Eliza Orme's Ambitions
Politics and the Law in Victorian London

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Prologue

Eliza Orme was a rarity in Victorian Britain, an independent single woman in public life. Academically trained in law but excluded from formal practice, she forged a precarious career on the fringes of the patriarchal legal community and used that as a springboard for energetic involvement in party politics. She lived, and worked, and made her mark in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in Britain. After that, she was more or less forgotten, until I got curious, remained interested, eventually came to understand why and how her story had disappeared from history, and finally wrote this book. It is my story almost as much as hers, and it is not a biography, because even after half a lifetime the author still does not know enough about the subject to write what is known as 'the definitive work'. (Perhaps no one will ever know enough about this elusive figure.) Instead, this is a research memoir, which allows me to integrate my own research adventure with an account of Eliza Orme's private life and public career, and to ask what it is about her that has intrigued me for some forty years. As for what it is about me that lets me speak for her—I am a historian, and one who takes joy in using the documents to be found in archives and libraries. But I also know that much of what happened in the past—especially to women—was never documented, or the documents were lost, or got buried among someone else's papers. I have discovered a lot, and recognized some connections, and finally allowed myself to speculate about her motives and her ambitions.

When Eliza Orme set about challenging the deeply patriarchal profession of law as practiced in Britain—at the remarkably early date of 1872—one of the reasons was that she believed nothing would assist the cause of women's suffrage so much as practical work done by women. This was typical, She once told an audience, 'I am hopelessly practical'. Her approach to being an agent of change meant getting things done,

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rather than rising into clouds of rhetoric about the causes she supported. Still less did she talk to people about her private hopes and dreams, perhaps for a brilliant career in public life. Instead she set about testing the limits of what could be done. Other women who espoused the same causes as she did were not noticeably practical; they were visionaries, and now they're celebrated as the leaders of Britain's contemporary campaigns for women's suffrage, for career opportunities, for all those crucial reforms. Perhaps that's why they are remembered, while Orme was all but forgotten until—as this book recounts—a chance encounter in a Canadian university seminar room somehow ignited decades of research. Orme was, it turns out, a remarkable woman: not only practical, but ambitious, competent, well-connected, witty, generous, and a strategist. What she wasn't, however, was England's first woman barrister or solicitor; those achievements happened almost half a century later, to other people. She wasn't the iniquitous anti-women's-suffrage schemer of some of her contemporaries' jealous imaginations, either. Formidable competence and relentless practicality, it turns out, are not always appreciated by the visionaries.

So, who was Eliza Orme? I have spent almost forty years following her traces through books, magazines, and newspapers preserved in libraries, and through handwritten records in archives. For most of that time, there was almost no information, not even a photograph, and I was too busy with other things to do much with what I did know. Now, with both retirement leisure and digital search engines at my disposal, I have learned enough to change the question. I know who she was, especially her public persona—first woman in England to earn a law degree (in 1888 at the age of thirty-nine); powerful behind-the-scenes strategist for the women's branch of the Liberal Party; a key figure in factory inspection and prison reform; active in Anglo-Irish politics; part of the first wave of the feminist movement; a journalist and public speaker who addressed women's work, their financial independence and their right to vote. I know what she did for a living, too, though that's hard to describe because it's complicated, implausible, and somewhat disheartening. Totally and irrevocably excluded from the practice of law either as a barrister or a solicitor, she set up a business at the fringes of those professions, discreetly preparing legal paperwork and charging a hefty fee for the service. (Her clients were credentialed

men who commissioned her services privately in order to publicly claim her labours as their own.) And she had other side hustles and gig jobs, albeit presenting herself in a much more dignified way than those words suggest, but I use them to stress that she was a precursor of today's precarious labour economy. More on that later, but for now the question has to change, to ask whose she is, beginning with whose she was—how her colleagues, friends, family, admirers, detractors, clients, competitors and protégées all measured an outsized personality against their own needs and ambitions. Further, whose academic or cultural research quarry is she now? What do twenty-first century lawyers and legal-history scholars make of her anomalous position with respect to a stringently regulated professional status? Are historians of the first wave of feminism ready to accept her as one of that number, despite a strategic position on the suffrage question that set her apart from her peers? Is her adventurous personal life of interest to readers more attracted to the woman than the legal pioneer?

