

The Viscountess, the Scientific Philanthropist and the School of Industry

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‘With respect to the School Establishment it may be too expensive. I therefore have no right to be continued — I am sure I have no pretension to ask it’.¹ So wrote Mary Mee, 2nd Viscountess Palmerston to her son, the future prime minister, in May 1804, seven months before her death from probable cancer. The school in question was one she had established in Romsey, Hampshire near the family’s country seat of Broadlands. The foundation of the school alongside the opening of a soup kitchen in the winter of 1799/1800 marked a step change in Mee’s philanthropic activities when she started to implement many of the ideas of her friend Count Rumford, a prominent exponent of scientific philanthropy. The school was very much a personal project for Mee: she wrote the rules, handpicked the lady visitors, chose the governess and spent a good proportion of her quarterly allowance on it.² This paper examines her use of charitable education as a tool for both enhancing her social and symbolic capital as benefactor and as an act of symbolic violence, “policing” the behaviour of the lower orders. It will compare her school with other schools for the poor and set it in the context of Georgian ‘particular charity’ and the development of scientific philanthropy.

Georgian Charity

The 1700s saw massive growth in the numbers of charities. Charity was not a private affair; published subscription lists were used as adverts for the beneficence of the donors. Would-be donors could be shamed into subscribing in order not to be conspicuous by their absence.³ The rise of associative charities allowed subscribers to network, borrow social cachet from other subscribers and patrons and bask in reflected glory regardless of how much they individually gave.⁴ Contemporaries were well aware of the self-interested motives of some donors: as early as the 1720s critics railed against the insincerity of public shows of charity, claiming 'pride and vanity have built more hospitals than all virtues together'.⁵ In Bourdieusian terms, charity in Georgian England can be seen as bolstering the donor's social and symbolic capital.

Women were not immune to the social benefits of charitable associations; single women, in particular, may have used active involvement in charity as a means to offset prejudice against their marital position or an escape from boredom.⁶ Many were motivated by the perceived feminine virtues of compassion and tenderness and felt their contributions, both monetary and physical, were a virtuous duty.⁷ Some women, such as Lady Spencer, a close acquaintance of the Palmerstons, became known as experts in charitable causes.⁸ The activities of Queens Charlotte and Caroline were important in the acceptance of female philanthropy leading to the declaration that 'Charity is the calling of a lady; the case of the poor is her profession, [her vocation was] instructing the poor, as the grand means of saving the nation'.⁹

There had been a shift of emphasis over the course of the century from a concern to solely ease the conditions of the poor, to a desire also to improve the morals of society, to 'police' the recipients of that charity.¹⁰ This motivation

chimes with Bourdieu's analysis of charity as an act of symbolic violence: the imposition of culture in such a way that it is experienced as legitimate by all involved. Misrecognition is key to the operation of symbolic violence and its ability to perpetrate cultural norms; the perpetrator misrecognises the violence they are inflicting as benevolence and the victim sees their treatment as an inferior as 'the natural order of things. As an expression of symbolic (soft) power, symbolic violence impels the recipient of any gift to attempt to reciprocate in kind, usually through behaviour. Thus the poor could be and were complicit in the production of behaviours which 'reinscribed' their subservient position.¹¹

Thus, the practice of charity could give twofold benefits to the donor: first to increase the donor's social and symbolic capital, and secondly to maintain the structure of society and the donor's position of power within that society. Was Mee aware of these aspects of charity? If she was, did she use the power to ensure that her dependent clients behaved as she wanted? Did she attempt to use charity to bolster her own standing?

Family Background

Mee's social position was more precarious than it might at first seem. As the daughter and sister of a merchant (and not even a great heiress), Mee lacked both social and symbolic capital compared to peeresses who were themselves relatives of peers. She was aged 28 in 1783, when she became the second wife of Henry Temple, the 2nd Viscount Palmerston whom she had first met several years earlier through her uncle by marriage, William Godschall, a distant cousin of Palmerston's mother. The Palmerstons were not a wealthy family in comparison with other aristocrats; their annual income was at most

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£19,000p.a. during their marriage and their title was relatively new and Irish. The Palmerstons were a happy and affectionate couple with a wide social circle. They were well connected to the centre of Whig society, yet not central to it.

