SEEKING A 'STEADFAST AIM':

A CULTURAL HISTORICAL BIOGRAPHY OF

BESSIE RAYNER PARKES BELLOC (1829-1925)

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of Portsmouth.

June 2021

Declaration

Whilst registered as a candidate for the above degree, I have not been registered for any other research award. The results and conclusions embodied in this thesis are the work of the named candidate and have not been submitted for any other academic award.

Deborah Ann Parker Kinch, June 2021.

Word count: 79,093

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Abstract

This thesis presents an account of the life of Bessie Rayner Parkes Belloc (1829-1925), a writer and leading feminist activist. As founding editor of the feminist *English Woman's Journal* (1858-1864) and a central figure in the Langham Place group of women's rights campaigners, Bessie's name was synonymous in the mid-nineteenth century with the women's rights cause. The significance of her efforts to the establishment of the British women's rights movement has been acknowledged in feminist historiography; however, her move away from front-line campaigning after 1866 has been previously interpreted as her rejection of this movement. Her conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1864 and her marriage in 1867, after which she largely devoted herself to domestic responsibilities, have been assumed to explain this turning point in her life, as reflecting a replacement of her youthful feminism with an increasingly conservative stance. Through examination of Bessie's private papers and published writings, this interpretation of her life is challenged, by demonstrating how her biography from childhood to old age can be considered an example of a feminist life. This research draws upon approaches from feminist biography, going beyond celebrating Bessie as an exceptional pioneer to explore the origins and development of her feminist consciousness and its significance in her life. Working across the disciplines of literature and history, the thesis contextualises Bessie's life and writings within her social, political and cultural worlds. The development of her writing career, previously regarded as of secondary importance to her feminist activism, is here placed at the centre of her biography. The core focus of this thesis is how literature, religious faith and feminist ideals of friendship and cooperation together shaped Bessie's outlook, informing her 'steadfast aim' to do practical good in the world, which guided her actions throughout her long, eventful, feminist life.

Abbreviations

AMEJ: *Alexandra Magazine and Englishwoman's Journal*

BJ: *Birmingham Journ*al

BLS: Barbara Leigh Smith, later Bodichon

BRP: Bessie Rayner Parkes, later Belloc

CCNSWS: Central Committee of the National Society for Women's Suffrage

EP: Eliza Parkes (Bessie's mother)

EWJ: *English Woman's Journal*

GCPP Parkes: Girton College, Cambridge Archives, Personal Papers of Bessie Rayner Parkes

HB: Hilaire Belloc (Bessie's son)

HSLN: *Hastings and St Leonards News*

JK: Jeanette Kelsey

JP: Joseph Parkes (Bessie's father)

KJ: Kate Jevons (Bessie's schoolfriend)

LSB: Louise Swanton Belloc (Bessie's mother-in-law)

MBL: Marie Belloc Lowndes (Bessie's daughter)

ME: Marian Evans, later Lewes (George Eliot)

NAPSS: National Association for the Promotion of Social Science

SPEW: Society for Promoting the Employment of Women

Acknowledgements and Dedication

I wish to thank The Mistress and Fellows, Girton College, Cambridge, and the descendants of Susan Lowndes Marques, for granting me permission to reproduce quotations from the Personal Papers of Bessie Rayner Parkes held at the Girton College Archive.

I would also like to express my thanks to Hannah Westall, Archivist & Curator at Girton College, University of Cambridge, and to her colleagues, for all the expert help and warm welcomes I have received during my visits to the Girton College Archive, and for all the online assistance provided to me while the Archive was closed to visitors in 2020-21. My thanks also to the librarians and archivists of the Bishopsgate Institute, the British Library, the Women's Library at London School of Economics, the University of Glasgow Library and the West Sussex Records Office, and to Mark Samuels Lasner and Professor William Baker, for their help in enabling me to access materials valuable to my research.

I am grateful to all those who have taken an interest in my research at seminars and conferences, and those who have taken time to discuss my research with me, in particular Dr Pam Hirsch. I am indebted to my PhD supervisors, Professor June Purvis and Dr Páraic Finnerty, for all their patient advice, encouragement and insightful feedback, without which I would not have been able to complete this thesis. I also thank all the staff and fellow-students in the English Literature and History Departments at the University of Portsmouth, past and present, with whom I have worked, learned and laughed.

My deepest love and thanks to my family – Phil, Caitlin and Ellie Kinch – for your patience, support and encouragement (and for the provision of endless, sustaining cups of tea and home-baked delights) while I was working on this research.

Finally, I would like to thank my mother, Val Parker, and my late grandmother, Joan Jarvis, for instilling in me a love of learning, literature and history from my earliest years. This thesis is dedicated to you both, with love.

Introduction

In May 1846, the seventeen-year-old Bessie Parkes wrote a letter to a schoolfriend, in which she commented, 'I believe no one is really happy without some steadfast aim; it is very difficult for a woman to find this, but I think it may be done.'[1] Bessie's efforts to find a 'steadfast aim' for herself was a major preoccupation for her in the years after she left school and tried to establish an independent, professional life. Not content to look forward to a life centred around the domestic duties of a wife and mother, which the conventions of the day accepted as the appropriate height of a young woman's ambitions, she set herself the lofty goal of achieving critical renown as a poet. She also became a passionate advocate of women's rights to greater educational and employment opportunities, encouraging other women to seek independence and personal fulfilment outside the home.

Exactly twenty years after this letter, in May 1866, a photographic portrait of the writer Bessie Rayner Parkes appeared in the latest number of the magazine *Portraits of Men of Eminence in Literature, Science and Art.* The portrait was accompanied by a short biographical profile by Edward Walford, which included this eulogy:

> It may ... be safely averred that whatever liberty woman has acquired, within the last nine years, to pursue, free from ridicule and obloquy, the honourable career of usefulness for which she may feel herself qualified, whether in works of benevolence or of intellect; whatever recognition she has been able to secure of her right to pursue the studies tending most fully to develop her intellectual organisation … will have been due eminently … to the labours of this lady. With the name of Miss Parkes had been especially associated the ridicule and obloquy unsparingly heaped upon this most important movement; with her name, therefore, will be associated, as is but right, when the history of this movement comes to be written, the honour and the credit which will then have attached to it.[2]

1. Bessie Rayner Parkes, later Belloc (BRP), letter to Kate Jevons (KJ), May 15, 1846, Girton College, Cambridge Archives, Personal Papers of Bessie Rayner Parkes, (GCPP Parkes) 6/49.
2. Edward Walford, 'Bessie Rayner Parkes,' *Portraits of Men of Eminence in Literature, Science and Art, with Biographical Memoirs*, vol. 5 (London: Alfred William Bennett, 1866), 46.

This thesis presents an interpretation of the life of this woman, a writer and activist whose name, as Walford's tribute indicates, became a familiar one to many of her contemporaries, as a high profile campaigner for women's rights and founding editor of the feminist periodical, the *English Woman's Journal* (*EWJ*).[3] Although Bessie is now almost entirely unknown to the general public,[4] scholars of nineteenth-century feminism have continued to recognise her as a significant pioneering figure, 'midwife to the infant feminist movement in the mid-nineteenth century.'[5] Her activism is discussed in a range of studies of Victorian feminism which have appeared since the 1980s. However, these discussions of Bessie focus almost entirely on the period 1848-66, when she was a young single woman, striving with a small group of like-minded friends to improve the conditions of women's lives. To date only two full-length books with Bessie as their subject have been published, both written by her direct female descendants.[6] The subtitle of her daughter Marie's work, *A Record of Love and Childhood*, makes clear the affectionate tone and intent in her account of her parents' marriage and her own childhood, covering the years 1867-81. In turn, Bessie's great-granddaughter, Emma Lowndes, states that she wrote her book (the only account, prior to this thesis, of Bessie's life from childhood to old age) to 'share the itinerary' of the

3. Although the terms 'feminism' and 'feminist' were not current until the end of the nineteenth century, I use them throughout this thesis to refer to the women's rights activism of Parkes and her circle. This has become an accepted approach amongst scholars of the nineteenth-century women's rights movement. I have found particularly useful Jane Rendall's explanation of her use of these terms 'to describe women who claimed for themselves the right to define their own place in society' and her definition of 'feminist practice' as 'the association of women together for a feminist purpose: the ability of women to address other women, and men, in public: and the organisation of a range of activities, campaigns and writing, around the claims of women to determine different areas of their own lives.' See Rendall, *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France and the United States, 1780-1860* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985), 1-2. These definitions have enabled me to bring together different aspects of Bessie's life and work under the umbrella of 'feminism' even though she would not have done so herself.

4. Throughout this thesis I generally refer to my subject as 'Bessie.' While I am aware that there are strong arguments for using women's surnames, to stress their parity with men who are routinely named in this way in scholarly work, I have embraced Lisa Merrill's argument that, for biographical writing, using the subject's first name 'situates her within private as well as public contexts.' It also aids clarity and continuity when writing about a subject whose surname changed upon marriage. See Lisa Merrill, *When Romeo Was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and Her Circle of Female Spectators* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2000), xxi.

5. Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide, 1866-1928* (London: UCL Press, 1999), 528.

6. Marie Adelaide Belloc Lowndes (MBL), *I, Too, Have Lived in Arcadia: A Record of Love and Childhood* (1941, repr. London: Reader's Union, 1943); Emma Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women: The Life of Bessie Rayner Parkes, 1829-1925* (Bethesda, MD: Academica Press, 2012).

woman much admired within her family.[7] Bonnie S. Anderson notes the 'warm intelligence and family feeling' in Lowndes' work and regards it as an 'essential starting point' for further 'much-needed' study of Bessie.[8] This thesis responds to Anderson's call, drawing on existing historiography, the work of Bessie's descendants and the archive they have collated, together with Bessie's extensive published writings. It presents an account of Bessie's life from birth to death that takes into consideration the relationship between her private and public worlds and explores her activist life alongside her ambitions as a poet and the deeply-held religious sense of duty which shaped her work inside and outside the women's movement.

Anderson argues that the reason for the limited interest in Bessie's longer biography is the 'split' in her life, following her conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1864.[9] This conversion coincided with a period of physical ill-health and emotional strain which had forced Bessie to step aside from her public campaigning work. Three years later, in September 1867, Bessie married Louis Belloc, a Frenchman she had first met only a few months earlier. Her married life in France took Bessie's attention further away from campaigning work in England, as the swift arrival of two children was followed by Louis' sudden death in 1872. In the wake of these events, her break from public activism ultimately became permanent. For the rest of her long life, Bessie's world was a largely private one, centred on family and close friends, although she continued to publish volumes of essays and memoirs into her seventies. Anderson argues that Bessie's life has been 'virtually ignored' because the combination of her feminism and her Catholicism has made her an unattractive subject for historians of religion on the one hand, and of feminism on the other.[10] Ann Dingsdale

7. Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 6.
8. Bonnie S. Anderson, 'Foreword,' in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, xi–xii.
9. Ibid., xi.
10. Ibid.

identifies a different reason for Bessie's obscurity, arguing that Bessie became a 'problematic' figure within her own lifetime, not because of her religious conversion but as a result of losing her financial capital after a bad investment in 1877, after which she was 'abandoned' by all but her closest friends.[11] Although both these events affected Bessie's reputation, while she was alive and posthumously, I contend that the lack of more extensive scholarly interest in Bessie's life is largely because she has been categorised primarily as a feminist activist, and therefore it has been assumed that her longer life outside of this role is not of significance.

In the nineteenth century, female subjects of biographies were usually exemplars - 'worthy' women whose achievements and admirable personal qualities could serve as evidence of women's capabilities and as inspiration for other women.[12] Group biographies of 'models of female excellence' and examples of women's 'contributions to the progress of the world' were increasingly presented as evidence in support of arguments for wider opportunities for women to utilise their talents in the public sphere.[13] Bessie herself wrote several short biographical essays of women she admired for the *English Woman's Journal*.[14] This form of women's biography fed into later accounts of the women's rights and suffrage movements, written to record, and celebrate, for posterity the achievements of women, particularly middle-class women, in securing the vote. This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in Ray Strachey's famous account of British feminism and the suffrage

11. Ann Dingsdale, '"Generous and Lofty Sympathies": The Kensington Society, the 1866 Women's Suffrage Petition and the Development of Mid-Victorian Feminism' (PhD thesis, University of Greenwich, 1995), 70.
12. June Purvis, 'From "Women Worthies" to Poststructuralism? Debate and Controversy in Women's History in Britain,' in *Women's History: Britain, 1850-1945 - An Introduction*, ed. June Purvis (London: UCL Press, 1995), 1–3.
13. Alison Booth, *How to Make It as a Woman: Collective Biographical History from Victoria to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 54, 57.
14. Bessie later re-published some of these essays in collected form: BRP, *Vignettes: Twelve Biographical Sketches* (London: Alexander Strahan, 1866).

movement, *"The Cause": A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain* (1928).[15]

Here, then, lies the first difficulty with Bessie's biography. Her withdrawal from a public life of activism while still in her thirties not only meant she faded from public consciousness; it also meant that the narrative of her life appears to point to a rejection of her feminist achievements, a fading into domestic obscurity, difficult to fit into the expected life of a feminist heroine. Despite Walford's optimistic prediction of her lasting fame, by the time of her death Bessie's name was no longer readily linked to the women's rights movement, if it was remembered at all. Furthermore, the professionalisation of history as an academic discipline from the late nineteenth century, dominated by white, middle-class men, led to a focus of interest on male achievements in the public spheres of war, politics and business. It was not until the arrival of second-wave feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s that this 'invisibility' of women in the historical record was systematically challenged and research into women's lives and achievements again taken up, as part of a broader feminist movement challenging the inequalities and oppression women identified in their own lives. The aims of these feminist historians were to recover the stories of women 'hidden from history' and to redefine academic history so that private and domestic lives of women were accepted as serious topics of enquiry. With the influence of socialist historians such as E.P. Thompson, champion of 'history from below,' the lives of working-class women came to be a focus for socialist feminist historians.[16] Where previously accounts of women's lives had focused on middle-class women and their individual outstanding achievements, such 'exceptional' women were no longer seen as valuable

15. Kathryn Dodd, 'Cultural Politics and Women's History Writing: The Case of Ray Strachey's "The Cause",' *Women's Studies International Forum* 13, no. 1-2 (1990): 127–37, https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395(90)90079-D.
16. Purvis, 'From "Women Worthies" to Poststructuralism?,' 5–8.

subjects of academic study; indeed biographies of Victorian and Edwardian feminists came to be regarded as having little to offer feminist history.[17]

Yet, as Barbara Caine argues, it is possible, by taking a different approach to the biography of Victorian and Edwardian feminists, to make it highly relevant to the aims of feminist history. Rather than present individual women as deserving of attention as exceptional feminist heroines, studies of their lives can be used to investigate broader issues such as the history of feminism itself. Caine's 'feminist biography' draws on feminist history's focus on the private and domestic, seeking to explore the specifically gendered aspects of these women's lives. This approach examines how a feminist woman experienced her own girlhood and womanhood in the context of the dominant conceptions of gender of her time and place, how she felt about her family and wider social networks and how she reacted when faced with gender structures that she perceived as oppressive or which thwarted her personal desires. By focusing on how such a woman negotiated family and social expectations in relation to her own interests and where she had to compromise in the pursuit of her personal ambitions, a biographical study can contribute to a deeper understanding of the catalysts for the development of a feminist consciousness in individual women in specific socio-historical contexts. It can also highlight factors which facilitated or hampered feminist women in their struggles. Hence the biographer's interest becomes not so much *what* her subject achieved (or failed to achieve) but rather the personal, socio-historical and cultural factors which help explain *how* and *why*.[18]

Such an approach is a constructive model for research into a subject such as Bessie Parkes Belloc. The large collection of her letters and diaries which have been preserved, together

17. Barbara Caine, 'Feminist Biography and Feminist History,' *Women's History Review* 3, no. 2 (June 1994): 249–50, https://doi.org/10.1080/09612029400200049.
18. Caine, 'Feminist Biography and Feminist History': 251.

with her output of published journalism and poetry, provides a rich archive of source material from which to draw evidence in support of such an enquiry. Clearly, the very existence of such an archive is itself an indicator of Bessie's exceptional status, as a woman with connections to figures and institutions of influence. Hence her life cannot be regarded as representative of the majority of women of her times. Yet, as Caine points out, such sources provide a rare and valuable opportunity to gain an insight into women's own articulations of their subjective experience.[19]

This thesis seeks, then, to apply such an approach to examine a broader chronology and wider range of aspects of Bessie's life than has been attempted to date. Her most well-documented work as a campaigner, although lasting for less than twenty years of her life, has overshadowed other themes in her biography worthy of exploration: her literary writing (particularly her poetry), her religious faith and her family life as a wife, mother, widow and grandmother. I look at how Bessie's views on women's role in society in general, and what she felt she should strive for as an individual, shifted at various stages in her life. My focus is on tracing these shifts as they are captured in Bessie's writings; I attempt to identify when, how and why her views altered, as well as what remained constant in her attempts to find a 'steadfast aim' and do 'worthy work in the world.'[20] In exploring different aspects of Bessie's life and identity, I draw upon current historical understandings of nineteenth-century women's lives in relation to friendship networks, life-cycles and religion, together with recent scholarship on writing by Victorian women, which takes an interest in how women negotiated the literary marketplace and established careers.[21] Thereby I place

19. Ibid.: 253.
20. These two phrases are Bessie's own. The first is from the letter to her school-friend, Kate Jevons, quoted above (see fn. 1). The second is from Bessie's comment on her women subjects in the Preface to her collection *Vignettes*, vi.
21. See, for example, Linda H. Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); *The History of British Women's Writing, 1830-1880: Volume Six*, ed. Lucy Hartley (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

Bessie's individual experiences and achievements in their historical and cultural contexts and, in turn, present my research as a case-study contribution to these fields of enquiry. In doing so, this biography provides an example of the process described by Jo Burr Margadant of 'liberating' feminist biographical subjects from their status as 'exceptional' women to become 'prisms for observing shifts in the gendering of their worlds.'[22]

The theme of friendship provides the spine running through this thesis. The importance of friendship networks to the emotional lives of nineteenth-century women and to the developments of organised feminist campaigning has been an important strand in the feminist historiography of this period, and friendship was a vital part of Bessie's personal and professional lives. As Jane Rendall notes, 'No reader of Bessie Parkes's correspondence can be unaware of the centrality of female friendship to her life and political work. … [H]er world was supported by the friendships and values of that separate female sphere.'[23] Therefore I trace the development of Bessie's female friendships, beginning with her joyful account of her life at a girls' boarding school, her first experience of living within a female community. I demonstrate the significance of her friendships with a number of radical women, most notably Barbara Leigh Smith (later Bodichon, 1827-1891), on the development of Bessie's political and feminist consciousness, including her embracing of the concept of 'sisterhood' as a model for collaborative life and work. The roots of the organised women's rights movement in these friendship circles is also highlighted, as are the parallel networks of women writers, artists and religious women (both lay and members of religious orders) who numbered amongst Bessie's friends and who inspired and supported each other in their professional and personal lives. The complexities of these

22. Jo Burr Margadant, *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 25.
23. Jane Rendall, 'Friendship and Politics: Barbara Leigh Bodichon (1827-91) and Bessie Rayner Parkes (1829-1925),' in *Sexuality and Subordination: Interdisciplinary Studies of Gender in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall (London: Routledge, 1989), 163.

friendships, shifting between maternal mentorship, sisterly camaraderie, non-sexual 'romantic friendships' and erotic passions, form the backdrop to many of the joys and frustrations Bessie experienced, enabling the establishment of pioneering feminist campaigns but also at times creating disruptive tensions amongst the pioneers. Bessie's relationships with her mother and mother-in-law are also considered; I argue that her decision to marry Louis Belloc was partly influenced by her identification of his mother, Louise, as a more sympathetic mother-figure than Eliza Parkes, who did not share Bessie's radical outlook.

Louise Belloc also shared with Bessie the profession of writer and a love of literature. Bessie's extensive bibliography of literary writing, mostly poetry and including both published and manuscript works, has not been examined in any detail before. A small number of her poems have appeared in recent anthologies of nineteenth-century women poets but this leaves much more which is worthy of exploration. While there has not been space in this thesis to do justice to the depth and range of this material, I have drawn upon examples of Bessie's poetic output at each stage in her life, to help explore her changing conceptions of her role and status as a poet, and the ways in which she engaged in her poetry with different strands of literary and aesthetic traditions, many of which were coded in gendered terms. Therefore the focus in this strand of the thesis is on the cultural and biographical contexts of Bessie's writings, neither evaluating their literary worth nor reading them as straight-forward autobiographical documents, but rather using them to help identify the 'imaginative patterns' which 'determine[d] the shape' of Bessie's life.[24]

24. Phyllis Rose, *Parallel Lives: Five Victorian Marriages* (1983, repr. London: Vintage, 1994), 14.

One important aspect of Bessie's sense of the function of poetry was her belief that 'to be a poet is to profess to teach spiritual things.'[25] The seriousness with which she attempted to live up to this responsibility was in keeping with her strong sense of religious duty (instilled in her by her Unitarian schooling) and her need for spiritual fulfilment. Her thirst for spirituality was satisfied first by her love of Romantic and transcendental poets, notably Percy Bysshe Shelley and Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose writing she emulated in her youth. However, through her friendships with several converts to Catholicism, particularly Adelaide Procter, she came to find her spiritual home in the Catholic Church, to which she converted in 1864. The lasting impact of this conversion, on her relationships with friends who disapproved of her choice of faith, on her choice of husband and on her posthumous reputation (as evidenced by Anderson's statement, quoted above) makes this a crucial aspect of her biography to explore. While religion was previously viewed by social and feminist historians primarily through the lens of religious institutions and the regulations they imposed on individuals and communities, the 'religious turn' in history in recent decades has encouraged scholars 'to think in more nuanced and judicious ways about the influence of religion in the formation of women's private selves and public roles.'[26] I adopt this approach, in order to examine the reasons for Bessie's decision to convert and the impact this had on her lived experience, in the light of assumptions that Catholicism was antithetical to female emancipation. In doing so, this aspect of my thesis contributes to the historiography of Catholic feminist women in the nineteenth century, such as works by Eileen Yeo and Kimberley Van Esveld Adams.[27] I extend these analyses of the positive feminist role models provided by Catholic sisterhoods and the iconography of the Virgin

25. BRP, journal entry, November 13, 1852, GCPP Parkes 1/35.
26 Jacqueline deVries and Sue Morgan, Women, *Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800-1940* (London, Routledge, 2010), 2.
27. Eileen Janes Yeo, 'Protestant Feminists and Catholic Saints in Victorian Britain,' in *Radical Femininity: Women's Self-Representation in the Public Sphere*, ed. Eileen Janes Yeo (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 126-48; Kimberly Van Esveld Adams, *Our Lady of Victorian Feminism: The Madonna in the Work of Anna Jameson, Margaret Fuller, and George Eliot* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2001).

Mary, through an exploration of the importance to Bessie of Catholic friendships and the Romantic aesthetic of the nineteenth-century Catholic and Gothic Revivals.

These three themes are woven through each chapter in this thesis, in a multi-faceted, thematic approach which is in keeping with developments in biographical writing in recent decades. The focus for many biographers has shifted away from approaching biographical research as the microscopic interrogation of the archive to reveal a definitive 'truth' about a subject's life and personality, to an exploration of the different components of the subject's experiences and identity. Liz Stanley has compared this to the experience of viewing the subject through a kaleidoscope, each shift of the lens revealing 'something rather different, composed of the same elements but in a new configuration.' [28] Postmodernism has challenged the concept of a unified coherent identity, arguing instead that a person's sense of self is a social construction formed of a shifting interaction of subject positions. Similarly biography can be conceptualised as 'a construction of selves pieced together by individuals and their observers.'[29]

This postmodern conception of biography as a construction, rather than a definitive narrative of a 'Life,' is reflected in recent discussions on the methodologies of the genre. On a practical level, the inevitability of gaps in the archive frustrates any attempt at producing a comprehensive account of every aspect of a subject's life.[30] The biographer needs to decide how far it is valid to speculate in the face of fragmentary evidence and the subjective nature of much of that evidence - letters, diaries, memoirs - further complicates

28. Liz Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/Biography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 176.
29. Margadant, *The New Biography*, 24.
30. Julian Barnes' image of biography as a fishing net full of holes, leaving the biographer pondering 'everything that got away' is one which several commentators on the methodology of biography have found pertinent, including Hermione Lee. See Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot* (London: Cape, 1984), 38; Lee, *Body Parts: Essays in Life-Writing* (London: Pimlico, 2008), 6.

matters.[31] However, such sources, while 'unreliable' in an objective sense, are invaluable for biographical research which seeks to explore a subject's conceptions of his or her lived experiences. When the biographical subject is herself a writer, the rich range of available source material provides opportunities to explore how she constructed and articulated different versions of herself, depending on whom she was addressing and the form (public or private; journalistic or literary) she was utilising. Nevertheless, I have needed to remain alert to the particular qualities and subjectivities of each kind of evidence, in order to draw valid interpretations from them.[32]

Such 'biographical uncertainty' is increasingly acknowledged, even embraced, by biographers,[33] and this perspective is part of wider reflection on the part of practitioners of the processes underlying their work. One key point of debate is the process of shaping the accumulated mass of 'raw' biographical material into a coherent narrative. The assumption that a linear, chronological narrative from birth to death is the most appropriate structure has been questioned since the arrival of modernism challenged traditional forms of literature in the early twentieth century.[34] Alternatives, including thematic structures and reverse chronology from the present backwards, have been championed, in the belief that such experimental forms can better reflect the reality of lived experience and the tentative

31. For example, Meritxell Simon-Martin describes letter writing 'as a site of struggle and empowerment where the writer negotiates different subject positions.' See Simon-Martin, 'Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon's Travel Letters: performative identity-formation in epistolary narratives,' *Women's History Review* 22, no. 2 (April 2013): 226. I have found this definition useful to bear in mind as I interpret the evidence of Bessie's perspective on events as recounted in letters to correspondents with whom she had different relationships, and, indeed, in the context of a particular moment in a longer relationship.
32. See June Purvis, 'Using Primary Sources When Researching Women's History from a Feminist Perspective,' *Women's History Review* 1, no. 2 (1 June 1992): 273–306, https://doi.org/10.1080/0961202920010205.
33. See, for example, Ian Donaldson, 'Biographical Uncertainty,' *Essays in Criticism* 54, no. 4 (10 January 2004): 305–22, https://doi.org/10.1093/eic/54.4.305.
34. For example, A.J.A. Symons argued, in 'Traditions of Biography' (1929), against the 'timeworn chronological formula' of traditional biography in favour of a more 'telling order.' See Symons, quoted in Laura Marcus, 'The Newness of the "New Biography": Biographical Theory and Practice in the Early Twentieth Century,' in *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography.* ed. Peter France and William St Clair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 219.

nature of biographical research.[35] However, defenders of chronological structure point to its useful clarity and to the ways in which it mimics the 'proto-narratives' by which we organise our conception of lived experience in the real world.[36] My decision to adopt a chronological structure for this thesis is informed by the strengths of such arguments and by the usefulness of such an approach to demonstrating the shifting interconnections between different thematic elements in Bessie's biography over time.

This thesis therefore follows the chronology of Bessie's life, with each chapter centred upon particular pieces of source material from her archive, and chapter divisions marking turning points I have identified in her biography. Chapter 1 covers the years from Bessie's birth to her twentieth birthday, identifying key early influences in her family and schooling on the development of her feminist consciousness and ambitions as a professional writer. My main source of evidence here is an account Bessie wrote, aged twenty, of her childhood and school days, which is among the earliest in her hand to have survived. Together with her earliest attempts at writing poetry it provides an insight into what Bessie regarded as most significant amongst the events and people in her childhood and adolescence, as she looked back on these years from the threshold of adult life. In Chapter 2, Bessie's first forays into publication are considered, in an account of her life up to the age of twenty-five, by which time she had published volumes under her own name and received critical recognition of her work. These published works, together with private letters and diaries, provide insights into how her outlook developed as she established herself as an author and campaigner for women's rights. They also document the central importance of the growing network of female friendships, in particular her pivotal close friendship with Barbara Leigh Smith,

35. See, for example, Alexander Masters, *Stuart: A Life Backwards*, (London: Fourth Estate, 2005).
36. Mark Kinkead-Weekes 'Writing Lives Forwards: A Case for Strictly Chronological Biography' in *Mapping Lives*, ed. France and St Clair, 251; Michael Benton, 'The Aesthetics of Biography--And What It Teaches,' *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 49, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 5–6, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jaesteduc.49.1.0001.

which sustained her in her endeavours and provided role models for achieving her ambitions for a professional independent life. Chapter 3 has an even tighter focus, examining closely the years 1854-56, when Bessie was just on the point of establishing a public name for herself and found herself contemplating the practicality of combining a professional career as a writer with marriage to her suitor Samuel Blackwell. The public face of feminism and wider radical political outlooks here met, in a very immediate way, what Philippa Levine terms 'the tissue of women's lives,'[37] as Bessie sought to negotiate the competing demands of work and family and find a new way of living which lived up to her principles. The practical and emotional demands of being in the vanguard of the emerging women's movement are identified in her private letters and journals, where she attempted to make decisions in her private life which held true to her feminist beliefs and ambitions. At the same time her published writings demonstrate her sense of the blurred boundaries between private and public, politics and art.

Chapters 4 and 5 then examine the decade from 1856, when Bessie was at the centre of the nascent women's movement, editor of the *English Woman's Journal* and established as a 'public character,' her name intrinsically linked to the women's rights movement. Both in public and in private, Bessie's experiences during these years shaped her sense of self as an independent, professional woman and strengthened her determination to work for the emancipation of her sex. Her journalism for the *EWJ,* together with her private correspondence commenting on (and defending) her work as editor, provide a range of perspectives from which to investigate her subjective experience of this work. Towards the end of this period, the pressures of this high-profile role, together with illness and bereavement, began to take their toll. Chapter 5 examines the factors which influenced her

37. Philippa Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England: Private Roles and Public Commitment* (1990, repr. Los Angeles: Figueroa Press, 2004), 21.

decision to convert to Catholicism and the impact of that decision on her working relationships. While 1866 in some ways marks the high point of Bessie's achievements as a feminist activist, as her profile in the *Men of Eminence* periodical testifies, it was also when she had finally given up hopes of continuing the *EWJ* in any form, had seen her ambitions as a poet dashed, and had lost patience with being a public figure and the target of attacks from those who opposed the very notion of women's rights to independence.

The final chapters, 6 and 7, are an account of Bessie's life after the demise of the *EWJ*, when she shocked friends and family by marrying Louis Belloc, an unassuming French lawyer she had met six months previously, and established a new life for herself in France with her husband's family. The unexpected arrival, relatively late in her life, of two children, too soon followed by the sudden death of Louis and then bankruptcy, changed the trajectory of her life forever, creating practical barriers which exacerbated her distance from front-line activism. This is the period of Bessie's life which has received the least examination to date. By drawing upon the available sources - private letters together with Bessie's daughter Marie's published account of her parents' marriage and her own childhood - I have been able to examine Bessie's motives for marriage, her experience of motherhood and widowhood and trace the extent to which her feminist principles remained unchanged during these upheavals. As I show, Bessie's energies were for many years focused on her children, including using her contacts in the publishing world to establish both of them in writing careers, at the expense of her own writing. Yet, in the final years of her life she was able to regain some of her status as a respected writer, through a series of publications which chronicled the changing times through memoirs of the great and good she had known well. These works, I demonstrate, contain valuable evidence of how her feminist ideals continued to underpin her outlook on life, even though she was largely removed from the activities of the women's movement. I also foreground the evidence of

Marie's comments on her mother's work, to show Bessie's influence on the next generation of feminist campaigners, and counter the assumption that the very public antifeminist views of her son, Hilaire Belloc, reflected her views in older age.

The crafting involved in constructing a cohesive narrative of a life out of the available source material involves decisions of selection, organisation and inevitable simplification. The biographer's work in researching and crafting an account of a life is increasingly forming a part of the biography itself, rather than being left lying beneath the surface of the text. Biographers such as Liz Stanley and Richard Holmes have been at the forefront of approaches to researching and writing biographies which position the relationship between biographer and subject at the centre. Holmes describes the process of writing a biography as a 'living dialogue' between biographer and subject.[38] Stanley, in her accounts of the lives of women such as Hannah Cullwick and Emily Wilding Davison, foregrounds her experiences of researching her subjects, an approach which she labels 'auto/biographical,' to capture the interconnections she sees as inherent between biographer and subject. Stanley argues that the subject position of the biographer needs to be acknowledged along with that of the subject. By recognising the biographer as a 'socially-located person, one who is sexed, raced, classed, aged …' the socially and historically-contingent nature of their view of their subject becomes explicit.[39]

The brief summary provided here, of the status of biography and its methodologies within feminist history and more broadly, points towards the approach taken in this thesis. I am clear that this biography is only one interpretation of the life and work of Bessie Parkes Belloc, and I acknowledge that it is inevitably shaped by the particular interests and

38. Richard Holmes, *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985).
39. Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I*, 7.

perspectives which I bring to the task. The questions I have found pertinent to explore in the sources and the conclusions I draw from them are as much a reflection of my time and place as they can ever be of Bessie's own. Another biographer may ask different questions, focus on different aspects of Bessie's life and reach different conclusions. Despite these caveats, the account provided here - of an exceptional life lived alternately in the glare of public attention and the privacy of domestic responsibilities - speaks to the wider lived experience of women of Bessie's generation. It also encompasses women's fraught negotiations between professional ambition and family ties, and the struggles of women for their voices to be heard and respected in the public sphere, of which the present day provides its own examples. Examining Bessie's experience of these struggles, and her solutions to them, both illuminates the past and provides a different perspective for considering how these issues manifest themselves in the twenty-first century.

Chapter 1 1829-1849: Early influences and ambitions

> [T]he world seems a wide field for putting forth our energies even as far as we can ever have dreamed; and action is happiness if well directed.
>
> Bessie Parkes, letter to schoolfriend Kate Jevons, January 1847.[1]

On June 16th, 1829, at Temple Street, Birmingham, a baby girl was born prematurely, 'covered in down and without fingernails.'[2] She was the second child of Joseph and Elizabeth (Eliza) Parkes and a sister for their four-year-old son. Doctors did not expect her to survive. A few weeks after the birth, Joseph (away from home) wrote to his wife 'I was very sorry to hear that the dear little thing is so precarious … you must view its existence for some weeks or months as hanging by a slight tenure.' Joseph steeled himself to bear the loss of his new daughter and urged his wife to 'look calmly at the uncertainty of the little creature's life.'[3] Thankfully tragedy was averted and the baby lived. She was formally named Elizabeth but from her earliest days she was called Bessie.

Joseph Parkes came from a prominent Unitarian manufacturing family in Warwick. His father, John, was a leading figure in the town: his woollen mills were at one point the largest employer in Warwick and he was also a banker and a trustee of the Unitarian chapel in the High Street. Joseph did not join the family business, pursuing instead a career in the Law. As a religious non-conformist, unable to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, he was barred from university study. Instead, with the aim of being called to the Chancery Bar, he enrolled as an articled clerk to a solicitor in London, where he became part of the radical circle centred round the philosopher and social reformer Jeremy

1. GCPP Parkes 6/50.
2. MBL, 'Before she found Arcadia: The Early Life and Work of Bessie Rayner Parkes,' c.1942, annotated unpublished typescript, GCPP Parkes 15/32, 1.
3. Joseph Parkes (JP), letter to Eliza Parkes (EP), August 2, 1829, GCPP Parkes 4/1.

Bentham. When his father's business collapsed in 1822, Joseph abandoned his plans to become a barrister and returned to the Midlands, establishing a solicitor's practice in Birmingham. After eight years of courtship and several rejected proposals he married Eliza in 1824. The couple set up home in Eliza's maternal grandparents' house in Temple Street and their first child was born the following year.

Joseph worked hard to establish himself, supplementing the income from his legal work by writing reports for the legal journal *The Jurist* as well as articles and pamphlets arguing the case for legal reforms. These were mostly published anonymously in *The Times*, the *Morning Chronicle* and the *Birmingham Journal*.[4] Joseph's legal practice specialised in election work and he became closely involved in electoral reform. He played a pivotal role in organising agitation for municipal and parliamentary reform, acting as an intermediary between the Birmingham Political Union and his radical and Whig contacts in London in the period before the Reform Act was passed in June 1832.[5]

Although Eliza does not seem to have taken a particularly active interest in her husband's politics, she was also from a radical political and religious family, the granddaughter of the Reverend Joseph Priestley (1773-1804). A leading figure of the British Enlightenment, Priestley was a pioneering scientist, dissenting theologian and spokesman for political reform. His extensive published writings expounded the importance of freedom of speech and worship. His rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity led him to take a leading role in the

4. Joseph's interest in journalism is reflected in his investment in the *Birmingham Journal;* he was the paper's co-proprietor from 1832 until 1844.
5. 'Warwick,' The History of Parliament, accessed 15 January 2018, https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1820-1832/constituencies/warwick; Philip J. Salmon, 'Parkes, Joseph (1796-1865), Election Agent and Reformer,' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography,* accessed 11 January 2018, http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-21356.

development of Unitarianism in England. This radical dissent from religious orthodoxy,[6] together with his support for the French Revolution, led to suspicions he was a dangerous revolutionary and his home was attacked and destroyed by a riotous mob in July 1791. To escape the continuing inhospitable situation in England, in 1794 Priestley and his wife emigrated to America, where their eldest son, also called Joseph, had already emigrated with his family. Eliza was the daughter of the younger Joseph, born and raised in Pennsylvania; the family returned to England when she was thirteen but she always regarded herself as American.[7] She passed onto Bessie fond memories of her maternal grandfather, who died when she was seven, including being taught to read by him.

Thus Bessie was born into a tradition of political and religious non-conformity, and grew up within the networks of people and organisations which steered the political and social reforms of the early nineteenth century. In the account of her childhood she wrote in 1849, Bessie claimed her earliest memory was the day of the passing, just before her third birthday, of the 1832 Reform Act, legislation which created new parliamentary constituencies for the growing industrial towns, including Birmingham, and expanded the parliamentary franchise to around one-fifth of the male population. Bessie recalled 'the crowded streets and the blue cockades. My Father had one in his button-hole, and he came into our room that day, and took me on his knee calling me "his lamb" while I was admiring the pretty ribbon.' Bessie declared this memory 'a sort of omen, that I began my conscious life at the time of the People's Triumph.'[8] The liberal principles of individual freedom and democracy, which underpinned the reform campaigns of the 1820s and '30s, would later

6. Denial of the Trinity was illegal until the Blasphemy Act of 1698 was repealed in 1813.
7. BRP, 'Elizabeth Rayner Parkes (née Priestley),' GCPP Parkes 1/5.
8. BRP, 'My Childhood,' and 'My School Days,' GCPP Parkes 1/2. This manuscript document is the source for all information and quotations related to BRP's childhood and schooling contained in this chapter, unless otherwise specified.

form the starting point for Bessie's own activism in pursuit of equality for women.[9] Her pride in this personal connection to the 'People's Triumph' was intertwined in her recollection with the keen sense-memory of an affectionate moment between father and daughter. The precise details of sitting on her father's lap and the colour of his rosette, together with his endearment 'my lamb' and the intimate domestic setting of the nursery (a room middle-class fathers like Joseph might not visit often), all combine to indicate the emotional significance of this memory for Bessie. Such details help explain why she held onto this memory as an 'omen' of the path her future life might take. She would become a 'reformer' partly in her father's image.

Bessie's immediate family was small and close-knit. She retained a few clear and happy memories of living in Temple Street, including watching in admiration as her brother Priestley climbed a tree in the backyard and sat at the top singing 'Pye sat in the Pear Tree.' This memory must be a very early one, for in 1833 her father relocated the family to London. Bessie's abiding memories of this change were distress at the loss of her pet cat in the move and then pleasure at being able to see Westminster Abbey from the window of her new nursery. The move was also an upheaval for Eliza, who only learned of it when Joseph announced he had bought the lease on 21 Great George Street and all its contents. According to the family's account of these events, Eliza, who possessed a strong sense of her duty as a wife, 'at once carried out his wishes,' even though the move meant she would be at a considerable distance from her family in Staffordshire. She left her Birmingham life behind, including the servants at Temple Street, with the exception of the children's much-loved nurse, Elizabeth Thornton ('Teddy'), who would remain in Eliza's service for over fifty years.[10]

9. Jane Rendall, ''A Moral Engine'? Feminism, Liberalism and the *English Woman's Journal*,' in *Equal or Different: Women's Politics 1800-1914,* ed. Jane Rendall (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 112.
10. MBL, 'Before she found Arcadia,' GCPP Parkes 15/32, 3, 6.

Bessie described this move as 'the great turning point of my life; all my after destiny hung on it.' Just a stone's throw from Parliament, 21 Great George Street was conveniently-located for Joseph's new employment as secretary to the royal commission on municipal corporations, a role he combined with work as a parliamentary solicitor. The Parkes' new home became a gathering-place for Joseph's political contacts and Eliza's duties included organising, often at very short notice, the entertaining of his many associates. Regular visitors included radical and liberal Members of Parliament who had played key roles in the passing of the 1832 Reform Act and other progressive legislation, including the Lord Chancellor, Henry Brougham, Lord John Russell (who would go on to serve twice as Prime Minister) and Richard Cobden and John Bright (co-founders of the Anti-Corn-Law League).[11] The philosopher John Stuart Mill was another associate; he would later become a close ally of Bessie's in her campaigns for women's rights.

It was at a meeting at the Parkes' house in 1835 that plans were drawn up for a new Liberal Club (which became the Reform Club), a meeting-place for 'the Reformers of the country … when they come to town' and a counter to the Tory Carlton Club.[12] Thus Bessie was surrounded from her earliest years by figures of power and influence in the world of political reform and she witnessed networking and association-forming in action. This gave her first-hand knowledge of political lobbying and a formidable list of contacts, which later proved invaluable. It is no coincidence that, in years to come, she and her fellow

11. Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 14. The Anti-Corn Law League campaigned successfully for the repeal of the 1815 Corn Laws, which restricted and taxed imports of grain into Britain, on the grounds that such restrictions created high bread prices and because they went against the Free Trade economics favoured by industrialists.
12. 'Reform Club,' accessed 16 January 2018, https://www.reformclub.com/home/about/history.

campaigners for women's rights would informally refer to themselves as the 'Reform Firm.'[13]

With Joseph's career progressing well, the family settled down to life in the comfortable world of London's upper-middle classes. Bessie remembered her early life at home in Westminster as loving but isolated. With Priestley away at school, Bessie was left the only child in the house: her days usually revolved around mornings spent with her mother, and afternoons sitting in her nursery with the nurse-maid, Teddy. Her outdoor amusements consisted of walks with Teddy to nearby St James's Park, to trundle her hoop and feed the swans. When she was older, Joseph would also take her on walks around Westminster, telling her vivid stories of historical events that had happened in the vicinity and showing her sites such as Westminster Hall 'where Sir Thomas More and Guy Fawkes had stood when they were tried and condemned to death.'[14]

At home, Bessie quickly learned to read and books became her greatest pleasure. She remembered waking up 'early in the bright summer mornings … and - pulling "Rosamond" or "Harry and Lucy" from under my pillow - lie absorbed in their, to me, most exciting adventures.' These characters - the child protagonists of Maria Edgeworth's short stories for children - are depicted learning, through first-hand experience, important lessons about the world around them. The stories of Rosamond focus on lessons of morality and virtue - the mistake of choosing to buy a decorative trinket rather than a practical pair of new shoes, or of believing the lies of another child, for example - while siblings Harry and Lucy are guided by their parents to a scientific understanding of their domestic environment.[15]

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13. Pam Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon 1827-1891: Feminist, Artist, Rebel* (London: Pimlico, 1999), 54.
14. MBL, 'Before she found Arcadia,' GCPP Parkes 15/32, 8.
15. For example, making sugar-plums becomes the starting point for a practical lesson on crystallization, complete with requisite chemicals and scientific terminology, while an evening walk through the town becomes an opportunity to learn about the science explaining the working of gaslight. Edgeworth's first stories

Such stories sound dry for modern tastes but they were highly successful and popular, with compilations in print from the 1790s until the late nineteenth century. They gave Bessie a taste for 'embryo philosophical [i.e. scientific] experiments' making 'horrible … messes with wood and water, paste, paper and glass.' Edgeworth's work was radical in depicting children learning by practical experience and experiment, rather than through instruction, and for promoting scientific education for girls as well as boys. They grew out of the collaborative writings on education of Edgeworth and her father, promoting a pedagogy firmly grounded in Enlightenment principles of reason and Joseph Priestley's theories of educational psychology.[16] Bessie's early 'rational' education proceeded directly from her great-grandfather's ideas and echoed the kind of reading and experimental play which her mother would have experienced as a child in the Priestley household.

However, not all Bessie's reading was focused on science and reason. She adored the *Arabian Nights* and claimed she first read Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819) at age seven, beginning a life-long love of historical romance and adventure. Yet despite enjoying being left alone to read (or perhaps because of this), Bessie described herself as a nervous child, prone to lying awake distressed by things she had read or heard about during the day, such as fears of ghosts, being buried alive or trapped in a burning building. From this experience she concluded 'great care should be taken with lonely children … they ought to sleep two

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of Rosamond appeared in *The Parent's Assistant; or, Stories for Children* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1796). Harry and Lucy first appeared in Edgeworth, *Early Lessons* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1801). The stories about crystallization and gaslight are included in Edgeworth, *Harry and Lucy Concluded: Being the Last Part of Early Lessons* (London: R. Hunter, 1825).

16. Richard Edgeworth was a member of the Birmingham Lunar Society, and thus an associate of Joseph Priestley; Priestley's theories about psychology, notably the interdependence of moral, physical and intellectual education, influenced the Edgeworths' understanding of how children learn. See Ruth Watts, *Gender, Power and the Unitarians in England, 1760-1860* (London: Longman, 1998), 33 and Kathryn Scantlebury and Colette Murphy, 'Maria Edgeworth: Nineteenth Century Irish Female Pioneer of Science Education,' *Irish Educational Studies* 28, no. 1 (March 2009): 105-7, https://doi.org/10.1080/03323310802597374.

in a room, or the nurse should continue her sewing till they are asleep,' indicating that the young, imaginative Bessie was herself left alone more than she would have wished.

This sense of isolation was not, however, permanent, for when Bessie was seven years old her life underwent another significant change. Her health, so precarious at birth, continued to cause concern. After several worrying inflammations of the chest, doctors prescribed a respite from the London air. She was sent to the countryside, to a girls' boarding school in the hamlet of Leam, between Warwick and Leamington. Leam House School was run by a Unitarian minister, William Field, with the assistance of his wife Mary. The school was also the Field family home, a former farmhouse and still a largely self-sufficient household producing its own beer, bread, eggs, poultry, bacon and ham.[17] The house had a large, well-tended garden and was surrounded by fields where pupils were permitted to wander.

The rural location of the school was thus chosen to be beneficial to Bessie's physical health. However, in sending Bessie to the Fields' establishment her parents were also placing her in the care of a family they knew and trusted. The Fields had a long association with Bessie's family, as William was the Minister of the High Street Unitarian Chapel in Warwick. Joseph Priestley had attended Field's ordination there in 1790 and delivered the sermon, while Joseph Parkes' parents worshipped at the chapel and were closely involved in its work. Field was a leading figure in the political as well as religious life of Warwick and Bessie's father, who knew him from childhood, admired him greatly. Joseph later described Field, in a letter to Bessie, as the man 'who Christianised me.'[18]

17. MBL, 'Before she found Arcadia,' GCPP Parkes 15/32, 13.
18. Letter from William Field to JP, October 21, 1821, GCPP Parkes 4/26; Letter from William Field to JP, May 21, 1827, GCPP Parkes 4/27; Letter from JP to BRP, 1843(?), GCPP Parkes 2/42.

William Field was in his seventies when Bessie arrived at Leam but he still played an active part in the activities of the school. It was originally an academy for boys but transformed into a girls' school a few years before Bessie's arrival in 1836. The change enabled the Fields to employ their unmarried daughters as school-mistresses. Laura, Alice and Lucy Field all taught at the school, with the eldest, Laura - 'Miss Field' - taking on the majority of the responsibility for the pupils.[19] When Bessie first arrived at Leam she was one of eight pupils who, she recalled, 'lived in a cheerful room facing the south.'[20] Bessie's account of her school days includes the domestic routine of mealtimes in the family dining room and happy memories of evening conversations around the fire, with pupils gathered round whichever Field sister was in charge, one of the smallest girls often sat on their teacher's lap.

Bessie first attended Leam House for around two months in autumn 1836, aged seven; she returned the following autumn for a similar length of time. Her stays were gradually extended until she became a full-time pupil from the age of eleven. We have only one hint of any distress on Bessie's part at being separated from her family at such a young age, in a letter she wrote to Eliza from Leam in August 1838. This letter, the earliest extant piece of writing by Bessie, with its large, painfully neat handwriting and wayward punctuation, is an endearing combination of formal address and childlike expression:

> My Dear Mama
> … I am pretty happy here, but not very[.] I want you. Miss Field says she will not look at this letter because I want to tell you something. When I think

19. The decision to become a girls' school came at a time of expansion in educational establishments for girls, as the prosperous middle-classes increasingly sought the social advantages of education for their daughters as well as their sons. See Christina de Bellaigue, *Educating Women: Schooling and Identity in England and France, 1800-1867* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 13.
20. This cosy domestic arrangement was typical of girls' schools at this time, which promoted themselves as providing a 'pleasing substitute to home.' See De Bellaigue, *Educating Women*, 19. This focus on domesticity helped proprietors of girls' schools defend themselves against accusations they might be unsuitable environments for the raising of their pupils to be good wives and mothers. Even in the 1860s, such an attitude remained common, as evidenced by the response of one Sussex schoolmistress to a circular from the Schools Inquiry Commission (1867-68), stating that the commission had 'mistaken the character of my establishment, which is not so much a school, as a home for young ladies.' See De Bellaigue, 39-40. See also Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1981), 46-48.

> of you I want to see you and then I do not write here about it. when I hope you are enjoying yourself[.] give my love to Papa and brother. do not forget the cake[.] bring it down with you. I give my love to yourself. so now goodbye[.] ever your affectionate child E.R. Parkes[21]

Presumably the prospect of visits from her family (and cake!) helped Bessie settle happily into school life. Miss Field's agreement not to read Bessie's letter also indicates a compassionate ethos and the beginnings of a trusting, affectionate relationship which deepened between Bessie and the Field family during her years as their pupil.

Over this period the school expanded. The 1841 census lists ten pupils, ranging in age from eleven (Bessie's age) up to twenty years old. By the time Bessie left in 1845 there were around twenty pupils and the school's buildings had been extended to accommodate the extra numbers. The growing popularity of the school was based on more than its location and domestic atmosphere. Unlike many girls' schools of the period, it was not devoted to training in domestic tasks and ladylike accomplishments in anticipation of marriage. Music and drawing were taught by 'good masters from Leamington' but the Fields 'would suffer us to neglect no more solid branches of instruction for these.' The pupils received a comparatively broad and academic curriculum for the time, in comparison to that provided to most girls. The Field sisters were largely responsible for educating their pupils in subjects such as history and literature while Mr Field regularly delivered lectures on topics such as optics, the steam engine, hydrostatics and astronomy and gave demonstrations with scientific apparatus. These, Bessie claimed, 'were a great advance to girls who have seldom much opportunity of gaining clear and scientific knowledge' and 'imbued [her with] a strong taste for dabbling in experiments.'

21. BRP, letter to EP, August 21, 1838, GCPP Parkes 2/1.

Mr Field also tutored the girls in geometry and Latin and Bessie recalled 'many a winter's morning have he and I pored over Latin by fire and candle at seven o'clock.' When she was fourteen, her father suggested Mr Field might also teach her 'a little Greek - just enough to construe a little of the Greek Testament. … I don't want you to be a "Blue Stocking!" Heaven forbid! But a half year work at Greek… would I think form your mind to a severer application.'[22] This suggests Joseph cautiously supported the progressive attitudes towards girls' education reflected in the curriculum at Leam. However, his derogatory reference to 'Blue Stockings' shows his subscription to the commonplace view that intellectual women were unattractive and girls should not be overeducated beyond their sphere.

The principles of Unitarianism - also known as 'rational Christianity' - placed great emphasis on education, as the means by which individuals could achieve knowledge, happiness and virtue, and as a force for eradicating social inequalities.[23] The tenets of the Unitarian faith were particularly conducive to promoting equality of education between the sexes, meaning Unitarian girls benefitted from a more rigorous and academic education than that provided to many of their peers. Unitarians' belief that differences between people were the result of education and upbringing led logically to the view that men and women were intellectual equals.[24] The curriculum at Leam, following these principles, stressed the importance of education and respect for female intellect. However there was a disparity even between the more advanced education for the girls at Leam and the instruction their brothers would have received. Bessie's fellow pupil Sarah Beard felt that, in comparison to the education she had previously received at her father's co-educational school, the lessons

22. Letter from JP to BRP, December 1843, GCPP Parkes 2/42.
23. Ruth Watts, 'Harriet Martineau and the Unitarian Tradition in Education,' *Oxford Review of Education* 37, no. 5 (October 2011): 638, https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2011.621682.
24. Watts, *Gender, Power and the Unitarians,* 13. In an essay on her great-grandfather which Bessie wrote in her later years, she stressed that Priestley 'at all times gave his best mind to the teaching of girls, and showed by many incidental words that he held women in as high mental and moral estimation as men.' See BRP, 'Joseph Priestley in Domestic Life,' *Contemporary Review*, October 1894: 572.

at Leam 'were no difficulty to me … They seemed absurdly easy.'[25] Furthermore, some aspects of the Fields' methods deferred to more conservative ideas about femininity and domesticity. There were no prizes for academic excellence, only an award 'for neatness, and one for every girl obtaining a certain number of tickets for an upright carriage,' and the Shakespeare class on Saturday afternoons consisted of Miss Field reading from one of the plays while the girls were busy with clothes-mending - not something boys would have been required to do.

Nevertheless, Bessie was full of praise for the regime at Leam. One of the things she most prized was the intellectual freedom pupils were allowed. She recalled the 'animated' discussions the girls had with their teachers about history, geography, art, literature and religion, which she considered 'rich intellectual food.' The spirit of Unitarian rational enquiry informed the Fields' pedagogy, encouraging the girls to explore ideas and form their own conclusions. Most significantly for Bessie, they were allowed to read novels, 'a most uncommon thing,' she maintained, 'in a seminary for young ladies.' The girls had access to a library which included Bessie's beloved authors Maria Edgeworth and Walter Scott, along with other romance novels, such as Fanny Burney's *Camilla* (1796) and Samuel Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753). 'Many and many a happy half hour,' she recalled, 'have I spent on the floor, stretched at full length, devouring the feelings of Edgar Mandelbert or the graceful courtship of Harriet Byron.' The Field sisters even listened patiently to the girls' 'nonsense' about whichever novel they were 'mad about' at the time. Bessie claimed there was a complete absence at the school of girlish gossip, love letters or intrigues about boys, which she attributed to the freedom to read about courtship

25. 'Recollections by Sarah Dendy (née Beard) (18 January, 1831 - 4 November 1922),' in Herbert McLachlan, *Records of a Family, 1800-1933. Pioneers in Education, Social Service and Liberal Religion. [Biographical sketches of members of the Beard and Dendy families. With portraits and a genealogical table.]* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1935), 117. Sarah's father was the Manchester Unitarian minister and educational reformer John Relly Beard.

and marriage. While such an innocent atmosphere seems improbable amongst a group of adolescent girls, it is certainly true that the range of reading available to the pupils at Leam was much broader than that of many girls' schools at the time.[26]

Physical exercise was also promoted at Leam and the girls were by no means expected to be delicate and demure. Bessie described in detail the lively ballgames they played and their exercises with ropes and hoops. Independent outdoor activity was particularly encouraged: girls were permitted to walk in the fields and woods beyond the playground, with minimal supervision, and given their own patches of garden to tend. Throughout her life she would suffer bouts of ill-health - some of them very serious - but she would always rely upon fresh air and vigorous exercise to restore her strength.

Thus Leam gave Bessie a reasonably good academic grounding, promoted physical health and encouraged an enquiring outlook on the world. Bessie recognised how unusual this was, remarking that Miss Field's 'endeavour to strengthen the independence of our minds and bodies had its root in opinions which the parents probably would have been very far from holding if directly expressed.' She felt this provided her and her school friends with a distinct advantage for their own futures and that of their sex: 'What mother educated at Leam,' she asked, 'would give her daughter a fashionable training, or endeavour to make her other than a noble independent woman, cultivating all her powers to the utmost limit God has put, undismayed by ridicule or the censure of the world?' Naturally, religious faith was central to the environment fostered by the Reverend Field. Overarching all, according to Bessie, was a strong emphasis on duty, truth and self-sacrifice, which profoundly

26. For example, Walthamstow Hall, founded in 1838 as a school for the daughters of missionaries, was relatively advanced for the time. It included Latin in its curriculum, but did not allow pupils to read Shakespeare, for fear that their minds might be 'polluted.' See Elsie Pike, *The Story Of Walthamstow Hall: A Century of Girls' Education*, ed. Constance Curryer (London: Carey Press, 1938), 20, 32.

influenced all of her adult endeavours. She concluded her account of her schooling, written four years after she left the Fields, with the declaration that 'what good I may do in the world will have been in consequence of their teaching.' Indeed, when she began to channel her desire to 'do good' into campaigning for women's rights, her first significant publication, *Remarks on the Education of Girls* (1854) drew heavily on her experiences at Leam as a model of the kind of education needed to enable girls to fulfil their intellectual, physical and moral potential.[27]

Unitarians' emphasis on education, and their belief in the intellectual and moral equality of the sexes, played an important part in creating a generation of young women armed with the intellectual wherewithal and confidence to mount an orchestrated challenge to gender inequalities. Networks of Unitarian women in the first half of the nineteenth century were thus an important influence on the organised feminist activism of the second half, of which Bessie was to become a prime mover.[28] Schoolmistresses like the Field sisters and spaces like Leam House were a significant part of this trend. For while the domestic ethos of such schools might be assumed to uphold conservative ideals of femininity, Christina de Bellaigue highlights the potential for them to be a space where 'the status quo could be challenged,' providing 'a kind of collective "room of one's own" where girls could develop their own interests and gain a sense of autonomy.'[29] Similarly Sharon Marcus, in her study of nineteenth-century middle-class women's friendships, notes that friendships between women both reinforced ideals of femininity and 'licensed forms of agency [which] women were discouraged from exercising with men.'[30] The almost-entirely female world at Leam

27. BRP, *Remarks on the Education of Girls, with Reference to the Social, Legal, and Industrial Position of Women in the Present Day* (London: John Chapman, 1854, third, signed, edition, 1856).
28. See Ruth Watts, *Gender, Power and the Unitarians,* and Kathryn Gleadle, *The Early Feminists - Radical Unitarians and the Emergence of the Women's Rights Movement 1831-51* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995).
29. De Bellaigue, *Educating Women*, 147.
30. Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 2.

gave Bessie accessible role-models, in the Field sisters, of intellectual and purposeful women whom she could strive to emulate without fear of male censure. She felt privileged to be allowed to borrow books from Miss Field, and to be admitted into her room:

> that enchanted and enchanting room as it seemed to my childish imagination … filled with things of which I then but knew half the use and worth, casts, prints and water-colour drawings with her ample bookcase … now I can estimate the mind which furnished it, I admire it still more.[31]

This literal 'room of one's own' symbolised for Bessie a female cultural and intellectual space, acting as an inspiration to her own efforts.

Leam also provided Bessie with friends who became as close to her as the sisters she lacked. The lonely little girl who had nervously lain awake in her London bedroom found herself sharing a room with seven other girls and staying awake whispering with them about every subject under the sun, as they lay tucked up in their 'little green beds.' Bessie's recollections of the other girls are full of affection and admiration for their intellect, spirit and beauty: Kate Jevons, a particular friend, was 'Clever, dashing, warm-hearted, with a violent temper; … very untidy, very merry, very pretty and energetic and very charming.' Away from formal lessons, there were ample opportunities at Leam for pupils to form strong bonds of comradeship, through sport, dancing, charades and *tableaux*. Bessie revelled in the opportunities afforded by drama productions to enjoy the company of two girls - 'our beautiful ones' - whom she particularly idolized. She also became close with Lucy Field, the youngest of her teachers, ten years her senior. Her great pleasure in the company of other girls and women is a striking part of Bessie's memories of her school days and female friendship would remain centrally important to her throughout her life.

