "or those doing birth control work", possibly a veiled reference to the need for a more professional approach. He promised a "programme of vigorous work" from the "newly formed and strengthened" international sub-committee. Typescript letter from Lord Horder to membership, June 1938, Wellcome SA/FPA/A.13/6. Their attention to niceties reveal the acrimony surrounding the various birth control groups at the time. In May 1939 the NBCA changed its name to the Family Planning Association. See also Ledbetter, *Malthusian League*, p. 222.

health and wellbeing by deploying ideologies of maternalism and the cult of motherhood. Ultimately this enabled women to capitalise on welfare reform of the first three decades of the twentieth century.

Through her work with Margaret Sanger she was at the forefront of the international fight for readily-available contraception. They ensured that in many countries a hitherto submerged desire for effective contraception became explicit, often in the teeth of indifference or virulent opposition. They provided a network for professionals where research to improve the mechanisms of contraception could be promulgated and evaluated. They brought women's values and needs into the open. Had Edith How Martyn captured the interest of the international women's movement during her earlier struggles, a more concerted demand for women's needs to become a priority might have ensued. With more resources and greater input in formal processes on the international stage, for instance at the League of Nations, How Martyn's and Sanger's work might have resulted in much greater acknowledgement of practical issues - to the benefit of men and women the world over.

Edith How Martyn constructed herself as a propagandist, an expert. Her specialism was the creation of a matrix of interests which aimed to have birth control accepted as a necessary and rational feature of public health and hygiene. She saw birth control as a primary facet of women's struggle for emancipation. In her work there is a sense of connection between women of all classes and cultures. Although at times she presented women as victims, she felt women's empowerment would come from their own efforts, and reproductive control was fundamental to that liberation. Having taken part in the suffrage campaign she saw herself as articulating women's needs in the basic arena of heterosexual relationships. Until women had equality and reproductive choice, they would not be emancipated. Her feminist rhetoric was not always translatable where cultural

difference was involved, as in India. She was a catalyst in opening up the debate in Britain and a number of other countries.

Even if only implicitly, her decision to promote birth control internationally carried with it some notion that the treatment of women was an index of civilisation. In that respect it may have contributed to imperialist racism. If the effects of reproductive practices were quantified and compared, for example, in terms of infant mortality rates and maternal mortality and morbidity rates, would it be feasible to compare different cultures? Would an index of which reproductive practices are beneficial or detrimental to women's physical and emotional well-being enable a comparison of civilisation? Edith How Martyn assumed it was possible to compare some aspects of gendered oppression across class and race. I think that by trying to ensure at a practical level that women had access to adequate information and contraceptive methods, she undermined class prejudice and racism. She saw gender as the primary social category. Her attitude to motherhood both contested and supported the dominant ideology. Her discursive strategy was to acquiesce in current conventions where women were seen primarily as mothers. She was thus able to argue that maternal health was a right. Besides empowering women, reproductive control would contribute to improved health and welfare of all peoples, regardless of class or culture. In the eugenic debate, she did not dwell on class or racial difference, building her argument on maternal health to emphasise the benefits of controlled reproduction. She thought that if all women had adequate access to birth control information, their chances of emancipation would be immeasurably improved.

CONCLUSION: FROM SUFFRAGE TO SEXUAL POLITICS: THE CONTINUITY OF FEMINIST ENDEAVOURS

In this thesis I have demonstrated how four participants in the Edwardian suffrage campaign believed their work in specific areas of sexual politics would help transform gender power relations to bring about greater equality for women. The connections between claims for women's enfranchisement and wider challenges to women's sexual subordination have been discussed to emphasise the continuous threads with earlier feminist demands. My four subjects took up elements from the first-wave women's movement opposition to sexual double standards and fought against new forms of restriction on women's sexual freedom.

Those traditions from the first-wave women's movement which were debated during the suffrage campaign and which are relevant to the issues adopted by the four women have been delineated. Similarly, I have shown how the women's movement associations with the social purity movement came to be a mixed blessing by the turn of the century. While wider religious and moral constituencies could be mobilised, repressive solutions to particular problems, for instance of prostitution and VD, contradicted feminist ideals for women's equal treatment.

Membership of the Women's Freedom League contributed to the personal identities of the four women; it gave them a sense of agency and insight into the potential for women's collective action. The friendships and networks created during the years from 1907 to 1914 provided a personal and political community and enabled them to carry forward their activism into the 1920s and 30s, as I have illustrated by examples of the companionship between Alison Neilans and Edith How Martyn and Nina Boyle and Edith Watson. By highlighting their wider links, between both individuals and organisations, I

have underscored some of the connections and resource-sharing which promoted feminist objectives for two decades after the campaign for the vote ceased. I have proposed that the shared commitment exemplified Janice Raymond's concept of 'gyn/affection', where "women affect, move, stir and arouse each other to full power".¹ The means by which they were able to challenge dominant discourses of sexuality from marginal positions of power has been explored in the thesis by using deconstructionism as a methodological tool, although I am aware that I have shifted backwards and forwards between Foucauldian analysis and women's history in the process.

