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

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5. Public Figure: 1888 to about 1903

Beginning about the time of her law degree in 1888, the 'Miss Orme' who had been active in behind-the-scenes feminist and Liberal politics became a respected public figure, and sometimes a controversial one. Brief notices began to appear in the press, reporting on her drawing-room and public lectures and her rousing speeches at political meetings. Then on 3 March 1892, a full-fledged profile of Eliza Orme appeared in the *British Weekly*, a widely-circulated newspaper. The occasion was her appointment to lead an investigation, for a Royal Commission on Labour, into working conditions for women in several branches of British industry. There had been controversy about involving Lady Assistant Commissioners in the project, but the author assured readers that 'her presence guarantees the women's reports against sensationalism, the evidence against looseness and irrelevance'.

The article was anonymous (and indeed I am working from a reprint that appeared in another paper), but the author may have been the *British Weekly's* editor, William Robertson Nicoll. Whoever wrote the article must have known quite a lot about Orme, since they not only mentioned her family ('the early environment of a brilliant literary circle') but also noted her promising work in mathematics, her mentors, her law degree, and her practice of 'that part of the legal profession which is open to women in England'. Nicoll was in a position to know all that. The article praised Orme's powers as a debater and public speaker as it touched on her practical nature and propensity to crack a joke: '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'. Establishing Orme's notoriety in the context of her

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leadership of the Women's Liberal Federation, the article commented on a dispute then underway: 'in one section of the Federation, her name is one to conjure with; in another, it inspires horror and alarm'. In future she might be remembered as either 'a comet or the north wind'. The author went on to explain that for some women supporters of the Liberal Party, Miss Orme was an 'arch-villain', a 'malignant schemer ... 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'. Whereas to her allies she was 'the quick-witted champion, with a convenient appetite for combat, at once capable and ready to be captain or scapegoat'. Beyond her brilliant rhetoric and political strategizing, Orme's friends identified 'a certain genial sympathy and helpfulness which they affirm to be peculiarly her own'.

What was this all about, and why did I know nothing about it until I started doing extensive research on the internet? Just as the letters archived at the University of Manchester have expanded my awareness of Eliza's 'genial sympathy and helpfulness' to Samuel Alexander, another recently recovered document helps me understand where the harsher characterizations were coming from. This time, however, the material is in print not manuscript, and I found it in a volume that might be unique in the whole world. A bulky volume of bound newspapers somehow avoided accessioning by the British Library, but nevertheless made its way from a political office in London to a university library in Eugene, Oregon. It was once the Women's Liberal Federation's own copy of the last few issues of the *Women's Gazette and Weekly News*, a paper that Orme edited for most of its history–until the Royal Commission appointment that occasioned her resignation and the *British Weekly* article.

Most profiles of Eliza Orme mention her membership in the Women's Liberal Federation and duly note that she, along with Catherine Gladstone and others associated with the male leaders of the party, broke away from the WLF in 1892 over the question of women's suffrage. This is a rather confusing and not very satisfactory bit of information. Her position can easily be misconstrued as a betrayal of the feminist cause, elitist, and generally on the wrong side of history.

Briefly, Orme's faction, the moderate majority, were determined that the issue of women's suffrage not be raised by the WLF in such a way as to embarrass or undermine William Ewart Gladstone's leadership of the party and in government. Her opponents in the 'progressive' faction were out-and-out suffragists, determined that the Federation should insist the party support their cause in the House of Commons, and prepared to undermine the organization in order to get their way. It is a complicated story, but everything becomes a good deal clearer with access to the volume in Eugene. In those pages lie the evidence for Orme's efforts to stave off the zeal of naïve political enthusiasts who did not, in her view, understand that they were putting their own (Liberal) cause at risk. Her efforts failed when it came to the women's branch of the party, as I shall explain, although she may have preserved her own reputation and standing with the broader Liberal leadership. Which would be remarkable, given the messiness of the situation that developed in the spring of 1892.

Eliza Orme was editor of the WLF's newspaper, the *Women's Gazette and Weekly News* (*WGWN*) from 1889 to 1892. I am not certain about how significant the role of editor was to her multifaceted identity: during the years she was an editor, she was also practicing as a quasi-lawyer; she belonged to numerous organizations that advocated various progressive causes; and she was on the board of a building society that offered mortgages. She was also an executive member and outspoken advocate for an auxiliary to the Liberal Party, the WLF. Her newspaper served as the WLF's 'organ' but was not formally associated with the Federation. This is another moment for the questions: who was she, and whose was she? My guess is that Orme regarded being an editor merely as one aspect of her leadership and advocacy—something useful that a 'hopelessly practical' supporter could do as a contribution to the cause. But which cause? She was ardently committed both to small-l-liberal ideas and to large-L-Liberal Party policy and strategy, as well as to the feminist aims of parliamentary suffrage, education, and work opportunities. Presumably she had all those interests in mind when she took on the job. But being an editor of a small, poorly funded, weekly national newspaper was not a nominal or honorary position. To read through the paper is to trace the evidence of Eliza Orme's intense

involvement as a journalist, newsgatherer, opinion leader, production/advertising manager, and finance officer.