31. BRP, 'My School Days,' GCPP Parkes 1/2.

Bessie left Leam at the age of sixteen, in the summer of 1845, whereupon her horizons expanded: that summer she accompanied her parents on their travels to the continent for the first time. Both then and again in the autumn of 1846, she enjoyed the novelty of travelling abroad, experiencing new scenery and culture. She recorded her observations in writing and sketches, and her journal entries show her particular interest in the lives of the women she saw. She was impressed, for example, by a visit to a *béguinage* in Ghent, Belgium, writing admiringly of this 'feminine city' of between six and seven hundred lay religious women, who seemed to her very content and to enjoy considerable freedom. She also remarked on the differences between British and French attitudes towards women:

> A French girl is amazed at the idea of a married woman in any way retiring from the world, as is often the case with us, when the gay lively girl changes into the domestic mistress of a family. To her marriage is an entrance into society, and her husband the magic key which unlocks the gate of paradise.[32]

Such comments show Bessie's growing awareness of the position of women in society, as she began to gain a broader perspective on her own circumstances by comparing her life to that of women in other places and cultures.

Once back in England, Bessie busied herself by continuing her studies. She kept up private tuition in Latin and geometry and her journals for the next few years include summaries of sermons and lectures she had heard, together with abstracts of the wide range of historical, philosophical, scientific and literary texts she read.[33] Such occupations were common for girls of Bessie's class, a reflection of the ways in which girls' lives increasingly diverged

32. BRP, 'Journal of a month in Normandy in the Autumn of 1846, incorporating 'Journal of a week in Paris … 1846' and 'Journal of a tour up the Rhine into Switzerland … 1845,'' GCPP Parkes 1/36, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women,* 90-91.
33. Bessie's journal for 1847 contains her abstracts of Kitto's *Travels in Persia*, Sismondi's *The Italian Republics*, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* Robertson's *History of Charles V*, Comte's *Moral Philosophy* and Lyell's *Elements of Geology*, while her letters also include comments on Bacon's *Essays,* John Stuart Mill's *Principles of Political Economy*, Emerson's *Orations and Lectures,* Tennyson's poetry and several of Shakespeare's plays. See 'Book of Abstracts 1847,' GCPP Parkes 1/32. See also BRP, letters to KJ, January 24, 1847 and November 11, 1847, GCPP Parkes 6/50 and 6/51.

from that of their brothers as they grew older. Boys of Bessie's class and generation typically moved from school to further study or training, with the inauguration of secular institutions such as London University (later University College, London) reducing the barriers to higher education which non-conformists such as Joseph Parkes had faced a few decades before. This widening of educational opportunities did not extend to women: from their late teens onwards middle-class girls were expected, whatever their previous academic achievements, to return to a life revolving around family. Valerie Saunders notes how women's autobiographical writing often reflects this 'circular' nature of women's lives, and the 'striking … passivity' of nineteenth-century female adolescence, with girls 'bridging the gap between childhood and marriage by helping out at Sunday school, or with younger brothers and sisters, continuing their education at home, or paying calls.'[34]

Bessie's experience echoed this. Her days at home were filled with reading and study, and - despite her professed aversion to it - needlework. 'I have actually made two nightcaps and am in the middle of a third!' she reported. 'If Mrs Field did but know, she would look upon me sewing away, as on a reformed profligate character.'[35] Other diversions included less conventionally-feminine experiments with the new technology of photography, creating images of ferns and lace. In this she was frustrated by the limitations of what she could achieve as a young woman without the wherewithal to acquire more specialised equipment: 'The photogenic paper is easy to prepare but requires knack. If I had been a man I would have had such a laboratory.'[36] Such activities provided a distraction from the fact that Bessie's life was circumscribed by her family, particularly by the poor health of her brother.

34. Valerie Sanders, *Records of Girlhood: An Anthology of Nineteenth-Century Women's Childhoods* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 19.
35. BRP, letter to KJ, January 24, 1847, GCPP Parkes 6/51.
36. BRP, letter to KJ, November 11, 1847, GCPP Parkes 6/51. An album containing eighteen of the photographic negatives and prints Bessie produced is held in the Rare Books and Manuscripts collection at the Yale Center for British Art (reference TR144.B4 1848). Some of these can be viewed via the Center's website: https://collections.britishart.yale.edu/catalog/orbis:13445597 (accessed 22 February 2021).

Priestley fell ill with tuberculosis in the autumn of 1846 and for the next three and a half years the family focused on his needs. Fresh air was recommended and so, while Joseph continued his work in London, Eliza, Bessie and Priestley moved between Hastings, Brighton and Hampstead Heath as the seasons (and Priestley's whims) dictated. Visits to her extended family provided some pleasurable respite for Bessie but also further caring duties. As her paternal grandfather became frailer with age, she spent increasing periods of time at his home in Birmingham, and helped him with tasks, such as organising his accounts, which his failing eyesight made difficult.[37] She was also able to combine journeys to the Midlands with visits to Leam. There she delighted in participating once more in the sporting and drama activities she had enjoyed as a pupil, while also undertaking some teaching herself and socialising with the Field sisters on a more equal footing.[38]

Female friends remained an important part of Bessie's life. They provided her with relationships outside her family and enabled her to continue to enjoy the pleasure of female companionship which she had first experienced at school. She later confided to a male friend how, on leaving 'the busy cloister of Leam' aged sixteen and entering 'into something like the World,' she was shocked to find 'young men (office mates, etc of my … brother) irreligious and immoral, and the old men … irreligious and bearing the mark at least of past immorality. My quick instinct revolted against them.'[39] References to 'immorality' suggest the teenage Bessie was deeply uncomfortable with sexualised attitudes towards women of the men in her social sphere. This experience helped her appreciate the sheltered life she had enjoyed at school, free to be herself among other girls.

37. BRP, letter to her cousin, Mary Swainson, April 8, 1849, GCPP Parkes 3/20.
38. BRP, letters to KJ, May 15, and June 6, 1846, GCPP Parkes 6/49 and 6/53.
39. BRP, letter to Samuel Blackwell (SB), January 20, 1855, GCPP Parkes 9/10.

Repulsed by what she now witnessed of men's behaviour, she turned to women for emotional support.

She remained in contact with several of her former school-friends, although she saw them rarely now they had returned to their homes across the country. Her correspondence with one friend, Kate Jevons, included deliberations on their current and future lives. Echoing the ethos of Leam, concerns about usefulness and duty were Bessie's focus:

> I have been pondering upon your observations as regards a young lady's life, and I do not quite agree with you. I allow that most girls do lead a useless life, but I cannot admit that such is a necessary consequence of our state. I think it is a fault of education; they are not taught that they are solemnly responsible for their time, money, knowledge and health. … The duties of a responsible creature can scarcely be termed negative … in a world full of sickness, poverty, domestic duties and (not least) friends. If you add to these the intellectual cultivation necessary in our rank of life, and advisable in all, I fancy that the sum of your young Lady's positive duties will swell up to a bulk without the addition of Berlin Wool [i.e. embroidery thread] in any great quantities!![40]

Bessie's upbeat tone suggests she was attempting to make the best of her restricted circumstances. Writing again to Kate a few months later, she expressed more dissatisfaction with her situation:

> I believe no one is really happy without some steadfast aim; it is very difficult for a woman to find this, but I think it may be done. … I have great difficulty in getting an object; I often wish I could do more among the poor people in London, but they live in such horrible neighbourhoods that my Mother is naturally afraid of my going. Sometimes I wish to write eventually, but novels and annual poetry are the staple feminine line of the present day and I have no ambition for either. If one could be but useful … What do you say Kate to our publishing a set of elementary lesson books in future years? … Kate the world seems a wide field for putting forth our energies even as far as we can ever have dreamed; and action is happiness if well directed.[41]

40. BRP, letter to KJ, May 15, 1846, GCPP Parkes 6/49.
41. BRP, letter to KJ, January 24, 1847, GCPP Parkes 6/50.

Bessie's frustrations were the result of the restrictions of her class, age and gender, shaped by the pervasive domestic ideology which promoted the private realm as women's 'proper sphere.'[42] Her interests in both philanthropic work with the poor and writing literature were circumscribed by what were deemed appropriate spheres of activity for a young lady. The working-class neighbourhoods she wants to work in were deemed too 'horrible' for her to enter without risk to her physical safety and her reputation, while conventionally 'feminine' genres of literature, such as writing genteel poems for popular ladies' annuals and yearbooks, did not satisfy her more intellectual literary interests. Her proposed compromise - to write a 'useful' set of school textbooks - seems an inadequate outlet for her energies and desire for happiness through action. However, at the point she wrote this letter in January 1847 Bessie had recently formed a friendship with another young woman, Barbara Leigh Smith, who shared her frustrations with the limitations of women's roles and inspired her to take a bolder approach to carving out a purposeful life.

Bessie's friendship with Barbara was pivotal in both their lives. It was brought about by the Parkes family's move to Pelham Crescent, Hastings, where they became the tenants and neighbours of the Leigh Smith family. Ben Leigh Smith was a Unitarian, an MP and part of Joseph Parkes' radical political circle.[43] Barbara, the eldest of Smith's five children, was two years older than Bessie and the two young women quickly became friends. They shared

42. Debates regarding the usefulness of the gendered ideologies of domesticity and 'separate spheres' for conceptualising nineteenth-century women's lived experience are well-versed. Amanda Vickery's critique of this approach is often cited as an influential contribution to this debate. While I agree with much of Vickery's argument, not least her conclusion that the 'power [of such discourses] to shape female language and behaviour needs to be demonstrated not taken as read,' I follow Sarah Dredge's position that 'this is not to say that these terms were not critical in shaping the ways in which women's experience in this period was understood' and we should not 'undervalue the force of domestic ideology as an ideal by which women were judged.' See Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History,' *Historical Journal* 36, no.2 (June 1993): 413, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2639654 and Dredge, 'Opportunism and Accommodation: The *English Woman's Journal* and the British Mid-Nineteenth-Century Women's Movement,' *Women's Studies* 34, no.2 (March 2005): 143, https://doi.org/10.1080/00497870590923935.

43. Ben Leigh Smith (1783-1860) was the son of the Whig politician William Smith (1756-1835), a prominent campaigner for social and political reform and religious toleration.

very similar views on art, literature and politics and the same frustrations at the limitations of the role prescribed for their sex. Bessie had found a kindred spirit.

Despite these similarities in their backgrounds and ideas, Barbara's bohemian family was a stark contrast to Bessie's socially-conservative one. Ben never married his children's mother, Anne Longden, a milliner's apprentice, who died when Barbara was seven; therefore the family were not regarded as respectable by polite society. Their wealth, together with the family's strong links to influential figures in dissenting politics and Unitarianism, gave them some independence from convention, and prevented total ostracism, but Barbara and her siblings still bore the stigma of illegitimacy.[44] Smith's approach to raising his children was also by no means conventional. He was closely involved in their upbringing and unusually demonstrative in his affections.[45] All Smith's children were educated along experimental lines and participated in their father's public activities, including philanthropic investment in education and hospitals, political campaigning and dinner parties with distinguished guests. Barbara was soon to become financially independent too: on reaching the age of twenty-one (in 1848) she received a settlement of stocks and shares from her father which yielded around £300 a year. This effectively released her from the protective control of her male relatives by which most women were bound. Bessie, in contrast, was reliant on her father for spending money and had to negotiate her parents' ideas of what constituted acceptable behaviour.

44. Marian Evans (the novelist George Eliot) referred to the Smiths as 'the tabooed family' and their first cousins, the Nightingales (including Florence), refused to acknowledge them. See Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 14-15, 61.
45. Bessie had seen this for herself as a child: when the two families had once met briefly, she witnessed Smith kneel down to help his children put on their boots. This little gesture was so unusual for a man of his generation and class, and so unlike anything her own father would do, that Bessie remembered it for the rest of her life. See MBL, 'Before she found Arcadia,' GCPP Parkes 15/32, 12.

Through Barbara, Bessie was introduced to a new network of friends, many of whom shared a keen desire to change attitudes towards their sex. Barbara's aunt, Julia Smith, was part of a circle of women including writers Harriet Martineau, Anna Jameson and Mary Howitt, who were politically active in the Anti-Corn Law League and the anti-slavery movement, were critical of society's acceptance of women's subordinate status and believed strongly in the need for better educational opportunities for women.[46] Bessie was particularly delighted to make the acquaintance of Howitt, another Hastings resident, whose tales and poems Bessie had enjoyed since childhood.[47] Her daughter Anna Mary was close in age to Barbara and Bessie and was training to become a professional painter at an art school in London.[48]

Bessie was thrilled to become part of this world and Hastings became the centre of all she enjoyed most in life:

> To Hastings; mad in the train, singing, shouting, yelling, laughing. Oh how happy I was, thinking of the glorious winter to come, all the books to read, all the lovely rides, all the reading and talk with Barbara, all the acting and music, … then came heaven down upon earth to my fancy, & I felt so intensely happy that I could scarce contain myself. Oh those free wild spirits the Smiths always seem to have, how glorious to feel their rush into one's own heart.[49]

Friendship with Barbara and her circle provided a new world of female friends to replace the ones Bessie had left behind at Leam, as she enthused to Kate Jevons:

> all these people are such characters and so different and delightful. I can compare Miss Leigh Smith only to a ten horse power steam engine, with no noise or bustle. She has Miss Field's strength with Sophia Taylor's intellect, Marianne Elliston's vivacity and great personal beauty of an artist's kind, which may be ugly to ordinary eyes, you know, but I don't think anybody

46. For a more detailed account of this 'radical unitarian' circle and its significance for the British women's rights movement, see Gleadle, *The Early Feminists*.
47. BRP, letter to KJ, March 8, 1849, GCPP Parkes 6/52.
48. Spurred on by Anna Mary's example, in 1849 Barbara enrolled to study drawing at the newly-opened Ladies' College in Bedford Square, London, founded by another of Julia Smith's friends, Elizabeth Reid. See Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 23, 28-29, 39.
49. BRP, Diary for 1849, GCPP Parkes 1/4, quoted in Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 33-34.

> could call Barbara plain at least they would be very stupid if they did. There's a tirade.[50]

Barbara was 'impulsive and … fearless,' very different from Bessie's 'tender, sensitive nature.'[51] Barbara's eccentricities and radicalism were seen by many as a reaction to her precarious social status. The novelist Elizabeth Gaskell, another Unitarian, commented:

> She is - I think in consequence of her birth, a strong fighter against the established opinions of the world … I can't help admiring her noble bravery, and respecting - while I don't personally like her.[52]

Barbara's confident, independent spirit and striking, unconventional looks, particularly her masses of golden red hair, made her a charismatic figure who inspired the devoted admiration of both Bessie and Anna Mary. Among the earliest surviving correspondence from Bessie to Barbara is a lively letter written entirely in verse, which captures the intellectual yet playful spirit of their new friendship. It begins

> Dear Barbara,
> In discussing various questions,
> The truth of morals, or the fate of nations,
> A subject co-important with the state,
> Our Sex, has held due place in our debate. [53]

This verse-letter parodies Pope's *Rape of the Lock*, attacking Pope's antifeminist depiction of women and presenting evidence of womankind's noble qualities: 'You cannot need another word to show it; / I need but name a Martineau and Howitt.'[54]

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50. BRP, letter to KJ, March 8, 1849, GCPP Parkes 6/52.
51. MBL, *I, Too, Have Lived in Arcadia,* 8.
52. Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell, letter to Charles Eliot Norton, April 5, 1860, quoted in Sheila Herstein, *A Mid Victorian Feminist - Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 15.
53. BRP, letter to BLS, 1847, GCPP Parkes 5/1.
54. Ibid. Elizabeth Barrett Browning had also, aged sixteen, penned a critique ('Essay on Woman') of patriarchal society in the style of Pope, in which she also 'map[ped] out a skeleton tradition of radical female thinkers and achievers.' See Rebecca Stott and Simon Avery, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), 42. Barrett Browning's essay, not published until the 1980s, demonstrates similarities between her and Bessie, in the role of reading and writing literature in their early feminist consciousness-raising.

The shifts between humour and earnestness in this letter are indicative of the intense pleasure and sense of purpose Bessie gained from her relationship with Barbara. As Rendall notes, the bond between these two young women was central to the development of their sense of shared identity and feminist consciousness, demonstrating the importance of networks of personal friendships to the history of feminism.[55] The role models of Harriet Martineau and Mary Howitt, together with Barbara's energy and determination, were spurs to Bessie's efforts to pursue a career and challenge the limitations placed on women's lives. The two friends supported each other in their endeavours: Barbara's ambition was to be an artist, which complemented Bessie's aim to be a serious writer and they encouraged each other in their work. For both women, artistic aspirations were closely connected to a desire to carve out a fulfilling, independent life for themselves. Bessie shared with her new friend her frustration with her life, with 'nothing beyond the surface of everyday concerns' and confided 'sometimes … I find too little water in my well of hope and faith. I say this to you alone, don't let anyone else think I feel a deficiency.'[56] Unwilling to openly express her discontent to others, with Barbara she could articulate her dissatisfaction with her present circumstances and envisage a brighter future.

A frequent topic of their discussions was the independence available to women through paid work. Bessie was aware of her privileged position, enjoying the pleasures of literature, art and travel her father's money provided. She was also alert to the precarious position of being reliant on another for financial security. One friend (possibly Kate Jevons) endured great anxiety when her father suffered a large financial loss, as Bessie reported to Barbara: 'poor girl … there are five lads & another younger girl, & she just one & twenty.' Pondering what a woman might do to support herself financially in such circumstances, Bessie

55. Rendall, 'Friendship and Politics,' 163.
56. BRP, letter to BLS, 1847, GCPP Parkes 5/2.

bemoaned the limited employment options available to educated women in Britain, and suggested that an administrative role such as bookkeeping, or managing a warehouse 'like so many French women,' would be highly preferable to the constraints of being a badly-paid governess, the fate of so many middle-class women who fell on hard times.[57]

For Bessie and Barbara, being able to 'earn one's own bread,' (as they phrased it) was a matter of self-autonomy and dignity. Although her father was generous with his money, Bessie found it demeaning to have no income of her own, and be required to request funds for any purchase she wished to make.[58] For while the influential social commentator Thomas Carlyle declared 'there is a perennial nobleness, and even sacredness, in Work,' such sentiments applied to men only.[59] Bessie was dismissive of the stigma attached to middle-class women working for money: 'I should not mind losing caste at all,' she declared.[60] Both she and Barbara realised women would not be treated as equals with men while they remained financially dependent on their male relatives. Desiring for themselves the freedom and sense of self-worth conferred on men through work, they appropriated the discourse of political economy which helped define men's role in the public economic sphere. When she attempted to explain her aspirations, Bessie drew upon the language of John Stuart Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), which she and Barbara had studied together:

> Perhaps in using the word 'productive consumer' I was hardly fair to my own meaning. I do certainly feel a great desire to be one; to create and possess and expend capital; but if I could be a great artist or author, unpaid, or do any great practical good, it would be still more.[61]

57. BRP letter to BLS, February 13, 1847, GCPP Parkes 5/6.
58. Margaret Crompton, 'Prelude to Arcadia: the early life and friendships of Bessie Parkes,' unpublished biography c.1970s, GCPP 15/70, 36.
59. Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (1843, repr. London: Chapman and Hall, 1872), 168.
60. BRP, letter to BLS, February 13, 1847, GCPP Parkes 5/6. Philippa Levine observes that many wealthier nineteenth-century feminists, like Bessie and Barbara, took up paid work 'as a practical identification of their feminism, fuelled by belief more than necessity' while others were forced by economic circumstances to try and support themselves financially. See Levine, *Feminist Lives,* 84.
61. BRP, letter to KJ, April 1850, GCPP Parkes 6/56.

Women's ability to engage with economic theory had been ably demonstrated by Harriet Martineau, whose *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832-34) was well-respected and commercially successful.[62] However, when Joseph suggested to Bessie that she read Mill's work he presumably did not intend for her to take from it the lesson that she should become a creator and possessor of capital. Bessie was herself far from decided that this should be her primary goal, recognising the tension between her pragmatic aim to 'earn her own bread,' her loftier ambitions of achieving artistic renown and her sense of religious duty to do 'practical good 'in the world. Protected from any urgent practical need to support herself financially, she could devote her time to educating herself for her imagined independent future as a professional writer, rather than just as an enjoyable diversion to fill the time between schooldays and marriage.

As the example of Mill indicates, reading and discussing books was an important part of Bessie's friendship with Barbara, and their studies covered a broad range of works of philosophy, politics and literature, both contemporary and classical. Bessie followed Barbara's suggestion to study Shakespeare's plays, borrowed her father's Chaucer as part of her study of 'our Old Poets' and read Greek tragedies in translation in order to consider 'the Greek treatment & mode of thought.'[63] She kept up-to-date with the latest publications too, Tennyson's *The Princess* proving a particular favourite. She was given a copy by her mother soon after its publication in 1847 and she urged Barbara to read it, certain her friend would share her admiration of its heroine, Ida, 'so bold & yet so quiet and stately withal, a very ideal of womanhood.'[64]

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62. In her *Autobiography* (1877), Martineau stated that starting from the success of her *Illustrations*, she 'never had any other anxiety about employment than what to choose, nor any real care about money.' See Lana L. Dalley, 'On Martineau's Illustrations of Political Economy, 1832-34,' *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History* (blog), accessed 31 January 2018, http://www.branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=lana-l-dalley-on-martineaus-illustrations-of-political-economy-1832-34.
63. BRP, letters to BLS, December 16, 1847, GCPP Parkes 5/17 and 1848, GCPP Parkes 5/19.
64. BRP, letter to BLS, 1848, GCPP Parkes 5/19.

Unsurprisingly the theme of *The Princess*, a fantasy of the founding of a women's university, chimed with the preoccupations of Bessie and her circle and the wider public debates of the day on the subject. Anna Mary Howitt also wrote of her admiration for the poem, describing it as a 'poem on women's education, women's rights, women's true being.' She felt Ida strongly resembled Barbara.[65] Bessie admired both Tennyson's 'gorgeous' descriptions and Ida's 'enthusiasm for her sex,' but she disagreed with her friend's reading of the poem. She interpreted Tennyson's message as a warning: Ida 'went to the other extreme & put the men below instead of equal,' she told Barbara. She saw the marriages at the end of the poem as a reminder of the fundamental necessity of marriage 'for the continuing of the race … [T]he object is not to banish that union from all consideration in education or legal arrangements but to endeavour to make it as noble & dignified & a source of happiness to both parties as possible.'[66] Bessie admired the poem, describing it as 'one dream of beautiful images throughout.'[67] It brought together two of her passions: the cause of women's independence in the present day, and literature that transported the reader back to a romantic past of medieval chivalry.

Bessie's own ambitions as a writer led her to experiment with a range of forms. In the summer and autumn of 1849 she attempted to write a novel, the story of two 'model lovers': 'John Ashton' and 'Florence.' However, she found herself drawing closely on her own experiences and relationships, which she found distasteful:

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65. Anna Mary Howitt, letter to BLS, n.d., quoted in Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 34-5.
66. BRP, letter to BLS, January 20, 1848, GCPP Parkes 5/20. Critical responses to Tennyson's poem have been divided, since its first appearance, between those who (like Anna Mary and Bessie) saw Tennyson as a champion of women's rights and others who interpreted the poem as a satire. Donald Hall, for example, challenges the idea that *The Princess* can be read as a proto-feminist argument, as Tennyson's 'superficial' sympathies with the cause of women's emancipation do not prevent the poem ending with a 'return to a culturally sanctioned ideology of women's disempowerment and a celebration of benevolent male hegemony.' See Donald E. Hall, 'The Anti-Feminist Ideology of Tennyson's 'The Princess,'' *Modern Language Studies* 21, no. 4 (1991): 58, 62, https://doi.org/10.2307/3194982.
67. BRP, letters to BLS, 1848, GCPP Parkes 5/19 and 5/20.

> I do not think I could ever comfortably represent friends in a novel without feeling as if I were desecrating my own small temple of a few beloved names … I feel as if I should, if ever published, be telling the very expressions I have used to Emma [Evers, a childhood friend], or to you [Barbara]. In describing feeling it must be what one has felt only under fictitious names & that is unpleasant.[68]

She was much happier transforming her experiences and feelings into art through the medium of poetry. Two manuscript journals of Bessie's early poetry have survived, covering the period June 1846 to July 1849. Each is a compilation of fair manuscript copies of her poems, carefully presented in a neat hand, and including indexes, introductions and conclusions, replicating the professional presentation of published books of poetry to which she aspired.[69] These journals contain between them over one hundred poems on a variety of themes and in a range of poetic forms, chronicling Bessie's development as a poet as she became increasingly serious in her literary ambitions.

Several of the poems show Bessie drawing inspiration from her personal experiences, including places she knew well or had visited on travels with her parents.[70] Some are short and jaunty autobiographical or observational pieces, similar in tone to the verse-letter to Barbara, providing glimpses into life as a young middle-class woman.[71] In 'I'm coming out next year' the speaker, 'Miss Shaw,' describes her preparations for her entry into fashionable society, in terms which make clear Bessie's disdain for the superficial

68. BRP, letter to BLS, August 3, 1849, GCPP Parkes 5/34.
69. BRP, 'Poems written between June 1846 and Feb 1847,' GCPP Parkes 1/29 and 'Poems written Between Aug 1847 and July 1849,' GCPP Parkes 1/30.
70. For example, GCPP Parkes 1/29 contains several poems connected to Bessie's travels to the continent with her parents in the summers of 1845 and 1846, including 'Normandy,' 'La Pucelle d'Orleans' and 'A Steamboat Soliloquy.' GCPP 1/30 includes poems describing familiar places nearer to home, such as 'Hampstead Heath' 'Manufacturies. Coney Hill,' 'Westminster Bells' and 'Hastings in Spring.'
71. One poem, 'Women's Profession,' dated August 1846 (GCPP Parkes 1/29, 36), depicts a scene from one of Bessie's visits to her grandfather's home in Birmingham. It opens with the description 'Auntie & I on the sofa were sitting, / I with quill pens very busy, she knitting,' and celebrates (somewhat tongue-in-cheek) the 'placid' temperament encouraged by the aunt's craft activity, the ostensive 'woman's profession' of the title, noticeably not engaged in by the poem's speaker. This poem is dedicated 'with the greatest respects to Miss Clifford.' Miss Clifford seems to have been related to Bessie's grandfather's second wife, Martha Parkes (née Clifford) and to have become a companion and carer to the elderly John Parkes after his wife's death in 1845. Bessie describes Miss Clifford in a letter to her cousin as 'a very good tempered and well informed person and very loveable too.' BRP, letter to Mary Swainson, January 9, 1846, GCPP Parkes 3/15.

'accomplishments' such young women were encouraged to acquire to enhance their marriage prospects.[72] This poem is addressed to 'ye rhymsters of Almanacks all,' linking the trivial world of 'Miss Shaw' to the poetry published in ladies' annuals. Such publications were popular and commercially successful from the 1820s onwards, but their combination of highly decorative design and sentimental lyrical writing, aimed at a young female readership, meant they were often dismissed as trite and lacking in literary merit. Given this reputation, it is not surprising the earnest and ambitious Bessie did not feel inclined to emulate what she termed this 'staple feminine line' in her own writing, even though it offered many examples of women earning a comfortable living from their pens.[73] While many of her manuscript poems are in the conventionally-feminine mode of the times - short lyrics on flowers, scenes from nature or the consolations of religious faith - regarded as the appropriate province of the 'poetess,' there is also evidence of Bessie attempting to move outside this framework.[74] Several of the poems draw inspiration from the literary and

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72. GCPP Parkes 1/29, 46-48, dated September 1846. Bessie's own distain for this world is evident from her question in a letter to Barbara: 'Are you out? I am not sure whether I am or not. I once went to a large grown up ball which I suppose constitutes the rubicon, & abominably stupid it was too.' See BRP, letter to BLS, January 17, 1847, GCPP Parkes 5/5.

73. BRP, letter to KJ, January 24, 1847, GCPP Parkes 6/50. The link between these annuals and fashionable society was closer than just that of being part of the same conventionally-feminised cultural milieu. Publications such as *The Keepsake* (1828-1857) were keen to secure high-profile society women, including the Countess of Blessington, as editors, and Charles Heath's *The Book of Beauties* (1837) was even structured around engraved portraits of young aristocratic 'beauties' paired with lyric poems extoling these young women. However, scholarship on these publications in recent decades often stresses their importance in the professionalisation of women's writing and demonstrates that the subject matter of this writing was far more wide-ranging and serious than the stereotype of the genre would suggest. See Margaret Reynolds, 'Introduction,' in *Victorian Women Poets : An Anthology* ed. Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); Sarah Brown, 'The Victorian Poetess,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry,* ed. Joseph Bristow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 180-202; Patricia Pulham, '"Jewels - Delights - Perfect Loves.": Victorian Women Poets and the Annuals,' in *Victorian Woman Poets,* ed. Alison Chapman (Cambridge: DS Brewer, 2003), 9-31; Kathryn Ledbetter, *British Victorian Women's Periodicals: Beauty, Civilization, and Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) ; Lorraine Janzen Kooistra*, Poetry, Pictures, and Popular Publishing: The Illustrated Gift Book and Victorian Visual Culture, 1855-1875* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011); Katherine D. Harris, *Forget Me Not: The Rise of the British Literary Annual, 1823-1835* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015).

74. As Charles LaPorte notes, 'Certainly no tradition of writing in the nineteenth century is more self-consciously feminine than the poetess tradition … [N]ineteenth-century readers conceived of a categoric difference between women's and men's poetry, and they discerned the 'poetess' as a figure distinguishable … by the distinctive feminine attributes of her work: tenderness, sentimentality, an investment in … domestic affections …, conflat[ing] gender difference with specifically *literary* difference.' See LaPorte, 'George Eliot, the Poetess as Prophet,' *Victorian Literature and Culture* 31, no. 1 (2003): 160, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25058618. However, Susan Brown argues that the term poetess 'proved enabling as well as constraining for women writers in its insistence that masculinity and femininity mattered where

philosophical works she was reading, while others show her using poetry to comment on social and political issues of the day.

One example of Bessie's poetic engagement with contemporary issues is 'The Lady Abbess,' a dramatic monologue of roughly two hundred lines of blank verse, set in medieval Italy. The abbess of the title recounts her idyllic childhood before her separation from her beloved sister when their father forces one into an arranged marriage and the other into a convent. The poem ends with resignation, as the abbess endures her enforced seclusion of many years by becoming 'A tender mother to my little flock,' and waits to be reunited in death with her blood sister.[75] The date of this poem's composition, around the time Bessie was reading Tennyson's *The Princess,* suggests a link between her evocation of the 'sisterhood' of the convent and Tennyson's ambiguous fantasy of an all-female university, cloistered from the world. Tennyson's work reflects masculine anxiety at the idea of a community of women outside of male control, just as anti-Catholic criticisms of convents were often framed around the argument that all-female communities were a perversion of the 'natural' patriarchal order, removing women from their domestic role as wives and mothers.[76] Yet, notably, this is not Bessie's focus in her poem. Rather she depicts the patriarchal authority of literal and clerical fathers as unnatural and cruel, and places at the heart of this cruelty the Abbess's separation from her sister, not being denied marriage and motherhood. While 'The Lady Abbess' is a juvenile work, tending towards cliché and

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poetry was concerned. … In … complicated ways, the poetess designated a fiercely contested role in the literary market of a rapidly changing society.' See Brown, 'The Victorian Poetess,' 180-1.

75. GCPP Parkes 1/30, dated December 8, 1847. Bessie's use of the dramatic monologue in poems such as this shows her exploring different perspectives and identities in her writing as she honed her craft. Like other women poets before and after her, using this genre was also a way to create distance between herself and the speaker of her poem, at a time which the voice of the 'poetess' was assumed to be the lyrical self-expression of her 'private world of emotion.' See Glennis Byron, *Dramatic Monologue* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), 46. Byron argues that the dramatic monologue form has its origins not in the work of Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson, but in the poetry of female poets of the early nineteenth century including Felicia Hemans.

76. See Rene Kollar, *A Foreign and Wicked Institution?: The Campaign Against Convents in Victorian England* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2011).

melodrama in places, it also demonstrates how Bessie, like Tennyson, experimented with a medieval poetic setting to explore and question the position of the sexes in her own times.

Tennyson was not the only poet of the day who influenced Bessie's early poetry. Bessie greatly admired Elizabeth Barrett Browning and followed her career closely. She commented to Barbara 'I know you laugh at my love of Miss Barratt but I have such faith in her future doings,' and several of her letters include recommendations to read 'my dearly beloved … Mrs Browning,' declaring her work 'the finest ever written by a woman.'[77] Barrett Browning was a cherished role model for Bessie, a woman poet who had achieved both critical and popular acclaim on a par with her male contemporaries and who refused to limit herself to the genres and subject-matter conventionally associated with the 'poetess.' She employed a wide range of poetic forms (including the medieval ballad) and used her poetry to comment on contemporary social and political issues. Poems such as 'The Cry of the Children' (1843) and 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' (1848) articulate passionate criticism of the evils of child labour and slavery, part of what Simon Avery terms her 'poetics of power,' critiquing 'systems of power and … oppression.'[78] Later works such as *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851), a defence of Italy's fight for independence, also show her determination to participate in public political discourse on equal terms with men.

The influence of Barrett Browning can be seen in several of Bessie's manuscript poems, including 'Two Scenes of Infancy' and 'A Scene of Everyday,' both emotive depictions of poverty focused on the deaths of starving children.[79] Bessie's interest in the political

77. BRP, letter to BLS, March 30, 1848, GCPP Parkes 5/21; letter to KJ, April 1850, GCPP Parkes 6/56. See also GCPP Parkes 5/17a and 6/57. As Barrett Browning was a highly respected poet by this time, it cannot be that Barbara was laughing at Bessie's judgement; rather it was probably the *enthusiasm* with which Bessie eulogised her idol to her friends that caused amusement.
78. Stott and Avery, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 105, 180.
79. GCPP Parkes 1/29, pp.10-12, dated December 20, 1846 and 112-114,

upheavals in Europe and, like Barrett Browning, the cause of Italian nationalism, are captured in several of her poems and she followed the political situation in Europe with interest.[80] Her poems express admiration for those fighting for independence, and optimism for a future of democratic freedom from the 'stern oppression' of 'haughty Despots.'[81] This optimism in the revolutionary spirit of the times was also the theme of 'Progression,' Bessie's first published work.[82] This poem considers 'progress' more broadly, personifying it as 'one progressive power' and part of 'Creation's primal law.' In this work Bessie draws together her enthusiasm for the contemporary mood of progress and democratic reform alongside her belief that this progress is God's will. That the poem chimed with the mood within progressive circles is indicated by its publication first in the moderately radical *Birmingham Journal* on 22nd April 1848 and then in the liberal *Hastings and St Leonards News* a few weeks' later.

'Progression' was Bessie's first step towards becoming a professional writer. She made use of her father's connection to the *Birmingham Journal*, writing to the paper's new owner, John Feeney, to seek his advice on making writing her career. His reply demonstrates how shocking it was for a middle-class woman to seek fame or desire to earn money for any reason other than absolute necessity. 'You have no knowledge of what it means to write for bread and not for fancy,' Feeney told her. He acknowledged her ambitions for 'literary distinction' and flattered her that it was 'hard to pass judgement on one so young and gifted, and to say you cannot attain it.' Yet he did his best to dissuade her from such an idea on the grounds of impropriety, suggesting she would be 'elbowing others in the struggle for fame or bread. … I pray you,' he concluded, 'abandon the idea … seek the counsel of your

80. 'The Italian Exile,' 'The Mother of a Patriot' and 'Rome in 1849,' GCPP Parkes 1/29: 97-99, 100-102; GCPP Parkes 1/30, dated July 23, 1849. BRP letter to BLS, March 30, 1848, GCPP Parkes 5/21.
81. BRP 'The Italian Exile,' GCPP Parkes 1/29: 97.
82. GCPP Parkes 1/29: 103-105.

father.'[83] Despite this discouragement, Bessie persisted and several of her poems and reviews were published in the *Journal,* although there is no record of what payment she received for them, if any.[84] She also benefitted from Barbara's friendship with William Ransom, founding editor of the *Hastings and St Leonards News*.[85] Barbara and Bessie published a range of pieces in Ransom's paper: Barbara wrote articles on topics such as sanitary reform and women's education while Bessie contributed pieces such as an essay on Westminster Abbey and a review of Mary Howitt's translation of the utopian novel *Brothers and Sisters* by the Swedish feminist Fredrika Bremer, as well as a number of her own poems.[86]

In focusing on publication in regional newspapers, Bessie and Barbara were taking advantage of the proliferation of such publications during the nineteenth century. Poetry was a significant feature in both national and regional papers, useful to editors for filling space, forming part of a heterogeneous range of printed voices commenting on current events, adding an element of refinement and culture to the paper's pages or simply providing light relief from more serious matters. Within these publications, poetry was employed to fulfil a broad range of entertainment, aesthetic and journalistic functions and

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83. J Feeney, letter to BRP, October 11, 1847[?], quoted in Crompton, 'Prelude to Arcadia,' GCPP 15/70, 36-37.
84. 'Progression' by 'P' [BRP], *Birmingham Journ*al, (*BJ*) April 22, 1848, also published under the name of 'ED Rayner,' *Hastings and St Leonards News* (*HSLN*), June 2, 1848. Pieces published under the signature 'ERP' or 'BRP': Review of *Eastern Life, Past and Present* by Harriet Martineau, *BJ*, June 3, 1848; 'A Scene of Every Day,' *BJ*, July 8, 1848; 'The North Wind,' *BJ*, January 6, 1849; 'A Reverie,' *BJ*, January 27, 1849; 'Kenilworth,' *BJ*, June 9, 1849; 'A Carol for Christmas,' *BJ* December 22, 1849; 'A Translation of an Old English Thought' *BJ*, January 5, 1850; 'Christmas Comes But Once a Year, *BJ*, December 21, 1850; 'New Year's Eve and New Year's Day' , *BJ,* December 28, 1850.
85. Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 36.
86. BLS, 'The Education of Women,' *HSLN*, July 28, 1848 and 'Female Education,' *HSLN*, August 25, 1848, under the name of Esculapius (attributed to BLS by Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 36); BRP, 'Review *of Brothers and Sisters*' , *HSLN*, July 14, 1848 [anon., attributable to BRP: BRP discusses the novel in a letter to BLS, 27 May 1848[?], GCPP Parkes 5/9]; 'Westminster Cloisters,' *HSLN*, August 11, 1848, signed 'ED Rayner'; 'A Legend,' signed 'EDR,' *HSLN*, May 26, 1848. Poems published under the name 'Bernard' [BRP]: 'A Love from Dream-Land,' *HSLN*, June 16, 1848; 'London From Hampstead Heath,' *HSLN*, June 27, 1848; 'Lines,' *HSLN*, July 21, 1848; 'Two Scenes of Infancy,' *HSLN,* August 18, 1848; 'No Thoroughfare,' *HSLN*, September 29, 1848; 'The Poet's Mission,' *HSLN*, October 20, 1848; 'Eyes and No Eyes,' *HSLN,* April 27, 1849; 'The Lady Abbess' (extract taken from a longer manuscript poem in GCPP Parkes 1/30), *HSLN*, June 22, 1849.

this was reflected in the variety of pieces that Bessie published.[87] She tried to judge her market carefully. She agreed with Barbara that she could 'do better' than 'Progression' but explained 'I did not pick [it] out as the best, but as most suitable for the Birmingham paper at that time.'[88] She also composed work specifically to add her voice to debates on local issues. She composed 'No Thoroughfare,' a demand for public access to the countryside, in response to Barbara's request that she 'write for the H[astings] news about … the necessity for people to see and love and study nature … Write … a battle cry against the oppression of the selfish Squires.'[89] The friends worked collaboratively, supporting each other in their attempts to get published. Bessie's letters show her updating Barbara on submissions she made to various editors, giving her advice on how best to approach Feeney at the *Birmingham Journal* and how to adapt her writing style to suit the paper.[90]

Newspapers often selected poetry (both original compositions and previously published works) to provide some seasonal 'colour' during the year. There was, for example, often a proliferation of poems about springtime in March and April, while the period around Christmas and New Year was frequently marked with some suitably festive verses. Bessie successfully tapped into this market, publishing three poems related to Christmas and New Year in the *Birmingham Journal*.[91] While the commercial motivation of such compositions

87. Andrew Hobbs estimates that 'there were five million poems published in the periodical press in the nineteenth century,' making local newspapers 'the largest publisher of poetry in this period.' See Hobbs, 'Five Million Poems, or the Local Press as Poetry Publisher, 1800-1900,' *Victorian Periodicals Review* 45, no. 4 (2012): 488-92, https://doi.org/10.1353/vpr.2012.0044 See also Natalie M. Houston, 'Newspaper Poems: Material Texts in the Public Sphere,' *Victorian Studies* 50, no. 2 (1 January 2008): 233-42, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40060322; ; Andrew Hobbs and Claire Januszewski, 'How Local Newspapers Came to Dominate Victorian Poetry Publishing,' *Victorian Poetry* 52, no. 1 (2014): 65-87, https://doi.org/10.1353/vp.2014.0008.
88. BRP, letter to BLS, 1848, GCPP Parkes 5/27.
89. BLS letter to BRP (n.d.), GCPP Parkes 5/167, quoted in Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 37.
90. BRP, letter to BLS, 1848, GCPP Parkes 5/27. It is clear from this letter that Bessie used what influence she had with Feeney to help Barbara get her work accepted by him. This created embarrassment when Feeney praised one of Barbara's essays, sent to him by Bessie, clearly under the impression that it was Bessie's work. She assured Barbara in the same letter that she would do her best to rectify the mistake and added 'I will always send your essays if you think Miss Parkes has an Open Sesame, but please sign Leigh Smith or something that he may not think it mine.' (Ibid.)
91. 'A Carol for Christmas,' *BJ*, December 22, 1849; 'Christmas Comes But Once a Year,' *BJ*, December 21, 1850; 'New Year's Eve and New Year's Day,' *BJ*, December 28, 1850.

may seem at odds with Bessie's loftier literary aims, she was by no means placing herself in inferior poetic circles through such work. Many established 'greats' of Romantic and Victorian poetry, including Wordsworth, Tennyson, L.E.L. (Letitia Elizabeth Landon) and Barrett Browning, used periodical publications to launch their careers, and newspapers often reproduced pieces by well-known names alongside those of their own contributors.[92] Indeed, 'The Old Year and the New' by L.E.L. was reprinted in the *Birmingham Journal* in December 1849, a week after Bessie's 'A Carol for Christmas,' while Bessie's own 'New Year's Eve and New Year's Day' was published immediately below Alfred Tennyson's 'The Dying Year.' Thus publication in the provincial press gave her the encouragement of seeing her work placed alongside that of well-known and highly respected poets.

Like many other contributors' work, Bessie's and Barbara's work was published under a variety of pseudonyms, making them part of a 'secret army of Victorian citizen-journalists who connected newspapers to their communities.'[93] Such anonymity was particularly useful to women writers to circumvent any editorial bias against female authorship and avoid censure for their 'unfeminine' presentation of themselves in the public sphere of the press.[94] Bessie used several pseudonymous signatures: 'P,' 'EDR,' 'ED Rayner,' 'ERP,' 'BRP,' and 'Bernard.' Each of these concealed her identity and her gender, and 'Bernard' lent her a masculine persona. At a time when 'poetesses' were admired for work that expressed seemingly unmediated feminine emotion, and female figures were the 'aestheticized objects' of much poetry,[95] publishing a poem under a male signature helped

92. Pulham, 'Jewels - Delights - Perfect Loves,' 11-12; Hobbs, 'Five Million Poems': 489.
93. Hobbs, 'Five Million Poems': 491.
94. Hobbs and Januszewski calculate that poems published anonymously or under a pseudonym formed over fifty per-cent of the works published in in provincial newspapers during the nineteenth century and only 27 per-cent of nineteenth-century newspaper poetry was by an identifiably female writer. See Hobbs and Januszewski, 'How Local Newspapers': 78-79.
95. Brown, 'The Victorian Poetess,' 199.

ensure it would be read in a more detached way than if it was assumed to be the direct expression of the poet's feelings.

Bessie's interest in seeing her work published is evident from these endeavours but in other manuscript poems she explored the loftier significance of the artform to which she had dedicated herself. In 'The Poet,' an ambitious piece of over four hundred lines, she attempted to bring together aesthetic, moral and spiritual ideas about love, the role of poetry in the 'onward march of humanity' and the 'Poet's duty … to console the unhappy.' She drew parallels between Christ's role as 'Comforter of the weeping, strongest hope / Saviour of many hearts' and the poet's duty to 'make men ever more / The joyful creatures which will please their God.' This conception of poetry as a powerful and spiritual artform, connected to natural and eternal forces, reflects the influence of writers Bessie admired, particularly Percy Bysshe Shelley and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Her poem echoes their presentation of the poet as a genius and heroic prophet-figure performing a vital public function. Yet the explicitly Christian tenor of Bessie's poem makes it more orthodox than that of the notoriously atheistic Shelley or the pantheistic Emerson.[96]

'The Poet' also shows Bessie once again following the example of Barrett Browning, who in works such as 'A Vision of Poets' (1844) presented the poet as a Christ-like figure whose mission is to experience and articulate the shared suffering of humanity.[97] Barrett Browning's focus on suffering and martyrdom offered a version of the poet-as-prophet to

96. Bessie took her title for this poem from Emerson's 1844 essay 'The Poet,' which was in turn influenced by Thomas Carlyle and his work *On Heroes, Hero-worship and the Heroic in History* (1841). Bessie expressed her admiration for Emerson's writing in several letters to her friends, although she dismissed his theology as 'errant nonsense' (See BRP, letter to KJ, November 11, 1847, GCPP Parkes 6/51). Her poem 'Life is Our Dictionary' (GCPP Parkes 1/30 and reprinted in her *Poems,* 1852), takes its title from a statement by Emerson and presents a version of his argument that a poet needs to draw upon lived experience. Bessie also professed her love of Shelley, despite his 'blinded soul.' See BRP, letter to KJ March 8, 1849, GCPP Parkes 6/52.
97. Stott and Avery, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 82-3. Another of Bessie's poems of this period, 'The Poet's Defence' (GCPP Parkes 1/30, dated 1847) is clearly a version of Barrett Browning's 'A Vision of Poets.'

which a young woman with a strong sense of Christian duty could more easily identify. For Bessie, Barrett Browning's success as a serious and politically-engaged poet made it easier for her to believe she too could be a great female poet, rather than a feminised 'poetess.'[98] 'The Poet' can be read as Bessie's attempt, following in Barrett Browning's footsteps, to unify her views on poetry and her literary ambitions with her religious beliefs and strong sense of duty to do good in the world. The humility with which she concludes the poem, submitting her success or otherwise as a poet ('To high renown or quiet hidden paths'[99]) to God's will, enabled her to resolve the tension between her ambition to be great and her desire to do good. It also challenged John Feeney's accusation she was trying to 'elbow' aside other more deserving candidates for 'fame or bread.' At the age of twenty, with a growing portfolio of published pieces (albeit anonymously), writing offered Bessie the steadfast aim she had sought when she first left school.

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When Bessie sat down in August 1849 to write an account of her childhood and schooling, she did so with the hope, if not the expectation, that her future success as a writer might make her recollections of interest to others. Karl Weintraub states the 'genuine autobiographical effort is guided by a desire to discern and describe meaning to a life.'[100] These texts show Bessie, at the age of twenty, doing just this, identifying the origins of her political radicalism, her faith in the abilities of women and her ambition to do good in the

98. Anne Mellor argues for a long Romantic tradition of the 'female poet' as distinct from the tradition of the 'poetess,' in 'The Female Poet and the Poetess: Two Traditions of British Women's Poetry, 1780-1830,' *Studies in Romanticism* 36, no. 2 (1997): 261-276, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25601229. However, Barrett Browning's roll-call of poetic forbears in 'A Vision of Poets' includes only one woman: Sappho. This dearth of female poetic role models echoes Barrett Browning's famous assertion that 'I look everywhere for [literary] Grandmothers & see none.' See Barrett Browning, letter to Henry Chorley, 1845, quoted in Stott and Avery, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning,* 3. Marjorie Stone discusses the gendered nature of the poet figure in 'A Vision of Poets' in *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), 89-93.
99. 'The Poet,' GCPP Parkes 1/30.
100. Karl J Weintraub, 1975, quoted in Sanders, *Records of Girlhood*, 3.

world. She was also staking a claim to a public persona as a writer and drawing on a Romantic conception of the individualised self, shaped through childhood experience, using autobiography to trace her individual intellectual, political and spiritual development.[101] As she grew into adulthood, however, she would increasingly be confronted with the conflict between her ambitions to be a writer, participating in public debate, and society's assumption that womanhood meant marriage, domesticity and a selfless life of duty to others.

101. It is perhaps no coincidence that the previous year Bessie had read Goethe's autobiography. See BRP, letter to BLS, April 29, 1848, GCPP Parkes 5/22.

Chapter 2 1849-1854: Striving against the weight of custom

> Striving against the hinderance of time
> And all the weight of custom; … I will,
> I tell you, … I *will* succeed.
>
> Bessie Rayner Parkes, 'Summer Sketches' (1854)[1]

Contemplating the milestone of her twentieth birthday in June 1849, Bessie commented to her old school-friend, Kate Jevons, 'It is a solemn year. A sort of starting point for the holy race we hope to run.' Yet, for the present, her brother's precarious health prevented her and her parents looking very far into the future. While Priestley was somewhat improved that summer, they had 'little ultimate hope' he might survive.[2] Nevertheless, in August and September Bessie accompanied her father on a trip to Scotland, leaving Eliza and Priestley behind in Hastings.

The journey enabled Joseph and Bessie to enjoy their shared love of fine art and antiquities, as well as their interest in modern industrial progress. On the journey north, Bessie delighted in the fine collection of paintings and artefacts at Castle Howard near York, and was moved by the beauty of the Gothic ruins of Fountains Abbey.[3] In Glasgow they viewed 'Mr Napier's wonderful engine foundry' and 'a worked collar etc warehouse.' Reflecting her growing awareness of the conditions of the lives of the labouring classes, Bessie noted 'The ironers get 9-6 [9 shillings and sixpence] a week … but some of the workers work at home for 4D & 8D [fourpence and eightpence] a day, stitch stitch wearily indeed. It made me miserable to think of it.'[4]

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1. BRP, *Summer Sketches and Other Poems* (London: John Chapman, 1854), 35.
2. BRP, letter to KJ, June 6, 1849, GCPP Parkes 6/53.
3. BRP, Diary for 1849, GCPP Parkes 1/4, entry for August 30, 1849.
4. BRP, Diary for 1849, GCPP Parkes 1/4, entry for September 18, 1849.

From Bessie's diary a picture emerges of her father enjoying the company of his daughter and seeking to keep her happy by, for example, organising their itinerary so she could meet up with her old schoolfriends on their route. Joseph was not, however, her ideal travelling companion. To Barbara she confided that although he was 'kind,' she found his lack of imagination and curiosity frustrating:

> He looks at things so differently from us. … He is … very clever & well read, but the world I think seems to him like a huge pudding, of which he acknowledges his great ignorance, but is well contented to enjoy it, & be thankful somebody understood the cooking… [Y]esterday passing in the rail carriage a magnificent Godmade place bounded by hills, he observed "a very good place for a battle." Dear B, do you think any human being penetrated with real feeling of the utter sin & misery of war could have made such a remark? [5]

As she found herself increasingly at variance with the views of her family, she turned to her friends. During her travels she noted in her diary when she received letters from Barbara and from another close friend, Emma Evers. Emma's father died in June 1849, whereupon the family moved from their home at Netherend near Cradley, where they had been neighbours of Eliza's relatives.[6] One letter from the grieving Emma left Bessie forlorn without her company: 'without Emmie I cannot think of my tour with the intensest [sic] wonder.'[7] A three-week stay with relatives in the Midlands at the end of her holiday enabled Bessie to spend cherished time with Emma in her new home.

Bessie was swift to console Emma and reaffirm their bond of friendship: 'My little sweet Emmy, my love-bird; she nestled up to me so lovingly, so tenderly, - how I do love her; … I told her how precious she was, which she knew before.'[8] Such an intimate description

5. BRP, letter to BLS, 20 September 1849, GCPP Parkes 5/37.
6. Emma's father appears to have been Samuel Evers, a Unitarian ironmaster. This information about the Evers family has been deduced from census data and death records, correlated to the very limited information about Emma contained in Bessie's diary and letters.
7. BRP, Diary for 1849, GCPP Parkes 1/4, entry for October 4, 1849.
8. BRP, Diary for 1849, GCPP Parkes 1/4, entry for October 7, 1849.

indicates how deeply Bessie regarded this relationship, and that she and Emma were unselfconsciously comfortable expressing their feelings for each other in these terms. A modern reader might interpret their attachment as extending beyond sisterly friendship into an erotic attraction. However, to do so would ignore the lack of any evidence that Bessie regarded her intimate friendships with women as analogous to a sexual relationship between a man and a woman, or any sense that Bessie regarded these relationships as emotionally exclusive.[9] Commenting on her leave-taking from Emma at the end of her stay, she wrote in her diary that she hoped the Evers family would be happy in their new home and that 'my beloved one [will] leave it a wife.'[10]

Yet Bessie's feelings about 'little sweet Emmy' lacked the depth and complexity of her regard for Barbara, whom she idolised for her talent, intelligence, moral strength and beauty. Her diary documents her insecurity about Barbara's affection for her, and how far she was worthy of any such reciprocation. One entry records her thrill at receiving a letter from Barbara, in which Barbara had referred to Bessie's 'dear letters.' She commented, 'To be dear to Barbara seems wonderful to me, she seems so lofty, so magnificent, so half

9. Bessie's description of her relationship with Emma also needs to be read in the context of the prevailing discourse of female friendships of this time. Sharon Marcus notes 'One of the most striking differences between Victorian and twentieth century [female] friendship is how often Victorian friends used "love" interchangeably with weaker expressions, such as "fond of" of "like", and how often women used the language of physical attraction to describe their feelings for women whom a larger context shows were friends, not lovers.' Marcus's careful differentiation between emotionally-expressive female friendships and relationships between female lovers or female couples provides a more nuanced reading of female friendships, such as those which were important to Bessie, than approaches that seek to place them within what Adrianne Rich terms a 'lesbian continuum' and Judith Bennett conceptualises as forms of 'lesbian-like' behaviours. See Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' *Signs* 5, no. 4 (1980): 631-660, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3173834 and Bennett, '"Lesbian-Like" and the Social History of Lesbianisms,' *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, no.1/2 (2000): 1-24, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3704629. As Marcus argues, such interpretations - as also exemplified by Lilian Faderman's *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (1981) and Martha Vicinus's *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women 1778-1928* (2004) - did important work in drawing attention to the significance of female relationships in women's lives. However, they also blur the distinction between women friends and women lovers, not least in terms of how such relationships were understood by the women themselves and how they fitted alongside women's familial and marital relationships with men. See Marcus, *Between Women,* 56, 34-35.
10. BRP, Diary for 1849, GCPP Parkes 1/4, entry for October 24, 1849. Marcus points out that hoping a friend would marry was a common way for one woman to express her affection for another. See Marcus, *Between Women,* 44.

divine.'[11] Not surprisingly, therefore, on her return to London in late October, she was eager to be reunited with her dear friend at the Smiths' Marylebone home:

> up to dear Blandford Square to dine … Barbara is magnificent. Such a pure lofty & lovely character; brave & gentle Christian from the stern strength; & gifted moreover from the sparkling glorious light encircling her whole being; she is so scientific yet so poetical, & so deeply earnestly religious. Her face seems to me a summing up of herself; how I love to look at it … she is as nearly perfect as any one I have seen.[12]

Once back in Hastings, the friends shared walks on the beach and evenings where they read Shakespeare together. 'Read Timon of Athens to B[arbara] at night … B was particularly loving to me,' Bessie noted in November, treasuring, as she had with Emma, a moment of emotional intimacy with her dear friend. Yet she remained in awe of Barbara and unsure of where she stood in her friend's regard. 'Oh how dearly I do love & reverence Barbara,' she confided in her diary, 'how I long for her to love me dearly; I wonder if she ever will; I feel when I am looking at her so utterly unworthy of her deep affection.'[13] This affection, when Barbara bestowed it, made Bessie feel 'brave & strong willed,' but it was not guaranteed. 'Should I [feel so brave] if she cut me again?' Bessie asked herself. 'I don't know,' was her honest answer.[14]

Nevertheless, Bessie's friendship with Barbara did endure, establishing itself as a vital one in both their lives, as the depth of their bond increased both emotionally and intellectually. They provided comradeship and understanding for each other, as well as practical support and encouragement in the endeavours they undertook. In her letters, Bessie variously

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11. BRP, Diary for 1849, GCPP Parkes 1/4, entry for October 4, 1849.
12. BRP, Diary for 1849, GCPP Parkes 1/4. In a later poem, 'Two Artists,' Bessie depicts two painters, one working 'Within a little room' and the other 'Out on the far hill-side.' As Jane Rendall comments (in 'Friendship and Politics,' 150), this is likely a verse-portrait of Anna Mary Howitt and Barbara respectively. Bessie's adoring devotion to Barbara is therefore discernible in the poem's conclusion: 'Wherever Nature calls / Will this brave artist speed, / And I! - whate'er befalls, / Follow like Ganymede!' (BRP, *Poems*, second ed. 1855, 33.)
13. BRP, Diary for 1849, GCPP Parkes 1/4, entries for November 13 and 23, 1849.
14. BRP, Diary for 1849, GCPP Parkes 1/4, entry for December 13, 1849. Pam Hirsch attributes Barbara's 'cutting' of Bessie to a disparaging comment Bessie made in a letter (February 13, 1847, GCPP Parkes 5/6) about milliners, which Barbara interpreted as a slight on her mother's lowly occupation. Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon,* 20.

addressed Barbara as 'dearest Barbara,' 'dearly beloved,' 'dearest fellow' and 'beloved frater' and also bestowed on her the romantically-heroic name 'Barbarossa' - endearments that together summed up the mixture of affection, adoration and camaraderie which characterised her feelings for her closest friend. Bessie knew that Barbara understood and shared her developing outlook on social and political matters as no-one else did. 'I do think so totally differently from all about me & so must you except your father & the Howitts. I go farther & farther every year,' she told her. '[Y]ou know I began in many ways much more conservative than you; year by year conventional scales seem to fall from my eyes.'[15] Bessie recognised Barbara's profound influence on her outlook, but she also saw their views as part of a wider trend, as the increasingly liberal views of each succeeding generation contributed to the progressive 'spirit of the age.' Central to this, according to Bessie, were changing attitudes towards women's education: 'The narrow people used to say "let her learn nothing", now the same set say "let her learn in private" and we think; "let her learn however privately, she will do the rest herself, the weapons once in her hands."'[16] Bessie was by this point trying to work out how she could best use the educational 'weapons' she had acquired, first at Leam and then through the influence of Barbara and her circle, to achieve both a measure of independence for herself and some practical improvement to the wider situation of women in society.

The attention was caught by reports in the press of the atrocious pay and working conditions of middle-class women forced to support themselves financially. 'The Governess papers are awful. I can scarcely read them,' Bessie told Barbara in May 1849, expressing horror at the 'privation' of women employed as governesses, as revealed by the latest report of the

15. BRP, letter to BLS, 1849, GCPP Parkes 5/33.
16. Ibid.

Governesses Benevolent Institution.[17] In December of that year, she read in the *Morning Chronicle* a letter from Tory MP Sidney Herbert, about the plight of dressmakers. '33,000 needle women in London, 28,000 under 20!' she exclaimed in horror in her diary.[18] Governesses and dressmakers were two high-profile instances of the terrible impoverishment faced by women competing in the very few, overpopulated occupations which were open to them.[19] Herbert argued that giving alms did nothing to address the root of these women's problem. He announced the establishment of a fund to enable women to emigrate to Australia, where they would be supported in establishing a new life in a country where, in contrast to Britain, the male population greatly outnumbered females and women's work and influence was much needed.[20] Bessie was enthusiastic about Herbert's scheme, which she declared a 'present & permanent good! Not a useless morbid charity - a most noble plan.' The possibility of finding practical solutions to women's suffering and of opening up wider opportunities for their lives inspired her and Barbara: 'B delights in these plans & I feel … as if I could spend my life in them.'[21] Supporting such schemes offered her a way to fulfil her strong sense of religious duty by helping women less fortunate than herself.