Although her mother-in-law and step-grandmother-in-law were also of the mercantile class, by the 1780s Mee was an exception marrying into a title.¹² The cult of domesticity and the increasing disdain for arranged, mercenary marriages left women who had jumped several nice distinctions of rank at the mercy of gossips and prone to backhanded compliments, such as that from Mrs Sheridan, who noted Mee was 'a pleasing, unaffected women ... tho' she did squeeze thro' the city gates into a Viscountess'.¹³

There has been no serious consideration of the Mee since Connell's biography of her husband in the 1950s although Brown does give her more importance than most.¹⁴ Where she appears in biographies of her son, she is frequently characterised as social butterfly, a clinging mother and friend, pleasant but little more, and unsure of herself and her place in society, although Brown does give her more importance than most.¹⁵ Mee is not only written out of the historical record as anything other than an adjunct to the males in her family, but when she does appear she is frequently misrepresented.

As a mother to a young family of five, and a vivacious hostess whose home was 'an enchanted castle ...[of] ... amusements and splendid hospitality', in her early married life, Mee behaved as a typical landowner's wife in her charitable obligations: clothing the poor, visiting the sick, lending birthing linens, sponsoring families and acting as a local patroness.¹⁶ As her four surviving children grew up (she lost a daughter aged three to smallpox inoculation in 1791), she gradually became more organised in her activities (fig 1) but it wasn't until 1799, when her youngest child was ten, that there was a

significant change with the foundation of the kitchen and the school.¹⁷ This coincided with the period when Count Rumford was living in London, and frequently visited the Palmerstons

The Palmerstons first met Benjamin Thompson, Count Rumford, in June 1793 while they were on their continental tour with their children and instantly struck up a friendship.¹⁸ Mee and Rumford enjoyed a long correspondence from this date onwards. He wrote lengthy letters, often describing his experiments at the poor houses in Munich or military doings on the continent, mixed with gossip about mutual friends. She, in turn, passed on news from and about Rumford to her husband, uncle Godschall and other friends.¹⁹

The Scientific Philanthropist

Rumford was an American-born British subject, knighted by George III and created a count of the Holy Roman Empire by the Elector of Bavaria for whom he worked in the 1780s and 1790s, reorganising both the army and poor relief. He was interested in ‘the applications of science to the common purposes of life’.²⁰ Between 1799-1802 he lived in London, and while there greatly influenced the work of the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor (SBCP) and founded the Royal Institution, with which the Palmerstons were also closely involved (Lord Palmerston was one of the first Visitors, Mee was one of the book holders for ladies’ subscriptions).²¹ During this period, Rumford personally influenced Mee’s move into more practical, institutional charity, something she recognised three years later in a letter to her eldest son, stating that she was ‘obliged to Count R for having put me in a way to do some good in a place which, too extensive for particular charity, I must do some on a large scale’.²²

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Rumford's philanthropic investigations were driven by a wish to be as efficient and effective as possible; charity should be based on scientific rather than moral assumptions.²³ His approach became known as scientific philanthropy. Like John Locke and Adam Smith before him, he believed that the poor should be employed and not simply given relief. He believed poverty need not be perpetuate moral failing.²⁴ He advocated for voluntary charity, run on a settlement-wide basis by a committee made up of the highest ranks of society, while the administration should be carried out by those from the middle ranks. Government should only be involved to recommend good schemes and ensure the laws are compatible to the practice of any given charitable scheme. This approach found favour in England where there was considerable dissatisfaction with state organised Poor Law relief and a widespread belief that 'charity voluntarily administered by reasonable citizens would be more effective than relief from the parish poor rates'.²⁵

Rumford's writing on philanthropy was imbued with the concept of policing society; maintaining an ordered society for the benefit of all and the moral requirement on the higher ranks to instruct those beneath them. So widespread was this idea of policing that Mee might not even have been aware of it as a motivation. Her uncle Godschall had written a pamphlet on the topic in 1787 but the viscountess herself expressed her motivations in terms of doing something useful; that the utility of her charity could benefit both the recipients and the wider society.²⁶