In the Introduction I referred to Nancy Cott's view that histories of suffrage and of women's movements have tended to be confused.² To her three-fold definition of modern feminism, I added Delmar's suggestion that feminism involves action to change systems which denigrate and disadvantage women. Delmar's criterion of what makes a feminist is met through the life-long political activism of my four subjects. They also fulfil Cott's description: of opposition to sex hierarchy; of the promotion of the view that gender relations can be altered because they are not biologically determined; and the holding of a group consciousness of women. The demand for equality which includes recognition of sexual difference follows the notion of women possessing special needs as 'women'. If these needs are unsatisfied or negated, a radical change in social, economic, and political order is required.

While, initially my four subjects focused their energies on the suffrage campaign because they believed that women's participation in democratic government could influence public perceptions on sexual issues, simultaneously they acknowledged that the ballot box itself was inadequate to effect the profound transformation of attitudes required. Their choice of issues and subsequent work illustrate a demand for equality which includes

¹ Janice Raymond, *A Passion for Friends* (London: The Woman's Press, 1986), p. 9.

² See Introduction, pp. 11-12.

a recognition of sexual difference and that women have particular needs as 'women'. Further research might reveal how the political situation and crises of the 1930s affected the possibilities for change by feminists internationally.

Recognition of sexual difference is shown because all four women located their activism in that area of sexual politics where social constructions of gender and sexuality have an impact on the materiality of women's bodies. In addition to the obvious example of Edith How Martyn's promotion of birth control, instances I have given include the physical protection of women and children from violence and sexual abuse and the question of women's access to public space. Anxieties about their own and their children's personal safety and freedom from sexual attack or harassment in public space constituted part of the reality of many women's lives, as did concern about physical security in the home. So inevitably, because my four subjects aimed to change the ways these issues were seen, we can assume they thought the gender or power relations of their time were not immutable.

Equality in heterosexual relationships could not be possible without some basic element of fertility control such as knowledge of safe, effective contraception. I have shown how this was the basic premise underlying Edith How Martyn's work. Other changes in the social order which they demanded included the elimination of legally-enshrined sexual double standards and an overhaul of the judicial system because they believed that women's needs and experiences were overlooked by a supposedly impartial process.

I have argued that the suffrage campaign, as well as furthering their politicisation, gave my four subjects experience of organising, the chance to develop campaigning strategies and to create networks of like-minded women. All four felt militant confrontation would be inappropriate to achieve subsequent objectives. Party politics had

proved disappointing; during the decade from 1910 to 1920, the parties were not prepared to take up issues as controversial as birth control or as seemingly private as domestic violence and sexual abuse and harassment. Therefore the four women had to find other means to achieve their aims. I have suggested that one way was to create alternatives to, or demand additions to, state provision. These might be for example, a policing service or welfare provision designed to fulfil women's requirements. Another way was to construct identities as 'experts' and enter moral, scientific, medical, and legal discourses to uphold feminist principles.

I have pointed to the direct connection between Nina Boyle and Edith Watson's suffrage activism and their attack on another site of male power. Their suffrage activity resulted in confrontation with the police; in law courts they witnessed the entrenched inequalities experienced by females involved in judicial processes. The solution, that women should officiate in the system to make it more humane, was a part of the wider demands made by all suffrage organisations. By 1914, Nina Boyle and Edith Watson had proposed an alternative 'policing' service to protect women's interests. Their proposals were perhaps naïve, though not unrealistic, given that within five years discrimination on the grounds of sex against lawyers and magistrates was officially banned. Just over a decade later, the value of women in the police service was officially recognised. I have outlined Nina Boyle's attempts to formulate a theory of systemic male violence to show that she was ahead of her time in some instances, yet that she also inherited an imperialist framework which could be racist. She failed to judge cultures from anything other than her own ethnocentric stance. In the early 1930s Nina Boyle tried to reveal what she perceived as a glaring example of female sexual subjugation, genital mutilation. Edith Watson attempted to galvanise public concern on the issue in the mid-1950s. Limited as they were, their efforts can be seen as feminist undertakings.

Two examples of campaigns by Alison Neilans have been traced to show how she continued traditional challenges to the sexual double standard. The first aimed to end legal discrimination against a class of women, the second to highlight a hitherto well-hidden phenomenon of sexual behaviour whose victims were children and young females. I have shown how she negotiated between and within religious, moral and medical discourses in her attempts to influence the legislature. Her international work continued efforts to articulate a feminist perspective on behalf of the most exploited, least powerful females involved in systems set up to service men's sexual demands.