Most of all, she was her own woman. Eliza Orme was independently single and financially secure, at a time when marital status pretty much defined identity for women and earning a comfortable self-sufficient living was very rare. She came from a large, loving, prosperous and supportive family from whom she inherited a talent for friendship and a sense of security that let her be combative in encounters with people she disagreed with. She was often funny, and I think she was probably a lot of fun to spend time with. She had one very close lifelong companion who was both a fellow-student and a family friend, later a business partner, and eventually the executor of her estate. That was Reina Emily Lawrence. It is reasonable to speculate that theirs was an intimate relationship, the kind that was acceptable in advanced social circles at the time as long as it was not made explicit. There is no hard evidence for this idea, but neither have I found a scrap of evidence that she had any love affairs with men.

This book is about Eliza Orme, but it is also about me. I have written it partly to figure out why I remain intrigued with her story, even after spending decades researching and teaching a different branch of British history. Like me, like most people with a reputation, she was a public figure whose private side was accessible only to those she trusted. And like almost everyone, neither Orme nor the people close to her obliged

posterity by leaving very many records of that private side behind. Having said that, though, I am going to start with two remarkable bits of historical evidence—both of them I discovered quite recently—one that shows the public Miss Orme, LL.B. another offering a glimpse of the private Eliza.

The public person was well known for being a divisive figure in the Women's Liberal Federation—or as an anonymous newspaper article called them, 'a group of Liberal dames'. On 3 March 1892, an article in The *British Weekly* suggested, rather snidely, that a book might someday be written about such anomalous political figures. The imagined book, an epic poem, would solve a contemporary conundrum about Eliza Orme: 'In that serio-comic epic which must surely one day depict to the world the story of the early days of the women's Liberal movement, it is an entertaining matter for conjecture which of Miss Orme's two reputations the poet will find most convenient for his artistic purposes'. She had adversaries within the Federation, so-called 'progressives', who aspired to force their party to start accepting women's suffrage as a matter of policy and felt thwarted by her insistence on more circumspect tactics. To those people, Miss Orme was 'the arch-villain, the malignant schemer, who spends her nights in laying traps for innocent "Progressives" and her days in leading her victims to the snare, whose every action is full of sinister meaning, to whom intrigue is both meat and drink, in whose "good morning" there is guile, and on whose lips the multiplication table would be full of undiscoverable, but none the less dangerous wickedness'.

For her friends and colleagues, however, for those who had Liberal interests at heart, there was another Miss Orme. To them, she was 'The quick-witted champion, with a convenient appetite for combat, at once capable and ready to be captain or scapegoat. She is the sort of person of whom it is safe to prophesy she will give rise to a myth, though whether a future generation of women Liberals will explain her as a comet or the north wind I dare not conjecture'. The article went on to sketch in a little of Orme's background, and then highlighted her skill as a debater and reinforced her practical nature: 'Rhetoric and fine language are abhorrent to her. The pathos of facts seems to her more effective than that of mere words, and humour a healthier instrument, as a rule, for the handling of an audience than sentiment'.

As for the *British Weekly* writer (who might have been William Robertson Nicoll), his description was quite accurate, but not his prophecy: Orme died over forty years later, when the causes she cared about had changed beyond recognition and long after her moment in the public eye. Many of the people who wrote the first histories of those causes were busy making myths of other leaders, some of whom had indeed regarded her as a malignant schemer. When I first wrote about her myself, I knew only the bare bones of the schism in the Women's Liberal Federation and nothing about Orme's interactions with either her allies or her antagonists.