As it happens, I have never yet read through the paper in the conventional way, which would have meant visiting the British Library and requesting the bound volumes containing the copies that institution owns, then sitting down in a reading room and turning over the pages, perhaps getting a little Victorian printer's ink on my fingers as I took notes on my laptop. I visited the BL often during my research career, first the original building in Bloomsbury and later the new one in St Pancras—both neighbourhoods in central London. I even went once or twice to Colindale, a far-northern suburb of London where the Newspaper Library used to be situated, but I was looking for different periodicals and never once thought of asking to see the *WGWN*. By the time I returned to researching Eliza Orme after 2014, I quickly discovered that the British Library's copies had been microfilmed, so that I could read them on a device at Robarts Library at the University of Toronto. I could even take digital scans of individual pages to facilitate my research. That was quite satisfying, and I learned a lot about Orme's lecturing and other activities, and something of the WLF as an organization. I also soon realized that the BL collection was incomplete. They have issues from the beginning in 1888 and through 1889. Then 1890 is missing, and only a few issues from 1891 are there. The standard reference works made no mention of any copies in existence, apart from those deposited—by law—in the British Library by the newspaper's publisher at the time of publication.

My friend Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, scholar of another branch of the Victorian periodical press, suggested I check WorldCat for further copies of the *WGWN*, a strategy that had worked for a colleague of hers looking for an obscure literary magazine. WorldCat is an online union catalogue, combining multiple library catalogues from around the world. WorldCat stated that the Special Collections Library of the University of Oregon at Eugene held copies of *WGWN* from 1890 to 1892. Once I got over my initial astonishment, I wrote to the librarians who sent a description of the materials—a single bound volume—and suggested a research assistant I might be able to hire to read it for me.

I also considered going to Eugene, a slightly daunting prospect for a woman in her seventies travelling alone with no idea how voluminous or useful the materials would be. First I corresponded with the freelance researcher the librarians had suggested, but that did not work out. Then I despaired for a while, and then 2020 and the Covid-19 pandemic came along. I returned to the Eugene website and this time discovered that they would digitally scan materials in their collection, for a fee. Unable to travel in any case, I was delighted to pay (about $C4000) for scans of each and every page of the Eugene volume and have access to them on my own computer.

Closer examination of the British Library Catalogue, and correspondence with their staff, revealed that their collection had initially included 1890 but that volume has been lost for many years. After 1888-89 there were a few issues from 1891, but the BL collection never, apparently, ever included the ten crucial issues covering the period January through November 1892. That is where the evidence unfolds of the conflict between Miss Orme and her allies on the one hand, and the 'Progressive Party' of the WLF on the other, the events that explain why her opponents regarded Eliza Orme as a malignant schemer to whom intrigue was meat and drink.

Before I get to the 'intrigue', however, I want to work chronologically through Eliza Orme's public life as we know it. This activity runs in parallel with her legal career through those years from 1875 to about 1903 when the various chambers in and around Chancery Lane were in operation and Orme and her partners prepared property documents for barristers and solicitors, managed patent applications, and engaged in the loan operations of a building society. First there was her public engagement with various political and social causes, notably that of Home Rule for Ireland. Then her involvement with the WLF and the Federation's split over the question of women's suffrage as Liberal Party policy. Next I will discuss the Royal Commission on Labour and the role of factory inspector, as well as her appointment to a committee investigating conditions in women's prisons. In the following chapter, I turn to Eliza Orme's journalism as another aspect of her public life – not just the *Women's Gazette* but her authorship of books and articles in several different venues.

Public Engagement and the Campaign for Irish Home Rule

From very early adulthood, Eliza Orme was eager to take on leadership positions in organizations devoted to the causes she thought were important and to write about those causes for mainstream periodicals. I mentioned in Chapter 3 that John Stuart Mill manoeuvred her onto the London Committee for Women's Suffrage executive in 1871 when she was only twenty-two years of age, having just abandoned her mathematical studies in favour of law. The following year found Eliza attending, with her friend Mathilde Blind, a republican meeting honouring the radical politicians Charles Dilke and Auberon Herbert. In 1874, now twenty-five, she wrote a couple of articles for *The Examiner* about the fraught question of University degrees for women. That periodical also published her acerbic article, 'Sound-Minded Women' the same year, and a poem ('Song') in 1875. She taught a short course on the elements of law for the North London Collegiate School. (I learned this from Anne Bridger's doctoral thesis). She attended meetings of the Association for the Promotion of the Legal Education of Women and later, with her partner Mary Ellen Richardson, joined that Association's Executive Committee. She joined a Ladies' Debating Club and later the Women's Political League. She was involved in the 1878 foundation of the Somerville Club for women—a somewhat contentious occasion that I still have not got to the bottom of, although it was apparently at her instigation that the Club later refused to accept the daughters of Charles Bradlaugh as members. In 1880, she gave the first of several addresses to the Sunday Lecture Society, on 'Free Trade in Education' and one to the Personal Liberty Club on 'The Evils of Compulsory Education'. Later (in May 1882) the Sunday Lecture Society heard her views on 'What shall we do with our criminal & neglected children' and the following year on 'Religious liberty. Do we possess it in England?' 1880 is the first record I have of a pro-women's suffrage lecture, but many more followed. Some were in public places like St. James's Hall; others were at drawing-room meetings in middle-class private homes. Others, remarkably, were at fortnightly sewing meetings held in a dissenting chapel, where women metal workers appeared with infants in arms to talk politics.

As Honorary Secretary of the newly-founded Women's Political League, in mid-1885, Orme spoke about the organization's objectives: to get women in general more interested in public affairs, to put them to work as canvassers for parliamentary candidates, and to see to it that capable women were elected to the executive councils of political associations. When challenged by someone who objected to women offering their services to candidates on record as opposed to women's suffrage, she replied: 'What would be more likely to bring about a general recognition of women's full rights as citizens than the fact that they were both able and willing to work side by side with men in public affairs?'. This was a robust point of view, but Orme was to learn that many of the feminist politicians of her generation did not share it.

