

## WOMEN, SERVICE AND SELF-ACTUALIZATION IN INTER-WAR BRITAIN\*

Lytton Strachey's biographical essay on Florence Nightingale in *Eminent Victorians* (1918) is perhaps the most infamous critique of Victorian notions of women's service. Decrying the 'popular conception of . . . the saintly, self-sacrificing woman, the delicate maiden of high degree who threw aside the pleasures of a life of ease to succour the afflicted', Strachey described instead a woman, who, from girlhood in a 'well-to-do' family, 'would think of nothing but how to satisfy that singular craving of hers to be *doing something*', achieving the seemingly impossible in the Scutari hospitals by 'fix[ing the] determination of an indomitable will'.<sup>1</sup> Strachey's exploration of the coexistence of 'self-abnegation' and self-interest in the biographies in *Eminent Victorians* caught a contemporary mood and has been much debated since. His portrait of Florence Nightingale, however, albeit deliberately provocative, was only one of many characterizations between the wars of the interrelationship between women's service, social privilege and self-expression. Others put the focus rather differently. In 1926, the writer Winifred Holtby discussed the role of feminism in challenging the 'line of sex differentiation' and argued that the social and economic inequalities which checked the development of a woman's personality also 'prevent[ed] her from making that

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<sup>1</sup> Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (1918; Oxford, 2003), 95, 98, 96, 111.

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contribution to the common good which is the privilege and the obligation of every human being'.<sup>2</sup> In 1934, the writer and agony aunt Christine Jope-Slade linked privilege, service and self in another combination when she advised business and professional women to cast aside the social constraints faced by 'leisured' women of previous generations and 'give because you want to give, to render service because it is a pleasure to you personally [which] is a bigger thing than to render it to the exigencies of the moment, or in obedience to the necessity enforced relentlessly by others'.<sup>3</sup>

I argue here that by concentrating on the self, historians have diminished the continued importance of service within constructions of women's identities in the inter-war years, just as they have overlooked how concepts of service were changing in this period.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the *idea* of women's service, and the intellectual contexts in which it came to be interpreted specifically in relation to elite women's public commitments, assumed a central place in narratives of modern selfhood in this period. In making this argument, the important insights into the role played by service in women's lives provided by historians of domestic service, working-class women's organizations and women's cross-class organizations are not neglected. This work has addressed service relationships which have constructed female agency in relation to debates about employment, health and family politics in the nineteenth and early to mid twentieth centuries.<sup>5</sup> Scholars have also discussed the contingency of

<sup>2</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'Feminism Divided', *Yorkshire Post*, 26 July 1926 (reprinted by *Time and Tide*, 6 Aug. 1926), quoted in Paul Berry and Alan Bishop (eds.), *Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby* (London, 1985), 48.

<sup>3</sup> Christine Jope-Slade, 'Ladies! Be Nonchalant!', *British Soroptimist* (Feb. 1934), 262.

<sup>4</sup> An exception, relevant to a slightly earlier period and interpreting the construction of 'subversive femininities', is Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton, 2004), 222.

<sup>5</sup> On domestic service see, for example, Lucy Delap, *Knowing Their Place: Domestic Service in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2011); Alison Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants: The Hidden Heart of Domestic Service* (London, 2007); Selina Todd, 'Domestic Service and Class Relations in Britain, 1900–1950', *Past and Present*, no. 203 (May 2009). On working-class organizations, see esp. Gillian Scott, *Feminism and the Politics of Working Women: The Women's Co-Operative Guild, 1880s to the Second World War* (London, 1998). On women's cross-class organizations, see Caitriona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women's Movement in England, 1928–64* (Manchester, 2013); Caitriona Beaumont, 'Citizens Not Feminists: The Boundary Negotiated between Citizenship and Feminism by

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service relationships in this period with respect to women's material lives: while those who did not rely on an independent income might approach public commitments for a sense of individual purpose, working-class no less than middle-class women apprehended a sense of community and sociability through acts of service to others.<sup>6</sup>

Notwithstanding these insights, the connection between the material implications of service and new thinking about women's personal psychological development in the inter-war period remains understudied.<sup>7</sup> The comments of Strachey, Holtby and Jope-Slade, ranging from the now clichéd to the unremarked, point not only to the widely held significance of ideals of service in elite women's subjective lives between the wars but to the contested relationship between the values of obligation, personality and pleasure in understandings of women's personal development in this period. The focus here is on the negotiation of competing models of the feminine self amongst a group of socially privileged, educated women, in which feminist arguments for self-reliance and personal initiative were refined and tested by forms of women's self-expression in conformity with social and spiritual models of companionship and interpersonal encounter. In the years following the First World War, the narratives produced by and about this group of women registered a newly calibrated ideal of service that emphasized the mutuality of self-fulfilment and community development, not self-sacrifice or the neglect of the self. These debates about the modern feminine self contested

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Mainstream Women's Organizations in England, 1928–39', *Women's History Review*, ix (2000); Linda Perriton, 'Forgotten Feminists: The Federation of British Professional and Business Women, 1933–1969', *Women's History Review*, xvi (2007); Maggie Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism: The Women's Institute as a Social Movement* (London, 1997); Helen McCarthy, 'Service Clubs, Citizenship and Equality: Gender Relations and Middle-Class Associations in Britain Between the Wars', *Historical Research*, lxxxi (2008).

<sup>6</sup> Scott, *Feminism and the Politics of Working Women*, 244. A London member of the Women's Co-operative Guild distinguished the organization from other women's groups in terms of 'the feeling of comradeship' between members, with the result that members 'become less self-centred and more public-spirited': Margaret Llewelyn Davies (ed.), *Life As We Have Known It*, 1<sup>st</sup> edn (1931; Virago, 1977), 140.

<sup>7</sup> My argument builds upon Mathew Thomson's important contribution to the history of psychological thought in Britain: *Psychological Subjects: Identity, Culture, and Health in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2006).

embedded ideas of women's natural propensity to work for others, which were now critiqued in the light of evidence of new psychological thinking about personal transformation. Traditions of public commitment and social responsibility were to be readdressed alongside new thinking about social exchange and the role of the personal and the individual in service projects.

The lack of attention paid to the shifting significance of the language of service in shaping women's modern sensibilities between the wars reflects dominant interpretative emphases which have deployed a canon of famous women too unproblematically as a window onto 'an age'. 'Modernist' women writers are still too often presented as consciously reacting against the 'Victorian' ideal of self-abnegating femininity and prioritizing aesthetic and intellectual interiorization. Such interpretations gloss over the conflicting responses of women writers themselves on the subject of service, which were often framed by their personal experiences and formed part of a process of development in their thinking. For a generation of educated and elite women who spanned the Victorian, Edwardian, wartime and post-war worlds, the notion that there were distinct ages, each with its own ethical and social character, made little sense. This generation explored both continuities and shifts across their lifetimes in the models of personal morality they used to interpret their own social contributions, and those of other women around them. As inter-war novels show, many 'modernist' women writers specifically considered the synergies, as well as the tensions, between personal- and public-mindedness, egotism and altruism, and service and self-interest.<sup>8</sup>

This article problematizes the relationship between 'tradition' and 'modernity' in new ways. In her book *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (1991), Alison Light argued for the growing prominence of middle-class women as consumers of a modernity centred on home, family and privacy.<sup>9</sup> Light developed the influential framework of

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Vita Sackville-West, *All Passion Spent* (1931; London, 1950), 288; Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925; London, 1963), 132–3, 120.

<sup>9</sup> Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London, 1991). See also Judy Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity* (Oxford, 2004); Carroll Pursell, 'Domesticating Modernity: The Electrical Association for Women, 1924–86',

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'conservative modernity' to explain a realignment in the inter-war period in women's lives of the public and private behaviours, values and norms of the pre-war years, expressed through a new language of reticence.<sup>10</sup> She argued that this thereby funnelled interpretations of modern feminine sensibilities in the direction of middle-class women's private life to the relative neglect of other modes of self-expression. Alternative readings of the inter-war years, by contrast, argue for a 'resurgent Victorianism' within elite and educated society in the form of the 'reassertion of the civilizing or moralizing mission'.<sup>11</sup> 'Far from "retreating" into an intimate realm', Peter Mandler and Susan Pedersen suggest that many distinguished twentieth-century reformers and thinkers sought to reinforce a 'quintessentially "Victorian" tendency to link private behaviour to public morality' through service roles.<sup>12</sup> This emphasis, too, needs qualification. The role that service played within narratives of modern selfhood was the subject of significant rethinking in this period that was to have a particular resonance in the articulation of elite women's subjectivity. Such reflection in part embodied accommodation to the shifts in educated and elite women's professional and public status that had begun in the previous generation. But more fundamentally, it addressed the contemporary emphasis upon the psychology of women's 'relations' as a platform for the expression of individual identity and experience that could be both personal and social in character.<sup>13</sup> It constituted neither a rejection nor a reformulation of 'the Victorian', but a new and creative way of thinking about the role, constitution and personality of the individual in society.