Still less did I know anything about the private Eliza's personal relationships. The second bit of evidence is a letter, written in 1888 by Orme herself to her young friend Sam Alexander. Very few of her letters have survived—at one time, I thought that nothing like this would ever surface. It still exists because Samuel Alexander (1859–1938) happened to become a distinguished philosopher of Manchester University, where his papers are carefully preserved in an archive. The handlist to the collection is online, which is how Google helped me find a bundle of eighteen letters written to Alexander by Eliza Orme. He was ten years her junior, and a friend (or possibly a relative) of the family of Reina Emily Lawrence. There is a lot of variety in the correspondence—advice about handling a delicate situation; affectionate praise for his first book; counsel about how to draft his will; news about her visits to Ireland on business, first for the Liberals and later for employers. On this particular occasion she refused to take Sam's 'no' for an answer to an invitation to a social gathering in a fashionable London suburb. 'Besides you ought to want to', she wrote. 'It is pleasure of a very high kind to listen to beautiful music and recitations and refined conversation surrounded with pictures and clever Cambridge students with exceedingly classic profiles. And even the eating and drinking will be of an ennobling kind—for bananas are very cultured food and iced lemonade Oscary Wildey'. The teasing, almost giggly, tone of this letter is extraordinary, and such a far cry from both the arch-villain scheming to bring down the Women's Liberal Federation and the quick-witted champion of worthwhile causes. In the context of all the other letters to Alexander, I can confirm that this missive is not at all flirtatious. But it is intimate. And it gives a voice to someone who felt at home among bohemian

artists, writers, publishers, and journalists, someone who was not afraid to allude to decadence. We will see that she lived among people like that too, in the west-London neighbourhood known as Bedford Park. But her work was in Chancery Lane, where the barristers had their chambers.

Both of these illuminating scraps of evidence about Eliza Orme as public politician and private friend came to light only recently with the help of search engines. For most of the last four decades, her life was not much more than a shadowy sketch that did not fit its background.

Readers who want to read the *British Weekly* article and the Alexander letters for themselves will look in vain, at this point, for a footnote to guide their research. Even though the other books and articles I have written are conventionally documented, I came to understand this one would have to be different. There is, of course, a list of sources in an appendix, for those scholars and students who want to pursue Eliza Orme further. But in order for that to happen, I believe my task is to show why this woman was 'hidden from history' for so long and thus restore to her a voice and a face that the women and men of her time might have recognized. It is not a coincidence that so many of her contemporaries have been researched and contextualized, in politics, social reform, literature, and science, while this one's context was legal study and practice where women did not appear. Discovering and interpreting all the biographical and genealogical information, sorting out which contemporary networks she joined and which she evaded, and speculating about what those facts and connections convey—all that research happened over decades, as my own assumptions and judgments changed alongside changing technologies and methodologies.

When I first encountered Miss Orme, all I knew was that she helped George Gissing, the novelist, when he was in a tight spot. Back in those days, the mid-to-late 1980s, I was enrolled in a graduate Victorian Studies program, mostly concerned with British social history but required to take an interdisciplinary seminar and one course on literature. In the latter I learned about Gissing, who was into neither feminist activism nor aestheticism, being the rather unhappy writer of novels like *New Grub Street* and *The Odd Women*. He modelled no characters on Orme. But after he met her through the publisher they shared, he came to depend on her for legal advice and hands-on practical assistance in the breakdown of his second marriage. I was beginning to enjoy research challenges,

especially this one after I discovered that Gissing's 'Miss Orme' had the letters LL.B. after her name. There were no search engines in those days, but if a person in the past had published books or journalism to their credit, they had left a trace in card catalogues and periodical indexes that could be pursued on library shelves. Later there would be deeper explorations, in archives and record offices in London. A professor of literature encouraged my efforts, not least because they might offer him ammunition in a scholarly spat with a rival academic interested in the same novelist. For those two men, Eliza Orme was an adjunct to Gissing; and for Gissing himself, she was 'a very strong-minded woman, who has been a good friend to me'. If the novelist knew she was trained in law and prominent in politics, he never mentioned that fact in his letters or diary. In that sense, my Eliza Orme has been the one I rescued from the indignity of being a minor character in someone else's life. But to be fair to Gissing, neither he nor anyone else in the 1890s had a way to think about her education and experience. And to be fair to the Gissing scholars, and to me, in the 1980s we were just beginning to learn how to think about such things ourselves.