

# Eliza Orme's Ambitions

## Politics and the Law in Victorian London

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### 3. The Commitment to Law: 1872 to 1888

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I still wonder what circumstances made Eliza Orme decide to become a lawyer, when she might have been a medic or a mathematician. Many people make that career commitment on the basis of family tradition, but neither her father nor any of her brothers and brothers-in-law were lawyers. So perhaps it was her professorial mentors who motivated the decision, men like Leonard Courtney, John Elliott Cairnes, and W. A. Hunter. And maybe those men did inspire her, although I doubt if any of them endorsed her most ambitious hopes and dreams. I think that probably their influence was more at the level of installing liberal—and Liberal—political ideals, and perhaps also the notion of law as a means to an end in public life. Instead I like to think that, before she met any of those eminent gentlemen, the seed of the idea might have been planted by her mother's friend, the feminist leader Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon. Wealthy and independent, Bodichon was involved in founding the *English Woman's Journal* in 1858 and Girton College, Cambridge in 1869. Her book, *A Brief Summary of the Laws of England concerning Women*, had first come out in 1854 and prompted changes in the Married Women's Property Acts. Eliza was only five years old in 1854, but in 1869 a revised and expanded third edition of the book appeared, one that included information on franchise reform and was widely reviewed and discussed. Eliza was twenty-one that year and considering her options for university-level education. I can imagine some exciting and productive conversations taking place between the three of them: the unconventional, experienced feminist politician, her wealthy and well-connected friend Mrs Charles Orme, and the determined young Eliza. Perhaps that was the moment, as I speculated in Chapter 2, when she moved from an interest in science and mathematics to embrace the study of law.



Fig. 3 Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon (1861, Samuel Laurence),  
©National Portrait Gallery, London.

Books and movies about the Victorian women's movement mostly focus on the campaign for the vote, and to a lesser extent on the one for respectable opportunities for middle-class women ('ladies') to earn their own livings by work. But what kind of work did they envisage? Leaders in the movement recognized that if a lady were to avoid moving from the financial support of her father to that of a husband (that is, to remain single) she would have to find a job of some sort. If she got married she would have children, which was deemed to preclude work outside the home altogether. Meanwhile, if a woman was of the working class, a whole other set of social and economic conventions applied. The first difficulty was that a 'lady' could not respectably take the kinds of jobs that working-class women did, and the second was that clerical work—otherwise eminently suitable—was restricted to men. At mid-century, a 'lady' could really only work as a governess, because that labour could be carried on under a domestic roof. It was also poorly paid, subject to exploitation, and precarious. The Society for Promoting the Employment of Women existed to remedy this situation. However, in addition to opening up the work of teachers, 'typewriters' (the person, not the technology) and other non-professional occupations, there was

a campaign to make it possible for women to be doctors. Medicine was one of three traditional professions; the other two were the law and the clergy, but feminists were not campaigning to enter these. In the case of medicine, reformers like Elizabeth Garrett Anderson and Sophia Jex-Blake were able to argue that women doctors provided an important service to women patients. Whereas the merits of having either legal or theological technicalities explained by women, to women as well as men, remained unthinkable to almost everyone, even feminist leaders.

Such was the situation as Eliza Orme came of age at the end of the 1860s. But that young woman had courage and ambition. Whether or not she shared my opinion that Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill took advantage of her goodwill (when they manoeuvred her to fill the secretary's post in the London National Society for Women's Suffrage) she ruthlessly took advantage of her acquaintance with them—and perhaps even their obligation to her—to seek support for an extraordinary project. (And incidentally to announce her resignation from the job they had landed her with a year and a half earlier.) Mill and Taylor were out of London at the time, so she wrote to them. Although Orme had almost certainly met Mill in her family's home from a young age and more recently through the women's suffrage movement, she addressed the letter to Taylor. As Mill's stepdaughter, Helen Taylor managed most of his correspondence, even writing some letters on his behalf herself.

Part of the correspondence between the two women is preserved at London School of Economics (LSE), which is located close to the Inns of Court and Chancery Lane and so not far from where some of the letters were written. The Women's Library at LSE has a comfortable and well-appointed reading room where an archivist brought me the file when I revisited in 2021. On my first visit, in 1990, it was a different room, simpler and plainer—though I really do not remember much from back then, except the excitement of reading the letters, scrambling to transcribe as many as possible, and all too quickly running out of time.