The four sections that follow examine inter-war autobiographical narratives, advice literature and other published writings by a group

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*British Journal for the History of Science*, xxxii (1999); Wendy Gan, *Women, Privacy and Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century British Writing* (Basingstoke, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Light, *Forever England*, 12, 59, 108.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Mandler and Susan Pedersen, 'Introduction: The British Intelligentsia after the Victorians', in Peter Mandler and Susan Pedersen (eds.), *After the Victorians: Private Conscience and Public Duty in Modern Britain. Essays in Memory of John Clive* (London, 1994), 11.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, 48; Ian Gazeley and Claire Langhamer, 'The Meanings of Happiness in Mass Observation's Bolton', *History Workshop Journal*, lxxv (2013), 181.

of educated, elite women that explored the relationship between service, self-fulfilment and women's 'nature', analysing them in the context of broader contemporary debates about personal satisfaction, social service and citizenship. Section I considers how university-educated women readdressed ideals of goodness, social purpose and happiness — principles central to Victorian imaginaries of service — in response to women's professionalization. Examining correspondence and memoirs by Violet Butler and Lettice Fisher, two women well-known in the inter-war period for voluntary work, it is argued that in rebelling against older notions of benevolence and seeking instead to combine an ethic of service with professionalism and self-reward, educated women reappraised the significance of individual psychology for service projects. The perspectives of second-generation suffragists who claimed the potential for women's self-actualization through service in their critiques of the essentialization of women's family roles and sex are traced next. Vera Brittain's, Winifred Holtby's and Maude Royden's writings illuminate how the language of service was used to contest intellectual perspectives and public rhetoric of social work as the sublimation of sexual impulses. In the third section, inter-war debates about the 'voluntary citizen' in the arguments of social workers and theorists, Conservatives and feminists are read as revealing of challenges to gendered assumptions about the linkage of service to contemporary understandings of mass democracy. Women commentators' concern with 'training' for social work complicated commonplace perceptions about women's psychological propensity for service as simply an other-facing activity. Finally, the article addresses advice literature produced between the wars by three popular women's organizations which discussed women's paths to self-realization through service: the National Federation of Women's Institutes, the Young Women's Christian Association and the Federation of Soroptimist Clubs in Great Britain and Ireland. Leaders of cross-class and middle-class women's organizations differed in their emphases respectively upon self-improvement and self-management, but they shared a commitment to encouraging women's personal development and contributions to community life. In specifically addressing the individual self as part of collective identity, these groups contributed to refining the concepts of freedom, companionship and responsibility in coherent narratives of women's modern sensibilities.

## I

For many inter-war intellectuals, the relationship between service, social purpose and self-expression presented a pivotal set of problems about the modern psychological condition. If Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* deliberately critiqued the Victorian 'polarity between egoism and altruism', other writers looked beyond 'the Victorian' to explain the shifting bases of personal and public morality.<sup>14</sup> Many addressed what seemed to have become stereotyped tropes of the Victorian 'Age of Virtue' and the contemporary 'Age of Pleasure' and focused attention instead upon the vectors of personal happiness, pleasure and satisfaction.<sup>15</sup> A critical distinction was drawn between those who saw 'happiness' as an antidote to Victorian ideas of public 'duty' which were supposed to have crushed personal satisfaction (a position exemplified in Richard Aldington's 1929 war novel, *Death of a Hero*) and others who linked happiness explicitly to moral purpose.<sup>16</sup> Of the latter, the educationalist Cyril Alington puzzled over the relationship between happiness and 'be[ing] good' in his book *The Task of Happiness* (1931) and asked whether people trying to live up to high personal and social standards were happier 'than those living by a less structured philosophy?'<sup>17</sup> Underpinning this debate were endorsements of different ways to be happy that moved between the pursuit of personal satisfaction and social engagement. T. H. Green's writings, which had stressed that pleasure and personal happiness could not be the goal of moral action, but could be a by-product, were one dominant influence upon understandings of civic and political life in the period.<sup>18</sup> Endorsements of happiness through social engagement emerged also in different intellectual traditions, such as Bertrand Russell's *The Conquest of Happiness* (1930), which stated that happiness was gained by looking outwards in

<sup>14</sup> Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850–1930* (Oxford, 1991), 65.

<sup>15</sup> G. K. Chesterton, 'This Psychological Age', *Pall Mall Magazine* (April 1930), 85.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Aldington, *Death of a Hero* (London, 1929).

<sup>17</sup> C. A. Alington, 'The Task of Happiness', *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, 23 May 1931, 760.

<sup>18</sup> T. H. Green, *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation and Other Writings*, ed. Paul Harris and John Marrow (Cambridge, 1986).



personal relationships and lost when individuals were wrapped up in themselves, dwelling on anxieties and fears.<sup>19</sup>

Educated and elite women explored connections between ideas of goodness, social purpose and personal happiness within a particular additional context in the inter-war period. They needed to confront the impact of women's expanding educational, professional and public opportunities upon existing modes of social engagement.<sup>20</sup> Violet Butler (1884–1982) addressed this issue in the early 1920s. Raised in an academic family, Butler studied history as a member of the Society of Home Students (later St. Anne's College, Oxford) in the early 1900s, completed a teaching diploma in London and then combined research and teaching posts in Oxford with work for the Charity Organization Society (COS) and other charitable groups. From 1919 to 1948, she was secretary for social training at Barnett House, Oxford, a centre for social work training established in 1914.<sup>21</sup> Two years into this role, in 1921, in a letter to her sister Olive, she questioned the validity of her work:

The people who are really happy — after 23 — are the people who have one purpose in life . . . Now I really have had a 'purpose' since I was 13 (it is written in the works of Matthew Arnold); but each time I've thought it was getting translated into something solid, somebody else has done it a good deal better, so the work, as at present, has just run away, like the tide going out . . . Practically, it comes to this. Do I wait here (till I'm shortly too old for anything else), waiting for teaching work to come back, when all the young women are on their way to degrees?<sup>22</sup>

Butler, who never married, was 37 when she wrote the letter, and she was beginning to doubt the wisdom of her father's advice that 'if one waited, looking into the right direction, the right work would come'.<sup>23</sup> Her comments indicate the difficulties a woman of her

<sup>19</sup> Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness* (London, 1930), 242–4.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Krista Cowman and Louise A. Jackson (eds.), *Women and Work Culture: Britain, c. 1850–1950* (Aldershot, 2005); Anne Witz, *Professions and Patriarchy* (London, 1992); Alison Oram, *Women Teachers and Feminist Politics, 1900–39* (Manchester, 1996); Meta Zimmeck, 'Strategies and Stratagems for the Employment of Women in the British Civil Service, 1919–1939', *Historical Journal*, xxvii (1984). For discussion of this evolving context in the period before the First World War, see Gillian Sutherland, *In Search of the New Woman: Middle-Class Women and Work in Britain, 1870–1914* (Cambridge, 2015), ch. 3.

<sup>21</sup> C. Violet Butler, *Barnett House, 1914 to 1964: A Record for its Friends* (Oxford, 1964).

<sup>22</sup> Bodleian Libraries, Oxford (hereafter Bod. Lib.), C. V. Butler Papers, Box 66 [uncat.]; Violet Butler to Olive Butler, 30 June 1921.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*



background — educated by a governess, at private school and university — had in keeping pace with women's expanding higher educational and professional opportunities, and the increased social competition between women who were now awarded degrees and formal qualifications; and she wrote that someone was always writing to her about precisely the same challenge.<sup>24</sup> An author of early social surveys, Butler herself contributed to the growing authority of the social sciences in the early twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> But her letter shows her grappling with the outcomes of this development in respect of shifting fashions of social work practice. In the early 1920s, the Joint University Council for Social Studies (JUC) identified a swing amongst young people away from 'organized personal philanthropy' of the sort undertaken by the COS, in girls' and boys' clubs, and settlements towards more obviously political or educational work. The JUC found the Labour Party, the trades union movement, the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), government departments and local administration were increasingly popular choices for social work.<sup>26</sup>

Scholars have argued that the expanding occupational opportunities for educated women in the first decades of the twentieth century repositioned voluntary service within women's leisure time and specific stages in family life, and hence defined the voluntary in contradistinction to the professional.<sup>27</sup> Yet the dilemma for Violet Butler was not framed around this distinction at all. Wrestling against the supposedly widening divide between traditional and modern spheres of social work, she saw her options in the latter field as limited. These were limitations not brought about by professionalization per se, but by her own social and moral

<sup>24</sup> The University of Oxford conceded degrees to women in 1920: Carol Dyhouse, *No Distinction of Sex? Women in British Universities* (London, 1995), 239. At Barnett House, women (and men) completed a Certificate in Social Training: see George Smith, Elizabeth Peretz and Teresa Smith, *Social Enquiry, Social Reform and Social Action: One Hundred Years of Barnett House* (Oxford, 2014), 193–5.

<sup>25</sup> C. V. Butler, *Social Conditions in Oxford* (London, 1912); London School of Economics Library, The Women's Library Collection (hereafter TWLC), Brian Harrison Suffrage Interviews, 8SUF/B/012: Interview with Christina Violet Butler, 16 September 1974 and 8SUF/B/014: Interview with Christina Violet Butler, 7 October 1974.

<sup>26</sup> M. D. S., 'Social Work as a Career', *Woman's Leader*, 3 October 1924, 288.

<sup>27</sup> Pat Thane, 'The Careers of Female Graduates of Cambridge University, 1920s–1970s', in David Mitch, John Brown and Marco H. D. Van Leeuwen (eds.), *Origins of the Modern Career* (Aldershot, 2004), 207–24.

imaginary. Here the issue was not simply about formal qualifications, but rather the points of comparison that were used to construct a sense of self.<sup>28</sup> For Butler, these remained within her family and close circle of acquaintance.<sup>29</sup> She wrote that for the past nineteen years, when she had been supporting home students in Oxford, she had been 'supplementing' her sister Ruth; while in the social training instruction for which she worked as a tutor at Barnett House, she maintained that 'all the interesting outside work . . . goes to Miss [Grace] Hadow. Is this my fault or baleful circumstances again?' She aspired to be a WEA teacher and to join the Oxford City Council, although she found the predominance there of Mabel Prichard, who was prolific in voluntary work in Oxford, inhibiting. As she neared the end of her letter, the distinction between modern and older fields of social work weighed even more heavily upon Butler's estimation of her independent abilities. She summarized her options as doing probation or rescue work in a Children's Home in another town, 'go[ing] and liv[ing] alone in a slum', or remaining as she was, a 'limpet' on her sisters.<sup>30</sup>

Butler understood personal satisfaction to be derived through social relationships; however, these relationships would only afford such satisfaction if they incorporated intellectual, social and spiritual stimulus. In the letter to her sister, Butler configured her ambition for such personal stimulation and growth as a search for what she defined as the work of 'stretch'. It was an ideal she understood was intertwined explicitly with the practice of service, and to which she aspired not only for herself but for women across classes. In 1916, Butler authored a book with the Women's Industrial Council on the future of domestic service, which called on the privileged classes to support material opportunities for servants' personal 'expan[sion]' through membership and self-management of clubs and hostels,

<sup>28</sup> On women's autobiographical writing and the device of using the other to discuss the self, see, for example, Nancy Miller, 'Representing Others: Gender and the Subjects of Autobiography', *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vi (1994).