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17. BRP, letter to BLS, May 30, 1849, GCPP Parkes 5/30. The Governesses Benevolent Institution was founded in 1841 to relieve some of the suffering of women working as governesses, with the establishment of an employment register, a savings bank and provision of pensions for impoverished women who could no longer continue working because of age or infirmity. The GBI published annual reports which included harrowing case studies of women who had approached the Institution for aid and these accounts were picked up by the press.
18. BRP, Diary for 1849, GCPP Parkes 1/4, entry for December 13, 1849.
19. See Ellen Jordan, *The Women's Movement and Women's Employment in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), 3-5, 65-7.
20. Sidney Herbert, Letter to the Editor, *Morning Chronicle*, December 5, 1949.
21. BRP, Diary for 1849, GCPP Parkes 1/4, entry for December 13, 1849. In her uncritical approval for Herbert's emigration scheme, Bessie was typical of her time in regarding empire as a positive force for civilization and progress in the world, offering opportunities for British men and women to better themselves. The actual efficacy of Herbert's scheme was debatable; see Swasti Mitter and Sheila Rowbotham, *Dignity and Daily Bread: New Forms of Economic Organization Among Poor Women in the Third World and the First* (Routledge, 2003), 175. However, female emigration remained a popular solution to the perceived problem of 'superfluous' women, and Bessie helped found the Female Middle Class Emigration Society in 1862.

Bessie was full of optimism at the prospect of doing something to 'push on my own sex,'[22] emboldened by her supportive female friendships. Relationships with men were, however, more problematic. Bessie had grown up enjoying the company of male cousins and the brothers of her friends, including Emma's brother Frank. As they grew into adulthood she was irritated that romance began to overshadow such friendships, at least from the male perspective. 'I think friendship between young people of different sexes possible,' she wrote to Barbara, 'but highly improbable ... [A] man would be sure to fall in love; a woman would be content with friendship.'[23] Emblematic of this problem was Robert Fane.

Bessie had briefly met Fane during her trip to Scotland. When she unexpectedly received a proposal of marriage from him two months later, she found the notion laughable. Eliza urged her to seek her father's advice, but she refused to do so. She independently wrote to decline the offer, telling Fane that she would need to know a man well before she could contemplate marrying him. Her diary entries on the matter record both her annoyance that Fane should mistake their slight friendship in this way and how the incident made her reflect on her contentment in her current life. 'A single woman is so free, so powerful,' she declared. Far from yearning for a husband, she recoiled from the idea of being 'absorbed' into a husband's life, required to give up her 'beloved' friends, or the men whose company she enjoyed, in particular 'Cousin Sam & my dear brother Frank.' She admitted that an 'intense love' might persuade a woman to give all this up, 'but that alone.'[24]

The argument that a woman might be contentedly single by choice, rather than through failing to secure a husband, was one which Bessie later would promote in public debates

22. BRP, letter to BLS, 1848[?], GCPP Parkes 5/27.
23. BRP, letter to BLS, [1849], GCPP Parkes 5/36.
24. BRP, Diary for 1849, GCPP Parkes 1/4, entries for November 24 and 25, 1849.

on the problem of 'surplus' (i.e. unmarried) women.[25] She was naïve, however, in assuming such unconventional views would be understood and accepted by those around her. Fane initially accepted Bessie's rejection contritely but then wrote in a more threatening tone, to give her a 'word of warning,' accusing her of misleading him and having another suitor.[26] At this point Bessie did seek her father's help and he employed his legal experience to bring a swift, absolute end to the matter. He also took the opportunity to lecture Bessie on taking matters into her own hands, accusing her of a reckless over-confidence borne of inexperience - a criticism which he would reiterate on various occasions over the coming years. He furthermore expressed the hope that the incident would make Bessie more respectful for the 'ways and customs' of polite society.[27]

Bessie was grateful for her father's intervention. Distressed that she had 'vexed' him, she contritely accepted some of his criticisms. However, she also defended her decision to act independently, on the grounds that she believed Eliza's advice to consult him was wrong. Despite her respect for her parents she asserted that her own conscience was a 'louder voice' that she 'must obey.'[28] She shared her thoughts on the subject in a letter to Barbara, explaining that 'I think a daughter may conscientiously disobey her father' and distinguishing between 'filial gratitude' - which she argued should be at least 'outwardly' observed - and 'filial obedience' which she felt had limits as one grew older. Respect for one's parents was no reason, she argued, to 'sacrifice conscience.'[29] For an unmarried

25. The phrase 'surplus women' appeared in response to the revelation in the 1851 census that the population included 500,000 more women than men and 2.5 million unmarried women. The assumption that this was a problem, based on the middle-class domestic ideology that women's role was marriage and motherhood rather than being economically productive, was most famously articulated in W. R Greg's 1862 article 'Why are Women Redundant?' Women's rights activists from the 1850s onwards put forward a range of responses, ranging from support for female emigration to recognition that single women should be afforded the same opportunities to live a productive life as unmarried men. See Kathrin Levitan, 'Redundancy, the "Surplus Woman" Problem, and the British Census, 1851-1861,' *Women's History Review* 17, no. 3 (2008): 359-376, https://doi.org/10.1080/09612020801924449.
26. BRP's copy of a letter from Robert Fane to BRP, November 29, 1849, GCPP Parkes 9/112.
27. JP, letter to BRP, November 1849, GCPP Parkes 2/45.
28. BRP, letter to JP, December 3, 1849, GCPP Parkes 2/36.
29. BRP, letter to BLS, n.d., GCPP Parkes 5/3.

daughter to challenge her father's directions went against expectations of daughterly duty and the accepted order of male authority.[30] Bessie's stance also demonstrates how her personal conscience and political consciousness went hand-in-hand as she began to critique patriarchal authority in all its forms.

Such a stance was difficult for Bessie to maintain. While Barbara was financially independent, and (due to the Smiths' unconventional lifestyle) free from many of the domestic ties that shaped most unmarried daughters' lives, Bessie, like most women, was constrained by family responsibilities. For all her exaltation of the free and powerful life of the single woman, at times she felt 'hampered' by her financial dependence on her father and resented being required to accompany her mother to what she described to Barbara as 'horrid fashionable' society events where she was forced to 'hold my tongue … utter no heterodox wickedness and sit utterly swamped and nullified in my blue silk dress.'[31] Bessie's relationships with men remained a particular source of conflict, including that with 'Cousin Sam.'

Samuel Blackwell was a Dudley ironmaster twelve years Bessie's senior, and the widower of one of Joseph's relations, Harriet Twamley. Bessie had met him and his wife soon after their wedding in 1845 and she had been moved by the sudden death of Harriet and the couple's baby less than a year later. When she met Sam again soon after his bereavement,

30. Conflicts between father and daughter also appear in the biographies of other famous, independently-minded women of the period, including Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Marian Evans. Janet Oppenheim identifies an 'extended debate over the rights and duties of spinster daughters that the Victorian women's movement pursued for decades.' For example, in 1865 Frances Power Cobbe would present a paper to the all-female Kensington society entitled 'The Limits of Obedience of Daughters,' arguing publicly, just as Bessie had previously done privately, that adult daughters had the right to use their independent judgment of how they should conduct themselves and were under no obligation to obey their parent if they regarded their demands as unreasonable. See Oppenheim, 'A Mother's Role, a Daughter's Duty: Lady Blanche Balfour, Eleanor Sidgwick, and Feminist Perspectives.' *Journal of British Studies* 34, no. 2 (1995): 197, https://doi.org/doi:10.1086/386074. See also Caine, *Victorian Feminists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 132-3.
31. BRP, letter to BLS, May 30, 1850, GCPP Parkes 5/48.

this tragedy lent him a romantic air that attracted her sympathy. She enjoyed their conversations and was pleasantly surprised, after her return to Hastings, to receive a letter from him, enclosing the gift of a book. Thus had begun an intermittent correspondence between the two, where he expressed sympathy for her growing political and social interests. She later explained that, after leaving Leam and being shocked at what she witnessed of men's immorality, she had found in Sam 'a man … as good as women' who restored her faith in men and society, and whose friendship she therefore valued, though they did not meet in person again for several years.[32]

Her unorthodox view of her friendship with this older man was not shared by her parents. She was annoyed at her mother's reaction, in January 1850, to the news that Sam was about to make a reappearance in their lives. Bessie and Eliza were staying with the Twamley family when Sam was invited to dinner. Eliza, keen to avoid giving Sam any encouragement as a potential suitor for Bessie, made a 'fuss' and wanted to write to Joseph, although Bessie persuaded her not to. 'All this,' she complained to Barbara, 'because of the dangerous neighbourhood of a male friend whom I may not like as well as I did at simple seventeen.'[33] In the event, Bessie found that she *did* still enjoy Sam's company at the dinner and when they met again at various social events in the coming months. She somehow managed to allay Eliza and Joseph's concerns, to the extent that they 'behaved very civilly to him.'[34] This enabled her to innocently enjoy the development of the friendship without any awareness of the potential hazards of a romantic entanglement. When in April 1850 she and Barbara discussed how they should console a friend who was unhappy in love, she pondered 'I wonder if you will ever have to pull me thro love affairs! Does not the mere notion sound eminently ridiculous. I am sure you will not[,] nor I you.' She did not reject the idea that

32. BRP, letter to SB, January 30, 1855, GCPP Parkes 9/10.
33. BRP, letter to BLS, January 13, 1850, GCPP Parkes 5/44.
34. BRP, letter to BLS, [n.d.], GCPP Parkes 5/28a.

she and Barbara would both marry but imagined that in their relationships with men they would avoid the 'ridiculous' heartache of clichéd romance, as 'our ideas of love & marriage are so particularly different to the current ones.'[35] Rejecting conventional notions of matrimony would become a long-running strand in Bessie's feminist outlook.

Perhaps Joseph and Eliza's acquiescence towards Sam also reflected the fact that they now had more pressing concerns, as Priestley's health continued to deteriorate. He passed away in Hastings on June 26th, 1850, ten days after Bessie's twenty-first birthday, with Eliza and Bessie at his bedside. Bessie's relationship with her brother was not close, as they had not spent much time together before his illness.[36] Yet she was naturally upset by his death and worried for her grieving parents.[37]

Barbara was close at hand to support her friend through these sorrows and suggested they travel to Europe. The main purpose of the journey was to visit Anna Mary Howitt and another friend, Jane Benham, who were studying art in Munich.[38] Barbara proposed they travel unchaperoned, which was typical of Barbara's lack of concern with notions of middle-class respectability, but it was a novel notion for the more conventional Parkes family. Joseph and Eliza's concerns about this arrangement are not recorded, but presumably they were persuaded of the benefit to their daughter of such a holiday. A

35. BRP, letters to BLS, April 23, 1850 and November 25, 1851, GCPP Parkes 5/46 and 5/59.
36. Bessie's daughter stated that Bessie's letters from Leam to her brother 'betray a great desire on her part to keep in touch with Priestley; he was, however four years older than herself, and entirely unlike her in temperament. He was also, it is clear, extremely spoilt, in so far as her conscience allowed it, by his mother.' See MBL, 'Before she found Arcadia,' GCPP Parkes 15/32, 17.
37. BRP letter to BLS, June 26, 1850, GCPP Parkes 5/51.
38. Howitt and Bentham lived entirely independently in Munich, without parents or a maid, which was highly unconventional for young, single, middle-class women at this time. They were serious in their ambition to become professional painters and studied art under the tutelage of Wilhelm von Kaulbach, a history painter and director of the city's Academy of Fine Arts. See Alexandra Wettlaufer, 'The Politics and Poetics of Sisterhood: Anna Mary Howitt's *The Sisters in Art*,' *Victorian Review* 36, no. 1 (2010) : 133, https://doi.org/10.1353/vcr.2010.0005.

compromise was agreed - they would meet up with the travellers in Munich, to accompany them safely home.[39]

The journey through Belgium, Germany and Switzerland proved the ideal way for Bessie to escape her family's grief for a time. Her letters to Barbara's sisters, Annie and Bella, are heady with excitement about everything, including the 'gallant captain' of the steamer on Lake Constance, with his 'manly bearing … blue & gilt uniform … and … winning moustache' who failed, despite his best efforts, to win over the two friends.[40] Bessie and Barbara turned heads themselves with their unusual appearance. Their choice of dress was, Bessie maintained, selected on the basis of 'pure Kantian reason & not … female adornment' and consisted of sturdy walking boots, skirts several inches above the ankle and (most shockingly) no corset. Barbara captured the pleasure of such liberating dress in a poem:

> Oh! Isn't it jolly
> To cast away folly
> And cut all one's clothes a bit shorter
> (A good many pegs)
> And rejoice in one's legs
> Like a free-minded Albion's daughter.[41]

However Bessie was more sensitive than Barbara to the attention created by their outlandish appearance. She complained to Annie and Bella that Barbara's 'frightful' blue tinted sunglasses (worn to protect her weak eyes) looked 'so queer' that she drew laughter and cat-calls from the locals. Barbara in turn told her sisters not to believe Bessie's 'dreadful stories … If I have my spectacles, she has her boots …When she has made friends with a

39. Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 43.
40. BRP, letter to Anne and Bella Leigh Smith, August 24, 1850, GCPP Parkes 6/63.
41. BLS, 'Ode on the Cash Clothes Club (n.d.), quoted in Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 43-4. An ink sketch by Barbara shows Bessie in this dress striding up a mountain with a volume of poetry in her hand. Aside from its practicality, Wettlaufer stresses the symbolism of Bessie, Barbara (and Anna Mary Howitt) adopting this unconventional dress 'to establish their collective identity as women for whom nobility, labour and art are more important than elegance and bourgeois propriety.' See Wettlaufer, 'The Politics and Poetics of Sisterhood': 132.

fine moustachio'd German, on she draws the enchanted boots (and vice versa to a certain waist band) and stumps about bitterly thinking of an Englishman.'[42]

Yet if that was a hint Bessie was brooding over Sam Blackwell, she did not pine for long, for it was not only a 'moustachio'd German' whom Bessie befriended. She described to Annie and Bella her encounter with Mr Turner, a young London lawyer - 'a slight elegant creature with a straight intellectual brow & fascinating manner' - travelling with his sister, whom Bessie 'fell in with' during the train journey to Heidelberg. Her account of what happened next is spirited and self-deprecating, a delightful example of Bessie's humour and her assurance as a writer of anecdote:

> at Heidelberg … we went up to the Castle to see a glorious sunset; & - He was there - it was damp; & I … had put on my - Big Boots - Up & down went we, by the beautiful red ruin ... His heart warmed; I know it did; & I - shall I confess it - mine - was - not cool. We talked of romantic old times (such a touching subject, suggestive of knights, ladyloves, etc). Suddenly, with an air of the tenderest interest he turned; - & a fine smile lighting up his beautiful eyes, he said "I fear you will be wet." I - oh that I live to record it; I - insensate ass, goose, fool; in my simplicity; my innocence of all arts of coquetry, delicately turned up my sole from under my long robe and showed it him. I showed him my sole, but not my soul; … a sarcastic smile lit up His face with a cold metallic glitter, & he said "I think you are better provided than I am." And those were the last words I heard from his dear lips. Oh Boots, Boots, Boots, how shall I henceforth bear the sight of you[?] The Boots I put on for my defence have turned out my destruction. Boots (it shall be recorded) were my death …[43]

Bessie teasingly ended the tale of her passion-killing Big Boots with the addendum '& you may - believe as much as you like.' Even if she embellished the truth of her naivety for comic effect, she was clearly enjoying her freedom away from her parents' gaze, gaining confidence in her ability to look after herself.

42. BRP, letter to Anne and Bella Leigh Smith, 2 September 1850, GCPP Parkes 6/64; Hester Burton, *Barbara Bodichon 1827-1891* (London: John Murray, 1949), 33.
43. BRP, letter to Anne and Bella Leigh Smith, September 2, 1850, GCPP Parkes 6/64.

When they reached Munich, Bessie and Barbara were delighted to meet up with Anna Mary and Jane, visiting their lodgings and their art studio. The friends' excitement is captured in Anna Mary's account of their visit, which she described (in her published memoir of her time in Munich) as 'days which we will never forget.' Like Bessie, Anna Mary idolised Barbara, whom she pseudonymised in her memoir as 'Beloved Justina.' She described in detail 'Justina's' idea of a 'beautiful sisterhood in Art,' a vision inspired by the independent artistic lives which Anna Mary and Jane had established for themselves. At the centre of this 'sisterhood' was an imagined 'Associated Home' for women 'all striving after a pure moral life,' contributing their labour to the life of the community and supporting each other in their art.[44] This was a utopian, co-operative model of women's artistic endeavour and community, echoing the friends' earlier discussions about the female university in Tennyson's *The Princess*.[45] The concept of a 'sisterhood' of female collaboration would prove to be an enduring and influential one for Bessie, both in her literary endeavours and for her wider conceptions of women's work outside the domestic sphere.

Bessie's first experience of independent travel broadened her intellectual and artistic horizons and strengthened her sense of being part of a supportive community of like-minded women. Once back in England, she reaffirmed her determination to make her mark on the world, for herself and her sex. On the eve of her twenty-first birthday, she had recorded in the privacy of her diary a solemn prayer for her future, asking God to help her 'lead a good life; one blessed for humanity, successful in arts and poetry, and happy for myself … May our generation and our sex be better for our having been born.'[46] Inspiration on how she

44. Anna Mary Howitt, *An Art-Student in Munich*, vol. 1 (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longman, 1853), 90-91.
45. This idea of artistic sisterhood also appears in Howitt's novella *Sisters in Art* (1852), where the protagonists are a collaborative group of female artists, starkly contrasting with the competitive individualism of the male art world, including the contemporaneous Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. See Wettlaufer, 'The Politics and Poetics of Sisterhood': 134-40.
46. BRP, diary entry "Near Twelve - June 15th - 1850", GCPP Parkes 1/4b.

might go about achieving this now appeared, in the form of Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman to qualify and register as a medical doctor.

Bessie had taken a keen interest in Dr Blackwell's career since learning of her graduation from a New York medical school in 1849. She believed women like Blackwell could do 'a vast deal of good' in medicine and saw the advantage, 'as a matter of delicacy,' of women patients being attended to by female doctors.[47] Her interest in this pioneering woman was all the greater because the Bristol-born Blackwell was Sam Blackwell's cousin. After graduating Dr Blackwell had trained in Paris, where an eye infection had left her partly blind, putting an end to her ambitions to become a surgeon. In October 1850 she moved to London, to train at St Bartholomew's Hospital, and Bessie lost no time in gaining an introduction through Sam. She visited Elizabeth at her rooms just a few weeks after her arrival, when she was thrilled by her heroic tale of 'energy, & hope; of repulses from men, & scorn of her own countrywomen.'[48] She immediately set about enlisting Barbara's help, to support Elizabeth in her endeavours to open up medicine as a career for women and to befriend a woman alone in an unfamiliar city. They brightened up Elizabeth's lodgings with pictures and flowers, and invited her to their homes, quickly establishing themselves as her friends and supporters.[49] They explored the possibility of helping Elizabeth, either by founding a women's hospital in Britain, or setting Elizabeth up in a medical practice. Barbara's wealth and connections meant she was able to put Elizabeth in contact with other sympathetic women such as Helena, Comtesse de Noailles and Lady Noel Byron (widow of the poet), who were in a position to offer financial backing to such an enterprise.[50]

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47. BRP, letter to KJ, March 8, 1849, GCPP Parkes 6/52.
48. BRP, letter to BLS, November 30, 1850, held in the Blackwell Family Papers, Library of Congress, quoted in Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 54.
49. Elizabeth Blackwell, *Autobiographical Sketches*, cited in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women,* 29.
50. Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 54. One introduction that Barbara was unable to arrange for Elizabeth (because of the Leigh Smiths' 'tabooed' status) was to her cousin Florence Nightingale, who was at this time facing her family's opposition in her ambition to train as a nurse. Barbara and Florence's Aunt

Elizabeth was touched by Bessie and Barbara's friendship, which for the first time gave her the experience of being part of a circle of sympathetic women, rather than an outsider. However, despite her own unconventional life, she found her new friends' behaviour remarkable. Her description of Bessie in a letter to her sister shows how Bessie's appearance and behaviour, which rejected the conventions of middle-class femininity, were perceived as outlandish by others: 'She will not wear corsets, she won't embroider, she reads every heretic book she can get hold of, talks of following a profession, and has been known to go to an evening party without gloves!' Elizabeth also astutely recognised that Bessie was 'a very noble girl, but chaotic and without definite aim.'[51] This was an accurate assessment: in one letter, Bessie compared herself to Barbara, making progress in her artistic training, and asked 'What shall I do? What shall I educate myself for?' Her early hopes for a literary career had not flourished into greater success and she was unsure of her talent as a writer, feeling 'not in the least clever.' Her lofty conception of the real task of authorship, as the communication and translation of 'great truths,' left her feeling unequal to her chosen calling. 'I can produce nothing' she declared, in a particularly despondent mood.[52] Nevertheless, she continued to submit work for publication in newspapers and periodicals, and she could be tenacious in her efforts. She sent one article to Charles Dickens (presumably for publication in his magazine *Household Words*), but she told Barbara she would try another editor if Dickens did not accept it.[53]

Julia was possibly the one to bring about a meeting. Florence invited Elizabeth to her family's home, Embley Park, in April 1851, where she shared her dream of turning the house into a hospital. Although the two women were later to have very differing views of the role women should play in medicine, in 1851 the figure of Elizabeth Blackwell was an inspiration to Florence Nightingale, reinforcing her in her resolve to follow her own chosen path in nursing and medical reform. Mark Bostridge, *Florence Nightingale* (London: Penguin, 2009), 152-54.

51. Elizabeth Blackwell, letter to Emily Blackwell, November, 20 1850, quoted in Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 54.

52. BRP letter to BLS, December 5, 1849, GCPP Parkes 5/39.

53. BRP letter to BLS, c. 1850, GCPP Parkes 5/54a. Bessie continued to publish poems in the *Hastings and St Leonards News* during this period, including 'Past and Present,' February 1, 1850; '1793,' February 22, 1850; 'The Alps. Thusis,' December 13, 1850; 'Summer's Song,' April 25, 1851; 'To An Author Who Loved

Dickens's approbation may have been out of Bessie's reach, but life in London provided her with ample opportunities to meet other literary greats of her day and feel part of their world. Joseph's connections included the 'banker poet,' Samuel Rogers, and Bessie was twice invited to his social breakfasts, renowned at the time as the preeminent meeting-place of the leading figures in literature.[54] The novelist William Thackeray was a frequent visitor at the Parkes' home; Eliza much preferred his company to that of her husband's politician friends and Bessie remembered him with affection.[55] Through Mary and William Howitt (themselves well-connected in London literary circles), Bessie was invited to an evening soirée at the home of the radical publisher John Chapman, where guests included the Swedish writer Fredrika Bremer, a feminist whose novels Mary Howitt translated and Bessie much admired. Bessie was thrilled to be in Bremer's presence, and when they said goodbye to each other at the end of the evening, Bessie 'kissed her for all the hours and years for which her creations have been like real experience to me … I am almost crying now I write it,' she told her mother.[56]

Among the other guests that evening was Marian Evans, who had recently moved to London and was lodging with the Chapmans. Bessie had first met the 'very clever' Miss Evans during a visit to Warwickshire the previous month and had immediately determined that she and Barbara must get to know her well.[57] Marian, who in a few years would become well-known as the novelist George Eliot, was at this point establishing herself as a

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Truth more than Fame,' June 27, 1851; 'Lines,' July 4, 1851; 'A Dream,' September 26, 1851; 'The Cloud-Face,' October 10, 1851; 'With Primroses,' October 17, 1851.

54. Letter from 'Mr Roger' to JP, dated July 27, 1853, GCPP Parkes 4/42; BRP, *A Passing World* (London: Ward and Downey, 1897), 5.

55. Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 14.

56. BRP letter to EP, October 16, 1851, GCPP Parkes 2/3.

57. BRP letter to BLS, September 11, 1851, GCPP Parkes 5/57. Bessie first met Marian Evans through Lucy Field, when they visited Rosehill, the Coventry home of Marian's close friends, Charles and Cara Bray. Lucy was friendly with Cara and is mentioned several times in Marian's letters, e.g. letter to BRP, May 15, 1853, *The George Eliot Letters. Vol.2. 1852-1858*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 101.

professional writer, employed as the anonymous editor of the *Westminster Review*. She was already connected with the Parkes family: Joseph had provided funds to enable Chapman to produce an English version of Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* and Marian had been employed as the (anonymous) translator.[58] *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (1846) was the first major work of this intelligent, serious-minded and determined woman, for whom Bessie felt both instinctive affection and professional admiration. Joseph was also fond of Marian and invited his protégée to dinner whenever he was entertaining anyone of political or literary note, where she was often the only woman present apart from Eliza and Bessie.[59]

While Marian Evans' literary fame lay in the future, in the summer of 1852 the most famous woman writer of the day was also in London. Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her husband Robert were visiting England from their home in Italy, during which time they attended a function hosted by Ann Procter, a childhood friend of Eliza Parkes. Ann's husband Barry Procter was the successful poet 'Barry Cornwell'; according to Bessie, 'everybody of any literary pretension whatever seemed to flow in and out of' the Procters' London home.[60] It was there Bessie met her literary heroine:

> On Wednesday 21st July [1852] I went to Mrs Procter's to meet Mr and Mrs Browning. Elizabeth Barrett Browning! At last, friend so long and so passionately loved as she has been to me. I knew her books so long ago, when I never heard her name, that she seemed to belong to myself like some saint to be worshipped, the original in heaven, the image locked up in my shrine. … [S]he, my idol, my darling, came leaning on her husband's stout arm; such a little creature, so fragile, so dainty, so inexpressively womanly …, her whole being tho' exquisitely feminine is full of firmness & power. … When I went away I went behind her and said very frightenedly, "Good night Mrs Browning" she turned round and said "Oh, goodnight." And then

58. Joseph Parkes, although increasingly close to the Anglican creed in his personal faith, nevertheless maintained a dissenting political interest in challenging the Anglican establishment. His commissioning of the Strauss translation shows his key role in encouraging debate in Britain about 'higher criticism,' controversial studies of the Bible as an historical document rather than divinely-revealed truth. See BRP, 'The Parkes of Warwick,' n.d., GCPP Parkes 1/10.
59. The image of Marian 'descending the great staircase of our house … on my father's arm' was recalled many years later by Bessie, in her reminiscences of her friendship with the famous George Eliot. See BRP letter to BLS, March 27, 1852, GCPP Parkes 5/60; BRP, *In a Walled Garden* (London: Ward & Downey, 1895), 17.
60. BRP, *In A Walled Garden*, 162.

> she gave me a very good shake of the hand. May God Almighty forever bless her for all she has been to me.'[61]

Bessie's emotional response to this encounter, even more than her earlier meeting with Bremer, demonstrates her passionate devotion to literature and her intense admiration of her poetic heroine. Meeting Barrett Browning in person was the realisation of the kinship she long felt with a woman who had shown her what women could achieve in literature, combining artistry and intellect (traits assumed to be masculine) with 'womanly' femininity. In fact Bessie's diary entry echoed closely the sentiments and imagery of an ode dedicated to Barrett Browning which Bessie had already penned, for inclusion in her soon-to-be-published first volume of poetry. Anne Procter brought this tribute to Barrett Browning's attention, eliciting, a few weeks after their meeting, a letter to Bessie from the senior poet:

> I little thought when I had the pleasure of sitting by you & hearing your name at Mrs Procter's, that you had addressed to me such touching verses. Mrs Procter has brought your volume to me & pointed out the page which, she says, relates to me — and now, I can't help writing to you to thank you warmly from my heart for the words which have touched it so deeply. Thank you, thank you. There was no need of the grace & poetical feeling—the kindness would have been enough to have moved me without the rest. And the kindness makes it pleasanter, too, to acknowledge the merit.
> I hope I shall see you again before I leave London. Always I shall wish you the best good, - & you will believe .. will you not? .. that these are the wishes of a "friend".[62]

The page Anne Procter had pointed out was the ode 'To *****,' where Bessie referred to Barrett Browning as 'my friend.'[63] Therefore when the illustrious poet declared herself Bessie's 'friend,' she was both making clear she had read her admirer's poem and was reciprocating its sentiment of poetic friendship and female literary solidarity.

61. BRP, Journal for 1852-1854, GCPP Parkes 1/35.
62. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, letter to BRP, August 27, 1852, *The Browning Correspondence Online Edition*, https://www.browningscorrespondence.com/correspondence/3365/ (accessed June 30, 2020).
63. BRP, *Poems* (London: Chapman, 1852), 93.

Friendship was one of the themes of Bessie's first poetry volume, which was dedicated to Barbara and also contained an ode to Elizabeth Blackwell.[64] In writing her tribute to Barrett Browning, Bessie also placed herself into a tradition of women poets addressing each other, which functioned as an imagined dialogue across generations and helped establish a sense of poetic 'professional sisterhood.'[65] What characterises Bessie's poem within this tradition is the modest tone of the final lines:

> Indeed, I should not dare - but that this love,
> Long nursed, demands expression, and alone
> Speaks by love's dear strength - to approach near you
> In words so weak and poor beside your own.[66]

Bessie was not attempting to assert her own poetic status alongside Barrett Browning, only to express sincere admiration and love. Receiving a response from her heroine which praised both the 'merit' of her 'poetic feeling' and her 'kindness' transformed this fictitious 'approach' to her illustrious poetic role model into a gratifying real-life connection. It also marked the beginning of a friendly acquaintance between Bessie and the Brownings, which would continue even after Elizabeth's death in 1861.

The publication of Bessie's poetry volume in November 1852 was a profound moment for Bessie, as her diary entry demonstrates:

> My poems are out. … They have had 3 favourable reviews, & [are] already connected with one of my deepest experiences. Many have now the deepest of my thoughts … I think they are going to succeed in the present and limited sense. In the future and nobler sense I have sworn to myself that I will be a poet.[67]

64. BRP, 'To E.B.,' *Poems*, 94.
65. Margaret Reynolds in *Victorian Women Poets*, ed. Leighton and Reynolds, xxx. Barrett Browning wrote poems ("Felicia Hemans", "L.E.L.'s Last Question") addressed to her poetic predecessors, as well as two sonnets ("To George Sand: A Desire" and "To George Sand: A Recognition") addressed to the French contemporary she much admired. Christina Rossetti responded to Barrett Browning's "L.E.L.'s Last Question" with her own poem, "L.E.L".
66. BRP, *Poems*, 93.
67. BRP, Journal for 1852-1854, entry for November 13, 1852, GCPP Parkes 1/35.

The seriousness of her commitment to her poetic vocation is evident here in her distinction between immediate 'success' and her aim to achieve more lasting and elevated recognition as a poet. Yet she was wary of such ambition, and defended herself against the charge of 'conceit':

> I don't believe such an experience as this would make one conceited. To be a poet is to profess to teach spiritual things. And ah! how weak one feels, how weak one is, so brought in contact with the constant idea of God, and profess to speak his will with peculiar directness. ... Ah! it is not really doing any true work that makes one conceited, that only brings one more in presence of the great God whose servants we are.[68]

This conception of the poet as a spiritual teacher and a passive instrument for the articulation of spiritual truth demonstrates once again the influence on Bessie of the Romantic poets.[69] Her fusing of Romantic and Christian notions of spiritual truth and duty defines this first collection published under her own name.

Like her poetry journals (and as was common for verse collection of the day) the fifty-three poems in this volume comprised an eclectic range of themes and genres, but through them runs a consistent theme of her serious moral purpose as a writer. The opening poem, 'Warning' established a strong sense of urgency to prove her spiritual worth. In the first line 'Time, rushing past' wakes the sleeping speaker, who is then left contemplating the 'abysmal darkness' between her and eternity. 'Soul, work and pray,' she urges, 'That he may take thee unto the Divine.' The thirteen line truncated sonnet form creates a sense of incompleteness, of work and prayer still to be done. The rest of the volume shows Bessie placing her poetry at the service of her faith. In this, she was following the dominant trend in women's verse at the time: as Elizabeth Gray points out, 'expressions of piety … inform

68. BRP, Journal for 1852-1854, entry for November 13, 1852, GCPP Parkes 1/35.
69. This conception of the poet also appears at the level of Bessie's imagery. In 'The Moors' (*Poems,* 1852, 10) Bessie employs the metaphor of the Aeolian harp, a trope which appears in poems by Coleridge, Shelley and Emerson. Also known as the 'wind harp,' for the Romantic poets it symbolises the harmony of poet, nature and the divine, with the poet acting, like the harp, as the instrument through which divine 'inspiration' is made audible.

the majority of women's verse' in the Victorian era, from the work of high-profile writers including Barrett Browning to obscure women poets publishing in devotional anthologies and periodicals.[70]

Nevertheless, several reviewers assumed 'B.R. Parkes' was male, a presumption, reflecting the rarity of women publishing under their own names, which amused Bessie.[71] Reviewers' responses varied considerably depending on whether they believed they were reading work by a man or a woman. According to the *Spectator,* the style of 'Mr Parkes' contained echoes of Tennyson, while the *New Quarterly Review* commented on the 'not ungraceful ease in his lyrics.'[72] The *Critic* discerned traces of Hood and Coleridge in Bessie's 'A Ballad for Smuggling Days,' one aspect, according to the reviewer, of the 'many-sidedness' of a poet with 'real stuff in him.' *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* also praised the poems as 'evidence of considerable power on the part of the writer. He has thought deeply and justly on many things.' This recognition and respect for the serious-minded tone of much of the volume was not matched by reviewers who knew the poet was female. The *Gentleman's Magazine* did not find in the work by 'Miss Parkes' any resemblance to male poets. Instead the reviewer discerned the influence of Barrett Browning in a fondness for irregular poetic metre and warned her 'Mrs. Browning … is an unsafe guide' in such matters.[73] Meanwhile the *Leader* declared Miss Parkes's poems contained 'Talent … and beauty' but expressed the writer's 'reading, not her heart,' the elegant work of a leisured amateur, 'not works of passionate Art.'[74]

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70. F. Elizabeth Gray, *Christian and Lyric Tradition in Victorian Women's Poetry* (New York: Routledge, 2010) Google Books, Introduction. Gray argues that for Victorian women 'Christianity centred every discussion and every endeavour'; writing devotional poetry could be 'liberatory' for these women, enabling them to 'do Church work' (such as biblical exegesis) that was generally the preserve of men and articulate a personal relationship with God.
71. BRP, letter to Mary Swainson, January 2, 1853, GCPP Parkes 3/25.
72. 'Publications Received,' *The Spectator*, November 13, 1852, 18; 'Miscellaneous,' *New Quarterly Review* Vol. 2:5, January 1853, 106.
73. 'Miscellaneous Reviews,' *The Gentleman's Magazine,* January 1853, 65.
74. 'Poems,' *The Critic*, January 1, 1853, 16; 'Poems,' *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol. 19:228, December 1852, 762; 'Recent Poems,' *The Leader*, January 8, 1853, 43.

Bessie might have hoped for a favourable mention in the *Westminster Review,* owned by her publisher, John Chapman, and edited by her friend Marian Evans. On seeing some of the draft poems in July, Marian had encouraged Bessie: 'Publish the poems with all my heart, but don't stop there. Work on and on and do better things still.'[75] Marian was an exacting literary critic and did not flatter Bessie with insincere praise of her work. Marian's short critique of *Poems* in the *Westminster* was kindly but restrained, describing it as a 'little volume' containing 'some genuine poetry … characterised by a spiritual vein of sentiment … in language graceful and melodious.'[76] Bessie respected Marian's opinion, recognising in her an 'odd mixture of truth and fondness' which meant she 'expresses every opinion, good and bad, with the most unflinching plainness and yet she seems able to see faults without losing tenderness.'[77] She therefore took Marian's muted praise with good grace.

Her friendship with Marian deepened over the coming months, as the two women came to know each other better. At first Bessie had wondered if she or Barbara would ever 'love' Marian rather than solely admire her for her intellect and 'high moral purpose.' Yet she suspected Marian had a greater 'capacity for warm affection' than had been apparent at first.[78] This affection - so important to Bessie as a marker of real friendship - did indeed reveal itself over time. In a diary entry for January 1853, Bessie recorded 'A long walk with Marian in Hyde Park … one of those walks which mark days in red ever after.'[79] The following month she told Barbara that Marian 'has seemed to have finally made up her

75. Marian Evans (ME), letter to BRP, July 15, 1852, reproduced in *The George Eliot Letters. Vol.2.*, ed. Haight, 44.
76. 'Contemporary Literature of England,' *Westminster Review* Vol. 59, January 1853, 287.
77. BRP letter to BLS February 12, 1853, GCPP 5/66.
78. BRP letter to BLS March 6, 1852, GCPP Parkes 5/60a. Bessie predicted to Barbara that 'I think she will alter. Large angels take a long time unfolding their wings; but when they do they soar out of sight. Miss Evans either has no wings, or, which I think is the case, they are coming; budding.'
79. BRP Journal for 1852-1854, GCPP Parkes 1/35.

mind to love me.'[80] Barbara also came to know and love Marian, establishing a circle of close friendships which would last until Marian's death in 1880.

For her part, Marian had reported to her Coventry friends that 'Miss Parkes is a dear, ardent, honest creature, and I hope we shall be good friends.'[81] Her growing affection for Bessie is evident in letters which quickly shifted in their address from 'My dear Miss Parkes' to 'Dear Friend' and 'Dear Bessie,' and were soon being signed off 'Yours, with hearty love' and 'Ever thine.'[82] At times Marian adopted the stance of a protective elder towards Bessie (who was ten years her junior), addressing her as 'Chère Enfant' and telling her 'Now, dear child, don't be playing pranks and shocking people, because I am told they lay it all to me and my bad influence over you.'[83] The nature of any 'pranks' Bessie might have played is unknown, but Marian's concern stemmed from her awareness that her life amidst the bohemian Chapman circle was very different in character from the conventional morals of the Parkes' home in Savile Row. Probably unknown to Bessie, Marian had been involved in a relationship (possibly a sexual one) with John Chapman, and she continued to lodge at his home, together with his wife, Susannah, and his mistress, Elizabeth Tilley (his children's governess). Joseph Parkes, with his connections to Chapman, would have been aware of such rumours and perhaps it was he who expressed concern. Any hint of Bessie being caught up in such a scandalous situation would have done her a great deal of harm in an age when a woman's good name was closely linked to her reputation for sexual purity.[84]

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80. BRP letter to BLS February 12, 1853, GCPP 5/66.
81. ME, letter to Charles and Cara Bray and Sara Hennell, February 2, 1852, quoted in Rosemary Ashton, *George Eliot, a Life* (London: Penguin, 1997), 95.
82. ME, letters to BRP, January - July 1852. In one letter (dated June 15, 1852) Marian addressed Bessie as 'Dear Hamadryad' (i.e. 'tree nymph') after receiving a letter from Bessie in which she extolled the beauty of the countryside where she was staying. *The George Eliot Letters. Vol.2.,* ed. Haight, 7, 30, 32, 45.
83. ME, letters to BRP, June 4 and July 15, 1852. *The George Eliot Letters. Vol.2.,* ed. Haight, 32, 44.
84. Ashton, *George Eliot, a Life*, 84-85; Kathryn Hughes, *George Eliot: The Last Victorian* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998), 160-61.

However, there was no suggestion Marian Evans was considered an unsuitable friend for Bessie, away from the dangerous atmosphere of the Chapmans' residence at 142 Strand. In June 1853, Marian was included in Bessie and Barbara's plans for a holiday, with Barbara's Aunt Julia, in Ockley, near Dorking in Surrey.[85] The three women stayed at the King's Arms in Ockley, where they enjoyed a routine of reading and conversation, with painting excursions to nearby Leith Hill. Marian was invited to join them and arrived a fortnight later, along with John Chapman, his wife Susannah and Marian's friend Sara Hennell.[86] The party broke up when Bessie, Barbara and Aunt Ju travelled on to Winchester, then Bournemouth and Poole, whereupon Julia 'suddenly resolved … to see Miss Carpenter's Reformatory' in Bristol and they made their way there by omnibus.[87] The events of this summer had a marked impact on Bessie and she began work capturing some of them in verse, with a view to publication. Valuing Marian's opinion, both as an individual depicted in the work and as a discerning critic, she sent samples of the poem for her comment. Marian's response was encouraging, telling Bessie she would 'read as many verses of your "Poem preparing for the press" as you like to send me. Miss Hennell and I were heartily amused by your specimen.'[88]

This poem was 'Summer Sketches,' which drew closely on events at Ockley and on Bessie's friendship with Marian. It takes the form of three verse letters, the first two from 'Lilian' (Bessie) in Ockley to 'Helen' (Marian) back in London; Helen's reply forms the

85. BRP Journal for 1852-1854, GCPP Parkes 1/35.
86. BRP, Journal for 1852-1854, GCPP Parkes 1/35; Marian Evans, letters to BRP, June 29 and June 30 1853, *The George Eliot Letters. Vol.2.,*ed. Haight, 107-8.
87. BRP, Journal for 1852-1854, GCPP Parkes 1/35. Julia Smith's wide-ranging interests in education and social reform make it unsurprising that visits to reform schools formed part of this summer's itinerary. Mary Carpenter, a fellow Unitarian, impressed Bessie with her 'humble and unselfish' character and quiet determination in the face of considerable challenges. Her school, Kingswood, was home to thirty boys and girls from the most deprived backgrounds in Bristol. The visit made Bessie appreciate the hard effort and strength of character that such philanthropic work required, and that there was more to 'subduing' such troubled youngsters than simply taking them away from their home environment and putting them under Christian care.
88. ME, letter to BRP, July 12, 1853. *The George Eliot Letters. Vol.2.,* ed. Haight, 109.

third section. Lilian describes to Helen the 'household plan / Framed without the help of man' of the party, comprising Lilian, 'Ella' (Barbara) and 'Mistress Clare' (Aunt Julia), who, 'Escaped from every social tie, / Dwell at this inn, and … / Live just the life that suits us best.'[89] The depiction of the women's rural sojourn, devoted to art and conversation, evokes Barbara and Anna Mary's vision of an 'Associate Home' of artistic sisterhood, liberated from the constraints of everyday life and male company; even the serving staff at the inn are entirely female. Helen's reply, in the final section of the poem, brings inspiring news of calls for women's rights from the outside world, as she sends copies of 'the "Una", / Chiefly by brave New England women penn'd,' along with 'A few stray copies of the Liberator, / And Wendell Phillips' speech.'[90] Alongside this public evidence of women's demands for emancipation, Helen's personal news is her dedication to her art. Echoing the real Marian's effort and determination to achieve renown for her writing, Helen describes herself working

> From morn to eve, from morn to eve again,
> Striving against the hinderance of time
> And all the weight of custom; and I will,
> I tell you Lilian, that I *will* succeed.[91]

This lengthy poem (covering forty printed pages) is thus an entertaining account of a pleasurable summer vacation, an affectionate testament to Bessie's friendships and evidence of her admiration for Marian's single-minded pursuit of professional success. However, the poem needs considerable glossing to be fully intelligible to anyone outside

89. BRP, *Summer Sketches*, 11, 17.
90. Ibid., 34-5. The *Una,* 'a paper devoted to the elevation of women' (according to its strapline) was the first publication in America devoted to the cause of women's rights. Its first issue was in February 1853; it ceased publication in 1855. The *Liberator* was a long-running American abolitionist newspaper which also supported demands for women's rights. Wendell Phillips (1811-1884) was an American campaigner for the abolition of slavery who was also a vocal supporter of women's rights.
91. BRP, *Summer Sketches,* 35. Kathleen McCormack identifies a range of ways in which the voice of 'Helen' in 'Summer Sketches' captures the tone, imagery and interests of Marian Evans' letters and published work, including some aspects of her biography (such as an interest in American politics) where have been less widely recognized by scholars. Kathleen McCormack, 'Bessie Parkes's Summer Sketches: George Eliot as Poetic Persona,' *Victorian Poetry* 42, no. 3 (2004): 303-7, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40002773.

Bessie's immediate circle; indeed one reviewer wondered why the poem was ever published.[92] That is not to say it lacks interest as a literary work in its own right: the style is engaging and varied, with evocative descriptions of both the Surrey landscape and passages capturing its particular moment in Victorian urban modernity.[93] Nevertheless, from a biographical perspective it is the evidence the poem contains of Bessie's development as a writer and a feminist activist which is of most interest.

In the middle of 'Lilian's Second Letter' - and so at the very heart of the poem - the women's conversation turns to

> … the question which the age demands,
> "What is a woman's right and fitting sphere?"
> How best she may, with free and willing mind,
> Develop every special genius,
> … And …
> Walk in a joint obedience with man,
> And equal freedom of the law of God.[94]

The section then ends with a prayer serving as a dedication to the cause of women's rights:

> That as founders of a colony
> Create a nation's heart, so we who strive
> For the foundation of a principle,
> May work with pure hands and a clean heart,
> Regarding nought as trivial; …[95]

The appearance of this explicit feminist polemic within the poem reflects a shift in Bessie's understanding of her role as a poet, a change which is itself articulated in the verse. In a brief dialogue between Ella and Lilian, Ella declares she and Lilian must each capture the natural beauty around them, in painting and poetry respectively, so they 'translate our

92. 'A Batch of Poets,' The *Atlas,* April 22, 1854, 18.
93. For example, the passages in 'Summer Sketches' which describe the bustle of London Bridge station and compares the train to an 'ichthyosaurus' place the poem firmly in its cultural moment, with the increasing ubiquity of rail travel and the growing discourse on geology and prehistory of the time appealing to the public imagination. Charles Dickens' famous image of the 'Megalosaurus … waddling up Holborn Hill' in the opening of *Bleak House* is exactly contemporary to Bessie's poem: the novel first appeared in serial form in 1852 and was published in book-form the following year.
94. BRP, *Summer Sketches,* 22-3.
95. Ibid*.,* 25

thoughts to men,' a sentiment which echoes Bessie's much earlier discussions with Barbara about the task of the poet to 'read … the Universe … and translate it to [their] brethren.'[96] However, Lilian rejects this, feeling her life has had 'too small a scope' to enable her to achieve such a lofty ambition. Instead

> There is a story, which if told,
> Might have an interest manifold,
> Simply those things we think and do,
> The daily life of 'I and you;'
> Which, were it told in plainest words,
> Might strike some sympathetic chords,
> At least in every woman's heart;[97]

'Summer Sketches' is itself just such an account of the 'daily life' of Bessie and her friends, capturing the moment when their discussions about the 'women question' were about to be translated into concerted action. By asserting this is a suitable subject for poetry, Bessie was making clear the seriousness of her commitment to her feminist principles and turning her poetic voice to direct political commentary and engagement with the contemporary world.[98]

Summer Sketches and other poems was published by John Chapman in January 1854. The bulk of the volume was taken up by 'Summer Sketches' itself, but Bessie also added a quartet of her other recent compositions. 'The Duke's Funeral' and 'White Oxalis' had previously been published in the *Hastings News* while 'Thoughts on God's Acre' and 'The Ballad of the King's Daughter' were recent compositions.[99] These additions sit awkwardly

96. BRP letter to BLS, December 5, 1849, GCPP Parkes 5/39.
97. BRP, *Summer Sketches*, 27.
98. There are several echoes here, once again, of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's work. Although Bessie was unlikely to have been aware of it, in the same year Barrett Browning began writing her own feminist work, *Aurora Leigh*, which was published in 1856 and was also written in a semi-autobiographical poetic voice. In a letter to Robert Browning outlining her intentions for her verse-novel, Barrett Browning described a 'completely modern' poem, 'running into the midst of our conventions, and rushing into drawing-rooms and the like … ; and so … speaking the truth as I conceive of it out plainly.' Quoted in Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, ed. Margaret Reynolds, New Ed edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 149. In the poem itself, Aurora declares that the poet's 'sole work is to represent the age, / … - this live, throbbing age / …[T]his is living art, / Which thus presents and thus records true life.' (Book V, ll. 202-22).
99. 'White Oxalis,' which can be read as a tribute to Bessie's happy memories of Hastings and the Sussex countryside, was published in the *HSLN* on July 10, 1853.

alongside the title poem, sharing little in the way of style, form or theme. However, Bessie was particularly pleased with her ballad, which adopted the fashionable medievalist genre first popularised by Coleridge and Scott, and more recently utilised by Tennyson and Barrett Browning. Marian (reading a proof copy) corroborated Bessie's judgement, commenting that 'As poetry' the ballad was 'immeasurably the best in the book.'[100]

Critics also singled out the ballad for praise: the *Athenaeum* admired its 'old theme and ancient moral - the story of the daughter of a king who had married for love and sacrificed her place' and included a lengthy extract. The reviewer felt it was 'of more ideal - possibly, also, of more human - interest' than the political and social 'speculations' of 'Summer Sketches,' which were 'evidently' the work of a 'strong-minded lady.'[101] Similarly the *London Quarterly Review* felt the 'freshness' of the poem's language was 'diminished by occasional intimations of sympathy with certain new views respecting women … more popular in America than in this country.' In contrast, the more radical *Leader* expressed admiration for the eloquence with which 'the woman's view of the woman's question' was expressed in the work, reproducing a lengthy passage from 'Lilian's Second Letter' as evidence.[102] Bessie's first volume had divided opinion on her talent as a poet; her second publication was recognised as a more assured piece of work, but proved controversial in its overtly political stance.

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100. ME, letter to BRP, November 29, 1853. *The George Eliot Letters. Vol.2.,* ed. Haight, 129. Marian described in this letter having 'very sweet tears in my eyes over several passages.' Although she felt the 'Ballad' the best poetry, she added 'But the *thoughts* are everywhere what I love.'
101. 'The Minor Minstrels,' *The Athenaeum*, February 18, 1854, 205-6. This appears to be the first occasion on which the epithet 'strong-minded' (with its insinuations of lack of femininity, and also, sometimes, lesbianism) was applied to Bessie in print. In the years to come it would become a familiar taunt aimed at Bessie and her fellow campaigners for women's rights.
102. 'Brief Literary Notices,' *London Quarterly Review*, June 1854, 572; 'Recent Poems,' *The Leader,* March 18, 1854, 259-260.

'Summer Sketches' was a timely articulation of the growth of interest in the 'woman question' in Britain in the 1850s, presenting an optimistic vision of woman walking alongside man in 'equal freedom of the law of God.'[103] However, it was the status of women under the laws of man which led to calls for immediate reform in 1853-4, when the Norton case hit the headlines. The well-known writer and socialite beauty Caroline Norton had been battling with her cruel and violent estranged husband since the 1830s, when George Norton sued the Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne, on a charge of 'criminal conversation' (i.e. adultery) with his wife. Losing the case, he punished Caroline by denying her access to their three young sons. In 1853, the couple were back in the public eye, when George was taken to court by his wife's creditors in a dispute over his liability for her debts. On both occasions, there was salacious public interest in the details of Caroline's alleged affairs and in her accounts of the violence she had suffered at the hands of her husband.

Despite the permanent damage she suffered to her personal reputation, Mrs Norton determined to use her pen to achieve some retribution on both her husband and the legal system which denied her justice. In the aftermath of the 1853 court case, Caroline defended her reputation in a series of letters in the *Times*. The following spring she produced a pamphlet, *English Laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century,* which again focused on defending her own position. She also set out in detail the ways in which the legal system failed to protect married women like her, denying them rights over their own earnings or to have the independent legal status needed to defend themselves against accusations of immorality.[104]

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103 BRP, *Summer Sketches,* 23.

104. Caroline Norton's first campaigning efforts, against the inadequacies of the laws surrounding child custody, had led to the Infant Custody Act of 1839, which for the first time enabled divorced or separated women to gain custody of their children. The Act only permitted mothers to be given custody of children up to the age of seven years, however. See Diane Atkinson, *The Criminal Conversation of Mrs Norton* (London: Arrow Books, 2013), 274, 368-71.

Opinion was divided over whether Caroline Norton deserved any sympathy for her plight, and whether legal reform was an appropriate response to such cases of marital breakdown. Joseph Parkes' attitude, expressed in a letter to Bessie, was typical. He acknowledged, as a lawyer, that the law was in need of reform in relation to married women's rights, over their children at least, but he argued it could do very little to remedy such 'isolated' cases as the Nortons'. He admitted that reading Mrs Norton's pamphlet had led him to a more severe condemnation of George Norton, but he felt her public and 'bitter abuse of her contemptible Husband' only weakened her argument. Furthermore, he felt her known acceptance of money from the Melbourne family and her involvement with the politician Sidney Herbert had done irreparable damage to her reputation. 'When we find fault with Laws & existing social relations, my dear Bessie, we must not forget the duties of married life … Nor ought Women ever to forfeit their sexual delicacy of character.'[105] Joseph's distaste for a woman publicly denouncing her husband and laying herself open to charges of sexual impropriety, reflected the general social view that a woman's character could be ruined by such behaviour, whatever cruelties she had suffered at the hands of men.

In reply to her father, Bessie launched a spirited defence of Caroline Norton, focusing on the sexual double standard which underpinned Joseph's stance: men could afford to treat women badly because they were not financially dependent on them. 'It would be a very nice state of things for men if their pecuniary rights depended upon their conduct with regard to the other sex,' she argued. 'I am afraid few of them would be in a position to demand any sort of legal redress.' She refused to condemn Mrs Norton for finding happiness with another man after being placed in the 'unheard of situation of neither wife, maid nor widow … I really do not think St. Peter will slam his door in her face for the sin.' Driving home her point about male hypocrisy, she added that 'no question of expediency

105. JP, letter to BRP (n.d.), GCPP Parkes 2/86.

with regard to the sexes will make me judge such a case hardly, and then associate comfortably with men whose whole lives I know to be marked by coarseness.'[106]

Despite Bessie's spirited words, it was Barbara who publicly took up the issue of women's legal inequality, in a tract entitled *A Brief Summary, in Plain Language, of the Most Important Laws concerning Women.* Partly inspired by the Norton affair, she considered married women and their property, separation and divorce, the status of widows and laws concerning illegitimate children and their mothers - the latter dealing with matters closely connected to her own family circumstances.[107] Meanwhile Bessie turned her attention to writing about girls' education, a topic she had been considering for some time. Her reflections on her own schooling at Leam, together with her later experiences of visiting schools and undertaking some teaching herself, had led her to consider how education could be either a barrier to, or a facilitator of, girls' emancipation.[108] Between them, Bessie and Barbara were formulating important contributions to the growing debate on the 'woman question' and, true to their friendship, they supported each other as they did so. They travelled to north Wales for a summer of painting and writing, staying together in 'Pen-y-lan,' a cottage in the little village of Maentrwog near Porthmadog.

In a letter to Bella Leigh Smith, Bessie painted an idyllic picture of this remote setting, where she and Barbara threw off social convention and bathed naked in a lake 'in a most utterly crazy Diana like way … like Grecian nymphs who never had any sense of propriety.'

106. BRP, letter to JP, 1854, GCPP Parkes 2/41.
107. Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 86-89. Hirsch argues that it was this 'personal identification with the wrongs women suffered,' combined with her abstract belief in natural justice, which formed the basis of Barbara's motivation as a feminist campaigner.
108. Apart from her trips back to Leam and her visits to reformatory schools in the summer of 1853, Bessie also visited schools in Birmingham, London and Hastings to observe the teaching and occasionally teach lessons herself, although she felt herself inadequate to undertake the role of educator. (See, for example, GCPP Parkes 5/40 and 5/55.) Bessie was also a keen supporter of Barbara's scheme to open a school in London. Portman Hall School opened in November 1854, on Carlisle Street near the Edgware Road and was progressive in its methods, as well as in teaching boys and girls together. See Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 74-76.

Their only audience were the sheep, one of which, she told Bella, 'distinctly ejaculated Bar, thereby putting her into an agony of alarm, as she thought it was your Father, summoned magically … and … about to continue "Bar, I'm ashamed of you."'[109] Even Barbara, it seems, feared paternal censure at times. However, aside from laughter and relaxation, Bessie and Barbara used their time in Wales diligently, to edit the proofs of their pamphlets.

Bessie entitled her pamphlet *Remarks on the Education of Girls*. She adopted a broad conception of 'education' encompassing social attitudes as well as specific aspects of girls' intellectual and physical training. She asserted girls' right to achieve their full physical, intellectual and moral capabilities, and given the skills to inquire independently into matters rather than having the conclusions of others impressed upon them. She positioned demands for women's liberty in the context of wider social progress, comparing the subordinate status of women towards men to that of 'the churl or the bourgeois' of previous centuries, 'to whom the arms and accomplishments of knighthood were denied.'[110] Just as American feminists were framing their arguments in the context of the Declaration of Independence,[111] Bessie placed women's emancipation within a British narrative of progress towards liberty and democracy, the logical development of the reforms achieved by her father's generation.

Bessie advocated physical and mental training along the lines of the regime at Leam, with freedom to play, exercise and read without censorship, and supported her argument by invoking the authority of a range of female experts. She cited Elizabeth Blackwell's lectures on the physical education of girls to demonstrate the 'benefits of muscular training' and

109. BRP, letter to Bella Leigh Smith, September 3, 1854, GCPP Parkes 6/66.
110. BRP, *Remarks*, 4-6, 22.
111.Yvonne Johnson, *Feminist Frontiers: Women Who Shaped the Midwest* (Kirksville, Missouri: Truman State University Press, 2010), 14.

argued public gymnasia (citing Fredrika Bremer's description of such an institution) should be made 'universally accessible' for the use of young women, particularly in urban areas where outdoor exercise was impractical. She challenged the fashionable ideal of the female form as girl-like and immature, arguing 'the mature beauty of real womanhood … is much more admirable' and recommended Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* ('an old and much-abused book') for its 'excellent remarks' on the subject.[112] Turning to girls' mental training, Bessie focused on reading as 'the key to learning.' In particular, she asserted, girls needed the freedom to learn about the 'character of the two sexes' and so their reading of literary depictions of relations between men and women should not be censored. Influenced by the freedom she had been given at Leam to read novels and poetry, she argued girls should be allowed to read Chaucer, Dryden, Jonson and Fielding and, in a statement later singled out as evidence of Bessie's extreme and dangerous 'strong-minded' views, she asked 'how can that mind have a true appreciation of the ideas now operant in Europe, which ignores the forces which have formed, or those set in motion by George Sand?'[113]

Slightly less controversially, Bessie also promoted the study of social and political economy, as a subject useful to girls and women, both as training in logical thought and for

112. BRP, *Remarks,* 6-9. Wollstonecraft's work was controversial to cite, as the writer's reputation had suffered greatly from both her revolutionary politics and the revelation, after her death in 1797, of her sexually-liberal life, including mothering an illegitimate child. See Barbara Caine, 'Victorian feminism and the ghost of Mary Wollstonecraft,' *Women's Writing* 4, no. 2 (1997): 261-275, https://doi.org/10.1080/09699089700200009.

113. BRP, *Remarks,* 10-12. Bessie's assertion that girls should be free to read the works of the French novelist George Sand (who was notorious for the sexual frankness of her novels and for her cross-dressing, sexually-liberal lifestyle) was probably the most controversial element of the whole pamphlet, although for her it was a natural part of her rejection of different standards of morality for men and women. In a letter to Barbara from around this time, she recounted a dinner party conversation with a man who sought to make her uncomfortable by speaking at length to her about various infamous French novels (of which Bessie feigned little knowledge), before declaring that such books were 'only fit for a bachelor's table.' In angry response she told him that 'it was just as wrong for men to read bad books as women!' (See BRP letter to BLS, c.1853, GCPP 5/66a.) Her essential argument in *Remarks* is that, as George Sand's novels were frequently being discussed in periodicals, women should be able to read them and make up their own minds about them. Her argument also reflected radical intellectual admiration of Sand's critiques of the sexual double standard and her creation of new female role models. See Gleadle, *The Early Feminists,* 61-2.

understanding the modern world and women's place in it. Linking her argument to that of Barbara's pamphlet, she pointed to the need for women to understand and challenge the laws which denied married women legal equality with their husbands. She also outlined the ways in which women were already contributing in growing numbers to the public sphere, in philanthropic social work and professions such as medicine. She cited Mary Carpenter and Elizabeth Blackwell as admirable examples, alongside Anna Mary Howitt and other 'cultivated women' succeeding in the world of art. She emphasised the importance of a women's individual liberty to choose her own occupation, whether inside or outside the home and in a short section headed 'Social Intercourse' attacked as out-dated those social conventions which prevented young women socialising freely with men. Just as she had told Robert Fane she would need to know a man thoroughly before she could consider marrying him, here she declared 'much freer intercourse between people of different sexes will be absolutely necessary as a basis for noble matrimony' and pointed to the more liberal customs in America as a model.[114]

Thus *Remarks on the Education of Girls,* Bessie's first extended contribution to demands for women's rights, fashioned her feminism from her radical non-conformist upbringing, challenging received ideas and championing respect for individual liberty. She concluded her pamphlet with a call to action addressed to all women: 'If you care for your own responsibility before God, … if you care for your generation and its honour among the ages, work for this cause.'[115]

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114. BRP, *Remarks,* 12-21.
115. Ibid, 22.