Schools of Industry

Rumford was a loud advocate of schools of industry, having set up several in Bavaria to train the children of the poor in employable skills. In Britain, schools of industry could trace their history back to the 1720s when

the SPCK championed the infamous school in Artleborough. It ran for 15 hours a day with a short break for lunch, covered its costs and made as much as £500-£600 annual profit for the town coffers. In the 1790s, SBCP supported schools of industry; they singled out various schools as exemplars, including the schools at Boldre in the New Forest, founded by William Gilpin in 1791 using his publishing profits. Had Pitt's Poor Law reform of 1795 succeeded, every parish would have had to set up a school of industry with attendance compulsory for the children of those on poor relief. Instead the provision was piecemeal and usually only flourished under an enthusiastic patron, although even that did not guarantee success. A 1803 government survey of children receiving parish poor relief found that only 11% of children were in schools of industry.²⁷

Lady Palmerston's school of industry was the only weekday girls' charity school in Romsey. There was a long established charity school for boys at the Abbey and several dame schools catering for both boys and girls (Mee sponsored children at several of these).²⁸ As there was no competition for pupils between the school of industry and another charitable institution there was none of the social stratification wherein older charity schools were for the 'first degree among the Lower Orders' and the new schools for the 'bad and dull' children who could be trained up to work in manufactories or as common servants.²⁹ The girls in Mee's school came from a variety of backgrounds; some had no father's occupation listed, some were the daughters of labourers, gardeners, bricklayers and washerwomen while others were the daughters of more skilled workers such as shoemakers, butchers, carpenters and tailors. However despite being the only girls' charity school in Romsey, not all girls

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were admitted; only those who could demonstrate that they would be likely to make use of the education offered were accepted.³⁰

The Curriculum

There was general consensus on the need for girls to be educated to be fit wives and that education, regardless of its depth, should differ based on rank. Lady Palmerston definitely preferred a well-educated girl. She praised Lady Carnegie as 'the most sensible woman' she had ever met because of the quality of the education she gave her daughters and was aghast at the lack of education in Neapolitan noblewomen.³¹ Her own daughters observed astrological events and scientific experiments, puzzled over maths problems for enjoyment, knew several foreign languages and studied drawing.³² The school for industry was never going to produce well-educated girls compared to those of the middle- or upper-classes; Mee was not a radical. She may have read Mary Wollstonecraft and declared to her husband that he would find her 'very tenacious of [her] rights and privileges', but she was not about to overturn the 'natural' order of things.³³ She followed the conventional wisdom that girls of different social ranks should be taught differently; as the Hampshire Chronicle report of her school stated, its aim was to turn out 'excellent servants'.³⁴

Mee's school followed a curriculum which emphasised the practical but also allowed some time for the academic. Initially, the school took girls aged four to fourteen. Skills taught included spinning, knitting, all aspects of dressmaking, and housekeeping; exact tasks being age dependent.³⁵ Work was taken in at rates half the women's rate and the girls were paid for the work they did, directly addressing the opportunity cost of educating a child. They were also taught reading, spelling and their catechism (or equivalent for

dissenters). The governess had a supply of books to be given out gratis to those pupils who showed enthusiasm for reading.

Writing, or rather penmanship, does not appear on the curriculum, in common with many charity schools. At Gilpin's school it was an added extra.³⁶ Mee may not have paid it much heed as her own penmanship was somewhat lacking (her eldest son often teased her about her writing and also complained to his siblings about her illegible letters).³⁷ However her correspondence also shows her to be aware of the conditions many of the recipients of her charity lived in. Requiring payment for extra tuition may not have sat easy with a woman who cautioned her teenage that 'threepence in a shilling is an object to a poor Person'.³⁸

The Rules

Mee was very practical in how the school should be run and drew up the rules of the school herself (leaving a copy each for her children). Holidays were fixed at the discretion of the governess, to be 'most advantageous to the parents, and to the children, at the different seasons of the year'.³⁹ She recognised that the provision of free childcare enabled parents to be more economically active; of recounting to parents her desire to open an infant school in 1803, taking boys and girls as young as two, she wrote 'they all seemed delighted with the plan ... of getting rid of their children which will allow them to go out'.⁴⁰ This very pragmatism in ensuring that attending school did not adversely affect the household economics meant that the school did not suffer from the absenteeism that frequently occurred in other charity schools.⁴¹ However another force was at work, namely soft power: her very

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recognition of the realities of seasonal work in a rural economy put the recipients of her charity in her debt.