The first letter in the folder is dated 7 December 1872. Orme's 24th birthday was a few weeks away, her sojourn teaching in Wiltshire was a couple of years behind her, and her studies at University College were well established and already yielding prizes. Her letter begins formally, 'Dear Madam' and gets straight to the point.

For some months I have been considering the best method of entering the legal profession. Professor and Mrs Cairnes, who have taken the kindest interest in the matter, approve my now writing to you for advice. Before stating my plans and difficulties it may be as well to explain, as shortly as possible, why I have undertaken what seems such a hopeless task. Since I have been actively working on the Women's Suffrage committee I have become convinced that we probably have many years work before us and that nothing assists the question so much as practical work done by women.

What an opening! Here was a clear statement of purpose, backed up by an impeccable academic reference. A gracious acknowledgment that the challenge was a hopeless one, and then a commitment—not to ideals, but to a political strategy and to hard practical work. Eliza went on to mention the name of Henry Fawcett, to repeat that of Professor Cairnes, and to add that of her brother-in-law, David Masson. She continued:

I therefore resigned my office of secretary of the Exec. Comtee of the Lond. Nat. Soc. with the definite purpose of doing some practical work if possible and at the same time remaining a public supporter of the cause which seems to me to be of paramount importance. I have made up my mind to study law (1) because I see work to be done in explaining to women their real position from the legal point of view; (2) because it is a lucrative profession which ought to be open to women.

She was astute enough to realize that the quixotic decision to attempt a career in law might damage the reputation of the women's movement. ('The manner of making such an attempt as this has such an important effect that I should be quite willing to give up all public action if experienced friends thought the time ill-chosen or that I was an unsuitable person to commence it. Otherwise I am prepared to work steadily at the subject, quite independently of whether I am admitted as a student, and to gather support and sympathy as I go along'.) It was going to be a slow process and Eliza Orme, Helen Taylor, and John Stuart Mill all knew that for every instance of 'support and sympathy' there would be many more occasions for derision and undermining of the project.

She then apprised Taylor of her situation: 'In 1869 I passed the General Exam. at the Univ. of London and in 1870 took a Special Certificate in Physics and Chemistry. I intend taking similar certificates in Mathematics and Mechanics and in Political Economy next May,

if possible. I am 24 years of age and am strong enough to work hard without its doing me any harm. I tell you these particulars because it seems unfair to ask your advice without giving you full information'. She was fudging her age, but only by a few weeks.

Having reminded Taylor of what she already knew, that Orme was a student at University College, the letter moved on to the nitty-gritty of legal training and credentials. These had nothing to do with academic education or the degree of Bachelor of Laws. To become a barrister, a young man had to spend three years as a pupil at one of the four Inns of Court. These were very old and tradition-bound institutions in central London, situated near the law courts. Their purpose was to reinforce and reproduce for succeeding generations the legal profession's culture of entitlement and privilege, which has been described by Ren Pepitone as 'a culture deeply resistant to women'. Calmly ignoring this incontrovertible fact, Orme noted for Taylor the pros and cons of applying to each of the Inns. Her own idea was to go to Gray's Inn, partly because 'there are so few benchers that it would be possible to bring pressure on each'. The letter closes with courtesies. In this initial communication, Orme is aiming for the more prestigious and powerful part of the legal profession, the bar. She might have tried to become a solicitor, where she would at least not have been putting on a wig and arguing in court in front of a learned judge. However that branch of the law was also restricted to men, this time by statute. Later on, she did consider that option, but at the beginning she coolly sifted the fitness of the several Inns of Court for her purposes.

Mill and Taylor replied a month later. The document that survives is a copy of their letter, with a note 'To Miss Orme, dictated by me'—that is dictated by Helen Taylor to John Stuart Mill. The Mill scholar Ann Robson says in an article that it is his handwriting. So Helen Taylor composed the letter, but she and Mill must have discussed the matter too. Taylor was positive, but she also mentioned two caveats in the first paragraph:

There is no profession better suited for women to exercise, & none the study of which is better calculated for women's minds than that of the bar, & the only objection, therefore, that I see to it is the very great length of time that is likely to elapse before in the first place they can get admitted to it, & in the second place, before they will be able to practise.