<sup>29</sup> Violet Butler's sister Olive was herself a prominent figure in women's social work as the warden of the Lady Margaret Hall settlement in Lambeth, London.

<sup>30</sup> Bod. Lib, C. V. Butler Papers, Box 66 [uncat.]: Violet Butler to Olive Butler, 30 June 1921.

extended WEA schemes and avenues for social work.<sup>31</sup> Unpicking her personal desire for stretch involved Butler addressing, moreover, the interrelationship between action and contemplation in the work of service. This exercise required assessment of the moral and religious influences upon her and her sisters, including the writings of Thomas and Matthew Arnold and the family friendship with T. H. Green and his wife.<sup>32</sup> Butler's self-criticism explored additionally an anxiety that self-reflection was either 'a temptation of the Devil, or a punishment for one's own past cowardices, or both'.<sup>33</sup> There were connections between this inner dialogue and that undertaken by some religious women in the mid to late nineteenth century when debating the demands of social work. In the 1860s, Octavia Hill, for example, wrote to a female friend that excessive preoccupation with detail, such as that which demanded time for quiet thought (and therefore deviation from action), might arise from pride.<sup>34</sup> Seeking balance between personal reflection and social engagement, serious-minded nineteenth-century women engaged in such self-criticism. By contrast, Butler's reflections in the 1920s point to the perception that self-preoccupation was an essential aspect of psychological nature that emphasized personal development. She elaborated the concept consistently through comparison with other women: she wrote 'that all this puzzlement is because I am not good (like [Rosalind] Simeon) but everyone doesn't, apparently, have to wait to find their work in the world until they are "good"'.<sup>35</sup>

A fundamental influence on Butler's social work was exerted by her former tutor at Oxford, Lettice Fisher.<sup>36</sup> Fisher (1875–1956), who grew up in a political family and became an economic historian, began charitable work visiting poor families — in

<sup>31</sup> C. V. Butler, *Domestic Service: An Enquiry by the Women's Industrial Council* (London, 1916), 30, 20–5, 33.

<sup>32</sup> TWLC, Brian Harrison Suffrage Interviews, 8 SUF/B/014: Interview with Christina Violet Butler, 7 October 1974.

<sup>33</sup> Bod. Lib., C. V. Butler Papers, Box 66 [uncat.]: Violet Butler to Olive Butler, 30 June 1921.

<sup>34</sup> Jane Garnett, 'At Home in the Metropolis: Gender and Ideals of Social Service', in Elizabeth Baigent and Ben Cowell (eds.), *'Nobler Imaginings and Mightier Struggles': Octavia Hill, Social Activism and the Remaking of British Society* (London, 2016), 249.

<sup>35</sup> Bod. Lib., C. V. Butler Papers, Box 66 [uncat.]: Violet Butler to Olive Butler, 30 June 1921. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>36</sup> TWLC, Brian Harrison Suffrage Interviews, 8 SUF/B/012: Interview with Christina Violet Butler, 16 September 1974.

part, following her mother Jessie Ilbert (née Bradley), who before marriage had worked as a rent collector in London under Octavia Hill — and establishing infant welfare clinics in Oxford in the early 1900s.<sup>37</sup> She went on, in 1918, to chair the newly formed National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child. Like Butler, Fisher explored her sense of self primarily within female networks of educated women and in discussion with female family members.<sup>38</sup> In 1894, during her first weeks as an undergraduate at Somerville College, Oxford, Fisher wrote to her younger sister with observations of her fellow students and tutors. She found most of her college peers ‘dull’, although an exception was Eleanor Rathbone, who ‘looks as if she ought to be extremely good, & she’s not. She dresses nicely, has a nice voice, & is nice’.<sup>39</sup> Niceness became a term of approbation which combined personal qualities of attractiveness and a sense of purpose. Fisher assessed two tutors as particularly ‘nice’: Miss Melkish — ‘She is short, wears a Hack jacket & skirt . . . rather masculine hair, cold grey eyes (wh[ic]h) however can look nice, as they have long lashes)’ — and Miss Pope, ‘. . . & she’s not a bit nice looking. Nevertheless, she’s very nice & I like her as much as anyone’.<sup>40</sup> The slippage in Lettice Fisher’s imagination between the presentation and explanation of feminine selfhood emerged again in a letter to her mother in 1924, recounting political gossip. Fisher had attended one of Nancy Astor’s parties with her husband, the former President of the Board of Education in David Lloyd George’s coalition government, H. A. L. Fisher. She described the women MPs she had met there as ‘a queer lot’: Mrs. Philipson and Lady Terrington were ‘most common’, Miss Bondfield was ‘tiny, vivid, tremendously alive’, Mrs. Wintringham ‘the picture of pretty calm middleaged matronhood’, the Duchess of Atholl ‘very small . . . but looks competent’ and Miss Silcox, in Lesbia Cochrane’s words,

<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth Peretz, ‘Infant Welfare Between The Wars’, in R. C. Whiting (ed.), *Oxford: Studies in the History of a University Town since 1800* (Manchester, 1993), 134–5.

<sup>38</sup> Susan Pedersen identified the suffrage generation’s preference for single-sex societies and socializing: *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience* (New Haven, Conn., 2004), 179.

<sup>39</sup> Somerville College Archives, Oxford, SC/AO/RG/RC/12: Lettice Ilbert to her sister Olivia, 21 Oct. 1894. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

'rather mad'.<sup>41</sup> Fisher's portraits suggest that the new identity of the woman MP tested her self-fashioning with respect to established models of the psychology of women's public commitment.<sup>42</sup> As Violet Butler had measured her own character against Rosalind Simeon, so Fisher portrayed the women MPs as 'common', odd or socially awkward (she wrote that the Duchess of Atholl 'dashed' at her husband) in order to represent their inner natures as essentially different from her own.

In the mid 1930s, Fisher looked back on the difficulties she had faced growing up in balancing her ambitions for social purpose and prevalent ideals of privileged women's femininity. In doing so, she revealed further complexities in her own imaginings of the feminine self. In an article in *The Cornhill Magazine* in autumn 1936, she recalled as a young girl in Simla, North India, where her father was a Member of the Council for the Viceroy of India, meeting with the Viceroy Lord Dufferin who cautioned: 'It is better to be pretty than good'. Fisher remembered being inconsolably upset after this encounter because she was 'accustomed, though not resigned' to her 'exceeding ugliness', as measured against her 'unusually pretty' younger sisters.<sup>43</sup> Allowing for mis-remembering, the fact that this encounter, and the weight of her perception of her siblings' attractiveness, remained near the forefront of Fisher's consciousness in middle-age is revealing of her strategies for self-actualization. In choosing to publish her recollection some fifty years later, Fisher participated in the re-evaluation of the criteria of what it meant to be and do 'good' that had been in vogue amongst intellectual and aesthete thinkers since the 1890s in response to the construction of 'Victorian' codes of social action.<sup>44</sup> Although she imagined rebelling against the gendered strictures of the previous generation, Fisher's reflections were not wholly reactive against 'the Victorian'. They demonstrated the profound individual psychological challenges that educated and

<sup>41</sup> Bod. Lib., MS Eng. D. 3784, Miscellaneous Fisher Family Correspondence and Papers, Correspondence of Lettice Fisher, fos. 95–6: Lettice Fisher to Jessie Ilbert [n.d.].

<sup>42</sup> Fisher would present the identity of the woman MP to Home University Library readers in a frontispiece portrait of Nancy Astor in her book, *The Citizen: A Simple Account of How We Manage Our National and Local Affairs* (London, 1927).

<sup>43</sup> Lettice Fisher, 'Indian Memories', *Cornhill Magazine* (Sept. 1936), 344.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Dixon, *The Invention of Altruism: Making Moral Meanings in Victorian Britain* (Oxford, 2008), 321–2.

elite women who had grown up in the late nineteenth century continued to face in rationalizing a purposeful feminine self. This required both ongoing personal negotiation of the dominant aesthetic and moral codes of a privileged upbringing and a willingness to reconfigure identity to address the changing landscape of women's social opportunities.

## II

In 1926, Vera Brittain (1893–1970), then in her first year of marriage, wrote to her close friend Winifred Holtby that her husband George Catlin, 'says that according to Freudians it is not the artistic but the social devotions which most successfully achieve the sublimation of sex', and that this was the reason that 'health visitors, political workers and "committee women"' were either unmarried or in unhappy or 'uninteresting' marriages. Countenancing Freudian insights about the repression of erotic desire, Brittain imagined her husband's mother, the wife of an Anglican clergyman, to be 'a typical example' of a woman motivated to do social work by an unsatisfactory marriage. She saw the inverted model playing out in her own changing feelings as a newly married woman, and she confided in Holtby: 'This is why I have become so suddenly bored with my L.N.U. [League of Nations' Union] work'.<sup>45</sup> Vera Brittain's letter introduces a second context in which the idea and practice of service was explored as central to elite women's self-actualization between the wars: feminist discussions about sex and women's family roles. Feminist interpretations of personal development were varied, and even individuals subscribing to shared feminist cultures could move intellectually in different directions as they negotiated personal psychological frameworks for self-fulfilment.<sup>46</sup> Equally, Freudian modelling of the sublimation of sexual desire (here, in social work), with which Brittain engaged, was neither novel nor unique in this period: in the 1920s, eugenic

<sup>45</sup> Vera Brittain to Winifred Holtby, 10 Jan. 1926, quoted in Vera Brittain and Geoffrey Handley-Taylor (eds.), *Selected Letters of Winifred Holtby and Vera Brittain, 1920–1935* (London, 1960), 77.