Mee also used the school to consolidate her family's soft power with local middling-rank families. She appointed Mrs. Latham, Seward, J. Latham, Tarver and Comley, to act as visitors. All four families appear in the viscountess's account books as having recommended people to her for help.⁴² The women and Mee took turns to make weekly visits to the school to ensure it was running well and the governess wrote regular reports to the viscountess when she was away from Broadlands.⁴³ In this she was following Rumford's philosophy of settlement wide charity, patronised by the elite and run by the middling ranks, however her letters reveal that Mee did find it difficult to be a hands-off patroness.

It was common for aristocrats to sponsor schools on their estates, appearing at prize days and annual dinners doling out beneficence, however Mee's personal interest in her school in Romsey, in particular her close knowledge of the girls, was atypical. She remained interested in the girls once they left her school and listed the leavers and their destinations every year in her books, noting if they had 'got into good places turning out well'.⁴⁴ In 1802 she rented the house next to the school to provide workroom for those who haven't gone on to other employment, to ensure that 'her girls' didn't fall prey to that 'degenerating evil, idleness'.⁴⁵ Whether she recognised this action as 'policing' or not, it is a classic example of the upper ranks attempting to control the behaviour of those socially below them.

Mee does not seem to have shared the widely held view, as expressed by her uncle Godschall that the poor 'can scarcely be taken too soon from the idle and dissolute'.⁴⁶ The need to remove the children of the poor from the baleful influence of their parents was another tenet widely held by those who sought

to police society. Unlike at Gilpin's school, Mee did not require her girls to spend most of their Sundays apart from their families.⁴⁷ However weekly attendance at church or chapel was compulsory; girls had to meet at the School to walk to worship together, accompanied by a teacher. Mee was not evangelical but she was sincere in her faith and the requirement for charity school pupils to attend a religious service on Sundays was a well-established tradition.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the effect of her regulation on the manner of their church attendance was to place loyalty to the school above loyalty to their families, and make a weekly public demonstration of their status as recipients of her benevolence. It was, in Bourdieusian terms, an example of inflicting symbolic violence upon those below her in order to maintain social norms.

Her pupils were also visibly set apart by their clothing. Every New Year they were given clothes. The December 1803 bill for these came to £27.3.0.⁴⁹ School leavers were given bonnets and in 1803 Lady Palmerston planned to give all the girls cloaks to wear when going to church.⁵⁰ She does not appear to have insisted that parents undertake not to sell off or swap the clothes, or return them once the girl left, unlike other charity schools, thus the distinction was maintained post-schooling.⁵¹

While at the school, pupils were subject to a detailed list of rewards and punishments. Tickets were issued for both good and bad behaviour (similar to systems in use at other schools).⁵² The use of rewards alongside punishments was a development in educational theory in the eighteenth century. Gilpin had famously introduced rewards at Cheam to encourage good behaviour and studiousness. The rewards in her school were often practical; money and clothes were items that would be useful to a poor family.⁵³ The academic was not entirely forgotten, with books given out to enthusiastic readers, but books

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were relatively cheap; penny tracts for children were well within the reach of many labouring families.⁵⁴ Mee pre-empted the SCBP's advice that 'that kind of merit which might offer to *every scholar* the ground of competition - viz *regularity of attendance, cleanliness of person, habitual diligence and orderly behaviour*' be rewarded.⁵⁵ She wrote in her rules that each girl was expected to be clean and tidy and 'as neat as the circumstances of her situation will admit of'; although outwardly liberal and understanding of circumstances, her rules also embody the Bourdieusian concept of symbolic violence: behaviour and appearance were congratulated.

Some rewards were less tangible and the annual school dinner was the highlight of the school year. In 1804, 136 girls and the staff dined, waited on by the viscountess's family and friends embodying the spirit of beneficence, and finished the evening with dancing in the school's spinning room. It was a ritual that the viscountess particularly enjoyed: 'I never saw a gaier Ball & the pleasure arising from seeing so many happy is reflected back doubly upon those who enter it. They danced until 9 o'clock then had warm milk or water and a piece of cake'.⁵⁶ Another intangible reward was being invited to Broadlands. In January 1803 when the schoolgirls came to the house to receive their New Year prizes, Mee wrote to her son that "this morning had my school here and am quite ruined in presents"⁵⁷ She frequently made mock complaints to him about the good behaviour of her schoolgirls costing her a fortune. He replied in the same tone with a modest suggestion that she should "introduce some sly little discordant Pippin among them, and make the young ladies misbehave their prizes away in forfeits".⁵⁸