If you look upon it as a pursuit, likely to enable a woman to attain to real superiority of mental power, & likely to enable her to be of use in advising women, as well as in shewing what women can do, I know of none which I should value more highly or perhaps even so highly. But I do not feel sure whether the effect on the public of the endeavor would be especially useful. I do not however think it would be injurious, & therefore the decision sh<sup>d</sup> rest, I think, very much upon personal inclination.

Clearly Taylor thought that legal education was not a high priority for the women's movement. Not only would success take too long, but she foresaw—correctly—that 'the public' would not be supportive of 'the endeavor'. She continued:

As regards the question of which Inn of Court to apply to, it depends upon details of which neither Mr Mill nor myself feel ourselves competent to give any opinion without further consultation and advice. We expect to be in England early in next year, & if you do not make your decision before that time it would give us much pleasure to talk over the matter with you, & in the mean time we will consult those of our friends whose judgment we sh<sup>d</sup> most rely on in such a matter.

I have long thought that it would be very useful if a firm of women solicitors could be established. But I am not sufficiently conversant with the details of the profession to know the relative difficulty of the obstacles to the success of a woman as a solicitor or as a barrister, happening the necessary capital for the beginning of a solicitor's business to be found. There is no doubt room for considerable development in England of the solicitor's portion of the law; and it would be very satisfactory if a woman were to lead the way in raising the solicitor's profession to a level with the barrister, as it sh<sup>d</sup> be, instead of being regarded merely as a trade, as it is. How far these considerations might weigh in a choice between the two branches of the legal profession, I have not however considered from a practical point of view.

This was a diplomatic and somewhat hesitant response. (Not to mention remarkably unstrategic. Why ever should the admission of women to the legal profession serve to improve the status of solicitors vis à vis barristers?) Orme ignored their lack of enthusiasm in her follow-up letter of 28 April 1873. This offered details of an arrangement that had presumably been discussed, although not in the correspondence that survives. Those missing letters or conversations may also have contained Mill's commitment to pay Orme's fees at one of the Inns.



## From Lincoln's Inn Fees to 'a Miniature Girton'

The initial arrangement, which in the end did not work out, was for Miss Orme to become a fee-paying pupil in the Lincoln's Inn chambers of John Savill Vaizey. That barrister knew John Westlake as a fellow-bencher and fellow-Liberal. Westlake's wife, the artist Alice Westlake, had met Orme through the women's movement and was willing to facilitate the introduction. Aspiring barristers were required to spend three years as pupils at one of the Inns, attached to a senior lawyer's chambers (office), eating a certain number of formal dinners and participating in other social rituals, as well as picking up some courtroom or litigation skills from the lawyers and clerks who lived and worked in these ancient and very masculine establishments. (They were not required to study for the academic LL.B. qualification.) For this extraordinary situation, the arrangement was fluid, perhaps six months or maybe a year, with only some of the rights and privileges of a pupil. Notably, it was imperative that Miss Orme become acquainted with her instructor's wife. Vaizey would have preferred to have two women pupils together, presumably for reasons of propriety, and there was some thought that Edith Simcox would participate. (Later, Mary Ellen Richardson joined the class.) While he did provide her with some professional guidance during their years together, Vaizey also required her assistance with his book on marriage settlements. It is not clear how extensive her participation in that project may have been, but Vaizey later acknowledged Orme's labour in preparing an 'elaborate index' of sixty-nine pages.

It is possible that Helen Taylor was less enthusiastic about supporting Eliza Orme than her stepfather would have been. John Stuart Mill died in the spring of 1873 and Taylor, while not withdrawing the offer of support, hinted that it would be difficult to find the money for Vaizey's fee. This put Orme in the awkward position of assuring her patron that she could cope easily with any delay. While she might really have needed the money, despite her family's wealth, I think it is more likely that Orme valued Taylor's sponsorship from more of a social and political perspective, given the latter's influence in both suffrage and Liberal circles. In any case, Taylor sent her £50 in October for the first six months, and Orme's training began. In a letter of December 1873, Orme reported that she would be 'unable to do anything profitable' until either

the legislation or the professional norms changed: only simple wills and powers of attorney, not the more lucrative property conveyances. The legislation, she explained, explicitly forbade 'what is called "devilling" for other barristers'. Her judgment was that she 'must therefore work on with the hope of one day getting sufficient support to be admitted to an Inn'. Beneath Orme's humble approaches to Taylor and presumably to supporters like the Cairneses and Fawcetts (and perhaps to others where the correspondence is lost) she reveals the political motivation and strategy inherent in her ambition, aiming to 'get sufficient support' and even to 'bring pressure' on the benchers of one of the Inns.