Edith How Martyn witnessed substantial changes in public attitudes to the question of birth control during her thirty years' work. I traced her activities in the campaign to have birth control information provision at local authority welfare clinics and her international work with Margaret Sanger to help illuminate how these changes came about. Those coalitions of women's organisations which Edith How Martyn helped to create during the 1920s have been highlighted to show how sites of male power were undermined by women's collective action. I have argued that cultural changes in attitudes to female sexual pleasure, partly brought about by feminist re-evaluation of sexual dynamics, contributed to contestations of men's social control in heterosexual relationships. Although her attempts to negotiate in scientific and medical discourses in the 1920s and 1930s were hampered by lack of a recognised power base and inadequate resources, through working with Margaret Sanger, a wealthy and effective propagandist, Edith How Martyn achieved some success. She helped to found a prototype clinic in 1921; she assisted the move to have public provision of birth control on government agendas by 1929; she formed an embryonic pressure group for future family planning organisations. Working in a transitional period, she pursued the feminist aim of empowering women, giving them freedom of choice to make possible more egalitarian heterosexual relationships.

By describing the lives and work of Nina Boyle, Edith How Martyn, Alison Neilans and Edith Watson, I have shown how the Edwardian suffrage campaign can be interpreted as involving much more than the demand for votes for women. Activists aimed to transform relationships between men and women. My four subjects worked to end female sexual subordination for many years after the vote was won. Through the exploration of their hopes and lives, some women's history has been recovered.

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- 2. Material in Author's Collection**
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3. Interviews

Personal interviews from 1990 to 1992, at Swanage, Dorset: with Mrs. Eileen Palmer, a life-long friend and colleague of Edith How Martyn. She and Edith How Martyn worked together in the 1930s for the Birth Control International Information Centre and Birth Control Worldwide.

In 1939 Edith How Martyn left England for Jamaica, then Australia, but when war broke out she did not return to England. In 1942 her house was bombed. Her papers, including material from the Malthusian League and BCIC, were rescued by Eileen Palmer who kept them at her London home. Much of the material was given to the British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, for the Eileen Palmer Collection.

A complete run of The Malthusian and The New Generation from 1879 - 1932 was donated by Eileen Palmer to the J.B. Morrell Library at the University of York. She gave me a few of Edith How Martyn's books for my own collection. Some of the correspondence between Edith How Martyn and Margaret Sanger from 1915-54, a file containing correspondence written during the campaign of 1928-9 to have birth control information available at local authority clinics, letters, notes for speeches, printed items and other miscellaneous material will be given to an appropriate archive.

Personal interviews in May and October 1991, at Twickenham, London: with Squadron Leader Bernard Watson, Edith Watson's son. In addition to the discussions, he allowed me to examine and take photocopies of parts of Edith Watson's unpublished autobiography, which he is considering depositing, with his mother's papers, either with the Museum of London or the Fawcett Library.

4. Newspapers and Periodicals

The British Medical Journal

Common Cause (1909-13)

The Daily Herald

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The Malthusian (1879 - 1922) and The New Generation (January 1922 - October 1932):
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The Medical Times

The Observer

The Record of the Save the Children Fund (1921 - 1923) and The World's Children (1923 - 1930): (both the journal of The Save the Children Fund).

Shafts Vols. I-III (1883-5), Vols. V and VI (1897-8)

The Shield (journal of the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene)

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The Vote (particularly January 1912 - December 1915)

Votes for Women

Women's Franchise (1907-9)

Women's Freedom League Temporary News Sheet (1909)

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ABBREVIATIONS

Abortion Law Reform Association:	ALRA
All India Women's Conference:	AIWC
American Birth Control League:	ABCL
Association for Moral and Social Hygiene:	AMSH
Birth Control International Information Centre:	BCIIC
Birth Control Worldwide:	BCW
British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology:	BSSSP
Conference on Christian Politics, Economics and Citizenship:	COPEC
Contagious Diseases Acts:	CD Acts
Defence of the Realm Act, Regulation 40D, March 1918:	DoRA, Regulation 40D
Independent Labour Party:	ILP
India Office Library:	IOL
International Woman Suffrage Alliance:	IWSA
Ladies National Association for the Abolition of State Regulation of Vice:	LNA
National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts:	National Association
National Council for Combatting Venereal Disease:	NCCVD
National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children:	NSPCC
National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies: which became the	NUWSS
National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship:	NUSEC
National Union of Women Workers: which became the National Council of Women	NUWW
National Vigilance Association:	NVA
Neo-Malthusian League:	Malthusian League
Society for Constructive Birth Control and Racial Progress:	CBC
Society for the Protection of Women and Children from Aggravated Assault:	SPWCAA
Society for the Provision of Birth Control Clinics:	SPBCC
Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History Archive:	SSC
Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine:	Wellcome
Women's Co-operative Guild:	WCG
Women's Freedom League:	WFL or the League
Women's International League for Peace and Freedom:	WILPF
Women's Social and Political Union:	WSPU
Women's Tax Resistance League:	WTRL
Workers Birth Control Group:	WBCG
World League for Sexual Reform:	WLSR
Young Woman's Christian Association:	YWCA