<sup>46</sup> Cheryl Law, *Suffrage and Power: The Women's Movement, 1918–1928* (London, 1997); Johanna Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage: Feminists in War and Peace, 1914–28* (Basingstoke, 1989); Harold Smith, 'British Feminism in the 1920s', in Harold Smith (ed.), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (Aldershot, 1990).

and sexological literatures explained unmarried women's enthusiasm for social work as indicating an abnormal gender identity which deviated from 'natural' female sexual impulses that were directed properly towards motherhood.<sup>47</sup> These arguments themselves reformulated broader late nineteenth-century cultural critiques of unmarried women's public and philanthropic commitments as 'passion'.<sup>48</sup> The emphasis upon sexual desire, however, repressed the potential for a range of creative self-expression that inter-war feminists identified in women's service.

Marriage, for Brittain, became a crucible for re-evaluating the self-work that could be achieved through women's service. She argued that marital status should be reformed to allow for women's self-actualization outside of (as well as within) marriage. Already in the first months of married life, Brittain was coming to understand her need for an arrangement something like 'semi-detached marriage', in which she would not be subsumed by wifely duties and those of family life, and might continue to pursue her independent interests, work and personal friendships.<sup>49</sup> In the letter to Holtby, she explored what was, in effect, the other side of the argument about the sublimation of sex: that her own fulfilment in marriage altered her interest in social work. She had experienced something similar in the summer of 1915 when, after a brief spell of romantic bliss with Roland Leighton during his first wartime leave when the couple became engaged, she returned to nursing personally fulfilled but lacking energy for her work at the hospital: 'Life now I have had & lost you', she wrote to Leighton, 'is so empty & dull & depressing'.<sup>50</sup> Scholars continue to discuss how Brittain's experiences of war service brought her in touch with her

<sup>47</sup> Arabella Kenealy, *Feminism and Sex-Extinction* (London, 1920), 101–2; Charlotte Haldane, *Motherhood and its Enemies* (London, 1927), 156; Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778–1928* (Chicago, 2004), 208.

<sup>48</sup> For a satirical representation see, for example, Henry James, *The Princess Casamassima* (1886; Harmondsworth, 1987), 248.

<sup>49</sup> Vera Brittain, 'Semi-detached Marriage', *Evening News*, 4 May 1928, quoted in Berry and Bishop (eds.), *Testament of a Generation*, 130–2; Vera Brittain, *Halcyon: Or the Future of Monogamy* (London, 1929).

<sup>50</sup> Vera Brittain to Roland Leighton, 1 Sept. 1915, quoted in Alan Bishop and Mark Bostridge (eds.), *Letters from a Lost Generation: The First World War Letters of Vera Brittain and Four Friends. Roland Leighton, Edward Brittain, Victor Richardson and Geoffrey Thurlow* (London, 1998), 156.



suppressed female identity, at first wholly in relation to her feelings for Leighton, yet her own writings indicate just how conflicted she was about which models of duty and femininity would enrich her personal development.<sup>51</sup> Her changing viewpoint on service was pivotal. Between April and May 1915, she moved from regarding nursing as fulfilling her aspirations for 'physical endurance' and 'action', to a 'longing to be nursing' to support her own 'suffering' through alleviating that of others.<sup>52</sup> In September 1915, she wrote of 'loving to be a successful nurse', but by January 1916, following Leighton's death, she resented what she saw as the fact that 'anyone can be moulded into a good nurse' and sought an activity — much as Violet Butler would do in searching for 'stretch' — 'to exercise her brains and education'.<sup>53</sup> The theatre of war complicated Brittain's shifting evaluations of the scope for self-development in service. In the years that followed, she feared women's service would be reascribed within the restrictive models of duty and 'well-trained conscience'. She wrote, in 1923, that the battle between 'reason' and 'sentiment and tradition' continued to pull educated women in conflicting directions as they contemplated community work outside the family and 'leav[ing] the one for the many'.<sup>54</sup>

In readdressing the weight of family roles upon women's lives, Winifred Holtby (1898–1935) considered a different set of implications of service for women's selfhood from those raised by her friend. In an article for the *Evening Standard* in 1929, Holtby observed that family life was a 'handicap' — for both men and women — if traditional models were regarded as 'sacred'. She maintained, however, that those individuals who went on to become teachers, doctors, administrators or organizers of a large office, were 'probably far better at any job involving the management of human beings because he or she has

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Mark Bostridge, *Vera Brittain and the First World War: The Story of Testament of Youth* (London, 2014), 50.

<sup>52</sup> Vera Brittain to Roland Leighton, 17 Apr. 1915, 7 May 1915, 26 May 1915, quoted in Bishop and Bostridge (eds.), *Letters*, 81, 96, 113.

<sup>53</sup> Vera Brittain to Roland Leighton, 11–12 Sept. 1915; Vera Brittain to Edward Brittain, 24 Jan. 1916, quoted in Bishop and Bostridge (eds.), *Letters*, 166, 222–3.

<sup>54</sup> Vera Brittain, 'The Whole Duty of Woman', *Time and Tide*, 23 Feb. 1923, quoted in Berry and Bishop (eds.), *Testament of a Generation*, 121.

been practising on the family'.<sup>55</sup> Holtby focused on the development of women's position not through advancing 'women's point of view', as she criticized 'New Feminists' for doing, but rather through emphasis upon a more flexible principle of 'the primary importance of the human being' in which she could 'be about the work in which my real interests lie' and, like all men and women, fulfil the human responsibility to contribute to the common good.<sup>56</sup> This conviction, complementing her argument for the multiple avenues for women's self-development within and beyond married life, complicated Brittain's perspective, which often assumed a willingness or opportunity for marriage not always shared amongst privileged women.<sup>57</sup> Holtby wrote in another piece of journalism, in 1932, that there were as many frustrated lives among married people as there were among the unmarried. She went on to critique Freudian essentialization of human nature, which Brittain had countenanced earlier, concluding:

Each of us has to find his or her work in life, and that thing greater than ourselves which gives life its meaning. The question of our virginity or otherwise has its own importance, though this is too frequently exaggerated; but really it is irrelevant to the main issue, and the sooner we recognize this, the better.<sup>58</sup>

There were synergies between Holtby's emphasis on the need for women's lives to contain meaning beyond sex and the arguments that the Anglican preacher and feminist Maude Royden had made during and since wartime which grew out of her Christian conception of suffrage as a 'humanist' cause.<sup>59</sup> Like Holtby, Royden (1876–1956) lived for most of her adult life as a celibate unmarried woman with a married couple, the Reverend George William Hudson Shaw and his wife Effie and their son.

<sup>55</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'Is Family Life a Handicap?', *Evening Standard*, 2 Nov. 1929, quoted in Berry and Bishop (eds.), *Testament of a Generation*, 283.

<sup>56</sup> Holtby, 'Feminism Divided', quoted in Berry and Bishop (eds.), *Testament of a Generation*, 47–8.

<sup>57</sup> On 'surplus women' see, for example, Katherine Holden, 'Imaginary Widows: Spinners, Marriage and the "Lost Generation" in Britain after the Great War', *Journal of Family History*, xxx (2005); Katherine Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England, 1914–60* (Manchester, 2007), 28–30. See also Billie Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the 1920s: Flappers and Nymphs* (London, Macmillan, 1988), ch. 1.

<sup>58</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'For Services Rendered', *Time and Tide*, 19 Nov. 1932, quoted in Berry and Bishop (eds.), *Testament of a Generation*, 78.

<sup>59</sup> Sue Morgan, 'Sex and Commonsense: Maude Royden, Religion and Modern Sexuality', *Journal of British Studies*, lii (2013).

She married George Hudson Shaw on Effie's death in 1944.<sup>60</sup> In her essay, 'Modern Love' (1917), Royden explored individual fulfilment through marriage and love within an argument about the importance of creative expression. She wrote that 'we have all a certain vital force, which seeks expression in creation'. She argued specifically that motherhood should be recognized as a pre-eminently creative force, which the overwhelming majority of women desired to fulfil and deplored the social prejudices that undervalued motherhood, including the feminist perspective that motherhood was a 'mere episode' in a woman's life.<sup>61</sup> Royden was convinced that sex ought to be contained within marriage; she did not see this, however, as some feminists did, as 'bondage' or as 'implying a lack of freedom and spontaneity in emotional life', and she finessed feminist arguments against marriage.<sup>62</sup> For her, at issue was a wider challenge faced by women, other than those suffocated by the burden of poverty or the restrictions of the richest lives, in choosing a life's work of service that was compatible with ambitions for personal freedom.<sup>63</sup> Royden herself had chosen to dedicate her life to public work. She hoped for compassion towards her choice so that, as in the medieval church, contemporary society might be 'free from the vulgar assumption that if a woman gives herself to the service of humanity in some other way than motherhood there is "something wrong" in her character and temperament'.<sup>64</sup> In 1923, she argued more boldly for the rewards that women could achieve through social service: 'I tell you what I know when I say that the power of sex can be transmuted into a power that will make your lives as rich, as fruitful, as creative as that of any father or mother in the world'.<sup>65</sup> The message was forceful, in that it detached the authenticity of personal reward from desire: God's love, which Royden conceived as 'all-wise and almighty, hold[ing] off a little from the human soul to give it room

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 159–60.

