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

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7. Last Years

The following account of the last twenty years of Eliza Orme's life is sketchy, shaped by a handful of documents. Some of these are the kind of incontrovertible evidence produced by the state or preserved through the accident of a correspondent's eminence, while others are the more ephemeral scraps that have to be pieced together and supplemented by disciplined speculation. In the first category, we have her last letter to Samuel Alexander written in 1916 when she was sixty-seven; we also have the census record of her residence in a care facility in 1921 when she was seventy-two; and we have certification of her death, with a list of three causes, in 1937 when she was eighty-eight. Whereas the second category offers little more than a tangle of fragments, hints, absences, inferences and guesses.

Eliza's January 1916 letter to Sam Alexander is beautiful, warm, nostalgic and affectionate. The occasion was his fifty-seventh birthday; he had written to her when she turned sixty-seven a few weeks earlier. There was a terrible war going on, but she did not mention that. Instead, she remembered a new year's eve sixteen years earlier and recounted family news, some of it sad and some heartening. Her mind was clear and her voice strong, although she did report a recent illness. She wrote from home, from her own house in southwest London at number 118 Upper Tulse Hill, where she has just returned after staying with Reina Lawrence during a protracted recovery.

> Dearest Sam. I 'made a swear' as the children say to answer your letter today so as to wish you all the good old wishes for tomorrow. We were thinking of you last Friday night and recalling the night you spent here in 1899 when we, accompanied by your dog and our Rhoda walked down Tulse Hill and fancied we heard St Pauls Cathedral ringing in the new century. We heard all sorts of strange noises and the vague hum of the great city.

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As for the illness, she does not specify her diagnosis, although it had been severe enough that Eliza and Beatrice temporarily broke up housekeeping to stay with the Lawrences at their Belsize Avenue house for over two months. Although she was now apparently recovered and returned to her own home, she referred to an ongoing 'stupid woolly condition' and observed that 'To hear of a friend's work is like a refreshing breeze when one is locked up in a sick room and it was good of you to let me have such a pleasant tonic'. She reported that:

> Beatrice and I led a lazy and luxurious life for ten weeks—or rather I did for Beatrice interrupted her rest cure to stay with Mrs Bastian until she was a little recovered from the shock of Dr Bastian's death. We knew he was very ill but the end was not expected and his keen interest in everything, especially in his own old work, made it very difficult to believe that the machine was going to stop.

She then shared news of the Masson family in Edinburgh, where Eliza's elder sister Rosaline had also just died, but her niece Flora was engaged in political writing and was herself interested in Samuel Alexander's intellectual work. All the Lawrence women were flourishing: the three unmarried sisters were doing philanthropic committee work, she told their mutual friend, exercising their excellent judgment and extensive experience in the aid of good causes.

This was the letter of a vigorous woman in her late sixties, speaking with pleasure about younger friends (Esther Lawrence was about fifty-four, and Caroline fifty-two, while Reina was fifty-five) who have come to maturity and the practice of successful careers, friends who are themselves beginning to slow down and retire into private life. Eliza herself was no longer a director of the Nineteenth Century Building Society, the property management organization she been part of for so long. Her name had not been in the news lately either, not since a few years earlier when activists were making an (unsuccessful) attempt to break down gender barriers to the practice of law and newspaper articles had referred to her labours as a conveyancer in the 1890s. But that was now far in the past. If she was being strictly accurate when she told the *Law Journal* in 1903 that she had practiced unofficially for twenty-five years, she might have stopped somewhere about 1900 (timing her start from the opening of the Chancery Lane chambers with Mary Ellen Richardson in 1875). She does not use the word, but

let us say provisionally that she has retired. She continued to live for almost twenty years after the letter to Sam, no longer appearing in the press either with her own writings or in reports of public addresses or political work.

