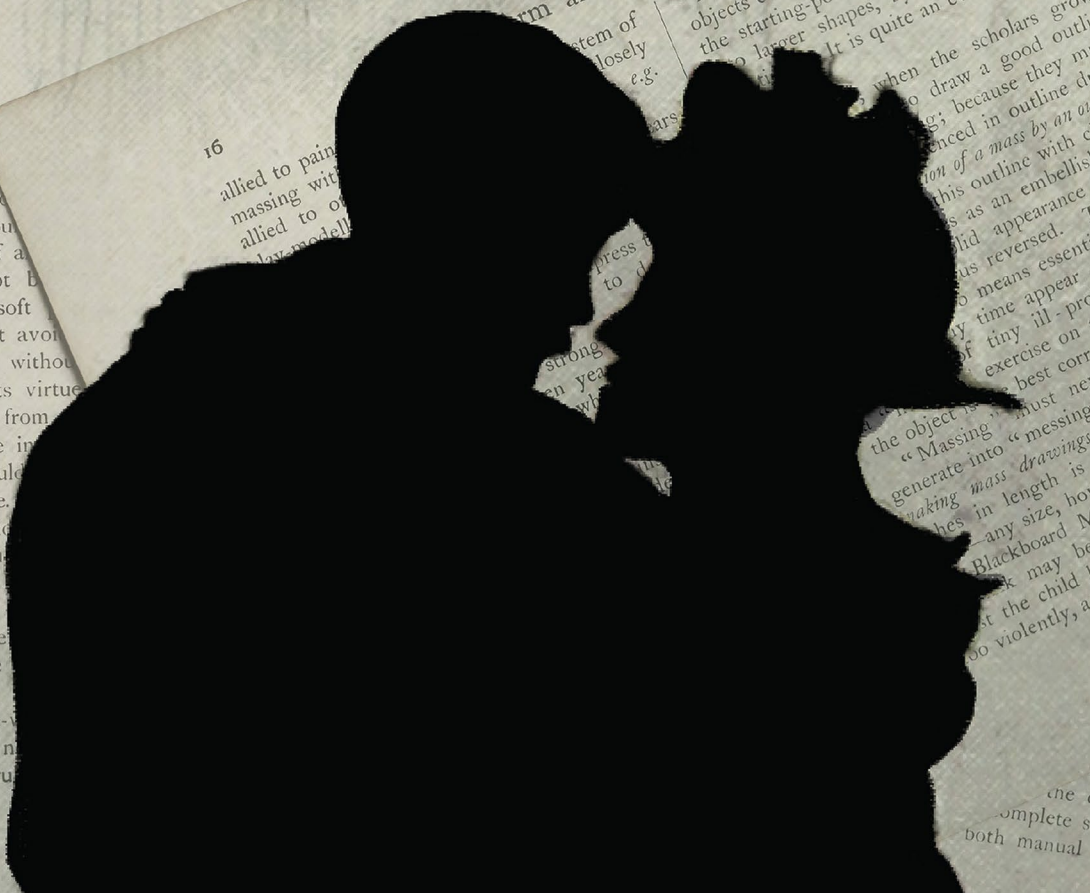


# BREAKING CONVENTIONS

## FIVE COUPLES IN SEARCH OF MARRIAGE-CAREER BALANCE AT THE TURN OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

PATRICIA AUSPOS





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## 4. A Partnership of Equals: Beatrice and Sidney Webb

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The extraordinary partnership that Beatrice Potter and Sidney Webb embarked on when they married in 1892 spanned almost fifty years and left a lasting mark on British sociology, social welfare policy, and public administration. Born in 1858 and groomed for a high society marriage, Beatrice grew up believing that love and career were incompatible goals for a woman. She married the lower class Sidney, a Fabian Socialist and a clerk in the Colonial Office, because she believed he would be the ideal partner for her work. Their partnership was fundamentally egalitarian and showcased Beatrice's talents as much as Sidney's. They wanted their relationship to be a model for others.

Instead of having children, the Webbs wrote books together. They investigated social and economic issues, campaigned for sweeping changes in education and social policy, sat on government commissions, and founded the London School of Economics. They are buried together in Westminster Abbey, the only non-Royal couple to be so honored. The Webbs were a deeply devoted couple who became "singularly at one in heart and intellect," Beatrice wrote.<sup>1</sup> But their seemingly idyllic union was marred for many years by Beatrice's yearning for a more romantically compelling partner than Sidney and her sublimated

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1 Beatrice Webb, Diary, 12 January 1934. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:rut323dac>. Beatrice's manuscript and typescript diaries (along with the Webbs's letters) are archived in the London School of Economics and Political Science, British Library of Political and Economic Science, Passfield Papers. I cite the digitized manuscript diaries in the London School of Economics Digital Library. If the digitized link fails to load or key pages are missing or unreadable, I cite the digitized typescript copies. Dates are consistent with those in *The Diary of Beatrice Webb*, ed. by Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie, 4 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1982–1985), an indispensable resource for scholars as well as general readers.

passion for the dominating politician Joseph Chamberlain, whom she had earlier hoped to marry.

## Upbringing

The eighth child in a family of nine surviving daughters, Beatrice Potter grew up in a world of wealth, influence and privilege, among “a class of persons who habitually give orders.”<sup>2</sup> Both her grandfathers were members of Parliament. Her father, Richard Potter, lost the fortune he inherited, but made another as a railway investor and director. The Potter household upheld many gendered stereotypes of male and female roles but deviated from others. Beatrice described her father as “the only man I ever knew who genuinely believed that women were superior to men, and acted as if he did.”<sup>3</sup> He treated his wife and daughters as confidantes and asked for their advice in his business dealings, although he generally did not follow it.<sup>4</sup> According to Beatrice, his “love for his children was more like that of a mother than a father”, and it was he, not her mother, who provided “the light and warmth of the home.”<sup>5</sup> She and her sisters remembered Richard Potter as loving and affectionate, but there was another, darker side to his personality: he had a strong authoritarian streak, and sometimes treated his loved ones with contempt, cruelty, and bullying.<sup>6</sup> Beatrice herself recognized that her father controlled the family destinies; the household “lived where it suited him to live, and he came and went as he chose.”<sup>7</sup>

The Potters’ union was a love match, and Beatrice wrote that Richard “worshipped” his wife. Nevertheless, during most of her married life, Lawrencina Potter was a disappointed and dissatisfied woman. The daughter of a Member of Parliament who had raised her to be

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2 Beatrice Webb, *My Apprenticeship* (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1971; first published, 1926), p. 65.

3 Ibid., p. 35.

4 Barbara Caine, *Destined to Be Wives: The Sisters of Beatrice Webb* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p.16.

5 Love: BP to SW, 30 December 1891, London School of Economics and Political Science, British Library of Political and Economic Science, Passfield Papers. “Light and warmth”: BW, *Apprenticeship*, p. 35.

6 Caine, pp. 15, 16, 19–20.

7 BW, *Apprenticeship*, pp. 35, 36.

“a scholar and a gentlewoman,” Lawrencina expected that Richard Potter would enter Parliament and they would build a life around their mutual interests in politics and religion. This hoped-for ideal was never realized, however. Instead, Richard had to earn his fortune and spent long periods away on business trips while Lawrencina remained at home, incapacitated by frequent pregnancies and ill-health. Although she enjoyed the friendship of several of England’s leading intellectuals, her intellectual aspirations were largely unfulfilled, and her time was spent caring for her growing family and maintaining the large houses that Richard Potter rented for the family. She published one novel, but it was not well received.<sup>8</sup>

Lawrencina was further disappointed in being the mother of daughters rather than sons. After her only son died at the age of two (Beatrice was six), Lawrencina largely withdrew from the family’s social life. Isolating herself in her bedroom, studying foreign grammars and religious texts, she relied on her daughters to serve as housekeepers, hostesses, and traveling companions for their father. Lawrencina’s unhappiness made it difficult for her to provide much affection to her children. All the Potter daughters found Lawrencina to be cold, stern, and difficult to please, but Beatrice in particular felt unloved and displaced by her mother’s affection for her younger brother and her younger sister, who became the pet of the family.<sup>9</sup> Beatrice would later write with sympathy about her mother’s difficult life and blighted intellectual aspirations, but she did not seem to see a connection between her mother’s frustrated ambition and her own ambivalence about marriage and childrearing. Not feeling much sympathy with or affection from her sisters, Beatrice grew up lonely and unhappy in the midst of her large family.

The Potter household provided a rich environment for Beatrice’s intellectual development if a crippling one for her emotional growth. Her parents enjoyed the friendship of prominent scientists, philosophers and politicians — Herbert Spencer, Thomas Huxley, and Sir Francis Galton were frequent guests — and the girls were encouraged to read widely and discuss intellectual topics. Lawrencina

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8 Ibid., pp. 37–41; Caine, p. 24.

9 BW, *Apprenticeship*, p. 36; Caine, p. 27.

arranged for their education with great care. Tutors taught them classical languages, mathematics, music, history, and geography; they were sent to finishing schools, and had extensive opportunities for foreign travel.<sup>10</sup> Her younger sister was being tutored for the entrance examinations for Oxford University in the late 1870s, but Beatrice was not encouraged to develop academic interests.<sup>11</sup> “Beatrice is the only one of my children who is below average in intelligence” was Lawrencina’s early judgment.<sup>12</sup> Because she was frequently ill, the only formal schooling Beatrice received was a few months at a boarding school when she was seventeen. But she read widely on her own, and won the special attention and affection of Herbert Spencer, the philosopher and sociologist who was a close friend of both her parents. The interest and encouragement he paid to Beatrice — teaching her his ideas about the scientific categorization of human society, evaluating her philosophical essays, and comparing her favorably to the young George Eliot — were critical to her intellectual development.

Despite the unconventional aspects of their upbringing, Beatrice and her sisters were groomed to take their place in the world as the wives of men who were successful in business, politics, and the professions. Each spring, the Potters rented a house in London so the girls could attend the balls, dinners, and parties that constituted the London “Season”; they officially “came out” and were presented at Court. Although two sisters had flirted with unconventional lifestyles, by the time Beatrice was in her early twenties her older sisters had all made traditionally “good” marriages to upstanding, successful, mostly wealthy, men. Not all the sisters had happy marriages, but all were conventional wives, bearing and raising children, supervising their children’s education, managing large households, and devoting themselves to their husband’s well-being.<sup>13</sup>

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10 Caine, pp. 35, 43–44.

11 Ibid., p. 41.

12 BW, *Apprenticeship*, p. 36.

13 See Caine, pp. 59–61, 68, 76–77. Theresa Potter gave up her desire to study nursing in the face of familial opposition in 1874. Kate, the second oldest child, rejected two proposals of marriage in the mid-1870s, lived apart from the family in London, and volunteered with Octavia Hill’s Charity Organization Society. She married Leonard Courtney, a Liberal Member of Parliament, in 1883, when she was thirty-five.

## Leading a Double Life, 1882–1885

Beatrice's halting rebellion against family models and expectations started when she was twenty-four, just a few months after her mother's death in 1882. Her diary records both her reservations about participating in a social life designed to result in marriage to a prominent man and her growing ambition "to lead a life with some result" of her own, despite the obvious obstacles. Influenced by Herbert Spencer, she was interested in using scientific principles to understand how human society was organized.<sup>14</sup> Intent on writing a book, she embarked on a rigorous course of study so she could learn observation and experimentation, become competent in numerical evidence, and develop a literary style. She read philosophy, mathematics, and literature, and arranged to be taught biology and physiology. Her resolution was sorely tested as family responsibilities claimed more and more of her time. As the older of two unmarried daughters, she was obliged to act as her father's hostess, supervise his households in London and the country, and take charge of her younger sister. Nevertheless, she managed to study for three hours a day before the rest of the household arose at eight o'clock.

Reconciling what she would later term the "rival pulls" of family affection and intellectual curiosity was no easy task.<sup>15</sup> Beatrice resolved to conduct herself in such a way that her family would have no cause for criticism: "Now my honest desire is to appear commonplace and sensible so that none of my dear kind family will think it necessary to remark to themselves or to me that I am otherwise than ordinary; to be on the right side of ordinary is the perfection of prudence in a young woman, and will save her from much heartburning and mortification of spirit."<sup>16</sup> But four months later she raged, "At present I feel like a caged animal, bound up by the luxury, comfort and respectability of my position. I can't get the training I want without neglecting my duty."<sup>17</sup>

Beatrice dissembled at social gatherings as well as at home. She attended the events of the London Season in the spring of 1883 as though in camouflage, deliberately trying to mask the intellectual side of her

14 Diary, 13 August 1882. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:diy675wal>

15 BW, *Apprenticeship*, p. 133.

16 Diary, 25 November 1882. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:diy675wal>

17 Diary, 31 March 1883. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:diy675wal>

nature. “[I]t is a curious experience” she wrote in her diary, “moving about among men and women, talking much, as you are obliged to do, and never mentioning those thoughts and problems which are your *real life* and which absorb, in their pursuit and solution, all the earnestness of your nature.”<sup>18</sup> Beatrice’s determination to hide her real interests from her “dear kind” family and their social world suggests a healthy instinct for selfpreservation. But it also reflected her own deep ambivalence about her intellectual aspirations: Despite the pleasure she derived from her studies, Beatrice was beset by doubts about her capacity for intellectual work and the propriety of her efforts. Her diary entries vacillate between a belief that she could accomplish something of real worth if only she could “devote myself to one subject”, and an equally pervasive fear that her writing was hopelessly “amateurish” and her thoughts too subjective.<sup>19</sup> Having no opportunity for advanced schooling and being forced to work in virtual isolation, she had no way to judge the value of her work.

Beatrice herself was somewhat repelled by her ambition. Brought up in a society that valued women more for the pleasantness of their personalities than for the sharpness of their minds, she faulted herself for being self-promoting rather than self-effacing, assertive rather than compliant, selfish rather than self-sacrificing. Explaining her attempts to keep her “intellectual” life “hidden from the world”, Beatrice admitted, “in my heart of hearts I’m ashamed of it.”<sup>20</sup> She had begun to question the traditional female role, but she was reluctant to cast it aside altogether. On the eve of the London Season in 1883, she struggled to decide whether she should “*give myself up* to Society, and make it my aim to succeed therein” or do only as much as duty required and spend the bulk of her time on her studies. In the end, she resolved to devote herself to the “cultivation of social instincts” because it was the more conventional option. “It is going with the stream, and pleasing my people [...] it is *taking* opportunities instead of *making* them; it is risking less and walking in a wellbeaten track in pleasant company [...] and

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18 Diary, 24 April 1883. Emphasis in the original. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:cal528buz>

19 Diary, 24 March 1883. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:diy675wal>

20 Diary, 24 April 1883. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:cal528buz>



lastly, and perhaps this is the reason which weighs most with me, there is less presumption in the choice," she wrote in her diary.<sup>21</sup>

Eager to learn more about the lives of the urban poor, Beatrice volunteered with the social reformer Octavia Hill's Charity Organization Society in the East End slums in the spring of 1883, replacing her older sister, Kate, who left the Society when she married. Founded by Hill in 1869, the Charity Organization Society had made volunteer charity work an acceptable activity for a well-to-do unmarried woman. But Beatrice's motivation was far from conventional. Trained to distinguish the "deserving" poor from the "undeserving" poor, COS workers were expected to help the families and individuals who seemed capable of bettering themselves; the volunteers dispensed moral advice as well as other forms of assistance to those deemed worthy of aid. Beatrice was less interested in improving the morality and lifestyles of individual families than in learning about the underlying causes of poverty and unemployment.<sup>22</sup>

In the fall of 1883, Beatrice carried her exploration of social conditions farther afield. She spent a few weeks in the working-class village of Bacup in northern England — a very different experience of poverty from that in London's slums. Although the family she stayed with was distantly related to her mother, Beatrice lived with them under an assumed identity, passing herself off as a working girl from another village so she could more easily win their trust and more closely observe their lives and their religious, social, and cooperative organizations.<sup>23</sup> Her experiences in London and Bacup fired Beatrice's enthusiasm for hands-on social investigation. In January 1885 she became a rent collector and manager of the newly opened Katherine Buildings, near the docks in London's East End. Operated by the COS, they housed a very poor population of dock workers and casual laborers. Beatrice and a female co-worker were responsible for selecting the tenants, keeping the rent accounts, and evicting tenants who created disturbances or fell behind in their rent. Beatrice began compiling detailed information about the

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21 Diary, 22 February 1883. Emphasis in the original. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:diy675wal>

22 Deborah Epstein Nord, *The Apprenticeship of Beatrice Webb* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), pp. 122–23; BW, *Apprenticeship*, p. 186.

23 On the importance of assuming different identities in Beatrice's life, see Nord, pp. 154–55.

residents' families, work histories, and housing and emigration patterns, and had plans for collecting similar information from residents in other buildings.<sup>24</sup>

These activities expanded Beatrice's world beyond the narrow circle of her family and social class. She moved freely about London, traveling between the opulence of the West End and the squalor of the East End neighborhoods, and developed a network of unmarried women friends among the volunteers and writers whom she came to know in London. Well aware that her interest in social analysis rather than traditional social work set her apart from her female peers, Beatrice was eager to present a more conventional image to the outside world. She was exhilarated by her new freedom, but still desirous of being treated "as a pleasant ordinary women." She reassured herself as much as her father, "An interesting hardworking life, with *just a touch* of adventure is so delightful, so long as one does not get stamped with that most damaging stamp: 'Eccentricity.'"<sup>25</sup>

### An All-consuming Passion, 1883–1886

The ambivalence Beatrice manifested during the mid-1880s as she vacillated between the typical life of an upper-middle-class woman and the pioneering life of an unmarried working woman was exacerbated by her equally ambivalent relationship with Joseph Chamberlain. A Cabinet minister and leader of the radical wing of the Liberal Party, Chamberlain combined a commanding personality, a keen intelligence, and good looks with wealth, social position, and political power. When Beatrice met him at a dinner party at the end of May or beginning of June 1883, he was forty-seven, twice widowed, and reportedly looking for a new wife. Beatrice was twenty-five, wellconnected, intelligent and wealthy, but far less experienced in courtship and still uncertain whether she wanted to devote her life to marriage or work. She fell passionately in love with Chamberlain but was unwilling to stifle her independent spirit and become the type of compliant, self-effacing woman that his domineering personality required in a wife. She spent four years

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24 Nord, pp. 138–39 and 144–46.

25 BP to Richard Potter [? August 1885], Passfield Papers. Emphasis in the original.

agonizing over whether she would accept a proposal if it came and fighting off depression whenever it appeared that there would be no proposal. Even after Chamberlain married in 1888, Beatrice was unable to free herself from her obsession with him.

