

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

Leslie Howsam





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## 8. Who Was Eliza Orme?

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Eliza Orme was a remarkable woman whose life should be remembered, and not only because she achieved the status of first woman in England to earn a university degree in law. She became a property conveyancer and patent agent, a significant achievement that gets overlooked because she could not be a barrister or solicitor. She was a figure in the early days of the women's suffrage movement, but her leadership there was complicated by other people's meddling. She trained Liberal women in the skills of political organization and rhetoric, but that legacy, too, was compromised. She was a prolific writer, but one with eclectic interests that set her apart from journalists. Her private letters reveal an affectionate, loyal, sweet woman, but letters are difficult to interpret without a life to attach them to. Similarly, fragments derived from newspapers, or from the lives of others, demonstrate that her public life was extraordinary but evanescent, briefly in the spotlight and then anonymous again until someone remembered to call upon her. People interested in the same issues she cared about knew who she was, but may never have asked about her motivations. Or if they did, they did not leave a record of the conversation. In any case, in the nature of things, a lot of what she did remained private and unrecorded.

Stripping away all those 'buts' and archival absences, we are still left with the questions of who she was, and both why and how she should be remembered. My research has turned up some answers to the first question. She was striving, secure, and assertive. With trusted associates she could be witty and often sarcastic; with those she cared for, she was playful, sparkling, loveable; but out in the world her demeanour was reticent and dignified. She was a competent professional who was not recognized by the accrediting bodies of her profession. She was always precariously employed, but in extraordinary roles. Among her political colleagues she was known to be loyal, organized, and influential, a

strategist with smart ideas and a plan for implementation. In her own mind, she was practical and logical. I think the key to all this is that she was both hugely ambitious and deeply disappointed, but I have no way to ask her how she would like to be remembered. A summing-up chapter, then, has to start with who she is to me.

### Eliza and Me, since 2016

I am not the only person who has taken an interest in Eliza Orme. Mary Jane Mossman properly identified her as a forerunner of the first women lawyers. Gissing scholars labelled her as a competent associate who assisted their man in his hour of need. Researchers with an interest in barmaids and metal workers, in the prison system, in Indian jurisprudence, have come across her writings and cited them with as much context as was available. Some who want to reclaim the queer identity for Londoners of her period have suggested that she belongs in that category. But I am the only one who has tried to study her on her own terms. During the years when my career took another direction, I never quite forgot about her and never quite accepted the prevailing judgment that she was not interesting enough to warrant significant research. I was disappointed that my 1989 *Atlantis* article did not seem to gain any traction among feminist historians of Britain. I told myself that her story didn't fit in with their intellectual debates (and I did not know then that Mossman was reading it). When, in about 1992, the editors of the *Dictionary of National Biography* announced that they were going to produce the 'Missing Persons' volume, gathering in the people whose lives had not been deemed important enough by generations of their editorial predecessors, I diffidently offered her as a subject and was accepted. That enterprise produced results: my first correspondence with the Gissing scholar Pierre Coustillas came as a result of it. Identifying her as a 'missing person' was deeply satisfying, and on the strength of it I wrote to an American publisher of trade biographies in 1994, proposing one of Eliza Orme. They politely replied that her life was probably not sufficiently extraordinary to capture the interest of general readers.

The next thing that happened was much later, after I had retired in 2014. This was the renewed interest in Orme that came about as women lawyers and legal scholars began to anticipate the 2019 centennial of

legislation permitting women to practice law in Britain. It was gratifying to be asked to speak at a 2016 symposium on the First Women Lawyers in Great Britain and the Empire, and later to write a blog post about her for 'The First 100 Years' project celebrating the anniversary. But at the same time it was troubling to realize how some of that community framed her as a 'precursor' or even as a 'failure'—as someone who did not manage to become a fully-fledged lawyer. (As if that would ever have been possible in the 1870s and 1880s; as if 1919 did not come along too late to matter, in career terms, for anyone born in 1848.) I recognized that their framing set Orme outside the conversation about the women lawyers who did manage that feat, so that her achieving the degree and the quasi-professional practice did not seem to count—or not quite. It was very helpful for me to identify that frustration, and realize that if Orme is worth remembering, it has to be for what she did do, not for what she did not. And perhaps for what she might have done. In retrospect, I think that feeling defensive of her reputation became an important part of my persistence. I wanted to write her story, and that meant trying to figure out what she herself thought about women and the practice of law while recognizing that was not necessarily the defining motive of a long and complex life.