All this activity attracted notice, of course, especially when it was observed alongside Orme's professional work providing legal services from chambers in Chancery Lane. Jealous fellow-students (like Pascoe Daphne) and sniping reporters (like the commentator in the *Sporting Gazette*) were ready to draw public attention to the anomaly of a single woman in public life. Private comments could be even more vicious: the aptly-named Miss E. M. A. Savage wrote to the novelist Samuel Butler in 1880 about an 'obnoxious article' written by Miss Orme on the subject of the new Somerville Club and took the opportunity to tell him she was 'happy to say that she is horribly ugly'. The thing is, there must have been dozens of other occasions—of everything from annoyance or sabotage to sniping or outright harassment—for every one that surfaces however slightly in the public record. Orme's calm demeanour and 'practical' approach to challenges must have concealed a great deal of frustration and distress. Still, the attention could sometimes be positive, as well as negative. Her political activity, and the convictions behind it, sometimes drew the attention of prominent men who were in a position to create opportunities for such a woman.

Several of Eliza Orme's interests still seem remarkably relevant in the twenty-first century. She belonged to the Proportional Representation Society. She took an interest in building a tunnel under the English Channel. She was a pacifist, belonging to the Arbitration and Peace Association. Certainly she was a strong supporter of women's rights, especially the right to work unimpeded in a chosen job or career. Her most passionate interest, however, the cause of Home Rule for Ireland,

was a campaign whose objectives were realized in her lifetime, albeit not in the way she would have wanted or expected.

In the nineteenth century, the UK was called a 'united' kingdom because parallel acts of the British and Irish Parliaments (the Act of Union of 1800) had merged England, Wales, and Scotland with the Kingdom of Ireland. (Today's union includes only a small portion of the northern part of the island of Ireland, but then it was the whole country.) By the 1870s when Eliza Orme was coming of age politically, there was a strong movement within Ireland for 'home rule' (that is, for self-government) and a lot of support for the idea in England, too. The history of injustice and colonial rule was centuries-long and painful, but at this point it was the laws governing land ownership that caused the most hardship. Home rule would have to be 'granted' to Ireland by the British Parliament passing the necessary legislation. The idea appealed ideologically to many members of the Liberal Party in England, but others were adamantly opposed. From the mid-1880s to the mid-1890s, the issue divided the Liberals. In 1886 the Liberal Prime Minister, William Ewart Gladstone, introduced legislation that failed and split his party. The foundation of the Women's Liberal Federation the following year was, in part, a project of the Home Rule faction—with Sophia Fry and Catherine Gladstone at the forefront and Eliza Orme in the background, organizing and strategizing.

I do not know exactly what made Orme such a strong supporter of Home Rule, but I suspect that she absorbed the ideology from her university mentors and perhaps from some in her family circle. Home Rule was the issue that encapsulated calls for justice in her time—like the anti-Vietnam-war movement in my youth, or Black Lives Matter in the 2020s. She spoke and wrote enthusiastically about the cause. She also visited Ireland and came home to share her experiences with friends and with Liberal audiences. After one such trip, she wrote to Sam Alexander: 'We have got little peeps into the homes and the habits of the people which no reading—not even good novels—can give you and just now when the whole world is watching the Irish fight it is so exciting to feel one is getting hold of the real facts'. And a few lines later: 'Nothing I can say conveys a hundredth part of the worth of these people. We ought to begin to pay our debts to them pretty quickly for we are in monstrous arrears'.

She was eloquent, witty, and persuasive, not only in a private letter, but on the platform and in the committee room, and also on the pages of her weekly newspaper.

The *Women's Gazette* began in November 1888—initially as an independent periodical under a male editor, Sydney Hallifax, himself a prominent Home Ruler. From the beginning, however, Hallifax proclaimed the *Gazette* to be 'devoted to the social well-being and political education of women, with a chronicle of the work of the Women's Liberal Association'. The first issue featured an admiring profile of Mrs Gladstone and a clear statement that the newspaper would address the prominent question of the government of Ireland. Hallifax was editor, but it is not clear who was the newspaper's proprietor. After only a few weeks, an editorial statement attempted to quash a rumour that the newspaper was funded by none other than Charles Dilke, another Gladstonian and Home Rule supporter. (My suspicion is that Dilke was indeed backing the paper but everyone concerned preferred that he do so anonymously because of his divisive reputation.) Eliza Orme herself may well have been involved behind the scenes of the paper from the beginning, though I have found no evidence to that effect. She was announced as its editor and manager in September 1889, at the same time as ownership passed from Hallifax to a new company complete with shareholders and a board of directors, the Women's Gazette Printing & Publishing Company, Limited. Letters to that company were directed to Orme's chambers, and cheques were made out in her name, but as editor she undertook to report on Liberal women's meetings. In the WLF and the *Women's Gazette*, the Home Rule movement had an organization—and an organ—made up of supportive women eager to be politically active.