The Potter-Chamberlain relationship has fascinated Beatrice's biographers but the details of their encounters are not always clear. Chamberlain left no account of the relationship and Beatrice's diary entries are frequently oblique and leave many gaps.<sup>26</sup> Her initial reaction to him was ambivalent: "I do, and I don't like him," she wrote in her diary.<sup>27</sup> As they saw more of each other at various social events in London during the summer of 1883, Beatrice's interest grew. She spent a week at Chamberlain's London residence in September 1883, as the guest of his daughter. Apparently believing herself to be under inspection as a matrimonial candidate, Beatrice continued to express ambivalence to her sisters and in her diary.<sup>28</sup> When Chamberlain spent several days at her father's home in January 1884, his unequivocal statements about the subordinate role he expected his wife to play and Beatrice's reluctance to accept such a position created doubts on both sides, and caused Beatrice much heartache.<sup>29</sup> By May 1884 Beatrice was convinced that she had "loved and lost", but the story was by no means over.<sup>30</sup> She acknowledged that Chamberlain "had been the wiser of the two" for not pursuing the relationship, but she sank into a severe depression that lasted several months. Repeatedly berating herself for not being the compliant female that Chamberlain wanted, Beatrice despaired at

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26 Kitty Dobbs Muggeridge, the daughter of Beatrice's younger sister Rosalind, wrote that, according to family accounts, Joseph Chamberlain was once seen hurrying away from the Potter house in London, "pale-faced and distraught", while Beatrice was found inside in tears, sobbing that she had just refused him. Kitty Muggeridge and Ruth Adam, *Beatrice Webb, A Life 1858-1943* (New York: Knopf, 1968), p. 93. There is no other evidence that Chamberlain proposed to Beatrice, and her diary entries and correspondence with her sisters suggest otherwise.

27 Diary, 3 June 1883. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:cal528buz>

28 BP to Mary Playne [October 1883], in *The Letters of Sydney and Beatrice Webb*, ed. by Norman Mackenzie, 3 vols. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1978), I, p. 17. Diary, 26 September 1883; 5 November 1883; New Year's Eve 1883. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:cal528buz>

29 Beatrice recorded their differences in considerable detail in her Diary, 12 January 1884. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:cal528buz>

30 Diary, 9 May 1884. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:cal528buz>

finding personal happiness, and strove to dull her pain through the “narcotic” of her work with the Charity Organization Society.<sup>31</sup>

A renewal of contact at the end of January 1885 — after Beatrice had taken on the management of Katherine Buildings — left her just as unsure about Chamberlain’s intentions and her own desires.<sup>32</sup> They did not meet again until late July 1885, when one of Beatrice’s sisters hosted a picnic in an attempt to move the issue towards a resolution. Beatrice, humiliated by what she took as Chamberlain’s arrogance and disdain, would later recall that day as “the most painful one of my life.”<sup>33</sup> Stung by Chamberlain’s apparent indifference, Beatrice contemplated not seeing him again.<sup>34</sup> But in November 1885, she discussed her feelings for Chamberlain with his sister (whom she was visiting), and was bluntly informed, “The brother had never thought of me.”<sup>35</sup> Still Beatrice could not free herself from her obsession with Chamberlain. On two occasions — once by letter in March 1886, and once in person in July 1887, when he again came as a guest to her father’s house, at her invitation — Beatrice told Chamberlain himself that she loved him.<sup>36</sup> During their conversation in 1887, she rebuked him for suggesting they should remain friends when their relationship was so painful to her, and insisted that they not see each other again.<sup>37</sup> This time, her resolution held. Chamberlain traveled to America a few months later, as the head of a diplomatic trade mission. He returned to

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31 Diary, 28 July 1884. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:cal528buz>. “Narcotic” of work: Diary, 8 March 1885. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:tag606voq>

32 Diary, 29 January [1885], and [1 February] 1885. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:tag606voq>

33 Diary, 12 [22?] May 1886. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:yom975poh>

34 BP to Mary Playne [?late July 1885], in *Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb*, I, pp. 36–37.

35 Beatrice did not write about this painful conversation in her diary until five months later, on 6 March 1886. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:yal805mem>

36 By letter: Diary, 6 March 1886 and 15 March 1886. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:yal805mem>. In person: Diary, 9 June 1887, 8 August 1887 [?August 1887]. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:yom975poh>. See also, the comment Beatrice wrote on the letter Chamberlain sent her on 7 August 1887, quoted in *Diary of Beatrice Webb*, I, p. 211, and editor’s notes, pp. 208–11.

37 Beatrice tore the 1887 entries (between June 1 and August 11) describing these events out of her diary in 1887 and sealed them up, along with several letters from Chamberlain. She did not reopen the packet until May 1890, when she added a note explaining what she had done (Diary, May 1890 note penned at the end of manuscript vol.14, <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:zib295pim>). See also, *Diary of Beatrice Webb*, I, editor’s notes, pp. 208–11, 333.

England in March 1888, secretly engaged to Mary Endicott, the twenty-three year old daughter of the US Secretary for War.<sup>38</sup> Beatrice did not meet Chamberlain again until 1900, but his hold on her imagination persisted.

Beatrice was well aware that she was drawn to Chamberlain against her better judgment, a realization that in no way reduced the power of his attraction. She characterized her struggle as a conflict between “the intellectual and the sensual”, between Reason and Emotion, between “principle [and] feeling.”<sup>39</sup> She knew that she and Chamberlain held incompatible views and understood that if they were to marry, she would have to give way to him. In Beatrice’s view, Chamberlain was “a despot” who ran his household as dictatorially as the political machine he headed in Birmingham. She believed that he wanted a wife who would be completely subordinate to him and not hold — or at least not express — independent opinions. She did not try to hide either her incapacity or her disdain for such a role. What he characterized as “intelligent sympathy” in a woman, she termed “servility”; he angered her by his attempt to assert “absolute mastery” in his conversation and social relations with her; she disappointed him by refusing to yield and openly disagreeing with him.<sup>40</sup> She recognized, too, that if she married him, she would be forced to give up her intellectual aspirations and accept the traditional role of a woman who lived through — and for — her husband. As his wife, she would need to “separate, even more than I do now, my intellect from my feeling [...]. I should become par excellence the mother and the woman of the world intent only on fulfilling practical duties and gaining practical ends,” Beatrice warned herself.<sup>41</sup> Her family and friends confirmed her assessment; most cautioned her against marrying Chamberlain. Such a marriage would

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38 History WestMidlands, “The Mistress of Joseph Chamberlain’s Highbury — Mary Endicott Chamberlain” (podcast, November 25, 2019), <https://historywm.com/podcasts/mary-endicott>. Chamberlain wooed Mary in a traditional manner, sending her red roses after their first meeting.

39 Diary, 10 December 1886, [https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:yom975poh;BW, Apprenticeship; BW, Diary, New Year’s Eve, 1883](https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:yom975poh;BW,Apprenticeship;BW,Diary,NewYear'sEve,1883), <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:cal528buz>

40 Diary, 12 January 1884. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:cal528buz>

41 Diary, 16 March 1884. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:cal528buz>

be “a tragedy — a murder of your independent nature,” her sister Kate counselled.<sup>42</sup>

Beatrice devoted much thought and heartache over many years trying to understand why, despite this basic incompatibility, she was so attracted to Chamberlain. In part, she saw a union with Chamberlain as an opportunity to increase her own “prestige” and “importance.” She candidly acknowledged: “Ambition and superstition began the feeling. A desire to play a part in the world, and a belief that as the wife of a great man I should play a bigger part than as a spinster or an ordinary married woman.”<sup>43</sup> Playing a helpmate role to Chamberlain “would not have been a happy life, but it might have been a noble one,” she mused.<sup>44</sup> Beatrice’s conviction that she could accomplish more as a political hostess than through her own work reflected both her personal insecurity and the position of women in the 1880s. Powerful women in their own right were the rare exception; public prominence and influence was far more easily acquired through marriage to a prominent man. Her self-doubts were exacerbated by the contrast between Chamberlain’s political prominence and her own obscurity. She saw him as an “extraordinary man,” and always referred to him as “the Great Man.” She, in contrast, was merely “an ordinary young woman” still unsure whether her intellectual gifts were sufficient to fulfill her aspirations.<sup>45</sup>

Beatrice’s obsession with Chamberlain reflected more than just displaced ambition. She responded to him with an almost overwhelming physical passion. The discovery of her own sexuality transformed Beatrice’s life. “The woman’s nature has been stirred to its depths,” she wrote a year after meeting Chamberlain. The intensity of her feelings was devastating: “Last of all came — passion — with its burning heat, an emotion which had for long smoldered unnoticed, burst into flame, and burnt down intellectual interests, personal ambition, and all other selfdeveloping notions,” she marveled.<sup>46</sup>

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42 Kate Courtney to BP, July 1885, written after the disastrous picnic she hosted on Beatrice’s behalf, quoted in *Diary of Beatrice Webb*, I, editor’s note, p. 135.

43 Diary, 22 April 1884. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:cal528buz>

44 Diary, 28 July 1884. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:cal528buz>

45 Diary, 16 March 1884. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:cal528buz>

46 Diary, 15 October 1884. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:tag606voq>

Chamberlain elicited Beatrice's passion, in part, *because* of the masterful way he conducted himself and the dominance and superiority he exuded. She wrote in her diary:

Joseph Chamberlain with his gloom and seriousness, with absence of any gallantry or faculty for saying pretty nothings, the simple way he assumes, almost asserts, that you stand on a level far beneath him and that all that concerns you is trivial; that you yourself are without importance in the world except in so far as you might be related to him: this sort of courtship (if it is to be called courtship) fascinates, at least, my imagination.<sup>47</sup>

Chamberlain embodied a key element of the Victorian ideal of masculinity — mastery — and Beatrice found this sexually exciting. She compared his working of the Birmingham crowd at a political rally to the way a man established power over a woman. After seeing the crowd's reaction to his speech, she reported in her diary, "It might have been a woman listening to the words of her lover! Perfect response, unquestioning receptivity. Who *reasons* with his mistress? The wise man asserts his will, urges it with warmth or bitterness, and flavours it with flattery and occasional appeals to moral sentiments."<sup>48</sup> For a Victorian woman, even an independently-minded one, the idea of being attached to another, stronger personality was compelling even though — indeed, *because* — it meant submerging one's own personality in another's. Alice Freeman Palmer struggled with the same issue, and Elsie Clews Parsons thought that a woman's tendency to lose interest in everything but her lover was one of the most damaging aspects of being female.

The attributes that Chamberlain wanted in a wife — submission, selfsacrifice, obedience — were the very virtues that Victorian women were taught to cultivate. Beatrice did not live up to this ideal, but instead of rejecting it, she blamed herself for failing to meet it. Insecure about her talents, uncertain about committing herself to an unconventional lifestyle, and struggling to define herself as a professional, Beatrice found the idea of marriage to Joseph Chamberlain appealing because it offered a ready-made identity and well-defined responsibilities: it would provide her with a "settled and defined occupation" without

47 Diary, 16 March 1884. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:cal528buz>

48 Diary, 16 March 1884. Emphasis in the original. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:cal528buz>

requiring her to pioneer a new role.<sup>49</sup> If she married Chamberlain she would acquire prominence through his position and become the type of woman her family and social world admired. The part of Beatrice that clung to the traditional and disdained the unconventional welcomed this, but the part of her that longed to make a significant contribution of her own rebelled against the subordination and vicariousness of such a relationship.

So painful were the seemingly mutually exclusive choices — losing her independence or losing Chamberlain — that Beatrice remained in a paralysis of indecision for years. She repeatedly asserted that the issue was over and done with, only to return to it again and again in her diaries, questioning, reevaluating, reinterpreting her own behavior as well as Chamberlain's. Her inability to resolve her feelings or end the ambiguity of the relationship was an added source of unhappiness. "Doublemindedness has run right through — a perpetual struggle between conscience on the one hand and feeling on the other — I had not the courage to follow either to the bitter end — hence my misery," she wrote in the spring of 1886.<sup>50</sup>

### Embracing a Career, 1885–1890

After the humiliating visit from Chamberlain in the summer of 1885, when he treated her with rudeness and indifference, Beatrice resolved to embrace a future of work with courage and determination, and planned to record her progress with care.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, the uncertainty with Chamberlain had undermined her confidence in herself as a worker as well as a woman. "[M]y intellectual faculty is only mirage, I have no special mission," she had despaired in 1884.<sup>52</sup> The prospect of spending her life as an unmarried career woman filled her with dread.<sup>53</sup> Apart

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49 Diary, 9 May 1884, and 22 April 1884. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:cal528buz>

50 Diary, 6 March 1886. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:yal805mem>

51 Rudeness and indifference: Diary, 12 [22?] May 1886. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:yom975poh>. Resolved: Diary, 7 August 1885. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:tag606voq>.

52 Diary, 9 May 1884. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:cal528buz>

53 Diary, 5 November 1883. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:cal528buz>; 19 November 1884, <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:tag606voq>; and 28 May 1886. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:yom975poh>



from the inevitable loneliness, she feared a lifetime of work would “unsex” her and cultivate “masculine qualities” and “masculine interests.” Writing to her father, she drew a harsh portrait of “the working sisterhood” of women who were shut out from “matrimonial career[s]”: they were “exceedingly pathetic” women who exercised their “somewhat abnormal but useful qualities” while leading “lives [...] without joy or lightheartedness.”<sup>54</sup>

The frequent discussion of the relationship between work and gender in Beatrice’s diaries in the 1880s underscores how troubling she found this issue. Her concerns echo the judgments of Victorian scientists and philosophers about the female mind and the unnatural and harmful effects of intellectual work on women. Herbert Spencer, Beatrice’s early mentor and intellectual champion, was a prominent contributor to the debate, and his views likely exercised a powerful influence on her. In *The Principles of Sociology* (1876) Spencer argued that the division of labor that led men to earn a living and women to take care of the home was the most “progressive” and efficient method of social organization. He understood that since women outnumbered men in Victorian England, some women would be forced to earn a living, but warned:

no considerable alteration in the careers of women in general can be or should be, produced, and *further*, that any extensive change in the education of women, made with the view of fitting them for business or professions would be mischievous. If women comprehend all that is contained in the domestic sphere, they would ask no other.<sup>55</sup>

Beatrice compiled a long list of the ways middle-class working women transgressed gender norms. She was particularly appalled by women who gave public addresses. When she attended a lecture by Annie Besant, the social reformer and women’s rights activist, Beatrice admired her skill but recoiled from the spectacle of a woman speaking in public. “[T]o see her speaking made me shudder. It is not womanly to thrust yourself before the world. A woman, in all the relations of her life, should be sought.”<sup>56</sup> Female administrators were “unsexed” because they

54 BP to Richard Potter [early November 1885]. Passfield Papers.

55 Quoted in Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian England* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 152–53; emphasis in the original.

56 Diary, 27 November 1887. Emphasis in the original. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:yom975poh>

exercised “justice, push and severity” in their work. “Learned women” had no outlet for their emotions. Rent collectors and charity workers were more acceptable because they were guided by “feeling more than thought” and could develop “the emotional part of their nature.”<sup>57</sup> She most “revered” the “unknown saints” (such as her sister, Kate) who devoted themselves to good works but sought no recognition for their efforts.<sup>58</sup> Unable to free herself from cultural stereotypes that defined her ambition and talents as “abnormal”, Beatrice looked for careers where women could excel by bringing a “*woman’s temperament*” — meaning feeling and empathy — to their work. Solving social problems was one of those areas, she believed.<sup>59</sup>

Shattered by the painful encounter with Chamberlain in July 1885, Beatrice resolved to establish herself in such a career and recover from her attachment to him. The winter of 1885–86, when her struggle began in earnest, was a particularly bleak period, both personally and professionally. When her father suffered a major stroke in early December, Beatrice left London to become his caretaker in his country home. Distraught over Chamberlain, denied the opportunity to work, and forced to spend her time “companionizing a failing mind”, Beatrice despaired about her past and future.<sup>60</sup> “I am never at peace with myself now — the whole of my past life looks like an irretrievable blunder, the last two years like a nightmare!” she agonized in her diary.<sup>61</sup> Deeply depressed, she contemplated her own death and wrote out instructions for how her possessions should be distributed if she were to die.<sup>62</sup>

Nevertheless, as Beatrice would later realize, this period of enforced isolation was critical to her professional development.<sup>63</sup> Freed from the distractions of London’s social life and the demands of managing Katherine Buildings, she studied economics and history in order to understand the unemployment and poverty she had encountered in London, and began to put her thoughts into writing. Her almost suicidal

57 Diary, 12 August 1885. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:tag606voq>

58 BP to Richard Potter [early November 1885]. Passfield Papers.

59 Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

60 Diary, 19 December 1885. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:tag606voq>

61 Diary, 11 February 1886. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:tag606voq>

62 BP, Testamentary Letter, January 1, 1886, in *Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb*, I, p. 50.

63 BW, *Apprenticeship*, p. 289.

depression did not lift until she had a small professional success. When she submitted a letter to the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, the journal published it as a short article, entitled “A Lady’s View of the Unemployed at the East”, under her name, in February 1886. “A turning point in my life,” she scrawled above the note from the Gazette’s editor before pasting it into her diary.<sup>64</sup>

Seeing her work in print and knowing that people (including Chamberlain) were reading and discussing her opinions gave Beatrice hope and courage.<sup>65</sup> Her friendship with Charles Booth soon provided her with an opportunity to delve more deeply into social issues. Booth, a wealthy merchant, shipping company owner, and social researcher, was married to her cousin Mary, and Beatrice had known and admired him for years. In the spring of 1886, he embarked on an ambitious exploration of poverty and employment in London. The massive study (eventually entitled *Life and Labour of the People in London* and published between 1889 and 1903 in seventeen volumes) broke new ground by combining quantitative data on employment and unemployment, wages, rents, and household size with observations on the daily routines and personal circumstances of London’s poor.<sup>66</sup> Aware of the information Beatrice had compiled on the Katherine Buildings tenants, and her interest in the methodological challenges of studying poverty, Booth asked her to join the small committee that was advising him on the study design in the spring of 1886 (just weeks after she told Chamberlain how she felt about him).<sup>67</sup> A year later, she became one of the researchers on Booth’s project.

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64 Diary, final pages of mss. vol. 7 (February 1886), <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:tag606voq>. The article was published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* on February 18, 1886. Beatrice’s diary entry of 27 March 1886 also identifies the acceptance of her article as a “turning point [...] a small sop to my almost wrecked ambition.” <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:yal805mem>

65 Chamberlain wrote to Beatrice asking for more details on her thinking, precipitating an awkward exchange of letters that ended with her informing him, “I could not lie to the man I loved” (Diary, 6 March 1886. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:yal805mem>).