Around the same time as the legal scholars started gearing up for a celebration, a new generation of feminist historians began asking questions about professional work in the decades at the turn of the twentieth century. Brilliantly, in a way the scholars who studied 'professionalization' in earlier years had never thought to do, Heidi Egginton and Zoë Thomas and others introduced the question of precarity. If there were barriers to women and other marginalized people working as highly skilled professionals, then their situation could fairly be characterized as precarious. The feminist historians of my own generation had never shown much interest in Orme, but it turned out that the ones who were young enough to have been our students found her appealing. And their conceptualization of precarity and professionalism was an eye-opener for me. The result was my chapter for Heidi's and Zoë's *Precarious Professionals* volume of 2021.

It was a deeply satisfying coincidence when my knowledge as a historian of books, periodicals, and publishing began to enhance my research on Eliza Orme, and vice versa. I have to admit that for a long

time I did not take her editorship of the *Women's Gazette* seriously enough. This changed with the realization that the Women's Liberal Federation's own copy of the closing issues of the newspaper had not been irretrievably lost, and that I could get my hands on digital scans of each and every page. The result was my 2022 article in the journal *Victorian Periodicals Review*, published by the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals (RSVP). I have been part of the leadership of RSVP, as I have of the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading, and Publishing (SHARP). I would not understand Eliza Orme as author, as journalist, and as editor the way I do, if it were not for my 'day job' as a historian.

A centrally important aspect of my identity as a historian has been coming to understand the way that historical scholars think, what kind of questions we ask about the past, how we read the documentary evidence, and when it might be safe to speculate. I learned to think that way too, through my experience of doing a master's degree and then the coursework and comprehensive reading required for a doctorate, then being guided by historians through the writing of a dissertation, and later learning about collegiality and pedagogy by practicing my discipline in an academic appointment. Many, perhaps most, of my colleagues take thinking like a historian for granted, but for me that was impossible because I found myself engaged in an interdisciplinary pursuit. Literary scholars, librarians, and others are also studying the histories of books and of the periodical press, but they think like people trained in those disciplines. I have made this insight central to my scholarship: in books and articles and keynote addresses, I have urged repeatedly that 'book historians' who come from whatever background should be respectful of the boundaries between the various disciplinary approaches to our protean subject. The fact that interdisciplinarity is valuable does not mean that book history is itself a single discipline. Recognizing this essential aspect of disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity probably hit me so hard because so much of my graduate-school experience was shaped by a literary scholar who did not himself respect the boundaries. But now I realize that my peculiar experience of higher education made me who I am. The reason I mention it here is because I also realize that it was her professional education that made Eliza Orme who she was, even while it did not make her a lawyer.

I have learned, from friends who are legal academics and whose job it is to train the next generation of working lawyers, that the way lawyers are taught how to think is peculiar to their discipline and profession, perhaps even more than with historical or literary studies. It is not easily acquired; it is difficult for outsiders to understand; it is often hard for lawyers to explain or justify their ways of thinking to outsiders; nor are they required to do so. (Insert joke here about their high fees, but that is not the point I am trying to make.) The law is a complicated cultural construct. It is an agreed-upon arrangement for making society work under stress, whether the challenge comes from international affairs or federal-provincial relations or business contracts or personal security. Law students learn that while the objective of law is justice, the interpretation of law, both at the point of legislation and later in the courts, does not always bring about justice. They learn that law is inextricably connected with politics and history, because laws are made by elected officials, inside the constraints of particular governments operating at specific moments. That is the gist of what Eliza Orme learned from her professors and mentors, whether they spoke explicitly to her about those principles or not.