Two years passed, and Orme was obliged to take on some pupils herself to make ends meet, and to avoid accepting any more money from Helen Taylor than was absolutely necessary (or perhaps politic). She helped Taylor with preparing a new edition of one of Mill's books, *Dissertations and Discussions*. By this time Mary Ellen Richardson, another London law student, had joined her in Vaizey's chambers, but the two women seem to have realized they were not getting very far. Someone introduced them to yet another barrister, William Phipson Beale, who told them they were wasting their time (and presumably their money). He advised Orme and Richardson to set themselves up independently, lease premises in Chancery Lane and offer their services to any barrister willing to pay for them, rather than tie themselves to one. This they did. Orme described Beale's plan in an August 1875 letter to Helen Taylor:

He thinks we can become pupils of well-known men if we like at any time when the opportunity occurs and meantime we shall be gaining knowledge and friends by 'devilling' in our own chambers. It will be less expensive for us to take chambers than to read with a barrister and on the whole I am inclined to follow his advice. By taking rooms in Chancery Lane we shall excite less attention than if we were to try to engage any within one of the Inns of Court. Mr Beale is strongly of the opinion that we had better do some work before we make our claims to enter the profession and Miss Richardson and I both agree with him in this entirely.

To 'read' with a barrister as his 'pupil', the arrangement with Vaizey, would be a bit like undertaking an independent study project with a professor. But since male pupils were not so much reading (or studying) as apprenticing for a lifestyle that was limited to people of

their gender, the arrangement was obviously not working very well for the two women. A barrister's 'devil', on the other hand, might be a pupil or a clerk; in the latter case their job was to prepare written legal work on behalf of the principal barrister. They might also go out and secure briefs from solicitors, and in those cases, they received a percentage of the principal barrister's fee. The clerk might work outside the rigid culture of the Inns of Court, not 'indoors' but 'outdoors', with chambers (an office) in Chancery Lane. Another loose category was that of 'legal assistant'. But there were no generally accepted terms, legal or informal, with which to describe a woman who was doing the work of a lawyer.

Three months later, Orme wrote again to Taylor, describing the set-up at 38 Chancery Lane as 'a miniature Girton', a phrase that evoked all the austere joys of the women's college at Cambridge. There were three of them, Eliza Orme, Mary Ellen Richardson, and a younger woman, Minnie Robertson. Minnie was a niece of Eliza Cairnes, preparing for examinations of her own. They had a little boy to run errands and 'a very respectable laundress' who looked after the establishment. (In the legal culture of the Inns of court, house servants were known as laundresses.) They all lived together too, in a house in Camden Road belonging to Richardson. As at Girton and other women's colleges, they could engage in tough disciplined intellectual work, argue politics and revel in literature—all the while drinking cocoa and toasting muffins at the fireplace—without having to perform the exacting and tedious social roles expected for leisured young women of their class.

Both Vaizey and Beale were offering work, as much as Orme and Richardson could handle, she told Helen Taylor. In Beale's case, he gave Orme half the fee he took for any draft that she could 'do completely enough to save him the trouble'. In his view, she told Taylor, if the women never signed the draft documents they prepared, 'but did them in the character of outdoor clerks' they could 'go on safely' even without being called to the bar. (Much later, in an 1893 article, Orme came to describe this kind of work in a more formal and above-board manner, in terms of working on the established legal principle of 'qui facit per alium, facit per se'—'He who acts through another does the act himself'. At this early stage, she was understandably more hesitant, and perhaps Beale was too.)