66 Nord, pp. 155, 181–84. See also the discussion of the methodology on the London School of Economics website: <https://booth.lse.ac.uk/learn-more/what-was-the-inquiry>.

67 Diary, 17 April 1886. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:yom975poh>. BP to Mary Booth [?March 1886] and [?early March 1886] in *Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb*, I, pp. 55–56.

Beatrice spent the summer of 1886 completing the first of several lengthy essays on economic history and theory. She worried that she would be thought “conceited” because of the forceful way she stated her views. “It is this hopeless independence of thought that makes my mind so distasteful to so many people and rightly so,” she reflected, “for a woman *should* be more or less dependent and receptive.”<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, she resolved to remain true to herself, and circulated the paper for review and comment among her friends.

Having arranged for her sisters to take over Richard Potter’s care for four months a year, twenty-eight-year-old Beatrice returned to London in the spring of 1887 to begin an investigation of poverty in Tower Hamlets in the East End for Booth. She spent several weeks observing workers at the docks, gathering information about dockside employment, compiling statistics, and interviewing laborers, their families, and employers. In striking contrast to the tortured selfdenigration of earlier years, she wrote with new confidence in her diary, “I see more reason for believing that the sacrifices I made to a special intellectual desire were warranted by a certain amount of faculty [...]. I feel power, I feel capacity.”<sup>69</sup> It was not just bravado.

Several months later, the *Nineteenth Century*, a monthly journal that encouraged the exchange of ideas among the intelligentsia, published an article by Beatrice about the dockworkers. She aimed to provide local color and context, not just bare statistics, to explain the worker’s lives. “[I]t is *the* work I have always wanted to do, the realization of my youthful ambition,” Beatrice rejoiced.<sup>70</sup> More successes followed. Her editor at the *Nineteenth Century* urged her to write two additional articles for publication. Already committed to Booth to study the system of “sweated” labor that paid women for piecework tailoring done in shops or at home, Beatrice resolved to “dramatize” her account by

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68 Diary, 14 September 1886; emphasis in the original. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:yom975poh>

69 Diary, 30 March 1887. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:xih515bal>. See also, Diary, 22 January 1887. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:yom975poh>

70 Beatrice Potter, “The Dock Life of East London”, *Nineteenth Century*, 22 (October, 1887), 483–99. Local color: BW, *Apprenticeship*, p. 301. Diary, 30 September, 1887. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:xih515bal>. Emphasis in the original.

learning the tailoring trade and writing about the working conditions from the inside, as she had done when she wrote about life in Bacup.<sup>71</sup>

When she returned to the East End in the spring of 1888, Beatrice added sewing lessons to days full of interviews, observations, and statistical analysis. After she acquired some basic skills, she dressed herself as a working class woman, adjusted her accent, and sought employment as a “trouser hand.” She worked in one establishment for two consecutive days, and several other employers hired her for a few hours of work.

Beatrice was not a very accomplished seamstress, but she was making a mark as a social investigator. In May 1888 she gave evidence as an expert witness before the House of Lords Commission on the Sweating System. Several months later, she published two articles about sweated labor in the *Nineteenth Century*. The first was a straightforward analysis about the employment and living conditions of sweatshop workers in the tailoring trade. The second, entitled “Pages from a Work-Girl’s Diary” was her personal account of working in the sweating industry, which generated a wider readership. Her confidence grew and she again believed she had “a special mission” to help solve the social questions of her day.<sup>72</sup> Still working for Booth, she began a study of London’s Jewish immigrant community.

Despite her professional success, Beatrice’s inner battles persisted. Determined to devote her life to the well-being of others, she struggled to rid herself of vanity, egotism, and ambition. Nevertheless, her efforts to achieve “selfrenunciation” were painful and halting.<sup>73</sup> Denied an outlet for her “strong physical nature,” she had to sublimate her sexual feelings. “If I were a man, this creature would be free, though not dissolute, in its morals, a lover of women,” she acknowledged. “[But] as I am a woman: these feelings, unless fulfilled in marriage which would mean destruction of the intellectual being, must remain controlled and

71 Diary, [August?]1887. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:xih515bal>

72 Beatrice Potter, “East London Labour”, *Nineteenth Century*, 24 (August, 1888), 161–83; Beatrice Potter, “Pages from a Work-girl’s Diary”, *Nineteenth Century*, 25 (September, 1888), 301–14. Diary, 5 May 1888. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:yom975poh>

73 Diary, 21 January 1887, 22 January 1887, 5 February 1887. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:yom975poh>

unsatisfied, finding their only vent in [...] religious exaltation.”<sup>74</sup> A few years later, Beatrice noted that celibacy was “as painful to a woman [...] as it is to a man.”<sup>75</sup> Shortly thereafter, she berated herself for feeling sexually attracted to a man she did not otherwise care for: “How one despises oneself, giving way to these feelings (and over thirty too — it would be excusable in a woman of twenty-five), but that part of a woman’s nature dies hard. It is many variations of one chord — *the supreme and instinctive longing to be a mother*.”<sup>76</sup>

The battle to crush her ambitious nature was equally hard fought. “[B]efore my work can be perfectly true, vanity and personal ambitions must die [...] I must love my work and not myself,” Beatrice admonished herself in the summer of 1886, articulating a theme that would echo repeatedly in her diaries.<sup>77</sup> Two years later, she was forced to admit: “Selfconsciousness and vanity [...] are still the great stumbling blocks of my nature.”<sup>78</sup>

Expunging Chamberlain from her consciousness was even harder. Throughout the 1880s, Beatrice’s unrequited love sounded a contrapuntal refrain of despair, anguish, and humiliation against the rising chorus of her professional achievements. New encounters with Chamberlain and bitter memories of past confrontations threw her into periodic bouts of severe depression. The pride she took in her early publications was undercut by the two humiliating exchanges with Chamberlain in 1886 and 1887 when she confessed that she loved him. When he did not reciprocate, she was as chagrined by her own behavior as she was pained by his indifference. Try as she might, she could not free herself from the spell of the man she had come to view as her “evil genius.”<sup>79</sup> In an apparent effort to rip Chamberlain out of her heart and mind after their exceedingly painful meeting in the summer of 1887, she tore out the diary entries describing it and sealed them up with the last letters he sent her.<sup>80</sup>

74 Diary, 10 December 1886. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:yom975poh>

75 Diary, 7 March 1889. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:tus438hic>

76 Diary, 4 June 1889. Emphasis in the original. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:tus438hic>

77 Diary, 11 July 1886. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:yom975poh>

78 Diary, 21 August 1888. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:yom975poh>

79 Diary, 27 March 1886. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:yal805mem>

80 She did not reopen the packet until May 1890, when she added a note explaining what she had done (Diary, May 1890 note penned at the end of manuscript vol.14,

Marriage, spinsterhood, and Chamberlain were still very much on her mind throughout 1888. When her younger sister became engaged early that April, Beatrice stoically accepted being “the old maid of the family.”<sup>81</sup> Reading unofficial reports of Chamberlain’s engagement to Mary Endicott in the press in late April was far more devastating: Beatrice felt as though she had been stabbed.<sup>82</sup> She felt comforted when her work was going well, but became severely depressed whenever she doubted its value or her abilities. In September she and a female friend in London laughed together over a popular magazine’s depiction of the hardworking, earnest, cosmopolitan life of The Glorified Spinster — “a new race of women not looking for or expecting marriage.” But when she quoted the article’s description of the “self-dependent, courageous, and cool headed” Glorified Spinsters in her diary, Beatrice observed pityingly, “Ah, poor things.”<sup>83</sup>

Chamberlain’s marriage in November 1888 was the cruelest blow. Rumors of the engagement had circulated since April, but it was not officially announced until November 7, just eight days before the ceremony.<sup>84</sup> After reading newspaper accounts of the wedding, which took place in Washington, DC, Beatrice suffered “a week of utter nervous collapse” that left her unable to work. Several more weeks of “exquisite mental torture” followed. Nevertheless, she did her best to get back to research and writing. By year’s end, she was again taking solace in her growing sense of competence in her chosen craft.<sup>85</sup>

There was no turning back. The first volume of Booth’s *Life and Labour of the People in London*, which included three chapters by Beatrice, was published to considerable acclaim in April 1889. “[A] great success,” she wrote happily in her diary.<sup>86</sup> Feeling secure enough as a researcher to strike out on her own, Beatrice decided to study working-class

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<https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:zib295pim>). See also, *Diary of Beatrice Webb*, I, editor’s notes, pp. 208–11, 333.

81 BP to Mary Playne [?9 April 1888], in *Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb*, I, p. 63.

82 Diary, 26 April 1888. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:yom975poh>

83 “The Glorified Spinster”, *MacMillan’s Magazine*, 58 (September 1888), 371–76. Diary, 3 September 1888. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:yom975poh>

84 The secrecy was intended to avoid political fallout from the trade agreement that both Chamberlain and Mary’s father were involved in negotiating when the couple met (History WestMidlands, “Mistress”).

85 Diary, 29 December 1888. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:yom975poh>

86 Diary, 21 April 1889. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:tus438hic>

cooperative organizations, a topic she had become interested in during her 1883 visit to Bacup and which the editor of the *Nineteenth Century* encouraged her to investigate. She rejected the advice of the renowned economist Alfred Marshall to study “the unknown field of female labor,” a topic which he believed only a woman could do well and for which he thought Beatrice was especially well-suited. He praised her abilities, but warned her off the subject she had chosen. “A book by you on the Cooperative Movement I may get my wife to read to me in the evening to while away the time, but I shan’t pay any attention to it,” he told her dismissively in March 1889.<sup>87</sup>

Alfred’s wife, Mary Paley Marshall, was a former student of his, an author, and a college don. She wrote about and taught economics, but seemed to efface herself completely during her marriage to him.<sup>88</sup> Hearing Alfred Marshall assert that marriage required the submission and devotion “body and mind of the female”; listening to his declamations against strong, independent women; and seeing the devoted ministrations of his “gentle, unassuming [wife], who sits by his side, selects his food, and guards him from obtrusions” made a strong impact on Beatrice, who wrote detailed entries about her encounters with the Marshalls in her diary.<sup>89</sup>

Observing the Marshalls’ interactions must have reinforced Beatrice’s growing sense that she had been right to resist Chamberlain’s efforts to dominate her. But the anguish of losing him remained. Recalling the pain of her last meeting with him two years before, she resolved in July 1889 to devote herself to a “life of loneliness and work”, so that others could experience “the peaceful joy” she herself had lost.<sup>90</sup>

Despite Marshall’s warning, Beatrice was convinced she had found a career that would allow her to express her womanly nature and in

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87 BW, *Apprenticeship*, p. 351. Emphasis in the original. Beatrice reported the conversation in detail in her Diary, 8 March 1889, but this quotation from Marshall is not in the original diary entry or the Typescript copy.

88 See John Maynard Keynes, “Mary Paley Marshall, 1850–1944” in *Cambridge Women: Twelve Portraits* ed. by Edward Shils and Carmen Blacker (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 73–92.

89 Diary, 8 March 1889 and 7 June 1889. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:tus438hic>

90 Diary, 29 July 1889. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:tus438hic>. She ripped the next eight pages of commentary on Chamberlain out of her diary; they have not survived. See *Diary of Beatrice Webb*, I, editor’s note, p. 288.



which her gender would be an asset. She could infuse her “female” sensibility into her investigations by focusing on “feeling” and the human context behind the statistics. As a woman, she felt she was more readily trusted than a man, more able to put interviewees at ease, and better able to get information from them. Such considerations helped to allay her deepseated fears about the “masculine” aspects of her work and personality. At the same time, she relished the unconventional friendships and social interactions she developed with male trade unionists and cooperative society leaders in the course of her investigations.<sup>91</sup>

Nevertheless, Beatrice somewhat perversely allied herself with the champions of traditional womanhood by signing a well-publicized petition against female suffrage in 1889. Although she soon realized that her anti-suffrage stand was a mistake, she did not endorse female suffrage until 1906. Twenty years after that, she finally explained her early opposition: she felt she did not need a vote because she herself had never “suffered the disabilities assumed to rise from my sex.” On the contrary, she believed her gender had given her distinct advantages in the late 1880s when few men of her socio-economic class had the freedom to pursue a career of “disinterested research” as she had done, and male magazine editors were eager to publish articles by women because they were a novelty that attracted readers.<sup>92</sup>

As Beatrice grew more confident about her talents and her ability to bring a female perspective to her work, she began to value aspects of her character that had once troubled her. Now she viewed her perseverance and forcefulness as strengths that would help her achieve her goals rather than merely “disagreeable masculine” traits to be deplored.<sup>93</sup> Instead of viewing the celibacy required of unmarried women as a repudiation of their womanhood and motherhood, she accepted it as a way for strong

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91 Diary, 25 March 1889; 7 June 1889. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:tus438hic>

92 Beatrice Webb, *Our Partnership*, ed. by Barbara Drake and Margaret I. Cole (New York: Longmans, Green, 1948), p. 361. BW, *Apprenticeship*, pp. 353–55.

93 Diary, 12 April 1886, and 30 September 1887. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:yom975poh> “Disagreeable masculine”: Diary, 8 March 1889. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:tus438hic>

women to focus “the special force of womanhood, motherly feeling” into public work, enabling them to accomplish things men could not.<sup>94</sup>

Beatrice also began to see a new pattern in her life, one that gave more legitimacy to her intellectual aspirations. She had initially portrayed herself as a victim of circumstances who joined the “working sisterhood” out of necessity rather than choice. In the first agony of Chamberlain’s rejection, she had cried: “I have not despised the simple happiness of a woman’s life; it has despised me and I have been humbled so far down as a woman can be humbled. My way in life has been chosen for me.”<sup>95</sup> Now she concluded that work had always been her destiny. The Chamberlain episode began to look like a regrettable interlude that had distracted her from the true focus of her life: “If only I had been true to my ambition! I tried to push it from me, and to clutch at other things, but all in vain,” she lamented.<sup>96</sup>

By the end of the decade, Beatrice had undergone an important transformation. Despite unhappiness, personal setbacks, and great insecurities, her identity as a social investigator and a “glorified spinster” had jelled. She was no longer a wealthy Society woman who dabbled in social work and studied social policy in her spare time; she was a professional “brainworker,” a published author whose opinions were sought by reformers, politicians, and the press. She embraced — not just tolerated — her life as an unmarried working woman. Recording her father’s desire to see his “little Bee married to a strong man”, she unapologetically observed in November 1889, “he does not realize that she has passed away, leaving the strong form and determination of the ‘glorified spinster’” in her place.<sup>97</sup> Believing once again that she had a special mission and the skills and discipline to accomplish it, Beatrice faced the future with equanimity. “My whole thought and feeling have drifted far into the future. It is for future generations, for their noble happiness that I live and pray,” she wrote, somewhat melodramatically, in the spring of 1890.<sup>98</sup>

94 Diary, 29 August 1887. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:xih515bal>

95 Diary, 4 April 1886. See also, Diary, 10 December 1886. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:yom975poh>

96 Diary, 25 December 1887; also, Diary, 30 March 1887 and 30 September 1887. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:yom975poh>

97 Diary, 26 November 1889. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:tus438hic>

98 Diary, 5 May 1890. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:zib295pim>

## Courtship, 1890–1892

Beatrice's hard-won equilibrium was thrown off balance by her friendship with Sidney Webb, a rising star in the British Fabian Society. They were introduced in January 1890, when Beatrice was researching workingmen's organizations and a mutual friend recommended Sidney as a knowledgeable source. When they met, each already knew and admired the other's work. Beatrice had described Sidney's contribution to *Fabian Essays on Socialism* as "by far the most significant and interesting essay" in the volume; he thought her chapters in Booth's *Life and Labour of the People in London* were the only ones with literary merit.<sup>99</sup> Their first conversation convinced her that her views on alleviating poverty made her a socialist, although she had not previously thought of herself in those terms.<sup>100</sup> Intrigued, Beatrice invited him to dinner to meet the Booths. Despite his Cockney pronunciation, "shaky" use of "Hs", lack of eloquence, and unkempt appearance, she found Sidney "a remarkable little man" and decided, "I like the man."<sup>101</sup> Her friends were less impressed.

Sidney had none of the privilege, wealth, and social connections that Beatrice inherited. Born in 1859 to lower-middle-class parents, he had made his way in the world by virtue of his formidable intelligence and unflagging capacity for hard work. His father was an accountant who was active in local politics; his mother ran a hairdressing shop in an unfashionable section of central London. As their means allowed, they invested in their sons' education. They scraped together enough money to send Sidney and his older brother to a private academy in London, and both boys had two years of schooling in Switzerland and Germany in the early 1870s.<sup>102</sup> When he returned to London at the age of sixteen, Sidney had to earn his living. He worked as an office clerk by day and took classes at night, distinguishing himself with many prizes

99 Webb, *Apprenticeship*, p. 401.

100 BP to SW, May 2, 1890. Passfield Papers.

101 Diary, 13 February 1890. See also, Diary, 26 April 1890. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:zib295pim>

102 Royden J. Harrison speculates in *The Life and Times of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, 1858–1905: The Formative Years* (Houndmills, UK: MacMillan, 2000), pp. 7–8, that the boys were sent abroad for schooling during a troubled time at home, when their father very likely had an affair and an illegitimate child, possibly with a live-in servant.

and honors. After finishing second in the competitive examinations for the civil service in 1883, he was hired by the War Office, and advanced to become a clerk in the Colonial Office. He earned a law degree from University College, London, and was called to the Bar in 1885.

Like Beatrice, Sidney had been unhappy in love. During 1884 and 1885, he was romantically attached to a woman named Annie Adams, and expected that they would marry. When their relationship ended in the summer of 1885, he was deeply depressed.<sup>103</sup> Like Beatrice, he tried to bury himself in work in order to forget his pain. More than three years later, when his friend Edward Pease, a fellow Fabian, became engaged, Sidney acknowledged that “an old wound, which still embitters me, was torn open and bled.” He lamented that many of his friends had married in recent years, while he himself remained single and lonely.<sup>104</sup>

All the while, Sidney devoted his passion and energy to the reform clubs and political societies that proliferated in London in the 1880s. In 1885, he joined the fledgling Fabian Society, which aimed to abolish poverty through legislative and administrative reforms, establish communal control of production and social life, and convert the British public and governing class to its socialist agenda with a barrage of facts and statistics. Quickly emerging as a leader, he formed friendships with a number of men who would make their mark on British culture and politics. All were instrumental in introducing and popularizing the concept of democratic socialism in Britain. In demand as a pamphleteer, lecturer and debater, he impressed his audiences with the breadth and depth of his knowledge and his total recall of facts. Hearing Sidney give a public address for the first time, the great Irish playwright and fellow

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103 Adams married Corrie Grant, a barrister and former journalist who would eventually become a Liberal MP. Sidney wrote to Graham Wallas and Bernard Shaw in July and August 1885 about his great unhappiness and Adams’s decision to marry someone else. See *Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb*, I, editor’s note, p. 86, and *Selected Correspondence of Bernard Shaw: Bernard Shaw and the Webbs*, ed. by Alex C. Michalos and Deborah C. Poff (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), p. 7. Sidney identified Adams’s future husband as “Corrie-Grant-Woodstock” in a letter to Wallas, but Woodstock is the bye-election he lost in July 1885, not part of his name. See “Lord Churchill Wins”, *The New York Times*, July 4, 1885, p. 1.