Bessie and Barbara's pamphlets were both published anonymously by John Chapman in the autumn of 1854. They initially attracted little attention in the press, although the *Athenaeum* described *Remarks* as 'more original and more interesting' than another recent publication on the topic. The reviewer assumed *Remarks* and Barbara's *Brief Summary* were the work of the same (presumed male) writer.[116] Chapman marketed the two tracts together, alongside a few other recent works which also dealt with the 'woman question,' indicative of the developing discourse on these issues in the radical press at this time.[117]

The *Westminster Review* declared it a 'happy propriety' that 'these two thoughtful tracts' appeared simultaneously.[118] In fact they were the culmination of Bessie and Barbara's close collaboration, as thinkers and writers, over eight years. Through them they made together their first contributions to radical political discourse, laying the foundations for the next stage of their joint endeavours to defy custom and promote the rights and capabilities of their sex.

116. 'Pamphlets,' *The Athenaeum*, December 9, 1854, 1493. It was only two years hence, when the tracts were reprinted as signed editions, that they received greater attention, because, as the works of women, they were deemed more outspoken and controversial. See discussion below (Chapter 3).
117. Inside the back cover of *Remarks* was an advertisement for Barbara's *Brief Summary,* alongside two works by American Unitarian radicals, *Women and Her Wishes* by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and *The Public Function of Women* by Theodore Parker, plus a reprint of an article entitled 'Prostitution' from the *Westminster Review* of July 1850.
118. 'Politics and Education,' *Westminster Review,* January 1855, 235-236.

Chapter 3 1854-1856: Contemplating marriage and tasting the profit of work

> Perhaps you do not know how much cultivated women are beginning to tremble in contemplating marriage as it is now.
>
> Bessie Parkes, letter to Sam Blackwell, July 1854.[1]

> As well try to dam out the flowing of a mighty river as to stop women from working when once they have seen the need, felt the power and tasted the profit of exertion.
>
> Bessie Rayner Parkes, 'The Laws Relating to the Property of Married Women,' *The Leader,* February 1857.[2]

In *Remarks on the Education of Girls*, Bessie had argued for freer social intercourse between unmarried men and women, so they could make an informed choice of marriage partner, based on solid knowledge of that person's character, and thus help ensure 'moral and intellectual sympathy' between husband and wife.[3] This argument highlighted the restrictions placed on the freedoms of young middle-class women. It formed part of Bessie's concern, shared with Barbara and their circle, about the legal and social position of women and their belief in the principle of equality between the sexes. It was also highly pertinent to her personal situation in the summer and autumn of 1854, when she received an offer of marriage from her friend Sam Blackwell and was forced to seriously consider her own future. The prospect of marriage brought into focus the difficulties inherent in trying to live a life in accordance with principles of women's equality. Bessie tried to work out if it were possible to commit to becoming a wife and mother without giving up the independent life and writing career she had established for herself.

1. GCPP Parkes 9/6.
2. BRP, 'The Laws Relating to the Property of Married Women,' 'Open Council,' *Leader,* February 14, 1857, 154.
3. BRP, *Remarks*, 21.

Sam had visited Bessie while she and Barbara were in Wales, taking advantage of the opportunity to spend time with her away from the watchful eyes of her parents.[4] He made his proposal in a letter to Bessie in late July 1854, to which she replied cautiously and at length.[5] Whereas five years previously Bessie had found Robert Fane's proposal laughable, now she contemplated a prospective husband whom she cared for and respected, and she considered his offer soberly. She was twenty-five and many of her school friends were married; she could no longer claim to be too young to contemplate the possibility of her own marriage. In fact she had already considered it. In her diary the previous year she described watching Sam playing with a small child; she admitted then to herself that the scene had led her to contemplate the 'sweet image of home & children' of her own together with this kind and gentle man.[6]

Therefore, while professing her 'great objection to the Holy Estate of Matrimony,' Bessie did not reject Sam's offer out of hand. 'Perhaps you do not know how much cultivated women are beginning to tremble in contemplating marriage as it is now,' she commented, explaining that such women could 'only learn to waive the general fear for the special trust and affection' of a man they knew well. She made clear to Sam that she was unable to accept his proposal without further discussion of each other's expectations for such a marriage and time to get to know one another better. She pointed out that despite their long friendship they had 'scarcely since 1847 been alone together,' most of their encounters occurring in social situations which prevented Bessie freely expressing 'all the more marked features of [her] opinion and character.' She contrasted this with the 'intimacies of character which occurs with friends of the same sex' and declared she could only

4. In a letter to SB, January 20, 1855 (GCPP Parkes 9/10), Bessie recollected his visit to Maentrog and 'the night in Barmouth, when we walked out together.'
5. BRP letter to SB, October 9, 1854, GCPP Parkes 9/9.
6. BRP, entry for June 5, 1853, Journal for [1853-1854], GCPP Parkes 1/35.

contemplate a marriage based on 'absolute sisterly confidence.' Such comments underline Bessie's resentment of those conventional notions of propriety which prevented unmarried women of her class from socialising freely with men, as well as demonstrating the high value she placed on her existing 'sisterly' relationships with women.[7]

Marriage was indeed a daunting proposition for women like Bessie, who had experienced some measure of independence for themselves and appreciated the potential dangers in becoming the legal property of a husband who may turn out to be uncongenial, unfaithful or even violent. Caroline Norton's well-publicised experience of domestic violence may have been an extreme example, but it demonstrated the absolute vulnerability of a wife should her marriage turn sour. This was an age when divorce was almost impossible, and a wife was legally a *femme couverte*, her property and legal identity subsumed into that of her husband. Bessie and Barbara would soon begin campaigning to change this position, and while it still existed it is understandable that Bessie was cautious. As her letters to Sam make clear, her awareness of the inherently unequal status of husbands and wives informed Bessie's objections to marriage.

Yet it was not only loss of legal independence Bessie feared. Like other nineteenth-century feminist women, she experienced what Olive Banks terms 'anxiety over subordination in marriage.'[8] She rejected any idea that she should be expected to set aside her own pursuits to become absorbed into a husband's interests. 'I have so much to lose; so much that a man might destroy. So many aims & interests & friends, hopes,' she told Sam, and these were losses 'for which no passion could make amends.' Her ideal of marriage was one of '2 people being loving and working side by side; any amount of union you please, but no

7. BRP letters to SB, July 28, 1854, September 28, 1854 and January 20, 1855, GCPP Parkes 9/6, 9/8 and 9/10.
8. Olive Banks, quoted in Levine, *Feminist Lives,* 73.

unity.' She sought to ensure Sam fully appreciated her own character and interests, recognising that her 'keen interest' in women's status and rights was 'such as men rarely heartily like in a woman' and stressing that marriage would not change her. 'What I am now I should essentially continue to be,' she declared, including a continued commitment to her literary career, which she described as the 'working aim' of her life. 'How can any sensible man want such a sort of wife[?]' she asked, aware her views were radically opposed to generally-held ideas about marriage and women's role.[9]

The pervasive domestic ideology of the mid-nineteenth century venerated women's role within the private world of the family home. Social norms dictated it was a wife's duty to selflessly tend to her husband and family. Bessie's commitment to a career and recognition outside this domestic sphere was, therefore, highly unconventional. Bessie was determined Sam would understand her position. '[W]hat made you once suppose I should publish without my name[?]' she asked him, adding 'you did not know what an unfeminine desire for active life … I had.' Bessie wanted to ensure he appreciated how important it was to her that she was 'in direct association with the forward party [of social and political reform] - one of them, identified by name & public expression of principle.'[10]

If Bessie's status as a public figure challenged conventional views of women's role, it also, paradoxically, allowed her some freedom which otherwise her parents would not have tolerated. 'My parents draw some curious distinction between Miss Parkes their daughter & Bessie Rayner Parkes the authoress,' she observed. As an 'authoress' she was free to associate and correspond with men and women in a professional capacity, while as a

9. BRP letter to SB, September 28, 1854 and n.d.[1854/5?], GCPP Parkes 9/8 and 9/12.
10. BRP letter to SB, n.d. [1854/5?], GCPP Parkes 9/12. That Sam (who sympathised with Bessie's political views) questioned her decision to publish under her own name is an indication of just how bold an act this was for a woman at this time.

'daughter' she claimed she could not show any 'marked preference' for an individual man without giving rise to 'instant observation' at home for possible impropriety. Such associations with men were unconventional for a young unmarried woman of her class and she knew they were vulnerable to misinterpretation. She felt it necessary to name for Sam her '20 male correspondents' and reassure him she did not regard any of them as potential lovers. Yet she also insisted that, if she married, she would reserve the right to maintain these correspondences without feeling duty-bound to show her husband all her letters.[11] That she felt it necessary to state this point is further evidence of her awareness that marriage was assumed to entail restrictions on a woman's independence, in terms of work and relationships.

While Joseph and Eliza accepted their daughter's public status, and took pride in her successes as a writer, they still treated her as their dependent child in personal matters. Even at the age of twenty-five, Bessie, as an unmarried woman living in her parents' home, lacked the autonomy which a man of a similar age might enjoy. Such 'blurring' between childhood and adulthood was typical of life for a Victorian middle-class woman, who remained under the authority of her father until she married. It was marriage, not age, which conferred full adulthood on such a woman, but only by placing her in a dependent relation to her husband instead. Levine argues that, in the face of this, women such as Bessie who challenged the legal and social status of women sought to 'reappropriate' adulthood for themselves, by insisting on the value of single womanhood and women's work outside of the home, and rejecting the notion that a woman who did not marry had failed to attain the primary aim of their sex. However, in their relationships with men, many radical women in

11. BRP, letter to SB, n.d. [1854/5?], GCPP Parkes 9/14. Only fragments of this letter survive, which includes her description of the egalitarian nature of her friendship with the philosopher and sociologist Herbert Spencer: 'We quarrel every time we talk; & yet he likes me & I him, from various moral grounds of sympathy, tho' all our tastes & intellectual sympathies are wide apart as the poles.'

this period sought - as Bessie's letters demonstrate - to 'remould rather than reject' marriage, adopting a conception of the marital relationship that accorded to their principles and choosing a marriage partner who would be amenable to the idea of a wife continuing to pursue her independent interests.[12]

Away from the supervision of her parents, Bessie began to get to know Sam better, and this evidently further encouraged her affection for him. After Bessie and Barbara departed Wales in October 1854, Bessie travelled on to the Midlands, spending a few weeks with friends including Emma Evers and Sam. In an excited letter to Barbara she described a visit with Emma and Sam to an 'enormous' house, The Ellowes, in Sedgley, Staffordshire. Sam suggested it as their marital home, telling Bessie it could be afforded on an income of around £2,000 per annum. It is clear from this letter that Bessie was swept up in the excitement of her situation, imagining Barbara and the rest of their circle visiting 'en masse … a jolly lot together, the only way to keep the place.' Two days after this visit, Bessie sent a brief note to Barbara, reporting that she had visited her mother in Birmingham, who took the news 'in the most beautiful kind way, & says S will be an excellent son in law … She says my Father won[']t object.' Bessie ended the note with ten exclamation marks and the comment 'Words fail me,' adding in a footnote 'Say nothing yet to anyone.' She had anticipated a very different response from Eliza and was still unsure how her father would react.[13]

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12. Levine, *Feminist Lives,* 72-73. Lucy Bland identifies the same trend amongst the next generation of feminists in the 1880s: 'most feminists did not reject marriage *per se*. On the contrary they wished for it to be radically reformed,' including by actively challenging the sexual double standard and only marrying a man 'free of taint.' See Bland, *Banishing the Beast: Feminism, Sex and Morality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), 133.

13. BRP letters to BLS, October 22 and 29, 1854, GCPP Parkes 5/68, 5/69. Sam was clearly very optimistic about his financial position. Although the house was in some senses a practical idea, being close to his ironworks in Dudley, it was very large and grand. £2,000 p.a. was a considerable sum, the equivalent of £100,000 today (http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/, accessed October 10, 2018).

Her caution was well-judged. The gulf between Bessie's views on marriage and her parents' conventional perspective proved hard to bridge. Bessie insisted she could not commit to a formal engagement before she and Sam were better acquainted. In particular, she wanted Sam to spend time with her in London so he could understand her life there, in her 'natural sphere.'[14] Joseph and Eliza were, however, adamant that any such meetings could only take place once the couple were officially engaged to be married. After six weeks of 'anxiety' at home, trying to reach an acceptable compromise, Bessie resorted to setting out her position to her mother in writing. The text of this letter replicates closely several phrases and points from Bessie's letters to Sam, suggesting that in writing she was able to organise her thoughts on the subject, and present them as her considered and resolved position:

> You appear to think that in an engagement and early marriage I shall find some kind of safety. It would only be so in the case if I were happy in that engagement and marriage. If on freely associating I or he found that discrepancies arose we should both, I most certainly, put an end to any engagement however public rather than sacrifice a lifetime.
>
> For years I have seen but little of him; […] and all my high opinions of his character and the confessed attraction which he possesses for me, do not make me easy to jump into a connection involving so much responsibility and many of whose laws and customs you are well aware I regard with no favour.
>
> It is useless and cruel to argue on this matter as if I were an ordinary woman. You know my dear mother that I am not so and that the causes of my opinions and actions be deep seated in my intellect and in the aim of my whole life.[15]

Such comments demonstrate the restrictions she felt living as a dependent in her parents' home, and how radically different her views on marriage were to theirs. Her insistence that she was not 'an ordinary woman' was a reflection of her awareness of the degree of difference she felt from most of her sex, including her mother. The growing number of 'extraordinary' women with whom she now associated - most notably Barbara, Marian Evans, Mary and Anna Mary Howitt and Anna Jameson - provided role models for her of

14. BRP letter to EP, December 15, 1854, GCPP Parkes 2/4.
15. Ibid.

women openly challenging sexual inequalities and succeeding in professional work as artists and writers. Although Bessie's own writing during this period was not lucrative enough to give her financial independence from her father, she held onto the idea that a writing career was a route to freedom. Jameson, estranged from her husband, supported herself and family dependents out of her earnings as a writer on art and literature. She provided Bessie with an example of how a woman might escape an unhappy marriage, as she made clear to her mother:

> [D]id [Sam and I] find after marriage that we were unsuitable we are neither of us people to wear out such a union of the sake of public opinion - I should live as Mrs Jameson or Mrs Kemble or Mrs Hemans have done, finding social position and a partial pecuniary independence from my pen. This is my definite conclusion as to my course in the contingency of an unhappy marriage such as so many literary women have made.[16]

Bessie's disdain for 'public opinion' reflected her divergence from the conventional attitudes of her parents. The bohemian circles in which Bessie was now moving included couples who, for various reasons, flouted bourgeois conventions of marriage. For example, through Barbara and Anna Mary Howitt she had recently met the Pre-Raphaelite poet and painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Bessie was happy to befriend Rossetti's lover, Elizabeth Siddall, unconcerned by Siddall's precarious social status as a woman from a working-class family employed as an artist's model, an occupation generally deemed morally dubious. She was entranced by Siddall's beauty, and considered her 'intellectual' and 'full of poetry.'[17] Rossetti, in turn, was grateful to Bessie and Barbara for their kindness to Siddall when she stayed in Hastings to improve her health, writing to his mother about the 'ladies who have been most attentive to Lizzy' and reporting '[n]o one thinks it at all odd' that he sat alone with her in her room at their lodgings.[18] Such an arrangement would have been

16. Ibid. The actress and writer Fanny Kemble (1809-1893) and the poet Felicia Hemans (1793-1835) both, like Anna Jameson, achieved critical acclaim and financial success in their writing careers after the breakdown of their marriages.
17. BRP, Journal, April 24 [1854], GCPP Parkes 1/35.
18. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, letter to Frances Mary Lavinia Rossetti, May 7, 1854, reproduced in *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. William E. Fredeman Vol. 1 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer,

considered reprehensible by more conservative minds such as those of Bessie's parents (and, presumably, Mrs Rossetti) and Rossetti hoped news of Siddall socialising with 'ladies' such as Bessie and Barbara would help present the relationship in a favourable light to his family. Barbara described Rossetti as 'an honourable friend' to Siddall, adding 'I do not doubt that if circumstances were favourable he would marry her.'[19] The lack of any formal engagement between Siddall and Rossetti was not, for Barbara and Bessie, a barrier to friendship, although it would have been for many women with more conventional views on female morality and reputation.[20]

However, her broad-minded views on morality and marriage were most fully revealed in the stance Bessie took regarding Marian Evans' relationship with a married man, George Henry Lewes, the co-founder and editor of the radical *Leader* newspaper and a central figure in London's progressive intellectual circles. Lewes's marriage had irrevocably broken down, due to his wife's relationship with his friend and colleague Thornton Hunt, and he had left the family home the previous year, whilst continuing to support it financially. Now in love with Marian, he was unable to sue for divorce and could not remarry.[21] Despite these circumstances, Marian had confided in Bessie in the spring of 1854 of her intention to set up home with Lewes.

2002), 343. Rossetti sent Bessie volume of poetry by his sister Christina and later a signed holograph of his poem 'The Blessed Damosel' (which Bessie had mentioning admiring) as tokens of his thanks. See Dante Gabriel Rossetti, letters to BRP, May 9, 1854, in Fredeman, *Correspondence,* 345, and November 1856, GCPP Parkes 9/57-8.

19. Quoted in Jan Marsh, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti; Painter and Poet* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), 117.

20. Bessie remained a faithful friend to the Rossettis. Gabriel and Lizzie eventually married in 1860 and Lizzie died of a laudanum overdose in February 1862. Bessie, who had visited the couple at their home the day before, refused to believe the rumour that she had taken her own life. She did not give evidence at the inquest, to avoid distressing her parents, but she remained Gabriel's friend. He was one of the few people Bessie took her husband to meet when they first visited London together after their marriage. (See Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women,* 75; MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 207.) When Rossetti's letters were published, Bessie was disappointed to see that he had not given greater credit to the efforts she and Barbara had made on Lizzie's behalf 'at a time when her position was exceedingly ambiguous.' See BRP, letter to Jeanette Kelsey, December 15, 1897, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 231.

21. As Lewes had initially been accepting of his wife's affair, and had recognised the two children she had borne Hunt as his own, he was deemed in law to have 'condoned' her behaviour. Thus it was impossible for him now to sue for divorce on the grounds of her adultery.

Bessie, although sympathetic, had listened to Marian 'with a sinking heart,'[22] aware that her friend was about to forfeit her reputation and become an outcast in polite society. Nor were Bessie's own views so progressive that she could easily condone a relationship between a man and a woman conducted outside of wedlock. She took some time to digest Marian's news and decide upon her response: three weeks later Marian expressed her delight at receiving a letter from Bessie. She had been afraid that 'some cause of coolness or disgust towards me had arisen. … But I said - Ah well, I have told her that I shall always love her *quand même* [regardless], and I resigned myself to having no other satisfaction than of thinking of you affectionately.'[23] Bessie's letter (now lost) presumably made clear the position to which she remained firmly committed for the rest of her life: Marian was her friend and she respected her decision. While she could not imagine taking such a step herself, Bessie recognised that for the agnostic Marian (who had rejected Church doctrine as manmade rather than divine) it was a moral and justifiable course of action.[24]

In late September, while Bessie and Barbara were in Wales, it became public knowledge in Britain that Marian and Lewes were living together as husband and wife in Germany. Bessie had written to Marian in Weimar over the summer with all the news of their summer activities, thereby reassuring her absent friend that nothing had changed in their friendship.[25] However, the letters Bessie received from her parents on the subject made clear they did not share her empathy for Marian's position. Eliza avoided any direct

22. BRP, *In a Walled Garden,* 22.
23. ME, letter to BRP, April 21, 1854, in *The George Eliot Letters. Vol.2*, ed. Haight, 151.
24. In her later account of their friendship, Bessie defended Marian's moral integrity: 'In principle she was a strict monogamist, witness the testimony of all her books; and in every relation of life she placed in an immense value upon the virtue of faithfulness. … But she probably believed, though she would hardly have allowed in words … in a sliding scale of action; by which I mean that she considered a man or woman justified on rare occasions, in taking circumstances into account.' See BRP, *In a Walled Garden*, 19. For an account of Marian Evans's loss of religious faith and her embracing of rationalist philosophy, see Ashton, *George Eliot, a Life*, 43–45, 75–76, 82–83.
25. Marian replied to this letter on September 10, 1854. *The George Eliot Letters. Vol.2*, ed. Haight, 173.

criticism of Marian, out of fear of upsetting Bessie, but felt obliged to make clear she could not forgive Lewes for destroying the domestic security and happiness of the children involved.[26] Joseph was more directly scathing about Marian. 'No doubt she has done her best at self-justification & to palliate her conduct in the sight of her friends,' he stormed, but 'no right-minded persons … can view this unhappy scandal otherwise than a most immoral act & a most bad example.' He expressed his 'great sorrow and deep regret' for 'Miss Evans's folly' but warned Bessie not to 'compromise' her own reputation by publicly expressing any sympathy for Marian. He laid the worst of the blame at Lewes's door, making it clear to his daughter that her friend's lover had a long-standing reputation as a 'morally … bad man' and predicted he was unlikely to remain faithful to his new 'amour' for long.[27]

The tone and length of Joseph's letters on the subject reflect the depth of his anger. He was fearful how it would reflect on the cause of liberal progressive ideas that 'two such highly gifted individuals,' well-known for their liberal social and political views, had behaved in such a morally shameful manner, and were now the subject of intense speculation and gossip across the country. He was also clearly bitterly and personally disappointed in the behaviour of a woman whose career he had supported, as well as fatalistic about the inevitable end result of what he referred to as her 'sad fall.'[28]

Bessie confessed she too feared for Marian's happiness, but defended her friend's actions as in keeping with her independent and sincere character, 'which must work its own

26. EP letters to BRP, September 22 and 23, 1854, GCPP Parkes 2/25 and 2/26.
27. JP letter to BRP, October 1854 (GCPP Parkes 2/53). Joseph repeated a rumour that Lewes had previously fathered an illegitimate child, for whom a foster home had to be found. According to Rosemary Ashton, this story seems have originated with the novelist Elizabeth Gaskell. There appears to be no evidence to support this story, but it added to the general attitude of profound disapproval towards Lewes amongst Bessie's circle at this time. See Ashton, *George Eliot, a Life*, 123; Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 63.
28. JP letter to BRP, October 1854, GCPP Parkes 2/53.

teachings amidst storms and discipline of which the world that is now talking of her cannot judge.' More optimistic than her parents, she was hopeful Marian might prove able to 'retain Mr Lewis [sic] and give him greater respectability of life.'[29] She was also alert to the double standards evident in many of those who denounced Marian, writing to Sam 'when we remember the men who form illegal connexions sub rosa; who do vile & bad things, & keep up a white washed character, I feel more lenient to that little Weimar home than others do.'[30] Bessie may have been referring here to her own father's marital infidelity, of which she at some point became aware.[31] The comment certainly reflects her awareness that polite society judged women's sexual morality far more severely than that of men and her determination to challenge this hypocrisy through her words and actions.

When Marian and George Lewes returned to England the following spring, Bessie was quick to make contact and express her continued support. Marian was grateful, writing, 'Dear Friend, I was more delighted with your letter because it was fresh proof to me that you can feel and act nobly, than because it was an expression of affection towards me - much as I value that affection.'[32] Marian was sorely in need of such kindness, excluded as she was from most of polite society. While Lewes resumed his visits to the home of his mentor Thomas Carlyle and his wife Jane, for example, Marian was not included in the invitations.[33] Bessie went against her parents' wishes and visited Marian at her new lodgings in East Sheen, near Richmond Park, although she avoided being in Lewes's company.[34] She remained sceptical of Lewes's good qualities, but accepted Marian's

29. BRP letter to JP, October 6, 1854, GCPP Parkes 2/40.
30. BRP, letter to SB, September 28, 1854, GCPP Parkes 9/8.
31. Bessie's daughter referred to Joseph's infidelity as a statement of fact, and she could only have learned about it from her mother. However it is not known when or how Bessie first came by this information. See MBL, *I, Too, Have Lived,* 36.
32. ME, letter to BRP, March 16, 1855, in *The George Eliot Letters. Vol.2*, ed. Haight, 195.
33. Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 4.
34. Perhaps influenced by her father's report of his character, she never warmed to Lewes, who appears to have snubbed her when they first met. In a letter to Bessie of 1854, Barbara refers to Lewes 'cutting' Bessie and describes her own first impressions of him as 'a flippant conceited superficial little man.' See GCPP

dedication to him and assumed 'she must have evoked some better self [in him] than that perceived by the outer world.'[35] She also seems to have found it difficult to regard the relationship in the same light as the couple themselves did, as a marriage. More than once Marian had to ask Bessie to address letters to her as 'Mrs Lewes' rather than 'Miss Evans,' to avoid embarrassment with her landlady. It would appear Bessie was either naïve in her understanding of the practical necessity for Marian of concealing her unmarried status or found it difficult to perform even this small act of dissemblance, to make life easier for her friend as she sought to re-establish herself in English society.[36]

Nevertheless Bessie and Barbara knew they were taking a controversial stand in remaining loyal to their friend. The majority of their circle, including Anna Jameson and Julia Smith, condemned Marian's actions and distanced themselves from her; influential women such as Harriet Martineau and Elizabeth Gaskell repeated unpleasant rumours about her. Yet Bessie continued to follow her own judgement, defying conventional opinion where she saw fit. She was acutely aware of the precarious social and legal position of any woman who entered into a relationship with a man outside wedlock (as, for example, Barbara's mother had done) and she refused to condemn such women for immorality. She and Barbara agreed the marriage sacrament was less important as a mark of chastity than sincere commitment between lovers.[37]

Parkes 5/179, quoted in Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 63. Barbara later revised her view of George Lewes and became a trusted friend of both him and Marian.

35. BRP, *In a Walled Garden*, 23–24. In this account of her friendship with Marian, written long after the deaths of both Marian and Lewes, Bessie was careful to emphasize that Lewes had a 'brilliant mind' and that she 'believe[d] him to be very kind and helpful in domestic life.' Her intention in writing was to record her perspective on the couple's relationship, wary that it would not be long before Marian's letters and diaries would be published and interpreted by people without any personal knowledge of the people or events involved.

36. ME, letters to BRP, May 1, 1855 and March 22, 1856, in *The George Eliot Letters. Vol.2*, ed. Haight, 200, 232.

37. Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon* 64; 66. Hughes, *George Eliot,* 155. This view reflected the utopian ideas such as those of the socialist Robert Owen, who contrasted 'the real chastity … of Nature' with 'the spurious chastity of the church and law. See Owen, quoted in *Women and Radicalism in the Nineteenth Century: Marriage, sexuality, and family*, ed. Mike Sanders (London: Routledge, 2001), 111-12. Bessie's interest in utopian communities and ideas is evident in a letter from her father, in which he

Barbara came close to living out this belief in practice, when she fell in love with the unhappily-married John Chapman and contemplated his proposal that they live together in a 'free union.' Like Lewes, divorce and re-marriage were not possible for Chapman. He framed this to Barbara positively, as in keeping with her radical views, declaring he 'would not allow' her to 'surrender' herself to him in marriage, even if he were free to do so.[38] Barbara was hesitant about taking such a step too quickly and confided in Bessie, who was once again a steadfast and non-judgemental friend. 'I am not a bit tired of J.C. if only you are happy with him,' she reassured her.[39] However the relationship ended abruptly in September 1855, when Barbara confided in her father the details of Chapman's proposal. Despite, or maybe even because of, his personal experience of living out of wedlock, Smith was adamant that Barbara should not follow the same path.[40] A woman's reputation was (as the example of Marian Evans had shown) far more vulnerable in such situations than a man's.

Meanwhile, Bessie also attempted to hold firm to her principles in her relationship with Sam. A letter she wrote to Sam in January 1855 makes clear she had worked hard to 'smooth the domestic waters' and persuade her father to allow her to see and correspond with Sam without interference. 'He appears at last,' she reported, 'to have come to the sense that I shall soon be 26, and am sana mens in sano corpore.'[41] Bessie presented herself in this letter as a careful negotiator, trying to find a way forward which would enable her to pursue her

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dismissed as 'Dreamers' the 'American Phalanxes' (Fourierist experimental communities) which Bessie had mentioned to him but offered to invite 'my old friend' Owen to breakfast so she could meet him. See JP, letter to BRP, May 2, 1853, GCPP Parkes 2/49.

38. Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 106.

39. BRP letter to BLS, August 29, 1855, GCPP Parkes 5/74.

40. Ben Smith's sceptical view of marriage was well-known: not only had he never married Annie Longden, the mother of Barbara and her four siblings, but after Annie's death he supported another mistress and three further illegitimate children at a house in Fulham. See Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon,* 96-7.

41. Translation: a healthy mind in a healthy body. BRP letter to SB, January 1855, GCPP Parkes 9/10.

relationship with Sam without alienating her parents. Her feelings about her family and her future were complex. As her parents' only surviving child she felt a strong sense of duty towards them and she chose to remain living in her (very comfortable) family home, funded by her father's money.[42] Her affection for Sam was not strong enough to induce her to turn away from her family in order to live independently according to her principles, as Marian had done and Barbara had contemplated.

Furthermore, while she presented herself to Sam as mature and level-headed, doing her best to 'smooth the waters' to their benefit, this is only one side of the story. Several years later, in a letter to Barbara, Bessie admitted she had in fact been 'frightened' at the prospect of marrying Sam: 'I felt too young … I actually sat on Mama's lap and cried from alarm ... Poor Mama didn't know what to do, and my father raved at me and swore I should marry in three months. You never heard of such scenes!'[43] In this later letter, Bessie's comments indicate that it was the precarious state of Sam's business interests, rather than Bessie's pleadings, which finally convinced Joseph of the wisdom of not insisting on an immediate engagement.[44] Bessie confided to Barbara that 'when I found Sam couldn't marry, I put my arms round his neck and kissed him, and said how very much relieved I was not to have to marry him!'[45]

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42. The Parkes had moved into 2 Savile Row, in affluent Mayfair, in January 1851. Joseph's career was progressing well, and he took pleasure in filling his grand new house with distinguished guests and fine art. Thanks to her father's money, Bessie's life was very comfortable and refined, surrounded by interesting people and beautiful things. She found the Savile Row house 'large, convenient & very handsome.' There she was able to entertain friends in her own sitting room, which Joseph referred to as her 'boudoir,' and her friends called 'the gilded cage,' an indication of the privileged parameters within which she was attempting to live as an 'advanced,' 'free' woman. See JP, letter to EP, January 4,1851, GCPP Parkes 4/4; BRP letter to Mary Swainson, December 1851, GCPP Parkes 3/24; Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 31–32.
43. BRP, letter to BLS, September 23, 1859, GCPP Parkes 5/92.
44. Joseph had insisted on being provided with detailed evidence of Sam's financial status, to judge whether Sam was in any position to marry his daughter. (He may have feared Sam had an eye on the substantial inheritance that awaited Bessie as his only surviving child.) Joseph estimated Sam's debts at this time to be around £200,000, an enormous sum (equating to approximately £11.8 million today), which makes clear just how impractical Sam had been in proposing The Ellowes as their marital home. See JP, letter to BRP, June 1860, GCPP Parkes 2/68.
45. BRP, letter to BLS, September 23, 1859, GCPP Parkes 5/92.

It can only be imagined how Sam must have felt at such a declaration of relief on Bessie's part, but it does fit with the ambivalence in Bessie's letters about the prospect of marriage, divided as she was between family pressures, political principles and private emotions. After the excitement of Sam's initial proposal, and dreams of setting home together in Staffordshire, much of her efforts seem to have been focused on persuading Sam to fit into her life in London. She invited him to one of Barbara's 'weekly receptions … where you could see all my friends & acquaintances, male & female, & get to feel the spirit of the atmosphere among us.' In a radical reversal of conventional marital roles, she hoped he would be willing and able to leave behind his business in Dudley to become part of the society she moved in, allowing her to continue her London life with minimal interruption.[46]

As Bessie struggled, in the coming months, to find a way forward in her relationship with Sam, she turned to her women friends for comfort and inspiration. 'I sit down in awe before our sex' she told Barbara, in the same letter where she reported bitterly that she had received a 'useless' letter from Sam, 'Saying he will do & be all I want; that is silent!'[47] This impatience with Sam contrasted with the pleasure she took in the company of a widening circle of female friends. One growing friendship was with Adelaide Procter, whose mother Anne had facilitated Bessie's meeting with Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Adelaide was an accomplished poet in her own right, her work frequently published in Charles Dickens' *Household Words*. She was also a deeply religious woman, a convert to Roman Catholicism, and her spiritual outlook on life came to have a significant influence on Bessie. One result of this was Bessie's growing admiration for women motivated by their religious faith to devote themselves to working outside the home for the public good.

46. BRP, letters to SB, January 20, 1855, and no date, GCPP Parkes 9/10, 9/15.
47. BRP letter to BLS, September 1, 1855, GCPP Parkes 5/76.

The most high-profile such woman in Britain at this time was Florence Nightingale, whose work managing the nursing care of wounded soldiers in the Crimea was widely celebrated in the press. She was revered as an 'ideal of Christian womanhood' and newspaper reports stressed the 'widely perceived religious nature of her mission.'[48] She was a forceful, independent figure, yet opinion was divided as to her usefulness as a role model for the working woman. Some, including Elizabeth Barrett Browning, were critical of the depiction of her as a 'saintly nurse,' reinforcing traditional notions of women's selfless, caring role, motivated by religious duty.[49] Barbara, as a religious sceptic, dismissed work undertaken for 'the love of Christ only' (i.e. unpaid philanthropy) as 'a profound and mischievous mistake … [which] tends to lessen the dignity of necessary labour. As if work for daily bread could not be for love of Christ too!'[50] Barbara's position was grounded in the principles of political economy, stressing the importance (both to women themselves and to society as a whole) of women taking their place in the labour market alongside men. The example of Nightingale and the middle-class women who accompanied her to the Crimea, working unpaid in military hospitals, organised on very similar lines to that of a religious sisterhood, was not one Barbara was keen to promote.

Bessie was not in complete agreement. '[M]y love of Adelaide Procter, my hearty admiration of that kind of character, makes me more hopeful about F[lorence] N[ightingale] than you seem inclined to be,' she told Barbara. 'Have we not room for a religious hero, like FN, even if they be not political economists? I know it is vexing to see any opportunity wasted; not taken full advantage of.' Bessie, keen to promote the cause of women's rights to a wider public, wanted to capitalise on Nightingale's status as a national heroine to argue

48. Mark Bostridge, *Florence Nightingale* (London: Penguin, 2009), 252-3.
49. Ibid., 263.
50. BLS, *Women and Work* (London: Bosworth & Harrison, 1857), 49.

for the right - and necessity - of women of all classes and motivations contributing usefully to the public realm. 'We want all the workers; the religious enthusiasts as well as the political economists,' she argued. 'Remember she has done far more in the last year[,] more than all the writers and talkers in 10.'[51]

Inspired by Nightingale, Bessie turned to her pen and wrote letters to the *Birmingham Journal* and the *Hastings News*.[52] She celebrated Nightingale as both a heroine admired for her 'religious mission' and as an intelligent and determined woman who had extensive knowledge 'in practice and in theory' of the latest ideas on hospital nursing. She emphasised the degree of professional expertise that informed Nightingale's 'missionary' work, presenting her as an exemplar of the valuable contribution well-trained women (rather than just well-intentioned amateurs) could make to the public good. She pointed out Nightingale's aim to 'open out a path of moral action for her own sex … on the one hand to alleviate misery, on the other to bring to bear the enormous mass of unused energy among women,' objectives that reflected Bessie's own religious and political priorities for women's work.[53]

Her writings on Florence Nightingale reflected both her own empathy with those who were driven by a religious sense of duty and her belief that women's rights could only be extended by appealing to as many different potentially-sympathetic groups as possible. They also demonstrated her awareness of the need to 'open out new paths and enlarge old ones' for women,[54] by encouraging greater respect for traditional women's work, such as nursing, organised on a more professional basis, as well as promoting opportunities for

51. BRP, letters to BLS, August 29 and 31, 1855, GCPP Parkes 5/74 and 5/75.
52. BRP, letters to BLS, August 31 and September 11, 1855, GCPP Parkes 5/75 and 5/77.
53. *Leader*, September 1, 1855, 842; *BJ,* September 22, 1855, 3.
54. *BJ,* September 22, 1855, 3.

women in many fields of employment regarded as the preserve of men. The basis upon which the mass of middle-class women should enter the work force was becoming a central focus of the women's rights movement, and it was an area in which Bessie took a particular interest over many years.

Bessie was surrounded by an expanding group of female friends who shared her enthusiasm for promoting women's rights, and who brought her what she described to Barbara as 'a new world of experience … in people, talk, books and life.' In their company she was buoyed up with optimism for the future of their cause:

> It pleases me so to see of women that be they downright like Jessie [White] or big & artistic like Miss Cushman (genius full I ought to say) or moral & tender like your St Eliz[th] [Blackwell], or travelled & cultivated like Miss Blagden, or daft upon missions like Bessie & Bar, or deep & dainty like my Mathew, they are all bent on doing the right.[55]

This rollcall of inspiring women helps chart Bessie's widening network of progressive associates. Jessie White (later Mario) was a writer who in 1855 tried unsuccessfully to enter medical school in London. She was a volunteer at Barbara's Portman School, teaching 'physiology and the laws of health' and later made her name as a high-profile campaigner for Italian Unification.[56] Isa Blagden and the renowned American actress Charlotte Cushman were both part of the network of expatriate artists and writers living in Italy and which also included the Brownings. Matilda Hays - often called Max or Mathew - was Cushman's companion. Bessie spent much time with Hays at the couple's home in Bolton Row, near Berkley Square in London, while Cushman was away on an acting tour around Britain in the summer of 1855. Hays had many interests in common with Bessie. She was a novelist and journalist, most well-known for her translation and editing of George Sand's

55. BRP, letter to BLS August 10, 1855, GCPP Parkes 5/7.
56. Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon,* 78.

work into English. Hays had also published a novel, *Helen Stanley* (1846), in which she depicted the limited options available for women for financial independence and fulfilment. In 1847 she had attempted to establish a periodical journal focused on women's rights but had failed to secure financial backing.[57] Bessie's friendship with Hays and Cushman drew her closer to the lives of these unconventional artistic women.

Charlotte Cushman was already a well-known actress, famous for playing male roles, when she first arrived in London in 1844. She was befriended by Mary Howitt, whose article about the actress in the Howitts' *People's Journal* helped establish her reputation in Britain. Cushman was welcomed into Mary Howitt's circle of women writers and formed a series of intimate romantic relationships with Eliza Cooke, Geraldine Jewsbury and Hays. Cushman and Hays formed an acting partnership and toured Britain and Ireland in 1848, with Hays playing Juliet opposite Cushman's Romeo. This unusual on-stage romance was short lived, but their personal relationship endured, and the women's status as a couple was well known and accepted amongst their friends. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who met Cushman in 1852, explained to her sister 'I understand that she and Miss Hays have made vows of celibacy and of eternal attachment to each other - they live together, dress alike … it is a female marriage.'[58] The term 'female marriage' might refer to a wide range of intimate relationships between women at this time, suggesting commitment to an intimate, exclusive relationship, but not necessarily a sexual one. However, the very public nature of Hays and Cushman's 'marriage,' combined with their choice of 'androgynous' outfits of tailored shirts and jackets and use of male nicknames, signalled their rejection of

57. Matilda M. Hays, *Helen Stanley* (London: Churton, 1846); *The Works of George Sand*, edited by Matilda M. Hays, translated by Hays, Eliza A. Ashurst and Edmund R. Larkin (London: Churton, 1846). The translation project was not a success. Hays and Ashurst had been encouraged by George Lewes to make Sand's 'unconventional messages palatable to English sensibilities' but were attacked from one side for 'smuggling' immoral ideas into England while Sand's friend Mazzini claimed they had 'stripped [Sand's works] of their power.' See Merrill, *When Romeo was a Woman,* 157-8.
58. Barrett Browning, letter to Arabella Moulton-Barrett, October 22, 1852, quoted in Merrill, *When Romeo was a Woman,* 160.

conventional hetero-normative society. As Merrill notes, at the time such a relationship had 'no distinct label [but] today it would be considered lesbian.'[59]

Bessie quickly came to value her close friendship with Matilda Hays. There is no evidence there was an erotic or sexual aspect to their relationship but equally no sense Bessie was in any way disapproving of Hays' relationship with Cushman. In becoming personally connected to these women who so openly flouted heterosexual norms, Bessie also had the opportunity to observe a different conception of marriage, one which also offered new possibilities for heterosexual marriage. Two women living together in a committed relationship might formalise their union through legal and financial arrangements (through, for example, drawing up wills in each other's favour). As Marcus argues, this helped establish the idea of marriage as a contract between equals, a 'mutually beneficial exchange in which each side received consideration,' both parties retaining independent control over their property and earnings. In addition, such an arrangement could, like a contract, be ended, in contrast to the insolubility of heterosexual marriage at this time.[60] The freedoms such women enjoyed were precisely those which heterosexual women were beginning to argue they should have. Bessie's letters to Sam indicate her desire to achieve in private a similar kind of egalitarian basis to their relationship; the opportunity now arose for her to be at the centre of a public campaign to reform the unequal legal status of married women.

Barbara's lucid account of the inequitable legal position of women in her *Brief Summary* of 1854 had gained the attention of the Law Amendment Society (LAS), a body set up by the Whig peer Lord Brougham (Joseph Parkes' political mentor) with the aim of reforming

59. Merrill, *When Romeo was a Woman,* 160.
60. Marcus *Between Women,* 205. Indeed, when Cushman and Hays' relationship ended acrimoniously in 1857, Cushman reportedly gave Hays 'a thousand or two dollars' in recompense for her financial 'sacrifice' in giving up paid employment to support her. See Merrill, *When Romeo was a Woman*, 185.

and rationalising legislation. The LAS took particular interest in Barbara's analysis of the legal status of married women. Under common law, a woman's property became, upon marriage, that of her husband, which he could dispose of as he wished. However, the Court of Equity enabled wealthy families to protect a daughter's property, by 'settling' it on her in trust, overseen by trustees acting on the woman's behalf, out of the control of any future husband. This inequitable situation - one law for the rich and another for the poor - was exactly the kind of anomaly which the LAS sought to remedy and there was considerable public sympathy with such an argument of fairness. In addition, the failure of the law to protect women could be demonstrated though harrowing stories of abandoned wives and children, husbands who squandered their wives' earnings and widows left destitute when the family estate was inherited by their sons or others. The legal position of married women was, therefore, a practical choice for a first foray into a public campaign to reform women's rights, with the potential to gain widespread support. The issue also encapsulated the central feminist principle of women's equality, challenging a system which degraded married women, depriving wives of their 'legal existence, of the rights and responsibilities of other citizens and thus of their self respect.'[61]

Barbara, with the encouragement of the LAS, set up a committee dedicated to reforming the law in relation to women, beginning with the organisation of a petition to Parliament calling for reform of married women's property rights. Barbara's drawing room at the Leigh Smith home, 5 Blandford Square, became the committee's headquarters and the committee members comprised her friends, including Mary and Anna Mary Howitt, Anna Jameson, Elizabeth Reid and, naturally, Bessie. Working from home enabled women to safely

61. Lee Holcombe, *Wives & Property: Reform of the Married Women's Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 35.

'negotiate a public presence' in this period,[62] and the campaign resembled the pre-existing informal and domestic model of women's political activism. Women's contribution to political campaigns tended to involve working at a local level on behalf of a cause, engaging in activities such as canvassing door-to-door and reading and writing campaigning pamphlets, while men took centre-stage in public meetings and at the national level. Elizabeth Reid, Mary Howitt and Anna Jameson had all gained experience of such activism in previous decades, in campaigns against the Corn Laws (which limited the imports of grain to Britain) and for the abolition of slavery, where women's voices and actions (including petitioning) had a significant impact on the campaign.[63] Now however, these women were asserting their political agency for their own cause. In calling for married women to be recognised by the law as individual citizens they were drawing attention to an injustice inflicted upon women purely on the basis of sex. In doing so, they were also declaring their rights as women to participate in their own right in debate in a political realm that was traditionally understood as masculine.

Bessie was tasked with finalising the wording of the petition. 'I thought it better to classify the women as merely "married & single",' she told Barbara. 'I hope you will approve it, and that the artist soul will think it executed with dignity & simplicity … firm and safe upholders of the sacred cause of our own sex.'[64] Such comments indicate Bessie's awareness of the importance of striking the right tone in the petition, to stir sympathy with the cause and ensure it could not be dismissed as foolish or disreputable. Defining the women involved in the campaign needed careful thought. While the well-known names of

62. Lynne Walker, 'Home and away: The Feminist Remapping of Public and Private Space in Victorian London,' in *New Frontiers of Space, Bodies and Gender: Exploring Bodies, Space, and Gender,* ed. Rosa Ainley (London: Routledge, 2002), 67.
63. Kathryn Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens: Women, Gender and Political Culture in Britain, 1815-1867* (Oxford: OUP/British Academy, 2009), 65-66; Sarah Richardson, 'Conversations with Parliament: Women and the Politics of Pressure in 19th-Century England,' *Parliamentary History,* 37, no. 1 (2018): 36. https://doi.org/10.1111/1750-0206.12328.
64. BRP, letter to BLS, December 21, 1855, GCPP Parkes 5/79.

Mary Howitt and Anna Jameson attracted attention and conferred the gravitas of their status as older, married women, there was also concern the petition should not be open to criticism as merely an outpouring of married women's discontents. This was especially the case given Jameson's status, separated from a husband who did not provide for her financially.[65] Unmarried women were particularly vulnerable to censure if they put themselves forward in the public political realm, but in this instance drawing attention to the unmarried members of the committee was valuable: they represented 'disinterested' parties arguing alongside their married sisters for the improvement of their rights.

The committee worked hard to encourage their personal contacts to sign the petition. For example, Barbara sent it to Marian Evans for her signature, whereupon Marian enquired whether her Coventry friends Sara Hennell and Cara Bray might also be interested in adding their names.[66] In addition, the campaign moved beyond this 'private' strategy of drawing on their immediate network of personal acquaintances, to seek national attention and support. The respected writer Harriet Martineau, when approached to sign the petition, offered 'with pleasure to do anything to help this rational object.'[67] As a leader writer for the *London Daily News* she was able to draw the campaign to the notice of the paper's readers. The coverage of the progress of the petition in the *Daily News* was extensive and notably positive, describing the women who supported the campaign as 'sensible' and declaring confidence that '[a]fter a longer or shorter time, the women of England are sure of being put in possession … of their personal fortunes and the earnings of their talent and toil.'[68]

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65. The philanthropist Angela Coutts refused a request from her friend Mary Howitt to sign the petition due to her unease at Anna Jameson's 'free opinions with regard to marriage.' See Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 93.
66. ME, letter to Sara Hennell, January 18, 1856, in *The George Eliot Letters. Vol.2*, ed. Haight, 225.
67. Quoted in Deborah Cherry, *Beyond the Frame: Feminism and Visual Culture, Britain 1850 -1900* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), 15.
68. *London Daily News*, 26 March 1856, 4.

Notices promoting the petition and encouraging women to sign it also appeared in regional newspapers around the country; these included a summary of the petition's demands and a list of the twenty-four committee members. Thus the names of Bessie Rayner Parkes, Anna Mary Howitt, Matilda Hays and Barbara Leigh Smith were seen by newspaper readers across Britain, alongside others much more familiar to the public, including Mary Howitt, Anna Jameson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charlotte Cushman, Mrs Gaskell and Harriet Martineau.[69] Bessie was delighted with the campaign's success in attracting support, and quickly became aware she was becoming a recognisable 'public name.' 'Everywhere [support for the petition] is growing' she declared, reporting to Barbara that she had been introduced to a 'very old lady [who] … hobbled up from her chair to shake hands with "Miss Bessie Parkes" because she had seen my name to it in the Daily News!'[70]

The original London-based petition gathered more than 3000 signatures of women while a further seventy petitions from around the country contained over 26,000 signatures in total. The collated petitions were presented to Parliament on 14th March 1856. As women could not set foot on the floor of either house, Lord Brougham presented it in the House of Lords and the liberal MP Sir Erskine Perry did so in the Commons, where, Mary Howitt reported, the unrolled scroll 'reached the whole length of the House.'[71] The presentation of the petition and subsequent debates on the subject in the House of Commons generated much attention from the press, bringing the issue to the forefront of public consideration. Publicity for the petition had also raised the public profiles of Bessie and Barbara as leading

69. The full list of published signatories in these notices (e.g. *Wiltshire Independent,* March 6, 1856, 2) appeared as 'Anna Blackwell, Isa Blagden, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Sarianna Browning, Mrs Carlyle, Mary Cowden Clarke, Charlotte Cushman, Ameila B. Edwards, Eliza F. Fox, Mrs Gaskell, Matilda M. Hays, Mary Howitt, Anna Mary Howitt, Anna Jameson, Geraldine Jewsbury, Mrs Loudon, Mrs Lovell, Harriet Martineau, Honble. Julia Maynard, Mary Mohl, Bessie Rayner Parkes, Mrs Reid, Barbara Leigh Smith and Miss Sturch.'
70. BRP letter to BLS, March 19, 1856, GCPP Parkes 5/82.
71. Quoted in Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 94.

campaigners on the issue. Capitalising on this, new editions of Bessie's *Remarks on the Education of Girls* and Barbara's *Brief Summary* were published by John Chapman in 1856, with the authors' names on the title page for the first time. Bessie in her preface for this edition commented on the rapid developments with regard to the debate on the 'Position of Women,' since the pamphlet's first appearance two years earlier. She cited both the respect given to 'the noble work accomplished by Florence Nightingale and her assistants' and sympathetic responses to the petition, as examples of how questions related to women's rights 'now … appear perpetually' in the press.[72]

At the heart of the argument put forward by the petitioners was the extent of female paid employment. The 1851 census showed a quarter of married women engaged in paid work, and in the petition which Bessie drafted she had been at pains to stress this was a trend in 'all classes of society,' not just the labouring poor, as 'married women of education are entering on every side in the fields of literature and art, in order to increase the family income.'[73] The recent expansion of the periodical press meant writing could increasingly be considered a profession, offering the possibility of an income sufficient to support a middle-class lifestyle. It was also a form of work adaptable to women's differing circumstances and possible to carry out from home alongside domestic duties and in collaboration with family and friends. Harriet Martineau, for example, had carved out an extraordinarily successful writing career for herself as an independent single woman, publishing texts on subjects such as political economy and providing a professional role model for younger women. Mary Howitt, in contrast, combined her writing with her responsibilities as a wife and mother, at times working alongside her husband on journalistic ventures. She also collaborated with her sister and her daughter, Anna Mary,

72. BRP, *Remarks,* iii-iv.
73. Text of the 'Petition for the Reform of the Married Women's Property Law Presented to Parliament 14 March 1856,' reproduced in Holcombe, *Wives and Property,* 237.

whose illustrations formed part of several publications, including children's books such as *The Children's Year* (1847).[74]

Bessie was now closely involved in the worlds of publishing and periodical journalism, and was able to observe how friends such as Marian Evans and the Howitts negotiated these literary marketplaces in different ways and for a range of political, financial and artistic purposes. Her letters to Barbara during this period are full of her enthusiastic ideas for various writing projects. The letters she wrote for publication in various titles, on the topic of the married women's property petition and the wider issue of women's work, meant her name was becoming recognised in the context of the 'woman question.' However she was anxious not to let her campaigning writing overshadow her efforts for her literary career. In the summer of 1855 she turned down requests from John Chapman to write for the *Westminster Review* as she was determined to carve out adequate time to develop her 'own line' in 'poems and poetical prose.' 'I do care for the woman question above all' she reassured Barbara, 'but I can never be a newspaper writer, nor much in reviews … my mind accumulates poems and images of art, in a slow creative manner, and if I had to do many scraps of work I should go crazy.'[75]

Writing reviews could be useful and reliable work. It formed the mainstay of income for many women writers of the period: for example, Bessie's contemporary Margaret Oliphant was the lead literary reviewer for *Blackwood's Magazine* for several decades, combining this with her prolific novel-writing career. Yet, as Bessie realised, such journalistic work could also be an unhelpful distraction from concentrated literary creativity. Oliphant felt her career suffered because she was forced to write extensively to provide for those

74. Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters,* 7 and passim.
75. BRP letter to BLS, August 1855, GCPP Parkes 5/74.

dependent on her.[76] Bessie had no such responsibilities for others and so could pick and choose her writing projects. Yet she also lacked the independent means to finance the publication of her work and so needed to shape her output to what was most likely to appeal to publishers and the market. To achieve her ambition of becoming a respected literary writer, she needed to focus on publishing books, a medium perceived as higher status than 'ephemeral' newspapers and periodicals.[77]

In 1855 Chapman produced a second, revised edition of Bessie's *Poems*, which combined the contents of her 1852 volume with *Summer Sketches* and which Bessie once again dedicated to Barbara. She was also working on two new projects: a children's storybook, *A History of Our Cat Aspasia*, and a poetry volume, *Gabriel*. This dual focus reflects the range of genres in which women writers worked during this period and also indicates the tensions in Bessie's ambitions as a writer, as she sought both popular commercial success and more elevated recognition of literary merit. *Aspasia* tells the light-hearted adventures of the real-life cat of the same name, whom Bessie had acquired during her summer in Wales with Barbara the previous year and whose various scrapes Bessie had recorded in her letters.[78] Writing for children was a lucrative market for writers in this period and one which was particularly 'hospitable to women,' regarded as an 'extension' of their 'natural womanly capacities' to teach and guide children.[79] Bessie's took a business-like approach to this book. She sought out a new publisher, Bosworth and Harrison (as she judged the radical associations of Chapman's name 'would go against a child's tale') and aimed to secure publication in time for the profitable Christmas market. She took care not to

76. Linda K. Hughes, 'The Professional Woman Writer,' in *The History of British Women's Writing, 1830-1880: Volume Six,* ed. Hartley, 64.
77. Alison Chapman, 'Achieving Fame and Canonicity,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women's Writing*, ed. Peterson, 77.
78. For example, BRP letter to BLS, 22 October 1854 (GCPP Parkes 5/68).
79. Claudia Nelson, 'Children's Writing,' in *Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women's Writing*, ed. Peterson, 251-2.

oversimplify her language for her child readers, instead including some more complex vocabulary and a 'tinge of satire,' which she hoped would appeal. She also asked Barbara to contribute some 'comical' illustrations for it, arguing these 'and our joint names' would make the book more appealing to a publisher.[80]

However Bessie's motives for collaboration were not entirely commercial. Rather, the book can be read as a testament to her personal and artistic friendship with Barbara, and to their shared vision of co-operative artistic sisterhood. Aspasia's story was also the story of their idyllic summer in Wales: the women who give Aspasia a home in Bessie's book are lightly fictionalised versions of Bessie and Barbara, under the pseudonyms 'Lilian' and 'Helen' which she had previously adopted in *Summer Sketches.* The Associate Home for women artists, which they had imagined together with Anna Mary Howitt, is even directly referred to at the end of the book, when the unruly Aspasia is deemed unsuitable for life in London and is sent to live in the country. The narrative concludes 'when Helen and I set up the Associate Home, of which we have been talking for the last ten years, and which is to include several other Artists and Authors … the very first domestic servant we establish by the new hearth will be out Cat ASPASIA'[81] Yet Barbara resisted Bessie's repeated entreaties to contribute to the book; the published volume instead included illustrations by Barbara's sister, Annie. It was a modest success, running to a second edition within a year. Bessie sent a copy to Marian Evans, who pronounced it 'charming.'[82] Despite this positive response, Bessie did not undertake any further writing for children at this time. Instead she set her sight on more esoteric literary success.

80. BRP letter to BLS, August 26, 1855, GCPP Parkes 5/73.
81. BRP, *A History of Our Cat Aspasia* (London: Bosworth & Harrison, 1856), 44-5.
82. ME, letter to BRP, 32 March [1856] in *The George Eliot Letters. Vol.2*, ed. Haight, 235.

Bessie's poetry project, *Gabriel,* proved, like *Aspasia*, to be a difficult enterprise, although for different reasons. Bessie intended her eponymous 'Gabriel' to be 'Shelley adapted' and she conceived the volume as a fictionalised version of the life of her poetic hero. She constructed it as a verse-biography of 'Gabriel,' told largely in the voice of Gabriel's wife. It was an ambitious idea, aiming for the most elevated form of literature in both form and subject-matter, and Bessie also argued for its contemporary relevance to radical political debates, 'since Shelley had he lived, would have been ever progressive.'[83] She devoted much of her attention to *Gabriel*, even while she was busy with the Married Women's Property petition, writing in one letter to Barbara 'You shall have the petition by the evening post. "J'ai fait mon possible" [I have done what I can] & must now devote my time to Gabriel.'[84]

This devotion to her new poem reflected her sense that poetry 'formulates … the ideas of any given time … Whatever be the civilisation, the religion, the law the acts, of an age, they are caught up by the poets, by them embalmed, by them handed down.'[85] She used *Gabriel* as an opportunity to draw together her ideas about poetic genius and spiritual truth, both venerating Shelley and reshaping his life and reputation to her own ends. She was unapologetic about her 'latitudes of treatment' of her subject, including an anachronistic scene where the speaker reads to Gabriel lines from Longfellow's 1847 poem *Evangeline.*[86] This allusion to Longfellow's epic, highly-regarded poem is an indication of the kind of poetry Bessie admired at this time and to which she aspired. Perhaps it was this that led her

83. BRP letter to BLS, 1855, GCPP Parkes 5/78.
84. BRP letter to BLS, December 1855 (GCPP Parkes 5/80).
85. BRP letter to EP, 1855 (GCPP Parkes 2/4a).
86. BRP letter to George Holyoake, June 15, 1856, GCPP Parkes 9/122a. The poem includes a quotation of a line from *Evangeline*: 'Gabriel, O my Beloved!' See BRP, *Gabriel* (London: Chapman, 1856), 49. Longman's poem is a tale of ill-fated love in the Catholic Acadian community expelled from Canada, with the eponymous heroine ending her days as a nursing Sister of Mercy. Longfellow's sympathetic presentation of this subject must have appealed to Bessie's increasing interest in Roman Catholicism. Andrew C. Higgins states that 'Evangeline may be the most famous Catholic character in nineteenth-century American literature.' See Higgins, 'Evangeline's Mission: Anti-Catholicism, Nativism, and Unitarianism in Longfellow's *Evangeline,' Religion and the Arts* 13 (2009): 566.

to offer publication of her poem to John Bogue, who had published an authorised British edition of *Evangeline*. Bogue's rejection left her despondent. She struggled to sell the work to a publisher and she began to realise it was unlikely to appeal to a wide audience. She eventually arranged to publish the work with Chapman and showed the proofs to Charlotte Cushman, hoping for the endorsement of someone she regarded as possessing the female artistic 'genius' she so admired. She was disappointed by Cushman's negative annotations on the text but refused to accept her criticisms, concluding 'her theories of poetical art differ from mine … I can but do my truest at any given time.' She chose to remain faithful to her own ideals of poetic artistic 'truth' and, quoting Milton, told Barbara she hoped *Gabriel* might 'fit audience find tho' few.'[87]

She also explained to George Holyoake (editor of the secularist periodical *The Reasoner*) that she 'could not deal with' Shelley's atheism in the poem, as it did not seem to her the 'legitimate outgrowth of his nature but rather born from his times and circumstances.'[88] In her poem, Gabriel is sent down from Oxford not (as Shelley was) for writing an atheistic pamphlet but for challenging an out-dated, prosodic College establishment by extolling poetic genius and the 'Truth' which 'God in his grace gave me light to see.'[89] She does not merely side-step Shelley's atheism; rather she makes Gabriel an explicitly Christian figure. She makes clear the symbolism of her choice of name by including as an epigraph the verse from Luke's Gospel: 'The Angel Gabriel was sent from God.' Gabriel is presented as a

87. BRP letters to BLS, March 19 and 28, 1856, GCPP Parkes 5/82 and 5/83.
88. BRP letter to George Holyoake, June 15, 1856, GCPP Parkes 9/122a. Bessie's rejection of Shelley's atheism reflects her personal spiritual journey at this time towards Roman Catholicism but also echoes the view of Robert Browning, who in his essay on Shelley described the poet's atheism as 'Crude convictions of boyhood' which, had he not died young, 'would have been left behind.' See *Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley. With an Introductory Essay by Robert Browning*. (London: Edward Moxon, 1852). Bessie copied out Browning's essay in its entirety into her journal around the time it was published. See GCPP Parkes 1/33. Sylva Norman, in the only post-nineteenth-century assessment of *Gabriel*, perceived that it demonstrated Bessie's 'missionary fervor' for Shelley's genius while 'remodeling' him 'according to the desires of a faithful heart.' See Norman, *Flight of the Skylark. The Development of Shelley's Reputation* (London: Max Reinhardt, 1854), 201-2.
89. BRP, *Gabriel,* 37.