<sup>61</sup> A. Maude Royden, 'Modern Love', in A. Maude Royden and others, *The Making of Women, Oxford Essays in Feminism*, ed. Victor Gollancz (London, 1917), 50.

<sup>62</sup> Royden, 'Modern Love', 63.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 50–1, 57.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>65</sup> A. Maude Royden, *The Moral Standards of the Rising Generation* (London, [1923]), 13.

enough to breathe', did not preclude but rather strengthened a sense of self rooted in commitment to a life of service.<sup>66</sup>

### III

The realization of mass democracy in inter-war Britain has been understood as a relatively smooth adjustment eased by the participation of men and women through voluntary societies. Numerically, mass membership of non-party organizations expanded as a critical feature of political engagement, helping to bridge the movement towards an inclusive political culture and anchoring British politics ideologically in the centre ground.<sup>67</sup> Conceptually, the 'voluntary citizen', a new category in this period, emerged as a critical mechanism discussed by experts as a linchpin of the modern, moderate state.<sup>68</sup> In *The New Philanthropy: A Study of the Relations Between the Statutory and Voluntary Social Services* (1934), the social worker and theorist Elizabeth Macadam defined a 'new technique of organisation', combining voluntary provision and statutory administration of social services, and bolstered by 'a habit of voluntary personal service inherited from past centuries, which, contrary to the gloomy forebodings of the antagonists of State intervention, continues to flourish with true British pertinacity'.<sup>69</sup> Elizabeth Macadam (1871–1948) was a leading figure within the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies and its successor body, the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship, alongside her life companion, Eleanor Rathbone. The daughter of a nonconformist Minister, she entered social work in the 1890s when she lived and worked in women's settlements in London before becoming warden of the Victoria Women's Settlement in Liverpool (1902–10).<sup>70</sup> Macadam saw the sorts of collective expression involved in voluntary work as integral to the

<sup>66</sup> Royden, 'Modern Love', 62–3.

<sup>67</sup> Helen McCarthy, 'Parties, Voluntary Associations, and Democratic Politics in Interwar Britain', *The Historical Journal*, 1 (2007), 893.

<sup>68</sup> Constance Braithwaite, *The Voluntary Citizen: An Enquiry into the Place of Philanthropy in the Community* (London, 1938), 2.

<sup>69</sup> Elizabeth Macadam, *The New Philanthropy: A Study of the Relations Between the Statutory and Voluntary Social Services* (London, 1934), preface, 16.

<sup>70</sup> Susan Pedersen, 'Macadam, Elizabeth', *Oxford DNB* (modern version).

functioning of 'democratic selfhood'.<sup>71</sup> In *The New Philanthropy*, she argued that alongside the statutory responses to the existing conditions of economic depression, voluntary social service enabled private citizens to act as a watchdog over state and government and exercise effective public opinion.<sup>72</sup> She stressed repeatedly 'the freedom of private philanthropy' — both past and present — to respond experimentally and spontaneously to social problems as a way to overcome the administrative limitations of the state and to foster the individual behaviours of active citizenship.<sup>73</sup> Commentators across a range of political positions identified the potential for a new dynamic in the synthesis of established models of service and the new priorities of mass democracy which, by necessity, would expand structural and personal liberties. In 1938, the social scientist Constance Braithwaite called for a socialist state within which philanthropy would provide a check on tendencies to centralization.<sup>74</sup> Macadam concluded *The New Philanthropy* with a quotation from Stanley Baldwin, the leading Conservative figure in the National Government, describing, in 1933, the administration's growing use of voluntary agencies as 'a means of rescuing the citizen from the standardizing pressure of the State mechanism'.<sup>75</sup>

Although the 'voluntary citizen' personified broad trends of the inter-war mass politics of pressure, leading commentators of the period continued to assume distinctively gendered modes of men's and women's participatory engagement. In October 1927, then Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin addressed middle-class members of the Union of Girls' Schools for Social Service on how the implementation of state and municipal welfare provision had changed the terms on which the previous generation had carried out voluntary social service: 'the old fields covered by benevolence . . . or philanthropy have been narrowed a great deal by the activities of the state and the municipalities. There is much less chaos in the world and much less need for what I might call "emotional benevolence"'. Instead, there was an imperative to bring 'a combination of heart and brain into the

<sup>71</sup> Helen McCarthy, 'Parties, Voluntary Associations and Democratic Politics'.

<sup>72</sup> Macadam, *New Philanthropy*, 302–3.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 27, 286.

<sup>74</sup> Braithwaite, *Voluntary Citizen*, 75.

<sup>75</sup> Macadam, *New Philanthropy*, 303.

task to-day'.<sup>76</sup> Baldwin's stress on the twin motors of 'heart and brain' spoke to a broader, cross-party message between the wars that configured benevolence and philanthropy as largely synonymous whilst marking a new critical distinction between 'voluntary social service' and governmental models: Clement Attlee made a similar point in *The Social Worker* (1920), in which he argued for the changed 'outlook of the social worker from the time when his principal object was benevolence down to the modern conception of social justice'.<sup>77</sup> Both Attlee and Baldwin recognized the interrelationship between service and selfhood, but envisaged different models and results. Attlee understood self-sacrifice as a vital force in social service (he gendered the practitioner male), which had as one of its objects the goal of replacing 'self-interest[ed]' charitable work.<sup>78</sup> For Baldwin, strengthening the roots of selfhood within service was vital to ensuring the individual's independence within the new challenges of massification and mechanization.<sup>79</sup> It was in this specific context of progressive Conservatism that Baldwin conceived the relationship between service and self as gendered respectively female and male. He maintained in the talk to the Union of Girls' Schools for Social Service that service was the 'surest way' for young women to enrich the life of the community and to 'enric[h] their own lives by the experience'.<sup>80</sup> In 1936, he addressed boys at Leys School, Cambridge about possible future 'vocations': 'Business, the Professions, the Ministry, possibly Politics. Whatever it is, don't think too much of yourselves or your career . . . Don't work only for yourselves, but for the good of the community'.<sup>81</sup> While the mediation of voluntary effort and personal enrichment, for both men and women, was to be a central feature of the Conservative-dominated inter-war state, the scope for personal expression that women were accorded in

<sup>76</sup> Stanley Baldwin, *Our Inheritance: Speeches and Addresses* (London, 1928), 202.

<sup>77</sup> C. R. Attlee, *The Social Worker* (London, 1920), 5–6.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 8, 25.

<sup>79</sup> Stanley Baldwin, *Service of Our Lives: Last Speeches as Prime Minister* (London, 1937), 117. Philip Williamson has argued that Baldwinite appropriation of the vocabulary of service was part of a broader anti-socialist position, conceived precisely as 'an ethic to counteract a politics of materialism and class conflict': *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative Leadership and National Values* (Cambridge, 1999), 204, 212, 215.

<sup>80</sup> Baldwin, *Our Inheritance*, 201.

<sup>81</sup> Baldwin, *Service of Our Lives*, 33.

this model was more fragile and contingent than it was for men. For women, individual fulfilment was to come after (rather than before, as for men) demonstrations of communal responsibility. The feminine self was delimited through social service in this model to a primarily other-facing role.

It was precisely the essentialism of such demarcations of an individual's role within the community that second-generation suffragists sought to challenge in the inter-war years through critiquing commonplace castings of women's public and voluntary work. In 1936, Eleanor Rathbone (1872–1946) reviewed developments in women's experiences of public life since achieving the vote and observed that progress 'had been rapid when it depended on political action and slow when it depended on changes in heart and habits'.<sup>82</sup> Rathbone queried whether women's public commitments demonstrated an essential psychology of women's 'minds' or the form ('nature') of the work usually done by women. Contrasted with the supposed self-absorption men showed in professional work, she critiqued the ideal of a woman's 'mind at leisure from itself', ever attentive to the needs, desires and feelings of others and overlooking the self, as stifling the most engaged forms of public work.<sup>83</sup> As a tutor in social training at the School of Social Science at the University of Liverpool, Elizabeth Macadam had enacted a complementary vision, maintaining that training for professional as well as voluntary social work needed to operate on equivalent principles in courses that combined theoretical study and practical training with impact upon personal development.<sup>84</sup> Macadam's expertise in settlement work underpinned her vision for this training which was located in studied engagement of the personal and collective psychological dimensions of service.<sup>85</sup> The benefits of 'common work' in settlements, undertaken with 'mutual understanding and sympathy amongst the workers', were to be the foundation for a broader principle of training: Mary Talbot, who was

<sup>82</sup> Eleanor Rathbone, 'Changes in Public Life', in Ray Strachey (ed.), *Our Freedom and its Results* (London, 1936), 16.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>84</sup> Elizabeth Macadam, 'The Universities and the Training of the Social Worker', *Hibbert Journal: A Quarterly Review of Religion, Theology, and Philosophy*, xii (1914), 286.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.



influential in the establishment of the Lady Margaret Hall settlement in Lambeth, described in 1895 the 'internal advantages' of settlement work, 'the pleasantness . . . of living among people of kindred aims, and interests, and occupations [and] the support and the stimulus which come from the sense of belonging to a body with a character to maintain'.<sup>86</sup> Settlement work was conceived as an antidote to the comforts of privileged women's lives, as in the early 1900s, when elite women were advised that settlements were a 'cure for too much leisure, from *ennui* and boredom' and a vehicle for 'those who want to get away from self', who would find in them new individual purpose and rewards.<sup>87</sup> Such experience could also reinforce older messages regarding the development of personal morality. In her 1923 history of the Lady Margaret Hall settlement, Gemma Bailey reworked the framing religious idiom of many settlements to insist upon the moral opportunities the educated and privileged female residents had enjoyed since the settlement was founded in 1897, where 'Goodness reigns, and it is goodness mixed with wisdom and good sense'.<sup>88</sup> Macadam would argue — apparently counterintuitively — in 1934 that settlement work was even more important than it had been in the 1880s and 1890s, when it had addressed the unrelieved problems of poverty and distress, because of the freedoms that settlement workers could exercise without a formal programme and through 'co-operation' with other institutions and individuals. She argued that a settlement, acting as a centre for different circles of social and educational enterprise, 'is not only a geometric but a psychological and administrative necessity'.<sup>89</sup>

Like Eleanor Rathbone, Elizabeth Macadam moved between discussing the 'natures' of those who performed social work and acknowledgement of the social and cultural construction of human experience. Rhetorically, she drew connections between the older models of, and new contexts for, service. Her textbook *The Equipment of the Social Worker* (1925) advocated a

<sup>86</sup> Mary Talbot, 'Women's Settlements', *Economic Review*, v (1895), 489.