I have written about the *Women's Gazette* in a 2022 article for the *Victorian Periodicals Review*, because the newspaper is interesting for its own sake and because I wanted to publicize my uncovering those missing copies in the library in Oregon. Orme was its editor for most of the newspaper's four-year run. Hallifax, her predecessor, retired gracefully in her favour; and her successor, Eliza Brabrook, acted as a caretaker for the few issues that appeared after she left to work on the Royal Commission. Both of those people were political allies in Home Rule Liberal and other causes. In this book, however, I am using the

Gazette as a historical source for documenting Eliza Orme's public engagement, and especially her fraught engagement with the movement for women's suffrage.

The Women's Liberal Federation Splits over the Question of Suffrage

The matter of women's right to vote in Parliamentary elections had been prominent since the 1860s, and Eliza Orme was involved with the National Society for Women's Suffrage since attending meetings with her mother as a teenager. For her, it was an important issue, although not as urgent as Home Rule for Ireland. Orme's priorities were shared by the co-founders of the Women's Liberal Foundation and by Sydney Hallifax, the first editor of the *Women's Gazette*. All these Liberals were thinking strategically, taking into consideration the interests of their party, the unlikelihood of any particular bill being passed in both the House of Commons and House of Lords, and the desirability of enlisting support from people who opposed them on one issue while agreeing with them on another. It was practical politics. The flagship issue of the *Gazette* proclaimed; 'The most prominent question at the present time ... is, of course, the government of Ireland, and many thousands of Englishwomen, filled with deep sympathy for the sorrows of that unhappy country, are anxious so to direct their efforts as to secure the greatest possible results for good'. The editorial went on to admit that 'There is also a large group of political questions about which Liberals do not agree, and in which women are particularly interested'. A 'fair example' was the political enfranchisement of women. These questions would be discussed in the *Gazette's* columns with a 'perfectly impartial opening' available to both sides.

Neutrality with respect to women's suffrage lasted, as settled policy of the Women's Liberal Federation, only a little over two years. Early in 1890, Rosalind Howard, Countess of Carlisle, got involved and began to press for change. She told the annual meeting of the WLF Council in London that 'her heart was enflamed for women's suffrage' and noted that unlike 'Miss Orme, who has been supporting women's suffrage since 1866' she herself had only recently been 'allowed to go on the platform'. Lady Carlisle was unlike Miss Orme in most ways: not only

a few years older, but born into a patrician rural family, educated at home, and married since the age of nineteen to a wealthy aristocrat and politician. (One of their properties was Castle Howard, which I have visited but remember best as the setting for the TV version of *Brideshead Revisited*.) Rosalind is recalled as 'the radical countess': she campaigned vigorously for abstention from alcohol, non-adulteration of food, and similar causes. She believed so strongly in Home Rule that she disagreed publicly with her husband on the issue; but even Home Rule was less important to her than votes for women. Lady Carlisle set about trying to persuade the leadership of the WLF to insist that women's suffrage become Liberal Party policy. This would have been an embarrassment and an impediment to Gladstone and the leadership, and reason enough for Orme and her allies to stand firm on the policy of neutrality.

Fig. 9 Rosalind Frances (née Stanley), Countess of Carlisle (1900s, H. Walter Barnett), ©National Portrait Gallery, London.

The pages of the *Women's Gazette* document the increasing acrimony within the Federation, and the use of underhanded tactics on the part of Lady Carlisle and her faction. These included manipulating ('beguiling') the politically naïve leaders of local Women's Liberal Associations in rural towns and villages—not necessarily to persuade them to support

the cause, but to appoint proxy voters to the meetings of the central WLF Council (voters who would then cast ballots for the 'progressive' faction) or even to produce unauthorized ('counterfeit') affiliation forms with the purpose of swamping Council meetings with votes for their side. Both sides described this kind of politicking as 'wire pulling'. The volumes held in the British Library finish at the end of 1891, with Lady Carlisle referring to 'the divided state of the Federation' and Miss Orme speaking at a Nottingham meeting where resolutions were made concerning the great importance of female representation on the Labour Commission then being set up.

January 1892 initiated not just a new year but a new volume of the *WGWN*, the one to be found only in Eugene. With a digital copy in hand, I can report that conflict quickly escalated and recriminations abounded. Moderate members wondered whether Lady Carlisle and her 'Progressive Party' were aiming to make the WLF a single-issue organization, 'a fourth Suffrage Society'. They seemed to wish 'to carry the Council by storm'—influencing agents, forging the official affiliation forms, collecting money subscriptions, scheduling lectures free of expense to the local organizers, and similar tactics. An editorial observed that 'The "Progressive Party" is singularly unfortunate in its name. It is not progressive in any Liberal sense, and it is not a party'.

Eliza Orme and her allies knew something that Lady Carlisle and her faction overlooked: women's issues and women's politics were not limited to the suffrage question, and certainly not to in-fighting within one party's auxiliary. In particular, labour conditions for women working in industry were of vital importance. A news item of 8 February 1892 announced that 'The committee dealing with textile industries on Tuesday last came to the decision to recommend the appointment of Miss Orme, Miss Collett, Miss Abraham, and Miss Irwin as Sub-Commissioners to investigate the problem with regard to women's labour'. This was an event of huge importance to reforming politicians of all parties and of both sexes, but it mattered little to those 'progressives' among women Liberals who continued to see Orme as a 'malignant schemer' and an impediment to their single-issue objective. In the two months between that announcement and Orme's resignation from both the WLF executive and the newspaper editorship in early April, the chaos continued. Mary Martin Leake, the paid secretary who was loyal

to the moderate leadership, reported 'difficulties introduced into the Federation office by an irreconcilable and irresponsible minority'. At one point one of the leadership had to implore Lady Carlisle not to insult Miss Leake. Somebody else observed that the WLF was 'like a bear garden', although it got worse after Orme's departure. The 'progressive' (suffrage as party policy now) minority refused to accept that their program, to which they were so passionately committed, would always be outvoted by the moderate (wait until later) majority. To the minority, dirty tricks seemed to be necessary in those circumstances.