From my point of view as a researcher, Eliza's retirement—if that is what it was—means I have not been able to find out much more about her life after that 1916 letter. Not much, but something: five years later, when the census was recorded, she was living at Fenstanton, an institution in south London not far from the house at Tulse Hill. The place no longer exists; there is a school on the site. At the time it was described as 'a comfortable private asylum for ladies with mental and nervous disorders' that stood in twelve acres of wooded grounds and gardens. There were thirty beds. Twenty-one years later, she died at that same institution, perhaps merely of old age. To be specific, Madeline R. Lockwood (a woman doctor, not so rare by 1937) certified that the cause of death was in three parts: '(1a) senile gangrene of right foot; (1b) cardiovascular degeneration; (1c) senility'. Tissue death due either to infection or lack of blood supply (that is, gangrene) is unpleasant and painful, possibly associated with diabetes, but not in itself life-threatening. Almost everyone who gets to their late eighties has some sort of heart condition. But what did Dr Lockwood mean by 'senility?' Was that just a way of saying that her patient was very elderly, or had Eliza been suffering from dementia? And if the latter, how long had it been going on?

How do we bridge the gap between someone referring cheerfully to a 'stupid' and 'woolly' condition that kept her 'locked up in a sick room' in 1916 and a death-certificate notation of 'senility' in 1937? She did not sound like someone with Alzheimer's disease or any other form of dementia when she wrote to Sam. Perhaps those symptoms appeared within a few years and at some point before 1921 (when the census pinpointed her whereabouts) her sisters were not able to manage her at home. Only Beatrice was single and, in that sense, available, but she may have been unable to do what was needed. Or perhaps Eliza had a stroke that left her physically disabled; maybe she moved to Fenstanton of her own volition, convinced that they could care for whatever 'nervous disorder' she might have been diagnosed with. In that case, the brutal verdict on her death certificate might have emerged much later. I hope

so, but I do not think I will ever know. Because the death certificate (like the record of her birth, and her will) was a legal document, I have had a copy of it since my first round of research, in the 1980s. It has always troubled me, and it still does. But now that I am older myself, now that a friend has come down with dementia, now that everyone in my generation is thinking about it—now I am ready to use it as a starting point for speculation, rather than as a grim end point to an extraordinary life.

Contemporaneities

One way to think about those last twenty-odd years might be to identify what was going on during the time of Eliza Orme's residence at Fenstanton. What happened to the people and causes that had captured her interest earlier? I find myself adopting the cultural historian's term, 'contemporaneity' (one scholar calls this concept 'the entangled now') to frame the questions. What was happening to the issues she was most passionate about? She was a Liberal, and Liberal governments beginning in 1906 made massive changes to Britain's social policy, many of which she had promoted. She was a pacifist, and there was brutal war in South Africa 1899–1902 followed by a horrific world war 1914–1918. Did she identify with the 'pro-Boers' who opposed the government's conduct in the first conflict, or with the 'conscientious objectors' who refused to fight in the second? She was a suffragist, and after the war legislation was passed to give women the right to vote in parliamentary elections. I would like to think she cast a ballot. She was a Home Ruler, and Ireland came to govern itself without reference to the British parliament. (Although that happened in a context of violence and uprising, and not as a matter of rationally decided legislation as imagined by people like Orme and her hero Gladstone.) She had aimed to practice law as a barrister or solicitor on the same terms as men, and in 1919 that right was granted to women by the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act. It happened not long after she (probably) moved to Fenstanton. I hope she heard that news, but if she did, it must have been a bittersweet moment.

During those same decades, Eliza's housemate contemporaries were her oldest and youngest siblings: Charles Edward Orme, long retired from medical practice and fifteen years her senior, lived under Eliza's

roof in Brixton until he died in 1912. At least that is what successive census records show; there is no further evidence of what he was up to. As for Beatrice Orme, when the household broke up a few years later she moved to Blanche Fox's home in Cornwall and lived there until she died, at ninety-two, in 1949.