<sup>87</sup> V. C. H., 'Life at a Women's University Settlement', *Temple Bar: A Monthly Magazine for Town and Country Readers* (April 1902), 457–8.

<sup>88</sup> Gemma Bailey, *Lady Margaret Hall: A Short History Issued on Behalf of the Lady Margaret Hall Appeal Fund* (London, 1923), 123; Jasper Griffin, 'Bailey, Cyril', *Oxford DNB* (modern version).

<sup>89</sup> Macadam, *New Philanthropy*, 203.

combination of 'goodwill, kindly feeling and instinctive tact' as well as applied knowledge of social conditions.<sup>90</sup> In 1945, she still maintained that 'the social worker, like the doctor, preacher, teacher, artist or craftsman, is born not made and inborn personal qualities must stand high', although she believed that these attributes needed to be reinforced by knowledge, understanding and practice.<sup>91</sup> The psychological impact that social work had upon the social worker was addressed in the preface to her 1925 text by the philosopher J. H. Muirhead, who wrote that, as well as the work itself, 'there are the conditions under which the work is done, and the reaction of these conditions on the bodies and, as we are now being taught, upon the minds of the workers'. Muirhead prioritized shifts in the social contexts of the work over the psychology of the social worker, arguing that as social conditions became more complex, attempts to address them by social workers and administrators were 'more and more of a fine art, requiring special knowledge and training'.<sup>92</sup> Macadam herself continued to stress the need for dialogue between the sorts of expressions made possible by shifting models of service. In *The New Philanthropy* — intended for experts, professionals, students and informed commentators — she wrote of the need for the insights of Charles Loch, Octavia Hill and Bernard and Helen Bosanquet, that she and reformers around her had grown up with, neither to be discarded nor simply to be reiterated, but to be translated to a generation that 'speaks a different language and moves in a totally different environment'.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Elizabeth Macadam, *The Equipment of the Social Worker* (London, 1925), 5.

<sup>91</sup> Elizabeth Macadam, *The Social Servant in the Making: A Review of the Provision of Training for the Social Services* (London, 1945), viii. The argument contrasts with Vera Brittain's observation that 'formal training' was required, or failing that, a few months of home study of economics, social theory and practical social action, rather than 'an untutored plunge into unforeseen responsibilities, or the supposition that modern welfare work resembles old-fashioned "philanthropy" in requiring as its sole qualifications a kind heart and vaguely benevolent intentions': *Women's Work in Modern England* (London, 1928), 137.

<sup>92</sup> J. H. Muirhead, 'Preface', in Macadam, *The Equipment of the Social Worker*, 5.

<sup>93</sup> Macadam, *New Philanthropy*, 21.

## IV

The growth in the 1920s of women's organizations, building upon both pre-war developments and the momentum surrounding the extensions of the franchise in 1918 and 1928, was a key feature of the inter-war associational landscape.<sup>94</sup> Offering cultural, economic and social opportunities and campaigning for a wide range of issues affecting women's and children's lives, these groups were central to the development and expansion of women's civic agency.<sup>95</sup> Caitriona Beaumont has argued that housewives' organizations educated women for democratic citizenship from the late 1920s onwards, whilst eschewing mainstream feminist perspectives and leaving unquestioned established gendered roles and modes of practice.<sup>96</sup> Beaumont's work identifies the impact these groups had in promoting the collective identities of the 'housewife' and 'mother' for campaigning issues as diverse as birth control, divorce, abortion, equal pay, women police and housing reform. Equally, if not more fundamental, was the concern of such organizations with the development of *personal* identity, which was linked to the wider popularization of psychological thought. This emphasis was evident across different sorts of women's groups, ranging from the housewives' associations that Beaumont has studied, to Christian groups and organizations for professional women. The preoccupations of the leaders of these organizations with harnessing members' individual agency in conformity with the strengthening of collective identities reveals a holistic ambition for realizing the expression of the individual and the social self in dialogue with the practice of women's service. Challenging embedded constructions of gendered models of women's service was a common goal of these organizations (as it was for feminist

<sup>94</sup> Helen McCarthy and Pat Thane, 'The Politics of Association in Industrial Society', *Twentieth Century British History*, xxii (2011), 225.

<sup>95</sup> Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*; Law, *Suffrage and Power*; Pat Thane, 'The Women of the British Labour Party and Feminism, 1906–1945', in Smith (ed.), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*, 124–43; Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Explaining the Gender Gap: The Conservative Party and the Women's Vote, 1945–1964', in Martin Francis and Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (eds.), *The Conservatives and British Society, 1880–1980* (Cardiff, 1996), 194–224; Beaumont, 'Citizens Not Feminists'; Perriton, 'Forgotten Feminists'; Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism*; McCarthy, 'Service Clubs, Citizenship and Equality'.

<sup>96</sup> Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*, 3.

groups). The development of women's personality became a priority of both political and psychological significance.

By the mid 1920s, the National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI) was the largest women's organization in Britain, with 250,000 members and an institute in nearly one out of every five villages.<sup>97</sup> The Vice-Chair of the NFWI Grace Hadow (1875–1940) was said to have recognized that 'the first task was to rouse the sense of responsibility towards the community in women who had been accustomed to think of themselves as bearing no share'.<sup>98</sup> In 1926, Hadow contributed an article on the progress of the NFWI to the *Journal of Adult Education* in which she stressed the movement's aim for 'common fellowship', building both upon British women's wartime experiences and a 'spirit' that had animated women of many nationalities over a longer period of time who were 'striving in various ways for self-expression and for better conditions in home life'.<sup>99</sup> The NFWI envisaged a model of cross-class citizenship that emphasized the teaching of skills, aptitudes and mental approaches, especially the openness to learning new things. In the second issue of the NFWI magazine, *Home and Country*, published in spring 1919, readers were advised of the merits of joining WEA classes and of participating in a 'university spirit'.<sup>100</sup> The 'university ideal' was a popular shorthand in inter-war debates that associated individual freedoms with civic values, but in this context it also validated the traditions of women's educational communities.<sup>101</sup> Hadow's emphasis upon facilitating women's active role in community politics was thus part of a distinctive vision for adult education.<sup>102</sup> In the article in the

<sup>97</sup> Pat Thane, 'Women, Liberalism and Citizenship, 1918–1930', in Eugenio F. Biagini (ed.), *Citizenship and Community: Liberals, Radicals and Collective Identities in the British Isles, 1865–1931* (Cambridge, 1996), 70; Brittain, *Women's Work in Modern England*, 165.

<sup>98</sup> Helena Deneke, *Grace Hadow* (London, 1946), 172.

<sup>99</sup> Grace E. Hadow, 'A Woman's Movement for Education', *Journal of Adult Education*, i (1926).

<sup>100</sup> H. Duncan Hall, 'Women's Institutes and the Workers' Educational Association', *Home and Country* (Apr. 1919), 14.

<sup>101</sup> See, for example, Baldwin, *Service of Our Lives*, 53. Grace Hadow had studied at Somerville College, Oxford before going on to study and tutor at Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania and Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford in the decade before the First World War.

<sup>102</sup> M. E. Campbell, *The Oxfordshire Rural Community Council: A History of the First Fifty Years, 1920–1970* (Oxford, 1970), 14.

*Journal of Adult Education*, she quoted from a Board of Education Report on the Educational Work of Women's Institutes, including the details that her Oxfordshire NFWI branch had arranged 166 lectures in a year and 105 discussion subjects for meetings.<sup>103</sup> The Report praised the branch's wide educative programme. However, Hadow glossed this emphasis to stress the NFWI's broader vision to teach 'village women to formulate their own wishes, to express themselves, and to work together to obtain what they need'.<sup>104</sup>

NFWI leaders stressed the development of women's personality for the purpose of establishing a 'woman's movement for education'. The goal was to expand women's experiences rather than delimit women's nature. The article in *Home and Country* in 1919 explained: 'One fact must stand out clearly to those who have had any experience of societies organized for social or political purposes, and that is that a society can have no permanent or useful life, unless it assists in the continuous development of the personalities of its members'.<sup>105</sup> Grace Hadow's brother, the educationalist William Henry Hadow, discussed the role of organizations in enabling the development of judgement in very similar terms in his book, *Citizenship* (1923). William Henry Hadow advocated investigating civic problems and institutions for 'civic education' to facilitate both conceptual and experiential relationships.<sup>106</sup> Readdressing personality as both an individual and collective value was pivotal: he charted the 'relationship of individual and community as equally personal' because it was rooted in 'mutual relationships', a 'bi-lateral my' between persons.<sup>107</sup> The goal of elaborating individual members' personality within the community also framed the NFWI's vision of citizenship. In the article in *Home and Country*, NFWI leaders argued that the organization must develop a common personality, but that this was only meaningful if it was used to nurture the autonomy of individual members. Making the connection explicitly, in 1926, Grace Hadow claimed that 'the aims of the movement [NFWI]

<sup>103</sup> Subjects discussed were as diverse as 'County History', 'Foreign Travel', 'Medieval England', 'What Schools Can Do', 'Women in Local Government', 'Classical Novels', 'Ancient Greece and her Love of Beauty', 'Medieval Guilds' and 'Wild Life in the Country': Hadow, 'A Woman's Movement for Education', 90–1.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>105</sup> Hall, 'Women's Institutes and the Workers' Educational Association', 14.