104 SW to Marjorie Davidson, 12 December 1888. Passfield Papers.

Fabian, George Bernard Shaw, who became a life-long friend, described him as “the ablest man in England.”<sup>105</sup>

Both Beatrice and Sidney were outsiders in the professional worlds of their day, Sidney by virtue of his class, Beatrice by virtue of her gender. This gave Sidney some sympathetic understanding of Beatrice’s efforts to establish herself a social investigator and writer, and helped him to be more supportive of her efforts. It might have made her more understanding of his situation, but she always saw class as a greater disability than gender and was put off by Sidney’s lower-class accent and demeanor and shabby clothing.

Beatrice and Sidney corresponded after she left London to resume caring for her father in March 1890; she invited him to visit for a day and sought his advice on her work. She valued his friendship, but noted his many faults in her diary: “His tiny tadpole body, unhealthy skin, lack of manner, cockney pronunciation, poverty, are all against him [...]. This self-complacent egotism, this disproportionate view of his own position is at once repulsive and ludicrous.”<sup>106</sup> Sidney was 5’4”, and his head was too large for his body. But his intellect, knowledge, and commitment to the social and political issues that she cared about appealed to her immensely. In May 1890, she suggested he travel with her and a few friends to the Co-operative Congress in Glasgow. As they strolled through the city, Sidney told Beatrice he was in love with her, upsetting the delicate balance of their relationship. After what she called a “critical twenty-four hours” had passed, she insisted, during another sunset walk, that she could offer him nothing but friendship. They agreed to a “working compact”: they would continue to discuss their work and give each other advice and guidance, but Sidney would refrain from displays of emotion.<sup>107</sup>

Deeply in love with Beatrice, Sidney tried in vain to suppress his feelings and treat her as a colleague; whenever he forgot himself, she drew back. He found her “*ravissante*.” She found him so “personally

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105 Quoted in Jeanne MacKenzie, *A Victorian Courtship: The Story of Beatrice Potter and Sidney Webb* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 62.

106 Diary, 26 April 1890. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:zib295pim>

107 Diary, 23 May 1890. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:zib295pim>

unattractive" that she doubted whether she could "submit to a close relationship."<sup>108</sup> Months of trial and tribulation resulted.

Still defining life in terms of either/or choices — love or work, reason or emotion, private happiness or public service — Beatrice was resigned to living a life in which emotions played no part. Characterizing herself as a woman "forged into a simple instrument for work" she warned Sidney, "Personal happiness to me is an absolutely remote thing; and I am to that degree 'heartless' that I regard everything from the point of view of making my own or another's life serve the community more effectively."<sup>109</sup>

Sidney was determined not to let personal happiness elude him. He urged Beatrice not to live in the past lest she succumb to "the growing numbness of emotional death."<sup>110</sup> He played on her fear of becoming "hard" and "self-willed" — that is, unwomanly — if she chose a professional life over a personal relationship. Using the same arguments that George Herbert Palmer had used to woo Alice Freeman, he warned her against sacrificing everything else for her intellectual work: "You would lose your subtle sympathy [...]. You would have dried up 'warmheartedness' in order to get Truth — and you would not even get Truth. Do not crush out feeling [...]. I cannot believe that you will commit this emotional suicide."<sup>111</sup>

Sidney offered Beatrice a life in which she could enjoy love *and* work, rather than continually pitting them against each other. He assured her that work would form the basis of their life together and pledged that each would contribute to the other's projects. "I will *make* you help me, and I will insist on helping you — our relationship shall be judged solely by the helpfulness to each other's work. Forgive me, if I say that I believe that if we were united we could do great things together," he claimed.<sup>112</sup> If they worked together, they would show that 1 plus 1 added to 11, not 2. "We have the ideas which can deliver the world [...]. Shall we continue to count each for one or is there no way of making our forces

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108 *Ravissante*: SW to BP, 29/7/90. Unattractive: BP to SW [?8 October, 1890], referring to her reaction to him in Glasgow in May 1890. Passfield Papers.

109 BP to SW [?29 May 1890]. Passfield Papers.

110 SW to BP, 11–12 October 1890 (Letters in Diary Notebook). Passfield Papers.

111 SW to BP, 30 May 1890. Passfield Papers.

112 Diary, 23 May 1890. Emphasis in original. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:zib295pim>

count for eleven? You have it in your hands to make me, in the noblest sense, great. I, even I, have it in my power to help your own particular work," he asserted.<sup>113</sup> "[T]ogether we could move the world!" he encouraged her, in stark contrast to Chamberlain's condescension and dominance.<sup>114</sup>

Nevertheless, Beatrice was still "haunted [...] day and night" by the memory of Chamberlain. Less than a week after striking her compact with Sidney in 1890, she reread her 1887 diary entries about Chamberlain, which she had sealed up with his letters.<sup>115</sup> She continued to follow Chamberlain's life and political career with feverish interest, gleaning details about him from newspapers and the gossip of friends. Later in the summer of 1890, she was mortified to find herself waiting outside a London museum for hours, hoping to catch sight of Chamberlain.<sup>116</sup>

As intellectual comrades, Beatrice and Sidney shared a great deal. Each had expertise that the other found useful. Sidney helped Beatrice develop practical proposals for solving the problems of sweated labor, explained theoretical economics to her, and introduced her to his fellow Fabians. Although she did not join the Fabian Society until the summer of 1892, she advised Sidney on how to increase its influence, instructed him about the English Poor Law, and helped to set up meetings between the Fabian leaders and the progressive wing of the Liberal Party.

On a more personal level, she corrected Sidney's pronunciation and suggested how he should dress and conduct himself in society.<sup>117</sup> He was quite willing to put himself in her hands. "Now tell me of other faults. Do you not realise that your real *Fach* [expertise] in life is to 'run' me?" he encouraged.<sup>118</sup> "I am trying to think of my vowels!" he proudly reported.<sup>119</sup>

Acutely aware that he was not her match in looks or social position, Sidney exhibited none of Chamberlain's domineering masculinity. When he learned that Beatrice would inherit considerable wealth when

113 SW to BP, 16 June 1890. Similarly, SW to BP [?4 December 1890]. Passfield Papers.

114 SW to BP, 30 May 1890. Passfield Papers. Emphasis in the original.

115 Diary, May 1890 note penned at the end of manuscript vol.14, <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:zib295pim>. See also, *Diary of Beatrice Webb*, I, editor's notes, pp. 208-11, 333.

116 Beatrice recorded this humiliating event in her diary on 1 December 1890. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:zib295pim>

117 BP to SW [11 August 1890]; BP to SW [?September 1890]. Passfield Papers.

118 SW to BP, 16 June 1890. Passfield Papers.

119 SW to BP, 19 September 1890 (Letters in Diary Notebook). Passfield Papers.

her father died, he felt the imbalance in their relationship more keenly and suffered “a pang of wounded pride.”<sup>120</sup> But he did not think her wealth should be an insurmountable bar to their relationship. In place of worldly riches, he offered her devotion, support, and encouragement, and dedication to the causes she believed in. He assured her he had no interest in trying to control her or absorb her life into his. “I can be in love without any desire for possession [...]. I am absolutely in your power,” he wrote abjectly.<sup>121</sup>

Beatrice was troubled by Sidney’s willingness to put himself so completely in her hands. Asking for his help in working through Alfred Marshall’s *Principles of Economics*, she wrote, “In that case I shall be at your feet, and not you at mine, a wholesome reversal of the [usual] relationship — more in keeping with the relative dignity of Man and Woman [...] which will relieve the one-sided strain of our relationship.”<sup>122</sup>

Nevertheless, she felt buoyed by their burgeoning friendship. She wrote appreciatively in her diary in the fall of 1890, “[Sidney] is certainly extraordinarily improved and becoming a needful background to my working life and I the same to him [...] the beauty of the friendship is that it stimulates the work of both.”<sup>123</sup> And yet, only a few days later, she recoiled when he made an off-handed remark that seemed to assume they would marry. His presumption jolted her into seeing how impossible their situation was. Heart sore, she wrote Sidney a devastating letter, telling him she had tried to love him, but failed. Chamberlain’s hold on her was too great, she explained, without identifying him by name. She had been “desperately in love [...] passionately attached to him” for six years and doubted she could care for anyone else. “The other man I loved but did not believe in, you I believe in but do not love,” she wrote in anguish. She could not become engaged to a man she did not love. Trying to soften the blow, she announced, somewhat histrionically, “I am doing more than I would do for any other man — simply because you are a Socialist & I am a Socialist.” She concluded by offering a modicum of hope, promising, “I will try to love you.”<sup>124</sup> The

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120 SW to BP, 29/7/90. Passfield Papers.

121 SW to BP, May 30, 1890. Passfield Papers.

122 BP to SW [11 August 1890]. Passfield Papers

123 Diary, 2 October 1890. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:zib295pim>

124 BP to SW [28 October 1890]. Passfield Papers



painful mixed messages she sent to Sidney reflected her own strong ambivalence about their relationship.

Sidney likened the unexpected letter to “an earthquake” but remained hopeful that she would be won over by seeing how much their combined work could contribute to the service of Humanity.<sup>125</sup> “I have love enough for two,” he assured her.<sup>126</sup> More anguished letters followed. Her friends’ disapproval increased Beatrice’s resistance. “He is not enough of a man: You would grow out of him,” Charles Booth warned her.<sup>127</sup>

In early December, when Sidney was recovering from a bout of scarlet fever, Beatrice confessed she still did not love him and was certain she could never love him. The still “open wound” that Chamberlain had inflicted left her incapable of loving. “I came out of that six years agony [...] like a bit of steel. I was not broken but hardened,” she explained. Because she did not love Sidney, she could not “make the stupendous sacrifice of marriage.”<sup>128</sup> She was even more adamant in her diary. “Marriage is to me another word for suicide,” she wrote. “I cannot bring myself to face an act of *felo de se* [suicide] for a speculation in personal happiness. I am not prepared to make the minutest sacrifice of efficiency for the simple reason that though I am susceptible to the charm of being loved, I am not capable of loving. Personal passion has burnt itself out.”<sup>129</sup>

Sidney was crushed, but accepted her decision with good grace. He wrote her several tender, gentle, loving letters and returned all of hers as she requested. “He has behaved *nobly*,” Beatrice noted approvingly.<sup>130</sup> He hoped she would be happy, but warned her, “It does seem very difficult for a woman to go on leading a lonely life, without wifeness or motherhood, without unconsciously losing much of ‘warmheartedness,’ without sinking into sourness and narrowness.”<sup>131</sup>

125 SW to BP, 7 PM [8 October 1890]. Passfield Papers.

126 SW to BP, Sunday 12 October [1890], Passfield Papers.

127 Diary, 22 October 1890. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:zib295pim?id=lse%3Azib295pim>

128 BP to SW [27 December 1890]. Open wound: BP to SW [28 October 1890]. Passfield Papers.

129 Diary, 1 December 1890. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:zib295pim?id=lse%3Azib295pim>

130 Diary, 31 December 1890. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:zib295pim?id=lse%3Azib295pim>. Emphasis in the original.

131 SW to BP [13?] 14 December, 1890. Passfield Papers.

Beatrice thought it would be better if they parted completely, but agreed to Sidney's desire to remain friends. She insisted that they could no longer be "intimate" friends, and could not write anything to each other that could not be read by somebody else.<sup>132</sup> Under these restrictions, they wrote less frequently for the next several months, and their correspondence became stiff and formal. They exchanged information about their work and asked each other for career advice, but their easy camaraderie was gone. Sidney was contemplating leaving the Colonial Office and earning his living as a journalist; Beatrice was looking for the topic for her next book. His letters were morose and dispirited; her emotional state is unknown because she wrote very little in her diary, and Sidney later burnt many of her letters. They did not meet in person between early January and April, when a sympathetic mutual friend brought them together by suggesting that Sidney would be the ideal person to help Beatrice write a summary of the first of the public lectures she was scheduled to give on cooperative organizations.<sup>133</sup> (Apparently, she had overcome her former aversion to women speaking in public.)

Their friendship restored through their work on the summary, Beatrice and Sidney traveled together with a mutual friend to the annual Cooperative Congress in May 1891, as they had the previous year. Sidney tried his luck again, and this time Beatrice did not withdraw. She explained her change of heart in her diary: "[Sidney's] resolute patient affection, his honest care for my welfare, helping and correcting me, a growing distrust of a self-absorbed life and the egotism of successful work (done on easy terms and reaping more admiration than it deserves), all these feelings are making for our eventual union, the joining together of our resources, mental and material, to serve together the 'commonwealth.'"<sup>134</sup> Her decision was the result of rational calculation rather than overpowering emotion. "My engagement was a very deliberate step each condition thought out thoroughly," she wrote in her diary at the end of 1891.<sup>135</sup> Several

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132 BP to SW, Sunday [14? December 1890]. Passfield Papers.

133 BW, *Apprenticeship*, p. 407.

134 Diary, 31 May 1891. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:zib295pim?id=lse%3Azib295pim>

135 Diary, 27 December 1891. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bin716wef>

years later, she admitted, “[I]t was reason and not love that won me, a deliberate judgment on the man’s worth and almost coldblooded calculation of the life I could live with him and he with me.”<sup>136</sup>

Beatrice and Sidney left the cooperative congress without a clear resolution of their relationship, but with the expectation that they would marry. The “years of dull misery, with flashes of veritable agony” can “end in Work and Love”, Beatrice wrote with cautious optimism in her diary.<sup>137</sup> They shared their first kiss in London, and in June they spent three weeks in Norway with two other Fabians. When they returned, they were secretly engaged.

Loneliness and a desire for companionship were factors in Beatrice’s calculation, but work considerations were paramount.<sup>138</sup> Her determination to make her marriage serve her work shocked her friends and family, but Sidney understand and felt the same.<sup>139</sup> Sharing her sense of mission and devotion to work, he too viewed their union as a “consecration of our lives to the service of Humanity.”<sup>140</sup> Such assertions left Beatrice confident that marriage to Sidney would “not wrench me from my old life, simply raise it to a higher level of usefulness.”<sup>141</sup>

Beatrice did not pretend that Sidney excited her passion as Chamberlain had done. “I am not ‘in love,’ not as I was,” she admitted in her diary when she and Sidney were on holiday in Norway.<sup>142</sup> She was acutely conscious that she was not making the “good” marriage that she had been groomed for. For a woman of her upbringing, marrying a man like Sidney was an act of bravery, boldness, and hope. “The world will wonder,” she wrote a month after they became secretly engaged. “On the face of it, it seems like an extraordinary end to the once brilliant Beatrice Potter [...] to marry an ugly little man with no social ambition

136 Diary, 24 May 1897. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:hus734mos>

137 Diary, 31 May 1891. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:zib295pim?id=lse%3Azib295pim>

138 Diary, 6 June 1891, and 20 June 1891. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:wip502kaf>

139 Shocked family and friends: BP to SW, 20 August 1891; BP to SW [28 December 1891]. Passfield Papers.

140 Diary, 20 June 1891, <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:wip502kaf>; SW to BP, 9 October 1890. Passfield Papers.

141 Diary, 20 June 1891. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:wip502kaf>

142 Ibid.

and less means, whose only recommendation, some will say, is a certain pushing ability.”<sup>143</sup>

Knowing that her marriage to Sidney would “griev[e] the old man past enduring,” Beatrice insisted that their engagement had to remain a secret while her father was alive.<sup>144</sup> In the meantime, she suffered her sisters’ criticisms about her lifestyle and work, and their concern that she would make a “bad” marriage.<sup>145</sup> She and Sidney told only a few close friends about their engagement.

Both Beatrice and Sidney were determined to pioneer a new style of marriage. “[W]e have a great responsibility laid upon us. Not only has each of us faculty and the opportunity of using it, but both together — the two united for a true marriage of fellowworkers — a perfect fellowship: it is for us to show that such a marriage may be durable and persisting,” Beatrice wrote the summer they became engaged, asserting that the challenge made both of them “grave and anxious.”<sup>146</sup> In fact, Sidney, more exuberant by nature, viewed their future with excitement. “Be it ours to prove to ourselves at any rate, that we are human beings of equivalent freedom and joint lives. What a chance we have!” he exulted.<sup>147</sup>

Sidney did much to allay Beatrice’s fears during their year-long engagement. Theirs would not be a “chattel marriage” in which the wife became a possession of the husband, he promised. He did not want to absorb Beatrice’s life or work into his, he repeatedly noted. If she ever felt he was acting out of “heedless selfishness” or “overpowering” her, she must let him know.<sup>148</sup> Because she was “a Sun” in her own right, with her own solar system, they would need to move in tandem, without becoming either “sun & planet” or “planet & satellite,” Sidney warned. “When two solar systems come together it is a big thing!” he encouraged.<sup>149</sup> He purposefully planned for a collaboration that would support their

143 Ibid. See also, Diary, 21 January 1892. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bin716wef>

144 Diary, 31 December 1890, <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:zib295pim?id=lse%3Azib295pim>, and 15 July 1891, <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bin716wef>. See also, BP to SW, 7 December 1890. Passfield Papers.