In December 1879 the *Women's Suffrage Journal* reported that 'a young lady has just sent in an application to the Incorporated Law Society'. This was the organization that controlled the accreditation of solicitors, quite separate from the Inns of Court that accredited barristers. However historians of the legal profession report that it was refused 'on grounds of sex'. I have never been able to determine whether this applicant was Eliza Orme, but it might have been. As it turned out, both the bar and the Law Society remained closed to women practitioners until after they were forced to open their doors in 1919.

More light on the work of conveyancing comes from Mary Jane Mossman, in her book on the first women lawyers in various jurisdictions. In England there was an elite category of lawyer known as the 'conveyancing barrister'. Their organization, the Institute of Conveyancing Barristers, was known as 'the forty thieves' and also operated as a dining club. These were high-powered men who handled complex and difficult property cases as well as estate law. Mossman speculates that:

It seems likely that [Orme] was engaged by members of the Institute to provide legal opinions on land titles and to draft conveyancing documents, as a 'legal assistant'; such an arrangement would explain her receipt of 'half-fees'. Furthermore, Orme's acceptance as an assistant at the bar probably resulted from her ability to do highly competent and reliable legal work within this close-knit and highly specialised group of conveyancing barristers; indeed, her work for this group suggests that she was both accomplished and professional.

Even if William Phipson Beale did not himself dine among the 'forty thieves', he probably knew enough of them to put his protégée in touch with a lucrative source of work and income.

It seems pretty reasonable to speculate that this arrangement was humiliating, even though the 'practical' side of Eliza Orme's nature might have believed it was the best she and Mary Ellen Richardson could do and they should make the most of it. Much has changed in the century between their generation and mine, but there are resonances nevertheless: powerful male mentors who seemed affable but nevertheless could be capricious; barriers to promotion and other kinds of achievement; the pinpricks of discomfort and annoyance that accompany questions about one's competence. When women lawyers in Britain began, in the lead-up to 2019, to look into their predecessors'

1919 achievement of equal status, many of the former focused on how judges smugly explained the latter's absence from courts by the lack of female toilet facilities in those establishments.

What did Orme and Richardson do all day? There is considerable evidence of a wide variety of professional activities going on in their chambers, beyond preparing conveyancing and estate-related documents for half-fees and doing less complex (and less legally restricted) work at full fee. In the latter category, Orme and Richardson were patent agents, and both were directors of a financial service business. The 1883 Patent Act had not only made the registration of intellectual property a more complex process than earlier; it had left the way open for qualified women by not limiting that process by formal qualifications. The Nineteenth Century Building Society was one of a class of important institutions concerned with mortgage lending. In addition to offering mortgages to individual house-purchasers, they also funded builders who were undertaking large-scale construction projects. The *Englishwoman's Review* reported in June 1880:

The NCBS affords, we believe, the first instance of a Building Society, which numbers women among its directors ... The Society provides also special facilities to people of small means, by giving borrowers the right to make their repayments weekly instead of monthly, and it pays particular attention to the sanitary condition of property mortgaged to the Society. This last consideration is one which we think specially shows the advantage of having women among the responsible directors, as the sanitary condition of dwelling-houses particularly demands qualified female supervision.

All this sounds a long way from winning prizes for top marks in subjects as academic as political economy and Roman law. Many lawyers, then and now, make the transition from intellectually challenging course work at university to the mundane tasks of preparing documentation and so forth when they set up in practice. A smaller number make a more complex transition, from law school through practice and on to an apprenticeship in politics, either national or local. Perhaps the progressive policies of the Nineteenth Century Building Society might serve as evidence that Eliza Orme and Mary Richardson cherished aspirations in that direction? Or perhaps the *Englishwoman's Review* was being idealistic, and the women lawyers were in the mortgage business for the money.

A sidelight on Orme's financial arrangements, and the extent to which she would go to overcome obstacles, comes from her cousin Mabel Barltrop, who wrote with considerable indignation if not full understanding: 'She has become a barrister . . . and she has become so to prove that women are fully as capable as men to act in that capacity. But she is compelled by law only to take half fees, and is not even allowed the use of the Libraries for the use of those in the legal profession. She has to buy for herself all the expensive books, one set cost £40, the other day'. Half fees were an informal agreement, not a legal provision; and the books were presumably for the chambers as a whole, not just for herself. Still, it is worth noting that library access was apparently yet another of the masculine privileges reserved for members of the Inns of Court.