Meanwhile, other members of the family and the families of their friends grew up, got older, had jobs and children; some of them died. Some of them embarked on successful careers, and in that case, records have survived. Eliza's Edinburgh niece Flora Masson became a nurse, working at that profession through the first world war (Florence Nightingale was her colleague and supporter). Flora and her sister Rosaline were active in the Scottish women's suffrage movement, and later Flora became a biographer and did some journalism. Their brother David Orme Masson emigrated to Australia and became professor of Chemistry at the University of Melbourne; Eliza kept in touch with this nephew and his wife. In her London sister Julia's family, the Bastians, there were three sons and two daughters: Charles Orme Bastian was an electrical engineer and inventor. (Did Aunt Eliza help out with patents?) James Bastian, a commercial traveller, also emigrated to Australia but later returned to England with his family. William Bastian was a staff surgeon in the Royal Navy. May Bastian (who followed her aunt Eliza to University College) married Edward Upton Strick a land agent. Sybil Bastian stayed single; she handled the sale of some family mementoes to the National Portrait Gallery in 1952. Among Eliza's Fox nephews (the sons of Blanche, living in Cornwall), Howard Orme Fox was an imperial civil servant and later a judge in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka); his brother Charles Masson Fox expanded his father's business as a timber merchant in Cornwall. Outside the Orme clan, Eliza's dear friend Samuel Alexander continued to practice as one of Britain's leading philosophers. Sam's brother Maurice taught music. Among the 'Belsize family', Reina Lawrence's sister Esther became head of Froebel College and hence a pioneer of early childhood education. Henry Walton Lawrence continued as a publisher until 1900 and later worked for the Medici Society. The eldest Lawrence sibling, Laurie, was an ear, nose, and throat surgeon and, in his private life, an aficionado of stamps and coins. His brother Arthur Moss Lawrence was a barrister and a businessman, keeping up the family's connection with the source

of its American playing-card fortune. Another Lawrence sibling, Gerald, was an actor on the stage and in silent films. Even if Eliza Orme came to be forgotten by her allies (and adversaries) in the women's suffrage movement, she had many people to remember her who were alive and flourishing through her years of retirement.

Other suffrage-movement contemporaries, both allies and adversaries, probably lost track of Eliza Orme as they all got older. Many of those women had gone through the traumatic weeks of the dissolution of the Women's Liberal Federation in 1892, when Miss Orme was perceived as either 'a comet or the north wind' (to recall the language of the *British Weekly* profile). Her comet appeared in the political realm and briefly lit up the sky with the exhilarating possibility of introducing articulate and practical women into the spaces of politics, and eventually of government, as the equals of men. The comet fell to earth when Lady Carlisle manoeuvred Miss Orme out of the majority leadership of the WLF and into a position where the necessity of adhering to principle meant exclusion from power and influence, at least within the party. Her north wind had briefly been a blast of common sense blown through an otherwise timid political cohort, but it was too cold, austere, and practical to attract a lot of support. According to the biography *Radical Countess*, Lady Carlisle eventually came to regret her campaign to make women's suffrage a plank in the Liberal platform. But that reversal was of no use to Eliza Orme or to the other women whose lives, decades later, were still affected by that quixotic crusade.

Of course, it is possible that Eliza knew nothing of any of these contemporaneities—that her move to Fenstanton about 1917 was caused by the dementia that appeared on her death certificate twenty years later. Evidence to the contrary might have been lost, or perhaps exists in a family archive in Australia, or among the descendants of her Edinburgh, London, and Cornwall families. I would like very much to know, but it does not really matter. She disappears from the public record as an active participant around 1903, when she was in her mid-fifties. Since women at that point mostly did not work as professionals and by definition could not retire from professional practice, it would be anachronistic to think of this disappearance as evidence of 'retirement'. Perhaps the invitations to public service gradually dried up, along with opportunities to do occasional journalism. Or perhaps they continued

to arrive, but she declined the offers. Beatrice or Reina or someone else might have needed her undivided attention. The house on Tulse Hill might have required extensive repairs that she was unwilling to undertake. She and Beatrice might have been low on money. Or so comfortable that they no longer needed to work.