This insight has been crucial in my understanding of how she conceptualized the women's suffrage movement during the 1880s and 1890s. For a long time, that question was a source of anxiety to me: was she a feminist and suffragist, or was she not? She was, but there is a crucial caveat and it is not just that she was a feminist suffragist Liberal. It is that Orme thought like a lawyer, whereas her friends and colleagues (and her adversaries, too) thought like laywomen, like non-lawyers. Her allies in the Women's Liberal Federation understood politics pretty well, and that enabled them initially to work together, especially since their objective was explicitly not to press the Gladstonian Liberal Party to make women's suffrage a matter of party policy, but rather to bring about Home Rule for Ireland. Those allies still did not think within the framework of the law, but merely in terms of political organization and electoral strategy. Whereas Rosalind Howard the Countess of Carlisle, and people like her, were not concerned with working within the constraints of either politics or law, but rather with promoting justice. Theirs were two diametrically opposed ways of thinking about the same cause.

Eliza Orme was a feminist, passionately committed both to women's suffrage and to the provision of opportunities for women to take their places in the workforce at all social levels. Scholars of the first wave of feminism in Britain are still arguing about the relative value of moderate 'suffragist' policy and the militant 'suffragette' movement that flourished later. We understand a lot better now that the law and politics are gendered, that laws and policies are sexist (and racist, and inflected by assumptions about class superiority, physical ability, and all the other ways to marginalize people). That understanding, however, is the legacy of the second wave of feminism, which makes it difficult to comprehend the conflicts that divided members of the first wave. In the Women's Liberal Federation of the early 1890s, the Countess of Carlisle was right in her doggedness and clarion call for justice for women. But her timing and tactics were wrong. There were better places to make a stand than an auxiliary of Gladstone's embattled Liberal Party. Eliza Orme was right too, when she said that 'nothing would assist the cause like practical work done by women'. But it did not happen the way she anticipated; when the laws finally changed about women's suffrage (and women's admission to the legal professions), it was after a world war that had demonstrated women's practical competence. It is important for me to acknowledge that Lady Carlisle was right, but that is not really my point, either. My point is that Eliza's legal education—an experience she shared only with Reina Lawrence and a tiny handful of other women—set her irrevocably apart from her peers. It made her think, not only like a lawyer, but to some extent like men of her class and background. Her own characterization of this mode of thought was that she was 'hopelessly practical', but that robust depiction concealed her capacity to understand and influence a delicate political and personal situation.

### Loyalty, Logic, and Strategy: The Case of Charles Dilke's Divorce Scandal

I have come to see Eliza Orme as a sophisticated, cosmopolitan person of wide experience and a habit of discretion, well aware that unconventional behaviour and relationships could flourish outside the bounds of respectability. This awareness was something else that set her



apart from many middle-class women at a time when public opinion could be censorious. Probably she knew and kept many secrets that have remained private. One exception may be the case of Charles Dilke, where there is tentative evidence, in an 1886 letter to Samuel Alexander, that she was privy to the politician's situation. Dilke went to court in that year, accused by Donald Crawford of seducing his wife Virginia. Donald claimed that Virginia had confessed to the affair and Dilke, on the advice of lawyers and colleagues, refused to give evidence of his own innocence. (The situation was murky since Dilke was carrying on an extra-marital relationship, but it was with Virginia Crawford's mother, and Virginia herself was related by marriage to Dilke's brother.) When Dilke, again badly advised by his lawyers, tried to reopen the case he was attacked and humiliated, first in court and then in the press. Many people, including members of the Women's Liberal Federation, were shocked, titillated, and prepared to believe the worst, but Orme admired Charles Dilke as a politician and counted both him and Emilia Dilke as friends.