Messiah, the 'poet of the future' prepared to sacrifice himself for spiritual and poetic truth. References to Christ and his Passion appear at several places in the volume, and the opening dedication, dated 'Easter 1856,' celebrates Easter as 'Holiest time / And radiance of the circling year!'

Gabriel is the most idiosyncratic of Bessie's works and is perhaps most fruitfully read biographically, as a reflection of the range of influences - literary, religious, personal and political - surrounding her at this time. It charts her growing sympathy with Catholicism, partly influenced by Adelaide Procter. It also, in its depiction of Gabriel and his wife as fellow poets who 'wrote together, sang together,'[90] celebrates the alliance of conjugal love with collaborative artistic endeavour, evoking partnerships such as Mary and William Howitt, Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Rossetti and Siddall, and Percy and Mary Shelley themselves.[91] Bessie's use of Gabriel's wife as the poem's main speaker also allows her to present this homage to a male Romantic poetic hero through the voice of a female writer. This gives her scope to include a tribute to Mary Shelley's mother, as the speaker take pride in the fact 'Her blood flows in my veins, her thoughts in mine' and celebrates 'How [her] clear brain, in triumph cutting through / The midst of ages, to the thought's core flew.'[92] Percy Shelley is momentarily forgotten as the poem honours another visionary articulator of truth, Mary Wollstonecraft, whose feminist arguments were so influential on the ideas of Bessie and her fellow women's rights campaigners.

Much of this range of references was overlooked by the critics. Reviews of *Gabriel* divided as much upon attitudes towards its controversial subject as they did regarding the writer's

90. BRP, *Gabriel,* 76.
91. The potential significance of the name Gabriel was not lost on Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who obviously made enquiries about Bessie's title. In a letter to a mutual friend, William Allingham, dated April 25, 1856 he commented 'Bessie P's *Gabriel* is Shelley I hear.' See *Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. Fredeman, 119.
92. BRP, *Gabriel,* 22.

treatment of it. The radical *Leader* praised the work as 'brave and noble' in challenging the 'prejudice … not yet entirely departed' against the 'reviled and persecuted Shelley' while the *Chambers's Journal* mused 'Miss Parkes might have selected a subject better suited to her gifts and … of general interest.' The limited appeal of a work on Shelley was also remarked upon in the *Critic*, which imagined the likely 'indignation' of 'the class of freethinkers' who most 'value Shelley,' at her depiction of him as 'sent from God.' This critic also offered ambiguous praise for Bessie as 'distinguishable from the majority of her sisters in the tuneful art by the firmness and almost masculine grasp of her thoughts,' a further reminder of the extent to which literature was read through the lens of gender.[93]

There were also, however, notes of praise for Bessie's 'exquisite' poetry and 'intellectual subtlety' and several reviews included lengthy quotations of passages of description. The *Athenaeum* praised and reproduced 'Miss Parkes's sketch of the Welsh coast, after the manner of Mr. M. Arnold.' The *Literary Gazette* printed all six stanzas of the canto entitled 'His Singing' as well as over thirty lines of the description of Italy, as examples of 'passages of description such as few writers of our time have equalled.' Marian Evans, in the *Westminster Review*, similarly commented on the 'beauty of many descriptive passages, in which we think Miss Parkes shows a certain vein of poetic power' and included the first six stanzas of the volume as an example. However, with her novelistic eye, she regarded the decision to tell Gabriel's story through the voice of his wife as a 'disadvantage, since it raises a demand for psychological verisimilitude which Miss Parkes has not satisfied.'[94]

93. *Leader*, 28 June 1856, 618-9; 'Four Books of Poetry,' *Chambers's Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Art,* August 16, 1856, 102; *Critic*, September 15, 1856, 445.
94. 'Minor Minstrels,' *Athenaeum*, June 14, 1856, 743; *Literary Gazette*, June 21, 1856, 393; [ME], 'Belle Lettres and Art,' *Westminster Review*, July 1856, 264-6.

Although *Gabriel* is, today, almost completely forgotten and Bessie's intentions in writing it were little understood at the time, passages from it were reprinted in other contexts, from the date of its publication and for many years since. For example, the description of the Carnarvon coast admired by the *Athenaeum* appeared in the Welsh regional press and the *Reasoner* in the summer of 1856.[95] An extract from the canto 'Under the Beeches' was particularly popular and was frequently reproduced in anthologies under the title 'Robin Hood.'[96] *Gabriel* thus established Bessie's reputation as a poet skilled in the evocation of place. One further personal triumph came in the form of appreciation from Shelley's son and daughter-in-law, Sir Percy and Lady Jane Shelley, with whom Bessie entered into correspondence and who presented her with an autograph manuscript of a Shelley lyric.[97]

After this intense focus on her poetic output, and the disappointment of not seeing *Gabriel* achieve significant critical or commercial success, Bessie turned back to journalism and renewed her efforts for women's rights. A bill to give married women the same property rights as single women was introduced to Parliament by Lord Brougham in February 1857; in a series of letters published in the *Leader* Bessie explained the argument behind each clause of the petition which had initiated the bill. Her approach, like that of the campaign as a whole, combined appeals to abstract principles of justice with utilitarian arguments of necessity, highlighting real-life examples of the suffering of women denied control of their own earnings and property. She also took the opportunity to again highlight and defend the growing number of married women in paid employment outside of the home. Not only, she argued, was this evidence of the economic necessity for wives of all classes to help generate adequate income for their families; it was also a reflection of women coming to appreciate

95. *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, June 21, 1856, 8; *Reasoner*, July 6, 1856, 5.
96. For example, the literary critic Edmund Gosse reminisced that 'ever since I was a schoolboy I have known and loved … "Robin Hood".' See Gosse, letter to Mr. Besant, 17 July 1894, GCPP Parkes 9/99.
97. Lady Shelley, letters to BRP, 1856-9, GCPP Parkes 9/110-130; Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Fair-copy Manuscripts of Shelley's Poems in European and American Libraries Vol. 7*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Michael O'Neill (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1997), 330.

the dignity and self-respect to be gained from earning a wage alongside their husbands. Furthermore, she argued, such a trend was unstoppable: '[a]s well try to dam out the flowing of a mighty river as to stop women from working when once they have seen the need, felt the power and tasted the profit of exertion.'[98]

Through such assertions Bessie linked the specific demands for reform to married women's legal status to a call for much wider and more radical transformations in women's lives and in relations between the sexes. She was also articulating her individual experience as she took further strides in her own career. She had gained confidence as a poet and was experiencing the satisfaction of helping co-ordinate efforts to improve women's legal and economic status.

§

In the short term the campaign failed to achieve its aims: Brougham's bill failed after its first reading and it was not until 1882 that married women finally gained control over all their property and earnings. However, the petition had drawn considerable public attention to the subject of women's rights and had created a valuable network of women sympathetic to the cause. Bessie later identified this moment as the starting point of a national, organised women's rights movement in Britain: 'In the effort to obtain signatures people interested in the question were brought into communication in all parts of the kingdom, and the germs of an effective movement were scattered far and wide.'[99] Bessie was at the heart of this movement and full of optimism for its future success. In the face of this, it became

98. BRP, 'The Laws Relating to the Property of Married Women,' 'Open Council,' *Leader,* February 14, 1857, 154. Further letters on this topic by Parkes were published in the *Leader* on April 11, April 18, June 6 and June 13, 1857. These letters are also discussed in Debbie Parker Kinch, '"We Who Strive for the Foundation of a Principle": Feminism and Suffrage in the Biography of Bessie Parkes Belloc,' *Women's History Review* 29, no. 6 (November 2020): 923, https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2020.1745399.
99. BRP, 'A Review of the Last Six Years,' *English Woman's Journal*, February 1864, 363.

increasingly unlikely she could consider diverting her energies away from writing and campaigning, towards marriage and family.

Chapter 4 1856-1861: Throwing down the barriers

> We ask but to throw down the barriers so that women may be free to choose their own way of life … hoping and trusting that all women … may gather hope, and walk with a firmer footing.
>
> *The English Woman's Journal*, May 1858[1]

Visiting Edinburgh in October 1856, Bessie met the Scottish journalist and poet Isa Craig. They noticed a local publication, the *Waverley Journal* which, its masthead slogan proclaimed, was 'edited and published by ladies.' Bessie later recalled that the *Waverley* was 'a paper of a very harmless but very inefficient sort, full of tales, poetry and occasional articles on charities' but the owner was keen to 'improve' it.[2] Bessie, Isa and Barbara began contributing to the *Waverley* articles on women's employment and legal status, as well as reviews and profiles of women writers and artists.[3] This introduced a recognisable feminist strand within the *Waverley* but the next step was to bring the title to London, install Bessie as editor and thereby transform it into a dedicated organ for the women's movement. It was to be a new kind of periodical: a journal controlled by women, nurturing women's writing and providing a platform for progressive discussions about women's education, employment and legal rights.[4] They envisaged this as part of a wider project, with a London

1. [BRP], 'The "Saturday Review" and the "English Woman's Journal" – the Reviewer Reviewed,' *EWJ*, May 1858, 57-60.
2. BRP, 'A Review of the Last Six Years,' *EWJ*, February 1864, 364.
3. These articles included two lengthy reviews, most likely penned by Bessie, promoting the work of two women she much admired: one a review of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's recently-published *Aurora Leigh* and another focused on Anna Jameson's lectures on women's work: 'Sisters of Charity' and 'Communion of Labour. See 'Literature,' *Waverley Journal*, December 13, 1856, 145-6; 'Communion of Labour,' *Waverley Journal*, January 10, 1857, 186. The only surviving copies of the *Waverley* are some from 1856 – 1857 (held at the University of Glasgow Library) and some numbers for January 1858 (held at the British Library), so many of these articles have not survived. Bessie's correspondence records that she made other contributions to the *Waverley* which are now lost, such as an article on the French artist Rosa Bonheur, and sought pieces from friends and associates for the title. See BRP, letter to Mary Merryweather, 1857, GCPP Parkes 6/73.
4. The idea of a periodical devoted to the issue of woman's rights was not new. In 1847 George Jacob Holyoake had written on the topic in his periodical *The Reasoner,* advocating the idea of a periodical dedicated to the 'woman question.' In the same year, and perhaps in connection with Holyoake's suggestion, Matilda Hays had attempted to establish such a publication with the support of Mary Howitt. However the project came to nothing and Hays later reflected that 'The time … was not considered ripe for the experiment.' See George Henry Holyoake, 'Hints to the Advocates on the Rights of Women,' *Reasoner*,

shop for newspapers, stationery and books, and publishing campaigning tracts in addition to the *Waverley* itself. The shop would be run by an experienced woman who could train others in the trade, to demonstrate that such an enterprise was 'respectable and profitable.'[5] This established a model for the expansion of the women's movement in the coming years: disseminating feminist arguments in the press together with establishing grassroots projects providing practical training and employment to women.

However, even wider vistas now opened up for Barbara and Bessie, when they travelled to Algeria for the winter, leaving Isa to continue negotiations over the *Waverley*.[6] Bessie's friendship with Barbara once again gave her the opportunity to expand her horizons and embrace the liberation of independent travel - this time, thrillingly, beyond the borders of her own continent. The trip to North Africa was arranged for the health of Barbara's sister Bella, who had earlier in the year been diagnosed with potentially-fatal tuberculosis. Barbara was also at this time still at an emotional and physical low-point after the end of her relationship with John Chapman and had fallen into a depression. In October 1856, inspired by his son's recent reports of the 'savage grandeur' of Algeria, Ben Smith set out with his daughters Barbara, Bella and Annie to winter in Algiers.[7] Bessie was to join them later.

As the capital of the new French colony of Algeria, Algiers was becoming a desirable winter destination for European tourists and convalescents. It offered a very mild and sunny climate and was cheaper than the European Mediterranean coast; therefore it became increasingly popular with upper-middle-class British travellers - so much so that it became

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3:63 [1847]: 429-37; Laura Schwartz, 'Freethought, Free Love and Feminism: secularist debates on marriage and sexual morality, England c. 1850–1885,' *Women's History Review*, 19, no. 5 (2010): 779, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1vwmdmp; Merrill, *When Romeo was a Woman,* 58.
5. BRP, letter to Mary Merryweather, January 126-28, 857, GCPP Parkes 6/72.
6. BRP, 'Review of the Last Six Years,' 364.
7 Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 117, 120.

known as the 'Torquay of Africa.'[8] The Smith sisters were able to recuperate while enjoying a leisured life of painting outdoors and exploring the exotic scenery and culture. The change of scene was immediately restorative for Barbara, who wrote excitedly to tell Bessie about the 'quite enchanting' place, evoking images from their favourite childhood book, *The Arabian Nights*, in her descriptions of 'Sinbads,' dark archways and 'mysterious doors.'[9] Beyond these romantic attractions, visiting Algiers afforded radicals such as Ben Smith and his circle an opportunity to study at first hand 'the impact of French commercial civilisation on old Mohammedan culture' as the radical MP John Bright termed it.[10] Assumptions of the superiority of European civilisation, and of the merits of colonialism as a civilising force, were commonplace, including among the politically-radical circles in which Barbara and Bessie moved.

In December 1856 Bessie sailed from Marseilles to join the Smiths. During her travels she continued to write, recording her impressions of Algiers in letters home but also recognising the commercial possibilities of publishing her observations. Within days of her arrival she had sent British publishers a proposal for a book on the city and had dispatched articles to several periodicals.[11] Travel writing was a new genre for Bessie and a potentially profitable one, as it was both popular and held high literary and intellectual status. At this time, being a 'tourist' positioned the travel writer as a first-hand expert, a particularly useful persona for women, who were not routinely awarded the same 'intellectual and cultural authority' as male writers.[12] Bessie vividly recounted her adventurous journey and the exotic sights and sounds of the 'Orient' (as Islamic Algeria was termed). Her report for the *National*

8. Osman Benchérif, *The British in Algiers, 1585-2000* (Algiers: RSM Communication 2001), 40.
9. Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 120.
10. Cherry, *Beyond the Frame,* 62.
11. BRP, letter to Mary Merryweather, January 11, 1857, GCCP Parkes 6/71) BRP, 'An English Woman's Notions of Algiers: how hard it was to get there,' *Illustrated Times,* March 14, 1857, 164-5.
12. Carl Thompson, 'Journeys to Authority: Reassessing Women's Early Travel Writing, 1763–1862,' *Women's Writing*, 24, no. 2 (2017): 135, 143, https://doi.org/10.1080/09699082.2016.1207915.

Magazine was a dramatic account of a night-time 'expedition' into the dark streets of Old Algiers to witness the 'celebrated ceremony of fire-eating.' She described the Arab fire-eaters working themselves into a frenzy of seemingly 'demoniacal possession' before proceeding to lick 'a red-hot fire shovel, glaring and sparking with heat.'[13]

Such a spectacle of machismo appealed to European fascination with the 'otherness' of the Orient but Bessie was most interested in observing the lives of Algerian women. Insights into the reality of eastern women's lives were also of great interest for British readers, not least because the status of women was frequently regarded in the west as 'an index in the stage of a society's progress' from 'savagery to civilisation.'[14] Bessie's father commented that travelling to Algiers would be 'instructive' for her, enabling her to witness what he took for granted to be the 'abused and inferior' status of women in 'Asia' [sic].[15] Bessie had an advantage over male writers in being able to access female-only spaces. Her writings on the subject, while influenced by many commonplace assumptions of European superiority and oriental exoticism of her time, also show her attempting to navigate the complex intersections between race, religion and gender in a colonised community and challenging essentialised and eroticised western depictions of 'native' women.[16]

Thus when describing a visit to the home of a local 'cadi' (magistrate) she stressed this was not a harem of sexually-available women but a respectable extended family community. She admired the women's practical 'dark hair cut short' and the 'adroit and convenient

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13. BRP, 'The Fire-Eaters,' *National Magazine*, March 1857, 339-41. She omitted the more gruesome detail of the men 'sticking iron skewers through [their] own cheeks and throat' which she recorded in a personal letter. See BRP, letter to Mary Merryweather, January 26, 1857, GCPP Parkes 6/72.
14. Clare Midgley, *Feminism and Empire: Women Activists in Imperial Britain, 1790–1865* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 14.
15. JP, letter to BRP, February 1857, GCPP Parkes 2/56. Joseph felt sure that, over time, the influence of France on Algeria would bring 'Civilisation … especially if it can effect an indigenous acclimated population of European origin.'
16. Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An analysis of women's travel writing and colonialism* (London: Routledge, 1991), 60-1. See also Tamara S. Wagner, 'Travel Writing,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women's Writing,* ed. Peterson, 175-6.

manner' in which they sat 'tucking their trousered and stockinged legs under them.' She also stressed their friendly hospitality and keenness to 'chatter' with their guests through an interpreter. Yet despite this willingness on both sides to break down the barriers of difference between them, Bessie was also adamant that these women were 'unfortunate creatures' leading 'forlorn' lives, confined in their 'domestic cloister.' She concluded by stating that she and the rest of her party of European ladies left the house 'heartily thankful that we were not born Mussulwomen.'[17] Such expressions of pity show how Bessie's concern for the position of these women was shaped by her acceptance of the established European view of Muslim women's secluded lives as a type of imprisonment. She also criticised the Islamic veil, which became emblematic in western eyes of the oppression and 'otherness' of Islamic women's situation; its removal and the adoption of western dress were commonly seen - by feminists as by colonialists - as markers of progress and liberation. Bessie contributed to this narrative in her writing, describing Arabic women wearing in public 'the all-enshrouding veil,' barely able to see where they were walking.[18] Yet she respected local customs including purdah, criticising a British woman she witnessed causing 'great offence' by sketching the women at the wedding of a Moorish chief's daughter.[19]

Bessie's interest in these women's welfare was, nevertheless, genuine. She and Barbara were therefore pleased to encounter Eugénie Luce, an expatriate Frenchwoman who ran a school for Arabic girls, teaching them Arabic, French, arithmetic and training them to earn an income from needlework. Madame Luce insisted the education of indigenous girls

17. BRP, 'A Forenoon Call in Algiers,' *Chambers's Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts*, July 18, 1857: 39-41.
18. BRP, 'An Algerian Marriage,' *National Magazine,* June 1857: 99-100; BRP, 'A Visit to Carthage,' *National Magazine,* October 1857: 387-8.
19. BRP, letter to EP, February 18, 1857, GCPP Parkes 2/5; Cherry, *Beyond the Frame*, 72-3.

should be central to France's 'civilising mission' in its new colony,'[20] echoing Bessie's belief in the importance of girls' education and the positive moral influence educated women could exert on society. Luce's personal story was also one which captured Bessie's romantic and feminist imagination: a tale of escape from an arranged marriage and abusive husband, an intrepid voyage alone to Africa and determination to gain support for her school in the face of official hostility. Bessie wrote admiringly and at length about Madame Luce's life and work in letters home and produced a profile of Luce for the *Waverley*.[21]

This was the beginning of a lengthy connection between Luce, Bessie and Barbara. Barbara's pamphlet *Women and Work* (1857) included an account of Madame Luce's efforts to establish her school, alongside profiles of other pioneering women including Florence Nightingale and Elizabeth Blackwell.[22] Luce was an energetic woman who had improved her own circumstances and those of her sex through her own efforts. She therefore represented the positive female role model Bessie and Barbara were keen to promote. In turn, the publicity for Luce's school and workshop generated by Bessie and Barbara's writing in the coming years provided Luce with financial support. She exhibited her pupils' needlecraft in European exhibitions and British tourists to Algiers began to include Luce's establishment on their sightseeing tours, snapping up oriental craft items as souvenirs of their exotic travels.[23]

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20. Rebecca Rogers, *A Frenchwoman's Imperial Story: Madame Luce in Nineteenth-Century Algeria* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2013), 83.
21. The original of this *Waverley* article is now lost but it was reproduced in the *EWJ,* as 'Madame Luce of Algiers,' in three parts, in May, June and July 1861.
22. BLS, *Women and Work*, 23-32. This account was, the text notes, by 'a lady who has recently visited [Luce's] school in Algiers' - presumably Bessie.
23. Dr and Mrs Bodichon [BLS], *Algiers Considered as a Winter Residence for the English* (London: English Woman's Journal Office, 1858), 72-3, 92; BRP, 'Madame Luce of Algiers,' *EWJ*, May, June and July 1861; BRP, 'Madame Luce and the Great Exhibition,' *EWJ,* July 1862, 355.

This support for Luce's work extended the principle of support for grassroots feminist projects beyond national and continental boundaries. Nevertheless, Bessie and Barbara focused on celebrating a European woman as a heroic figure and rarely depicted Luce's Arabic pupils as individuals. Bessie and Barbara's 'philanthropic vision of native women' hindered their ability to get to know these women as equals, or to consider their own perspectives on their situation.[24] Yet if travelling to Algeria did not fundamentally change Bessie's view of the situation of Islamic women, it did influence her sense of self. Pauline Nestor argues that travel writing in this era shaped European readers' understanding of the wider world in ways that reinforced the project of Empire, but also provided 'an opportunity for a new kind of … self-fashioning,' particularly for women.[25] In her Algerian articles and letters Bessie presents herself as a confident, independent woman, fearlessly exploring the colony and embracing the chance to experience life outside the customs of middle-class Europe. As Deborah Cherry comments, '[u]nchaperoned movement was part of the politics of feminism' in the nineteenth century.[26] In 1850 Bessie and Barbara had defied convention by travelling through Europe without a chaperone. At home in Britain they and their friends increasingly took advantage of the transport innovations of the age which facilitated autonomous mobility, eschewing private carriages for the democratic freedom of railway trains and omnibuses. Now Bessie wrote publicly of sailing the stormy Mediterranean and strolling the dark streets of Old Algiers while reassuring her worried mother back in England that 'Algeria is very safe and civilised.'[27]

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24. Rogers, *A Frenchwoman's Imperial Story*: 150-1; Cherry, *Beyond the Frame*: 63. For more extensive critiques of Bessie and Barbara's depictions of Algiers (in writing and visual art), see Cherry, 59-100 and Rogers, 147-162, 206.
25. Pauline Nestor, 'Negotiating a Self: Barbara Bodichon in America and Algiers,' *Postcolonial Studies,* 8, no. 2 (2005): 155-6, https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790500153562.
26. Cherry, *Beyond the Frame*, 27.
27. BRP, letter to EP, April 21, 1857, GCPP Parkes 2/7.

Bessie, as a wealthy European woman, was immune from the constraints which dictated how Algerian women needed to behave to avoid censure or danger. She also relished the freedom being far from home gave her to discard European norms of decorum and dress. One sketch of her in Algiers, drawn by Annie Leigh Smith, shows Bessie perched on a wall overlooking an expansive landscape, her feet resting on a chair. At her feet are scattered an assortment of books and newspapers, including the *Times* and *Daily Telegraph,* indicating her status as a woman of letters and the close eye she kept on the British press while abroad. Most striking in this image is Bessie's costume: over her long, plain, European skirt she wears a short jacket with a pointed hood, of the kind worn by men of the Kabylia region.[28] This crossing of gender and cultural dress codes, at least in private, indicates Bessie literally 're-fashioning' herself to reflect her changing situation and identity. In the Alps in 1850 her practical, shortened skirts and sturdy boots signalled she had more important concerns than fashion or male admiration. While her wearing of oriental dress in Algeria may be, to modern eyes, an example of unthinking cultural appropriation,[29] for her it was a statement of her bohemian rejection of European conventions.

As Annie's sketch recorded, during her time in Algiers Bessie remained in close contact with European current affairs. Good postal communications between Algeria and Europe enabled her to send articles to Britain for publication and keep in touch with friends and family. She also continued to follow the progress of parliamentary debates in London on reforming divorce law and married women's property rights, and participated in debates on these topics. In particular, she helped keep attention focused on the arguments set out in the 1856 petition through a series of letters published in the *Leader*.[30] In this she was aided by

28. Cherry, *Beyond the Frame*, 65-6 and Figure 2.2.
29. This is particularly the case here, as the Kabyle people strongly resisted European colonisation and the incorporation of their lands into French Algeria.
30. BRP, 'The Laws Relating to the Property of Married Women,' 'Open Council,' *Leader,* February 14, 1857: 154. Further letters on this topic by BRP were published in the *Leader* on April 11, April 18, June 6 and June 13, 1857.

her father, who kept up a detailed correspondence with her and used his parliamentary contacts to send her copies of parliamentary reports and the draft Divorce Bill via the Foreign Office consulate bag, knowing they would be useful for Bessie and Barbara's writing.[31]

While in Algiers Bessie also read the Paris press, to follow French debates on women's rights. This drew her attention to a dispute between the feminist writer and activist Jenny d'Hericourt and the anarchist (and antifeminist) philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. D'Hericourt challenged Proudhon's pronouncements on the 'woman question,' and in response he insisted upon women's absolute physical, moral and intellectual inferiority to men.[32] Bessie produced a translation of the exchange, which she sent to George Jacob Holyoake for inclusion in the *Reasoner*. Bessie declared d'Hericourt's article 'a masterpiece' and Proudhon's response 'a beautiful specimen of impertinence.' She suggested the 'secularist ladies' who read the *Reasoner* might be interested in the piece, not least because she understood d'Hericourt was herself a secularist. Bessie also made clear to Holyoake that she did not wish her name to be attached to her translation as 'I have quite enough to bear of my own contests, without adopting those of others.'[33] She wished to

31. JP, letters to BRP, February 12 and 21, 1857, GCPP Parkes 2/57 and 2/58. Joseph was sceptical of the more wide-reaching reforms to women's legal status that Bessie and Barbara championed but his assistance demonstrates that he took their work seriously and wished to offer his perspective as a seasoned campaigner for reform and an experienced lawyer.
32. The dispute appeared in the *Revue Philosophique et Religieuse* in December 1856. See Karen M. Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700-1950: A Political History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 128; Rendall, *The Origins of Modern Feminism*, 296-298.
33. BRP, letter to George Jacob Holyoake, June 15, 1856, GCPP Parkes 9/122a. Bessie's translation was published in the *Reasoner* under the title 'What Proudhon Thinks of Women,' in four front page instalments in March 1857. Laura Schwartz suggests that Bessie's request for anonymity reflects her anxiety that her reputation (and by extension the respectability of the women's movement) would be tainted by association with the *Reasoner* and its unorthodox religious ideas. See Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism: Secularism, Religion and Women's Emancipation, England 1830-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 158. However, while Bessie may have felt it politic not to publicise such a connection while she was negotiating to acquire the editorship of the more conservative *Waverley Journal*, on other occasions, before and after this date, she happily published her poetry in the *Reasoner* under her name. Advertisements for the refashioned *Waverley* under her editorship also appeared in Holyoake's title, together with editorial promotion of the new 'working women's journal,' demonstrating that the links between secularism and the women's rights movement during this period. See, for example, 'The Coast of Caernarvon: From "Gabriel"

facilitate the dissemination of d'Hericourt's argument in Britain and allow it to stand on its own merits, rather than present it as her own position, or that of the British women's movement.

Bessie's negotiations with Holyoake show her strategically aiming her translation of a theoretical debate on sexual equality towards the smaller, radical readership of the *Reasoner*; meanwhile her articles for the more mainstream *Waverley* focused on examples of women who worked for practical change in women's lives through legal reform, education, employment or the arts. She recognised that the periodical press might be used to reach out to women of different religious and political perspectives and encourage a wide-ranging discourse of feminist voices and arguments that could inform public debate on women's rights. She also asked Holyoake to send d'Hericourt a copy of the translation in the *Reasoner*, expressing her hope that there might be more 'exchange [of] newspapers and periodicals with the French Liberals.'[34] Her three months in Algiers helped Bessie gain a broader sense of the developments of the women's rights movement, enabling her to contribute new perspectives on the subject to the British press and leading her to seek closer connections between radical women across geographical borders. In these ways she contributed to the establishment of 'the world's first international women's movement.'[35]

By the time Bessie left Algiers in March 1857 her personal relationships with women were also at the forefront of her mind. Mary Merryweather, to whom Bessie wrote at length from Algiers, was a close confidante during this period. Merryweather, sixteen years older than Bessie, was a devout Quaker who since 1847 had been employed as a night school teacher

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by Bessie Rayner Parkes,' *Reasoner*, July 6, 1856: 5; 'A Working Women's Journal,' *Reasoner,* July 15, 1857: 123; advertisement for 'The Waverley,' *Reasoner,* December 30, 1857: 316.
34. BRP, letter to George Jacob Holyoake, June 15, 1856, GCPP Parkes 9/122a.
35. Bonnie S. Anderson, 'From Letters to a Movement: The Creation of Early International Feminism, 1830-1860,' in *Exchanges and Correspondence: The Construction of Feminism*, ed. Claudette Fillard and Françoise Orazi (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 21.

and 'moral missionary' to the female workers at the silk factory in Halstead, Essex owned by the Unitarian Courtauld family.[36] Bessie met Mary when visiting Halstead in 1856 to observe Mary's achievements in educating the mill's large female workforce both academically and in matters of hygiene and morality, beginning Bessie's close interest in the role of women in sanitary reform and the lives of female factory workers. In her letters to Mary, Bessie addressed her friend first as 'my darling Mary' and later as 'my darling Mother Mary' and adopted the antiquated Quaker egalitarian forms of address, 'thou.' It is clear from these letters that the friends felt their absence from each other keenly. Bessie wrote that she wished Mary were with her in Algiers, 'to be kissed & to hug me. … Thy letter… tells me as plain as if it were a photograph that the corners of thy dear mouth were pushed up, and wanted a shower of kisses which thou shouldst have had, had thy Benny been anywhere within walking distance.'[37] Such expressions of tender affection and Bessie's adoption of the nickname 'Benny,' neither of which appear in her surviving letters to other friends or relations (least of all to her own mother), suggest this friendship was particularly emotionally intimate. Bessie's daughter Marie (who was named after Mary) noted that Mary 'loved Bessie with an absorbing maternal love' while Bessie 'held for [Mary] a feeling quite different to any she had for any other woman.'[38]

The unique nature of this friendship explains why Bessie confided in Mary recent difficulties in her friendship with Barbara. She reported to Mary their differences of opinion on subject such as love and friendship: '[w]e talk round and round each other with no blending.' Mary imagined the two friends might set up home together, as other like-minded single women did, but in fact Bessie thought the relationship would improve if Barbara

36. Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 184.
37. BRP, letter to Mary Merryweather, January 26-28, 1857, GCPP Parkes 6/72.
38. MBL, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 45. Unfortunately it is not possible to gain a full picture of Bessie's friendship with Mary, as Marie took it upon herself to destroy Mary's letters after Bessie's death, on the grounds that Mary was 'an indifferent letter writer.' This leaves open the possibility that Marie found something embarrassing or too intimate in Mary's letters to her mother.

were to marry.[39] Indeed Barbara was contemplating marriage, to a French émigré, Dr Eugène Bodichon, an erudite, if rather eccentric, intellectual resident in Algiers. The romance took everyone by surprise but Bessie's loyalty to Barbara led her once again to support her friend, even in the face of much hostility from Barbara's family. At Barbara's request, Bessie enlisted her mother's help in obtaining a reference of Eugène's good character from a mutual friend, to help overcome the Smiths' opposition to him. Barbara's brother Ben regarded Bessie's actions as interference and refused to speak to her. He never fully forgave her and Bessie, who had considered Ben as a brother since her own brother's death, was understandably greatly hurt by this.[40]

In such uncomfortable circumstances, it was fortunate that Bessie's travel plans meant she left Algeria in the spring of 1857. Her route home from Algeria was a circuitous one, designed so she could finally visit Italy and in particular Rome, a city which had lived large in her imagination for many years. In her one surviving letter to Barbara during this time she declared 'I have been better satisfied to be away from you during the last 2 months because I wished Dr Bodichon to feel his own ground with you without any other influence at work than his own.' Bessie was careful to leave Barbara to make up her own mind in the matter, although she was keenly aware that the marriage would alter her relationship with the woman she regarded as her sister, not least because Barbara would no longer live principally in England.[41] Meanwhile, as Barbara looked ahead to married life, Bessie's freedom to enjoy her journey through Italy was tempered by the awareness that being an unmarried woman, travelling unaccompanied, restricted where and how it was deemed acceptable for her to go.

39. BRP, letter to Mary Merryweather, 1857, GCPP Parkes 6/73.
40. Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 127-9.
41. BRP, letter to BLS, May 14, 1857, CGPP Parkes 5/84.

Joseph had visited Italy several times himself and was eager to ensure Bessie made the most of this opportunity to experience a country he loved. His letters include lengthy directions on when and where to travel which were clearly intended to be helpful but they also indicate the extent to which he felt he had the authority to dictate Bessie's plans. The prospect of Bessie travelling alone caused him particular consternation; he wrote at length about respectable friends and relatives Bessie might stay with in Italy and where it was safe for her to venture.[42] The tone of one of these letters suggests Bessie had bristled at his instructions to stay with a relative. 'I do not wish you to be bored by residence with your aunt at Florence,' he assured her,

> yet [I] rely on you when at Florence or Rome to live with some Lady of proper standing. Otherwise I & your mother should be much & properly reflected upon here … it is not right that a young unmarried lady of your age, our daughter, should be travelling & residing in Foreign Capitals alone. … But I am sure that your own knowledge of the World & your natural delicacy of character will not give us cause for anxiety or complaint on this score.[43]

It is easy to forget, reading this letter, that it was written a few months before Bessie's twenty-eighth birthday. For all her public assertions of the importance of women's autonomy, and her public persona as an independent international traveller, she was a single woman still dependant on her parents for a home and financial security. Mindful not to cause them unnecessary worry, she avoided challenging their sense of authority over her too far. Thus Joseph's simultaneously facilitating and controlling hand guided Bessie's travels through Italy and onto France, suggesting routes and sending letters of credit to cover her expenses. Bessie in turn took care to reassure her parents of her safety and decorum, mentioning the names of all the highly respectable people she encountered. 'N.B.

42. JP, letter to BRP, February 1857, GCPP Parkes 2/56.
43. JP, letter to BRP, February 21, 1857, GCPP Parkes 2/58.

Lady Arthur Wellesley Torrens actually kissed me when we parted, which,' she reported wryly to Eliza, 'shows the great discretion and propriety of your daughter's behaviour.'[44]

Her weeks in Italy were spent in a whirl of sight-seeing and paying visits, seeing firsthand the places she had for many years only been able to imagine from depictions in art and literature. Her chosen reading while in Rome was Germaine de Stael's *Corinne* (1807), a novel which presented Italy as the spiritual home of female artists and had encouraged artistic women to settle there. Charlotte Cushman and Max Hays had a home in Rome which they shared with female friends, creating a female artistic community within the wider Anglo-American expatriate artistic population in the city. Cushman played host to a series of friends, including fellow Americans, sculptors Emma Stebbins and Harriet Hosmer and journalist Grace Greenwood, while her wider circle of connections included the Brownings, who were resident in Florence. Bessie was delighted that her arrival in the city coincided with the return of Cushman and, more importantly, Max. She spent three days in the nearby countryside with Max, who also showed Bessie around Rome and introduced her to Harriet Hosmer.

Hosmer was, Bessie told Eliza, the 'funniest little creature,' whose artistic talent and boyish charm she found 'exceedingly interesting.' Hosmer epitomised the liberated artistic life of Cushman's Roman circle. Far from home and the constraints of its conventional ideas of acceptable feminine conduct, and under the protection of Cushman's international celebrity, Hosmer was free to pursue a life which defied artistic and social gender norms. Her work as a sculptor in marble was itself highly unusual for a woman. In her studio she wore 'large bloomer-like pants [and] a man's shirt' and her disregard for the proprieties of dress extended beyond her atelier. She once even persuaded Elizabeth Barrett Browning to join

44. BRP, letter to EP, March 29, 1857, GCPP Parkes 2/6.

her in dressing up as schoolboys, to gain access to a monastery which housed some paintings she wanted to view. (Robert Browning was outraged and put a stop to the plan.) Bessie commented approvingly that Hosmer 'manages her petticoats with a certain extraordinary ease suggestive of trousers.' Bessie also noted Hosmer's practical 'short curled hair like mine,' a rare hint of Bessie's own appearance at this time. Bessie admired Hosmer's rejection of impractical femininities, which echoed her own 'rational' approach to fashion. She declared Hosmer to be 'irresistibly whimsical' and she enjoyed her company, as well as admiring the 'sublime steadiness' with which she worked on her art.[45]

Not everyone was as admiring of Hosmer and her circle. When Barbara's sister Annie planned to study in Rome, Barbara had been urged by a friend to warn her that

> unhappily a party of ladies among whom was Miss Cushman and Miss Matilda Hayes [sic] … brought great discredit on the plans of young ladies being independent of chaperones, by the very extraordinary manner in which they conducted themselves. … Your pretty young sister might find herself in a painful position if she be not aware of the state of feeling which the ladies I have alluded to have created in the artistic circles in Rome ...[46]

This 'state of feeling' was erotic: Hosmer, like Charlotte Cushman and Max Hays, made no secret of her attraction to women and sometimes in her letters referred to a female friend as a 'lover' or even a 'wife.'[47] The shifting intimate relationships within these women's circle ostensibly reflected their liberated lifestyle: they each respected the others' right to spend time with whichever of their friends they wished. Cushman had just returned from Naples, from where she had travelled with Stebbins and another friend, Margaret Gill,

45. BRP, letter to EP, April 21, 1857, GCPP Parkes 2/7; Kate Culkin, *Harriet Hosmer: A Cultural Biography* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 33; BRP, letter to BLS, May 14, 1857, GCPP Parkes 5/84. Short (i.e. above shoulder-length) hair was a daring choice for women at a time when long hair was associated with feminine attractiveness. It was a practical option for emancipated women like Hosmer and Bessie. The feminist writer Frances Power Cobbe also cut her hair short after her father's death in 1857, in order to be able to travel without a maid, whose assistance would have been needed to brush and arrange long hair. See Sally Mitchell, *Frances Power Cobbe: Victorian Feminist, Journalist, Reformer* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 83.
46. Florence Davenport Hill [n.d], quoted in Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 102.
47. Culkin, *Harriet Hosmer*, 32, 61.

leaving Max behind. Max, in turn, spent time alone with Bessie. Yet jealousies seriously threatened the harmony of this arrangement. Bessie's surviving letters from Italy make no mention of it, but she cannot have been ignorant of the furious arguments between Max and Charlotte which erupted just before she left Rome, which ended the couple's relationship.[48] Bessie's loyalties were with her friend; without disclosing any details, she confided in a letter to Eliza that she worried about Max's health and 'excitable temperament.'[49] The consequences of the break-up were considerable for Max, who was now cut loose from a relationship and way of life to which she had devoted nearly a decade. While others in Bessie's circle found Max a difficult, disruptive presence, Bessie determined to support her where she could, emotionally and financially. After securing for herself the position of editor of the *Waverley*, Bessie intended to commission articles and poems from Max and planned to hand over the editorship to her when she had 'thoroughly got the paper up' so Bessie could 'be free, in a couple of years, for other literary work.'[50]

In the meantime, Bessie travelled on with Anna Jameson to Florence, where she renewed her friendships with Isa Blagden, the Brownings and Jane Hay (née Benham), Anna Mary Howitt's fellow art student in Munich whom Bessie and Barbara had visited in 1850. Another old friend on Bessie's mind was Emma Evers, whom she had known since childhood and who now led a very quiet and financially-constrained life with her brother in Staffordshire. Bessie wanted to give her dear friend, who had never travelled abroad, a small taste of the wonders she had experienced in her time away and arranged to meet her in Paris to show her the sights. The guest house in which they stayed was also host to '2 of the Miss Stowes.' Bessie noted that their mother, the novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe, 'has

48. For details of these arguments, see Merrill, *When Romeo Was a Woman*, 182-5.
49. BRP, letter to EP, April 21, 1857, GCPP Parkes 2/7.
50. BRP, letter to BLS, May 14, 1857, GCPP Parkes 5/84.

been here 3 months, but has just sailed for America – What a miss!'[51] This near-brush with yet another female artistic celebrity was the endpoint of a six-month journey which had broadened Bessie's horizons both geographically and socially, strengthening her confidence in her abilities to look after herself and others.

Bessie ensured she was back in London in time to attend Barbara's wedding to Eugène in July 1857. 'You couldn't possibly get married without me! It wouldn't be legal,' she had written from Florence.[52] Although the marriage marked an inevitable shift in the women's friendship, they remained close allies in their campaigning work. They were both present on 29th July at the inaugural meeting of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science (NASPSS), held at the London home of Lord Brougham, Joseph's close political associate and the Association's first president. The NAPSS arose out of Brougham's Law Amendment Society, which had provided encouragement and advice to the married women's property petition campaign. It brought together 'leading figures from the political, administrative and professional classes' of the day and quickly became influential in debates around legal, penal, public health, educational and socio-economic reform. Through its meetings and publications it influenced public opinion and, with eighteen peers and twenty-eight MPs on its inaugural council, it also had the ear of parliament.[53]

Fifteen of the forty-three attendees at the NAPSS's founding meeting were women and several of them (Anna Blackwell, Mary Howitt, Elizabeth Jesser Reid and Mary Sturch) were seasoned advocates of women's rights, well-known to Bessie and Barbara as friends and co-workers on the Married Women's Property Committee. The sizable presence of

51. BRP, letter to EP, June 10, 1857, GCPP 2/10.
52. BRP, letter to BLS, May 14, 1857, GCPP Parkes 5/84.
53. Lawrence Goldman *Science, Reform, and Politics in Victorian Britain: The Social Science Association 1857–1886* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 2.

women at this inauguration meant that from the outset women's issues and women's voices were a core part of the NAPSS's activities, as they remained throughout the lifetime of the Association. The NAPSS provided a valuable national platform for the women's movement and consolidated connections between it and the networks of politicians and professional men promoting social reform, which helped advance the next stages in campaigns for women's rights. The Association's interest in bringing men and women together to work for shared social and political aims was underlined when the NAPSS Secretary George Hastings appointed Isa Craig his assistant, despite criticisms that a woman holding such a position was 'impossible' and 'improper.'[54]

Isa Craig had also been busy overseeing negotiations with the owners of the *Waverley* during Bessie's travels and in July 1857 Bessie became the title's editor. She intended to radically change the paper into a title that would 'deal unsparingly' with '[e]verything connected to the professional life for women'[55] and as the new 'Editress' she extensively publicised her prospectus for the relaunched title. The paper previously advertised as 'edited and published by ladies' was now a 'Working Women's Journal,' aimed at 'all women who are actively engaged in any labour of brain or hand.' Bessie's broad definition of 'working women' crossed class and economic boundaries, encompassing those in paid and voluntary employment, from the landed gentry to middle-class philanthropists, teachers, writers and artists, and those 'engaged in any of those manual occupations by which the multitudes of British Women … gain their daily bread.'[56]

54. Goldman, *Science, Reform, and Politics*, 378-9, 119.
55. BRP, letter to BLS, May 14, 1857, GCPP Parkes 5/84.
56. Statement of the 'aims and objects' of the *Waverley Journal*, *Irish Quarterly Review*, October 1857: xxxix-xl.

The *Waverley* was to be a dedicated space for women readers and writers, facilitating their participation in the public sphere of print culture. In addition to the *Journal* itself, the enterprise produced pamphlets, including one by Mary Merryweather, entitled *Experiences of Factory Life*.[57] Periodicals for women 'offered a closed space that valued and expanded women's interests' both as readers and writers, countering men's far wider access to educational, professional and social networking opportunities, including male-only private clubs.[58] The *Waverley*'s new London office (at 14A Princes Street, near Oxford Street) was, in parallel, conceived from the outset as a physical space for professional women, bringing the work of the women's movement out of domestic drawing rooms and into the public sphere. Bessie envisaged 'the beginnings of a club; room for exhibiting pictures, etc., etc.,' as a meeting place for women.[59]

Such inroads into traditionally male spaces did not go uncriticised and Bessie and Barbara found themselves facing personal attacks from unsympathetic sections of the press. These moved beyond critique of the arguments of the women's movement to declare that its spokeswomen were unfeminine and dangerously disruptive of the social order. The source of many of these *ad feminam* attacks was the 'cheeky, splenic Tory' *Saturday Review*, 'the most controversial weekly journal' of the time, dubbed the 'Saturday Reviler.'[60] An article entitled 'Bloomeriana,' singled out 'Miss Barbara Smith and Miss Bessie Parkes' for mockery as 'drawing-room Amazons … swaggering along.' It asked, 'Is there a plague of Egypt worse than the strong-minded woman?' and described them as 'a species of

57. This pamphlet was based on a series of articles by Mary which had appeared in the *Waverley* in the summer of 1857. See Rendall, 'A "Moral Engine"?,' 116, 262.
58. Kathryn Ledbetter, 'Periodicals for Women,' in *The Routledge Handbook to Nineteenth-Century British Periodical and Newspapers,* ed. Andrew King, Alexis Easley and John Morton (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 260-1.
59. BRP, letter to BLS, May 19, 1857, GCPP Parkes 5/85.
60. 'The Leader (1850-1859),' Laurel Brake, accessed March 27, 2019, https://ncse.ac.uk/headnotes/ldr.html; Hugh Craig and Alexis Antonia, 'Six Authors and the *Saturday Review*: A Quantitative Approach to Style,' *Victorian Periodicals Review* 48:1 (2015):17, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43663347.

vermin.'[61] Gentler criticism also came from much closer to home. Joseph and Eliza Parkes took issue with some of the content and tone of Bessie and Barbara's contributions to the *Waverley*, particularly what they considered the 'coarseness' of Barbara's discussions about relationships between the sexes. They told Bessie that topics such as marriage, separation, divorce laws and prostitution were 'more properly the vocation of men and married women and not of you single ladies.'[62] It was not only, therefore, the arguments for reform of gender relations which were perceived as improper, but the fact they came from the pens of young, unmarried women who signed their names to their work.

Undeterred, Bessie continued with her efforts. She at first envisaged a 'noble career' for the *Waverley* under her editorship, despite admitting to Barbara that it was 'not [ours] for propagandist purposes … because it is not our property, to risk.'[63] They soon realised they needed full financial control over the publication, to make it an explicit organ of the women's movement.[64] When efforts to buy the *Waverley* failed, plans turned to establishing a completely new periodical, the *English Woman's Journal* (*EWJ*).[65] Bessie, with Barbara's financial backing and the legal advice of George Hastings, set about bringing together supporters to finance and manage this new journal. The collaborative nature of the project was reflected in the form chosen for this management, which took advantage of recent legislation enabling the formation of a joint stock company. On a practical level this meant the financial risk was shared between investors but it also reflected the view (which Bessie

61. 'Bloomeriana,' *Saturday Review,* September 12, 1857, 238-9.
62. EP, letter to BRP, February 13, 1857, GCPP Parkes 2/28; JP, letter to BRP, February 12, 1857, GCPP Parkes 2/57.
63. BRP, letter to BLS, May 14, 1857, GCPP Parkes 5/84.
64. This is a lesson which later editors of such campaigning journals took to heart. See Michelle Tusan, *Women Making News: Gender and the Women's Periodical Press in Britain* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 30.
65. Bessie had first explored the possibility of buying another title. She requested George Holyoake's assistance in establishing whether the *Englishwoman's Review* was on the market and at what price, as 'of course it wd only raise the price for me to enquire.' Holyoake and his brother advised that this title was not a good investment. See the correspondence between BRP and George Holyoake, December 1857, GCPP Parkes 9/122a.

shared with John Stuart Mill) that cooperative organisations were a progressive and democratic form of business arrangement.[66]

The English Woman's Journal Company was registered on 13th February 1858.[67] Seven shareholders purchased a total of eighty-four shares out of the initial issue of 200. Annie Leigh Smith, Barbara's sister, held the largest single investment of sixty shares as a representative for Barbara, who as a married woman could not own shares in her own right. Bessie and Max Hays each held five shares, and one further share was taken by Maria Rye, who had served as secretary to the Married Women's Property Committee. The other three shareholders were men: four shares each were held by Mary Merryweather's employer, the Unitarian industrialist Samuel Courtauld (who had previously demonstrated his support for female education by giving funds to Bedford College) and the barrister James Vaughan, brother-in-law of the radical politicians John and Jacob Bright. A further five shares were held by William Strickland Cookson, a Unitarian lawyer and the business partner of Bessie's uncle by marriage, Robert Wainwright. Wainwright acted as a witness. These initial shareholders were also named as directors of the new company, with Cookson appointed chairman.[68] Fittingly, therefore, the board of the company comprised a female majority. It drew upon Bessie and Barbara's friendship and kin circles, together with the support and expertise of radical Unitarian professional men.

66. Bessie would later write (citing Mill) about the links between moral, religious and commercial forms of cooperation as examples of civilised enterprises based on trust and 'united action' and particularly useful as a way for women to set up in business. See BRP, 'The Opinions of John Stuart Mill' (First part) *EWJ,* September 1860, 1-11 and (Second part) *EWJ,* November 1860, 193-202; 'Women and Co-operation,' *EWJ,* February 1864, 368-76; BRP, 'Cooperation' in *Essays on Woman's Work,* (London: Alexander Strahan, 1865), 167-82. Jane Rendall notes that such 'sympathy towards a degree of collective practice' appears in both French and middle-class English feminism, even though the latter was broadly founded upon liberal principles of individualism. See Rendall, *The Origins of Modern Feminism*, 318.
67. The Company's registration documents are held at The National Archives, reference BT 41/227/1274.
68. Rendall, '"A Moral Engine"?,' 118.

The establishment of a completely new title provided the opportunity - and the challenge - of designing a publication that would provide a 'centre of meeting' for women involved in the various strands of activity around the country focused on improving women's legal, social and economic condition.[69] Although the bulk of the journal's financing came from Barbara, the day-to-day business of running it fell to Bessie, particularly as Barbara was in America on an extended honeymoon until June 1858, after which date she divided her time between Algiers and England. As editor, Bessie's role involved practical, managerial responsibilities - overseeing financial, administrative and commercial matters, including advertising, commissioning articles and organising items within each issue - as well as establishing and promoting the journal's 'distinctive character.'[70] While Bessie had gained much experience in recent years of writing journalistic copy and coordinating campaigns, these wider responsibilities were new to her.

Editorship was a highly unusual role for a woman in this period, but Bessie could seek advice from friends with publishing experience. Anna Jameson did not write for the *EWJ*, as she disagreed with Bessie and Barbara's views on marriage and divorce, but she gave Bessie constructive criticism on the strengths and weaknesses of early numbers of the *Journal* and advised her on the editing of problematic submissions.[71] Marian Evans stressed to Bessie that the new title should have a distinct identity and purpose, but she was pleased Bessie did not retain the proclamation of female editorship from the old *Waverley* masthead:

> It is a doctrine of Mr. Lewes's, which I think recommends itself to one's reason, that every new or renovated periodical should have a specialité, - do something not yet done, fill up a gap, and so give people a motive for taking it. But I do not at all like the specialité that consists in the inscription

69. BRP, 'Review of the Last Six Years,' 361.
70. Robert Patten and David Finkelstein, 'Editing *Blackwood's*; or, What Do Editors Do?,' in *Print Culture and the Blackwood Tradition* ed. David Finkelstein (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 152.
71. Anna Jameson, letters to BRP, March 1858 - May 1859, GCPP Parkes 6/23-29. Bessie wrote, of Jameson, that she was 'accustomed to rely exceedingly on her judgement in all matters requiring knowledge of the world & tact.' See BRP, letter to Harriet Hosmer, December 30, 1857, GCPP Parkes 9/32.

> "Conducted by Women," and I am very glad you are going to do away with it. [72]

Marian felt the quality and uniqueness of a periodical's content should be its calling-card, not the gender of its editors; she feared defining the *Journal* as a female-led enterprise would lead some to assume that it was an inferior publication. While Marian was de-facto editor of the *Westminster Review* she had been careful not to advertise her identity, both out of natural diffidence and because she was aware of the disapproval a woman in such an unconventional and public role would receive.[73] Nevertheless, although Bessie eschewed the banner 'Conducted by Women,' it remained central to her idea of the 'specialité' of the *EWJ* that it was avowedly a publication by women, for women and devoted to promoting women's interests.

The first number of the *EWJ*, published in March 1858, established the distinctive scope and tenor of the title. Comprising seventy-two pages of unillustrated typescript, it looked very different to existing publications aimed specifically at women. The most successful of these at the time, the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (edited by Samuel and Isabella Beeton) attracted readers with extensive illustrations and focused on women's domestic responsibilities, with articles on cooking, dressmaking, gardening and medical advice.[74] In contrast, the 'Englishwoman' to whom the *EWJ* appealed was one who took an active interest in the world outside the home. Each monthly edition contained a range of substantial articles on aspects of women's education, employment and status. From the

72. ME, letter to BRP, September 1, 1857, *The George Eliot Letters. Vol.2.*, ed. Haight, 379.
73. Rosemary Ashton, *142, Strand,* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006), 95; Solveig C. Robinson, '"Amazed at Our Success": The Langham Place Editors and the Emergence of a Feminist Critical Tradition,' *Victorian Periodicals Review* 29, no. 2 (1996): 159, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20082917.
74. The Beetons did include within their pages some more radical commentary on women's rights: they supported, for example, improvements to girls' education, the expansion of employment opportunities for women who needed to support themselves, and they promoted the aims of the Married Women's Property Petition. However, this was done with great caution and always with the caveat that women's primary ambitions should be marriage, motherhood and domesticity. See Kathryn Hughes, *The Short Life & Long Times of Mrs Beeton* (London: Fourth Estate, 2005), 171-2.

outset the *EWJ* claimed women's right to speak for themselves within a male-dominated print culture that largely ignored or depreciated women's interests.[75] Even though many of the sections of the *EWJ* mirrored those in other publications aimed at women - articles, fiction, biography, poetry, readers' letters - the journal's consistent promotion of women's rights was evident from even a cursory glance through its pages. It was more radical and political than other titles for women and also noticeably different from other titles, such as the *Leader* and *Westminster Review*, which, while treating women's rights seriously, discussed the 'woman question' as just one part of a wider reforming agenda.[76]

However, there was no regular editorial column presenting an official voice for the *EWJ* and many pieces were printed anonymously or signed only with initials, as was still common practice in the periodical press, obscuring the gender of the writer. Creating a recognisably female identity and sense of community instead relied upon the establishment from the outset of a dialogue between individual articles and between the *Journal* and its readers. In her lead article of the first edition, 'The Profession of the Teacher,' therefore, Bessie directly addressed those readers who might lack confidence negotiating the details of serious economic and political journalism, encouraging them to appreciate the importance of grappling with 'dates and figures.'[77] Just as she and Barbara had educated themselves a decade earlier through their joint study of works of philosophy and political economy, Bessie now urged the *EWJ*'s readers to learn how to evaluate data and appreciate

75. Philippa Levine, '"The Humanising Influences of Five O'Clock Tea": Victorian Feminist Periodicals,' *Victorian Studies* 33, no. 2 (1990): 294-5, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3828360.
76. Teja Varma Pusapati, 'Novel Networks: The "Specialité" of the *English Woman's Journal,' Victorian Periodicals Review* 47, no. 4 (2014): 599, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43663334; Sarah Dredge, 'Opportunism and Accommodation: *The English Woman's Journal* and the British Mid-Nineteenth-Century Women's Movement,' *Women's Studies* 34, no.2: 136-7, https://doi.org/10.1080/00497870590923935.
77. 'The Profession of the Teacher,' *EWJ,* March 1858, 4. While Bessie signed many of her contributions to the *EWJ* with her name or initials, she also published other articles and poems unsigned; some of these can be identified as hers by their later appearance in other signed publications. Bessie's authorship of 'The Profession of the Teacher' is confirmed by its inclusion in Bessie's 1865 volume, *Essays on Women's Work.*

an evidenced argument, so they too could become informed participants in public debates alongside men.[78]

The periodicals market was highly competitive and the 'woman question' was taking up increasing column inches, so it was not long before the *EWJ* attracted the critical eye of other publications. The *Saturday Review* labelled the first issue of the *EWJ* 'dull' and the very notion of a movement for women's rights as 'ludicrous.' It attacked Bessie's argument of the necessity of expanding employment opportunities for women, claiming there were no actual barriers to women working for a decent wage, if they needed to do so and had a skill to offer - and besides, a 'woman's ultimate function was to … attend to household duties. This is her calling and work.'[79] The *EWJ's* editorial response was swift and forthright. A piece subtitled 'The Reviewer Reviewed,' penned presumably by Bessie (either alone or with her co-editor, Max Hays), took issue with the 'Saturday Reviewer' on precisely the ground which he had claimed as a male preserve of knowledge: political economy. Bessie refuted the logic of his claim that employment was a 'fixed quantity' and that an increase in women in paid work would inevitably lead to lower men's wages or rates of employment. Concluding the case, the *EWJ* staked its claim for women's employment, not just for a minority of anomalous women who failed to marry but a rightful choice for all women:

> It may be true that a large proportion of women are wanted for domestic life: but we are too good political economists to desire, like our critic, to decide beforehand that the world wants but one kind of worker, and determine to supply no other. … We ask but to throw down the barriers so that women may be free to choose their own way of life – to earn their living independently, and to marry or not to marry, as they may deem it well or prudent. We ask for a wider field of employment, so that poor milliners … may not be compelled … to work all hours of Sunday and of a week-day – or to starve. We ask but to let things find a more natural and healthy level,

78. For a more detailed analysis of the 'particular mode of reading' promoted by the *EWJ*, see Beth Palmer, 'Reading Langham Place Periodicals at Number 19,' in *Reading and the Victorians,* ed. Matthew Bradley and Juliet John (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 48-52.
79. 'The English Woman's Journal,' *Saturday Review*, April 10, 1858, 369-70.

> hoping and trusting that all women … may gather hope, and walk with a firmer footing.[80]

Bessie's measured tone stressed the reasonableness of the demands she made on behalf of women: for choice, independence and the means to adequately support themselves. Yet such a stance was not moderate enough to placate those who were outraged by any challenge to the traditional gender order.

A particularly vitriolic article appeared in the *National Review* of October 1858, entitled simply 'Woman.' Ostensibly a review of several titles on the 'woman question,' including the *EWJ* and Bessie's *Remarks on the Education of Girls*, the writer attacked the 'dishonest' and 'dangerous' ideas in these works, based, he claimed, upon 'the false idea of women's equality with and similarity to man.' The name 'Miss Parkes' appeared repeatedly in the article, and her arguments on girls' education were derided at length. Bessie's suggestion in *Remarks* that young women be permitted to read the novels of George Sand was singled out as 'nonsense … of a very unpleasant sort' which went 'beyond all the limits assigned by decency and common sense.' While the article did not attack any specific content in the *EWJ*, it criticised in general terms the arguments for the expansion of women's educational and employment opportunities which lay at the heart of the *EWJ*'s mission. The writer made a clear distinction between what he saw as sensible provision for unfortunate women who were thrown upon their own resources to support themselves, and what he perceived to be the dangerous underlying argument 'constantly asserted[,] that all women ought to be educated as if they were men and were going to live as men.' He characterised Bessie and 'this body of female-rights vindicators' as 'the more neuter members of the sex,' who argued from the position of their own minority interest as unmarried women. He labelled such women 'unnatural' for rejecting the biological function to marry and have children

80. 'The "Saturday Review" and the "English Woman's Journal" – the Reviewer Reviewed,' *EWJ*, May 1858, 57-60.

which 'real women' embraced, in the misguided belief that 'their highest ambition should be successful rivalry in the masculine career.'[81]

After reading this article Joseph Parkes wrote a long, bad-tempered letter to Bessie, acknowledging that the piece was 'partially unjust' but stressing he had read it 'with some nausea, on account of both parties - the Reviewed & the Reviewer.' He told her that publishing such radical ideas in her *Remarks on the Education of Girls* 'with the thoughtlessness of your own young single name unnecessarily on the title page' had laid herself open to such attacks and she 'must now be ashamed of such nonsense' and see the foolishness of her position:

> You El Dorado young English Women will not believe, till older, in the natural distinctions of the two sexes; & that the males will never allow the females to wear men's clothes – much less to usurp their natural sexual superiority. … You will learn a lesson, as you grow older; … I often tell you, society cannot be so eagerly or practically revolutionised as you young inexperienced Women imagine or desire.[82]

Such a patronising dismissal of Bessie's work is evidence of the strength of Joseph's anger and embarrassment at seeing his daughter so publicly attacked, and of the perception, even among reform-minded men, that women entering traditionally masculine fields of work were trying to ape men and overturn men's 'natural sexual superiority.' He advised Bessie to moderate the tone of the *EWJ*, to achieve reform through persuasion and consensus, rather than taking a more radical stance which would lay the new *Journal* open to attack:

> If you unwisely provoke the opposition of other & more popular Periodicals than the National Review you will speedily smash your Journal. … You … forget that you are & must be in a small minority; & that without much … thought you may make that minority still smaller. [83]

81. 'Woman,' *National Review*, October 1858, 349-354. This article, and reaction to it, is also discussed in Parker Kinch, 'We Who Strive': 924-5.
82. JP, letter to BRP October 6, 1858, GCPP Parkes 2/64.
83. Ibid.