Eliza Orme took on an influential and demanding full-time political position when she was appointed Senior Lady Assistant Commissioner, and the job required her to maintain a stance of objectivity. She was thus perfectly justified in resigning from both the Federation executive and the *Women's Gazette* editorship. Still, I cannot help wondering if Eliza regarded the new post as a sort of exit strategy—a means to get away from the distasteful and futile squabbles that had begun to take up so much of her time and energy. She was gone when some of the 'progressives' took possession of the WLF offices, locking themselves in and refusing admittance to the temporary secretary who replaced Mary Martin Leake. She was gone when the story, embellished and sensationalized, made its way into the mainstream press (were cheques and postal orders and even £90 in cash left lying around, or was that account 'untrue'?). At the newspaper office, her place was taken by Eliza Brabrook, a subeditor at Lawrence and Bullen, the publishing house co-owned by Reina Lawrence's brother Henry. Brabrook brought the newspaper to a decorous close after a further five issues, although she seems to have neglected to deposit the year's volume in the British Library.

As for the Federation, Orme and her colleagues resigned *en masse* from the leadership and later formed a Women's National Liberal Association, splitting the party's women's auxiliary with predictable results. Not only was a cadre of canvassers and other political workers unavailable to the party's candidates, but a fragile structure within which women could learn the skills of organization and public speaking was damaged. Both had been among Eliza Orme's 'practical' objectives for supporting the Women's Liberal Federation and its local Associations by editing its newspaper.

The early months of 1892 may also have signalled a change in Eliza's business address and professional practice. For the last year or two, press advertisements for the Nineteenth Century Building Society and editorial notices about the *WGWN* had given her address as 5 Dane's Inn, near Chancery Lane like the Southampton Buildings chambers she had for about eight years before that. I do not know exactly when she moved, but by September the NCBS was listing her address as 16 Henrietta Street. That was the address where Lawrence and Bullen had their publishing house, and it was in Covent Garden not in the legal district. It was also the address from which Eliza Brabrook published the final issues of the *WGWN*. Perhaps the two Elizas shared the same chambers, possibly on their own or possibly a set of rooms inside Reina's brother's place of business. On her new adventure, Miss Orme was not only going to be on the road and occupied with interviews, supervision, and report-writing, she need not be available to high-powered barristers needing assistance with complex property transactions.

Factory Inspection and the Royal Commission

Eliza Orme spent about eighteen months on the work of the Royal Commission, from January 1892 to June 1893. She was paid £25 (which translates to almost £4000 in modern money) per month. That was £5 more per month than her three colleagues, because she was the Senior Lady Assistant Commissioner and had to supervise their investigations and co-sign their reports. It was not a straightforwardly political appointment; in fact the government of the day was a Conservative one, although both Liberal and Labour politicians, as well as people concerned about the unhealthy conditions in many factories and workshops had been agitating on the subject for some time. She seems to have got the job through her old mentor Leonard Courtney, who was entrusted with the task of finding four suitable women. Courtney did not select Beatrice Potter, just about to marry Sidney Webb and now an avowed socialist; he did, however, tell Potter on January 4th that Orme and the others had been commissioned. From the Webbs' point of view, the report on women's work was only a sidebar to the Royal Commission on Labour that had been set up after a contentious strike at the London docks and focused on male labour and questions

of trade unionism. But it was of vital importance to people on both sides of the question about women's work, those like Orme who wanted women to work unencumbered by regulation and those who sought to regulate labour in order to protect fragile female bodies. The news of the investigations hit the press late in February. March 7th 1892 marked both the first official meeting of the four Lady Assistant Commissioners with the civil servant who oversaw their work, and the last issue of the *Women's Gazette* to be edited by Miss Orme. She had a new and formidable challenge ahead of her.

The four members of the Royal Commission charged with investigating the employment of women had three broad tasks: tracking differences in the rates of wage of women versus men; looking into the 'alleged grievances of women'; and reporting on the effects of industrial employment on women's health, morality, and homes. They were particularly instructed to investigate the exclusion of women from certain trades. They could draw upon written information in existing government reports, but they were also adjured to visit 'centres of industry' and take evidence directly from both employers and employees. Each of the several reports to the Commission was to be signed by at least two of the Assistant Commissioners—in practice, by Eliza Orme and one of her subordinates. They were expressly committed to avoid expressions of personal opinion as to proposed legislation on these matters, and generally to stick to the facts. (This proved difficult for two of them, as it happens.) Clara Collet reported on working conditions in numerous industries in London, and also made a few forays to other urban centres. May Abraham's remit was the textile factories of the north and the Midlands, and the white lead industry in the north (with a few extra fields of work thrown in). Alongside Eliza Orme, Abraham also travelled to Ireland to report on women's work there. Margaret Irwin's job was also based geographically, this time in Scotland, where she looked particularly, but not exclusively, at the textile industries. Finally, Orme was assigned two further investigations: first the conditions of work for barmaids and others whose labour involved serving refreshments; and second the working conditions of women in the nail, chain and bolt-making industries in the Black Country (the coal fields of the West Midlands).