## Discrimination and Challenges

In contrast to this modest attempt to wedge open the door of Chancery Lane by even a crack, other parts of Eliza Orme's life looked like one academic or journalistic success after another, but interspersed with one public challenge or mortification after another. In July 1872 she won first prize in Political Economy at University College. In December of that year, she ought to have received the Ricardo Scholarship in the same subject but it went to a London barrister, George Serrell. What is interesting here, and why we know about it, is the press reports. These indicated that the judges were Cairnes and Courtney, the winner was Mr Serrell, and that according to the judges Miss Eliza Orme had 'obtained a sufficient number of marks to qualify for the scholarship had she not had so powerful a competitor'. Perhaps the judges were quietly advocating for their protégée and expressing veiled disapproval of the injustice of the scholarship process. Having read those reports, the *Englishwoman's Review* dismissed Serrell as 'that old and accomplished prize-taker' and celebrated Miss Orme's proficiency. Three years later Orme reported to Helen Taylor that Hunter assured her he would have backed her for a 200-guinea scholarship in Roman Law, but it was offered by the Inns of Court and 'not open to women of course'. According to Hunter, the previous year's winning paper had been inferior to her own. Apparently undaunted (though these injustices must have stung), Eliza wrote two articles about 'University Degrees for Women' for *The Examiner*.

She knew how to defend herself when directly attacked. Late in 1876, University College London announced that Miss Orme had won the Hume Scholarship, a three-year award for the study of Jurisprudence. Soon after that, the college authorities received a letter from one Pascoe Daphne. This gentleman had missed the prize exam and felt entitled to request that he be allowed to write it anyway. Mr. Daphne further observed that Miss Orme ought not to have won the prize because he had not often seen her attending the lectures. When challenged, she pointed out to the authorities that she had sometimes arrived late, but had indeed been present despite having already sat the course of lectures (and applied for the same prize) the previous year. The scholarship designation remained unchanged. I will restrain my twenty-first century feminist indignation and just observe that there is evidence here of patience, not to say determination, in the face of severe and often humiliating obstacles.

Meanwhile the enterprise in Chancery Lane was a business success which began to draw notice, not all of it very desirable. An article by the *Sporting Gazette's* 'Man About Town' column of 24 June 1876 called attention to the two partners' distinction in the Roman Law examinations (Richardson came third and Orme first) but academic commendation soon gave way to matrimonial speculation: 'How long, I wonder, will the partnership last? Will they be proof against entering into that other foolish partnership in which the partners are of opposite sexes—known to mankind for some time past as matrimony? With such pretty faces and graceful figures, and with youth and health to boot, I am diffident of their long holding the fort of celibacy'. The same columnist wrote in November about the prospects for women doctors, lawyers, and clergy: 'Miss Orme and Miss Richardson, those eminent legal practitioners in Chancery-lane, are pretty enough to make any susceptible male rush into law merely for the pleasure of consulting them—and now here is Dr Mary Hogan ... When the physician and the lawyer come to us armed with all the wiles of woman, with beauty and youth to supplement their attacks, what hope is there for us? Will you turn parsons next?' No doubt there were equally unpleasant remarks being made among the barristers, solicitors, and clerks who populated Chancery Lane and the Inns of Court, including those who availed themselves of Orme's and Richardson's professional services.