145 BP to SW [20 August 1891], 3 January 1892 [?January 1892], and [?8 January 1892]. Passfield Papers.

146 Diary, 7 July 1891. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bin716wef>

147 SW to BP, 5 December/91. Passfield Papers.

148 SW to BP, 31 October 1891, Passfield Papers.

149 SW to BP, 30 May [?1891], Passfield Papers.

mutual independence, develop each other's strengths, and upset the conventional gendered division of labor. Her role would be to think and inspire, he told her; he would help her write more efficiently, and attend to proof-reading and fact-checking so she had more time to think. They would take turns serving as each other's private secretary. He looked forward to standing for Parliament in the future, but lamented that she could not be a Member of Parliament instead of him.<sup>150</sup> He presciently warned her that she would need to recant her opposition to women's suffrage. Occasionally, less enlightened views crept into his letters. He noted that he loved her all the more for her faults of "willfulness" and "ambition", before conceding that those traits were not actually faults.<sup>151</sup>

Despite his encouragement, Beatrice remained defensive about her desire to be both social investigator and wife. Explaining her preference for work over "domestic details," she mused, "I do not despise those details, but it is no use forging a fine instrument with exceptional effort and then discarding it for a rough tool. It may have been misdirected effort to make the instrument, it may be a mistake to transform the woman into a Thinker, but if the mistake has been paid for, one may hardly throw away the result."<sup>152</sup>

Still tending to see the world in either/or terms, lacking models of women who managed to couple marriage with professional life, Beatrice continued to feared that her work or her husband would suffer. "Every now and then I feel I have got into a hole out of which I can't struggle. I love you — But I love my work better. It seems to me that unless I give up my work I shall make a bad wife to you. You cannot follow me about the country, and I cannot stay with you," she lamented in the fall of 1891, when she was spending long periods out of London researching trade union archives and interviewing trade unionists.<sup>153</sup> Signaling that she was not prepared to cut back on her research so they could have more time together, and acknowledging that she needed another year to complete her research, she candidly informed him, "We need not love each other the less because with both of us, our work stands first and

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150 SW to BP, 22 September 1891, Passfield Papers.

151 SW to BP, 25/5/91, Passfield Papers.

152 Diary, 7 July 1891. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bin716wef>

153 BP to SW, Saturday [12? September 1891]. Similarly, BP to SW, Xmas Day 1891. Passfield Papers.

our union second.”<sup>154</sup> Sidney readily confirmed that work and duty were more important than personal pleasure. “We could not love each other so well, loved we not our work and duty more,” he agreed.<sup>155</sup> He assured her she could be both a good researcher and a good wife, but unselfishly pledged, “I would infinitely rather endure to lose you for a year rather than have you neglect your work for my sake.”<sup>156</sup>

Although she was increasingly happy in his company, there were aspects of Sidney’s personality and looks that remained unappealing to Beatrice. He tried repeatedly to send a photograph of himself that was acceptable to her. She returned the first, admonishing, “It is too hideous for anything [...] let me have the head only — it is the head only that I am marrying.”<sup>157</sup> He had more photos taken, according to her directions, but feared she would be disappointed. Warning her that nothing could make his face appear handsome, he pointed out, “I could not love you anymore if I were perfect in form.”<sup>158</sup> He sent her one of the new pictures with apologies for his “ugliness” and later joked about their “Beauty and the Beast” relationship.<sup>159</sup> She continued to advise him on his pronunciation and clothing. “You can improve!” she encouraged.

Working directly with Sidney allayed more of Beatrice’s concerns. They spent a few days in August working together on material she was gathering for her book on trade unions, and had another two weeks of joint work in October. They worked long hours with frequent interruptions for “intervals of ‘human nature’”, as Beatrice referred to what was most likely kissing and cuddling — a reassuring indication that Sidney’s appearance did not pose an insurmountable bar to physical intimacy.<sup>160</sup> “It is very sweet this warm and close companionship in work,” she observed in August.<sup>161</sup> Their fortnight of hard work and

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154 BP to SW [?12 September 1891]. Passfield Papers.

155 SW to BP, 14/9/91. Passfield Papers.

156 SW to BP, 14/9/91. A second letter, written the same day (dated 14 Sept/91), reiterated his willingness to put her work ahead of their personal pleasure. Passfield Papers.

157 BP to SW [20 August 1891]. Passfield Papers.

158 SW to BP, 1 September 1891; her directions: SW to BP, 7/9/91. Passfield Papers.

159 Photo: SW to BP, 23 Sept/91; Beauty and the Beast: SW to BP, 3 Nov/91. Passfield Papers.

160 Human nature: Diary, 11 August 1891, 19 August 1891, and 10 October 1891. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bin716wef>

161 Diary, 11 August, 1891. Ibid.

“blessed” companionship in October made Beatrice very happy. But as old fears were laid to rest, new ones emerged. Convinced that her early success was the result of transforming her anguish over Chamberlain into productive energy, Beatrice soon began to worry that a happy marriage would make her less productive and too dependent on Sidney.

Despite their increasing closeness, Beatrice and Sidney had few opportunities to be together in the fall and winter of 1891–92. When she was not caring for her father, she was rushing off to industrial towns in northern England to review trade union records, interview trade unionists, and attend union meetings. Sidney resigned from the Colonial Office in September 1891, intending to work as a journalist and help Beatrice with her book, but was soon caught up on his own activities. Despite his good intentions, he was often unavailable to help Beatrice, as he struggled to meet journalistic deadlines, complete a busy lecture schedule, and wage a hard-fought electoral campaign for a seat on the London County Council.

Sidney was mostly in London, but also had engagements in other cities. They met when they could: on railway platforms in various towns, before their trains took off in opposite directions; in hotels, if their schedules permitted a longer stay in the same city. Beatrice, who thought of herself as an “investigator living the life of a bohemian”, took pride in the “daring unconventionality” of their hotel meetings.<sup>162</sup> When Sidney joined her for two weeks to work on the trade union book in the town of Tynemouth, she “coolly” hired a private sitting room in her hotel so they could work undisturbed. Sidney slept in a different hotel, but posed as her private secretary. They churned out masses of material, while also making time for “human nature” without the hotel guests being any the wiser.<sup>163</sup>

They handled their separations well and kept each other informed of all they were doing. Their correspondence (especially Sidney’s daily missives) teemed with work-related discussions: strategic analyses of key political and social issues, accounts of whom they saw and what was said, mutual advice about what to say or write or do about particular topics.

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162 Bohemian: Diary, 27 December 1891. Daring unconventionality: Diary, 25 September 1891. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bin716wef>

163 Diary, 10 October 1891. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bin716wef>

Although Beatrice was determined to focus on work rather than their personal lives, their relationship was not without romance. Beatrice sent flowers from her father's garden to spark memories of special times between them; Sidney saw her face in his imagination, kissed her picture before going to bed, remembered the smile on her lips and how beautiful she had looked in the blue silk dress she wore in Norway. Their marriage would be not a "foolish gust of passion" but a great and enduring love, a "holy friendship," he promised.<sup>164</sup>

Although he is often portrayed as a humorless grinder of facts, Sidney revealed another side of his personality in the daily letters he wrote to Beatrice during their engagement. He discussed literature and art, described scenic views, and wrote her gossipy, amusing anecdotes about people they knew. He was sympathetic to Nora in *The Doll's House*, but appalled by Mary Costelloe's "*wickedness*" in leaving her husband (Sidney's friend and fellow Fabian, Frank Costelloe) and two children to go off with Bernard Berenson.<sup>165</sup>

Their relationship overturned upper-class conventions in another major way. Beatrice paid Sidney's electoral expenses for the London County Council (LCC) seat, and planned to use her inheritance to pay for the bulk of their living expenses once they were married, freeing Sidney from having to earn a living. He gratefully accepted her financial support and admitted that it relieved him of considerable anxiety.<sup>166</sup> Reliant on her intellectual and financial assistance, he stressed that he would be "the Member for Potter" on the LCC and dutifully gave her an accounting his expenditures.<sup>167</sup>

Throughout the fall and winter, he continued to soothe Beatrice's anxiety about being a "'professional' wife", as she termed her future role.<sup>168</sup> He assured her that her calculated approach to work and marriage did not make her "unwomanly" (as one of her friends had charged), and promised, "It is possible to have at the same time great love, keen

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164 SW to BP, 1/3/92. Passfield Papers.

165 SW to BP, 1/9/91, 14/9/91, emphasis in the original. Passfield Papers. Before she married Costelloe, Mary Whitall Smith had been romantically linked with George Herbert Palmer, her professor at the Harvard Annex in 1884. See Chapter 1, pp. 36–37.

166 SW to BP, 9 Sept. 1891; BP to SW [?8 December 1891]. Passfield Papers.

167 SW to BP, 9 Dec/1891. Passfield Papers.

168 BP to SW, Xmas Day [1891]. Passfield Papers.



desire for work, and a great sense of responsibility.”<sup>169</sup> Responding to her persistent fear that a change of name and change in status from spinster investigator to married woman would be “disastrous” for her trade union investigations, he was prepared to delay their wedding until she completed more research.<sup>170</sup>

Despite herself, Beatrice was increasingly happy with her new life. When she saw Chamberlain and his wife from a distance at a railway station during one of her research trips in the fall of 1891, she was relieved she was not with him. “I shuddered as I imagined the life I had missed,” she wrote in her diary.<sup>171</sup>

When she finally informed her sisters about her engagement, several days after Richard Potter died on New Year’s Day 1892, Beatrice warned them that Sidney was “small and ugly” and lacked savoir faire, social position, and wealth.<sup>172</sup> Having been prepared to break with her sisters if they opposed the marriage, she was relieved that the family “behaved with benevolence and good sense” in accepting Sidney, even if they did not like him or his Socialist politics.<sup>173</sup> Beatrice found it hard to put aside her own class prejudices when she visited Sidney’s sister and widowed mother in their “dingy”, “crowded”, “lower middle class” home. But happiness and love helped her overcome her discomfort in their “ugly and small surroundings.”<sup>174</sup>

Sidney had many detractors and few champions among Beatrice’s friends and extended family. She was tainted by her adhesion to Socialism as well as her attachment to Sidney. The Booths virtually dropped her after they learned of her engagement although they resumed their friendship by the wedding.<sup>175</sup> Herbert Spencer, offended by her Socialist ties, no longer wanted her to be his literary executor.<sup>176</sup>

169 SW to BP, 9 Dec/1891; BP to SW [?8 December 91]. Passfield Papers.

170 Disastrous: BP to SW [?early January 1892]. See also, BP to SW [212 September 1891]; SW to BP, 14/9/91, and 14 Sept/91. Passfield Papers.

171 Diary, 21 October 1891. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bin716wef>

172 BP to Laurencina Holt (written in late December, mailed in early January 1892), in *Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb*, I, pp. 382–84.

173 Break: BP to Mary Playne [early January 1892], in *Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb*, I, pp. 384–85. Benevolence and good sense: Diary, 21 January 1892. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bin716wef>

174 Diary, 21 January 1892. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bin716wef>

175 Dropped: Diary, 27 December 1891. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bin716wef>

176 Diary, 21 January 1892. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bin716wef>

Beatrice's brother-in-law, Leonard Courtney, a Liberal MP, told her that she would have been an ideal candidate to serve on the Royal Commission on Labour (which he headed) were it not for her Socialist views.<sup>177</sup> The general reaction to the engagement was so critical that Beatrice wondered in retrospect whether she would have had the "courage" to marry Sidney had not at least one valued friend recognized that he "was essentially distinguished in character and intelligence."<sup>178</sup> Beatrice had detractors, too. H. W. Massingham, a journalist friend of Sidney's who was unaware of the engagement, advised him to marry a wealthy woman, but to steer clear of Beatrice Potter lest he discover that he "had bitten off more than you could chew." Massingham added, "Don't marry a clever woman, [because] they're too much trouble."<sup>179</sup>

After their engagement became public, Sidney battled on in his campaign to win a seat on the London County Council while Beatrice continued her exploration of trade unions. After his victory in March 1892, he took over two important committees and began to work on plans for overhauling London's technical education system. A newly confident Beatrice, feeling less in need of his help (she had hired a male secretary, much to the dismay of her sisters and brothers-in-law), told Sidney to focus on his work instead of helping her with her book.<sup>180</sup>

By the time she and Sidney married, in a civil ceremony at the St. Pancras Vestry Hall, in July 1892, Beatrice was increasingly optimistic about her chances of blending personal happiness with professional success. She may not have felt the same passion that she had felt for Chamberlain, but Sidney had become essential to her and they loved each other "devotedly." "Never did I imagine such happiness," Beatrice wrote in early May.<sup>181</sup> "The only thing I regret parting with is my *name* — I *do* resent that," she complained to Sidney three weeks before the

177 BP to SW [undated, between letters of January 1 and January 3, 1892]. Passfield Papers. Beatrice had been lobbying for the position. See *Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb*, I, editor's note, p. 278.

178 Diary, 24 May 1897. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:hus734mos>. The friend was Alice Stopford Green, widow of historian John Richard Green, and herself a writer. Beatrice often stayed with her when she was working in London, and Green had been instrumental in bringing Beatrice and Sidney back together in the spring of 1891.

179 SW to BP, 15/9/91. Passfield Papers.

180 BP to SW, 5 May, 1892. Similarly, BP to SW [?March 1892]. Passfield Papers.

181 Diary, 4 May 1892. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bin716wef>

wedding.<sup>182</sup> On the day of the ceremony, she again lamented, “Exit Beatrice Potter. Enter Beatrice Webb, or rather (Mrs.) Sidney Webb for I lose alas! both names.”<sup>183</sup> The newlyweds spent their honeymoon in Ireland and Scotland, happily researching trade unionism. They were away for eight weeks, but devoted only a few days to the sightseeing that would have constituted a more conventional wedding trip.

### Adjusting to Marriage and the Working Partnership, 1892–1902

The Webbs’s partnership lasted for more than fifty years and produced a remarkable body of work and a deeply devoted couple. They worked together as researchers and writers, activist reformers, practicing politicians, policy advisors, behind-the-scenes manipulators, and educators. They aimed to construct “a science of society” and translate their findings into practical reforms in social policy and public administration. They published highly regarded studies detailing the evolution of working class organizations and English local government. They wrote scores of books and articles proposing fundamental reforms in social policy and governmental institutions. They left a legacy in the administrative structure of London’s educational system, the socialist platform of the British Labour Party, and the design of the post-World War II British welfare state. They helped mold several generations of civil servants and policy analysts through their work with the London School of Economics and Political Science and the *New Statesman*, both of which they helped to found. Beatrice believed they fulfilled Sidney’s prediction that they would be more productive by working together than apart. She maintained they were “welded by common work and experience into a complete harmony of thought and action” and were “singularly at one in heart and intellect.”<sup>184</sup>

182 BP to SW [?1 July 1892], emphasis in the original. Passfield Papers.

183 Diary, 23 July 1892. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bin716wef>. There were precedents for not taking a husband’s name in British feminist circles, according to Philipa Levine, “‘So Few Prizes and So Many Blanks’: Marriage and Feminism in Later Nineteenth-Century England”, *Journal of British Studies*, 28 (April 1989), 150–74 (p. 157). But Beatrice was not part of those circles.

184 Welded: Diary, 16 July 1921. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:ras535xan>. Singularly at one: Diary, 12 January 1934. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:rut323dac>



Fig. 5 Beatrice and Sidney at work around 1895. Unknown photographer. LSE Image Library/1385. London School of Economics and Political Science, British Library of Political and Economic Science.

Although Beatrice characterized herself from the start of her marriage as an extraordinarily fortunate wife who delighted in the “perfection” of her relationship with Sidney and the great happiness of their daily life, she was, in fact, deeply ambivalent about her husband and her work throughout the first decade of their marriage.<sup>185</sup>

The root problem was that her sensual, passionate nature was not fully satisfied by Sidney. During their courtship, Beatrice had made it brutally clear that he did not excite her sexually. Indeed, she may have chosen to marry him, in part, because he did not arouse her passion. Convinced that passion and romance were antithetical to serious, intensive “brainwork”, she felt confident that her relationship with Sidney would not supplant her interest in work or undermine her commitment to social reform. Having spent the years after the rupture with Chamberlain trying to suppress her sexual yearnings, she had

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<sup>185</sup> Diary, 1 December 1892. Similarly, Diary, 21 June 1893, and Christmas Day, 1893. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bin716wef>

convinced herself that it was heroic and ennobling to subordinate her physical nature in order to devote herself to work that would contribute to the good of society.<sup>186</sup>

As Beatrice herself admitted, marrying Sidney was an act of renunciation, not self-indulgence. Referring to Sidney as a comrade and companion suggests they had a collegial working relationship rather than a passionate partnering. Addressing him as her “darling boy” when she wrote to him during their engagement and marriage suggests she took maternal pride in shaping him and advancing his career.<sup>187</sup> Both designations suggest she gave him affectionate devotion, tender and loving care — but not erotic, passionate love. “With intellectual persons love is the passion for warm enduring affection and intimate mental companionship,” she reflected after five years of marriage.<sup>188</sup>

At times, Beatrice’s sensual side rebelled, leaving her physically debilitated, emotionally drained, and deeply depressed. The outward signs were flagging interest in her work and recurrent daydreaming about Joseph Chamberlain, who remained for her a symbol of passion and romance. He began to appear in her fantasy life in July 1893, just a year after her wedding. Despite her claims of being “triumphantly happy” with Sidney, she was still dazzled by Chamberlain’s “extraordinary personality” and political gifts, although she increasingly questioned whether he was using them for self-aggrandizement rather than to advance the general good.<sup>189</sup> Brooding about him, she lost her zest for work. She followed his career, and struggled to keep her imagination in check. In March 1896, despite her avowals of being “absolutely happy with Sidney”, she could not shake Chamberlain from her thoughts.<sup>190</sup>

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186 Beatrice reviewed her reasoning at length in her Diary on New Year’s Day, 1901. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:nef769qal>

187 She remarked on the “maternal tenderness” she felt for Sidney in Diary, 20 June 1891. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bin716wef> Elsie Clews Parsons observed that when one spouse “comes to love the other in a parental kind of way”, the marriage was in trouble. See Chapter 3, p. 229.