In her report on the work of barmaids, Orme reports that she spoke to 287 persons—127 women currently or formerly employed in bars and pubs, twenty-one women and eighty-nine men in the position of employers or superintendents, and a further fifty people who knew the customs of the trade. She visited ninety-one public houses, hotels and restaurants, twenty railway, theatre, and music hall bars, as well as forty-three places of refreshment not licensed to sell intoxicating liquors. Then there were visits to six residential institutions 'for the benefit of working girls' two of which were specially designed to provide accommodation for barmaids. That was a formidable amount of preparation, interviewing, data collection, and information management. The investigation took place in London, large towns in the south of England, the north of England, in Scotland and in Ireland. Orme's report is both detailed and dispassionate. She refers to specific individuals and their concerns. She reports mistreatment when she finds it, but she is careful to be respectful to employers and sceptical of the complaints of employees. Addressing a concern felt by some social reformers, she refutes concerns that bartending would lead either to drunkenness or overfamiliarity on the part of women workers. Later, she even became a vice-president of the Barmaids Political Defence League.

The report on women's work in Ireland is similarly aloof, noticeably lacking the partisan commitment to the Irish people that is evident in Orme's political rhetoric on the subject of Home Rule. For example she notes that 'the houses occupied by shop assistants in Ireland are often untidy and furnished in a very slovenly manner, but the essentials of comfort are not disregarded' and the accommodations compare favourably with those in England and Wales. She reports quite nonchalantly about the conditions of work in convent industries, the infamous Magdalene Homes, now better known as the Magdalene 'Laundries'. Here her focus was on the high quality of the laundry equipment, not on the practice of 'penitents' (unmarried mothers) being put to work on the premises where they were receiving prenatal care. When it came to the question of married women labourers and childcare—or rather, the lack of childcare—she made it clear that the women themselves were generally opposed to being kept away from work for as long as three months after childbirth.

The same observation appeared in Orme's report on women's work in the Black Country metalwork industries, specifically the manufacture of nails, chains, and bolts in both domestic workshops and small factories. For some reason this report does not appear with the others on women's employment. It came out earlier and was included as an appendix to the minutes of evidence taken on work in the metal trades generally. She visited Birmingham in May of 1892, seeing twenty-three different workplaces and interviewing employers, workers, and trades union leaders; her report was dated 21 June. The tone of this report is somewhat more opinionated than the others. Orme makes it clear that the women wanted to work, needed the income to support their families. Indeed, they would undoubtedly respond to any legislation preventing married women's work by 'avoiding the legal ceremony of marriage' and continuing to work at the forge, live common law in their parents' home, and have babies alongside their own mothers. But she took time to note that the nearest approach to 'common action' was not a union meeting but large attendance at a cookery class: 'This may seem to have no relation to trade combination, but the very earliest step towards combination, that of creating some kind of public spirit, has yet to be taken among these women, and a cookery class, which will give them a higher standard of home comfort, and at the same time draw them together, is perhaps the best way of beginning'.

Her final remarks to those who commissioned her investigation are classic Eliza Orme: sensible, pragmatic, acerbic, always practical:

> I cannot close this report without recording my astonishment at the unsuitable dress worn by these workers. Instead of a short skirt with a leathern apron to guard them from the edge of the forge, comfortable broad soled shoes without heels, and a loose cool jacket, they wear the worn-out Sunday frock, ragged, burned and heat-stained, tight stays, high heeled shoes, and a bit of sacking pinned over the skirt completing the untidiness. When they are hot they loosen the throat of the dress, and this increases the unseemliness of their general appearance. A class for teaching the simple rules of health, and a supply of suitable garments at cost price, are schemes well worth the attention of kind-hearted ladies who wish to better the condition of the women in the Black Country.

Lady Carlisle and similar 'kind-hearted ladies' would have ignored the practicalities of cookery lessons and a clothing allowance in favour of

prohibiting paid work in such a rough industry altogether. Eliza Orme knew all too well the consequences of such an apparently kind-hearted policy, in the shape of hunger, malnutrition, and family violence. And neither of them could imagine a regime that might sponsor childcare services or support workplace safety regulations for people of all genders.

It is difficult to get a sense of the daily routine of her work on the Royal Commission. Eliza seems to have taken the hundreds of interviews in her stride, but perhaps that was a challenge. Certainly note-taking and reporting were skills she had to learn. (She did learn, and later advised a subordinate, Lucy Deane, 'not to buy smart leather bound note books, but soft cheap 3*d* school exercise books and indelible pencils; to keep one in her private handbag at all times, and to write immediately after any meeting, in cabs, hotels, trains, factories; and to keep a record of everyone and everything and everywhere she travelled; and to record her opinions and descriptions of everyone she met'.) For at least one of the investigations, the one in the Black Country, she travelled with a 'lady shorthand writer' who took charge of the notetaking.

I find myself comparing this to my own experience of a challenging but precarious new job when I began to teach history students at the University of Windsor while commuting back and forth to Toronto at weekends. I imagine that, for her, the travel must have been exhausting, though perhaps also exhilarating. And perhaps, too, we shared an optimism that was also ambition. Maybe she hoped that this eighteen-month gig would lead to better things, longer-lasting opportunities, a chance to make a name for herself in politics.