## ‘A Fine Chaos’: Co-workers and Business Partners

Not much is known about Mary Ellen Richardson, except that she was elected a member of the London School Board from 1879 to 1885, and she lived with a woman, Jane Chessar. Richardson and Chessar were involved in the Somerville Club (as was Orme), and with a debating society and swimming clubs. Richardson does not seem to have completed the LL.B. degree, although she did well in some exam competitions as we have seen. In addition to sharing the chambers in Chancery Lane from the mid-1870s to the mid-1880s, she and Orme were both directors of the Nineteenth Century Building Society. Outside of the work environment, they were both part of the leadership of an Association to Promote Women's Knowledge of the Law, founded in 1878. This is something I would like to know more about (even though ‘having knowledge of the law’ was not the same thing as ‘becoming a lawyer’) but apart from a few press notices of meetings, little evidence seems to have survived. The *ODNB* essay on the education pioneer Jane Chessar says that Richardson was Honorary Treasurer of the organization. Chessar was also a member, as was Annie Besant. In any case, Richardson and Orme seem to have worked together for about a decade and lived together for at least part of that time. They both moved, with their families of origin, to the Bedford Park suburb of Chiswick in the eighties. A letter from Eliza Orme to the American suffrage pioneer Susan B. Anthony reveals that Richardson (and another woman, Miss Novelli) left the firm before February of 1884, to ‘devote themselves ... to commercial speculations at Bedford Park’. The ‘commercial speculation’ was later advertised (including in Orme's own *Women's Gazette*) as The Stores, Bedford Park, a purveyor of toys, games, fancy boxes of chocolates, *patés de foies gras*, and turkeys from Ireland. I have not been able to track down any watertight documentation about Miss Novelli, but it is clear that not every woman who studied law continued to practice as a lawyer.

Thanks to that newsy letter to Susan B. Anthony, we also know that Reina Emily Lawrence had joined the firm by 1884. She too was a law student at University College. When Jessie Wright, an American lawyer, visited in 1888, the chambers (now located at 27 Southampton Buildings in Chancery Lane) still bore a brass plate marked ‘Orme and



Richardson' but it was Reina Lawrence that she encountered ('a very pretty girl, with short, dark, curly hair, and she was scrawling away in the most business-like manner'). Wright describes the room as 'a fine chaos'—furnished with revolving chairs and a 'good sized office table' in the centre of the room, the table 'loaded with papers, pamphlets, books'; there was also a bookcase stocked with reports, and 'the floors were carpeted, a blazing soft coal fire burned in the open grate, two large windows were lowered from the top, a book case stocked with reports was behind me'. Prints of two paintings, one modern and one Renaissance, hung on the wall. Miss Orme was in the office next door, working with a client. An office boy ('black-eyed, in a gray suit, stiff as a ramrod') stood next to Lawrence at the table, waiting for orders. Wright sketched this word-portrait of the firm for her fellow American members of the Equity Club, adding that 'Miss Orme is fine; a first-rate kind of woman, and nobody could have been more kind and cordial than she has been to me'.



Fig. 4 Reina Emily Lawrence (n.d., photographer unknown), ©John Partington, London. Reproduced with permission. <http://www.pjohnp.me.uk/famhist/lawrence-re.pdf>

A fictional description of a London professional women's office, intriguingly similar to Wright's of 27 Southampton Buildings, can only be a tentative attribution. It comes from Bernard Shaw in the text of his 1893 play *Mrs Warren's Profession*. The profession in question was that of prostitute and brothel-manager, but in the play it is set in contrast to the professional life and values of Mrs Warren's adult daughter. Vivie Warren is Cambridge-educated (in mathematics) and works with a partner in Chancery Lane chambers. The partner, Honoria Fraser is somewhat older than Vivie, in the business of actuarial calculations and conveyancing, resolutely single and financially independent. Setting the scene for the chambers of 'Fraser and Warren', Shaw noted: 'There is a double writing table in the middle of the room, with a cigar box, ash pans, and a portable electric reading lamp almost snowed up in heaps of papers and books. This table has knee holes and chairs right and left and is very untidy'. The Shaw scholar Michael Holroyd thinks Vivie might have been modelled on Eliza Orme, presumably on the strength of Shaw's remark on one occasion that the 'original' of Vivie 'heads a party which denounces my plays as disgusting'. (Close enough, although Orme was not technically head of the Women's Liberal Federation, which was not technically a party.) On another occasion, Shaw mentioned a different woman, Beatrice Potter, as his model. The play was not performed in England for many years, because of its 'immoral' (or as Shaw puts it, 'unpleasant') aspects, so it is unlikely that Orme was aware she might have been used as a model for Honoria Fraser. But now that so much more is known about Eliza Orme, I would suggest that it might be of interest to Shaw scholars to explore the connection once again. In any case, 27 Southampton Buildings sounds like an attractive place to work.