<sup>106</sup> William Henry Hadow, *Citizenship* (Oxford, 1923), 201–2.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 114, 112.

are identical with those of the educationalist: Teach people to think, and leave the direction of their thought to themselves'.<sup>108</sup>

This work to achieve the fullest development of women's personality moved in a different, though compatible, direction within organizations of Christian women that configured the relationship between individual and community development in spiritual terms. The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) evolved in the early twentieth century as an association providing social welfare for young working women and education in a Christian model of women's self-emancipation; by 1935, its membership stood at over a million worldwide.<sup>109</sup> In the inter-war years, the UK organization focused upon the liberal evangelical goals of the practical implementation of 'Christian liberty', and educating members into 'personal contact with Jesus Christ . . . who equips for life and service'.<sup>110</sup> The emphasis was upon Christian teachings of fellowship and mutuality as the motors of women's service. This ideal was given formal expression at the Stockholm Conference of the World's YWCA in 1914, when a new principle was added to the constitution: 'to enlist the service of young women for young women in their spiritual, intellectual, social, and physical advancement, and to encourage their fellowship and activity in the Christian Church'.<sup>111</sup> At a conference for UK YWCA Secretaries in Bangor, Wales in April 1916, delegates discussed girls' personality, in relationship to the call to wider fellowship and faith, as a simultaneously individual and 'corporate' mode of expression.<sup>112</sup> Such models of fellowship for service not only allowed room for, but *required* self-work to be achieved through companionship and sociability as well as ongoing personal

<sup>108</sup> Hadow, 'A Woman's Movement for Education', 91.

<sup>109</sup> Susan Mumm, 'Women and Philanthropic Cultures', in Sue Morgan and Jacqueline deVries (eds.), *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800–1940* (London, 2010), 63; World's Young Women's Christian Association, *A Study of the World's Young Women's Christian Association* (London, 1924), 58.

<sup>110</sup> The ambition was stated in 1915, see Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (hereafter MRC), YWCA Records, MS 243/64/22: Circular letter from H. M. Proctor and K. J. Wood, May 1915.

<sup>111</sup> World's Young Women's Christian Association, *A Study of the World's Young Women's Christian Association*, 16.

<sup>112</sup> MRC, YWCA Records, MS 243/24: 'Programme of YWCA Secretaries' Conference, 7–14 Apr. 1916'. The Programme is contained in the Diary of the First World's YWCA Conference held in London in 1898. The copy of the diary belonged to Emily Kinnaird.

spiritual engagement and instruction. For example, at the UK Conference in October 1922, delegates discussed 'education of Christian personality for service' through planned activities at YWCA clubs, including recreations, team games and study sessions and the example of branch and club leaders' 'co-operative leadership'.<sup>113</sup> Bible study and prayer circles remained central throughout the period to the YWCA's programme for addressing young women's obligations and to the work of 'freeing of personality'.<sup>114</sup>

While there were vital continuities from its earlier history in the terms of the organization's work, the language that YWCA leaders used to communicate ideas of women's service in the inter-war years advanced a version of post-war liberal evangelicalism that invoked the popularization of practical psychological thought. In 1923, the YWCA leader Emily Kinnaird (1855–1947) advised members that the results of Bible study 'must be sought in a higher moral standard, a nobler conception of duty, and a deeper inner life among the members of the Association'.<sup>115</sup> In her autobiography, *Reminiscences* (1925), Kinnaird cast the development of her own inner life in dialogue with the nineteenth-century evangelical conversions in which she and her sisters had given up 'worldly amusements' to explore instead the 'psychological value [of] concentrat[ing] on the main object of life — Christ — not enjoyment, and perhaps the sacrifice of things that were only for one's own pleasure'.<sup>116</sup> The influence upon inter-war psychological discourse of New Thought ideas of a multi-level mind comes through strongly in Kinnaird's writings in this period.<sup>117</sup> In a pair of articles published in 1927 in the YWCA magazine, *Our Own Gazette*, she set out a series of guiding principles for members to channel both conscious and unconscious strength through engaging with religious teachings

<sup>113</sup> MRC, YWCA Records, MS 243/40/3: 'The Interpretation of Christ in a World Fellowship: A Study for Members of the British YWCA in Preparation for their Biennial Conference, Oct. 1922'.

<sup>114</sup> MRC, YWCA Records, MS 243/40/3: Discussion paper on 'The Interpretation of Christ to Young Women To-day', World's YWCA Commission, Salzburg, 10–16 June 1922.

<sup>115</sup> MRC, YWCA Records, MS 243/21/8: Emily Kinnaird, 'Religious life', 1923 and the YWCA: *A Review*, 12.

<sup>116</sup> Emily Kinnaird, *Reminiscences* (London, 1925), 80.

<sup>117</sup> Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, 42.



about karma and fate, and stressed the value of discipline and contemplation through the use of Christian devotional texts.<sup>118</sup> Harnessing New Thought teachings, Kinnaird presented training in spiritual self-reflection as requiring the development of personality in both the conscious and unconscious mind. Managing inner life, in this model, was a necessary step to realizing oneness with a greater whole.

The argument that women should align service with methods of self-management was marshalled through the use of various idioms within inter-war women's organizations in respect of the broader vogue for psychology as a practical tool for self-development.<sup>119</sup> While some organizations stressed self-management for the recalibration of 'duty', others configured it as a consciously modern ethic of personal commitment that critiqued conventional models of social obligation. Founded in California in 1921 and quickly spreading in Europe and North America, the Soroptimist movement aimed to promote high ethical standards and efficiency amongst women professionals and businesswomen alongside a spirit of public service.<sup>120</sup> In 1930, the Federation of Soroptimist Clubs in Great Britain and Ireland was formed and had a membership of 3,500 on the eve of the Second World War.<sup>121</sup> British Soroptimist clubs were active in the 1930s in social work for a range of causes, often supporting women and children, but extending to relief work for refugees in Ethiopia after the Italo-Abyssinian war of 1935–6 and in Spain, during and after the Civil War, 1936–9.<sup>122</sup> Although members

<sup>118</sup> In the first article, Kinnaird explored Hindu teachings of karma, contemplation and meditation, before concluding that members should trust in God 'to steer our course aright.' Her second article provided readers with references to Christian devotional texts ranging from the Augustinian tradition to contemporary Anglo-Catholicism (Evelyn Underhill), via pre-Reformation Catholicism (Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*) and Christian mystic texts: 'In Touch With the Unseen', *Our Own Gazette* (May 1927), 18; 'Seeing the Invisible', *Our Own Gazette* (June 1927), 17.

<sup>119</sup> Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, 18–19.

<sup>120</sup> Greater Manchester County Record Office, Manchester (hereafter GMCRO), Papers of the National Federation of Soroptimists, G/SIG/1/1795/1/2: 'Minutes of the British National Council of Soroptimist Clubs, Constitution of Soroptimist Clubs, 1 Dec. 1927'; David Doughan and Peter Gordon, *Women, Clubs and Associations in Britain* (London, 2006), 128; McCarthy, 'Service Clubs, Citizenship and Equality'.

<sup>121</sup> McCarthy, 'Service Clubs, Citizenship and Equality', 533.

<sup>122</sup> *British Soroptimist* (Aug. 1935), 157 and (Mar. 1938), 17; GMCRO, G/SIG/1/1795/1/6: 'Minutes of Board of Governors of Federation of Soroptimist Clubs Meeting, Leeds, 6 Feb. 1937'.

were expected to show co-operation in the general principles of civic, social and industrial development, the movement also specifically required them to readdress the motives for their social behaviour. In early 1934, the monthly journal, *The British Soroptimist* featured an article by writer and agony aunt Christine Jope-Slade (1893–1942) — ‘Ladies! Be Nonchalant!’ — urging readers to critique older models of female obligation: ‘To give because you want to give, to render service because it is a pleasure to you personally . . . Be selfish, and rested, and free; and then when you would do good deeds, do them with a sweep of the wings and a definite twinkle-twinkle of the halo’.<sup>123</sup>

This injunction to seek ‘pleasure’ through giving appealed to women’s capacities for psychological self-management and willingness to celebrate service to others as bringing legitimate self-reward. Jope-Slade’s message challenged representations of women’s social commitments either as demonstrations of uncontrolled female ‘passion’ or as supererogatory and exceptionally self-effacing, the latter tropes being common in representations of celebrated Victorian female philanthropists as ministering ‘servants’.<sup>124</sup> It was all very well, she claimed, for the idealized ‘leisured Victorian woman’ to have devoted herself to social work but there was a real risk that in continuing to bend to this ideal the modern professional woman would overstretch herself, becoming ‘sentimentally and emotionally cluttered up’ by a sense of ‘minor duties’.<sup>125</sup> Jope-Slade’s re-configuration of duty and personal reward is striking in its playfulness, but it meshed with other arguments in this period about the need for women to rethink the personal implications of their social commitments. In *Women’s Work in Modern England* (1928), Vera Brittain estimated that one-fifth of middle-class women in England were balancing full-time professional occupations and voluntary work and suffering from overwork.<sup>126</sup> In 1924, Emily Kinnaird cautioned against a ‘narrowness of interest and limitation in view’ from an over-focus on a single vocation and wrote that she had been devoted to three causes in her life

<sup>123</sup> Jope-Slade, ‘Ladies! Be Nonchalant!’, 262.