That is speculation, but I am on firmer ground in being able to puncture the seriousness of the reports, a bit, by quoting a letter from Eliza to Sam, dated from the Imperial Hotel in Cork on 12 November 1892. 'Here I am trying to find industries to report upon in Ireland. My old friends are very anxious to help but, alas, the subject of the enquiry is wanting. I shall have to pad my report with a little history and it won't do any harm'. Then she went on to tell him a funny story about an old man who made her laugh, and about how 'Dublin is looking very quiet and dignified in the autumn lights. The public buildings are so suitable and consistent I fall in love with them afresh each time I come'. The

investigation was a good gig, a promising opportunity, but it was not her whole life.

There are numerous articles in the newspaper and periodical press about the reports of the Royal Commission, most of them unimpeachably straightforward and rather dull. One exception is an anonymous bit of doggerel in *Punch*, the famous comic magazine, published on 18 November 1893 with the tagline 'See the Report of the Lady Commissioners on Women's Labour'. The title, 'To Hebe' refers to a Greek goddess, sometimes described as the cupbearer to the gods, who was associated with youthful femininity and, by extension, with barmaids.

> To Hebe:
> Waitress with the dimpled chin,
> Cap as clean as a new pin,
> Here's a feather to put in!
>
> For Miss Orme's report declares
> That no male with you compares
> In the showing off of wares.
>
> Be it counter, be it bar,
> You can 'dress' it – you're its star,
> Bright, and most particular!
>
> Grievances you have, no doubt:
> Which of us exists without?
> Still, you do not pine or pout.
>
> Standing with reluctant feet
> Always ready, trim, and neat,
> No one tells you – 'Take a seat!'
>
> Hours are long, and meal-time short,
> Mashing bores, who think it 'sport',
> Say the things they didn't ought!
>
> Gather, then, the tips that fall;
> Don't let vulgar chaff appal;
> To the Bar you've had your 'call!'

Fortunately the anonymity of the author has been unveiled by the researchers behind the *Curran Index to Victorian Periodicals*. He was a

lawyer, a barrister, and a sometime novelist, Horace Frank Lester (1853–1896). Lester must have enjoyed writing that last double-meaning line, but I do not suppose Eliza Orme enjoyed reading it.

One reader of *Royal Commission on Labour: the Employment of Women* was distinctly enthusiastic. A young David Lloyd George, then a new Member of Parliament for a Welsh constituency (and much later Britain's Prime Minister) wrote a letter to his brother in which he zeroed in on the parts of Orme's report that referred to women's work in Wales: 'What a squasher. Tremendous. Ellis & I sat down for an hour to meditate upon it & chew it like a "joy o bacco" & spit it out'. For politicians of a progressive stripe, this report provided plenty to chew on.

A more measured response came in a review that appeared in *The Economic Journal* (in March 1894, by Caroline A. Foley). It sums up the general tone of the reports on women's labour, reveals that two of the lady assistant commissioners ignored the stipulation that they avoid expressing opinions, and comments on their personalities. 'There is literary interest', Foley noted, 'in watching the methods and standpoints of the several authors:–the disinterested, manysided watchfulness and statistical skill of Miss Collet, the championship of the worker and her wrongs throbbing through Miss Abraham's columns; the sagacious conclusions and sympathetic insight of Miss Irwin, whose Scotch lassies with "the bit shawlie" over their heads we seem to know personally; and the judicial balancing of evidence evinced by Miss Orme's legal culture'. Collet, it seems, thought like a sociologist and social worker, and Orme like a lawyer. Whereas both Abraham and Irwin were unabashedly in sympathy with the women whose working conditions they were commissioned to interrogate.

There is some evidence that the 'judicial' Miss Orme had to use her 'legal culture' and experience to rein in the passionate enthusiasms of both Abraham and Irwin. In the case of Irwin, the Aberdeen Trades Council suspected that Orme had suppressed evidence in the course of 'compiling' Irwin's report and this concern was reported in the press. Two Members of Parliament wrote letters to the editor of the *Aberdeen Evening Express* (7 December 1893). One attested to Orme's 'eminent competence' (this was James Bryce who, with his wife, worked with Orme on Liberal and Home Rule issues). The other affirmed that 'Miss Orme is usually considered very trustworthy' (this was W. A. Hunter,

M.P. and not the first time he had advocated for her.) Eliza Orme was not the Conservative lackey that the Labour Party of Aberdeen imagined her to be, but she did understand her responsibility to ensure that the tone of the reports had to be as neutral as possible if they were to be well-received. And she was, after all, an editor—well versed in revising someone else's prose for publication in print.

Beginning in 1893, immediately after the Royal Commission, the Liberal government then in power appointed a number of women as paid factory inspectors, specifically to examine and report on working conditions for women on an ongoing basis. Eliza Orme was not one of them. It seems clear to me that she was not interested in that sort of employment, although it would be nice to know if it was offered to her. At least one of her three lady-assistant-commissioner colleagues, May Abraham (later Tennant) was hired and began a lifelong distinguished career in this kind of work. Another of the initial intake of women inspectors was Lucy Deane, whom Eliza Orme had advised about notetaking. Deane remembered Orme's warning that if she took the position, she would have to be careful to avoid partisanship, whether with a political party or a trade union. Eliza Orme took her own advice a couple of years later, when she joined a committee to investigate the conditions in prisons.