Luckily Bessie received more supportive responses from others. Marian Evans wrote to a friend about the *National*'s 'very unjustifiable treatment of Miss Parkes'[84] and Bessie was grateful to George Holyoake for his 'kind sympathy' and his offer to intervene on the *EWJ*'s behalf, although she requested he 'please do nothing till I see what reparation I can obtain from the National Review itself.' She was shaken by the personal attack on her moral character, aware of how a woman's reputation and public standing could be ruined by such a slur. 'It is so bad' she told Holyoake, 'that I fear I shall only be more blackened by any public allusions to it.'[85] Anna Jameson also offered sympathy and understanding of the hurt and sense of injustice the attack generated, as well as reassurance that it would only strengthen the *EWJ*'s cause in the long run.[86]

Joseph advised Bessie to maintain a decorous silence and allow others to respond to the *National Review* on behalf of the *EWJ.* Instead Bessie included, in the *EWJ's* January 1859 number, a dignified, detailed, and witty rebuttal of the article's criticisms. She highlighted where the *National*'s reviewer had conceded points in favour of improving women's education and employment opportunities, and challenged his unsubstantiated allegations of more extremist views. She touched only very briefly on what had been most insulting in the original article, stating '[o]ffensive personal imputations … injure the attacker rather than the attacked. …We shall therefore pass over in silence what is to be regretted only for the sake of the reviewer himself.'[87] As Janice Schroeder argues, this article marked a significant moment in Victorian feminist journalism. It established a dignified tone for the *EWJ* which did not transgress the boundaries of feminine decorum, providing a means for the *Journal*

84. ME to Sara Hennell, Oct 6, 1858, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women,*103-4.
85. BRP, letter to GH Holyoake, 5 October 1858, GCPP Parkes 9/122a.
86. Anna Jameson, letter to BRP, October 1858, GCPP Parkes 6/26.
87. 'The Reviewer Reviewed No. 2,' *English Woman's Journal*, January 1859, 336-343.

to participate on its own terms in the frequently hostile, male-dominated discourse of the periodical press.[88]

Despite this spirited response, being on the receiving end of such abuse was a harsh lesson for Bessie in the difficult job she faced as the *EWJ*'s editor. The public profile which the role brought meant she was inevitably a particular target for such attacks. Moreover, she had to negotiate her own line between the differing opinions of those around her, who variously urged a more radical stance for the *Journal* or counselled greater caution. Significantly then, it was the words of her father's warning about the risk of 'smashing' the *EWJ* and the need to listen to older, experienced voices which echoed in Bessie's explanation to Barbara of the cautious editorial approach she had decided to take, avoiding more contentious topics:

> Max thinks I am far too timid in my expression of opinion & Mr Fox thinks so too; but I don't believe there is any abstract public for divorce & the suffrage & I am far better pleased to gain the approbation of our elders & betters & trust to the gradually workings of public opinion towards further extensions of principle than to smash my head & your money against a brick wall.[89]

Barbara had assumed she was financing a publication which would promote radical arguments on subjects such as women's suffrage; observing the progress of the *Journal* from Algiers, she was at times severely critical of Bessie's approach to its editorship. She told Marian Evans she was 'disgusted' by what she saw as Bessie's 'exaggeration' of the progress of the *EWJ*: 'She has not a big enough head to see the small size of her work! I wish she could.'[90] Bessie, in turn, felt Barbara was 'not judging fairly of the success of my work in the Journal & consequently of the chances of the Woman's Cause here.' She

88. Janice Schroeder, '"Better Arguments": *The English Woman's Journal* and the Game of Public Opinion,' *Victorian Periodicals Review* 35, no. 3 (2002): 263-4, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20083888.
89. BRP, letter to BLS, January 5, 1859 [incorrectly dated 1858], GCPP Parkes 5/87. 'Mr Fox' was William Johnson Fox, the former owner and editor of the Unitarian *Monthly Repository*, who became the *EWJ*'s auditor in November 1858. See Rendall, '"A Moral Engine"?,' 119.
90. BB to ME April 26, 1859, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women,* 119.

defended herself by reporting upbeat news of the progress of the *EWJ* and her management of it:

> To build up the circulation of a new periodical is a very difficult task, but … I feel amply satisfied at this close of our first year[']s work … [W]hen I think of the number of people of all sorts who have been brought into contact & some degree of sympathy with the work, I feel amazed at our success.[91]

The tensions in their friendship which such disagreements created, and the difficulties of resolving them when they were physically distanced, are clear from Bessie's concluding comment to Barbara: 'I hope all this … will be quite clear to you; I have a sort of nervous dread of the ease with which one is mistaken in writing.'[92]

Subscriptions were vital to the success of the *EWJ*, both to cover its financial costs and in terms of its propagandist aims. She was therefore keen to stress to Barbara the positive figures achieved by the end of 1858: 'subscriptions come in steadily[,] we have now close upon 400 & our sales are about 250 a month. … We have … new subscriptions thick as blackberries & every reason to think that the judicious path has been chosen.' Bessie also kept a keen eye on press coverage of the *Journal*'s work: 'We have had 3 leaders in the Times and 2 in the Daily News & in all the week[']s papers. Altogether matters going on famously.'[93] Such publicity helped spread the word about the *EWJ* and increase sales. Investment also grew quickly, with the share capital doubled to £2000 in November 1858.[94]

Bessie's own financial status also improved at this time, after she was left a legacy of £150 a year by a former business partner of Joseph. This income was of personal importance to

91. BRP, letter to BLS, January 5, 1859, GCPP Parkes 5/87.
92. Ibid.
93. BRP, letter to BLS, c.1858, GCPP Parkes 5/86a; BRP, letter to BLS, January 5, 1859, GCPP Parkes 5/87.
94. Additional shareholders were closely connected to existing investors, including Eugène Bodichon, Bella Leigh Smith, Mary Merryweather and members of the Courtauld family, as well as the wealthy Helena Comtesse de Noailles, who purchased sixty shares having previously supported Elizabeth Blackwell in her medical career. See Rendall, 'A "Moral Engine"?,' 119.

Bessie, because it, together with £50 per annum she received from her uncle, Josiah Parkes, enabled her to 'resign' (as she put it) her allowance from her father, giving her some degree of independence from him. It also meant, she told Barbara, that she would 'have no difficulty in borrowing at a reasonable interest' on the basis of this income, if required, in order to make a more substantial contribution to the finances of the *EWJ*.[95] Her keenness to invest money in the *EWJ* reflected her deep commitment to it: like the majority of the women connected to the running of the *Journal*, her work for the publication was unpaid. She worked long hours and her letters to Barbara include some examples of the challenges she faced as a young editor managing experienced writers, such as prolific journalist and novelist Eliza Meteyard:

> Miss Meteyard's stupidity about the population cut me dreadfully. I carefully altered it in her MS, but as ill luck wd have it she had her proofs to correct, altered it back & then sent it to the printer direct! … I wrote Miss Meteyard a severe note about it for she had no business to alter an editorial correction, & she replied that she considered herself "perfectly competent to that part of her work." This gives you an idea of the everlasting little rubs by which a business is carried on, when it involves so many hands.[96]

Orchestrating the contributions of these 'many hands,' and overseeing the production process (from commissioning work, through to editing, printing and distribution) all came under Bessie's editorial remit.[97] Her letters show her dealing personally with matters such as correspondence over distribution in America and visiting a printer in Norwich to discuss him overseeing the *EWJ*'s 'trade department.'[98] She also responded individually to the

95. BRP, letter to BLS, January 30, 1859, GCPP Parkes 5/88. The Parkes had moved in 1858 from Savile Row, in exclusive Mayfair, to a smaller home in Wimpole Street, Marylebone, part of an attempt by Joseph Parkes to consolidate his financial situation, along with selling much of his art collection (See Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women,* 32-3). This was another reason for Bessie to be keen to be less of a financial burden on her father, although of course she still lived under his roof.
96. BRP, letter to BLS, January 5, 1859, GCPP Parkes 5/87. An article entitled 'Charities for Women,' signed 'E.M.' appeared in the December 1858 edition of the *EWJ*. Another article, 'A Woman's Pen,' signed with Meteyard's pseudonym 'Silverpen,' had already appeared in the June 1858 number.
97. Miranda Marraccini's analysis of the networks of the Victoria Press Circle demonstrates how central a figure Bessie was to the business of the *EWJ* and its related publications and other enterprises, connecting male publishers to female writers. See Marraccini, 'Graphs and Analysis,' The Victorian Press Circle, accessed 3 August 2020, http://victoriapresscircle.org/graphs.
98. BRP, letter to BLS, August 23, 1859, GCPP Parkes 5/89.

innumerable letters sent to the office from readers, many of them from women desperate for help finding employment.[99]

All this exertion took a toll on Bessie's health and she was taken seriously ill during the winter of 1858. She reported to Barbara that while she was unwell 'all [went] like clockwork at the office under Max who is the most methodical worker and brings all knotty things to me with the docility of a child.'[100] Barbara was not convinced of Max's reliability, partly due to her suspicions of the Roman circle to which she had been attached and also because she shared Marian Evans' view that Max had been given her position at the *EWJ* out of charity and lacked any talent as a writer.[101] Bessie's defence of Max highlights the range of motives behind her efforts for the *Journal*: providing a friend with the stability of meaningful occupation after her recent trauma was as important to her as increasing subscriptions and receiving favourable publicity. Fortunately, Bessie was not reliant solely on Max, as the *EWJ* had begun to attract new recruits. Bessie and Max's friend, the poet Adelaide Procter, was a supporter of the project from the outset, contributing poems and reportage to the *Journal* and carrying out work in the office.[102] Another eager worker was Emily Faithfull, who Bessie described as 'the nearest approach to my ideal of a canvasser I have yet got hold of. A clergyman's daughter, aged 23 & rather strongminded; carries her own carpet bag, etc.'[103] A further important recruit, and one who demonstrated the capacity of the *EWJ* to inspire women to join the women's rights cause, was Jessie Boucherett, the daughter of a Lincolnshire country squire, who bought a copy of the *EWJ* at a railway

99. Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 135-6. Marie unfortunately considered these women's letters to be 'uninteresting, not to say useless correspondence,' which suggests she had the opportunity to read them and therefore that Bessie had preserved them. Lowndes concludes that the absence of any trace of the letters themselves suggests that Marie may have destroyed them, unaware that they would have been regarded as valuable historical documents in later years.
100. BRP, letter to BLS, January 30, 1859, GCPP Parkes 5/88.
101 .Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 188.
102. Jessie Boucherett, 'Adelaide Anne Procter,' *EWJ*, March 1864, 17-21.
103. BRP, letter to BLS, January 30, 1859, GCPP Parkes 5/88.

station and, on the strength of it, travelled to the *Journal*'s offices in London to offer her services.

Both Faithfull and Boucherett shared Bessie's and the *EWJ's* interest in expanding women's employment opportunities. Jessie's contribution was to establish, with Adelaide, the Society for the Promotion of Employment for Women (SPEW), which took a practical approach to expanding women's employment, training women in traditionally male trades such as bookkeeping and law copying. According to Jessie, Bessie was initially unwilling to join the SPEW committee as she feared linking the *EWJ* to such a 'rash enterprise.'[104] However, it was not long before she changed her mind, declaring 'I mean to join every committee in aid of women, however absurd. … we must sail with the tide & persuade people into one's own views gradually, or nothing will be done.'[105] When the SPEW became affiliated to the NAPSS, Bessie's decision was vindicated, as this link gave the SPEW a valuable platform to promote its work at NAPSS's annual conferences.

Bessie regularly reported the activities of the NAPSS in the *EWJ*, recognising its usefulness for promoting the aims of the women's movement. Unusually for the time, women attended NAPSS meetings as full members and even addressed the mixed audience as speakers. Bessie persuaded Barbara to co-write a paper with her for the October 1859 NAPSS meeting in Bradford, on the grounds that 'whatever the Association for Social Science promulgates is certain to become the law of the land in 5 years.'[106] Bessie and Jessie Boucherett were among the women who spoke in person at Bradford, while others, including Florence Nightingale, submitted papers to be read on their behalf by men. The

104. Ellen Jordan and Anne Bridger, '"An Unexpected Recruit to Feminism": Jessie Boucherett's 'Feminist Life' and the importance of being wealthy,' *Women's History Review* 15, no. 3 (2006): 392 http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09612020500530133.
105. BRP, letter to BLS, September 13, 1859, GCPP Parkes 5/91.
106. Ibid.

experience was novel and thrilling for Bessie, who regarded it as 'equivalent to women in Parliament,' debating on equal terms with men:

> I read our paper to a crowded section: 200 people listening, at the very least; Mrs Jameson and Miss Twining on the platform beside me. … We 8 ladies staid [sic] on the platform all day, among the gentlemen. Did you ever hear of such a thing! … It really was an extraordinary scene … because of the social weight of the male portion of the hearers & speakers.[107]

Furthermore, the impact of these women speakers extended far beyond those present at the meeting. Bessie reproduced her paper in the November 1859 edition of the *EWJ,* whereupon the *Saturday Review* unsurprisingly sought to ridicule her arguments, declaring that 'married life is a woman's profession' and any women who failed to find or keep a husband had 'failed in business; and no social reform can prevent such measures.'[108] The *Times*, in contrast, reproduced Bessie's paper at length, commenting that 'Female Labour may doubtless be largely improved and extended; and as the question is treated sensibly and practically by Miss Parkes … in the following essay [it] merits further publicity and discussion.'[109] Such publicity brought swift benefits. 'The whole kingdom is ringing with our Bradford Paper and subscriptions [are] pouring in to the EWJ Office,' Bessie told Barbara the following week. The names of the *EWJ* and Bessie Parkes were increasingly familiar to the public and Bessie was busier than ever, making it 'impossible' for her to visit Barbara in Algiers that winter.[110]

Nevertheless, travel continued to be an important part of Bessie's life. She was increasingly able to delegate work to her co-workers, giving her greater freedom from the administrative grind of editorship. 'The whole business is managed by Max & our clerk Miss Lewin under

107. BRP, letter to BLS, October 19, 1859, GCPP Parkes 5/93. The paper she read was entitled 'The Market for Educated Female Labor.'
108. 'Queen Bees or Working Bees?' *Saturday Review*, November 12, 1859, 576.
109. BRP, 'The Market for Educated Female Labor,' *EWJ*, November 1859, 145-152; 'The Market for Educated Female Labour,' *Times*, November 7, 1859, 10; [Editorial], *Times*, November 8, 1859, 6.
110. BRP, letter to BLS, November 17, 1859, GCPP Parkes 5/95.

her,' she told Barbara. 'I don't keep a single account nor sign a single receipt. Only think of that!'[111] This facilitated her travelling away from London and she attended the 1860 NAPSS meeting in Glasgow and travelled to Dublin for its 1861 congress. In addition to delivering papers and contributing to debates, Bessie helped establish branches of the SPEW in both cities and, armed with copies of the *EWJ*, sought out new subscribers. Her presence at these meetings also enabled her to make new contacts with others with similar interests in improving women's lives.

In Dublin, she met Sarah Atkinson and Ellen Woodlock, founders of an Industrial Institute for pauper girls which provided training in domestic skills and prepared pupils for a trade. They campaigned for wider social reform and gave evidence to a parliamentary committee on conditions in workhouses. Atkinson also published essays on a range of literary and artistic subjects, giving her many interests in common with Bessie and they became close friends.[112] Bessie returned to Dublin several times in the coming years, where she observed the work of the Sisters of Mercy and the Sisters of Charity, two Catholic sisterhoods providing education and healthcare to the poor with which Atkinson was closely connected. Like several of her contemporaries, most notably Anna Jameson, Bessie admired such non-cloistered religious sisterhoods as models of organised, well-trained work for unmarried women and she took great interest in their work.[113]

111. BRP, letter to BLS, January 8, 1860, GCPP Parkes 5/96.
112. K. Woodnutt, "Sarah Atkinson as a Social Worker." *Dublin Historical Record* 21, no. 4 (1967): 132-38, https://www.jstor.org/stable/30103878.
113. Jameson's 1855 lecture 'Sisters of Charity, Catholic and Protestant' drew attention to the significance of the work of European sisterhoods in providing high-quality care for the poor and needy in society and argued for the expansion of protestant sisterhoods in England as a way to harness the energies of single women in the service of the community. For an account of the development of Anglican sisterhoods in the nineteenth century, see Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850-1920* (London: Virago, 1985), 46-84. For an overview of Roman Catholic sisterhoods in England and Wales in the same period, see Carmen Mangion, *Contested Identities: Catholic Women Religious in Nineteenth-Century England and Wales* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).

Bessie commented that since becoming a 'Public Character' she had to go abroad to get 'any rest from that dreadful Penny Post.'[114] She valued the freedom of independent travel away from the constraints of home, as she reflected in her journal during a journey to Belgium and Germany:

> I feel, walking about any large town … so much of a free spirit so little of a being of sex & class.' …
>
> To … fear taking journeys alone, or entering into a conversation with anyone who has not been "introduced". What utter folly it seems, to one who is once freed… & when one hears a middle aged man talking on these subjects, & giving in plain language his opinions on these subjects, & the whys and wherefore (as sometimes one may in the bosom of family) the thrill of disgust … is impossible to be described.[115]

Her most frequent destination was France, a country she loved so much that she described herself as 'half-French… by all my affinities.'[116] After one trip to Paris in the spring of 1860, she reported in the *EWJ* on her visits to La Saltpetrière, a public hospital and asylum for five thousand poor women, a Maison de Secours run by the Sisters of Charity which provided relief and medical care to the poor in their own homes, and an infant school managed by Marie Pape-Carpantier, a pioneer in nursery education. Bessie's article showed her sympathies for the suffering of impoverished women and children, and her view that the care provided by these charitable and religious institutions was superior to that provided by English workhouses and industrial schools. She also noted the significant numbers of married women working in Parisian ateliers, shops and as domestic servants, and expressed ambivalence about their common practice of sending their children to a nearby creche or to foster care in the countryside. She feared industry in France was moving towards large-scale factories, as in Britain, placing the well-being of workers in the hands of powerful industrialists. She argued co-operation would be a preferable system.[117] Travel writing was

114. BRP, letter to BLS, January 30, 1859, GCPP Parkes 5/88.
115. BRP, journal written as a letter to Theodosia, Lady Monson, August 1859, GCPP Parkes 1/4a.
116. BRP, letter to BLS, January 22, 1862, GCPP Parkes 5/113.
117. BRP, 'From Paris (No. II), *EWJ*, June 1860, 259-268. Bessie's biography of Pape-Carpantier appeared in the January 1862 number of the *EWJ* and was later reproduced in her *Vignettes: Twelve Biographical Sketches* (London: Alexander Strahan, 1866). Her account of Dr Trelat's work with lunatic patients at

a significant element of the content of the *EWJ*, to which Bessie's articles contributed. The figure of the independent woman traveller evoked in the *Journal*'s articles and book reviews reflected the fact that such travel was an increasing possibility for the Victorian middle classes; it also reflected Bessie's belief that such travel was profoundly liberating for women.[118]

Back in London, the activities connected to the *EWJ* were expanding rapidly. Therefore acquiring the use of a second, sizeable room in the same building as the *EWJ*'s small office in Prince's Street was an important development. This room was used by 'the Committees of various Philanthropic Societies' in the afternoons, while in the mornings it functioned as a 'Reading Room for Ladies.'[119] Access to current periodicals and the latest books was an important part of the informal self-education for many women debarred from male institutions of knowledge and power. Letters between Bessie and her friends contain frequent discussions of books and articles they had read and they posted copies of journals to each other, to share their reading. Bessie and Barbara could access such publications at home but many other women were less fortunate.[120] A Ladies Reading Room was thus a valuable resource for those women who could afford the one guinea per annum membership fee. An opportunity to move to larger premises enabled such activities to expand further. The move came about, like so many of the developments of the early women's movement, through personal friendship ties. Theodosia, the dowager Lady Monson was a wealthy widow sympathetic to the cause of women's rights and a friend of several women in the

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Saltpetriere appeared in the *EWJ* as a two-part article entitled "Though This Be Madness, Yet There's Method In It", in June and July 1862.

118. For an overview of travel writing in the *EWJ*, see Barbara Korte, 'Travel Writing in "The English Woman's Journal" (1858-1864): An Area of Leisure in the Context of Women's Work,' *Victorian Periodicals Review* 45, no. 2 (2012): 158-174, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41638133.

119. 'A Reading Room for Ladies,' *EWJ Advertiser*, Sept 1858, 1.

120. For example, in 1859 Elizabeth Gaskell complained in a letter to her publisher that 'with a struggle and a fight I can see all the Quarterlies three months after they are published; til then they lie on the Portico table, for gentlemen to see.' Gaskell's husband was a prominent member of the Portico Library in Manchester, but she, despite being a highly successful and influential writer, was not admitted to this all-male bastion of knowledge and culture. See Ruth Watts, *Gender, Power and the Unitarians*, 153.

women's movement, including Anna Jameson and Max Hays, and took an enthusiastic interest in the workings of the *EWJ*. In the autumn of 1859 she rented and furnished 19 Langham Place on behalf of the *EWJ* and the SPEW, on terms which indemnified them from any debts.[121] This new location provided additional office space and a committee room for meetings, so the Reading Room could become a more substantial social space. Bessie had grown up in a household where her father's political associates regularly socialized together, out of which meetings the Reform Club had come into being. She therefore recognised the usefulness of an establishment where women could meet, socialise, read and discuss the matters of the day.

Advertising for the Reading Room stressed its potential to enable women from different social worlds to 'learn to co-operate, from occasionally meeting on common ground.'[122] A prospectus for the 'Ladies' Institute' at 19 Langham Place included this description:

> The Ladies' Reading Room is open from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Leading Daily and Weekly Papers, Magazines and Reviews. Terms, one guinea per annum.
> …
> Ladies visiting the West End on shopping or other business, will find it a great convenience, as attached to the Reading Room is a Luncheon Room, and a room also for the reception of parcels, for the use of subscribers only.[123]

In sum, it was a private club, providing a safe and pleasant place for networking, socialising and dining away from home. It enabled members to spend time in the public realm, for work or pleasure, while retaining their respectability, at a time when the phrase 'public woman' was a euphemism for prostitute.[124] The language used to promote the club

121. BRP, letter to BLS, January 5, 1859, GCPP Parkes 5/87; Patrick Waddington, 'Monson, Theodosia, Lady Monson (1803–1891), dilettante and promoter of women's rights,' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography,* 2004, https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-59337.
122. 'Passing Events,' *EWJ,* July 1859, 359-60.
123. Prospectus of the Ladies' Institute at 19 Langham Place, cited in Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*: 197. Beth Palmer points out that one guinea p.a. was in line with subscription costs for lending libraries such as Mudie's and the 'half price' rate was still unaffordable for most working women. She provides the comparison of the 1d per week fee charged by working men's reading rooms in the 1850s. See Palmer, 'Reading Langham Place Periodicals,' 58-9.
124. Lynne Walker, 'Home and away,' 65.

therefore emphasised its respectability, stressing that the club's members and management were 'professional women' and 'ladies.'[125] The requirement of references and the fee price ensured it attracted a solidly middle-class membership. Bessie also took pains over the décor of the rooms, buying some of Barbara's paintings to display on the walls, thereby creating a cultured atmosphere and simultaneously helping promote her friend's career.

Unsurprisingly, this all-female establishment was viewed with suspicion by those who believed women should remain in the domestic sphere. A mocking article in the *Saturday Review* asked 'What business … have ladies with a reading-room and a luncheon-room? What is the reading in the morning-room of the Club which they cannot get at home?' It suggested that the real purpose of the 'Club' must be a drinking den or a dubious 'lounge for the unprotected female, in which she can daily meet her like-minded and strong-minded sisterhood, to discuss the Divorce Court till half-past one, and then console the inner woman with sandwiches and sherry and the mutual confidences of the gynaeceum till half-past six.'[126] Bessie described the article as 'most beastly … dirty and indecent to a horrible degree.' Nevertheless, she was confident it would have little impact, 'because it is so outrageous & makes such disgusting classical allusions that it isn't fit for family reading.'[127] Such attacks showed how controversial and threatening women-only institutions were perceived to be, as attempts to usurp male space, power and knowledge. Such opposition demonstrates the importance of the female space of 19 Langham Place: what Cherry describes as a 'heterotopia' or 'counter site' for the women's movement within a wider hostile culture.[128]

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125. This demonstrated the limitations of the *EWJ*'s argument that such class-laden terms should be irrelevant to modern society. For example, the terms 'lady' and 'gentlewoman' are critiqued in an unsigned editorial article, 'West-end Housekeepers,' *EWJ*, December 1861, 249-54.
126. 'The Ladies' Club,' *Saturday Review*, January 7, 1860, 12-13.
127. BRP, letter to BLS, January 8, 1860, GCPP Parkes 5/96. The 'disgusting classical allusions' were to Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae* and *Lysistrata.*
128. Cherry, *Beyond the Frame*, 32.

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Bessie and her associates are remembered today as the 'Langham Place group,' indicating the symbolic as well as practical significance of the work undertaken at the *EWJ*'s headquarters. They established a hub for the various activities of the early women's movement, creating a female-led community of like-minded workers which resembled their earlier imagined 'Associated Home' of women artists. Bessie was unstinting in her efforts at the heart of this community and in her loyalty to her friends and fellow campaigners. Nevertheless, it would soon prove increasingly difficult to hold together all the strands of their work, as tensions grew over aims, strategy and religious differences.

Chapter 5 1861-1866: Being 'Bessie Rayner Parkes': Public life and private faith

> You know how I hate & detest the 'Bessie Rayner Parkes' aspect & what pains I take to seclude myself from it.
>
> Bessie Parkes, letter to Barbara Bodichon, March 1864[1]

In 1860 Bessie had been delighted with the success of the *EWJ.* Monthly circulation had reached 1000 and, as important in her eyes, she believed that the *Journal* was gaining 'incalculably in weight & estimation.'[2] Yet as the workforce expanded at Langham Place to support the growing range of activities co-ordinated from there, tensions began to surface. In March 1861, Bessie complained of 'bullying,' 'trouble' and 'contradiction' in the office, and she threatened to 'make a coup d'état, … by buying up the whole Journal.'[3] Disagreements grew as doubts were raised about the usefulness of the *EWJ* as a campaign tool and views diverged over priorities and strategies for the women's movement.

The *EWJ*'s office at 19 Langham Place was a hive of activity, a hub of women's rights campaigning and enterprises training and employing women in a range of trades, including bookkeeping and printing,[4] all managed alongside the work of producing the *EWJ* itself. However, discord at the office was growing. Marian Evans described the Langham Place office to Barbara as 'a coterie of women' and Barbara also received worrying reports from others about the situation.[5] These Bessie dismissed as 'very one sided … with all our faults

1. BRP, letter to BLS, March 16, 1864, GCPP Parkes 5/129.
2. BRP, letter to BLS, January 8, 1860, GCPP Parkes 5/96.
3. BRP, letter to BLS, March 30, 1861, GCPP Parkes 5/103.
4. Emily Faithfull had established the Victoria Press at premises in Great Coram Street, Bloomsbury in 1860, after Bessie had argued in the *EWJ* that printing was a very suitable trade for women. The EWJ Company invested £50 in the new Press, which trained and employed women as compositors. It became the printer for the *EWJ* and its associated pamphlet publications, as well as for *Transactions* (the published records of the NAPSS). It even gained the prestige of official approval from Queen Victoria.
5. Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 196.

& quarrels there is a real spirit of love at bottom, which is just what the outsiders cannot see.'[6]

Despite Bessie's faith in love and friendship, there were divisive factions forming at Langham Place. At the centre of this was Max Hays, who many found difficult but whom Bessie defended as a reliable worker who needed sympathy after the upheavals she had suffered. Bessie had retained a close friendship with Max, who was intimately involved with Adelaide and also established a relationship with Lady Monson, creating a tangle of emotional ties which were not conducive to the smooth-running of business.[7] Adelaide, who remained loyal to Max, blamed 'unfounded enmity [and]… spite' for the way Max was being treated. She suspected that attempts to force Max to resign her co-editorship of the *EWJ* were motivated by a desire to give Isa Craig and Emily Faithfull more influence over it, which she thought would be disastrous.[8] However, Bessie and Adelaide eventually recognised that Max's departure was expedient. In December 1861, Bessie assured Barbara that she and Adelaide hoped to encourage Max to move away from London, as Max herself wished to do, although the practicalities of this were difficult. Bessie resented Barbara's criticisms of her management of the office, pointing out, 'You have always held the purse & been able to hire labour, whereas I have to trust right & left to the independent actions of those I combine with.' This included Emily Faithfull who, she declared, though 'a splendid worker, full of energy & ability, is even more unsettled morally than Max.'[9] Adelaide also came to distrust Emily, ending her friendship with her in the summer of 1862.[10]

6. BRP, letter to BLS, April 19, 1861, GCPP Parkes 5/105.
7. Adelaide's poem 'A Retrospect,' in which the speaker's 'present bliss' is contrasted with 'That long and desert land' before she knew the addressee, was originally entitled 'To M.M.H.' She also dedicated her poetry volume *Legends and Lyrics* (1858) to Max, citing a quotation from Emerson referring to 'tokens of love.' After leaving Langham Place, Max was for many years Lady Monson's companion.
8. AAP, letter to BRP, July 4, 1861, GCPP Parkes 8/24.
9. BRP, letter to BLS, December 8, 1861, GCPP Parkes 5/108.
10. AAP, letter to BRP, August 7, 1862, GCPP Parkes 8/26. Adelaide did not explain the reasons for ending this friendship, but her mother told Robert Browning that Adelaide discovered that Emily had lied to her. Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon,* 202.

As strained personal relationships and professional disagreements took their toll, the difficulties of leading this disparate group of mostly volunteer workers became increasingly apparent. Several months later Max was no nearer to leaving and Bessie declared herself 'quite spent' after '5 months of incessant work.'[11] In addition to the disharmony at Langham Place, she also felt the strain of maintaining the success of the *EWJ* in what she saw as an increasingly competitive periodicals market, although she trusted that it would 'still ride on steadily doing its monthly function of practical work.'[12] In this fragile state, she was hard pressed to find the strength to cope with another crisis created by Max. This time the cause was a passionately-worded letter written by Max regarding men's treatment of women, published in the *Times*. In it she attacked men's 'coarse, if covert, ribaldry, and no less coarse, if open, assertion that woman is a breeding animal only' and condemned a nation 'where women as wives are bought and sold and … too often sell themselves into legalized prostitution.'[13] The description of marriage as 'legalised prostitution' had appeared in several radical arguments regarding the position of women (including Barbara's *Women and Work*) but the tone of Max's letter also gave a hint of her outspoken temperament which some found unacceptable. Andrew Edger, a member of the NAPSS Council who audited the SPEW accounts, was outraged and demanded that Max resign from the SPEW Committee. Although the Committee was supportive of Max and at first refused to accept her resignation, she, Bessie and Adelaide all departed from SPEW soon after.[14]

Bessie was worn down by such disputes and therefore willing to accept Barbara's suggestion that, with Max finally departed, Emily Davies take over editing the *EWJ*.[15] This

11. BRP, letter to BLS, 1862, GCPP Parkes 5/110.
12. BRP, letter to BLS, April 1, 1862, GCPP Parkes 5/114.
13. Matilda M. Hays, 'To the Editor of the Times,' *Times*, April 29, 1862, 14.
14. Jordan and Bridger, 'An Unexpected Recruit to Feminism': 397.
15. Barbara had met Davies in Algeria in 1858 and had brought her into the Langham Place circle when Davies moved to London in 1861. The two women would later work closely together to establish the first

enabled Bessie to take a much-needed rest and, amongst other travels, visit Mary Merryweather, who was now a nursing superintendent at a hospital in Liverpool. Davies edited the *Journal* for eight months from September 1862, taking a very different approach from Bessie's. In some ways even more cautious than Bessie about protecting the respectability of the *Journal,* she was concerned that the connection with Max had lent it a damaging reputation for scandalous 'Bloomerism,' in London at least. She also disliked the inclusion of critiques of political economy which she feared opened the *EWJ* up to attacks from other papers. Bessie was increasingly sceptical of the arguments of political economy, arguing that market forces needed to be tempered with Christian morality, and she wrote several articles for the *EWJ* on the merits of co-operation as an alternative to industrial capitalism. Emily wanted women to have access to education and the professions on the same terms as men, arguing that men and women shared the same political and economic interests. In contrast, Bessie focused on women's mission to help other women and saw widening women's participation in the public sphere as an opportunity to reform society through the distinct influence of female morality and skills.

Religious differences were another significant source of disagreement. Some radical women, including Marian Evans and Barbara, became sceptical of orthodox religion; 'freethought' would become an increasingly significant perspective in feminist circles in the coming decades.[16] However, for most of those in the Langham Place circle, like most women of their time, religious faith was an important part of their identity and informed their sense of the moral mission in their work. Followers of non-conformist denominations,

university college for women in Britain, Girton College, Cambridge. See Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 134-5, 244-87.

16. Pam Hirsch explains that Barbara Bodichon's religious faith was 'undogmatic and eccentric.' She was greatly influenced by Marian Evans' rejection of supernatural religion but 'although a free-thinker intellectually, she was not an atheist,' believing instead in 'an almost mystical spirituality … [of] God immanent in nature.' *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*: 221-2. For an account of freethought within nineteenth-century feminist movements, see Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism.*

including Unitarianism, were prominent within the women's movement, just as they were in the wider ranks of those working for social and political reform. Anglican women were campaigners too, including Emily Davies and Emily Faithfull, both the daughters of Church of England clergyman. It was within this context that Bessie's growing sympathy with Catholicism strained relations further.

Bessie had long expressed dissatisfaction with the rationalist Unitarian faith of her childhood, declaring soon after leaving school that 'Many Unitarians of the modern school […] crush their religion between eleven and half past twelve on a Sunday morning and make common sense do the rest of its work.' Given her poetic temperament and admiration of the transcendentalism of Shelley and Emerson, it is not surprising that she sought a more spiritual faith which gave 'due importance' to 'prayer and outward worship' and 'things unseen.'[17] After a period of religious doubt (influenced by the scepticism of Higher Criticism and works such Strauss's *Life of Christ*), she became attracted towards more orthodox religious devotion and found increasing affinity with the Roman Catholic church.[18] In part this was due to her admiration for Catholic religious sisterhoods, whose work she observed firsthand on her travels. She regarded the Sisters of Charity and the Sisters of Mercy as exemplars of disciplined and well-trained female workforces who provided vital educational, medical and social services to the public.[19]

Although Bessie aimed to balance the content in each issue of the *EWJ* to avoid partiality towards any particular faith, there were suspicions of editorial bias. When, for example, Bessie published an article by Anna Blackwell containing criticism of the schools run by

17. BRP, letter to KJ, November 11, 1847, GCPP Parkes 6/51.
18. Bessie commented that 'I was kept away from Xianity for years by a notion that Strauss['s] Life of Jesus was "incontrovertible".' BRP, letter to BLS, May 18, 1863, GCPP 5/117.
19. See, for example, BRP, 'A Year's Experience in Women's Work,' *EWJ*, October 1860, 45-6.

the Sisters of Charity in Paris, she appended to it an editorial comment, signed (unusually) with her initials:

> Having allowed my friend, Miss Blackwell, full expression of her opinion concerning the moral action of the Clerical Schools of France, I feel that justice demands my stating that my own impressions are widely different. … I am convinced that the schools kept by the Sisters of Charity are a most important item in their wide-spread usefulness.[20]

On another occasion, Bessie was 'distressed' to receive from Barbara's husband an article attacking French Catholics for inclusion in the *EWJ,* which she felt unable to publish. Her justification was her need to avoid upsetting a significant part of the *Journal*'s readership: 'I have numerous Catholic and High Church subscribers, & (without any reference to my own opinions) how can I throw an apple of discord into the midst of them[?]'[21] Bessie assured Barbara she would personally ensure that Eugène's piece appeared in another publication. Even so, such disagreements served to cause further friction between the two women, and Barbara increasingly turned instead to Emily Davies as her campaigning ally.[22]

Both Bessie and Emily identified a lack of shared religious outlook as a significant barrier to the smooth running of the *Journal*. After she took up the editorship, Emily wrote to Barbara outlining her reasons for thinking the *EWJ* should be 'wound up,' focusing on problems arising from Bessie's attempts to avoid the *Journal* being identified with any single religious denomination, which had led Elizabeth Garrett to describe the *EWJ* as 'atheistic.' Despite this professed neutrality, Emily felt obliged to defer to Bessie's editing of a short story which critiqued 'Romanism,' was annoyed that Bessie's excisions left the story with 'no point at all' and declared that she was unable to 'write freely' about religious

20. BRP, *EWJ*, August 1860, 377.
21. BRP, letter to BLS, April 19, 1861, GCPP Parkes 5/105.
22. Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 205.

sisterhoods, 'knowing Bessie's views.'[23] Bessie, in turn, felt Emily held her and her religious views 'in deep-seated contempt.'[24] She came to regard the lack of 'a common religious principle' as lying at the heart of the discord at 19 Langham Place. She told Barbara:

> I can work with Unitarians, because tho' I am not dogmatically a Unitarian, I have been trained in and still retain in a great measure their view of life and its duties. And I could work with Catholics because of my intellectual sympathy with their doctrines, and the definitiveness of their plans. But I confess that when I get hold of minds which have been trained (or not trained) in the Church of England, I don't know how to deal with them - Emily Davies, Jane Crowe, E[mily] F[aithfull] and to a certain extent our own dear Isa, seem to me to have no floors to their interior domains! And one may talk with them by the hour without coming to a solid conclusion.[25]

Bessie's interest in Catholicism was personal as well as intellectual, with its roots in her friendships with Roman Catholic women, particularly Adelaide Procter, to whom she became increasingly close during her Langham Place years. Adelaide shared with Bessie her experience of conversion to Catholicism and her views on religion. From around 1855, Bessie began attending Catholic Mass regularly, sometimes with Adelaide and at other times alone.[26] Barbara was horrified by Bessie's 'bias towards Catholicism' and wrote telling her so in no uncertain terms:

> I cannot tell you how wrong your views seem to me to be, and what a bar to anything you ought to wish for, & which we both love to do. God forbid you should go over, & God forbid that the Catholic Church should ever take you in. It is no place for women … .[27]

Barbara's antipathy to Catholicism was typical of the anti-Catholic feeling of much of British society at this time.[28] Catholic beliefs were widely attacked as outmoded

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23. Emily Davies, letter to BLS, January 3, 1863, in *Emily Davies: Collected Letters, 1861-1875*, ed. Ann B. Murphy and Deirdre Raftery (University of Virginia Press, 2004): 23
24. Quoted in Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*: 200
25. BRP, letter to BLS, 1863, GCPP Parkes 5/12.
26. Several of Adelaide's letters to Bessie contain discussions of services Bessie might attend, in multiple Roman Catholic churches across London, including GCPP Parkes 8/33-36, no date. It appears that none of Bessie's letters to Adelaide have survived.
27. Quoted in Hirsch *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 207.
28. This anti-Catholicism had long roots in the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century and had been recently reinvigorated by fears of the increasing influence of Rome: the shock of several key figures in the

superstitions, which Barbara felt keenly were incompatible with the progressive, intellectual outlook of her and her friend. She told Bessie that '[t]he Catholic Church so shocks me by the absurdities and impostures which its priesthood encourage and swear by, that I cannot feel it fitting our minds.'[29]

In response to Barbara's arguments, Bessie explained that for her it was not 'a simply intellectual question. … It is a contest for & against revealed religion.'[30] Embracing revealed religion - belief founded on divine revelation rather than reason - provided her, she explained, with comfort and emotional stability as she coped with increasing work and personal pressures:

> At 32, with neither a strong body nor a strong brain, I feel that I require a settled belief in religious matters to keep me sane, heathy, happy. … I feel that I owe whatever strength & peace I have to just that amount of conviction I have grasped, and that a more evil deed could not be done by me than to shake me in it.[31]

She told Barbara that Adelaide had helped her discover the 'refreshing fountain of the Catholic Church' at a time when she had been 'weary and mournful'; she later further explained that she found in the Catholic Mass, and in the quiet of empty Catholic churches, solace from the difficulties of her 'half-public, half social life.'[32] When Barbara tried to persuade her to read critiques of supernatural religion and the Catholic Church, Bessie rejected them, declaring 'What I want is Jesus; Jesus the Redeemer … If I cling to the Catholic Church it['']s because Jesus seems to me to be there, both historically and practically, more than elsewhere.'[33] Unitarians rejected the divinity of Jesus, but Bessie was increasingly drawn to belief in Christ as God incarnate, a figure of redemption uniting

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Oxford Movement 'going over' to Catholicism in the 1840s and '50s, and the so-called 'Papal Aggression' of 1850, when a Catholic clerical hierarchy was re-established in Britain.

29. BLS, December 27, 1861, quoted by Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into* Women, 143.
30. BRP, letter to BLS, August 1861, GCPP Parkes 5/107.
31. Ibid.
32. Quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 145-6.
33. BRP, letter to BLS, November 18, 1863, GCPP Parkes 5/123.

humankind to the Divine. The symbolism of Christ's Passion in Bessie's poem *Gabriel* demonstrated the growing significance to her of this aspect of Christian doctrine; it also echoed Adelaide's correspondence to her, in which she declared that Christ being both God and man exalted humanity and provided 'hope for the progress of the human race.'[34]

Adelaide provided Bessie with an alternative perspective on faith to Barbara's rationalism. When Bessie wrestled with conflicting arguments about religious belief, it was Adelaide who told her that accepting the Catholic faith was not an intellectual question to be 'solved,' but a 'universal truth' available to all who are willing to accept it.[35] She shared with Bessie her own experience of the 'fight' she undertook in finding her way to the 'Truth' of the Catholic Church, suggested books Bessie might read and encouraged her to attend services to hear particular priests' sermons. On Adelaide's advice, Bessie visited Dr Henry Manning, a former Anglican clergyman who had converted and been ordained into the Catholic Church in 1851. Despite his reputation as a social reformer, Bessie sensed he had little sympathy for her stance on women's rights and she found him austere and intimidating. However, she was deeply impressed by his conviction that his decision to convert had been the right one, whilst understanding the concerns of those who, like Bessie, risked losing social or professional standing by becoming a Catholic.[36] Manning's intellectual and spiritual certainty brought into focus Bessie's own doubts about whether she could fully accept Catholicism as the religious truth she sought. This, combined with her concern for the effect on her work should she decide to convert, meant that for several years, despite her increasing 'constitutional and intellectual leanings towards Catholic theology,' Bessie

34. Adelaide Procter, letter to BRP, no date, GCPP 8/31. Mary Merryweather's faith was also influential on Bessie, who told Barbara that 'Mary believes absolutely in the incarnation, in its most obvious sense; believes that Jesus Christ as the Godhead Incarnate.' See BRP, letter to BLS, January 12, 1862, GCPP Parkes 5/112.
35. Adelaide Procter, letter to BRP, no date, GCPP 8/37.
36. BRP, *In a Walled Garden,* 211-2.

hesitated to follow Adelaide's path to conversion.[37] She feared the impact on her public reputation of rumours about her religious allegiance, ending one letter on the subject to Barbara with a postscript: 'You must not conclude from this letter that I am a Catholic. … And above all don't talk of it to any of the people in Algiers; for the sake of my work.'[38] To convert would be more than a private commitment to a particular faith: it would redefine her identity in public life and make many people suspicious of working with her.[39]

Meanwhile Emily Davies believed that the *EWJ* was neither financially viable nor politically effective, and she was forthright in expressing her views in letters to Barbara, who sent money to cover an immediate shortfall. However, Emily argued that there remained very limited funds to secure good-quality contributors and, she claimed the *EWJ* was not, in any event, being read, and was 'of very little use as a rallying point,' and so it would be better to wind it up as soon as possible.[40] She dismissed Bessie's belief that 'if the EWJ were to die, it would be talked of "in America & Paris, to say nothing of our own towns" as one more failure in women's attempts at working together.' She expressed amazement at what she termed Bessie's 'delusion' on the matter and her 'ignorance' that 'there is nothing new in women's working together. All over the country, there are Ladies' Associations, Ladies' Committees, Schools managed by ladies, magazines conducted by ladies, &c. &c.' Emily believed that the 'new and difficult thing is for men and women to work together on equal terms, & the existence of the EWJ is not testimony with regard to that.' Like Marian Evans, Emily Davies felt advertising the *EWJ* as a title written by women unhelpfully overshadowed its content and thought that a 'good general Magazine, assuming throughout that men & women are interested in the same thing' would be a better way to

37. BRP, letter to BLS, August 1861, GCPP Parkes 5/107.
38. BRP, letter to BLS, c.1861, GCPP Parkes 5/107a.
39. Such fears were real: Bessie reported to Barbara that Maria Rye had refused to employ a Catholic woman in her law-copying firm, 'tho' the individual was a harmless one by birth; not a convert, & not particularly religious.' BRP, letter to BLS, April 1, 1862, GCPP Parkes 5/114.
40. ED, letter to BLS, January 3, 1863, in *Emily Davies: Collected Letters,* ed. Murphy and Raftery, 23.

promote their campaigns.[41] To this end, after editing the April 1863 edition of the *EWJ*, Emily Davies left to set up a new title with Emily Faithfull, whose Victoria Press trained and employed female compositors. The *Victoria Magazine* placed a greater emphasis on literary writing than the *EWJ,* using the appeal of well-known writers in order to attract a wider readership for its social and feminist articles.[42]

Despite having stepped away from the SPEW Committee and the *EWJ,* Bessie had continued to work hard for the cause, dealing with the substantial correspondence which she still received. She remained committed to the *EWJ* and used the money provided by her recent legacy to become the major shareholder in the Company in 1863, thus preventing Emily Davies' attempts to close it down. She returned to the *EWJ* after Davies' departure but felt unable to resume as its permanent editor and so appointed to that post Elizabeth Eiloart, a writer who had contributed to the *Journal* for several years using the signatures of 'Asterisk' and 'E,' while Sarah Lewin worked as secretary.[43] Bessie herself devoted time to reviving her poetry career. As *EWJ*'s editor she had ensured that poetry was a regular feature of the *Journal* and she published nine of her own poems in its pages, making her one of its most prolific poetry contributors alongside Isa Craig and Adelaide Procter.[44] In 1863 she also produced a new poetry volume, *Ballads and Songs* which contained fifty-eight poems, only one third of which had been previously published elsewhere.[45]

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41. ED, letter to BLS, January 14, 1863, in *Emily Davies: Collected Letters,* ed. Murphy and Raftery, 30-1.
42. For an overview of the *Victoria Magazine*, arguing that it was the 'first mainstream feminist family literary magazine,' see Jennifer Phegley, *Educating the Proper Woman Reader: Victorian Family Literary Magazines and the Cultural Health of the Nation* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2004), 153-194.
43. BRP, 'A Review of the Last Six Years,' *EWJ* February 1864, 367.
44. Seven of Bessie's poems were published in the *EWJ* under either Bessie's initials or her full name: 'Two Graves' (April 1858); 'The Old Chateau' (March 1859); 'Gibson's Studio' (May 1859); 'Minerva Medica' (June 1859); 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' (December 1859); 'The Palace and the Colliery' (February 1862) and 'The First Primrose' (April 1863). Bessie's authorship of 'New Year's Wishes' (signed 'The Editors' in the *EWJ* of January 1860) and the anonymously published 'The Wind amid the Trees' (*EWJ*, November 1861) is confirmed by their inclusion in Bessie's 1863 volume of poetry, *Ballads and Songs.* For a discussion of the 'domestic' nature of much of the poetry in the *EWJ,* see Miranda Marraccini, '"Fresh Fields" and "Humble Doors": The Politics of Poetry in the *English Woman's Journal*,' *Victorian Periodicals Review* 52, no. 4 (2019): 679-702.
45. BRP, *Ballads and Songs* (London: Bell & Daldy, 1863).

The volume's title echoed that of Adelaide Procter's *Legends and Lyrics* (1858), indicating the influence of Adelaide's work on Bessie's poetry at this time. This is most clearly expressed in Bessie's poem 'For Adelaide,' first published in 1855 and reprinted in this new volume. In this poem, another in her series of odes memorialising her female friendships and artistic mentors, Bessie expressed her admiration of her friend's poetic voice as the 'sweetest Singer … / [of] kind human melody.' She contrasted this with her own 'mysterious rhymes … / Born in the dim depths of some sage's dream' and her 'harsh ungenial muse.'[46] This celebration of Adelaide's songlike religious poetry demonstrates Bessie's awareness of the differences in the content and style of their work and marks a shift in her poetic ambitions, away from the idea of the poet as inspired, intellectual visionary, as exemplified in her earlier emulation of Shelley and Barrett Browning.[47] Adelaide's religious outlook is also discernible as an influence on the tenor of Bessie's poetry. Adelaide's poems 'Unseen' and 'Unexpressed,' for example, express an awareness of the limitations of human understanding to conceive the full extent of the 'world of mystery' of God's creation and the inability of language or art to adequately capture it.[48] Similarly, Bessie's poem 'Unspoken,' evoking in its title Adelaide's poems, captures half-understood meanings conveyed beyond words, 'through a look, and in a tone / … when my

46. BRP, *Ballads and Songs*, 154.
47. The popularity of Adelaide Procter's poetry is reflected in the fact that she was known to be Queen Victoria's favourite poet and several of her poems were set to music, most notably 'The Lost Chord' (1860), adapted by Sir Arthur Sullivan in 1877. For an exploration of the more radical elements of Procter's poetry and biography, which are not reflected in Bessie's ode, see Cheri Larsen Hoeckley, '"Must Her Own Words Do All?": Domesticity, Catholicism, and Activism in Adelaide Anne Procter's Poems,' in *The Catholic Church and Unruly Women Writers: Critical Essays,* ed. Jeana DelRosso, Leigh Eicke and Ana Kothe (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 123-138.
48. Emma Mason, *Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2006), 87. Karen Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries: The Liturgical and Poetic Practices of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, and Adelaide Procter* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012), 219. Dieleman defines this element in Procter's poetry more specifically as reflecting the imagery of the Roman Catholic Mass with its emphasis on sacred mysteries.

darling smiles on me,' and links this earthly 'mystery' to that 'which we shall not know / Till earth and stars have passed away.'[49]

In style and content *Ballads and Songs* conformed more fully to conventional ideas of the kind of poetry a woman should write than Bessie's previous publications, as several positive reviews attested. The *Reader* praised her 'well-rhymed utterances of … common feelings … suffused … by a certain imaginativeness and a fondness for scenery and flowers' and was grateful that only in 'Minerva Medica' (a tribute to female medics) was there any expression of 'those peculiar views which the authoress has advocated in prose.' The *London Review* declared her to be 'a true feminine poet … sensitive to impressions … emotional … widely sympathetic and deeply though unaffectedly devout.'[50] It appealed also to John Ruskin, an exacting critic of art and literature with decided views on women and their proper sphere, who wrote to Bessie 'I like your book of ballads mightily: I have never seen any with so much common sense and pleasant humour mixed with their deeper feeling.'[51] The combination of Bessie's established position as a published poet for more than a decade and her high profile as social reformer meant that a new volume of verse bearing her name drew critical attention from many of the most significant periodicals of the day. Bessie was pleased that even her more negative reviewers were 'extremely respectful, … devoting considerable space to the subject, which is more than I expected.' However, this publicity did not translate into substantial sales and she seems to have

49. BRP, *Ballads and Songs,* 123-4.
50. 'Ballads and Songs by Miss Parkes,' *Reader*, May 2, 1863, 426; 'Poems by Miss Bessie Parkes,' *London Review*, June 13, 1863, 640.
51. John Ruskin, letter to BRP, June 10, 1863, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies,* 71. Ruskin's praise is all the more telling when compared to his aggressive response to one of Barbara's paintings: 'Do you really think that a drawing of an American swamp is a thing to bequeath to the world. I don't like your ladies' reading room either.' His damning criticism of Anna Mary Howitt's painting *Boadicea* devastated Howitt so greatly that it contributed to her nervous breakdown and the end of her artistic career. See Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 164-8.

resigned herself to never achieving popular success as a poet.[52] She would not publish another volume of verse for over forty years.

Meanwhile another crisis arose at Langham Place when in November 1863 Emily Faithfull was named as an accomplice to adultery by Admiral Henry Codrington when he filed for divorce. Faithfull was a close friend of Codrington's wife, Helen, and had previously lived at the Codringtons' home. Bessie feared for the negative impact of an association between the *EWJ* and the likely scandal when Faithfull's name was linked to the forthcoming trial. She moved quickly: in December she ended the contract for the Victoria Press to print the *EWJ*. Emily Davies acted likewise, leaving the *Victoria Magazine* and ending her friendship with Faithfull.[53] Such caution was prudent. When the trial commenced in the summer of 1864, not only was Emily Faithfull accused by Henry Codrington of allowing his wife to meet her lover at her home but Helen, in a countersuit, denied adultery and alleged that her husband had raped Faithfull in the marital bed, a scandalous twist that ensured widespread press interest. Faithfull fled abroad to avoid being called to give evidence and the trial was suspended, although there were rumours in legal circles, passed on to Bessie by her father, that she was 'still in London in Male attire,' a reflection of suspicions circulating about the sexuality of this rather stout, unfeminine young woman.[54] When the trial resumed in November, Emily Faithfull retracted her sworn statement that Codrington had assaulted her. A *Times* report referred to a 'sealed packet' which Codrington had given his brother after Emily had been 'sent away' from his home, 'containing an explanation of the cause of her dismissal,' and there were widespread rumours that this letter contained an accusation that Helen Codrington and Emily had been caught in a sexual liaison.[55]

52. BRP, letter to BLS, May 18, 1863, GCPP Parkes 5/117. Lowndes states that *Ballads and Songs* 'sold only one hundred copies' but does not provide a source for this point. See Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies*, 71.
53. Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*: 203.
54. JP, letter to BRP, August 2, 1864, GCPP Parkes 2/80.
55. 'Codrington v. Codrington and Anderson,' *Times,* November 18, 1864, 8.

Emily Faithfull was clearly being used by both sides in the divorce for their own ends, and the truth of events remained uncertain, but her reputation was nevertheless damaged. The Victoria Press remained in business (and retained its Royal Warrant) and Emily continued to work for women's causes, but she was ostracised from Langham Place.[56] Joseph gave Bessie his legal and moral opinion on what he described as a 'dirty case' and the inadvisability of associating with someone who had 'publicly violated the great rules of morality.'[57] This time Bessie agreed with him. While she had loyally defended Marian Evans' unorthodox relationship with Lewes to her father, on the grounds that Marian's actions were moral according to her own principles, she had little sympathy for Emily's situation. Adelaide's dislike and mistrust of Emily may have played a part in Bessie's unwillingness to stand by her but, most importantly, her concern was focused on protecting the already beleaguered *EWJ* from further attack on the grounds of immorality.

In the face of such upheavals at Langham Place, Bessie looked to the women of the Catholic Church for models of effective co-operation. Her high regard for the work of Catholic sisterhoods centred on her view that their shared religious belief and subordination to God's will enabled them to work effectively together. Furthermore, her Dublin friendships with Ellen Woodlock and Sarah Atkinson provided her with further examples, alongside Adelaide, of lay Catholic women who were guided by their faith to help the needy and improve society.[58] In her review of the progress of the women's movement, written to mark six years of the *EWJ*, Bessie was careful to name individually many of the women whose

56. Martha Vicinus discusses the Codrington case and what it reveals about Victorian attitudes to marriage and female sexuality. See 'Lesbian Perversity and Victorian Marriage: The 1864 Codrington Divorce Trial,' *Journal of British Studies* 36, no. 1 (1997): 70-98, https://www.jstor.org/stable/175903. The case is also explored in fictional form in Emma Donoghue, *The Sealed Letter* (2008, repr. London: Picador, 2012).
57. JP, letter to BRP, August 2,1864, GCPP Parkes 2/80.
58. Bessie's daughter Marie described Atkinson as 'the saintly Irishwoman to whom [Bessie] owed her conversion.' MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 17.

work had contributed to the different 'branches' of the movement but she also stressed the difficulties of organising benevolent work along secular lines which, she argued, 'lack[ed] the fusing element' of people with a shared 'religious communion.'[59]

Bessie cited her admiration of the well-organised charitable institutions of the Catholic Church as its main attraction for her and she was clearly increasingly frustrated that the heterogeneous informal sisterhood of activists of which she was part did not share her vision of the *EWJ* as a 'moral engine' harnessing women's energies and talents for the good of society.[60] Yet ultimately it was deeply personal aspects of faith and her friendship with Adelaide which were most influential in Bessie's eventual decision to convert to Catholicism. Adelaide was ill for over a year with tuberculosis before she died in February 1864. Bessie, who had already witnessed at close hand her brother's decline and death from the same disease, tried to put aside her distress as she sat by her friend's bedside for many hours in her final weeks. To Barbara, Bessie described the dying Adelaide as serene and angelic. She stressed that Adelaide's was 'a calm & happy deathbed' as she resigned herself patiently to her suffering and gave those around her the strength to ensure their grief:

> Except the misery of being without her, there was nothing painful, & above all nothing bitter in this time. It was the death bed of ardent perfect faith, and a sort of radiance lingered round it, and round her to the very end. … [T]he darling child gave herself up wholly, those who loved her tried to take the blow in the same spirit.

Bessie tried to encourage others to take comfort, as she did, in the strength of Adelaide's faith in God's will and in a life after death:

> Dearest Barbara, it was the few who understood how my darling died, and in what spirit she met her last hour on earth that best made up their mind to let her go. Her own idea of life & death was thoroughly supernatural.
>
> I have tried hard to make everybody about us, about Langham Place[,] see & feel this; and not to treat it as a dreadful gloomy misfortune. I believe,

59. BRP, 'Review of the Last Six Years,' *EWJ,* February 1864, 368.
60. It was Adelaide Procter who defined Bessie's view of the *Journal* as a 'moral engine.' See APP, letter to BRP, July 4 [1861], GCPP Parkes 8/24.