188 Diary, 14 January 1898. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:hus734mos>

189 Diary, 30 July 1893. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bin716wef>

190 Diary, 28 March 1896. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:hus734mos>

Beatrice felt she had conquered her “morbid troublings” by the beginning of 1897.<sup>191</sup> She kept them at bay during 1898, when she and Sidney spent nine months traveling in America, Australia, and New Zealand, gathering information about the structure and practices of local governments. But after they were back in England, her thoughts returned to Chamberlain, who was drawing considerable press attention as Colonial Secretary during Britain’s involvement in the Boer War in South Africa. “When I am at work I do not feel otherwise than happy and fortunately am well and can work my six hours. But after dinner when the cigarette is done I either feel depressed or my cursed habit of sentimental castle-building leads me to harp back to the past,” she confided in her diary.<sup>192</sup>

Intellectually, Beatrice knew she had made the right choice in marrying Sidney and devoting her life to their joint work. “We have a constant delight in our daily life of search after truth and loving companionship, far away from personal ambition, competitive struggle, and notoriety. I should have hardened and coarsened if I had been subject to the strain of a big flashy social position. The sweet little person that he [Chamberlain] chose is far better suited to be his wife,” she reminded herself in the fall of 1899, at a time when she felt she and Sidney had almost no political influence.<sup>193</sup> Beatrice’s rationalizations were of little avail. During the spring of 1900, her “foolish daydreams” about Chamberlain were again interfering with her work.<sup>194</sup> She knew that her tender affection for Sidney, and his devotion to her, was real and heartfelt. But her more passionate, romantic self still yearned for a different type of intimacy with a more commanding and important man. She probed her contradictory emotions in her diary:

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191 Diary, 18 January 1897. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:hus734mos>

192 Diary, 15 June 1899. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:nef769qal>

193 Diary, 10 October 1899. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:nef769qal>. Beatrice made the same point about becoming “hardened and coarsened” in a conversation with Chamberlain’s sister in 1902 (Diary, 15 February 1902). Mary Endicott, the “sweet little person” that Chamberlain married in 1888, was the perfect political wife, according to Pat Jalland, *Women, Marriage, and Politics, 1860–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 229–31. Jalland notes that Mary gave Chamberlain uncritical support and never voiced her own opinions. She was not a total cipher, however. When Chamberlain was felled by a stroke in 1906, she conducted his political business in order to hide the extent of the damage he suffered.

194 Diary, 22 May 1900. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:nef769qal>

Just as it was the worst part of my nature that led me into passionate feeling for Chamberlain so it was the best part of my nature which led me to accept Sidney after so much doubt and delay. And certainly, just as I was well-punished for the one, I have been richly rewarded for the other course of feeling and conduct. And yet, notwithstanding this conviction, I find my thoughts constantly wandering to the great man.<sup>195</sup>

A chance meeting with Chamberlain on the terrace of the House of Commons in July 1900 increased Beatrice's unhappiness. During their lengthy conversation, she felt they were being watched and judged.<sup>196</sup> When she heard rumors, a few weeks later, that Chamberlain's marriage was in trouble, Beatrice battled against "a terrible depression."<sup>197</sup> She was distraught by the thought of Chamberlain's misery, and feared — even though she knew her concern was "morbid and exaggerated" — that some people were blaming her for his marital difficulties. "And to think that I am over 40, and he is over 60! What an absurdity," she chastised herself.<sup>198</sup>

Beatrice was in great anguish throughout the summer and fall of 1900, and unable to shake off thoughts of Chamberlain. His political mastery was on display in Parliamentary debates and public meetings, and his speeches were widely reported in the press during the general election of October 1900, which turned on the issue of the Government's prosecution of the war. Framed as a vote of confidence in the Government's conduct of the Boer War, and Chamberlain's actions as Colonial Secretary, the election resulted in a landslide victory for Chamberlain and the Conservative Party. Beatrice turned a brave face to the world, and to Sidney, who knew nothing of her struggle.<sup>199</sup> But she was so miserable that, on a working vacation with Sidney in Yorkshire in the fall of 1900, she sometimes went off by herself to the moors to weep. Decades later, she described what she went through as a "nervous breakdown."<sup>200</sup>

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195 Ibid.

196 Diary, 4 July 1900. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:cav667nar>

197 Diary, 19 October 1900. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:cav667nar>

198 Diary, 16 November 1900. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:cav667nar>

199 Diary, New Year's Day, 1901. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:nef769qal>.

Similarly, 9 December 1901. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bex452giv>

200 Diary, 14 April 1927. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:dut736noc>

Beatrice's battle with depression and obsession lasted for another year. She periodically announced that she was cured, only to suffer another relapse. Throughout 1901, which she described in her diary as the most unsatisfactory year since her marriage, she felt that "the sensual side of my nature seemed to be growing at the expense of the intellectual."<sup>201</sup> Nevertheless, she routinely described herself — in her diaries, and in letters to Sidney and others — as a happily married woman who had found the perfect mate and lifestyle. "Sometimes Sidney and I feel that we can hardly repay by our work the happiness and joy of our life. It seems so luxurious to be able to choose what work one will do according to one's faith in its usefulness and do that work in loving comradeship," she asserted in the midst of the period when she would slink off alone to weep.<sup>202</sup> On a day when she could not shake Chamberlain from her thoughts, she wrote to Sidney, "I don't like being away from my boy, but I lie awake and think how much I love him and how glad I am to have married him [...]. To have found a comrade who also believes in [building up a science of society] is extraordinary good luck."<sup>203</sup>

During this difficult time, the Webbs went off on another working vacation. Lying alone in the hot sun on a rocky beach on the Dorset coast, when Sidney had been called back to London for a day, Beatrice's thoughts turned to sex and motherhood. Watching the waves ebb and flow on the beach, she described the "music" made by the withdrawing waves as "a sound of infinite sweetness and sadness, like the inevitable withdrawal of a lover from the mistress he still loves." Languidly considering whether a woman "should marry the same man, in order to have babies, that one would select as joint author" and whether "a man or a woman [ought] to have many relations with the other sex or only one," she decided the answer was "one lover, not only in the letter but also in the spirit." Beatrice dismissed her thoughts as "noonday dreaming [...]" with no bearing on my personal life" but she could not shake her sensuous mood. She continued:

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201 Diary, 9 December 1901. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bex452giv>

202 Diary, 25 September 1900. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:foj709hir>

203 BP to SW [?22 May 1900], in *Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb*, II, p. 131. Diary, 22 May 1900. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:nef769qal>



I move and lie full length on the beach and watch the marvelously tinted wave break on the pink pebbles and then withdraw itself with a sweet low moan [....]. I remember I am well over forty, growing grey and somewhat wrinkled. I get up, shake myself mentally from sunshine dreams: Tomorrow I must plan out the chapter on the 'Select Vestry' otherwise it won't be ready for [Sidney] to write on Thursday.<sup>204</sup>

Beatrice's speculations about having two lovers, the erotic imagery of the waves lapping on the shore and withdrawing "with a sweet low moan", her abrupt transition from reveling in physical sensation and daydreams to the no-nonsense work of planning a chapter on select vestries: all are powerful testimony to her sexual and emotional repression.<sup>205</sup>

Beatrice's feelings of unfulfilled womanhood were exacerbated by the Webbs' decision not to have children. Convinced that the functions of "brainworker" and mother were essentially incompatible, Beatrice believed that a woman had to choose one or the other, a choice that was deeply painful for her. Accepting the societal view that motherhood was a woman's crowning achievement, she felt that "intellectual" women who did not have children "thwart[ed] all the purposes of their nature." In keeping with early twentieth-century views on eugenics, Beatrice also worried that the Britain's gene pool would suffer if intellectually gifted couples and members of the upper-classes failed to reproduce.<sup>206</sup> Nevertheless, having worked so hard and made so many sacrifices to shape her intellect into "an instrument for research," Beatrice believed that it was imperative to protect that investment. Fearful that motherhood would destroy her intellectual acuity, she opted not to have children, and Sidney agreed. Her summary judgment, written on New Year's Day 1901, a few weeks before her forty-third birthday, was "on the whole I do not regret the decision, still less does Sidney."<sup>207</sup> Nevertheless, a few

204 Diary, 24 April 1901. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bex452giv>

205 Some of Beatrice's contemporaries also thought about the benefits of having one partner for sex and another for intellectual activities. See Ruth Brandon, *The New Women and the Old Men: Love, Sex and the Woman Question* (New York: Norton, 1990) and Judith R. Walkowitz, "Science, Feminism and Romance: The Men and Women's Club, 1885-1889", *History Workshop Journal*, 21 (Spring 1986), 37-59.

206 See Caine, p. 116, for Beatrice's criticism of companionate couples who chose not to have children. For her connections to the early twentieth-century eugenics movement in Britain, see Donald MacKenzie, "Eugenics in Britain", *Social Studies of Science*, 6 (1976), 499-532.

207 Diary, New Year's Day, 1901. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:nef769qal>

months later, during her contemplation of her life choices on the beach in Dorset, she asked herself, “Are the books we have written together worth (to the community) the babies we might have had?”<sup>208</sup> The Webbs would refer to their pet projects — the London School of Economics, the *New Statesman*, the Poor Law Report, their book about Soviet Russia — as their “children.” These achievements were compensation, but perhaps not wholly satisfactory substitutes, for flesh and blood offspring.

## Coming to Terms with the Working Partnership

Everything about the Webbs’s life was arranged to maximize their ability to work. Neither Beatrice nor Sidney had an interest in making their home a showpiece of Victorian domesticity. Their London domicile was chosen for its proximity to Parliament. Their dining room doubled as a workroom, its walls lined with books. Their living room was set up like a public meeting space, with long banks of seats fitted into alcoves, and no sofa.<sup>209</sup> Beatrice spent several weeks shopping for wallpaper and furnishings when they moved in, but happily left the day-to-day details of housekeeping and food preparation to servants, who ran the household with little supervision.<sup>210</sup>

In their first years together, the Webbs did not go out much, entertained few people other than their families and Sidney’s Fabian friends, and rarely went to the theatre or concerts. Beatrice immersed herself in research and writing; Sidney worked with her, but also devoted long hours to the London County Council, the Fabian Society, and the London School of Economics. Vacations, too, were work opportunities, mostly devoted to reading and writing interspersed with walks and hikes. (During a three-week vacation in 1901, Sidney made his way through twenty-six books borrowed from the London Library.<sup>211</sup>)

Sidney was the perfect work partner, capable of unflinching effort and long hours of focused attention, morning, afternoon, and night.

208 Diary, 24 April 1901. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bex452giv>

209 *Diary of Beatrice Webb*, II, Introduction, pp. 13–14.

210 For example, Diary, 24 May 1897, <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:hus734mos>; 11 May 1923, <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:lec463nir>; 18 July 1926, <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:beg266zey>. BW to Mary Hankinson, 10/5/10, in *Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb*, II, p. 345.

211 Diary, 24 April 1901. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bex452giv>

He “is perpetually working,” Beatrice reported in 1901 — very likely with a mixture of awe and exasperation. She herself could work no more than six hours per day. Sidney did not share her cultural interests, and discouraged her from accepting social engagements that might distract her from the next day’s work or tire her out. These habits increased the Webbs’s output, but limited their companionship to a narrow sphere. They also made it difficult for Beatrice to pursue her interest in music, literature, and religion, and find outlets for her sociability. In 1893, in the midst of brooding about Chamberlain, she yearned for “a wider culture” of art and literature.<sup>212</sup> During her severe depression in 1901, she craved music and religious outlets.<sup>213</sup>

Accustomed to working on her own, highly ambitious but greatly insecure, Beatrice was sometimes frustrated by Sidney’s critical scrutiny, probing analysis, and dry writing style. After she spent five days writing a lecture in 1893, she was upset when Sidney felt it needed more work and offered to help her. His reaction caused a “little bit of a tiff” and left her feeling mortified and angry. They spent another four days working together on a new draft. Relying so much on Sidney’s help undermined Beatrice’s confidence and made her feel like a parasite. She was similarly unnerved by the constructive criticism and rewriting that Sidney’s fellow Fabians provided on draft chapters of their book.<sup>214</sup>

This was not the only occasion when the Webbs’s collaboration became acrimonious. They argued so much over one chapter of *Industrial Democracy* in 1897, that they agreed to focus temporarily on separate sections of the book.<sup>215</sup> At other times, they resolved their arguments with “a shower of kisses.”<sup>216</sup> All in all, Beatrice felt that the collaboration took a considerable mental and emotional toll. “How could we do it, if working together were not, in itself, delightful,” she reflected.<sup>217</sup>

She also felt constrained and oppressed by the dryness of their material and prose style. She wrote despondently in the summer of 1894, “Not getting on with our [trade union] book. It is a horrid grind, this analysis — one sentence is exactly like another — the same words, the

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212 Diary, 30 July 1893. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bin716wef>

213 Diary, 9 December 1901. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bex452giv>

214 Diary, 17 September 1893. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bin716wef>

215 Diary, 27 August 1897. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:hus734mos>

216 Diary, 18 January 1897. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:hus734mos>

217 Diary, 10 November 1902. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:won715bor>

same construction, no relief in narrative [...]. I feel horribly vexed with myself for loitering and idling as I do morning after morning, looking on while poor Sidney drudges along.”<sup>218</sup> Six months later, although the work was going better, Beatrice expressed her desire to write a novel as a way of having a “fling”: “I want to imagine anything I damn please without regard to facts as they are [...]. I want to try my hand at an artist’s work instead of mechanics. I am sick to death of trying to put out hideous facts, multitudinous details, exasperating qualifications in readable form.”<sup>219</sup> At work on the first volume of their massive study of local government in 1901, she found herself “brooding” over religious questions and reading about psychology, theology, and the lives of the saints. “The one subject my mind revolts at is local government,” she admitted.<sup>220</sup> Significantly, the recurring episodes when Beatrice could not motivate herself to work or argued with Sidney about their work coincided with the times she was unable to stop brooding about Chamberlain.

## Starvation Therapy

Beatrice maintained that she cured the deep depression that began in 1900 by “starvation.”<sup>221</sup> Taking the advice of a celebrated doctor who believed diet was the key to healthy living, she became a vegetarian late in 1901, put herself on an exceedingly strict diet, and precipitously lost weight. She recorded her food intake and health symptoms in her diary. After several months, her weight stabilized, her eczema was healing, she slept better, and she could concentrate and work for longer hours. Her mood improved, and she was able to keep her thoughts and emotions under control. “I am no longer plagued by foolish fancies and absurd daydreams,” she wrote in relief in late April 1902.<sup>222</sup> Her later diaries contain no more regrets about her childless state or yearning ruminations about Chamberlain, although she continued to follow his career with interest. (Chamberlain suffered a severe stroke in 1906 and died in 1914.)

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218 Diary, 10 July 1894. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:kac646sis> and <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:wip502kaf>

219 Diary, 1 February 1895. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:kac646sis>

220 Diary, 2 January 1901. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bex452giv>

221 Diary, 14 April 1927. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:dut736noc>

222 Diary, 25 April 1902. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:xas833lok>

Beatrice would remain an abstemious, even a faddish eater, rigorously limiting how much she ate and denying herself all rich foods and stimulants like coffee. The “starvation” therapy was more than physical: she was also starving her emotions by repressing the sensual and imaginative side of her nature in her life with Sidney.

Other lifestyle changes that began in 1902 very probably contributed to Beatrice’s recovery and helped to resolve her ambivalence about her marriage. She derived enormous satisfaction during their first decade of their marriage from their professional success and the conviction that their star was rising. Sidney had pushed through important educational reforms on the London County Council. They had published several books, founded the London School of Economics, and were sought out as experts. “No young man or woman who is anxious to study or to work in public affairs can fail to come under our influence,” Beatrice rejoiced in 1898.<sup>223</sup> But in 1900 and 1901, she felt they were largely isolated from the country’s political leadership and spent most of their time with the “intellectual proletariat.”<sup>224</sup>

By 1902, the Webbs were making deliberate efforts to increase their influence and gain support for their ideas by widening their social and political circles. They hosted eight to ten, occasionally as many as twenty-five, politicians, civil servants, and intellectuals at dinners and luncheons in their home on a weekly basis. Beatrice’s upbringing and family background had groomed her to be a political hostess, and that was the role she would have played as Chamberlain’s wife. The Webbs’s guests may have left hungry for better quality meals and more generous portions, but they were likely sated by the discussions of social and political issues.<sup>225</sup> Beatrice shone in dispensing brilliant conversation. Sidney could weigh in and bask in her glow. He gained standing and recognition in political circles, and so did Beatrice. With an expanded social and intellectual world, she had more scope for her sociability and her keen interest in human personality. All this must have helped her accept the sacrifices she had made to marry Sidney. The autumn of 1902

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223 Diary, [?] March 1898. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:hus734mos>

224 Intellectual proletariat: Diary, New Year’s Day, 1901. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:nef769qal>

225 Beatrice’s niece, Kitty Muggeridge, recalled the frugal meals Beatrice served. See Muggeridge and Adam, p. 15.

was “thoroughly satisfactory”, she pronounced.<sup>226</sup> “I am frightened at my own happiness,” Sidney confessed.<sup>227</sup>

The psychological battle Beatrice had waged for ten years was over. During the course of 1902, she settled into the routine of her married life and no longer wrote with yearning in her diary about the things Sidney could not offer. In 1903, she reflected, with seeming sincerity, “A woman who wanted a husband to spend hours talking to her or listening to her chitchat would find [Sidney] a trying husband. As it is we exactly suit each other’s habits. Long hours of solitary brooding is what I am accustomed to and without which I doubt whether I could be productive [...]. I have my thoughts and he has his book, and both alike go to complete and fulfill our joint task.”<sup>228</sup> In 1904, she paid a call on Chamberlain’s wife, and then lunched with Sidney and both Chamberlains, without recording any distress or brooding.<sup>229</sup>

## A Partnership of Equals

After 1902, the partnership with Sidney became the mainstay of Beatrice’s emotional life. Over the next four decades, she extolled the happiness she and Sidney found in each other and their work without expressing the dissatisfactions of earlier years. On their forty-seventh wedding anniversary in 1939, she proudly asserted, “[W]e have been one and indivisible, in work and in rest, at home and abroad, in our private life and our public career.”<sup>230</sup> The Webbs came to identify so completely with each other that they found it difficult to function apart. During one separation, Sidney lamented, “I get on with my various tasks with difficulty, missing my inspiration, my companionship and my joy! It is really terrible to think how dependent I am on your constant presence.”<sup>231</sup> Beatrice observed in 1907, “Apart, we each of us live only half a life; together, we each of us have a double life.”<sup>232</sup> In 1934, when

226 Diary, [?] December 1902. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:won715bor>

227 Diary, 7 June 1902. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:xas833lok>

228 Diary, 4 August 1903. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:xij627rup>

229 Diary, 10 June 1904, 17 June 1904. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:xij627rup>

230 Diary, 23 July 1939. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:tul234dab>

231 SW to BW, 22 April 1908, in *Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb*, II, p. 298.

232 Diary, 21 June 1907. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:wur719qow>

Sidney spent five weeks in the Soviet Union — the longest they had been separated — Beatrice suffered “acute emotional starvation” and felt she was “living a half-life.”<sup>233</sup>

The sense of unity that fueled the Webbs’ marriage and working partnership was as strong as that of any couple previously discussed. However, there was a fundamental difference in the way the Webbs experienced that unity. In the Palmer and Young relationships, and in Robert Herrick’s romantic ideal, “oneness” meant that the man’s interests and activities absorbed the woman and made it difficult for her to sustain a career of her own. In contrast, the Webbs achieved “oneness” without either partner being submerged in the other, and without rooting the relationship in male mastery and female subordination. Although Beatrice and Sidney talked about being “one,” they spoke as frequently about the “jointness” of their personal and professional partnership. The distinction is subtle but highly significant: “jointness” suggests a coupling and an adding together, while “oneness” connotes the absorption of one person by another. Beatrice’s characterization of Sidney as “the Other One,” and Sidney’s idiosyncratic arithmetic (“in our case,  $1 + 1 = 11$ ”) reinforces the idea that their unity was achieved by adding two personalities together to jointly create a new one rather than simply submerging a weaker personality into a stronger one. “[N]either of us is outstandingly gifted; it is the ‘*combinat*’ that is remarkable,” Beatrice observed.<sup>234</sup>

The Webbs’s collaboration and marriage has inspired many portraits and analyses. Most accounts highlight the partnership’s unity rather than its egalitarian aspects. Beatrice is generally portrayed as the more brilliant, more creative, more original thinker, and by far the more colorful and masterful personality. Sidney is often depicted as a plodder who was ill-equipped to take the initiative or oppose Beatrice if they disagreed.<sup>235</sup> Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie, the editors of Beatrice’s

233 Diary, 27 September 1934. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:rut323dac>

234 Diary, 25 September 1933. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:tol638hey>

235 Lisanne Radice, *Beatrice and Sidney Webb, Fabian Socialists* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1984) is an exception. She argues that Sidney was the “more gifted” partner to whom Beatrice owed an immense intellectual debt (pp. 4–6). A recent analysis finds that the Webbs had a more egalitarian division of labor than two other couples (Bernard and Helen Bosanquet, and Victor and Sybella Branford) of their day who were similarly engaged in social investigation and improvement efforts. See Eileen Janes Yeo, “Social Science Couples in Britain at the Turn of the Twentieth Century:

diaries, argued that she was the guiding force in the marriage and Sidney was “happy to defer to Beatrice in all the policies of the partnership.” Characterizing Sidney as a civil servant *par excellence*, trained and happy to implement the plans of his superiors, they suggest that he played a similar role with Beatrice, serving as “an untiringly loyal and immensely able instrument of her will.”<sup>236</sup>

Certainly, Sidney was not an overbearing, authoritarian, controlling Victorian husband. This does not mean, however, that Beatrice dominated him. To view the Webbs’s relationship as merely an inversion of the traditional model of dominant male and subservient female oversimplifies what was in fact a highly complex and mutually supportive collaboration. Their partnership fostered an egalitarianism that was manifested in three principal aspects of their work: the process of writing their books and developing their positions; the ways in which they influenced each other; and the diversity of roles each played over the long course of their partnership. Their union was a remarkable accomplishment for their own day, or for any time. Its success owed as much to Sidney as to Beatrice.