I say the evidence is tentative because no names are mentioned in the letter, but the dates match up and so do Orme's remarks about the details. Furthermore, Alexander received a letter five months later from Lady Dilke, referring to heavy misfortunes and 'foul lies' about her husband. Apparently Sam had sought Eliza's advice and suggested that Dilke might eventually retrieve his wounded reputation by good work in public life. In her reply, Eliza told Sam that she had been 'much concerned' in the case and encouraged her friend to take a generous view. She asked him:

Should we any of us be trampled upon in this way if a maniac or a liar or an enemy brought a grave accusation against us and, acting under high professional advice, we blundered amongst the technicalities of law courts and failed to do exactly what public opinion demanded? If so then we are all walking on the edge of a precipice. If it is the person's previous character that settles it then I put the opinion of intimate friends of many years standing and the undeniable fact of happy family life against the gossip of comparative strangers and political enemies. One especially circumstantial story I chanced to have the means of testing and though it had been often repeated during the last election and sworn to by men and women pretending to be responsible for its truth, I find it to be absolutely false. The details are true but the person concerned was a

different man living in the same locality with a somewhat similar name and the same title. I take this as a test case and put the rest down as of about equal value.

Another thing I cannot understand is the way in which men having experience of the grave responsibility of public life can for a moment forget that this man said in a letter addressed to representative constituents 'I am entirely guiltless of the charges brought against me'. Such a deliberate statement made with the object of retaining the confidence of the electors would be false, be by far the most disabling act that he could possibly be guilty of. No one could trust him for public service if he put his name to a deliberate lie with the object of being elected. Either that statement was true or false. If you believe he spoke the truth—and he has always been known as a truthful man—you are bound to do your utmost in any way that happens to be possible to you to cheer his present time of trouble and prevent the permanent injury of his chances of public work. If you believe he told this deliberate and profitable lie how can you say that he may retrieve himself by good work? Can a man *retrieve* a leg lost by amputation if he is to be a professional runner? A deliberate lie told with the object of self interest is surely as irretrievable in the career of a public servant.

The conscientious sifting of evidence and the absolute refusal to be affected by rumours seems to me to be the tone we most need in these newspaper-interviewing days. General disbelief would discourage the abominable trade. And besides the general good in this case strong personal liking makes me think much all round the question. So forgive a lengthy screed. At any rate it needs no answer.

Whether or not this screed referred to the Dilke case, it would be of great interest to know the exact nature of Orme's 'concern', and in particular whether she was involved in initiating the proceedings of the acrimonious Crawford divorce case.

Nor was she prepared to abandon him in 1892 when Dilke sought re-election (and to re-establish his reputation and political career) in the Forest of Dean constituency, just because Lady Carlisle and others in the WLF were offended by the old rumours stirred up at that time. But the rumours persisted. Another woman law graduate, Cornelia Sorabji, wrote to a friend in 1898 that she did not want to be 'a kind of Miss Orme [known to] put in train ugly divorce proceedings'. It is impossible to know whose divorce this refers to. Not the Gissing breakup in 1897, which was only a separation, and if she was talking about the Crawford divorce, Orme's 'concern' has not shown up in the

course of Kali Israel's extensive recent research on those proceedings. (Although if her intervention in the case was discreet, it would have been known only to someone like Sorabji who probably kept her eye on a fellow woman legal practitioner's activities.) Eliza was a loyal friend: even after his death she raised money for the Dilke Memorial Hospital. I can say all that with considerable confidence, but it is only because I can guess who Eliza was probably talking about when she advised Sam Alexander about how to handle his interactions with Emilia Dilke at the time of the original scandal.

### Speculation: Eliza's Thwarted Ambition

In the course of writing this book, I have identified Eliza Orme as ambitious, but I can only speculate as to her ultimate aim in life. I have not a scintilla of direct evidence to demonstrate that she wanted to become one of the cohort of Britain's first women Members of Parliament. In the event, that was just as unthinkable an outcome as to be called to the bar. I find it quite reasonable to imagine an optimistic young person of the late 1860s planning a career based on the expectation that women's suffrage would become law in time for her to take advantage of its affordances. With votes for women, surely there would be opportunities for someone who positioned herself for them by taking a prestigious university degree and then serving her chosen party with loyalty and energy. Once that party was in power, the archaic rules that barred women from being called to the bar could change. Or something even better might emerge. She was a close friend of Charles Dilke who (until his scandal) was talked about as a future Liberal Prime Minister. She was well acquainted with John Stuart Mill and other powerful politicians. One way or another, I think the young Eliza crafted a strategy and acted upon it: academic work, journalism and political service to build a reputation, then take advantage of opportunity when it came. Events did not work out the way she might have expected, but then they seldom do.

