The Women's Movement and Women's Employment in Nineteenth Century Britain

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In the first half of the nineteenth century the main employment open to young women in Britain was in teaching, dressmaking, textile manufacture and domestic service. After 1850, however, young women began to enter previously all-male areas like medicine, pharmacy, librarianship, the civil service, clerical work and hairdressing, or areas previously restricted to older women like nursing, retail work and primary school teaching. This book examines the reasons for this change.

The author argues that the way femininity was defined in the first half of the century blinded employers in the new industries to the suitability of young female labour. This definition of femininity was, however, contested by certain women who argued that it not only denied women the full use of their talents but placed many of them in situations of economic insecurity. This was a particular concern of the Women's Movement in its early decades and their first response was a redefinition of femininity and the promotion of academic education for girls. The author demonstrates that as a result of these efforts, employers in the areas targeted began to see the advantages of employing young women, and young women were persuaded that working outside the home would not endanger their femininity.

Ellen Jordan's treatment of the expansion of middle class women's work is perhaps the most comprehensive available and is a valuable complement to existing works on the social and economic history of women. She also offers new perspectives on the Women's Movement, women's education, labour history and the history of feminism.

Ellen Jordan is based at the University of Newcastle, Australia. Her research is centred upon the history of women's work and gender in early childhood. She has published widely in these areas and edits the *Journal of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies*.

ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN GENDER AND HISTORY

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PREFACE

When I was a pupil at a girls' secondary school in the mid-1950s, I and my fellow students had it very firmly impressed on us by our parents, and particularly our fathers, that we were not simply being educated to be suitable wives for men like our brothers. When our schooldays were over we were to go on to train for an independent career in one of the occupations regarded as suitable for women. Several of my schoolmates, in fact, married and had children without finishing their degrees. Although this was a time when very few women re-entered the workforce after marriage, the fathers of these women exerted considerable pressure on them to gain a qualification, their standard argument being, 'How else will you support yourself and your children if you are widowed?'

Many years later, when second-wave feminism focused attention on women and careers, I began to wonder where this set of beliefs had come from. In particular, I wondered whether convincing middle-class parents that their daughters should be trained for a career might not be one of the unrecorded achievements of the nineteenth-century Women's Movement. Further reading soon revealed that many of the occupations I grew up assuming to be immemorially feminine only became so during the second part of the nineteenth century, which raised the possibility that this, too, might be something my generation owed to the Women's Movement. These questions prompted the research and the answers recorded in this book.

No one researching in this area can fail to be grateful for the path-breaking efforts of three pioneering historians of women's work, Alice Clarke , Ivy Pinchbeck and Lee Holcombe. This book builds on their work and on the work of the many other historians of women's lives in the nineteenth century who have written in the last twenty-five years. I have tried to give credit to all insights and explanations taken from such books by naming the authors in the text and listing them in the index. I would also like to record my debt to the London librarians and archivists at the Fawcett Library, the Wellcome Insitute, the London Metropolitan Archives, the Guildhall Library, the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, the Prudential Insurance Corporation, the Public Records Office and the Family Records Centre, with particular thanks to

David Doughan, Lesley Hall, Shirley Dixon, Jonathan Draper, Lorraine Jones, Caroline Reed and Peter Traynor. Thanks also to contributors to the Victoria e-mail discussion list for suggestions of novels dealing with particular issues and other help relating to the period, in particular Sheldon Goldfarb, Patrick Leary, Beth Sutton-Ramspeck, and Helen Schinske. I am especially grateful to Sally Mitchell, also a generous member of the list, for sharing her profound knowledge of the period both in her writings and privately, and to Marion Diamond, whose work on Maria Rye has led to our fruitful discussions of the Women's Movement.

Friends and colleagues at the University of Newcastle to whom thanks are due for support and intellectual stimulation during the period when this book was in preparation are Inta Allegritti, Ari Brand, Lois Bryson, Linda Connor, Bethne Hart, Rob Irvine, Peter Khoury, Ken Lee, Helen Macallan, Dale Miller, Ross Morrow, Santi Rozario, Geoffrey Samuel, Ann Saul, Glenda Strachan, Maureen Strazzari, Stephen Tomsen, Judy Wells and Hilary Winchester, with particular thanks for their warm and supportive friendship to Hilary Carey, Chris Everingham, Deborah Stevenson, and Penny Warner-Smith.

ABBREVIATIONS

C&D	*Chemist and Druggist*
Contemporary	*Contemporary Review*
EWJ	*English Woman's Journal*
EWR	*Englishwoman's Review*
Fraser's	*Fraser's Magazine*
GW	*Good Words*
HW	*Household Words*
PJ&P	*Pharmaceutical Journal and Transactions*
PP	*Parliamentary Papers*
James's	*St James's Magazine*
TNAPSS	*Transactions of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science*
WG	*Woman's Gazette*

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FIGURES

All graphs, unless otherwise stated, are based on the census figures published in the following:
Parliamentary Papers 1844 vol. 27: 31–44, 48–51, 85–269; 1852–3 vol. 88: ccxxii–ccxxvii; 1863 vol. 53: xlii–lxv; 1873 vol. 71: xxxvii–xlviii, 65–607; 1883 vol. 80: x–xvii; 1893–4 vol. 106: x–xxv; 1903 vol. 84: 186–201; 1913 vol. 78: 6–11, 12–24, 75–88.

TABLES

All tables, unless otherwise stated, are based on the census figures published in the following:
Parliamentary Papers 1844 vol. 27: 31–44, 48–51, 85–269; 1852–3 vol. 88: ccxxii–ccxxvii; 1863 vol. 53: xlii–lxv; 1873 vol. 71: xxxvii–xlviii, 65–607; 1883 vol. 80: x–xvii; 1893–4 vol. 106: x–xxv; 1903 vol. 84: 186–201; 1913 vol. 78: 6–11, 12–24, 75–88.

Part I

INTRODUCTION

1

THE QUESTION OF MIDDLE CLASS WOMEN'S WORK

In the Britain of the 1840s the conditions in the two main occupations entered by middle-class women, those of governess and dressmaker, roused considerable public attention. In 1843 the Report to Parliament of the Commissioners on the Employment of Children was published. Among the revelations of this report were the very poor conditions offered to young women apprenticed to dressmakers. The sub-commissioner reported:

> The evidence of all parties establishes the fact that there is no class of persons in this country, living by their labour, whose happiness, health, and lives, are so unscrupulously sacrificed as those of the young dress-makers. They are, in a peculiar degree, unprotected and helpless; and I should fail in my duty if I did not distinctly state that, as a body, their employers have hitherto taken no steps to remedy the evils and misery which result from the existing system. . . . It may without exaggeration be stated that, in proportion to the numbers employed, there are no occupations, with one or two questionable exceptions such as needle-grinding, in which so much disease is produced as in dress-making, or which present so fearful a catalogue of distressing and frequently fatal maladies.
>
> (PP 1843, vol. 13: 122)

This concern was echoed by a number of journalists over the next few decades. An account of apprentice dressmakers' conditions published in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1846 expressed similar concern for their health:

> It is lamentable to see the change that sometimes comes over the country girl shortly after her admission as an apprentice. Arriving, perhaps, from her happy village home, where she has been the pride of honest and industrious parents, her cheeks redolent of rosy health, her step elastic, her spirits light and