> with the whole force of my soul, that she is with Jesus, & being with him is still closely linked up with his interests here. If I had looked at it in the natural way; simply death, removal into an unknown sphere, removed from us, the Church and Earth, the loss would have killed me. But I never could look at it except in the light of her own faith. And I thank God it is so!'[61]

Barbara, who struggled to maintain a belief in eternal life (particularly in the face of Marian Evans' intellectual certainty that death brought 'utter annihilation'), could not find comfort in Bessie's outlook. She told Bessie that 'Adelaide's death has come to me like an earthquake. … Death to me is so very dreadful, and hoping and believing in a future would not make it less so.'[62] Yet for Bessie this orthodox Christian concept offered consolation that she had not lost her dear friend completely. In addition, the Catholic Church's particular emphasis on commemorating the dead, by lighting candles and saying prayers for departed souls, provides tangible ways for the grieving to continue their relationship with a departed loved one. Alison Twells argues that such rituals were one factor in Mary Howitt's conversion to Catholicism in her old age, after the deaths of her husband, sister and eldest daughter; they likely provided similar comfort to Bessie in her grief.[63]

Adelaide's death had a profound impact on Bessie: she told Barbara that she felt as if a 'great chapter of my life were read and past' and another was about to begin.[64] This new chapter began with her decision to finally convert. She was baptized at St Mary Moorfields in July 1864, by Dr Daniel Gilbert, the founder of the Providence Row Night Refuge for women and children, and Adelaide's confessor. The Night Refuge, which was run by the Sisters of Mercy and to which Adelaide had donated the profits from her poetry volume *A Chaplet of Verses* (1862), was precisely the kind of practical philanthropy, supporting the

61. BRP, letter to BLS, 13 February 1864, GCPP Parkes 5/127.
62. Quoted in Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 207-10.
63. Alison Twells, ''The Innate Yearnings of Our Souls': Subjectivity, Religiosity and Outward Testimony in Mary Howitt's *Autobiography* (1889),' *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 17, No. 3 (2012): 325, https://doi.org/10.1080/13555502.2012.697742.
64. BRP, letter to BLS, April 7, 1864, GCPP Parkes 5/131.

most needy, which Bessie particularly admired in her new Church.

Bessie did not tell her parents of her baptism in advance and they were not present to witness it. Their responses to the news show their lack of surprise and their respect for the choice she had made. Although Eliza admitted she could not comprehend Bessie's perspective, she stressed her love for her daughter and sought assurance only that she was not about to abandon her and Joseph by entering a convent:

> I most affectionately and earnestly hope you may find help, strength and happiness in your present path. You have always been a good, dutiful, considerate and affectionate daughter to us. I am not afraid in that respect. Nor do I think you would enter on any vocation which would take you from us. That would indeed be a grief to me, and not like yourself. I could not spare you. Remember dear Bessie, I am not at all pained. We may all be as happy as we have been; you will not be a less good daughter to us, and we shall always love you as we have done. … Dear Bessie, you are very precious to me.[65]

Bessie was able to reassure her parents that she had no intention of leaving home unless she married. [66] To Barbara she stressed that she did not feel her new faith changed her outlook: 'I am not a renegade to any of my affections & interests … On the contrary I think I feel invigorated at being a member of a great community divided into several schools of thought, & with plenty of room to kick.'[67] Her letter on the subject to Mary Merryweather, in contrast, indicates her anxiety at how her devout Quaker friend would react:

> My darling Mary … I am now a member of the Church thee do not love. And … thou werest the one great pull on the other side – thou werest the only one of my friends who art a real Christian. If there were to be a shadow of real separation between us it would be a bitter grief to me.[68]

Perhaps for this reason, it was to Mary that Bessie confided the difficulties she had faced in her decision to convert, 'the strangest, the most intricate moral struggle in my inner soul.'

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65. EP to BRP, July 20, 1864, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into* Women, 146.
66. Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into* Women, 146.
67. BRP, letter to BLS, 1864[?], GCPP Parkes 5/132.
68. Quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 146.

She told Mary she felt it would have been wrong for her to 'waste' her life 'in unsettled beliefs and purposes' but she admitted that the decision had been 'a decided holding of my nose to the grindstone. … After I joined the Church it was months before I ceased to feel wretched in the new atmosphere.'[69] Her comment to Mary that 'I would far rather have remained a Freethinker …so far as this world's happiness goes,' points to Catholic doctrine on immortality and the afterlife as playing a significant part in her final decision.

Her friendships with Barbara and Mary survived their profound religious disagreements. However, her conversion strained her increasingly difficult relationship with Sam Blackwell, who, she told Mary, 'keeps worrying on about my religion, of which he thinks as ill as thee do!'[70] This disagreement played a part in Bessie's eventual termination of their engagement. Although she sought to keep her new religious affiliation a private matter, such a bold and controversial step for someone in the public eye was inevitably the subject of gossip. Robert Browning commented somewhat dismissively, 'Yes, Bessie Parkes "went over" after due hesitation and interesting struggle, and is now something or other that, it seems, she was not before, whatever amazement that may give to the world.'[71] Her new identity as a Catholic would affect how others viewed her, although she was at pains to stress that she had no interest in evangelising, nor did she judge others who did not share her faith.

Bessie rarely offered any explanation or defence of her decision to convert; when she did, she generally focused on practical aspects of the Church's work for the poor and suffering.

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69. BRP, letter to Mary Merryweather, June 1865, GCPP Parkes 6/89. Like Adelaide, Bessie's experience of her journey to conversion was not as a single moment of revelation; this echoes many accounts of conversions to Catholicism from this time which presented it as a period of 'prolonged and extensive self-examination and careful scrutiny of the Christian creed.' See Christine Bochen, quoted in Twells, 'The Innate Yearnings of Our Souls': 325.
70. BRP, letter to Mary Merryweather, March 2, 1865, GCPP Parkes 6/88.
71. Robert Browning, letter to Isa Blagden, January 19, 1865, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 146.

In 1875 she wrote 'I was haunted by the misery of the world. It was really and truly this, and only this, that gradually brought me into the Christian Fold; and it was the active, ordered charity of the Catholic Church which made me captive.'[72] Yet she also stated that 'I am strongly attached to Catholic worship in the service of the Mass' and her daughter recorded that she attended Mass regularly for the rest of her life, even as a 'very, very feeble' old lady 'in a bathchair.'[73] The rituals and community of the Catholic Church gave her spiritual succour in times of difficulty and a sense of connection to a faith with historic roots.

In addition to these influences on her religious outlook, consideration should also be given to her love, shared by many of her contemporaries, of Gothic architecture and the Victorian medievalism of Walter Scott, the Pre-Raphaelites and Tennyson. This made her aesthetically inclined towards Victorian Catholicism's harking-back to pre-Reformation forms of worship and ritual. One of her earliest published poems, 'The Cathedral,' presents the artistry of medieval cathedral architecture as divinely inspired 'sculptured song,' a symbol of the strength and longevity of the Christian faith. This poem was reprinted in most of her poetry volumes, indicating its lasting importance to her as an expression of her views on art and religion.[74] Her entry into the Roman Catholic Church gave her a spiritual connection to a past where art's primary purpose was to glorify God, as well as bringing her closer to the work of the Catholic men and women of her own day whose efforts to alleviate suffering were closely woven into the institutions of their Church.

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72. Quoted in MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc* (New York: P.J. Kenedy & Sons, 1956), 7.
73. Quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 147-8.
74. 'The Cathedral' was first published under the title 'A Translation of an Old English Thought' in the *Birmingham Journal,* January 5, 1850: 3. The poem was later included, with minor amendments, in four of Bessie's six published volumes of poetry. As a teenager Bessie had written, of Westminster Abbey (visible from her childhood bedroom window), 'Nowhere, perhaps, do the concentrated energies of Catholicism strike us more forcibly than in Westminster['s] cloisters, where the enormous pile towering above our heads shames us … for our lukewarm zeal.' See ERP [BRP], 'Westminster Cloisters,' *Hastings and St Leonards News*, August 11, 1848, 1.

Bessie had need of spiritual and physical succour immediately after Adelaide's death, as the stresses of recent months took their toll on her health. In March 1864, while visiting Merry Merryweather in Liverpool, Bessie contracted scarlet fever after visiting an emigrant ship. It was feared she might die and Mary set aside her work to nurse her.[75] The letters to Barbara which Bessie wrote during her convalescence indicate how weary she was with both work pressures and the responsibilities she felt for her family and friends. 'I find it a very hard moral problem to know how to apportion one's sympathy & help,' she wrote. 'I feel sometimes as if life were too heavy to be borne.'[76] However, she summarised, with bitter wit, the benefits of being in isolation with an infectious disease:

> This fever has dropped a dense veil between me and all my young women! Or middle aged women! And oh! How sick I am of them! I really laugh to myself as I sit reading Ivanhoe, & think that good little Miss Lewin can[']t get at me to torture me by hugging me & talking at me! And that worthy ED [Emily Davies] can[']t write me letters about those awful University Examinations, which I certainly couldn't pass; … – and that nothing can worry me about matrons, schools, workhouses, asylums, the Poles, the Italians, the epileptic idiots, the wounded Danes, governesses, social science, nurses, temperance, Sunday Leagues, cruelty to animals! Ugh!
>
> I need at least 2 years without hearing a word or writing a line on any one of these topics. The very fibres of my brain relating to … these subjects are all unstrung.[77]

Yet only a fortnight later she was writing to express her outrage at renewed discussions on the possible closure of the *EWJ*. She remained determined that she would not allow the Company to 'bury it like a veteran pioneer, with a salvo over its grave' and planned, if necessary, to get the *Journal* signed over to her sole ownership.[78]

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75. MBL, *I Too Have Lived in Arcadia,* 18-19. Mary Merryweather blamed Bessie's heavy workload for weakening her health and leaving her vulnerable to infection. Mary Howitt, however, felt that the underlying cause was Bessie's grief for Adelaide.
76. BRP, letter to BLS, March 20, 1864, GCPP Parkes 5/130.
77. BRP, letter to BLS, March 16, 1864, GCPP Parkes 5/129.
78. BRP, letter to BLS, April 7, 1864, GCPP Parkes 5/131.

Before her illness Bessie had been involved in establishing a new monthly periodical which would take a different approach to promoting the women's movement. The *Alexandra Magazine*, named after the Princess of Wales, echoed the *Victoria* not only in its regal title, but also in placing more emphasis on fiction and poetry alongside articles on women's employment and benevolent societies. Selling at 6d per issue, half the price of the *EWJ*, it was aimed at attracting a much wider readership. The first number of the *Alexandra* appeared in May 1864; this included 'Letters to Women on Money-Earning,' signed by Bessie, the first of a series of articles addressed directly to women looking to find paid employment, providing practical advice and encouragement.[79] Another attempt was made to improve the EWJ Company's finances, with a new share issue in May 1864, but after less than a third of the new 1200 shares were sold, Bessie arranged to take over the entire management of the *Journal* and amalgamate it with the *Alexandra*.[80]

The first number of the *Alexandra Magazine and Englishwoman's Journal* (*AMEJ*) appeared in September 1864, headed by Bessie's article 'The Use of a Special Periodical.' Here she reiterated her belief in the continued importance of a specialist title as a 'rallying point' for the 'separate parts' of the women's movement and expressed her hope that the newly combined title would 'reach many homes into which the *Englishwoman's Journal* could not penetrate.' The article also indicates how Bessie's views on women's work had shifted in recent years. She now considered 'the open possibility of intellectual advancement and creative toil,' while important, as realistic for only a minority of women and regarded 'the duties and happiness of domestic life' as the 'ideal lot' for the majority. She acknowledged that women's philanthropic work was an area of contention 'among

79. BRP, 'Letters to Women on Money-Earning,' *Alexandra Magazine* May 1864, 54-7. Bessie also wrote a second instalment of these 'Letters,' focused on 'Business,' which appeared in the June 1864 number, before further 'Letters' in later numbers were signed by others, including 'Asterisk' (Elizabeth Eiloart).
80. Rendall, 'A Moral Engine?,' 133.

friends of the cause' but argued that 'the close *solidarité* between the different parts of the population' meant that '*the* natural channel for most women of the upper class is that of helping the poor' and that the capabilities of these women were better applied to supervisory and leadership roles in workhouses, hospitals and prisons than in the pursuit of individual artistic or professional fulfilment. Echoing the founding principles of *EWJ* as appealing to 'all women who are actively engaged in any labour of brain or hand,' she argued it was 'comparatively useless' to address only the interests of those women 'who enjoy education, or who depend on their intellects rather than on manual toil, for physical sustenance.'[81] She hoped that the wider appeal and low price of the new magazine would help consolidate the cross-class '*solidarité*' of working women. It was not successful, however, and in 1866 Jessie Boucherett took control of the title and relaunched it as the *Englishwoman's Review*, which ran until 1903.

Bessie's involvement in the *AMEJ* was far less extensive than her years of dedicated work for the *EWJ*. Adelaide's death and her subsequent illness had forced her to slow down, and she had promised Mary Merryweather that she would reduce her workload and take greater care over her health.[82] She was also growing disillusioned with life as a public figure. To Barbara she confessed that

> I never see "Miss Bessie Parkes" in print without a nervous pang of disgust, and many causes have conspired to make me feel that for the last 2 or 3 years, every fresh appearance thereof is an injury and not a help to the real influence I might exercise in future years.
> … Don't be disgusted at me my darling, I am quite at the far end, after 6 years of unceasing anxiety, and publicity which I should never have had the courage to encounter if I had foreseen it.[83]

81. BRP, 'The Use of a Special Periodical,' *AMEJ*, September 1864, 257-263. Other signed works by Bessie which appeared in the *AMEJ* were 'A Cottage in a Wood,' October 1864, 336-50; 'The Unveiling of the Statue of Theobald Mathew' [poem], November 1864, 419-20; 'Two Poets,' December 1864, 485-94; 'At a Nurses' Training School,' February 1865, 65-71.
82. MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 19.
83. BRP, letter to BLS, August 28, 1863, GCPP Parkes 5/122.

One example of the 'disgust' she felt at the public evocation of her name was her anger when reports reached her, during her convalescence, that a stranger was spreading false reports of meeting her at the Mayfair home of a Dr Priestley:

> What do you think Meggie Howitt writes to her mother[?] That a Professor Ernst in Sweden, relates his "English Experiences" & says Dr Priestley invited him to meet Miss Mulock & Miss BRP. Miss Mulock he thought looked too delicate to write even a small volume, but Miss Parkes looked strong enough to write large volumes!!! And was "so independent" said "Oh, I can call a cab for myself." Now I never saw Professor Ernst; never spent an evening at Dr P's, or with Miss Mulock. Should never dream of leaving Hertford St Mayfair alone after dark; & finally I look quite as delicate as Miss Mulock![84]

Bessie surmised that Ernst must have met Emily Faithfull. Despite her usually good sense of humour, she was not amused by this case of mistaken identity, a reflection of the low spirits her illness had brought about. She declared 'it really is abominable to have a stupid foreigner mistaking some big strapping woman for me, & telling the story in the literary circles of Sweden!' Her upset reflected her antipathy towards Emily and sensitivity about the way her name was appropriated. 'You know,' she wrote, 'how I hate & detest the "Bessie Rayner Parkes" aspect & what pains I take to seclude myself from it.'[85]

Worn down by such slights and with the failure of the *AMEJ*, she confided in Barbara that she did not want to feel that so many years of hard work had come to nothing.[86] She was also aware that her views on women's work set her apart from many of the women she had worked so closely with at Langham Place, including Barbara, who were sceptical about the model of women's labour promoted by unpaid philanthropic and religious workers. Furthermore, Bessie's concern now lay more with the suffering of working-class women and their families, which distanced her from those aspects of the women's movement which

84. BRP, letter to BLS, March 16, 1864, GCPP Parkes 5/129. Dinah Mulock, later Craik (1826 -1887) was a novelist and poet.
85. Ibid.
86. MBL, 'Prelude to Arcadia,' cited in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 36.

were focused on gaining entry for middle-class women into higher education and the professions.

Her *Essays on Women's Work*, a compilation of some of her *EWJ* articles published in 1865, reflect her mixed feelings on the subject. She accepted that many women needed to be able to support themselves financially and had long asserted that all girls and women needed an education that would prepare them to do so, as well as decent working conditions and fair pay in a wider range of occupations. However, she now stated that she had been 'far from contemplating the mass of women becoming bread-winners to a greater extent than at present obtains.' She regarded the present crisis in women's employment as a temporary difficulty, created by the rise of industrialisation, and thought the English factory system unnatural, 'especially in the employment of married women away from their homes.'[87] Her observations of the lives of working-class girls and women across Britain, facilitated by her friendships with Mary Merryweather and Sarah Atkinson, led her to believe that more could be done to train such women in domestic skills and enable wives to stay at home, 'employed in the noble duties of the Christian household,' which she regarded as 'the primary unit in social organisation.'[88]

For Bessie, there was a world of difference between a woman following a religious, intellectual or artistic vocation, which she accepted as a noble principle for a minority, and labour for low pay and in poor conditions, which was the lot of the majority of working

87. BRP, *Essays on Women's Work* (London: Alexander Strahan, 2nd edition 1866), 218.
88. BRP, *Essays on Women's Work*, 221-2. Sonia Rose points out that 'Employers… structured factory jobs as though they were to be held by people without household responsibilities, and certainly by nonmothers - that is, by men. … As a consequence, mothering and breadwinning were oppositional constructs, both in their ideological representation and in the ways they were organised socially.' See Rose, *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Routledge, 1992), 76. Bessie's concern for the domestic lives of factory workers demonstrates her awareness of this incompatibility between factory work and domestic responsibilities but she did not consider exploring how changes to either the factory system or the gendered balance of domestic work might address this problem.

women. Her *Essays* reflected her conflicted views. She championed women's abilities in a wide range of industries and professions and promoted co-operation as a way for women without access to capital to establish themselves in business. Yet she also hoped for a reform of society where Christian morality would eliminate the human suffering industrialisation had created, to 'harmonise the laws of economy with the laws of the gospel.'[89] Such sentiments show Bessie's sympathy with the ideas of Christian Socialism and the extent to which she had become sceptical of the liberal individualism of her upbringing.

Despite these shifts in her religious outlook and political priorities, Bessie remained committed to the principles of women's equality. She supported John Stuart Mill's campaign to be elected to Parliament in 1865 on a platform of votes for women, riding with Emily Davies, Isa Craig and Barbara in a carriage displaying his placards.[90] The following year, when the Reform Bill raised the prospect of an extension to the male franchise, she worked on the committee to organise a petition to Parliament calling for it to 'consider the expediency of providing for the representation of all householders, without distinction of sex.' This petition, which gathered the signatures of 1,499 from across the country, failed; however, it marked the effective starting point of the women's suffrage campaign in Britain, which continued until the passing of the Equal Franchise Act in 1928.[91] Bessie was following once again in her father's footsteps as a campaigner for political reform. Joseph's sudden death from pneumonia in August 1865 freed her from his sometimes overbearing paternal care, but she paid affectionate tribute to his best qualities as a public servant and a

89. BRP, *Essays on Women's Work*, 228.
90. Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 216.
91. Crawford, *Women's Suffrage Movement:* x; 'Suffrage Stories/ Collecting Suffrage: The 1866 Women's Suffrage Petition' (blog), June 7, 2016, https://womanandhersphere.com/2015/09/15/suffrage-storiescollecting-suffrage-countdown-to-12-october-and-release-of-the-film-suffragette-the-1866-womens-suffrage-petition/ (accessed 30 October 2018). The other committee members were Barbara Bodichon, Emily Davies, Jessie Boucherett, Elizabeth Garrett and Jane Crow. For a detailed analysis of the significance of the petition and its signatories, see Dingsdale, 'Generous and Lofty Sympathies.'

private man in the epitaph she wrote for his grave.[92] His death, coming so soon after Adelaide's, reinforced the sense that her life was in transition.

§

By 1866 Bessie had spent more than a decade at the centre of the British women's movement, during which time she had become a well-known name and had gained considerable expertise as a campaigning journalist, editor and orator. However this high-profile life came at a price: ill-health, a loss of privacy and hurtful public attacks. The *EWJ*, to which she had devoted so much time and effort, had laid the foundations for the women's movement of later decades, but she had been forced to concede that it reached the end of its usefulness. Her literary career had also failed to flourish as she had hoped and her cherished friendship with Barbara was strained as their political and religious views diverged.

If she doubted how worthwhile her efforts had been, she might have taken comfort from a profile of her which appeared in a magazine entitled, somewhat ironically, *Portraits of Men of Eminence in Literature, Science and Art,* which included this eulogy:

> It may ... be safely averred that whatever liberty woman has acquired, within the last nine years, to pursue, free from ridicule and obloquy, the honourable career of usefulness for which she may feel herself qualified, whether in works of benevolence or of intellect; whatever recognition she has been able to secure of her right to pursue the studies tending most fully to develop her intellectual organisation … will have been due eminently … to the labours of this lady. With the name of Miss Parkes had been especially associated the ridicule and obloquy unsparingly heaped upon this most important movement; with her name, therefore, will be associated, as is but right, when the history of this movement comes to be written, the honour and the credit which will then have attached to it.[93]

92. Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 165-6.
93. Edward Walford, 'Bessie Rayner Parkes,' *Portraits of Men of Eminence,* 46. This article was mentioned, and the above quotation reproduced, in the *Victoria Magazine*, June 1866, 192.

Bessie was one of only seven women to appear in this magazine during its six-year run, alongside male luminaries including Dickens and Darwin. This portrait of 1866 marks the highpoint of her years as a public figure, an indication of her significance to the women's movement and the society of the day. The following year she chose to step away from this life almost completely.

Chapter 6 1866-1880: Finding and losing Arcadia

> In the last summer of my mother's life, I was sitting with her on the lawn of her cottage in Sussex, when she said suddenly: 'I always feel it is wrong to repine as life goes on, for I can always say to myself, "I too have lived in Arcadia". … I mean the five years with your father, and the further nine summers I spent with his mother, at La Celle St. Cloud.'
>
> Marie Belloc Lowndes, Foreword to *I Too Have Lived in Arcadia: A Record of Love & Childhood* (1941).

By early 1867 Bessie's professional life looked very different from the work as a writer and campaigner for the women's movement which had filled her previous decade. After the folding of the *AMEJ* and her contribution to the women's suffrage petition she had taken on no further campaigning roles. Instead she had returned to her literary writing, publishing poems and articles in a range of periodicals.[1] These continued to reflect travel as an important inspiration for her writing, with specific locations in Ireland, France and Italy forming much of the subject-matter.

The titles in which Bessie published were prime examples of the proliferation in this period of literary periodicals aimed at a broad middle-class readership. The *Argosy* was established in 1865 by publisher Alexander Strahan with Isa Craig as its first editor. It attempted to compete with the well-established *Cornhill Magazine* in producing poetry and literary prose accompanied by high quality illustrations, and it quickly established a strong reputation,

1. I have identified the following signed periodical publications by Bessie during 1864-7. (This obviously does not preclude the possibility of further works which I have not yet discovered, particularly as some of these may have been published anonymously.) 'The Legend of Limerick Bells' *The Month* [July] 1864; 'Fontainebleau' [poem], *Good Words,* January 1864; 'New Year's Eve and New Year's Day' [poem], *The Month,* January 1865; 'Pen and Ink Sketches in France,' *The Month*, May 1865; 'Letters from the West of Ireland,' *The Month*, June 1865; 'The Land of Gossip,' *Argosy*, February 1866; 'A Highland Romance' [poem], *Good Words,* February 1, 1866; 'A Day at Abbeville' *Once a Week,* May 1866; 'Cardinal Tosti' *Once a Week,* June 1866; 'The Campagna of Roma' [poem], *Good Words,* August 1, 1866; 'An Old French City,' *Argosy* August 1866; 'Battle Abbey,' *Once a Week,* October 1866; 'The Excavations at Ostia,' *Gentleman's Magazine,* October 1866; 'For Ladies Only,' *Once a Week,* November 1866; 'On the Bridge at Poissy' [poem], *Argosy,* December 1866; 'The Fountain of Guingamp,' *Argosy*, February 1867.

securing contributors including Christina Rossetti and Margaret Oliphant. Bessie's work for the *Argosy*, presumably facilitated by her association with Isa Craig, shows Bessie's interest in pursuing literary writing as a commercial occupation. The importance to Bessie of her religious faith is reflected in her decision to publish work in *Good Words* and *The Month,* two devotional periodicals of the day. *Good Words*, another of Strahan's publications, was a non-denominational Christian title containing a mix of secular and religious pieces suitable for family Sunday reading. *The Month* was a specifically Catholic publication established in 1864.[2] Other contributors to early editions of *The Month* included the novelist Georgiana Fullerton, another convert to Catholicism, with whom Bessie established a friendship. Bessie's friendship network increasingly included Catholic women, several of them writers with a keen interest, like Bessie, in literature and social reform, such as Julia Pitt Byrne.[3]

Bessie's only contribution to the *Englishwoman's Review*, which Jessie Boucherett established out of the *AMEJ*, was an article for its first number, delineating the great variety of female characters in literature and history.[4] In 1866 she also published *Vignettes*, a collection of twelve of her biographical sketches of women from the *EWJ*. This volume, like her *Englishwoman's Review* article, reflected Bessie's interest in the diversity of women's lives and achievements, and, alongside her *Essays on Women's Work* of the same year, showed her continued commitment to the cause of improving the status of her sex. Like other collective biographies of women, a genre popular since the mid-eighteenth

2. The founding editor of *The Month*, Frances Margaret Taylor, was a Catholic convert who later became a nun.
3. Byrne, who became a close friend of Bessie's, was the author of a series of (anonymously published) titles, including travel writing and examinations of society's treatment of the poor and insane. See Rosemary Mitchell, 'Byrne [née Busk], Julia Clara (1819–1894), author.' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.* 23 Sep. 2004, accessed 14 Jan. 2021, https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-4271.
4. BRP, 'Types of Character,' *Englishwoman's Review,* October 1866, 5-12.

century, Bessie was using the form to 'support a diffuse argument about women's contributions to the progress of the world.'[5] The subjects of *Vignettes* encompassed women from across Europe and America, covering a timespan from the seventeenth century to Bessie's contemporary moment, and included writers, artists, religious figures and reformers. In her preface, Bessie commented: 'There is a moral in [these women's] utter dissimilarity which I leave to the intelligent reader; but of every one of them it may truly be said that she did worthy work in the world.' [6] Doing 'worthy work in the world' continued to be the driving aim of Bessie's own life, but she took a broad view of what this encompassed and sought to challenge narrow gendered stereotypes of what women might strive to achieve.

Bessie's private life also underwent significant change during this period. In the years after Sam Blackwell's proposal in 1854, plans for their marriage had been postponed by Bessie's hesitancy, Sam's financial difficulties and Joseph's objections. In addition, as Bessie's professional life in London became more established, she found it difficult to see how it could be combined with marriage to a man who was tied by business and family to the Midlands - and she was not prepared to give up her life to fit into his:

> I cannot leave London or its neighbourhood, for a time of which I now see no limits. … As to travelling up [to London] 2 days a week, no married woman could do it. Suppose I had children - babies - [.] The idea is absurd on the surface. If anybody travels it must be the man.[7]

Again she defied convention, by conceiving of marriage as a partnership where the man might be required to compromise to support his wife's career, rather than a woman being

5. Booth, *How to Make It as a Woman*, 57.
6. BRP, *Vignettes,* vi. The subjects of the sketches are the Russian-born Parisian salon hostess Sophie Swetchine; Soeur Rosalie (Jeanne Rendu), a leading figure in the Parisian Sisters of Charity's reforms of care for the poor; the French educationalist Marie Pape-Carpantier; the artist Elisa de Lamartine; Eugénie Luce of Algiers; Margaret Windthrop, wife of the first Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in New England; Cornelia Knight, writer and lady companion to Princess Charlotte of Wales; Italian artist and writer Bianca Milesi Mojon; artist Mary Delany; American sanitary reformer Harriot K. Hunt; Methodist preacher Mary Bosanquet Fletcher; and Bessie's mentor, the art historian Anna Jameson.
7. BRP, letter to BLS, October 19, 1859, GCPP Parkes 5/93.

expected to devote herself to her husband's concerns. The increasingly dire state of Sam's business dealings prevented him moving to London, which in turn reinforced both Joseph's opposition and Bessie's determination to proceed. She told Mary Merryweather that her father 'says to me "at least wait a year & see how Mr B gets on". But I simply told him I would not. … I expect we shall just have to settle the wedding day, and carry it out without referring further to my father.'[8]

In June 1865 Sam agreed to her ultimatum that she would marry him only if he would 'settle in London and devote himself wholly to professional earnings.' However, behind Bessie's pursual of this plan was the influence of Sam's brother, Kenyon, who told Bessie that Sam's business difficulties had been 'very hard' and he would only be able to 'right himself' with Bessie's support. She therefore felt obliged to go ahead with the marriage, commenting fatalistically to Mary Merryweather 'I don't see what else to do than I have done; and after all we may all of us be killed in a railway accident, and there will be an end of it!'[9] Such sentiments did not bode well and, despite her insistence to her father that they would marry, to Mary she admitted doubts about whether they were well-suited. Sam disapproved of her Catholicism and she declared that although she held 'a very sincere and strong regard for him … if he worries me I wish him at Jericho. That ain't promising, is it!'[10] Such doubts were reinforced by Barbara's insistence that the marriage would be a mistake: 'How can you dare to think of marrying him,' she asked Bessie, 'when you know quite well you don't love him?'[11] Rumours that Sam gambled and kept a mistress may also have reached Bessie.[12]

8. BRP, letter to Mary Merryweather, December 9, 1864, GCPP Parkes 6/87.
9. BRP, letter to Mary Merryweather, June 1865, GCPP Parkes 6/89.
10. BRP, letter to Mary Merryweather, March 2, 1865, GCPP Parkes 6/88.
11. BLS, quoted in MBL, *I Too have Lived*, 18.
12. Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 156.

Not surprisingly then, in November 1865 Bessie wrote to Mary:

> My darling, I have broken off my engagement with SHB. I couldn't stand his way of going on; … He is a very good kind man and sincerely fond of me I know; but somehow his blessed self seems a sort of pivot for him … I know if we were to marry I should be perpetually knocking myself against the "Mountainous Me".[13]

It seems that only after her father's sudden death, in August of the same year, was Bessie able to admit the relationship had no future. While Joseph was alive she had remained loyal to Sam, out of affection and pity, as well as stubborn determination not to cede to her father's judgement. Once freed from Joseph's disapproval she realised she could not marry a man who would not leave her free to follow her own conscience. Much as she regretted causing Sam pain, the decision was a relief: Marian Lewes reported to Barbara that Bessie now appeared 'bright and happy, and courageous in the hope of working with her pen so as to eke out her income.'[14]

Bessie had many single female friends who demonstrated that one could lead a happy, fulfilling life as an unmarried woman and she harboured no ambition to find another fiancé. According to her daughter Marie, she turned down several offers of marriage during and immediately after the years she was involved with Sam, including from the academic and politician Henry Fawcett. Although Fawcett shared many of her political and intellectual interests, including women's rights (and she later described him to her granddaughter as 'one of the best looking young men she had ever known'[15]) she expressed delight at news of his engagement to Millicent Garrett, telling Barbara she felt she and he 'would never had done together.'[16] Another offer came from an English MP Bessie met in Rome in 1866, who proposed several times and of whom Eliza highly approved. Marie (who did not name

13. BRP, letter to Mary Merryweather, November 1865, GCPP Parkes 6/91.
14. ME, quoted in Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 234.
15. BRP, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 158-9.
16. BRP, letter to BLS, 1864[?], GCPP Parkes 5/132.

the man in question) believed Bessie's decision to refuse this proposal was to avoid being caught up once again in the world of Westminster politics and being pressurised into resuming her campaigning work.[17]

Bessie now looked forward to continuing her professional life as a writer yet she was also mindful of her responsibilities as the sole surviving child of her aging, widowed mother. After Joseph's death Bessie spent more time at home with her mother than she had done for many years. This gave her a taste of the future that lay ahead of her as companion to a woman who had limited understanding of her outlook on life and whose social circle was very different to her own.[18] Her friendship with Barbara was also strained by problems in the Bodichon marriage. Eugène had never attempted to learn English and when they were in England Barbara increasingly relied upon Bessie, who spoke much better French than Barbara or her other English friends, to keep her husband company. Bessie complained to Eliza she felt 'forced' to stay with the couple whenever Barbara invited her to her Sussex home, Scalands Gate, and she felt uncomfortable acting as a 'cushion' between them.[19]

Nevertheless, in the spring of 1867 Bessie agreed to meet Barbara in Paris, to accompany her back to England. Barbara had recently been ill with typhoid and chose to convalesce away from the heat of the Algerian summer, leaving Eugène behind in Algiers. Barbara could not face returning immediately to her busy English life and suggested she and Bessie send their maids home and find somewhere near Paris where the two of them might stay for a few weeks.[20] Despite the increasingly divergent paths their lives were taking, it is a testament to their friendship that Barbara chose Bessie as her companion when she was

17. MBL, *I Too have Lived*, 18, 40.
18. MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 36-7.
19. Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 230.
20. Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 233.

unwell. They sought advice on where to stay from their Parisian friend, the English-born salon hostess Mary Elizabeth Mohl, who showed them an advertisement for a chalet to let at La Celle St. Cloud, a village just outside Versailles. The chalet was part of the home of Louise Swanton Belloc, another friend of Madame Mohl, who was the widow of the artist Jean-Hilaire Belloc. Barbara had happy memories of studying at Belloc's studio in Paris and was keen to meet his wife, so she and Bessie set out to visit Madame Belloc the following day. Thus, through a series of chance events, Bessie encountered for the first time a place and a family which would change her life forever.[21]

The Belloc home, just outside La Celle St. Cloud, was in a remote and tranquil location, bordered by the parkland attached to the Chateau de Beauregard on one side and woodland on the other. The chalet, close to the main house, was a small and simple wooden building, its two bedrooms only accessible via an exterior staircase. Bessie later described it as 'such a queer little place, just like a house in a fairy tale.[22] It was a peaceful spot for Barbara to recuperate and for Bessie to briefly escape her life in England. Barbara and Bessie were enchanted by the chalet and agreed to lease it for six weeks.

Not least of the location's attractions for Bessie was the company of their hostess. The recently widowed Louise Swanton Belloc was the daughter of an Irish father and a French mother. She was a well-respected writer, admired by Stendhal and Victor Hugo, and her translations into French of works by writers including Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell were highly regarded. She was proud of her Irish heritage (although she never visited the country) and took particular interest in translating Irish writers such as Oliver

21. The main archival source for information about Bessie's visit to La Celle St. Cloud and subsequent events in her life up to 1878 is MBL's memoir *I Too Have Lived in Arcadia.* This is the source for factual information given in this chapter on these events unless otherwise stated, while commentary on them is mine.
22. MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 64.

Goldsmith and Maria Edgeworth, for whom she was the only authorised French translator. Aged seventy-one when Bessie first met her, she still supported herself through her writing and kept up a keen interest in literature, particularly poetry, and politics. As her friendship with Mary Mohl indicates, she maintained connections with Parisian salon culture which she had first established before her marriage.[23] Bessie therefore had much in common with Louise in their shared love of literature, their interest in Ireland, their profession as published writers and their Catholic faith. Their political outlooks were also similarly radical and Louise shared Bessie's dedication to the cause of women's rights. She had even subscribed for a time to the *EWJ*.[24]

Despite its quiet location, life at the Belloc home was pleasantly sociable. Bessie and Barbara were often invited to dine with the family and their dinner guests, where they discussed literature, art and politics. Bessie particularly enjoyed conversations with Louise and her lifelong friend and writing collaborator, Adelaide de Montgolfier, who spent summers with Louise. The elderly Adelaide, the daughter of the inventor of the hot-air balloon, revealed that her father's innovation had been inspired by reading Joseph Priestley's work on gases, information which delighted Bessie. However, it was only ten days into her stay that she first met Louise's son. Louis was a year younger than Bessie and had lived with his parents ever since an inflammation of the brain had ended his career as a lawyer thirteen years previously. He appeared very reticent, rarely participating in conversation with his mother's guests, although when he did speak he was 'often shrewd,

23. Raphaël Ingelbien, 'An Irish Diasporic Translator: Louise Swanton Belloc and the Diffusion of Irish Writing in Nineteenth-Century France,' *Translation Studies*, 13:2 (2020): 139-43, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/10.1080/14781700.2020.1736136; Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 173-7.

24. A letter from Louise Swanton Belloc (March 4, 1862, GCPP Parkes 4/44) presumably to the office of the *EWJ*, requested a termination of her subscription to the *EWJ* due to financial constraints. Although Louise's father-in-law had made (and then lost) a fortune as a sugar plantation owner in the Caribbean, she and her husband supported the abolitionist movement. Louise translated *Uncle Tom's Cabin* into French and the couple developed a close friendship with the novel's writer, Harriet Beecher Stowe and her husband. Louise's translation remained in print until 1913. See MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 45; Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women,* 178.

and even wise.'[25] Therefore Bessie was surprised when he joined her on a woodland walk and proved to be a lively companion for the afternoon, conversing with her about his family, to whom he was clearly close. This seems to have been the only occasion when Bessie was alone with Louis during her stay. She and Barbara headed back to Paris a few weeks later, Bessie having agreed to return to visit Louise again in the autumn.

It was therefore a shock to Barbara when Bessie announced, on their journey home, that she intended to marry Louis Belloc, particularly as she admitted Louis had not actually proposed to her. This confidence was vindicated, however, as Bessie soon received a letter from Louis which confirmed his feelings. The suddenness of this relationship worried Barbara, who suspected the influence of Louis's mother. However, Louise knew nothing until Bessie wrote to tell her, whereupon she sent Bessie a long letter expressing her surprise, and her fear that to marry the invalid Louis would be a 'sacrifice' Bessie might come to regret. 'You do not really know Louis,' she wrote, 'and so you cannot realize, as I do, that … he now lacks all initiative. Any woman who married him would have to lavish on him the affection of a mother, as well as that of a wife.'[26] Nevertheless, she agreed to Bessie returning to La Celle the following month, when she spent time getting to know her better. Much as she liked Bessie and could see how happy Louis was, Louise remained fearful their proposed marriage was misguided. On the advice of her sons-in-law, she asked Louis to seek a medical opinion. The doctor he consulted advised strongly against the marriage, warning Louis he could never father children.[27] In the light of this advice, Louis wrote to Bessie to release her from the engagement. In her memoir, Marie commented that

25. MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 25.
26. Louise Swanton Belloc (LSB), quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 32.
27. Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 183. It was possibly feared that Louis might be not only sterile but impotent.

Bessie, who kept all her letters, must have destroyed this one, 'but fifty years later she told [Marie] she remembered he had used in it the phrase: "*C'était un trop beau rêve.*"'[28]

Bessie's response was typical of her quiet determination when she was sure of her feelings. She told Louis, in her typically unconventional way, that she had never desired children, nor had much to do with them, and she still wished to marry Louis if he felt the same. This was enough to satisfy Louis and his family but Bessie now had to contend with her own mother's opposition to her marrying a man Eliza had never met, particularly as it would mean Bessie leaving to live abroad. Eliza feared Bessie would be 'very isolated' living with the Bellocs and wanted reassurance her daughter actually loved Louis.[29] Bessie dismissed as 'ridiculous' the idea of being 'in love' at her age but she stressed she had formed a sincere attachment to Louis. She told Eliza she had found her 'true sphere, and a lasting affection' and she trusted she was being guided by 'Providence.'[30] To Mary Merryweather she wrote that Louis was 'tall, handsome, and companionable' and 'meets all my sympathies in a wonderful way.'[31] Frustrated by Eliza's continued misgivings about the wedding, she asked Mary 'to tell anyone you think ought to be told, of my coming marriage.'[32] The wedding had originally been planned for the following spring, but the couple brought it forward to September, to put an end to the matter.

This decision gave Barbara a sense of urgency in trying to prevent what she believed would be a grave mistake for both Bessie and Louis. She wrote to Louise to express her disapproval of 'this hasty marriage,' stating Bessie was 'far too nervous and too delicate to

28. Translation: It was a too beautiful dream. MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 51-2.
29. MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 47.
30. BRP, quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived,* 46.
31. BRP, quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 49.
32. BRP, quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 53.

undertake married life' particularly given the 'unusual difficulties' created by Louis's ill-health. She further claimed:

> *She* is unaware of it, but *I* know that in time she will feel intensely the abandonment of all she has gained by her noble life of work for others in England. She has built up, though she may not be conscious of it, a position of great distinction. All this she now proposed to give up, apparently without a thought. … I beg you earnestly to ask her to pause, and to think, even now, well over what she is about to do. …
>
> Still, as Bessie knows, I feel that I am her sister, and, as I am constant in my relations, if she marries Monsieur Belloc, then I shall consider him exactly as I should do were he in truth my brother-in-law. And I am not going to tell any one but Bessie and you what I think.[33]

Barbara's letter shows a sincere concern for Bessie and her sense of sisterly obligation to do what she felt was right to protect her happiness. Bessie, to whom Barbara sent a copy of the letter, was deeply hurt. Barbara's actions stood in stark contrast to the unwavering support Bessie had given her in her relationships with both John Chapman and Eugène Bodichon. She had trusted Barbara to make her own choices and helped her overcome her family's objections to her marriage. Not only did Barbara not return this trust, she displayed a lack of understanding of Bessie's feelings about her current life and her desires for her future. Barbara's assumption that Bessie would come to regret leaving behind her life in England did not acknowledge the extent to which Bessie had become weary and disillusioned with being a public figure or her conviction that she could be content living a modest life in a quiet French village. Bessie had no doubts she was making the right choice, and that she and Louis could make a happy, successful life together in La Celle. It was a choice she made as much with her head as her heart and she was not going to be dissuaded from it.

33. BLS, quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 56-7.

Barbara's letter caused Louise consternation, as she had not appreciated the celebrated life Bessie was leaving behind her in England. She too found it hard to believe a woman who had spent so many years establishing herself as a leading public figure could be happy to leave England to be the wife of an invalid. She assumed Bessie was motivated by 'generous impulse to make an unhappy man happy' without properly considering her own happiness.[34] As Barbara requested, she once again encouraged Bessie to reconsider, while reassuring Barbara that, should the marriage take place, Bessie would 'find in me a strong maternal affection, and in my son a rare tenderness and devotion.'[35] In the face of the couple's continued determination, objections to the marriage were eventually set aside: Barbara hosted Louise and Louis at her London home and Eliza warmly welcomed her new son into the family. The wedding took place on 19th September 1867 at the Catholic church of St. James's in Spanish Place, near the Parkes' family home. After the wedding breakfast at Wimpole Street, the couple travelled to Paris for their honeymoon.

Bessie was confident Eliza would warm to Louis, telling her 'You have always liked men far more than I have done, and he really *is* a charming man.'[36] Eliza told her brother-in-law she found Louis 'quiet and pleasing' and 'his attitude to Bessie impresses me as being as near perfection as it could be.'[37] Bessie had chosen to marry a reserved, unassuming man who lived a quiet domestic life - someone very different to the ambitious men of business and politics of her London social circle. Louis had grown up in the heart of a close-knit family, with two much-loved sisters and a mother who had worked hard throughout his childhood to earn money for their family through her pen. It was therefore likely he would

34. LSB, quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 59, 60-1.
35. LSB, quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*: 60.
36. BRP, quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*: 44.
37. EP, quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*: 62.

respect the importance for Bessie of her writing career and share her enjoyment of female company.

Marie's account of her parents' courtship and marriage depicts the growth of their gentle and deep affection for each other, and also shows Louis letting Bessie take the lead in decision-making. Bessie had found a husband free of that 'Mountainous Me' which had soured her relationship with Sam Blackwell. Yet at the same time she had chosen to leave the high-profile world of public campaigning, which had once been the focus of her ambitions, to devote herself to helping her husband make the most of his life. She knew Louis desired to re-establish an independent life for himself but had acquiesced to his mother's pleas to remain at home where she could look after him. Bessie was certain she could help him break free of his mother's constraining love and find his own place in the world. As she told Mary Merryweather, 'From now on the main object of my life will be to make him, and every one round him, forget [his illness] as much as possible.'[38]

After a few days in Paris, the newly-weds returned to La Celle. They temporarily lived in the main house with Louise and her servants, while the chalet was being refurbished for them, as they could not afford to establish a separate home for themselves. Since her father's death Bessie had received an allowance of £100 a year from her uncle Josiah Parkes and another £100 from her mother.[39] As Louis did not work, and the Bellocs were not wealthy, these funds formed the bulk of the couple's income, to which were added Bessie's earnings from her writing. Bessie was content with this and refused Eliza's offer of a larger stipend. Although she had always lived in considerable comfort, thanks to her father's wealth, she never set much store in expensive material pleasures and adapted quickly to the Bellocs'

38. BRP, quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 53.
39. Josiah Parkes, Joseph's older brother, was widowed and childless and hence took a close interest in his niece's wellbeing.

simpler way of living. As 'Madame Louis' she felt she was quickly 'becoming in a real sense a Frenchwoman.'[40]

In the early days of their marriage, Bessie and Louis frequently visited the Paris homes of Louis's two sisters and sometimes treated themselves to a few nights' stay in a Paris hotel, which gave them cherished time alone together. However, Bessie was very content living under her mother-in-law's roof, as she recorded in her diary:

> How utterly my life has changed! In the old days it was always astonishing to me that with so many elements which should have made for real happiness - intelligence, great interest in literature, sufficient money, and the highest principles - my mother's house was so lacking, at any rate where I was concerned, in real happiness.
>
> This house is a paradise of joyous lightness and buoyancy, … though I know Madame Belloc terribly misses Louis' father …
>
> I remember feeling [when first arriving at La Celle] … as if I had stepped into a new dimension, and in that dimension I have, thank God, dwelt ever since, with increasing joy and peace.
>
> … It is such a dear, kind, simple household, and I fit into it as if I had been born in it.[41]

Louise was equally delighted with Bessie, writing to Eliza that she was 'truly the light and the joy of this house, a benediction to us all.'[42] The relationship between mother and daughter-in-law was very close. In Louise, Bessie found a mother who was far more sympathetic to her emotional, intellectual and artistic sensibilities than Eliza. Over the coming months she also came to know and love her two sisters-in-law, Louise and Lily. The girl who had experienced a lonely childhood in London, and who as a consequence had repeatedly sought out female friends as surrogate sisters and mother figures, was now a wife at the heart of a bustling family of independently-minded and affectionate women.

40. BRP, quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 64.
41. BRP, quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 64.
42. LSB, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 187.

Her marriage to Louis was not, however, secondary to her relationship with Louise but a full physical as well as companionate union. Despite the concerns expressed about Louis's fertility, and Bessie being considered an elderly bride at thirty-eight, within three months of the wedding Bessie was pregnant. She admitted to Eliza that this news initially made her feel an 'involuntary recoil - not because I was afraid, but because of the trouble a baby brings with it,' although she chose to trust to Providence in the matter.[43] Eliza and Barbara were less sanguine, fearful of the dangers of first-time childbirth for a woman of her age. The ever-forthright Barbara wrote to tell Bessie she was sure she would not survive the birth. Bessie's reply conveyed her contentment at her unexpected condition, which even Barbara's portents of doom could not shake:

> My dearest Bar, - I could not help smiling as I read your dreadful letter. I am remarkably well - in fact much better than I was before my marriage. Do believe me when I say that it is very wrong of you to anticipate any special trouble. I hope to have at least two - perhaps three - children.[44]

Bessie seems to have calmly accepted this unexpected turn of events. She did not alter her lifestyle during her pregnancy, continuing to take long walks and travel into Paris with Louis. She also progressed with her writing career. *La Belle France,* a collection of her prose and verse essays on provincial French towns (several of them previously printed in British periodicals) was published in London in spring 1868.[45] The pieces were composed, as Bessie explained in the introduction, 'from an antiquarian and poetical point of view' and reflected her desire to preserve the traces of medieval France, and its Catholic faith, which were rapidly disappearing. She aimed to celebrate 'the sense of repose and stability … found in older things' and the volume captured what she had most cherished in her extensive travels around France both before and since her marriage. She commended the

43. BRP, quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 68.
44. BRP, quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 68-9.
45. BRP, *La Belle France* (London: Strahan & Co, 1868). Quotations here are taken from a later edition of 1877, published by Daldy Isbister & Co.

book to 'all English travellers who seek somewhat more in France than the gay bustle of Paris.'[46] Her success in capturing the beauty and the atmosphere of the places she described was noted by several reviewers, even those who had little sympathy with her Catholicism. It was an expensively-produced volume, illustrated with a substantial number of engravings, and several reviews commented on its 'rich and tasteful' appearance as well as the charm and elegance of the writing.[47] This form of publication demonstrates the investment Bessie's publishers were willing to make in her writing, believing a new work by 'the author of "Vignettes"' would be of interest to British readers. Bessie signed the book as Bessie Parkes-Belloc, trading upon her well-known single name and adding to it her new identity as a wife and adopted Frenchwoman. She dedicated it to Louise, 'by her son's wife,'[48] making it a tribute to her new family as well as her adopted country.

Despite her love of France, Bessie was anxious to deliver her first baby in England, as she was wary of French doctors and their practice of bloodletting women after childbirth. She assumed she could arrange her lying-in at her mother's house but Eliza baulked at the suggestion. So Bessie and Louis took lodgings in George Street, Marylebone, close to Eliza's home, where their baby girl was born on 5th August 1868. Given Eliza's reluctance to be closely involved, Bessie must have been grateful that Mary Merryweather was present at the birth, on hand with her nursing expertise and motherly support. In Mary's honour the baby was named Marie. Within hours of Marie's arrival Bessie wrote a long letter to Louise, describing how delighted Louis was with his daughter. She was moved by the many letters of congratulation she received, many of them from women she had helped in the past,

46. BRP, *La Belle France*, ix, xvii, xxvi.
47. Literature,' *Warder and Dublin Weekly Mail*, November 13, 1869, 4. Other reviews appeared in *Dublin Weekly Nation* (April 18, 1868, 555); *Atlas* (April 24, 1868, 10); *Tablet* (April 25, 1868, 267); *Manchester Guardian* (April 29, 1868, 3); *Scotsman* (June 3, 1968, 3); *Athenaeum* (June 6, 1868, 795); *Eclectic Review* (June 1868, 563-4); *Westminster Review* (July 1868, 275-6).
48. BRP, *La Belle France,* frontispiece.

including one from a missionary in China,[49] evidence of how far in the world her influence had travelled.

Bessie was determined Marie should be baptised at the village church in La Celle and recovered quickly enough that she, Louis and the baby travelled back to France before the end of August. Much fuss was made of the new arrival and the arrangements for her baptism. The names Marie was given commemorated some of Bessie's close female friendships and her new French circle: Adelaide (after Adelaides Procter and Montgolfier) Julie (after her godmother, Bessie's friend Julia Pitt Byrne) Elizabeth (after Bessie and Eliza) and Renée (after her French godfather, Louis's nephew René Millet). Bessie was overwhelmed by her French family's excitement over Marie and she found being the mother of a small baby somewhat bemusing. 'I feel,' she wrote, 'like a traveller on the banks of the Amazon who is suddenly approached by a small unknown animal, and is, if charmed and interested, yet not sure how the little animal will turn out.'[50] Although 'the value of breastfeeding for both mother and child was strongly endorsed' in this period,[51] Bessie had difficulty producing milk so Marie was fed on cow's milk. Bessie herself did little in the way of practical care for Marie beyond bathing and dressing her every morning, before Louise's three servants looked after her for the rest of the day. Marie even slept in the main house with the chief maid Catherine, while Bessie and Louis lived in their rooms in the chalet.

Although Eliza was horrified by this arrangement, Marie thrived and Bessie delighted in watching the emergence of her strong, determined character. 'When I think of the quiet

49. MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 70-1.
50. BRP. quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 71.
51. Pat Jalland and John Hooper, *Women from Birth to Death: The Female Life Cycle in Britain 1830-1914* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1986), 122.

little babies I have been shown at times in England,' she wrote to Mary Merryweather, 'I feel amazed that I have produced such an extraordinarily strong-natured, self-willed little creature.'[52] She quickly warmed to motherhood and took pride in informing her uncle Josiah '[m]y little household is very flourishing' and expressing contentment with her 'purely … country life.'[53] However, she was delighted when Louis suggested they stay in Paris for the winter, not least because it meant they could avoid the bitterly-cold months they had endured in the poorly-heated chalet the previous year. They rented a four-room apartment near the Luxembourg Gardens and enjoyed shopping together to furnish this first home truly of their own. Louise's maid Catherine came with them, to oversee the housework, cooking and childcare, but Bessie wanted to learn how to care for her own family. She shopped at the local market (although Louis was greatly amused at her inept attempts to strike a bargain) and she took cooking lessons from Catherine. 'I used to enjoy the days when we came to an hotel … last winter,' she told her mother, 'but this way of life … is incomparably more agreeable to us both.'[54] The little family returned to La Celle for the summer, before returning to the Paris apartment for the following winter.

With the support of the Belloc family and their servants, Bessie was able to combine her duties as a wife and mother with writing. She informed her uncle Josiah she had been commissioned to write reviews of French books for the *Spectator* back in London, for which she received '£2 an article.'[55] This was less than half the fee she had received for an article in *Once a Week* in 1861.[56] However, her professional earnings meant much more to her now she was writing to contribute to her family's limited income: they were both a source

52. BRP, quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 79-80.
53. BRP, letter to Josiah Parkes, November 16, 1868, GCPP Parkes 3/7.
54. BRP, quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 77.
55. BRP, letter to Josiah Parkes, November 13, 1869, GCPP Parkes 3/8.
56. The *Once a Week* account book records that Bessie was paid '£04.04s.00d' for her article 'Algerine Interiors' (*Once A Week*, March 23, 1861: 356-61). This is the only evidence I have found to date of a fee Bessie earned from her journalism prior to 1869. See The Curran Index, accessed December 8, 2020, http://curranindex.org/articles?search%5Bcontributors%5D%5B%5D=1777.

of welcome additional funds and a matter of pride for her. She was certainly not seeking to persuade her uncle to increase her allowance; indeed she rejected her mother's offers to encourage Josiah to do so. She was happy living modestly in the heart of her family, balancing her domestic and professional lives as Louise had done for many years. Writing for the *Spectator* also meant her work was published in a title which was becoming one of the most influential at this time, with one of the widest circulations[57] - even if, due to the title's policy of anonymity, her name did not appear within its pages.[58]

Through reading the British and French press, and her correspondence with friends, Bessie also retained a keen interest in current affairs, including on the subject of women's rights. She commented to Barbara on the 'wonderful' news of the passing of the Married Women's Property Bill through the Commons on 24th July 1869: 'Thus ends, my dear, one chapter of what was once our life endeavour.'[59] She looked back on her past life in England as a very different time and one in which she now felt she made mistakes. After receiving a letter concerning Sam Blackwell, who had died in March 1868, she reflected on their failed relationship and hoped Marie would 'marry early, and meet some good sensible man, and not waste her youth, as I did, in straining after an impossible ideal.'[60] Bonnie Anderson assumes the 'impossible ideal' Bessie refers to here is the women's rights movement, and interprets this statement as an indication she had become disillusioned with the movement

57. Malcolm Woodfield, 'Victorian Weekly Reviews and Reviewing After 1860: R. H. Hutton and the "Spectator",' *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 16 (1986): 75, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/10.1080/14781700.2020.1736136.
58. Anonymity also makes it difficult to identify articles by Bessie. A piece entitled 'Sainte-Beuve's Last Volume' (*Spectator*, November 20, 1869, 16-17) fits with Bessie's statement in her letter of the same month to Josiah that 'They asked me for a notice on Sainte-Beuve' (see GCPP Parkes 3/8) and so can be attributed to her with some confidence. However, it is impossible to establish how many other articles she published anonymously at this time.
59. BRP, quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 84.
60. BRP, quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 82. An obituary of Sam noted he had been a highly regarded expert in geology but was also a 'notably unsuccessful ironmaster' and 'the debtor who brought down the defunct Birmingham Bank.' See 'Samuel Holden Blackwell,' *Wolverhampton Chronicler and Staffordshire Advertiser*, April 8, 1868, 3.

to which she had contributed so much.[61] However, the context of the comment as a response to memories of Sam suggests it was her idealistic ideas about marriage (and how a woman could combine it with pursuing a high-profile career) she now regarded as 'impossible.' Although she had ceased her frontline efforts for the women's rights cause, she certainly did not turn away from its principles. She delighted to report, in one letter to Barbara, 'I found Baby Marie diligently sucking one of your pamphlets on Woman Suffrage. I let her go on doing it, as I thought some of it might in that way percolate into her infant mind!'[62]

In the spring of 1870, Bessie was commissioned to write an educational book for children entitled *Peoples of the World*. Louis supported her plan for the two of them to travel together around France, with Marie, to aid Bessie's research.[63] Both sides of the family were against the idea, as Bessie was expecting a second child in July and it was believed long railway journeys were dangerous for pregnant women. Once again she brushed such concerns aside, refusing to allow pregnancy to limit what she could do. The family set out for south-east France in late March, with Catherine again accompanying them as their maid. They stayed at Pau for a month and then travelled via train and steamer to La Rochelle. In mid-May they returned safely to Paris via Poitiers and Orleans, with Bessie's book written and the family's finances in good order. As Eliza continued to worry they needed more money, she wrote to reassure her:

> As soon as the proofs are passed, I shall receive the forty pounds for my book. That will mean, as I did an article for the *Spectator* for which I was paid two pounds, and the thirty pounds I earned last autumn, that I have made seventy-two pounds in twelve months. So pray believe that we have enough for our present way of living.[64]

61. Bonnie S Anderson 'Early International Feminism: Contributions and Difficulties of Comparative History,' *Comparative Women's History: New Approaches,* Ed. Anna Cova, (New York, Columbia University Press, 2006), 83.
62. BRP, quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 84.
63. BRP, *Peoples of the World*, (London: Cassell Petter & Galpin, 1870).
64 BRP, quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 94.

Peoples of the World was published in November 1870. It described the characteristics of natives of different regions of the major European countries, and around the globe, 'from a picturesque point of view … see[ing] what their faces, their dress, their habits, and their occupations are like in their life of every day.'[65] Bessie drew on her personal experiences of her travels across Europe and in Algeria, and her interest in the condition of women's lives is evident in her comments on their status and activities within different societies. Parts of the book make uncomfortable reading today, as they uncritically reflect nineteenth-century notions of the superiority of Christianity and western civilisation, although Bessie also denounced the 'rapaciousness' of British imperial power in India. The book was advertised for the Christmas market and evidently sold well enough to warrant the production of further editions over several years.[66]

Of more immediate concern, Louis wished their second child to be born at La Celle, so Bessie arranged for Mercy Baker, who had attended Marie's birth, to travel from England to care for her and the baby. Joseph Hilaire Belloc, named after his grandfathers, was born in the grand salon of the Belloc house on 27th July 1870. The birth was straightforward and swift, with the baby arriving before the local doctor arrived, and Bessie recovered quickly. In contrast to this domestic harmony, in the wider world the first rumblings of war were sounding, although it was some time before the Bellocs noted them with any real concern. Napoleon III had declared war on Prussia on 19th July and the family traced the daily advance of the French troops on a map cut out from a newspaper and pinned to the wall, without any sense they or their village could be directly affected.[67] Then France suffered its first defeat at the Battle of Wörth on 6th August, after which events moved swiftly. Both Louis's nephews entered the army and his brother-in-law enrolled in the Parisian Garde

65. BRP, *Peoples of the World*, iii, v.
66. A third edition appeared in 1877. The copy in my possession was awarded as a school prize in 1885.
67. BRP, *In a Walled Garden,* 185-6.

National. Bessie told her mother '[h]eavy artillery has been passing our house all morning, going we suppose, from Versailles to the fort of Mont Valérien.' She had a clear grasp of the politics behind the events and feared for the future: 'Should France be beaten … the whole balance of Europe will crash into shivers.'[68] However, she took much persuading to leave La Celle: even when rumours arrived that the Prussians were about to march on Versailles, she refused to believe troops from such a civilised nation would pose a threat to the village. Louis did not share his wife's optimism and, in a rare example of defying her wishes, insisted they leave for Paris. Louise had already left La Celle, to stay with her elder daughter for the summer, so Bessie secured the house. Certain they would soon return, she did not bother to pack away the belongings she was leaving behind, apart from a few English books which she placed in a hidden cupboard.

Bessie, Louis and the children stayed with Louis's younger sister Lily and her husband Charles Ballot in Paris. Everyone urged them to go to England, where Louise had now gone with her daughter Louise and her granddaughter. At first they refused to leave but the capture of Napoleon III at Sedan and the fall of the Second Empire in early September, together with a flurry of fearful letters from Eliza and Louise in England, persuaded them they needed to depart for their children's sake. Their train was the last one to leave Paris: workmen followed behind it, covering the tracks with earth to prevent the line being used by the approaching Prussians. Thus they very narrowly missed being trapped in the five-month-long siege of Paris, during which many young children died of malnourishment.