Each element of her strategy (if that is what it was) produced results: her conveyancing, patent, and financial work; her editing, public speaking, and writing; her passionate interest in Ireland's land law; her being commissioned and appointed to policy work. With the Inns of Court, the Law Society, and the Liberal Party remaining obdurately

unchanged, however, the separate elements never fused together into a single coherent career narrative. Because so much evidence is lost, not least the evidence of discrimination and roadblocks put directly in her way, it is certainly possible to speculate that she had some other ambition in mind. Still, this is the one that makes sense to me: political service not at the local level like other ambitious women of her generation, but in the Parliament of the United Kingdom.

I have come to regard Eliza Orme as a woman of presence in British society, someone that people knew and respected. At the same time, though, she did not fit the customary roles. Perhaps nobody was quite sure what to make of her. She was independent when most women were not. She was practical when many independent women were artists and visionaries. She was influential, often behind the scenes with men who held power, but she did not entangle herself in their projects. I almost see her as acting a bit like one of the 'grandes dames' of her time—the society hostesses who knew everyone and whose behind-the-scenes intervention could change the course of a parliamentary enquiry or a courtship. But only a bit, because unlike most of those ladies, Orme had neither husband nor sons in her orbit. That must have been disconcerting for the women and men who knew her. She exercised charm as well as intelligence, enjoying both work and leisure. In public she supported the causes she cared about, while she could still walk in private with friends across country on a fine day, all of them arrayed in comfortable ulsters and practical tam o'shanter.

### Who was Eliza to Her Friends and Family?

Back in the 1980s, the only personal thing I knew about Eliza Orme was that she smoked a cigar after a private dinner party; now I know a lot more, even that she disliked Christmas cards and had a dog called Rhoda. But I still do not know whether at any stage in her long friendship with Reina Lawrence it became a sexual one. I do not know why she wrote more warmly to Samuel Alexander about Reina's 'Belsize family' than about her own brothers and sisters, or much of anything about the dynamics of her family of origin. (Nor do I know whether the 'other family at Buxton' she mentioned to Sam was a significant part of her life, or even who those people were.) Surely someone who wrote as

affectionately as Eliza did to Sam must have had other people in her life who heard that same pleasant voice, who knew the passion of Eliza's personality—but they threw her letters in the fire after replying to them.

Eliza Orme's will throws light on some of these questions and fortunately that document has survived intact, right down to her handwriting. It was dated 20 August 1885, identifying her as being 'of 27 Southampton Buildings in the county of Middlesex, Spinster'. She was then thirty-six years old, still studying law but already practicing in those professional chambers near Chancery Lane. The witnesses were Elizabeth and Emma Hull, both 'of 2, The Orchard, Bedford Park' so presumably servants in the family home where Eliza still resided (although not for the purposes of this document). Both her parents were alive that summer, as were all Eliza's siblings except Helen (died 1857) and Campbell (whose 1883 death might have precipitated the decision to express her wishes). She had an elder brother who was a surgeon, one brother-in-law a medical researcher, another a professor, and a third in business, as well as the long list of nephews already noted. She also had a long-standing lawyer, S.N.P. Brewster. All of these obvious male candidates for executor she ignored, and instead appointed 'my dear friend Reina Emily Lawrence' for that task. Two people were to benefit from her estate: Beatrice would receive 'all my money and securities for money', and Reina 'all my real estate and all my residuary personal estate'. In the end, presumably, everything went to Beatrice, since the house had long been sold, but had Orme died younger, the already wealthy Reina Lawrence would have been an important beneficiary. Lawrence's status as executor and beneficiary, given the date of the will, is the solidest evidence we have of the seriousness of their relationship. Leaving her money to Beatrice makes sense, since the two youngest Ormes, and the only two to remain 'spinsters' had long since formed a bond. The probate record showed that the total value of the estate was £787.15s.8d (roughly £125,000 in the 2020s). While that is not very much money, it is not surprising given the many years between Orme's peak earnings and her demise. The death certificate gives her address as 37 Belsize Avenue, Hampstead. This was, or had been, the Lawrence family home and was presumably taken from the Fenstanton patient records. By this time, however, Reina had a house of her own in the country, near Kelveden in Essex.