Retirement

All this raises a research question for historians: what did 'retirement' mean to unmarried professional, or semi-professional, women who came of age late in the nineteenth century? There were so few of them that their situations may have varied too much to make any generalizations. Or perhaps the investigation is just waiting to be undertaken. As it happens, we are only just beginning to realize what retirement means now, to women like me who came of age in the second-wave-feminist 1960s, created careers, reputations, and legacies for ourselves by the early twenty-first century, as lawyers, professors, politicians, civil servants, and leaders in all walks of life. Women have always worked, both in the labour market and in our own homes, but we have only recently begun to 'retire' in the sense of reaching a milestone birthday, terminating an employment contract, coming to the end of nine-to-five commitments and the beginning of voluntary engagements, and perhaps even starting to collect a pension. I was sixty-seven when I retired in that sense, from teaching and doing my share of academic administration, and left the university behind. Ten years later, I am still figuring out what retirement means. When Eliza was sixty-seven, she had probably been finished with her quasi-professional labours for a dozen or so years. But the comparison is meaningless, since she was never an employee, and mandatory, or even customary, retirement ages were still far in the future.

The circumstance that Eliza Orme died at such a great age (eighty-eight) after having started so very young (only nineteen) in the women's suffrage movement, is almost enough to explain why her name scarcely turns up in the memoirs and annals of her contemporaries. Even apart from her political differences in the 1890s with some who wanted to put the vote ahead of every other cause, she did not fit in demographically with that cadre of redoubtable women we call moderate suffragists and

militant suffragettes. She was somewhat younger than the first group, and much older than the second. More importantly, she was single and self-supporting, while many of them were either married to sympathetic husbands, widowed with significant means, or the unmarried daughter-heirs of wealthy men who had died conveniently young. Her education in mathematics, political economy, and law enabled her to forge a career in law, politics, and public policy. Other educated women could work in one or two of those areas, and did: I cannot think of anyone else who managed all three, unless it was Reina Lawrence. But Lawrence chose to enter politics directly, in London County Council elections as soon as women were eligible. And her focus seems to have been on local issues.

What Eliza Orme aspired to may have been much more ambitious, if I am right that she aimed to sit among the first women members of the British Parliament. While waiting for that role to open up in a practical way, though, she created and seized opportunities when possibilities presented themselves. She wanted to be the person asked to serve on a royal commission (not merely to be a factory inspector), probably angled for the job, and got it. She advised about how both working-class and middle-class women should conduct their working lives (while conducting her own exceptional enterprise). She sought to guide the political education of other Liberal women so they could become the leaders of the next generation (while her contemporaries were caught up in the struggles of particular moments). Once those objectives and experiences were played out, however, neither her contemporaries nor her successors, and neither her allies nor her antagonists, seem to have recognized the distinctiveness of Eliza Orme's ambitions, and the singular way she thought about how to achieve them.

If these speculations are anywhere near correct, perhaps what 'retirement' meant to Eliza Orme was a recognition that the moment had passed, the moment for her to move fully into the mainstream of political life and use her training, experience, and capacities to the full. It would not be surprising if, by 1917 or perhaps earlier, she was disillusioned with her contemporaries. Even her allies among Liberal women did not understand or acknowledge her analysis of how the party auxiliary should function. As for the powerful men in her circle, even those who respected her talents were not prepared to accept her leadership as part of the mainstream, but only to see her manage the

auxiliary. She must have been bitterly disappointed, too, with the lack of action emerging from her reports on working conditions and later on prisons, not to mention what had become of the Women's Liberal Federation. If policymakers and allies are not listening, and your personality calls for a quiet, clever campaign of persuasion (and if you are tired and not very well) it might seem eminently practical just to stop pushing, stop leading, and retire to private life.