## The Writing Partnership

Beatrice’s diaries make clear how much intellectual give and take was involved in forging a partnership that enabled the Webbs to speak with a single — often overpowering — voice and function like “two typewriters clacking as one.”<sup>237</sup> Beatrice may have chosen the topics for their books and led the research effort, but she did not control the writing or determine their conclusions unilaterally. In the early years of

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Gender Divisions in Work and Marriage” in *For Better or Worse? Collaborative Couples in the Sciences*, ed. by Annette Lykknes, Donald L. Optiz, and Brigitte Van Tiggelen (Basel: Springer, 2012), pp. 220–44. As Nord, pp. 1–14, points out, the unflattering, almost caricatured, portraits of the Webbs written by H. G. Wells and Beatrice’s niece, Kitty Muggeridge, focus on the ways Beatrice and Sidney violated the gender stereotypes of their day.

236 *Diary of Beatrice Webb*, IV, Introduction, xiii.

237 Speaking with a single voice: Margaret Cole, *Beatrice Webb* (London: Longmans, Green, 1945), p. 138; Muggeridge and Adam, p. 15; Kingsley Martin, “The Webbs in Retirement” in *The Webbs and Their Work*, ed. by Margaret Cole (London: Frederick Muller, 1949), pp. 285–301 (p. 297). Typewriters clacking: A. G. Gardiner, quoted in George Feaver, “Introduction” to *BW, Our Partnership* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1975), xxiii.



the collaboration, she took the first cut at organizing the material and outlining the chapters, but much of the writing was left to Sidney.<sup>238</sup> He did not adopt her ideas automatically, and her preliminary thinking and outlining were subject to frequent, often drastic, sometimes acrimonious, reworking once he began to write the text. Beatrice described the process of writing their book on local government in 1901:

The first three days I spent struggling with the first draft of the first chapter rearranging each section and, when I had rearranged it, submitting it to Sidney. Then he would begin (I sitting by his side) to rewrite it, both of us breaking off to discuss or to consult our material. Indeed this constant consultation of our 'specimens' is the leading feature of our work [...]. One of us will object 'that is not so' or 'that is not always the case' and then forthwith it becomes a question of evidence.<sup>239</sup>

They hammered out their understanding of the English Poor Law in much the same way in 1902. Beatrice explained:

For a whole month I played about with propositions and arguments, submitting them, one after another, to Sidney, before we jointly discovered our own principles of Poor Law administration [...]. It is a curious process, this joint thinking; we throw the ball of thought on to the other, each one of us resting, judging, inventing in turn. And we are not satisfied until the conclusion satisfies completely and finally both minds [...]. It is experimentation, and constantly testing the correspondence between the idea and the fact [...]. I do most of the experimentation and Sidney watches and judges the results, accepting some, rejecting others. It is he who finds the formula that expresses our conclusions.<sup>240</sup>

In later years, the division of labor changed somewhat, but the final product was no less collaborative. While they were working on *A Constitution for a Socialist Commonwealth of Britain* in the late teens, Beatrice wrote that she was "designing the separate chapters and dictating a rough draft and redictating until it expresses my mind, and then Sidney correcting all of it and adding sections to it after discussion with me — the finished product representing the combined thought of 'the Webbs.' In the end we never disagree!"<sup>241</sup> She stressed, "Neither of

238 *Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb*, II, ed. note, p. 15.

239 Diary, 24 April 1901. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bex452giv>

240 Diary, 10 November 1902. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:won715bor>

241 Diary, 5 July 1919. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:buh232top>

us would have written the book alone — it is the jointest of joint efforts.”<sup>242</sup> Their dear friend, George Bernard Shaw, who worked closely with them on many projects, remarked that the Webbs’s thinking was so entwined he could never tell whether Beatrice or Sidney had written a particular sentence.<sup>243</sup>

## Mutual Influence

The give and take that defined the Webbs’s intellectual partnership is also evident in the ways they shaped and molded each other. Beatrice persuaded Sidney to serve on the London County Council instead of seeking a Parliamentary seat in the early 1890s. She thought his talents would be put to better use on the local panel and he needed more political experience; she also did not want to lose his help in writing their books.<sup>244</sup> Noting his subsequent success in advancing the Fabian concept of municipal socialism at the LCC, she proudly asserted, “With his life I am more than satisfied. The work he is doing, creating machinery for collective action, is the work I desired to see him do [...]. This combination of practice and theory is, I think, the ideal life for him.”<sup>245</sup> When Sidney was considering becoming a Labour candidate for Parliament in 1920, Beatrice convinced him it was the right move at the right time.<sup>246</sup>

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242 Diary, 11 May 1920. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:buh232top>

243 See George Feaver, “Two Minds or One? The Mills, the Webbs, and Liberty in British Social Democracy” in *Lives, Liberties and the Public Good: New Essays on Political Theory*, ed. by George Feaver and Frederick Rosen (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 139–72 (p. 150). Edward Pease, General Secretary of the Fabian Society for many years, and Leonard Woolf also found it impossible to distinguish Beatrice’s and Sidney’s respective contributions to the Webbs’s joint work. Edward R. Pease, *The History of the Fabian Society* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1963), p. 212; Woolf quoted in Radice, p. 324.

244 SW to BP, 17 Sept/91. Passfield Papers. See also, *Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb*, I, ed. note, p. 405. Beatrice doubted that Sidney was “a first rate political instrument” or would become a political “leader”, by which she meant “an acknowledged chief.” Diary, 7 July 1891, and Diary, 1 December 1892. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bin716wef>

245 Diary, 30 July, 1893. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bin716wef>. Despite her happiness in Sidney’s success, her thoughts returned to Chamberlain while she wrote this entry in her diary.

246 Diary, 8 June 1920. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:buh232top>

Beatrice also took credit for advancing Sidney's career by smoothing his rough edges and creating opportunities for him to interact with leading politicians and intellectuals. "The perfect happiness of his own life has cured his old defects of manner — he has lost the aggressive self-assertive tone, the slight touch of insolence which was only another form of shyness and has gained immensely in persuasiveness," she noted a few years after they married.<sup>247</sup> Years later, she observed approvingly, "All asperity and harshness has left him [...] he is less of a doctrinaire than of old, more of an investigator [...]. And I think the 'setting' I have given him of simple fare and distinguished friends suits him, both in reputation and taste."<sup>248</sup>

Sidney was happy, even grateful, to accept Beatrice's guidance on these matters, but he did not always defer to her or look to her to tell him what to do. He initiated and led several of their joint projects. The educational reforms he achieved as chairman of the Technical Education Board of the London County Council (1892–1910) — a scholarship ladder for bright working class boys, a system of polytechnics and technical institutions to provide a practical education for poor children, a reorganization of the degree programs at London University — owed little to Beatrice.<sup>249</sup> He discussed his ideas with her, and enlisted her help in organizing some local vestry elections. But the details of the reforms and the strategies for moving them through the LCC were his. His work for the Fabian Society was a continuation of what he was doing before his marriage; Beatrice did not become active in the leadership of the Society until 1912. And it was Sidney, not Beatrice, who took the lead in developing the London School of Economics and the *New Statesman*, two of the Webbs's most important intellectual "offspring."<sup>250</sup> In 1924, she would have preferred to have him working with her rather than serving in the Cabinet, but she acknowledged that the decision to leave public office was his to make, not hers.<sup>251</sup>

247 Diary, Christmas 1895. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:hus734mos>

248 Diary, 22 March 1901. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bex452giv>

249 Cole, *Beatrice*, p. 85.

250 Feaver, "Introduction" to BW, *Partnership*, xxx–xxxi. *Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb*, II, ed. note, x. Diary, 21 September 1894. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:kac646sis>. Cole, *Beatrice*, p. 85.

251 Diary, 2 May 1924. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:fim518vor>

Sidney also molded Beatrice, although his influence may not always have been beneficial. She refused many social invitations because he insisted they would only exhaust her and distract her from her work.<sup>252</sup> Occasionally, he discouraged her from giving public lectures.<sup>253</sup> Most significantly, he had a stifling effect on Beatrice's creativity and imagination. He not only imposed a dry statistical tone in their manuscripts, but also squelched her interest in individuals and personalities. Resuming her solitary diary writing after keeping a joint journal with Sidney during their nine-month trip to the United States, Australia, and New Zealand in 1898, Beatrice complained that she had "lost the habit of intimate confidences." She explained, "One cannot run on into self-analysis, family gossip, or indiscreet descriptions, if someone else, however dear, is solemnly to read it then and there; I foresee the kindly indulgence or tolerant boredom with which he would decipher the last entry and this feeling would, in itself, make it almost impossible to write whatever came into my head at the time of writing without thought of his criticism."<sup>254</sup>

At times, Beatrice felt that Sidney's mere presence had an inhibiting effect on her diary writing. "When Sidney is with me I cannot talk to the 'Other Self' with whom I commune when I am alone — 'it' ceases to be present and only reappears when he becomes absent," she wrote in 1904.<sup>255</sup> Twenty years later, Beatrice noted that she had not written in her diary for nine weeks, in part because "Sidney has been here and I can never write in his presence."<sup>256</sup>

## Changing Roles Throughout the Partnership

Beatrice and Sidney's partnership was not a collaboration in which two people worked together to advance the career of one, and the dominant and subordinate positions were clear from the start. On the contrary,

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252 For example: Diary, [?] June 1904, <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:xij627rup>, and 14 October 1905, <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:nin225zok>

253 For example: BW to Edward Pease [18 April 1893], in *Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb*, II, p. 5.

254 Diary, 5 February 1899. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:nef769qal>

255 Diary, 16 October 1904. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:xij627rup>

256 Diary, 12 February 1925. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:siq946mib>

both the Webbs played a variety of shifting roles. At times, one assumed the leadership position or the more public role, while the other took on a more subordinate, behind-the-scenes, “helpmate” role. Then they reversed positions. Their revolving roles are another marker of the fundamental egalitarianism in their relationship. As Beatrice herself recognized, she “needed to be ‘leader’ in some respects and servant in others” in order to be fully happy in marriage.<sup>257</sup>

When they married, the Webbs anticipated that Beatrice would be the thinker and Sidney the pragmatic reformer and politician. She expected to live the life of a “recluse” while he would provide her with “an open window into the world.”<sup>258</sup> For the first thirteen years of the marriage, they followed this plan. Sidney helped Beatrice with their books (always published under both names), but he also served on the London County Council and spearheaded the founding of the London School of Economics as a college of public administration. The Webbs did not involve themselves much in running the LSE, but it would provide a welcoming environment and opportunities for both female faculty and female students and became known for a more informal, less hierarchical style than older, more traditional universities like Oxford and Cambridge.<sup>259</sup>

In the early 1900s, Beatrice expanded the Webbs’s narrow domestic circle by hosting what amounted to a political salon. Determined to “permeate” the major political parties with their reform agenda, they invited carefully selected politicians, civil servants, and intellectuals to luncheons and dinners and fed them information about specific projects and proposals. They believed their efforts succeeded in getting Sidney’s proposals for restructuring local education administration written into the Conservative Education Act of 1902/3 and adopted by Parliament. They were proud to be seen as effective and unscrupulous “wirepullers” who wielded influence behind the scenes.<sup>260</sup>

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257 She said this to Joseph Chamberlain’s sister, Clara Ryland. Diary, 15 February 1902. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:xas833lok>

258 Diary, 1 December 1892. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:bin716wef>

259 See Maxine Berg, *A Woman in History: Eileen Power, 1889–1940* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 142–44.

260 Others have questioned the effectiveness of their tactics and pointed out that they often backed the wrong candidates. See *Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb*, II, editor’s note, ix–x.

Their lifestyle changed more dramatically when Beatrice was appointed to the Royal Commission on the Poor Law in November 1905. For the next seven years, she played the lead public role while Sidney cheerfully took on the role of behind-the-scenes partner. “Just now our usual positions are somewhat reversed: it is he who sits at home and thinks out the common literary work, it is I who am racing around dealing with men and affairs,” Beatrice noted in her diary in 1907.<sup>261</sup> Dissatisfied with the direction the chair of the commission was taking, she conducted a separate investigation of the workings of the Poor Law, with help from Sidney and four paid research assistants. Together she and Sidney hammered out the principles of a new system to replace the existing but outmoded methods and institutions to help the poor. Beatrice drew strength from Sidney’s emotional support and encouragement as well as benefiting from his technical expertise. He proved invaluable to her in reviewing the mounds of evidence, formulating reform proposals, devising strategies for dealing with her fellow Commissioners, and writing the dissenting Minority Report.<sup>262</sup> “I tremble to think how utterly dependent I am on him — both in his love and on his unrivalled capacity for ‘putting things through,’” she acknowledged in her diary.<sup>263</sup>

261 Diary, 3 May 1907. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:wur719qow>

262 The ambitious plan outlined in the Minority Report, of which Beatrice was the principal author, would have replaced the old poor law relief system with separate programs to aid the sick, the aged, and the unemployed. Reflecting the Webbs’s structural view of the problems, the proposed reforms were intended not just to alleviate the effects of poverty, but to prevent it from occurring. Many of the core principles and central recommendations of the Minority Report were reflected in Walter Beveridge’s *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, better known as the Beveridge Report (1942), which became the blueprint for the social welfare system that Britain adopted after World War II. See Lucinda Platt, “Beatrice Webb, William Beveridge, Poverty, and the Minority Report on the Poor Law” (February 23, 2018), <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsehistory/2018/02/23/beatrice-webb-william-beveridge-poverty-and-the-minority-report-on-the-poor-law/>, and Jose Harris, “The Webbs and Beveridge”, in *From the Workhouse to Welfare: What Beatrice Webb’s 1909 Minority Report Can Teach Us Today*, ed. by Ed Wallis (London: Fabian Society, 2009), pp. 55–64.

263 Diary, 18 February 1907. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:wur719qow>. See also, BW to SW [?14 November 1907], in *Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb*, II, p. 276. Jose Harris notes in “The Webbs and Beveridge” that Beatrice could not have written the report without the work Sidney did in predigesting the technical details of poor law administration. Harris also argues that if Sidney had been a member of the Commission, he would have been better than Beatrice at managing the personal dynamics among the Commission members and succeeded in getting agreement around a Majority Report that incorporated the Webbs’s principles.

Beatrice assumed an equally public position as chairman of the National Committee for the Break-Up of the Poor Law, the pressure group the Webbs launched in 1909 to mobilize public support for the reforms outlined in the Minority Report. Directing a paid staff, thirty to forty volunteers, and over 400 lecturers, Beatrice discovered unsuspected talents as a manager, organizer, and lecturer. She relished being in a position of authority.<sup>264</sup> She also enjoyed an expanded sense of “oneness” with Sidney, who resigned from the LCC to write pamphlets and give lectures for the campaign to create a new welfare system.<sup>265</sup> “Our comradeship has never been so complete. Hitherto, we have had only one side of our work together — our research and book writing. But this last year we have organized together, spoken together, as well as written together,” she wrote enthusiastically.<sup>266</sup>

Beatrice was especially grateful that Sidney was willing to support her without claiming credit for himself. “He has been extraordinarily generous in not resenting, in the very least, my having nominally to take the front place, as the leading minority commissioner, and ostensible head of the National Committee,” she wrote appreciatively in her journal.<sup>267</sup> A few years later, when he did not want to be listed as co-author of a jointly written article, she marveled, “He seems to be wholly devoid of vanity or personal ambition, he never feels he does not get his [just] desserts.”<sup>268</sup> Yet, she had done the same for him, declining to put her name on pointedly political article they wrote jointly to promote the idea of guaranteeing a “national minimum” of education and welfare. “I believe in mere ‘wife’s politics’; only in research do I claim equality of recognition!” she asserted.<sup>269</sup>

After the Webbs ended the unsuccessful Poor Law agitation in 1912, Beatrice assumed a leadership role in the Fabian Society, helping to develop its policy agenda and running its Research Department. Sidney remained a key figure in the Fabian leadership, worked on the Webb’s ongoing study of English local government, and continued to write and

264 Diary, New Year’s Eve, 1909. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:won715bor>

265 Diary, 15 May 1909; 27 May 1910; 14 November 1909. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:won715bor>

266 Diary, New Year’s Eve, 1909. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:won715bor>  
267 Ibid.

268 Diary, 25 September 1915. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:cij556jub>

269 Diary, 8 June 1904. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:xij627rup>

lecture on British social policy. In 1913, he took the lead in founding the *New Statesman*, a national weekly journal of leftist opinion which the Webbs always referred to as one of their “children.”