If Eliza Orme was as cosmopolitan and discreet as we know she was, and at the same time people did not quite know what to make of an independent professional woman with political interests, where did her private self fit into the gender hierarchy of an inherently patriarchal society and culture? Specifically, did she identify herself, in any sense, as a woman who loved women? Can we call her 'queer'? I do think she probably loved Reina Lawrence and it is possible that they were open about their arrangements when with trusted friends. (Maybe that is why Sam was disinvented to the walking party in the Highlands of Scotland; and perhaps that is how one of Paul Delany's biographical sources got hold of the idea of a 'Boston marriage', and why a recent chapter by Kellie Holzer calls her a 'woman-identified woman'.) But I do not think we can call her queer as far as the public figure is concerned. Today's terminology would say that her public self-presentation was heteronormative. Beyond that, I suspect that she did not fit in with many men, beyond superficially. It may have been the same with most women: even those who shared her ends envisioned different means. But she did fit in with friends and family who took her seriously. Whatever she did behind closed doors, my analysis of her intentions and ambitions seems to preclude any wish to identify herself with other women in terms of sexuality. As 'Miss Orme' she stood out as a person with a female sobriquet, but she also fitted in, as a person of expertise with well-thought-out opinions and solid experience.

Apart from her relationship with Reina, there are questions to be asked about her position in the family, in particular during her retirement years in the house at Tulse Hill. It might seem odd that a single woman, the second youngest of six surviving siblings, would end up the head of the family, but then she was head and shoulders more able than any of them and probably impatient with dithering. Census returns reveal that Eliza Orme was head of a household that included a professional man who was much older than herself, her brother Charles Edward. However it seems pretty clear that she, not he, was the owner or leaseholder of the house in which the household resided, and the person who made the decisions. Her father's will left £5,446 to his three unmarried children, Charles, Eliza and Beatrice. Eliza was executor. Maybe that is why they all lived under the same roof. (There is a gap between Charles Orme's death in November 1893 and the move to Tulse

Hill; the timing is unclear but the move was some time before October 1895.) And if she was head of the household she shared with her siblings, might she also have been regarded as the head of the extended Orme family and keeper of the family record? One might expect one of the older, married, sisters to take on that role, but perhaps each of them was oriented to her husband's family. When Eliza's niece Sybil Bastian sold family treasures through Sotheby's in 1952, the record stated that ownership of one of them had passed from Mrs Charles Orme to 'Miss Orme 1917' to Sybil Bastian. I suspect that ambiguous note (to be found in the Rossetti Archive) means that Eliza received the treasures from her mother and then passed them on to her unmarried niece when she moved to Fenstanton, which would have been round about 1917. These objects included the drawing of Holman Hunt made by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (given by Hunt to his patron and friend the senior Eliza Orme and now in the National Portrait Gallery) and possibly the two medallions by Woolner, one of Tennyson, and the other of Helen Orme, the latter presented to her mother a few years after Helen's death.

Conjecture about these connections of family, friendship, and inheritance is supported by at least a thread of evidence. It is a lot more speculative when the record is lacking altogether. Take the case of Manomohan Ghose, the barrister from India whose book she edited. I do not think it too far-fetched to speculate that the two of them might have felt a kinship with each other, based upon the shared experience of being outsiders, eager and brilliant, but kept at arm's length by the legal establishment in London. They could even have been close friends, carrying on a correspondence as rich as Orme's with Samuel Alexander and producing a body of (hypothetical) evidence, since lost or destroyed.