Prison Committee

Early in 1894 there was an outcry in the daily press about the conditions in prisons and the treatment of prisoners. William Gladstone's Liberal government responded by setting up a committee on the matter, chaired by his son, Herbert Gladstone. Eliza Orme was the only woman on the committee, which began its investigations that summer and reported in April 1895. I do not know whether this one was a paid assignment, although I suspect so. Orme asked questions of the people testifying to the committee and joined her colleagues in signing the resulting report. Most of her concern appears to have been for the women who staffed the prisons as warders, rather than for the benighted prisoners themselves—at least on the surface. The author of a 1994 book on the contemporary prison system, Sean McConville, regards her contribution as 'surprisingly pusillanimous', noting that Orme felt strongly about the

charity workers who came into prisons and interfered with their operation by professional managers. She also, for some reason McConville could not understand, made a considerable fuss about insisting that women prisoners should not be allowed to cook food that was intended for consumption by women warders. Pusillanimous or not she maintained her reputation for practicality, recommending that it would be best for women to be assigned prison labour that would prepare them for jobs they could secure once they were released. When the report appeared, newspapers referred to Orme as 'a lady whose name is a household word with all who take interest in the question of prison reform'.

Four years after the Committee's official report, with a Prisons Bill in front of Parliament at the time of publication, Eliza Orme wrote a brief signed article for the *Fortnightly Review* entitled 'Our Female Criminals'. Among other things, the article answers McConville's question about prisoners cooking for warders. The article did not refer directly to her own authorship of the recommendations it cited, too many of which had been 'quietly ignored'. The article was unabashedly feminist ('The fact is that our prison administration is entirely in the hands of men, and partly from ignorance of the wants and characteristics of women, and partly from fear of doing more harm than good, the Commissioners [of prisons] turn a deaf ear to suggestions of radical reform. The matrons are often clever, experienced women, but, like most salaried officials, they know it is their wisest policy to obey orders without making suggestions'.) The five-page article goes on to make numerous recommendations, most of which had already appeared in Orme's official report. Drunkenness was a problem; so were prison labour, diet, and exercise, the care of mothers incarcerated with nursing infants, spiritual guidance, and job training. And here we find an explanation of Orme's concern with prisoners, themselves 'on a strict diet', being assigned to cook meals for the warders: 'A woman who has not tasted tea for six months has to pour the boiling water on the fragrant leaf, and is punished when a few tea leaves are found concealed in her pocket. She is living on brown bread and the prison broth, and she is expected to fry sausages without pilfering'. Despite this imaginative sensitivity to inmates, Orme is again eloquent on the needs of the prison matrons: she evokes the domestic comfort of a male warder who has a home and family to spend time with off duty, whereas his female counterpart either shares accommodation with

other matrons on the prison grounds, perpetually 'talking prison gossip and prison grievances over the fire in their common sitting-room', or languishes 'in her lonely little home'. Under such conditions, it was rare to find women prison staff of the kind Eliza Orme admired: 'with sunny tempers, bright hopeful spirits, and bubbling over with originality'.

Unlike the Royal Commission on Labour, I have not found evidence of a continuing interest on Orme's part in prison reform. The committee's investigations, the report, and the later *Fortnightly Review* article do, however, constitute her final foray into public life as this chapter has conceptualized it.

An Independent Single Professional Woman in Public Life

All this activity in the public-facing part of Eliza Orme's life in the 1880s and 90s makes it hard to understand how she came to remain quite unknown to posterity for such a long time, and why she is still relatively obscure. Part of the answer lies in the pivotal year of 1892. Eliza was forty-three that year (turned forty-four on Christmas day). Her legal career had, perforce, been so tightly restricted that it had not generated much of a reputation, although she was valued in her professional capacity by the handful of barristers who employed her services. She was the head of her own household. Her political activity and ambitions had been diverted from the Liberal Party's big issues (especially Home Rule for Ireland) to the party's women's auxiliary. Here she did her best to organize and educate her fellow members as well as her leadership colleagues. But now the Royal Commission might offer the opportunity to sit at the same table with powerful male colleagues and have her voice heard and respected. Instead, she was drawn into a dispute among women that many men found laughable, while many women chose the opposite side. In the Countess of Carlisle and her allies, Eliza came up against a feminism very different from her own, a feminism more emotional than intellectual, more idealistic than strategic. The encounter put her on the wrong side of history. Lady Carlisle's feminism was associated with a campaign whose extraordinary struggle, eventual success, and evident justice have made it difficult for people in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to see

that 'votes for women' might have come about any other way. This is not the place to discuss whether there might have been another way, but rather to think about why Eliza Orme's public life did not generate the kind of memorial narrative it might have otherwise. One reason is that her reputation turned out to be collateral damage in Carlisle's mission to make the Women's Liberal Federation over as a suffragist organization. That mission was a small part of the 'radical Countess's' activities, but it may have put an irreparable barrier in the way of Eliza Orme's path to significant political influence.

Another reason was longevity: she was only halfway through her lifespan in 1892. By the time Eliza died in 1937 most of her contemporaries had long gone, and the issues had changed irrevocably. The world had been at war and was gearing up to go to war again. There was nobody to write her obituary. Whereas if she had died in 1912 or 1917, the reputation she created with her early public life and then cemented with the Labour Commission and Prison Committee would have merited some notice in the press. That in turn might have captured the attention of the second-wave chroniclers of the first wave of the women's suffrage movement. But those scholars, in the 1970s and 80s, were researching in libraries and archives where the records put them at the mercy of Orme's own contemporaries, women and men who had never identified her as an independent single professional woman making her mark in public life. How could they? She blew through their lives like 'a comet or the north wind' and whether they admired her or not, they did not see her for what she was. Now that I am in a position to search for her name at a granular level in the press of the day, her substantial, though transient, contemporary reputation becomes apparent.