Having focused on domestic social policy and paid little attention to European politics and diplomacy, the Webbs found themselves emotionally and intellectually unprepared for World War I and largely sidelined in British political circles when the war broke out.<sup>270</sup> By mid-1916, Beatrice was in a state of severe depression and nervous collapse, horrified by the carnage and suffering caused by the war, and depressed by the realization that she and Sidney had no influence over the Britain’s wartime leaders.<sup>271</sup> Showing the classic symptoms of neurasthenia (physical and mental exhaustion, irritability, and headaches), she found it difficult to work on their usual studies. Instead, she began a new endeavor: transcribing her diaries in preparation for writing an autobiography that would tell the story of her life and work prior to her marriage. She rallied in 1917 and 1918, when she was appointed to several government committees that discussed plans for reconstructing British society after the war. Struggling to get some of her Poor Law proposals adopted by a government committee charged with improving local government, she reluctantly stopped working on her autobiography.

Sidney emerged as a prominent public figure in the late teens. As an influential member of the Labour Party Executive — Beatrice dubbed him the party’s “intellectual leader” — he wrote much of the party’s new constitution and was instrumental in getting it to adopt a Socialist platform in 1918. He sat on a government commission charged with considering the future of the mining industry, including working conditions, wages and hours. In 1922, he won a seat in Parliament, as a Labour MP for Seaham Harbor, a mining district in northern England. Two years later he was appointed President of the Board of Trade and became a Cabinet Minister. The Labour Party was in power for only ten months in 1924, but Sidney kept his Parliamentary seat until 1929.

While Sidney was in Parliament, Beatrice turned back to writing her autobiography, and played a conventional helpmate role in his career:

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270 Diary, 31 July 1914, <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:mod807hoq>, and the note Beatrice added in August 1918 in the typescript diary, <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:vat325giy>

271 Diary, 14 April 1927. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:dut736noc>



she answered his correspondence, wrote a newsletter to his female constituents, campaigned with him, and served as his political hostess. Her willingness to put Sidney's work ahead of her own makes her sound like the most subordinate of nineteenth-century wives. "My first duty is cooperating with Sidney's parliamentary work," she asserted, even though she knew she would have little time or energy for her own writing and found her new role rather tedious.<sup>272</sup>

Beatrice regretted that they were working on parallel tracks rather than on a joint project. "[H]e has interests about which I know little, and I am absorbed in creative writing in which he has no part but that of a kindly and helpful critic of style," she lamented when he was in the Cabinet.<sup>273</sup> Hard at work on her autobiography, she took little interest in the Labour Government and the issues that had previously absorbed her. "The concrete questions which I have investigated — trade unionism, local government, cooperation, political organization, no longer interest me: I dislike reading about them, thinking about them, talking about them, or writing about them," she admitted in her diary.<sup>274</sup>

The realization that Sidney did not value her autobiographical writing distressed Beatrice. "[T]here is something about it that he not exactly resents, but which is unsympathetic [to him...] the whole thing is far too subjective, and all that part which deals with 'my creed' as distinguished from 'my craft' seems to him the sentimental scribbles of a woman only interesting just because they are feminine," she maintained.<sup>275</sup> Writing a public account of her life and work before her marriage was immensely important to Beatrice. It was her attempt to come to terms with her own personality, the forces that had shaped her, and the dualities that defined her life. It also provided an outlet for the creative imagination that she had bottled up for almost thirty years of writing fact-filled analyses of British government and social policy. By showing her to be a sensitive observer of individuals and a woman of feeling as well as intellect, the publication of the autobiography, entitled

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272 Diary, 9 February 1923, <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:ras535xan>. Diary, [?28] January 1924, and 9 February 1924. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:fim518vor>

273 Diary, 28 June 1924. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:fim518vor>

274 Diary, 10 July 1924. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:fim518vor>

275 Diary, 19 March 1925. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:siq946mib>

*My Apprenticeship*, in 1926 radically altered Beatrice's public image.<sup>276</sup> This was a side of her that Sidney had never fully appreciated, and one that she had learned to keep hidden from him.

After the Labour Party lost power in November 1924, Sidney kept his seat in Parliament but resumed the writing partnership with Beatrice. They published the last of their ten volumes on British local government in 1929, the year the Labour Party was voted back into power. Sidney had not run for re-election, but was made a baron, given a seat in the House of Lords, and joined the Cabinet as Secretary of State for the Dominions and Colonies. Both of Sidney's Cabinet posts had been held by Joseph Chamberlain, Beatrice noted in her diary.<sup>277</sup>

Beatrice self-sacrificingly assumed a helpmate role once again, although she knew her own work would become "scrappy and incompetent" as a result.<sup>278</sup> But she refused to accept the title of "Lady Passfield" and be presented at Court.<sup>279</sup> Sidney retired to private life in 1931 after the Labour Party lost the General Election, and the Webbs, now in their seventies, took on several new projects. Beatrice started writing the second volume of her autobiography, an account of the Webbs's marriage and joint work, which she called "Our Partnership." The Webbs spent two months in Soviet Russia in 1932, and embarked on a study of the Soviet economy and government. Beatrice in particular saw Russian Communism as the triumph of socialism in action, and the Webbs enthusiastically endorsed it as a model for other socialist societies. When *Soviet Communism: A New Civilization?* was published in the fall of 1935, Beatrice and Sidney triumphantly hailed it as their last and biggest baby.<sup>280</sup> In fact, the book was severely critiqued by many who felt the Webbs had been taken in by Soviet propaganda.

Beatrice's prediction that *Soviet Communism* would be their last major work was prophetic. Sidney suffered a stroke in January 1938, at the age of eighty, and never fully recovered. Beatrice mourned the end of their

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276 See Nord, pp. 8–9, and G. D.H. Cole, "Beatrice Webb as an Economist", in *Webbs*, ed. by Margaret Cole, pp. 267–82 (pp. 276–77).

277 Diary, 6 July 1929. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:var297foh>

278 Diary, 2 October 1929; 16 June 1930; see also, 27 December 1929. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:var297foh>

279 Diary, 20 June 1929, 29 June 1929, and 6 July 1929. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:var297foh>

280 Diary, 15 November 1935. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:kuk362nid>

working partnership. "I cannot march alone," she despaired.<sup>281</sup> Miserable without Sidney's companionship and support, Beatrice arranged for his care, nursed him tenderly, and prepared for her own death. She kept on writing, but as her own health deteriorated, she asserted that she would welcome death but did not want to leave Sidney on his own.<sup>282</sup> She died first, at the age of 86, in April 1943. Sidney followed in October 1947. (The second volume of Beatrice's autobiography, posthumously edited at Sidney's request by Barbara Drake and Margaret Cole, was published as *Our Partnership* in 1948.<sup>283</sup>) At the suggestion of Bernard Shaw, Beatrice's and Sidney's ashes were buried together in Westminster Abbey, the only non-Royal couple to be so honored. Beatrice would have been pleased by this striking tribute to the jointness of their life and the importance of their work.

### Explaining the Partnership's Success

The Webbs's partnership succeeded not primarily, as the Mackenzies have suggested, because Sidney conducted himself like a civil servant committed to carrying out the will of the more powerful Executive, but because he was a collaborator by temperament and political conviction. A civil servant supports a hierarchical power structure and division of labor, while a collaboration suggests a more equal relationship in which all work together for a common vision and common goal. Advancing the work of a committee of which one is a member, a decision-maker, and a fellow strategist is different from being a civil servant who simply executes what another thinks up.

Determined that they would have "equivalent freedom and joint lives", Sidney conscientiously applied his collectivist political principles to his domestic life. Years before he met Beatrice, he explained his philosophy of collaboration and marriage to Marjorie Davidson, the fiancée of his friend and fellow Fabian, Edward Pease. "My own theory of marriage does not involve the merging of personalities," Sidney wrote,

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281 Diary, 25 January 1938. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:wid939bez>

282 Diary, 8 April 1939, <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:tul234dab>; 13 September 1942, <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:ril779lef>; 25 March 1943, <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:cej353yic>

283 Webb, *Our Partnership*, ed. by Barbara Drake and Margaret I. Cole (London: Longman's, Green, 1948). It provides a detailed account of their work through 1911.

My theory of life is to feel at every moment that I am acting as a member of a c[ommi]ttee, and for that c[ommi]ttee. I aspire *never* to act alone, or for myself. This theoretically combined action involves rules, deliberation, discussion, concert, the disregard of one's own impulses, and in fact is Collectivism or Communism [...]. This need not imply that I am in favour of "merger" or even of Communism in marriage, let it be a mere partnership. But let the partners, in every detail, act in and for the partnership.<sup>284</sup>

Sidney's collectivist philosophy is essential to understanding the success of the Webb's partnership and marriage. As a man who valued collective deliberation and discussion, Sidney did not approve of a marriage in which the wife made decisions for the husband any more than one in which the husband made decisions for the wife. Dismayed to learn that Davidson was unilaterally making decisions that affected both her and Pease, Sidney warned against "the evil effect" of such a practice, which he characterized as "merely the old bad theory of marriage inverted."<sup>285</sup>

The deference Sidney learned as a civil servant undoubtedly helped him to work well with Beatrice, but an equally important preparation was his collaboration with George Bernard Shaw. Sidney and Shaw formed what Shaw called "a committee of 2"; along with Graham Wallas, they were leaders of the infant Fabian Society years before Beatrice entered Sidney's life.<sup>286</sup> Like Beatrice, Shaw was a more compelling, complex, and creative personality than Sidney. Shaw later wrote that the wisest thing he ever did was to force his friendship on Sidney and create "a committee of Webb and Shaw." To Sidney he admitted, "When we met, you knew everything I didn't know, and I knew everything you didn't know."<sup>287</sup> The Shaw-Webb relationship, like the collaboration between Beatrice and Sidney, was an intellectual partnership distinguished by its complementarity and equality, rooted

284 SW to Marjorie Davidson, 12 December 1888. Passfield Papers. Emphasis in original.

285 Ibid.

286 Similarly, the collaboration of Marie and Pierre Curie, which resulted in a shared Nobel Prize for Physics in 1903, was preceded by Pierre's research partnership with his elder brother, Jacques, and facilitated by Pierre's "honest and modest nature." See Helena M. Pycior, "Pierre Curie and 'His Eminent Collaborator Mme Curie': Complementary Partners", in *Creative Couples in the Sciences*, ed. by Helena M. Pycior, Nancy G. Slack, and Phina G. Abir-am (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), pp. 39–56.

287 Quoted in Harrison, *Life*, p. 24.

in affection, and fueled by a mutual sense of enhanced power, insight, and influence. Royden Harrison describes it as an “equal relationship” in which Sidney “renounce[d] personal power in favour of a pervasive, self-effacing influence.”<sup>288</sup> A biographer of Shaw called the two men “an ideal couple.”<sup>289</sup> The fact that Sidney had enjoyed such a relationship with another man helped free him from any sense that such a role was demeaning or emasculating. It also made it easier for him to relate to Beatrice as a colleague without typecasting her as a woman and a wife.

Sidney’s background and upbringing also helped him to accept nontraditional gender roles. His mother owned and managed a hairdressing shop, and at times was the family’s principal breadwinner. Upper-middle-class norms of gender roles and domestic life had no attraction for Sidney. He had not grown up in that world, and he did not aspire to be part of it. On the contrary, as a socialist, he questioned its fundamental premises and principles. Nor was he awed by Beatrice’s wealth and social standing, an imbalance that might have posed problems for a more traditional — or less confident — man. Sidney was supremely self-confident and comfortable with who he was and what he was trying to accomplish. He had little of the self-doubt and self-criticism that plagued Beatrice.

While Sidney seemed genuinely indifferent to gender norms and questions about the distribution of power in their marriage, Beatrice continued to wrestle with them. She always insisted that Sidney was the dominant force in the partnership while she was merely the “nominal” head or “ostensible leader”, even when she assumed the more public role. “Fortunately, in spite of his modesty, everyone knows that [Sidney] is the backbone of the Webb firm, even if I do appear, on some occasions, as the figurehead” was her characteristic assessment.<sup>290</sup> In *My Apprenticeship*, she described Sidney as “the predominant partner of the firm of Webb.”<sup>291</sup> Dismissing fellow Fabian H. G. Wells’s judgment that Sidney lacked “will-power and capacity”, Beatrice asserted, “I am much more [Sidney’s] instrument than he is mine.”<sup>292</sup>

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288 Ibid., p. 25.

289 Hesketh Pearson, *G.B.S.: A Full Length Portrait* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing, 1942), p. 60.

290 Diary, New Year’s Eve, 1909. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:won715bor>

291 BW, *Apprenticeship*, p. 398.

292 Diary, 15 July 1906. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:nin225zok>

Beatrice wanted Sidney to be recognized as the more important half of the partnership, in part, because she thought that a woman who controlled or outshone her husband transgressed the natural order. She felt inferior to Sidney because, having absorbed societal views on gender and intelligence, she believed that men were innately superior to women in brain work.<sup>293</sup> "I do not much believe in the productive power of women's intellect; strain as she may, the output is small and the ideas thin and wire-drawn from lack of matter and wide experience. Neither do I believe that mere training will give her that fullness of intellectual life which distinguishes the really able man," she wrote two years after her wedding.<sup>294</sup> She repeatedly emphasized the ways in which Sidney's intellectual capacity exceeded hers. "He is stronger brained than I am, can carry more things in his mind at once," she noted when they were struggling to write a particularly difficult chapter.<sup>295</sup> "Sidney can do about four times as much as I, whether measured in time or in matter" was her characteristic judgment.<sup>296</sup> While she could work no more than five or six hours a day for an extended period without provoking a nervous collapse, he routinely spent almost all his waking hours working. Beatrice always took care to acknowledge how dependent she was on his help.<sup>297</sup>

Beatrice also considered Sidney the better, or at least, the more facile writer because he wrote quickly and easily while she produced a text only after laborious rewriting and editing.<sup>298</sup> Only in one area did Beatrice claim superior talents. "In the use of documents [Sidney] is far more efficient than I, but in manipulation of witnesses with a view of

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293 BW to Graham Wallas [?mid-July 1897], in *Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb*, II, p. 55, remarked on the "the essential inferiority of the woman."

294 Diary, 25 July 1894. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:kac646sis>. Herbert Spencer's early influence on Beatrice may have been at least partly responsible for this. He believed that the female brain had "somewhat less of general power or massiveness" than the male brain, and therefore lacked "the power of abstract reasoning and that most abstract of emotions, the sentiment of justice." Quoted in Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 119.

295 Diary, 27 August 1897. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:hus734mos>

296 Diary, 22 February 1906, <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:nin225zok>; see also, Diary, 24 March 1908, <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:wur719qow>

297 BW to SW, April 26, 1908, in *Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb*, II, pp. 302–3. See also, BW to SW [29 April 1908], *Ibid.*, p. 307.

298 BW to Frederic Harrison, December 28, 1897, *ibid.*, p. 59.

extracting confidential information, his shyness and scepticism [about using it] gives me the advantage. And I am more ruthless in the exercise of my craft when he is not there to watch," she acknowledged.<sup>299</sup>

Despite Beatrice's insistence that "everyone knows that Sidney is the backbone of the Webb firm", some did not see the partnership in that light. When H. G. Wells published an exaggerated and unflattering portrait of the Webbs and other Fabians in his novel, *The New Machiavelli*, in 1911, he depicted Beatrice as domineering and subjugating and Sidney as "almost destitute of initiative." Beatrice took the characterizations in stride. After reading the serialized version of the novel in 1910, she remarked, "we read the caricatures of ourselves [and others] with much interest and amusement. The portraits are very clever in a malicious way."<sup>300</sup>

Nevertheless, Beatrice's assessment of their personalities suggests she too might have seen their relationship as an inversion of contemporary gender norms. She contrasted Sidney's selfless nature, moral goodness, and self-effacing personality — stereotypically "feminine" attributes — with her egotism, self-will, and aggressive vanity — stereotypically "masculine" traits. Similarly, the "shyness" she noted in Sidney when he interviewed witnesses is more typically considered a "feminine" trait, just as her "ruthless" interviewing style would more typically be described as "masculine." Her description of the way Sidney managed her also suggests a gender role reversal: "It will be delightful to get back to our 'dovecote', and be again with my darling old boy — who twists his strong-minded wife round his little finger — by soft sounds and kisses."<sup>301</sup>

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Staying in 1927 in the house where she had lived before her marriage, Beatrice remembered the anguish she had experienced forty years earlier as she struggled to choose between love and career. Now she rejoiced in having found a solution for that dilemma. "If I could have foreseen an old woman of seventy striding across the common with forty years of successful literary work and thirty-five years of a perfect marriage,

299 Diary, 28 April 1899. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:nef769qal>

300 Diary, 5 November, 1910. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:won715bor>

301 BW to SW [late Sept. 1892]. Passfield Papers.

and both work and love continuing, how high-spirited and happy I should have been," she mused.<sup>302</sup> In the final decades of her long life, her deep satisfaction in having successfully combined love and work was a frequent refrain in her diaries. "We have had a good life together; we leave finished work, and the one who is left behind for a few more years of life will have as consolation, the memory of a perfect marriage. What more can a human being expect or demand?" she asked.<sup>303</sup> More than a decade later, she repeated, "We have lived the life we liked to live and we have done the work we intended to do, in blessed partnership. What more can mortals want?"<sup>304</sup>

In fact, Beatrice had, at times, wanted more: a more passionate love, such as she had felt for Chamberlain; a partnership that allowed her to express her creative, imaginative side; motherhood and flesh-and-blood children. Her attempt to combine marriage and work was not a perfect solution to the marriage-career dilemma. On key issues, she failed to free herself from the either/or thinking that made her life so difficult as a young woman. Nevertheless, in the context of nineteenth-century ideas about love and romance, forging "oneness" that did not require a woman to subordinate herself to a man and gave as much prominence to her achievements as to his, is a significant advance. In these respects, Beatrice and Sidney came closer to achieving the synthesis of independence and intimacy that many dual career couples were seeking. The American educator, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, and her economist husband, Wesley Clair Mitchell, discussed in the next chapter, came closer still.

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302 Diary, 28 July 1927. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:dut736noc>

303 Diary, 9 August 1922. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:ras535xan>

304 Diary, 10 June 1935. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:kuk362nid>