### Who Was Miss Orme to Lawyers (Then and Now)?

One of the biggest gaps in the evidence is about how Orme constructed her quasi-professional life. How did she manage the quotidian responsibilities of a conveyancer, a patent agent, a barristers' trusted assistant, and a mortgage broker? She gave Helen Taylor the impression that the work came easily to her and Mary Richardson, but they may have courted disapproval by marketing their services in Chancery Lane during those early years. The transition from Vaizey's office to their

own chambers, on Phipson Beale's advice, might have been fraught with anxiety. While that move seems to have turned out well, I have no doubt that there were male barristers who declined to take advantage of what their 'miniature Girton' offered, assuming that women could not possibly do exacting legal work at that level. In addition to the duties we know about, she probably undertook other tasks, paid or unpaid, that were private and confidential like the Dilke affair and have left no record. Trolling the British Newspaper Archive reveals a couple of cases where she served as executor of someone's will, but those small-print advertisements do not reveal whether that service was professional or personal.

There is, as far as I know, only one instance of another university-trained woman lawyer remarking on Eliza Orme's career, and that was Cornelia Sorabji, the first woman to study law at Oxford University, where she wrote the Bachelor of Civil Law examination in 1892. As I mentioned above, the Indian woman purposely distanced herself from the apparent impropriety of becoming 'a kind of Miss Orme' involved with an ugly divorce. Sorabji regarded herself as 'A Tory of the Tories', and cultivated members of the British aristocracy, while Orme might equally have been called 'a Liberal of the Liberals' and spent her time among aesthetes and intellectuals. It is not difficult to imagine that, in the late 1890s, the two women were rivals at a personal and cultural level, if not in professional practice (Sorabji returned to India after Oxford and primarily did social work among women living in seclusion (*pardahnashins*)). Mary Jane Mossman has written a useful essay about the intersection of gender, race, and political ideology in Sorabji's career.

Nor do I know how much money Eliza Orme made from her various paid jobs. They were highly specialized, and the work was in demand, so she probably did well, but her prosperity might still have been unstable. But the LL.B. did stand her in good stead. It was a credential that opened the door to gainful, if rather precarious, employment not available to other women. In the Liberal Party, the degree gave her credibility with the men, as well as the women.

Nevertheless, Eliza Orme's reputation has been hampered by her status as the first woman in England to earn a law degree. That was an accident, but it got presented at the time and later as though it were some kind of victory. In the first place, Britain was far behind other countries



in this regard, with women studying and practicing law elsewhere far earlier. More significantly, her degree preceded the first cohort of accredited, practicing, woman lawyers in Britain by three decades. A feminist analysis of such dubious achievements came almost a century later. Matilda Butler and William Paisley remarked in their 1980 book *Women and the Mass Media*: 'We are well into the age of the FW2. By patronizing the continuing struggle of women and by minimizing the distance from FW2 to HW2 ('Hundredth woman to ...'), these newspaper articles create an illusion of progress'. So, too, do historical accounts that conceal the realities of rebuff, frustration, and disappointment. To fit the FW2 stereotype, Eliza Orme's career narrative should have begun with a struggle to obtain the law degree, followed by some sort of practice that would justify the effort and make a coherent story. But in reality the degree itself was no great challenge. The setbacks were located in a system that did not change as quickly as she may have hoped it would.

### Who Was She to Posterity?

Someone once told me that, in my writing, I needed to get rid of 'negative theorizing'—such as starting every other sentence with 'despite'. I feel as though I am still indulging in that bad rhetorical habit with this book: she is important, but she is not getting a full-fledged biography here, just a research memoir. She is more than an adjunct to Mill, Gladstone, or Gissing, but I can understand how she got that reputation. She was not a factory inspector or a prison authority; in fact she positioned herself above those occupations as an expert advisor. She is not someone whose feminism failed at a crucial moment; it was her adversaries who portrayed her that way. She forged a life and career that was so exceptional—so unthinkable—that her contemporaries did not know what to make of it. Each individual and group tried to fit her into categories that made sense in the context of their own limited understanding. For Mill, she was a safe pair of hands, someone without 'that feverish bustle' he associated with other women in politics. Gladstone does not seem to have left his impression, although he probably knew who she was. For Gissing, she was 'one of the busiest women living' but he did not seem to know what she was busy doing, and never bothered to preserve the many letters she wrote to him. For all the men who shared the *British Weekly* writer's