<sup>124</sup> See, for example, Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton, 2007); Alison Booth, *How to Make it as a Woman: Collective Biographical History from Victoria to the Present* (Chicago, 2004), 136.

<sup>125</sup> Jope-Slade, ‘Ladies! Be Nonchalant!’, 262.

<sup>126</sup> Brittain, *Women’s Work in Modern England*, 134–5.

alongside her work for the YWCA: St. John's Training School for Girls, the 'Navvies' and 'India'.<sup>127</sup> The conclusions drawn were different, but what such discussions had in common was the recognition of the competing psychological pressures on women in their fulfilment of a sense of individual and social purpose.

Christine Jope-Slade's entreaty to Soroptimists was in fact part of a wider discussion within the movement in the 1930s that readdressed the idiom of service for both individual and community development. The challenges of pronouncing the social self emerges profoundly in these discussions. In 1934, the Bradford Soroptimists debated 'future social service', with Miss Martin stating the club did not exist for charitable purposes and 'that in the Soroptimist Club it was not altogether what one "did" that counted, but what one "was"'.<sup>128</sup> In 1935, the Federation's President described Soroptimism as a 'service club [which] satisfies in a specially fruitful fashion the inherent need of all of us to live, not for ourselves alone, but for others'.<sup>129</sup> In the same year, Miss Elsa Lowe told the Manchester Soroptimist Club that the professional and business woman needed to use her leisure time to 'undertake much more voluntary social work', not less, and to become a voluntary worker in the sense of 'one who gives her time voluntarily but regularly to some form of social work — not one who works for some cause when she feels like it'.<sup>130</sup> In 1938, the national magazine reported a talk by the President of the British Rotary movement, who spoke of the new ideal of 'service founded on fellowship' and countered the charge that fellowship might threaten members' 'individuality': 'Make your club the school of service and the instrument of service if you do not wish it to undermine your individuality'.<sup>131</sup> Contributing to this wider conversation, Jope-Slade's message was a plea for professional women not to renounce service, but to develop a social conscience whilst asserting a sense of self that evolved within the patterns of a busy home and work life, and without falling back on codes of self-repression. Self-development was not at odds with service, which should be reinforced and expanded as a source of personal pleasure.

<sup>127</sup> Kinnaird, *Reminiscences*, 81.

<sup>128</sup> 'News From the Clubs', *British Soroptimist* (Nov. 1934), 186.

<sup>129</sup> 'A Message from the Federation President', *British Soroptimist* (Nov. 1935), 191.

<sup>130</sup> 'Sane Citizenship', *British Soroptimist* (Apr. 1935), 32.

<sup>131</sup> 'Service Founded on Fellowship', *British Soroptimist* (Sept. 1938), 173.

## V

In September 1918, Virginia Woolf sat down with her diary ostensibly to consider John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. She was prompted by the knowledge that her friend, the classical scholar Janet Case was also reading the text. This personal context was pivotal to the shaping of Woolf's reflections and, as she contemplated Milton's ideas, her mind slipped onto the dynamics of women's service. Woolf was interested in Case's and another friend Lillian Harris' responses to the ageing former President of the Women's Co-operative Guild (WCG) Margaret Llewelyn Davies. She wrote:

Margaret dominates, & they [Janet and Lillian] taking pleasure in unselfishness, lavish sympathy & somehow make out a different scale of health for M[argaret] than for the rest of the world — but this is a little fantastic, & rises partly from the thought that I would, if I were kind, write a long affectionate amusing letter to M[argaret]. I am deterred from doing this by my prejudice against the patronage of the elderly. I want neither to be patronised, nor to patronise; & I feel that the sort of letter one writes on these occasions is an act of kindness, & so neither to be offered nor received. Inevitably the social worker approaches the non-social worker with a view to getting what they can give & very slightly disparaging the giver, who can be nothing better than a giver of amusement. Boredom is the legitimate kingdom of the philanthropic. They rule in the metropolis.<sup>132</sup>

The relationships Woolf considered here had developed over decades. Woolf (1882–1941) had met Llewelyn Davies in the early 1900s in women's suffrage work, with which Case and Harris were also involved, and the four remained (along with Leonard Woolf) in conversation into the 1940s, most influentially on the subjects of women's and workers' politics. Observing the interactions between her friends, Woolf critiqued an 'attentive' and 'solicitous' mode of women's service. She queried the basis on which sympathetic 'kindness' was often patronizingly expressed by the giver to those in need. She was sceptical of the 'pleasure in unselfishness' that marked the privileged woman's act of giving. Woolf focused her reflections partly upon the personal morality of pleasure, and she juxtaposed an alternative model of the pleasure of 'running on' in reading, rather than seeking out scrupulously the meaning of texts (as she thought Janet Case did). However, her thoughts were also

<sup>132</sup> Anne Olivier Bell (ed.), *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 5 vols. (London, 1977–85), i, 192.

connected to her wider personal discomfort at various 'service' relationships. As Hermione Lee and Alison Light have shown, the 'incomprehension' Woolf and Vanessa Bell felt towards their domestic servants, and the vacillating feelings of guilt, dependence, anger, sympathy and love Woolf felt towards her servant Nellie Boxall, in particular, reveal the complexities of these relationships for both employers and servants.<sup>133</sup> Woolf, like many other privileged women of her generation, addressed a continuing challenge to make sense of the personal and social meanings of women's service.

Coming from an acutely observant woman writer of the inter-war period, Virginia Woolf's insights are explained typically as those of a particularly intelligent woman absorbed in an interiorized realm. The slippage between people and concepts in Woolf's imagination, however, points to a more complex interrelationship between the interior and socially constructed self. As her diary entries show, she was receptive to the psychological and social mechanisms by which women came to shape a sense of self in tension with the lives of others and in conversation with resonant ideas of women's service. Thus, as well as observing the encounters between Janet Case, Lillian Harris and Margaret Llewelyn Davies, Woolf also reflected upon her meetings with Beatrice Webb in the autumn of 1918 and illuminated her mixed feelings towards, as well as the continuing significance in her post-war world of, the Victorian and Edwardian 'public-spirited' woman. Webb (Fabian), like Harris (pacifist, suffragist and left-wing) and Llewelyn Davies embodied a reputation for political vigour, which Woolf recorded could make her feel 'insignificant'.<sup>134</sup> Read within this personal context, the use of the oppositional labels 'social worker' and 'non-social worker', and the adjective 'philanthropic', is revealing. The opposition that Woolf constructed in part signalled her anxiety at being caught up in the bureaucratic trappings of the worlds of organized charity and professional social service (she critiqued in other diary entries the social models explored by Beatrice and Sidney Webb) and hemmed in by the reputation of the 'public-spirited' woman.<sup>135</sup> But it went

<sup>133</sup> Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London, 1997), 351–8; Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants*.

<sup>134</sup> Olivier Bell (ed.), *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, i, 193.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 193, 196.

further. By using the curious term 'non-social worker' to refer to the 'receiver' in a philanthropic relationship, and highlighting the negative aspects of the exchange which the 'social worker' generated, she played in her own mind with how non-instrumental compassion might be expressed. She seemed to be groping for a notion free from the distortions of unequal exchange and thus having the potential to be characterized by instinctive generosity of spirit — a conception which could challenge the reductive binary of 'social work'/'non-social work' and generate a more genuine relationship. Whilst deploring her father's mythologization of her mother's qualities, she revered Julia Stephen's intuitive responsiveness to human need and experience.<sup>136</sup> In 1930, Woolf would look back on her own pre-war work with Llewelyn Davies in connection with the WCG in terms of a well-meaning but nevertheless 'fictitious sympathy' between privileged women and working women, born more of aesthetics and imagination than material or 'nervous' understanding.<sup>137</sup> In October 1918, however, it was the context of personal friendship that provoked the dilemma: she did write a letter to Margaret Llewelyn Davies (describing the Webbs), although a few days later she recorded 'regret[ting] my generous impulse' and her decision to write about people rather than the ideas that 'my mind was full of'.<sup>138</sup>

Woolf's diary entries illuminate, once again, how the idea and practice of service was at the heart of elite women's search for self-understanding between the wars. Close readings of the intonation of women's writings highlight how the meanings of women's service evolved in the inter-war years as privileged women tested the mutuality of individual and community development for self-expression. Focusing attention upon the personal psychological dynamics of this process suggests the need to consider alternative configurations of the relationship between the traditional and the modern to those that typically have framed discussions of inter-war women's lives. Precisely

<sup>136</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, ed. J. Schalkkind, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (1976; London, 1985), 34, quoted in Jane Garnett, 'Stephen, Julia Prinsep', *Oxford DNB* (modern version).

<sup>137</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Introductory letter to Margaret Llewelyn Davies', in Llewelyn Davies (ed.), *Life as We Have Known It*, pp. xiii, xii.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

because examinations of service between the wars involved women readdressing and recalibrating 'traditional' models of the feminine self, my analysis points to the need to qualify the reading of inter-war women's sensibilities through the lens of 'conservative modernity'. This formulation has stressed the interplay of domesticity, modernity and new forms of individualism in shaping middle-class and elite women's lives in this era.<sup>139</sup> As a vehicle for articulating self-fulfilment, however, women's service contested individualist priorities. Rather, the significance of service in narratives of privileged women's self-realization illustrates the developing authority attached to modern psychological projects that validated both the expression of personal sensibility and commitment to communal and spiritual norms.<sup>140</sup> The goal of personal fulfilment was not at odds with elite and educated women's practice or conceptualization of service between the wars: the two were intertwined. Self-realization, for this group of women, was to be achieved through embracing both the inward- and outward-facing aspects of service.

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<sup>139</sup> Light, *Forever England*.

<sup>140</sup> Michael T. Saler, *The Avant-Garde in Interwar England: Medieval Modernism and the London Underground* (Oxford, 1999), 24, 75.