Forfeits, in the form of monetary fines from earnings, and not corporal chastisement, were the main form of punishment in the school. Girls would also be made to wear a headband to with the legend 'for misbehaviour' for the

rest of the school day. Continued bad behaviour would result in being excluded from the annual dinner. Mee believed that the punishments were ‘not very severe [and] more likely to produce a good effect from those commonly made’.⁵⁹ It is clear from her writing that, unlike evangelicals like Sarah Trimmer, Mee did not believe that poor children were inherently wicked nor that poverty was a moral failing. Her approach chimed with the Lockean ideas that children were innocent tabula rasa to be carefully taught. As her uncle Godschall wrote in his pamphlet on policing society that “children should first be taught what is right before they are corrected for doing what is wrong”.⁶⁰

Conclusion

Although Mee recognised her activities were at a larger scale than her previous ‘lady of the manor’ work, she still kept her charity restricted to Romsey. She did not seek to extend her influence to nearby Winchester where her husband was M.P. as that was under the patronage of Lady Mildmay. Nor does she not appear to have been eager to set herself up as a female expert like the first Countess Spencer and there are relatively few newspaper reports on her activities.⁶¹ Lady Palmerston does not seem to have used her charity work to bolster her own social and symbolic status amongst her social peers. Her belief in the utility and practicality of her work led her to be focused on the local and it there that she exercised her symbolic and social capital. She used existing networks within the middling ranks to help her run the school. She did not challenge existing norms: like her husband who preferred to buy his seat in Parliament, she turned a blind eye to the ‘Old Corruption’, even if that corruption was the school Governess’s daughter winning a top prize every year she was at school.⁶² Although sincere in her wish to help those below her,

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Mee did nothing to change or alter the social structures surrounding those she helped. It could be argued that Mee simply did not have sufficient social and symbolic capital to challenge the establishment but nowhere in her writings does she intimate the slightest desire to do so.

And what became of her school after her death? Before her final illness made her more pessimistic, Mee had written that 'my hopes carry me to think when I no longer exist this school will live and flourish'.⁶³ Despite the continued rickety finances of the Temples, it was supported by her family both financially and in social capital throughout the nineteenth century. It continued as a school within the school after being amalgamated into the Girls National School in the 1850s and awarded prizes funded by Lord Palmerston until his death. Afterwards the specialist needlework class, with material supplied by the family at Broadland's, was known as Lady Palmerston's and continued into the twentieth century.⁶⁴ The Palmerston name no longer appears in Romsey schools, superseded by that of their successors at Broadlands, the Mountbattens.

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- ³⁰ Soton BR 18/2/1, pp. 133-136, list of girls and parental occupations; p. 115. Jan. 1803, Lady Palmerston lists girls seeking admittance and notes one was 'not approved by Mrs Rout'.
- ³¹ Soton BR 21/9/1 Lady Palmerston to Henry Temple, 2nd Jan. 1803; Connell, p. 275.
- ³² Soton BR 24/4/5 Henry Temple to Frances Temple, 11th Feb. 1804.
- ³³ Soton BR 11/18/5 Lady Palmerston to Lord Palmerston, 13th May 1791.
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- ³⁶ Templeman, 197 SWAP WITH EN 47
- ³⁷ Soton BR 24/2/6 Letter from Henry Temple to Frances Temple, 1st Mar. 1801
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- ⁴⁷ William D Templeman, *The Life and Work of William Gilpin* (Urbana, University of Illinois, 1939), 195
- ⁴⁸ Soton BR 21/9/7 Lady Palmerston to Henry Temple, 25th Feb. 1803. One of the few times she expressed her religious views in her letters, was to decry the seemingly methodistical turn her illegitimate stepson, Campbell, had taken in his preaching; Lloyd, *Agents*, 108.
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- ⁵⁹ Soton BR 21/7/8.
- ⁶⁰ Godschall *Police*, 6.
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- ⁶² Soton BR 18/2/1 pp 91, 97, 105, 162 & 236.
- ⁶³ Soton BR 21/9/2 Letter to Harry Temple, 13th Jan. 1803.

⁶⁴ Pat Genge, Jessica Spinney, and Lower Test Valley Archaeological Study Group.,
Romsey Schools 900 until 1940 (Romsey, LTVAS, 1991), 58

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