There is a rather strange footnote to the story of Eliza's relationship with Helen Taylor. A whole year after Orme's last surviving letter (which described her 'miniature Girton', sought Taylor's support for a protégée's education and bragged a little about some of her own academic accomplishments), Taylor received a letter from Mary Ellen Richardson. It contained a cheque for £100, repaying funds that had been sent to Orme in three increments. Richardson insisted that Orme had spoken of Taylor and Mill with deep gratitude, 'but after the events of the past 2 months' (this was December 1876) 'I do not choose that she should longer remain indebted to you, for what, I can with no

inconvenience send to you for her'. Taylor replied, outraged and (at least in the draft version which is all that survives) rather incoherent. She declined to receive the money and denied that she knew who Richardson was. Ann Robson speculates that this had something to do with Helen Taylor's anti-clerical views, which had been publicized during her recent election to the London School Board. Given what I know of Eliza Orme, that seems unlikely, and research by Jane Martin (on Chessar) reveals that Taylor and Richardson, both school board members, clashed on several occasions. It is also possible that Orme and Richardson had, by this time, come to realize that Helen Taylor's support for their larger ambitions was lukewarm at best, and perhaps even a liability. The little incident is curious, a reminder of how much about these women remains unknown.

Although I cannot measure the relative proportions of each aspect, it seems that Eliza's working life in her thirties—roughly the 1880s—fell into three parts. She worked in the Chancery Lane office alongside Mary Richardson and later Reina Lawrence, preparing conveyancing documents for barristers as well as organizing financing for homeowners through the Nineteenth Century Building Society and helping inventors to secure patents. At the same time, she lectured extensively, wrote articles for the periodical press, and engaged in several organizations aimed at improving public life in various ways: not just women's suffrage and women's employment, but world peace, proportional representation, Home Rule for Ireland, and other causes. Some of these activities would have been paid, while others were, no doubt, done gratis. And thirdly, there were her studies. Most years, Orme's name appears on the register of University College, and in 1880 she passed the initial LL.B. exam. This was the first of two; the second came in 1888. Once her academic studies were finished, however, and the degree obtained, Orme seems to have committed more of her energies to party politics. Her friend Sophia Fry had founded the Women's Liberal Federation (WLF) in 1886, and Orme immediately took on a leadership position. From 1888 to 1892, she was the editor of the WLF's newspaper, the *Women's Gazette and Weekly News* (WGWN). I will return to several of these activities in Chapters 5 and 6, and just note for now that she always did more than serve as a barristers' devil.

This chapter is entitled 'the commitment to law' but it ends with a question. Just how committed to law was Eliza Orme? Or perhaps a better way to phrase it would be to ask what the practice of law meant to her. To the extent that law is an academic discipline and an intellectual exercise, I believe she enjoyed it and was good at it. (Her massive and painstaking index to Vaizey's book on the law of marriage settlements might be evidence of that arcane pleasure.) But law is also a career and an identity, and it can be a vocation. She told Helen Taylor she wanted to enter the profession partly to help women clients with gender-specific legal challenges, and partly because it was lucrative and should be open to women practitioners. Given the gender limitations on being a barrister or solicitor in her time, both ambitions were really impossible. (Slightly mystified press reports at the time of her 1888 degree, especially those reporting on her quasi-professional labours along with the academic kudos, are evidence of this ambiguity.) But law can also be a stepping-stone to political power, with the call to the bar serving as one step in a life plan that includes journalism, networking, the paying of social dues, the testing of a reputation for party loyalty, then eventually nomination, campaigning, election, and a seat in the House of Commons, perhaps even one in the Prime Minister's cabinet. I have not found evidence that this was Eliza Orme's ambition. It is only my speculation. But in the 1870s and 1880s, neither she nor anyone else knew how painfully long it was going to take before women in Britain could reasonably articulate this kind of objective. She told Jessie Wright in 1888 that 'when four or five women were ready to apply for admission to the bar, they would do so'. Wright added: 'She says she thinks things look more hopeful now than ever, and that several of the benchers are already in favor of [women] being admitted – not as solicitors ... but as barristers'. For an optimist with a high opinion of her own capabilities, perhaps Eliza Orme's larger aspirations seemed, that year as she turned forty, eminently reasonable and still on track. But it remains impossible to know whether the law was her ambition in life, or merely a stepping-stone to another goal, because we know so little of her private hopes and dreams, of her personal likes and dislikes, her prejudices and partialities.