belief that women would inevitably 'sensationalize' a social problem or waste the time of an important government commission by offering 'loose' or 'irrelevant' evidence, she was a valued exception to their patriarchal assumptions. Those who did not understand about the legal profession thought she was the first woman barrister. Politicians and others who did understand it were still not sure what went on behind the brass plaque in Chancery Lane, but they knew her journalism and activism. Lawyers who knew exactly what happened in those chambers were pleased to take discreet advantage of her professional services, especially since they could be passed off as one's own work. In the public realm, everybody understood her in relation to their own place in the world. In private, too, she was a friend, a daughter, a sister, an aunt, a cousin.

I have characterized Eliza Orme as an independent single professional woman in public life. Another way of saying this is that she was not the wife, daughter (or stepdaughter), or sister of a prominent man. Because of the way that archival preservation works, this negative status posed a problem for her impact on posterity. She played only a minor role in the lives of Samuel Alexander and George Gissing whose surviving papers capture some of her activities, whereas she might have been hugely important to W.A. Hunter, but he does not seem to have left much behind in the way of an archive. In any case, those three men were not at the social level of the Earl of Carlisle, John Stuart Mill, or W.E. Gladstone. The women associated with men like that have captured the attention of historians, not just because of their activities but because their papers were safely preserved along with those of their prominent family member. Rosalind Howard, Helen Taylor, Mary Drew (née Gladstone) and many others are important in their own right; but they are knowable because they can be identified and accorded the scholarship they deserve. For Orme, the absence of a defining relationship with a male who has captured the attention of historians is significant.

My own relationship to her has been rather like the one between biographer and subject in Alison Lurie's 1988 novel, *The Truth about Lorin Jones*. The biographer, Polly Alter, starts out half in love with her subject, gradually becomes disillusioned and alienated, then ends up recognizing the other woman's essential unknowability, finally deciding to write 'the real story ... the whole truth about Lorin Jones, with all the

contradictions left in'. In Eliza Orme's life and work, the contradictions lie in the way the various elements fit together, or do not fit. I think her feminism was tempered by her Liberalism, and vice-versa. I believe her heritage of class privilege was tempered by close observation of working-class lives, and vice-versa. I think her strategic brilliance was tempered by an impatience that made her unsympathetic to people who should have been allies. There really was no one like her, and that makes it difficult to know how to assess the choices she made.

To me, Orme's career narrative only makes sense for someone so 'hopelessly practical' and obviously ambitious if I let myself imagine the way she expected the story to start, and how she wanted it to end. My guess is that she assumed legalization of women's suffrage and candidacy for parliamentary election would happen in the 1870s or 1880s, in time for her to step in and claim the prize. From that perspective, her activities make sense, from 1872 when she was twenty-three and wrote her letter to Helen Taylor, to 1892 when she was forty-three and had to abandon the leadership of the Women's Liberal Federation, to a few years later when it became clear that the Royal Commission opportunity was not going to lead to anything more substantial either. If she had indeed become the first woman Member of Parliament or first woman cabinet minister in the 1890s, then her choices in the earlier decades would look eminently reasonable. She set out with a plan to use her talents and intellect in the same way that men of her generation did. She was loyal, disciplined, well-connected, and level-headed.

Put that way, the legal work in Chancery Lane was not an end, it was a means to an end. If Eliza Orme ever told anyone she aimed to be an elected Member of Parliament, the evidence is lost. And perhaps she never said it, even to Reina or Beatrice, and my guess is wrong. Either way, fitting the elements together is my decision, and I claim the right both to speculate and to ground the research in my own experience of doing it. For me, 'the real story' is not the whole truth, but rather this fragmented narrative based on rigorous scholarship but inevitably laced with both guesswork and memoir.