The family stayed with Eliza in Wimpole Street before moving into Uncle Josiah's London house, 11 Great College Street, Westminster. Bessie had often commented to Eliza that the cost of food and other essentials was far lower in France than England; being in London for

68. BRP, quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 96-7.

an extended time must therefore have put a strain on the couple's finances, exacerbated by the lack of French publications she might review for the British press. She continued to receive some commissions: for example, she informed Barbara 'I have got a curious Report on Trade Unions to review for the Spectator.'[69] However, the pieces she published during this period were mostly brief and unlikely to have generated much income.[70] These circumstances help explain two letters from Marian Lewes to Bessie from this time, which indicate Bessie made an unsuccessful application for a pension from the Royal Literary Fund, about which she sought Marian's advice when she visited her at home in St John's Wood.

Marian was immersed at this time in writing the work which is now her best-known novel, *Middlemarch,* but she followed the progress of the war closely, horrified by the development of events. She expressed sympathy for the situation of Bessie and her family, writing 'Alas, alas for the sorrows of poor France! … And I fear you have a large share in the sorrows.'[71] In response to Bessie's request, she made efforts to seek out information from those who knew how the pension application system worked. What she learned made her pessimistic about the success of a second application and it seems Bessie did not submit one. There is no evidence she received any such pension and the fact her name was erased at some point from both of Marian's letters suggests there was a desire to keep private this evidence of her and Louis's financial difficulties.[72] Nevertheless, this correspondence

69. BRP to BLS, February 12, 1871, GCPP Parkes 5/135. This review was most likely 'Trade Unions Abroad and Hints for Home Legislation,' *Spectator*, March 4, 1871: 261-2.
70. The only signed articles by BRP published during this time which I have identified were all for Anthony Trollope's *Saint Pauls Magazine*: 'Everybody's Baby,' December 1870, 398-400; and 'March Song' [poem], March 1871, 562. Her poem 'The Ghostly Maid' appeared in the same title in October 1871, 80-1.
71. ME to BRP, December 20, 1870, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies*, 195.
72. ME, letters to [BRP], January 10 and 23, 1871, held in the Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library, Museums and Press; William Baker, 'George Eliot, Bessie Rayner Parkes, Sarah Marks and Barbara Bodichon: New George Eliot Letters,' *Études Anglaises* 73 (1), 2020: 99-104, https://doi.org/10.3917/etan.731.0097. I am very grateful to Mark Samuels Lasner for furnishing me with a copy of these letters and further information about them, and to Professor Baker for providing me with a copy of his article.

demonstrates Bessie's continued friendship with Marian after her marriage and the way in which her old circle of female friends continued to be a source of support in time of need.

While in England, the Bellocs - fearful for their home and relatives - desperately scanned the papers for news of France. Lily had chosen to stay in Paris while her husband and son fought the Prussians, and the very elderly Adelaide de Montgolfier insisted on remaining in her Paris apartment throughout the siege. No correspondence could reach those trapped inside the city, but some letters from Lily and Adelaide, sent by balloon and pigeon post, made their way to England. Both women insisted they were well, despite the devastation caused by bombings and the increasing scarcity of food. In one letter Lily reassured her mother they had not, unlike other Parisians, had to resort to eating rats and dogs.[73] They all survived to see the end of the siege, when Paris capitulated to the Prussians on 29th January 1871, but the physical and mental trauma they had endured took its toll.[74]

Further chaos followed when the revolutionary Paris Commune seized control of the city on 18th March. Until the Commune was defeated by the French army at the end of May, it was too dangerous for Louise, Louis and Bessie to travel back to France. Louise then returned first. She began trying to restore order at La Celle, where the house and chalet had been ransacked, leaving little more than an empty shell. Bessie and Louis followed with the children in early June. Bessie described in a letter to Eliza the 'indescribably painful' sight she found when they arrived. Despite the efforts of the family, '[b]oth the gardens of the house and of the chalet are still heaped with indescribable mounds of rubbish and - forgive me the word - filth. … [A] farm dunghill is sweet-smelling and clear, in comparison.'[75] The

73. MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 133.
74. Marie remembered many years later her Aunt Lily confiding how her health had been permanently affected by the siege and that 'during those months she always woke to find herself crying.' See MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 124.
75. BRP, quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 158.

books she had put in the hidden cupboard were some of the very few possessions which had survived the wanton destruction of the Prussian soldiers.

She was anxious to help restore the house she had grown to love dearly. The death of her uncle Josiah in August 1871, while a great sadness to Bessie, also provided her with a substantial inheritance and thus the means to contribute to the Belloc family's costs in renovating the main house and the chalet. Her first response in print to the events of the conflict was a poem expressing her love for her adopted country and her horror at the Prussian attack:

> Oh! dear land of my love!
> Oh! country of my son!
> Has the German tramped above
> Thine ancient roots undone?[76]

Many years later, she published an account of events at La Celle during the war, paying tribute to the residents' bravery and dignity in the face of the terrible abuses meted out by the Prussian troops. She challenged the idea of war as 'heroic,' arguing '[w]ar between two highly-civilised nations is not only cruel, but profoundly shocking'[77] - a sentiment she would live to see proved again by the horrors of the Great War in the next century.

Bessie had also inherited from her uncle the lease and contents of 11 Great College Street. She and Louis spent the winter of 1871-2 there, enjoying a peaceful time in each other's company, reading together writers including George Sand. When they returned to La Celle in the summer Bessie proposed they should leave the children at home for a fortnight while they took a short holiday together further south in the Auvergne. However, they decided to head home early, as the August heat proved oppressive. Despite this, Louis insisted on

76. BRP, 'The Prussians at St. Denis,' *Spectator*, October 28, 1871, 1303. Unusually for the *Spectator*, this poem was printed with Bessie's name, as well as the location of its composition, La Celle.
77. BRP, *In a Walled Garden*, 207.

respectfully standing bare-headed for some time in the midday sun while a funeral procession passed by them. When they arrived back at La Celle on the evening of 18th August, Bessie was not concerned by Louis's evident exhaustion. She had seen him recover from a similar state following a previous long journey after a long sleep. When he could not be roused after lunch the following day, Bessie agreed to call the doctor only to placate Louise and Adelaide's concerns. Events then moved rapidly. The doctor announced Louis was dying of sunstroke and the priest was called to perform the last rites. Bessie sat holding Louis in her arms for several hours, until he took his last breath.

Losing Louis was a completely unexpected shock, 'the one thing I never imagined could happen to me.'[78] Bessie's letters immediately after his death demonstrate the depth of her feelings for him and how bereft and inconsolable she felt without the man who had become the centre of her life. She wrote immediately to tell her mother the news, stoically reassuring her 'I feel quite well, so do not be anxious about me.'[79] It was to Barbara that she later allowed herself to articulate her bewilderment, her love for Louis and her sense of loss:

> The father of my children was so dear to me, and I so little thought to lose him … that for the moment everything seems broken, gone. …
> From the time he uttered his marriage vows, giving his whole self to me …, I never had cause to regard him other than with exceeding reverence which ended in exceeding love, which made me hold so lightly all the real difficulties of a life to which I was never blind.[80]

The Catholic rituals of mourning, which had consoled Bessie after Adelaide Procter's long-anticipated death, proved a painful ordeal to her as a widow. At the funeral, she fulfilled her duty by leading the procession of mourners behind the coffin, holding two-year-old Hilaire by the hand, followed by Louise and Marie. However, she found it difficult to face the many villagers who wished to offer their condolences. In the coming days she coped by

78. Quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 193.
79. Quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 183.
80. BRP, letter to BLS, August 25, 1872, GCPP Parkes 5/136.

remaining quietly on her own in the chalet, while her children were cared for in the main house. In common with many in the early stages of grief, Bessie was initially dazed by the events happening around her.[81] Louise and Lily were concerned at her eerie calmness and how little she ate, and assumed she would find greater comfort with her mother. As Eliza was not well enough to travel to France, they persuaded Bessie to go to London, accompanied by Catherine, to be with her. However, she returned to La Celle within three days, insisting that although Eliza was 'wonderfully kind and strong,' she preferred to be alone. She confessed to Louise

> I try and think of my little children, and I suppose a day will come when I shall care to bring them up. But their father was so entirely the foundation of my own life, that I don't seem to realize that the children, after all, are his children, and so should mean very much to me.[82]

Being in La Celle was too painful for her, full as it was of reminders of her loss. She returned to England in the winter, establishing a home for herself and her children at Great College Street. Eliza had invited them to live with her but Bessie presumably preferred the freedom and privacy of own household, although she and the children visited Eliza frequently. Bessie's house was conveniently near to Westminster Hospital, where Mary Merryweather was now the Matron; Marie 'grew to love Aunt Mary' and had happy memories of 'the happy hours I spent in her charming sitting-room, listening to her and my mother talking.'[83] Bessie's new home was also close to her beloved Westminster Abbey. She established close friendships with Lady Augusta Stanley, the wife of the Dean of Westminster, and the writer Elizabeth Rundle Charles, who was part of the Stanleys' circle. Bessie's affection for these Anglican women demonstrates her affinity with, and respect for, people of deeply-held religious belief, whether or not they shared her Catholic faith. And it was to her faith - and those who understood it - that she turned for the strength to cope with her grief. Soon after

81. Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 231.
82. BRP, quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 188.
83. MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 199.

her return to London, Bessie visited Henry Manning, now the Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, whose counsel she had sought before her conversion to the Catholic Church. Manning understood Bessie's grief: many years before his ordination as a Catholic priest he had lost his wife after less than four years of marriage. He therefore spoke from experience when he told Bessie that grief was a 'luxury, which … if too much indulged in, becomes injurious to the character' and Bessie endeavoured to remember this stern admonition.[84] In a letter to Eliza the following summer she wrote 'I am trying hard, for the sake of the children, to put sorrow behind me. I … know that to indulge an unsatisfied longing for love is wrong, and the time has come when I must wrestle … to overcome that longing.'[85]

Widowhood, as Andrews and Lomas, point out, is 'both a private shift in a woman's personal relationships and a change in their status in society.'[86] Jalland notes that the end of their marriage and their position as a wife could be 'devastating' for women: although 'the role of widow was stigmatized less than that of a spinster … it was [considered] considerably inferior to that of a wife.' For many Victorian women widowhood also brought about 'a total disintegration of their lives, which for the most were dependent on the financial means, social status, and professional careers of their husbands.'[87] Bessie was unusual in not being in this dependent situation; nor did she regard being unmarried as an inevitably 'inferior' life. Yet she felt painfully the loss of her identity as Louis's wife. She told Eliza 'I had given up everything for Louis and I don't know how to take up a single thread of my life again. My marriage was to me the re-making of my life and I seem to have done it so thoroughly.'[88] Several years later she told her sister-in-law, Lily, 'Ma vie est

84. MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 197.
85. BRP, quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 203.
86. Maggie Andrews and Janis Lomas, *Widows: Poverty, Power and Politics* (Cheltenham, The History Press: 2020) iBooks, Introduction.
87. Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 230-1, 235.
88. BRP, quoted in MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*, 20.

finie'[89] Bessie regarded her marriage as a defining turning-point in her life, giving her personal and religious fulfilment. She was now at a loss as to how she could find a way forward as a single woman once again. Without being able to 'take refuge' in the strength of Louis's love, she knew she needed to provide for her children the emotional security he had given her: 'I must stand steady for *them* to dash up against *me*.'[90] It was a task to which she was not sure she was equal.

Nevertheless, she did find the strength to care, not only for Marie and Hilaire (known in England as Mary and Hilary) but also for the wellbeing of the needy in the wider community around her. Marie recalled on one occasion her mother receiving a late-night message, from Augusta Stanley, that an Irish girl was dying at a nearby brothel. She responded at once, taking a priest with her to the address and engaging the help of a policeman when she was denied entry. She sat with the girl until she passed way and then wrote to the girl's parents to inform them of her death and that 'she had died fortified by the rites of Holy Church,' sparing them the details of the life she had been living. She also gave time and money to support Parisian Communards who had escaped to London, finding them work and sometimes managing to secure pardons for them from the French authorities. In doing this, Bessie was guided both by religious compassion for those in need and her long-standing sympathies with cooperative and socialist ideas. Marie wrote 'I cannot remember a time of my childhood and girlhood when we were not burdened with people who had to be helped.'[91] The sense of duty which had been instilled in Bessie from childhood continued

89. Translation: My life is over. BRP, quoted in MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*, 35.
90. BRP, quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 199-200.
91. MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 201. Although there is no surviving evidence of Bessie's precise views on the politics and actions of the Communards, it is likely she would have sympathised with the Commune 'as a short-lived overthrow of the patriarchal status quo [which] served as an incubator for embryonic feminist socialisms.' See Carolyn J. Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades: Women in the Paris Commune* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 18. Eichner provides an account of the efforts of women in the Commune to establish education for all girls and support women's full participation in economic and political life.

to spur her into action on behalf of others, even in the midst of her grief. It was also likely a helpful distraction from it.

Bessie and the children returned to La Celle for the summer of 1873, establishing a pattern of summers in France and winters in London which they would follow for several years. Bessie now found comfort in being near her husband's family, although she chose to spend the night of the first anniversary of Louis's death alone in Paris to avoid the Requiem Mass at the village church. By the autumn she was beginning to feel it possible she might look forward to the future once again, writing 'Life must grow and mould anew, if it is to be life at all, however painful it may be to begin the process.'[92] The following year, as Eliza grew increasingly frail, Bessie and the children moved into 17 Wimpole Street, to be with her when they were not in France. This arrangement enabled Bessie to care for her aging mother and freed her from the demands and costs of running her own household. When in London Bessie kept up several long-standing friendships and, going against the social custom of her class, took her children with her on social visits. Every Sunday she and Marie visited Adelaide Procter's mother, who continued to play host to the leading literary figures of the age.[93] These literary connections helped Bessie continue in a small way with her own writing career. A new edition of *La Belle France* appeared in 1877, the same year as the publication of the first volumes of Henry Longfellow's anthology, *Poems of Place*. Longfellow's inclusion of twenty-six of Bessie's poems in this work indicated the continued high respect for Bessie's work. Longfellow wrote to Bessie thanking her for permitting him to use her 'beautiful poems,' stressing that his inclusion of so many was

92. BRP, quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 204.
93. Marie remembered meeting Robert Browning at the Procters' house and also going with Bessie to take tea at Browning's home. See MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*, 31-2.

evidence of his high regard of them.[94] Given Bessie's admiration of Longfellow's poetry, this was gratifying praise to receive.

Further change was brought about by Eliza's death in October 1877. The large house in Wimpole Street, staffed by three maids plus Sarah Mew, the children's nurse, was now Bessie's sole responsibility. In addition to the income derived from the investment of Uncle Josiah's money, her father's money (secured in a trust fund) provided a reasonable annuity on which Eliza had lived during her widowed years. However, lacking Eliza's experience in such matters, Bessie found it difficult to manage the household budget, having never received any systematic instruction in managing personal finances. Until her father's death she had been given whatever money she requested of him; according to Marie, Bessie had never even owned a chequebook.[95] Therefore when she accepted the offer of help from the son of a friend, a broker who claimed he could get a better return on her capital, she lacked any detailed understanding of the risky investments she was trusting him to make on her behalf. Although she had repeatedly, while editor of the *EWJ*, promoted the importance of girls being provided with a sound practical as well as academic education, she remained vulnerable to just the kind of error borne of ignorance of which her own publication had warned:

> [Girls] should learn … things of practical use, - how to … write a cheque on a banker, etc., and should be taught … what funds and securities are. … Had this kind of instruction been universal, the unhappy lady whose case we have so lately read in the newspapers, who left her money-securities with her broker from ignorance of their value, would still have been in the possession of her fortune.[96]

Over the course of several months the broker gambled Bessie's money on the stock market. She was unaware of the losses he incurred until, in April 1878, he departed suddenly for

94. Henry W. Longfellow, letter to BRP, May 30, 1877, GCPP Parkes 9/102.
95. MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 65.
96.'A Question: Are men naturally cleverer than women?,' *EWJ,* January 1859, 335.

Paris, informing her in a letter that her £12,000 capital (the equivalent of over £1 million in today's terms) was lost.

Bessie was unsurprisingly deeply shaken by this news, which left her reliant on her small income from the Parkes trust fund, the terms of which prevented her from controlling the capital. In an attempt to reduce her outgoings (and also concerned about the effect of the London air on Hilaire's health) she decided to sell the leasehold on 17 Wimpole Street and move to the countryside. On the advice of her Catholic friend Georgiana Fullerton (who had previously rented the same property), she leased Slindon Cottage, a spacious dower house attached to the Slindon estate, near Arundel in West Sussex, owned by the Catholic Leslie family. In July 1878 Bessie and her children began a new life in this small village 'perched on its high chalk hill and in sight of the sea.'[97] Slindon had never lost its pre-Reformation links to the Catholic faith and a Catholic chapel had recently been built in the village in addition to the older Anglican church.[98] Bessie appreciated being able to walk to Mass from her new home. However, while the house was still in disarray from the move, they returned to France for their annual summer stay. This provided Bessie with a welcome sense of security after the recent upheaval and uncertainty. 'It is such a comfort,' she wrote to Barbara from La Celle, 'to feel that this house is my children's very own, and that therefore there is never raised any question of letting it, or of parting with it.'[99]

97. BRP, letter to BLS, quoted in MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*, 43
98. Slindon House had been used as a rest-house by Archbishops of Canterbury in the Middle Ages. After the Reformation a secret Catholic Mission was maintained by the lord of the manor, which sheltered priests and enabled Catholic marriages and baptisms. There is also a record from 1785 of the existence of a 'Popish School … where Catholic children can be educated separately,' servicing the small but persistent population of Catholic families in the village. See Josephine Duggan Rees, *A Portrait of Slindon,* (Bognor Regis: Woodfield Publishing, 2002), 101, 105.
99. BRP, quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 292

Despite her sense that La Celle was her family's true home, she made every effort to make their life in Slindon a success. An attempt to generate an income by keeping hens quickly proved a failure and she ended up giving the birds away. More usefully, however, she realised the proximity to Goodwood meant she could lucratively sublet the cottage during race weeks each summer. Marie described their life in Slindon as 'a simple one - for those days. That is to say, we had three servants who had been for many years with grandmother Parkes: a gardener, a gardener's boy and a groom - for a friend had given Bessie a pony carriage.'[100] Bessie strove to provide her children with a comfortable life in Sussex and she was anxious her French relatives would not discover the full extent of her reduced circumstances.[101] Yet money remained a worry.

In April 1879 she again sought help from Marian Lewes, who had been so sympathetic during her financial difficulties a few years before. Bessie had maintained her friendship with Marian after Louis's death, mostly through correspondence rather than in person, although Marian expressed pleasure at receiving visits from her: 'I always get a fresh sense of [Bessie's] goodness and sweetness of nature whenever I have a glimpse of her.'[102] Bessie's letter of condolence after the death of Marian's partner George Lewes in November 1878 touched Marian deeply. Bessie must have hoped both the strength of their friendship and Marian's lucrative writing career would make her amenable to a request for financial assistance. Unfortunately Bessie's timing could not have been worse. Marian was still reeling from her bereavement and busily trying to consolidate her legal and financial position after Lewes's death, as well as fielding many other requests for money from friends and family. Bessie's letter requesting a loan of £500 (an enormous sum) must have seemed

100. MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*, 43
101. MBL, *Where Love and Friendship Dwelt* (London: Macmillan, 1943), 2.
102. ME to BLS, March 15, 1878, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 211.

too great an imposition: after consulting her confidant John Cross she replied the same day to decline.[103]

After this awkward incident the friendship between Bessie and Marian cooled for a time. On 5th February 1880 Marian informed Barbara she had 'not yet seen Bessie. I hope she does not regard me as neglectful in not writing … I don't know her address.'[104] However, this was evidently rectified soon after, as Marian's diary records that Bessie visited her on 15th February and 1st March.[105] When, in May the same year, Marian's marriage to John Cross (twenty years her junior) shocked many people, Bessie's letter of congratulation was warmly received as a token of her loyal friendship. Marian wrote to Barbara 'it is very sweet to me to feel that [Bessie's] affection is constant to me in this as it was in other crises of my life.'[106] Just a few days before Marian died in December of the same year, she wrote inviting 'Dearest Bessie' to visit her at her new marital home in Chelsea, although it is unclear if Bessie managed to make the journey.[107] Bessie treasured her friendship with her illustrious fellow writer, whose intellect and creative genius she had always championed. However, in keeping with what Bessie had come to most value in life, it was her friend's capacity for love she most cherished and which she chose to emphasise in her later tribute to her. She wrote in 1895, 'I know she loved much, not only the one to whom she gave faithful years of devoted care, but his children …, the friends of her youth, the poor, the sick, and the suffering.'[108]

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103. ME, diary entry, April 22, 1879, *The Journals of George Eliot* edited by Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 171.
104. Quoted in Baker, 'George Eliot, Bessie Rayner Parkes': 104.
105. *The Journals of George Eliot,* ed. Harris and Johnston, 198-9.
106. ME to BLS, June 1, 1880, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women,* 211.
107. ME to BRP, December 1880, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women,:* 211-2.
108. BRP, *In a Walled Garden*, 24.

1880 was a year of losses for Bessie: Mary Merryweather and Adelaide de Montgolfier - 'two such landmarks in my life' Bessie told Barbara - both also died that year.[109] Louise Belloc's death in November 1881 was the greatest sadness, although Bessie was consoled by the fact she and Marie were able to travel to La Celle to be with her in her final days. Bessie became the custodian of the house and chalet, in trust for her children, but she visited less regularly now Louise was not there. She wrote, 'I feel as if a great light and power had been extinguished. What she was to me there are no words to tell, and she was far the noblest and best human being I have ever known.' [110]

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Bessie's grief at the deaths of Louis and Louise was testament to the depth of her love for them. Together with the loss of her wealth, and the practical security that had given her, the gradual shrinking of her circle of close confidantes made her even more reliant on her own resources as she tried to the best of her ability to raise her children. The years since she had first arrived in La Celle had given her much joy - in her own family and her continued professional success - but this had been overshadowed by war and personal trauma. It was, as ever, her sense of duty and her trust in her religious faith which gave her the strength to carry on, as she now focused on her parental responsibilities, putting aside her own ambitions to enable her children to flourish.

109. MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*, 55.
110. BRP, quoted in MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 307.

Chapter 7 1880-1925: Alone and standing upright

> It is a very curious experience being absolutely alone for so long; there is no use, dear, in lamenting it … And so I try hard to stand upright.
>
> Bessie Belloc, letter to Jeanette Kelsey, 9 April 1897[1]

Despite now living quietly in rural Sussex, Bessie kept in contact with several of her friends from before her marriage. Marie greatly admired her mother's feminist friends: after meeting Elizabeth Blackwell at the age of eight, she declared that she wanted to become a doctor and so was taken to meet Elizabeth Garrett Anderson.[2] Bessie's friendship with Barbara was also renewed in these years, becoming for both of them an important source of comfort and support as they entered middle age. Barbara suffered a stroke in 1877, just after her fiftieth birthday, while she was staying in her cottage in Zennor. Bessie was the first of her friends to travel to Cornwall, to oversee her nursing and keep her company for a month. Barbara never fully recovered her health and was forced to retire from much of her campaigning and committee work.[3] Her Sussex home, Scalands Gate, near Robertsbridge, became her main residence. It was, according to Marie, the 'place Hilaire and I loved best in England when we were children. … We were welcome at all times[.] … Our happiest days were when "Aunt Barbara", as we had been taught to call here, was there with us.'[4]

Although Bessie never returned to the front-line of campaigning for women's rights, she retained a keen interest in the progress of the movement, which had increasingly focused on achieving higher education and suffrage for women. Barbara had worked with Emily

1. Quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 231.
2. MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*, 34.
3. Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, 287, 292-6, 309.
4. MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*, 50-1.

Davies to establish a women's college, which opened at Hitchin in 1869 before relocating to purpose-built premises at Girton just outside Cambridge in 1873. Bessie, while still a wealthy woman, had contributed £300 to the College's funds, in the form of a presentation securing Marie a place as a student in the years to come.[5] Barbara and Emily had also taken leading roles in efforts to gain the franchise for women, building on the pioneering petition of 1866 which Bessie had helped organise.

Suffrage campaigning organisations proliferated during this period, as various groups prioritised different aspects of the argument and advocated different strategies. One of the many publications on the subject was a pamphlet entitled *Opinions of Women on Women's Suffrage*, which appeared in April 1879 and to which Bessie contributed. The pamphlet was a collection of statements in support of female suffrage solicited from over one hundred woman who had achieved public recognition for their work in the fields of art, literature, science, medicine, education and philanthropy. The stated aim in compiling this material was to 'refute' the 'objection sometimes put forward … that political representation for women is only desired by women who have failed to find another field for their energies.'[6] The list of contributors demonstrates women's significant contributions to the public life and culture of the day; many were women Bessie knew personally as friends and fellow campaigners. Statements from Barbara Bodichon, Mary Howitt, Anna Mary Howitt-Watts and Elizabeth Rundle Charles appeared in the category of 'women engaged in literature and art,' Elizabeth Garrett Anderson and Elizabeth Blackwell were among the 'women following scientific & professional careers,' while Mary Merryweather and Florence Nightingale appeared as 'women engaged in philanthropic work.' Quotations from the writings of deceased women were also appended, including statements from Anna Jameson,

5. Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 215.
6. Central Committee of the National Society for Women's Suffrage (CCNSWS), *Opinions of Women on Women's Suffrage* (London, 1879), Preface.

Mary Carpenter and Harriet Martineau. Bessie's statement appeared in the section headed 'women engaged in promoting the higher education or the technical education and employment of women,' alongside a contribution from Emily Davies.

The pamphlet's contents reflected the range of pro-suffrage positions which were current at this date and which remained at the heart of the debate in the decades which followed.[7] Some of the contributors argued that the parliamentary franchise should be extended specifically to female ratepayers and householders (who could already vote in some municipal elections), to give parity with the male franchise and on the basis that women who paid taxes had a right to political representation in their own right. Some argued that women should be able to influence legislation which affected them directly and others focused on the symbolic importance of the vote to recognising women as full citizens with political rights and responsibilities. In the context of these disparate arguments, the statement contributed by Bessie was a straightforward defence of democracy and the importance of women playing their rightful role within it, echoing her earliest arguments that the democratic principle (as championed by her father's efforts in support of the 1832 Reform Act) should include women:

> I think that in a time and country wherein the power of the vote is supreme, that power should be increasingly diffused.
> The will of the majority has a tendency to become all-powerful; and, therefore, that majority should be composed of every diverse element, or injustice in a thousand subtle forms will result.
> It is on this ground that I think women should ask for and obtain the suffrage.[8]

7. Christine Bolt, *The Women's Movements in the United States and Britain from the 1790s to the 1920s* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1993), 143.
8. CCNSWS, *Opinions of Women on Women's Suffrage*, 37.

As I have argued elsewhere, the existence of Bessie's contribution to this pamphlet is important evidence that Bessie continued to support the women's rights movement, including the burgeoning campaign for women's suffrage, in the years after her religious conversion and marriage.[9] Despite common assumptions to the contrary (of friends such as Barbara, as well as later scholars), becoming a Catholic did not conflict with Bessie's feminism: she had maintained from the outset that the 'several schools of thought' within the Church gave her 'plenty of room to kick.'[10] She clearly was not swayed by Henry Manning's declaration that 'English womanhood' should 'resist … the immodesty which would thrust women from their private life of dignity and supremacy into the public conflicts of men' or his belief that involvement in political life would 'degrade' rather than 'elevate' women.[11] Indeed the suffrage pamphlet did briefly thrust Bessie back into public conflict with men. Her contribution was singled out by her old adversary the *Saturday Review*, which ridiculed her 'heroic declaration of the supreme all-powerful will of the majority' and labelled her as one of the 'Pythonesses of the female suffrage movement,' intent on seizing political power away from men.[12]

This foray back into the public political arena was short-lived. Bessie's attention remained focused on her children's needs and her financial difficulties. These continued for many years to come: she was eventually declared bankrupt in 1889.[13] A move from Slindon Cottage was forced upon her in 1880, when the landlord reclaimed it for his son's use. Although Bessie considered making La Celle their permanent home at this point, she decided Marie and Hilaire should be educated in England. So they remained in Slindon,

9. Parker Kinch, 'We Who Strive': 930.
10. BRP, letter to BLS, 1864, GCPP Parkes 5/132.
11. Henry Manning, Lecture at St Mary Moorfields, London, 1871. Quoted in Elaine Clark, 'Catholics and the Campaign for Women's Suffrage in England,' *Church Histor*y 73, no. 3 (September 2004): 639, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4146569.
12. 'Women in Council,' *Saturday Review*, April 26, 1879, 519-20.
13. A notice of Bessie's bankruptcy order appeared in the *London Gazette* on July 2, 1889.

moving into Newlands, a smaller property in the village, enabling some further economising of the family finances.[14] Bessie secured a place for Hilaire at the Oratory School in Birmingham, run by Cardinal Newman whom she greatly admired. Hilaire attended the school for seven years from the age of ten in September 1880. His fees were paid for by Elizabeth Phipson, a wealthy distant relative. Bessie kept this fact from Hilaire, who later regretted that his mother never shared her money worries with him.[15] Two surviving letters Bessie sent from La Celle to Hilaire at school demonstrate her affection and concern for him:

> I was intensely relieved to see your handwriting on Friday. It was between 3 weeks & a month since you had written … I thought it probable that some epidemic had got into the school. You see, dear, I am 3 to 400 miles away from you, & I love you very dearly.
>
> My darling – I am troubled about your money … shall I send you a cheque? Don't get into any complication for want of telling me what you require.[16]

Hilaire clearly valued and returned his mother's affection: in one letter to Marie he noted that their mother 'has not written for a week. Is she ill? If so, please do not mention it to her. But if she is not ill, she may have forgotten to write to me, so please remind her.'[17] Marie's account of her brother's schooldays indicates the close emotional connection between the three members of Bessie's little family, even when they were apart. Marie and Hilaire wrote to each other regularly, establishing a much more intimate relationship than Bessie had enjoyed with her brother.[18]

Bessie was anxious to secure a good education for Hilaire, whose intelligence and talent for writing (particularly poetry) was evident from a young age. He thrived at the Oratory, achieving academic success in mathematics and classics, and enjoying sports, drama

14. MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*, 50, 54.
15. MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*, 80.
16. BRP, letters to HB, November 2, 1885, GCPP Parkes 3/3a and July 5, 1886, GCPP Parkes 3/3b.
17. Quoted in MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*, 79.
18. MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*, 60-86.

productions and the camaraderie of his fellow pupils. Bessie was proud of his achievements and reported in letters to Barbara the prizes he had won.[19] Equally important to both Bessie and Hilaire was the spiritual ethos at the heart of the school, which reinforced the family's Catholicism, a faith Hilaire cherished throughout his life.

In contrast to Hilaire's scholastic success, Marie's education was more piecemeal and less satisfactory. Bessie championed the importance of education for girls but struggled to provide a suitable schooling for her own daughter. Despite Bessie's happy memories of her time at Leam School, she limited the time Marie spent away at a boarding school, eventually sending her to a convent school at Mayfield in East Sussex for two years. Marie remembered with affection the nuns who taught her but recalled that she 'felt keenly the separation' from Bessie.[20] Bessie was also lonely with both her children away from her and this may explain why she took Marie out of Mayfield before she had finished her studies. Instead Marie was largely educated at home, apart from a time, while they lived at Great College Street for a short period, when she attended Queen's College in Marylebone.[21]

Marie claimed that her mother's friends were 'appalled by her daughter's lack of ordinary education. I spelt badly, both when writing English and French.'[22] But she valued Bessie's efforts to ensure she and Hilaire were fluent in both their parental languages and was grateful for the freedom Bessie gave her to read what she wished. In this, Bessie upheld the principle she had first articulated in her *Remarks on the Education of Girls*, that parents should 'fearlessly open to [girls] all past and present literature; let them know all and act

19. MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*, 79-80.
20. MBL, *Where Love and Friendship Dwelt*, 1.
21. MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*: 79. Emily Davies's brother Llewelyn was the Principal of Queen's College at this time.
22. MBL, *Where Love and Friendship Dwelt*, 146.

upon the knowledge.'[23] Marie regarded English literature as 'the one subject I can truly say I knew far better than other girls of my age,' laying the foundation for her ambition to follow in her mother's footsteps to become a writer.[24]

The possibility of Marie attending Girton was abandoned and Bessie's financial situation forced her to ask Emily Davies to refund the money she had contributed to the College at its inception. She hoped to sell Marie's £300 presentation to another student for £250, stating the sum 'was riches to me.'[25] Although Barbara supported Bessie's request, Emily refused to deviate from Girton's rule preventing presentations being transferred. Like her failed attempt to secure a loan from Marian Lewes, it was a humiliating situation for Bessie. As Lowndes argues, such financial difficulties and social embarrassments help explain why Bessie never returned to her old world of campaigning.[26]

Marie thought it was 'strange' that Bessie did not make any concerted effort to earn money from her writing during this period, as anything she did publish generated interest.[27] The 1880s were fallow years for Bessie's writing career; she was, as she later described, 'absorbed in responsibilities which left me scant leisure for anything beyond the duties of every hour.'[28] She focused on supporting her children as they grew into young adults, each harbouring aspirations to become professional authors. The departure of tenants from 11 Great College Street in 1887 enabled her to move back to London with Marie for the autumn and winter and make the most, for her children's benefit, of the connections and interest

23. BRP, *Remarks*, 12. The first English book Marie read after learning to read was, she claimed, *Oliver Twist,* after which she 'went on to all the contemporary novels and books of memoirs which came into our home.' See MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 222.
24. MBL, *Where Love and Friendship Dwelt*, 146.
25. BRP, letter to Emily Davies, June 12, 1884, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 215.
26. Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 215-6.
27. MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*, 54-5.
28. BRP, *In a Walled Garden*, 94.

she had maintained with the literary world. According to Marie, Bessie 'knew … almost all' the 'writers of distinction' of the time and 'enjoyed getting in touch with any young poet or novelist whose work she admired.'[29]

Hilaire had already achieved some minor success with the publication of two poems while still at school. Bessie attempted to use her contacts to help him publish more of his work, but a visit to Charles Dickens (son of the novelist and editor of the journal *All Year Round*) at his London office achieved only rejection; Dickens felt Hilaire did not show promise as a writer. Dejected, the young Hilaire made abortive attempts to train for the French navy and then become a farmer in Sussex, although he continued to write and expected Bessie to act as his agent. 'Have you placed any of my verses yet? Do you think it can be done?,' he wrote to her in August 1888. 'Please do not wait to show [the poem] 'The Office of France' to all the world but try to get it taken as soon as possible.'[30]

Bessie also tried to help Marie, by introducing her to writers of her acquaintance including the best-selling authors Margaret Oliphant and Eliza Lynn Lynton. However, Marie felt that these successful women 'did their best to dissuade me from following in their footsteps,' pointing to the gaps in her education as proof that it would be 'impossible for me to earn a living by my pen.' She was saddened that Bessie appeared to agree with this assessment.[31] While Bessie may well have regretted the limitations of Marie's education, she might also have reflected on the changes that the worlds of literature and journalism had undergone since her own youth. The professionalisation of writing over the second half of the nineteenth century had made the literary marketplace a highly competitive place for the growing number of 'women of letters' (the term itself became commonplace in the

29. MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 277
30. Hilaire Belloc (HB), quoted in MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*, 92.
31. MBL, *Where Love and Friendship Dwelt*, 146.

1880s).[32] However, another of Bessie's connections did prove useful to Marie: she visited Henry (now Cardinal) Manning and told him of her desire to be a writer, whereupon he gave her an introduction to W.T. Stead, the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* and pioneer of investigative journalism. Marie's first commission from Stead was to co-author a guide to the 1889 Paris Exhibition. Showing the same spirit of adventure as her mother at the same age, she set off for Paris, although unlike the young Bessie she conceded to be chaperoned by her old nurse, Sarah Mew. She earned 'what seemed to me the enormous sum of ten pounds a week. I sent half to my mother, and Nurse and I lived on the balance in a small, cheap hotel, on the left bank of the Seine.'[33] Stead championed equality for women and mentored several female writers, including Marie, who followed him to work on the *Review of Reviews* after he left the *Pall Mall Gazette*.[34]

Meanwhile Hilaire too was showing evidence of inheriting his mother's youthful enterprising spirit. In October 1890 he launched a monthly literary magazine, the *Paternoster Review.* Bessie and Marie both helped to secure subscribers including Stead and Manning, who also contributed articles.[35] Stead's *Review of Reviews* promoted the *Paternoster* in its pages and the venture provided Hilaire with a foothold in the literary world. However, it was not a financial success. When it folded after six months Bessie was put in a difficult position, as the money of friends who had acted as backers was lost.[36] By this time Hilaire was more concerned with other matters. He had fallen in love with Elodie Hogan, an American from an Irish Catholic family. Elodie had been visiting London with

32. Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters*, 4.
33. MBL, *Where Love and Friendship Dwelt*, 147.
34. Elyssa Warkentin, Introduction to *The Lodger*, Marie Belloc Lowndes (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), xv. For an account of the public and private support Stead provided to the women's rights movements and individual women writers, see Lucy Delap and Maria DiCenzo, '"No One Pretends He Was Faultless": W. T. Stead and the Women's Movement,' *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 0, 16 (2013), https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.656.
35. The December 1890 edition of the *Paternoster Review* included a review by Manning of William Booth's book *Darkest England.* See MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*, 97.
36. MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*, 95-7.

her mother and sister, on their way home to San Francisco at the end of a European tour in the summer of 1890. They were introduced to Marie by Stead and when Mrs Hogan needed to return to America soon after, Bessie invited Elodie and her sister Elizabeth to stay with her and Marie at Great College Street, renting the ground floor rooms while their usual tenant was away. According to Marie, Hilaire fell in love with Elodie at first sight. Over the next few weeks, the two of them explored London together, unchaperoned. When the Hogan sisters departed for America six weeks later, Hilaire, who had only just turned twenty, told Bessie that he intended to marry Elodie.[37]

Bessie, who had once railed against her parents' disapproval of her marriage plans, now faced the responsibility of counselling her own child against an imprudent marriage. Hilaire was very young and in no position to support a wife and family, nor did he have any career prospects to speak of. She advised the couple not to become engaged and when Elodie arrived back in San Francisco she considered entering a convent, in fulfilment of a long-held religious vocation. However, the letters she wrote to Hilaire made clear that she still had feelings for him and he never doubted his love for her. Bessie was not, therefore, surprised when Hilaire suddenly announced a plan to visit his Priestley relatives in Philadelphia and did not try to interfere. He scrabbled together the money for the journey across the Atlantic, borrowing twenty pounds from Bessie's friend Elizabeth Rundle Charles and selling all the books he had won as prizes at the Oratory. (When, after Hilaire's departure, the books were spotted in a shop window in Oxford Street, Bessie bought them back.)[38]

37. MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*, 97-8; A.N. Wilson, *Hilaire Belloc* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), 32.
38. MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*: 99-100; Wilson, *Hilaire Belloc*, 33-4.

Hilaire arrived in New York in February 1891. The following month, as the final number of the *Paternoster Review* was going to press, he arrived in San Francisco. Mrs Hogan allowed him to meet with Elodie, although she disapproved of him and wanted her daughter to take her vows to become a Sister of Charity. By the end of April, Hilaire was back on the East Coast. On April 30th he wrote to Bessie, articulating both his emotional pain and the closeness of his relationship with her: 'My dearest mother, Elodie's refusal came today. It is very final and definite and I must accept it. … You must be a good friend to me, for I have been hit very hard indeed … - and you are evidently the best friend I have.'[39] That autumn he began his year of military service in France, required for him to retain his French citizenship. Bessie, who was distressed by his unhappiness, put aside any practical concerns about the wisdom of marrying without money or prospects and wrote to Elodie. She advised the young woman to think carefully about her feelings:

> [I]f you love my son, you certainly ought not to enter the religious life. … There is nothing wrong in your love for each other, and I cannot in the least understand the misery which you cause the one to the other. Pray my dear child, do not waste your life and his, in a struggle of feeling which seems to me quite wrong and useless, and if you do love him, follow the love simply, as God's will, and come over to me.[40]

Once again, Bessie trusted to love and to God's will as the most valuable guides to happiness. Marie speculated that she was 'influenced, perhaps, by poignant recollections of her own happy married life.[41] Possibly her actions in writing this letter were also guided by her regret at having allowed herself to waste so many years of her own happiness clinging to her unsatisfactory relationship with Sam Blackwell. It is not known if Elodie answered Bessie's letter. It would be several years before the happy union that Bessie envisaged for the couple was brought about.

39. HB, quoted in MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*, 102.
40. BRP, quoted in MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*, 103.
41. MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*: 102-3.

Meanwhile Bessie experienced her own sorrow. Barbara, whose health had continued to decline after her first stroke (particularly after her husband's death in 1885), suffered further attacks of apoplexy and died on 11th June 1891. Bessie's final act of friendship, to the woman who had played such a central role in her personal and professional lives, was to write her obituary for the *Englishwoman's Review*. As Hirsch notes, Bessie's eulogy was a far more detailed and personal one than that penned by Barbara's brother for publication in the *Times*.[42] Barbara's significance as an artist, a philanthropist and a social reformer are all delineated in Bessie's article, to 'place on lasting record' what she had achieved before illness prematurely ended her working life. Bessie's love and admiration for her friend is also evident, in her touching description of the women who she first met as 'a beautiful, active girl of nineteen, ardent in every social cause' and who 'carr[ied] into her work the sunshine of her vigorous intellect and warm heart.'[43] Barbara bequeathed Bessie a small legacy, which she initially used to send money to Hilaire while he was away on military service.[44]

It was typical of Bessie to spend additional funds on her children in this way, even though she continued to struggle with her own finances. She and Marie were concerned about Hilaire's future after he left the French Army, so Marie approached the family solicitor seeking access to money from the Parkes trust fund to enable Hilaire to study at Oxford, as, she maintained, the lawyer 'thought my mother totally unbusinesslike,' as did the fund's trustee.[45] However, it was Bessie who secured Hilaire his place at Balliol, by making the most of a chance encounter with the College's Master and persuading him that the great-

42. Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*: 319. The obituary written by Ben Leigh Smith appeared in the *Times*, June 15, 1891, 6.
43. BRP, 'Madame Bodichon,' *Englishwoman's Review*, July 15, 1891, reproduced in the *Review of Reviews*, August 1891, 162.
44. Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 224.
45. MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*, 122.

great-grandson of Joseph Priestley would be an asset to the College.[46] He flourished as a student, particularly as a speaker in Oxford Union debates. According to Marie his success 'brought Bessie the first gleams of real happiness that she had enjoyed since our father's death.'[47]

With Hilaire at Oxford and Marie's journalistic career flourishing in London, in 1894 Bessie took the opportunity to move into a smaller property in Slindon. Gaston Cottage, which cost £29 in annual rent, was a tiny home for a woman who had grown up in Mayfair. However, it had a pleasing view of the sea and Bessie insisted that the move to the other side of the village did not inconvenience her, as she was 'thoroughly respected all over the neighbourhood.'[48] Having sent her children off into the world, she needed little in the way of creature comforts for herself and Gaston Cottage remained her home for the rest of her life. For the first few years, she shared the cottage with Sarah Mew, who had remained loyal to the family after Bessie's financial downfall, uncomplainingly accepting her change of role from nursemaid to general servant. As Sarah grew elderly and frail, Bessie repaid this loyalty by caring for her and then arranging for her care at a hospice in her final days. After Sarah's death in 1897, Bessie had to ask Hilaire to lend her £10 to pay the fees for Sarah's nursing and burial, an indication that Bessie lacked spare income to cover such expenses.[49] Bessie wrote the epitaph for Sarah's gravestone, describing her as 'Nurse and dear friend of the family of Madame Belloc.'[50]

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46. Ibid., 123.
47. Ibid., 125.
48. BRP, letter to HB, December 8, 1894, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 210. An undated watercolour sketch by Bessie of the view from Gaston Cottage towards the sea is preserved in the Boston Library Archive and reproduced in Jon Eagar, *A South Downs Year. Creation of the Slindon Stone: The Sculptor's Journal* (Hesworth Press, 2016), 20.
49. MBL, *I Too Have Lived*, 268; Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 233-4.
50. Duggan Rees, *A Portrait of Slindon*, 97.

By this time both Bessie's children had married. Marie wed fellow journalist Frederic Lowndes in January 1896 and they set up home at 11 Great College Street. Freddie (as he was known) unswervingly supported his wife in her writing career, which was to prove prolific. Bessie was happy Marie had found both a loving husband and retained her commitment to her work. 'I am extremely thankful,' she wrote, 'that Mary is radically independent, with a small income of her own and an ample power for making money.'[51] Bessie may have initially doubted whether Marie was cut out to be a professional writer but she took great pleasure in watching her daughter's success when it came.

In the same year as Marie's marriage, Hilaire meanwhile finally won Elodie Hogan's hand. After news came that she had left the convent she had entered, Hilaire set out once again for America. This time Bessie accompanied him, taking the opportunity to fulfil a long-held ambition to see her mother's childhood home. They arrived in New York in March 1896, whereupon Hilaire continued west to Elodie in California; they married in June. Meanwhile Bessie visited the Priestleys' Pennsylvanian home in Northumberland and then stayed in Boston, before completing the twelve-day voyage home alone. This expedition was the most far-flung of her travels at a time when she continued to take great pleasure in escaping abroad. In addition to visits to La Celle, to oversee the upkeep of the Belloc house, she travelled widely around France and other parts of the Continent, as well as visiting the Sisters of Charity in Dublin. In 1898, she and Marie travelled together to Florence and she returned to Italy in 1901, this time accompanying her cousin, Sarah Wainwright.[52]

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51. BRP, letter to Jeanette Kelsey (JK), January 28, 1898, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 218. In addition to her journalism, Marie went on to publish over seventy books in her fifty-year career. See David Doughan, 'Lowndes, Marie Adelaide Elizabeth Renée Julia Belloc (1868–1947), author.' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.* 23 Sep. 2004; Accessed 16 Jan. 2021. https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-39089.
52. Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 228-30.

Released from the everyday responsibilities of parenthood, Bessie found opportunities for more than just travel. If her lack of focus on her writing in the 1870s and 1880s can be explained by being caught up in the demands of single parenthood and financial worries, it is no coincidence that a second flourishing of her career began once her children had both left home and established careers and families of their own.[53] She had contributed a reminiscence of Mary Howitt to Hilaire's *Paternoster Review*, which included an account of her friend's conversion to Catholicism late in life, and this piece was commented on positively by other titles,[54] whereupon she wrote more pieces in a similar vein. In 1894, two of her articles appeared in the *Contemporary Review*: 'Dorothea Casaubon and George Eliot' and 'Joseph Priestley in Domestic Life.' Here she made the most of her personal connection to eminent figures and provided a different perspective on them. In 'Joseph Priestley in Domestic Life' she drew upon family archives to illuminate her account of her great-grandfather's eventful life, referring to Priestley's memories of his mother, the influence of an aunt on his upbringing and education, and giving due credit to his 'extremely intelligent and original' wife.[55] Her piece on George Eliot drew upon the insights from her personal friendship with Marian to inform her critique of the character of Dorothea and provide a portrait of its creator. She foregrounded the non-conformist faith that she argued had informed Marian's moral and intellectual development (as it had her own) and defended her against any impropriety in her relationship with George Lewes. She was aware that this relationship was of public (and prurient) interest and felt required to provide her first-hand account of it before it was too late:

> [T]here will come a time when no care for the living and no respectful reticence with regard to the dead, will check the publication of contemporary diaries and private letters. It is because I see plain signs of that time

53. I have been able to identify very few signed publications by Bessie from the 1880s and early 1890s. Four articles on France appeared in *Good Words*: 'The Battle of the Tour Eiffel' in December 1888, 742-3, and three pieces in the January 1890 number ('A Glance at Versailles,' 239-43; 'St Germains,' 376; 'St Cloud,' 543-8). Lowndes lists her article 'Adelaide Procter' as appearing in the *Lamp* in 1892. See Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 263.
54. *Review of Reviews*, March 1891, 263, 271.
55. BRP, 'Joseph Priestley in Domestic Life,' *Contemporary Review*, October 1894, 567-79.

> approaching, that I wish to place on record the exact truth of my conception of George Eliot's character.[56]

These articles were reprinted in a book she published the following year: *In a Walled Garden*.[57] This comprised a collection of essays, the majority of them profiles of figures Bessie admired and many of whom she knew personally. Her memories of Anna Jameson, the Procters, Georgiana Fullerton, the Salvation Army leader Catherine Booth, Henry Manning and Adelaide de Montgolfier appeared here alongside her essays on Priestley and Howitt. Also included were reflections on wider areas of Bessie's personal experience, such as the Franco-Prussian War and the world of literature. The volume was prefaced with a short piece entitled 'A Ghostly Procession,' describing the ghosts of long-dead inhabitants of Slindon and travellers through the village over the centuries, whom she imagined she had sensed as she sat in her secluded garden at Newlands. The book tapped into the mood at the time, in the last decade of the century, for reflection and nostalgia and it sold well.

Bessie shared her pleasure in this unexpected reflowering of her literary career with a new friend. Jeanette Kelsey, an American twenty-one years her junior, was also a writer. It is likely that they met through their mutual friend Julia Pitt Byrne, who died in 1894 and to whom Bessie dedicated *In a Walled Garden.*[58] The two women first met in London but Jeanette lived mostly at her marital home in Pennsylvania, meaning that their friendship was conducted largely through an extensive correspondence. Bessie's letters to Jeanette included confidences about family matters and discussions about literature and politics, for

56. BRP, 'Dorothea Casaubon and George Eliot,' *Contemporary Review*, February 1894, 216.
57. BRP, *In a Walled Garden* (London: Ward and Downey, 1895).
58. The Huntington Library, San Marino, California has recently acquired an archive of Jeanette Kelsey's papers, including her account of her friendship with Julia Pitt Byrne, which at the time of writing had not been made available for viewing. 'News Release,' February 6, 2020, https://www.huntington.org/news/huntington-acquires-walking-purchase-archive.

which they exchanged books and periodicals.[59] In this their friendship echoed Bessie's youthful correspondence with Barbara, with Jeanette fulfilling Bessie's need for loving companionship.[60]

Bessie told Jeanette she had kept *In a Walled Garden* a secret from her children until after it was published, whereupon 'they were so astonished that it was hardly polite!'[61] However, she was disappointed by the muted praise the book received from critics, who described it as containing 'cultivated impressions of remarkable people,' 'pleasantly-written and informing.'[62] Her ruminations on her past had left her contemplating her advancing years; she was not sure if she could 'gather myself sufficiently to achieve anything fresh. The record of my photographs is a warning ... that I am really old, though in my daily life I do not realise it. I have poured all my purpose into my two children.[63] Looking back on her life, she commented that 'It is a very curious experience being absolutely alone for so long; there is no use, dear, in lamenting it … And so I try hard to stand upright.'[64]

Like the majority of widows in the nineteenth century, Bessie never remarried. For many women this was at least in part a result of lack of opportunity: at a time when the female population significantly outnumbered men, there was 'little expectation of remarriage, except for the youngest and the prettiest' women.[65] Already aged over forty when Louis died, with two dependent children, Bessie might not have expected to receive another proposal of marriage. However, according to Marie, she did receive at least one offer, from

59. Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 224. The archive of Bessie's letters to Jeanette Kelsey (Jeanette's letters to Bessie are not extant) are held at the John J. Burns Library, Boston College, Massachusetts. As I have been unable to view this archive, I rely here on the details from it contained in Lowndes' work, although the commentary I present on these letters is my own.
60. Lowndes posits that Jeanette satisfied Bessie's 'thirst for affection and empathy' which the death of Louise Belloc had created. See Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 224.
61. BRP, letter to JK, 1 April 1897, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 226.
62. 'Some Pleasant Reminiscences,' *National Observer*, January 4, 1896, 241; *Times*, November 8, 1895, 14.
63. BRP, letter to JK, 1 April 1897, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 227.
64. BRP, letter to JK, 9 April 1897, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 231.
65. Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 230.

Richard Potter, father of the sociologist Beatrice Webb and her eight sisters, who proposed 'after what seemed … an extremely short interval' following his wife's death in 1882.[66] She never seems to have seriously considered marrying again. When she was first widowed, she had imagined entering the order of the Sisters of Charity once her children had left home, as 'I did not think I should be too old at sixty.'[67] Once past that age, and with Jeanette's encouragement, she instead found herself very capable of 'standing upright' as a single woman in the public sphere and keen to re-establish herself as a literary name.

A second edition of *In a Walled Garden* appeared in 1896. (It evidently sold well, running into a fifth edition in 1900.[68]) The following year Bessie's second collection of memoirs, *A Passing World*, appeared.[69] Bessie was pleased that she had been able to quickly secure her publisher's interest in the project and reported with some relish Marie's surprise at this: 'though my Mary is always most respectful to Mamma, I felt in my bones that my dear clever girl child didn't one bit believe that I should ever make myself heard in the modern world.'[70] She also showed herself capable of business negotiation, securing 'an advance on the first thousand copies.'[71] In her book she took the opportunity, in the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, to pay tribute to 'the passing world' of men and women from earlier decades of Victoria's reign who were now fading from public memory. She focused on a few celebrated figures, including Benjamin Franklin, but many of her chosen subjects, such as the writer and Catholic nun Augusta Theodosia Drane, reflected Bessie's more personal literary and religious interests.

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66. *The Diaries and Letters of Marie Belloc Lowndes*, ed. Susan Lowndes (London: Chatto & Windus, 1971), 244. Aside from finding Potter's unseemly haste to remarry distasteful, Bessie presumably did not relish becoming a stepmother to nine girls!
67. BRP, letter to BLS, December 31, 1880, quoted in MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*, 56.
68. Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 261.
69. BRP, *A Passing World* (London: Ward and Downey, 1897).
70. BRP, letter to JK, April 9, 1897, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 228.
71. Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 228.

The introductory chapter of *A Passing World* takes the reader through Bessie's lifetime of literary, philanthropic and political connections, beginning with the poet Samuel Rogers (whose famous literary breakfasts she had attended as a girl), through Angela Burdett Coutts and Lady Eastlake to Lord Brougham and the NSPSS. Several pages are devoted to the political and artistic achievements of Barbara, whom she described as 'the most powerful woman I have ever known.'[72] She also once again exploited her personal associations with individuals whom she knew would be of interest to the public, reproducing previously unpublished letters sent to her by the now-deceased Robert Browning, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Henry Longfellow, the latter including the poet's praise of her *La Belle France*. However, she made clear she would not deviate from the maxim '*De mortuis nil nisi bonum.'*[73]

It was Bessie's references to Rossetti and Browning which attracted the most critical attention. The *Times* and *Academy* reviewers both quoted at length from Browning's letter, taking particular interest in the comments on Thomas Carlyle it contained. Although the *Academy* found the quality of the collection as a whole variable, Bessie was described as having 'a very pretty knack of reminiscence writing … At her best Mme. Belloc is very good indeed.'[74] Bessie was delighted with this reception in the national press, especially in the *Times*: 'It means the fact of the book's existence being carried to the ends of the earth. The principal paper in Scotland says it contains "A fine essay on Benjamin Franklin". That is just what pleases me. I aim at the highest class of writing.'[75] Bessie had confidence in her writing voice, telling Jeanette 'I have always had something to say to my fellow creatures if they would listen.' Although she went on to claim 'I have never really troubled

72. BRP, *A Passing World*, 21.
73. Translation: 'Speak only good of the dead.' BRP, *A Passing World*, 33.
74. *Times,* April 30, 1897: 4; *Academy*, June 12, 1897, 605-6.
75. BRP, letter to JK, [1897], quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 227.

myself whether they would listen or not,'[76] she clearly enjoyed seeing her writing praised once more in the press.

Two more publications swiftly followed, this time works exclusively devoted to reflections on religious topics. The first of these was *Historic Nuns* (1898), another collective biography, which recounted the lives of four nineteenth-century Catholic sisters: Mary Aikenhead, Catherine M'Aulay, Madame Duchesne and Mother Seton of Emmettsburg.[77] It is characteristic of Bessie's continued interest in the lives of women that her first volume devoted entirely to explicitly Catholic subject-matter focused on women in the Church. Like her earlier *EWJ* articles on Catholic women religious, she chose here to focus on women who had founded active orders and led evangelical missions which performed practical work in the community. She stressed their talents as organizers, motivators and leaders of their communities, working alongside male clerics as equals. She was in effect presenting them as feminist role models. Carmen Mangion argues that nineteenth-century female religious communities are evidence of female autonomy and self-determination which, although 'eschewing an explicitly feminist discourse,' can be read as a form of 'feminist practice.'[78] Bessie's account of the work of these 'historic nuns' certainly fits with such a perspective, helping further establish how Bessie's engagement with her chosen faith reflected an evolution of her radical feminist outlook rather than a withdrawal from it.

76. BRP, letter to JK, 1 April 1897, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 226.
77. BRP, *Historic Nuns* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1898).
78. Carmen Mangion 'Women, religious ministry and female institution-building' in *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800-1940*, ed. Sue Morgan and Jacqueline deVries (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 87. Mangion is drawing here upon Jane Rendall's definition of 'feminist practice' as 'the association of women together for a feminist purpose' (see Rendall, *The Origins of Modern Feminism*, 1–2). Mangion writes 'Jane Rendall and Olive Banks have both argued that the prevailing [religious] doctrine of female moral superiority limited women's feminist vision, yet scholarship on the sisters and deaconesses reveals a genuine radicalism inherent in their mission.' This argument can be extended to Bessie's writings about these sisterhoods.

By 1899 Bessie was well-known as one who 'delights the public with her published recollections.'[79] However, *Historic Nuns* eschewed an autobiographical standpoint. The one exception was her brief comment, when describing the cosy domesticity of the convent building established by Mary Aikenhead in Dublin, that 'I have sat for hours in its parlour, under circumstances which have stamped its every line into my heart and imagination.'[80] This remark hints at Bessie's personal experience of these sisterhoods as welcoming and supportive communities of women. Barbara had not been able to comprehend why a champion of women's rights would choose to submit herself to the patriarchal hierarchy of the Catholic Church, a puzzlement which has been echoed subsequently by scholars of feminist history. Bessie's depiction of these sisterhoods in *Historic Nuns* shows that, for her, the Church was not an oppressive institution, but a site of female agency and solidarity, of a kind she had not found in the other female communities within which she had worked.

Bessie's focus in *Historic Nuns* was on the sisters' work, not the substance of their belief or forms of worship. She feared that what she termed this 'Anti Ritualist' stance would limit the book's appeal amongst a Catholic readership.[81] Instead it was received well by the Catholic press and beyond. One review praised both the 'vivid strokes [and] revelations of character and energy' in Bessie's style and declared that the book was 'well worth reading,' as a 'page of modern history' and evidence of the 'very noble deeds … done by modern women.'[82] Bessie commented to Hilaire that the book had 'caught on' much more than she had anticipated, giving her 'quite a place.'[83] She sought to capitalise on this success with publication of *The Flowing Tide* (1900), a collection of essays tracing the development of Catholicism in England during her lifetime.[84] In contrast to *Historic Nuns*, here she again

79. 'Reminiscences of Old Hastings,' *Temple Bar Magazine*, October 1899, 269.
80. BRP, *Historic Nuns*, 38.
81. BRP, letter to JK, 7 December 1898, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 227
82. 'A Group of Modern Women,' *The Speaker: a Liberal Review*, 22 July 1899, 82-3.
83. BRP, letter to HB, 21 February 1899, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 228.
84. BRP, *The Flowing Tide* (London: Sands & Co, 1900).

placed her experiences and personal connections to influential figures at the centre of her writing. She began by tracing her own faith journey from her non-conformist upbringing, through her encounters with Catholicism in her youth, acknowledging the influence of Adelaide Procter and Monsignor Daniel Gilbert, who had baptised her, on her growing affinity with the Church. In a chapter entitled 'The Three Great Cardinals' she made use of her personal acquaintance with Wiseman, Newman and Manning in her account of their contributions to the Church. In these respects, the volume can be read as a faith autobiography, delineating the experiences and the people through which she came to embrace the Church as her spiritual home.

However, the book also argues more broadly for the Catholic Church's positive contribution to society in England, across Europe and in America. She sought to counter the ignorance of such institutions which she perceived amongst non-Catholics, recounting the good work of Catholic sisterhoods and charitable institutions, such as the East End night refuge established by Gilbert. Unsurprisingly, she stressed the importance of women to the work of the Church, including the part played by English Catholic sisters in the nursing work of Florence Nightingale, as well as paying tribute (as she had done in the *EWJ*) to the work of Irish and French nuns. The volume was by no means only a tribute to charitable good works, however. Bessie included a chapter on Catholic Socialism and discussed Manning's support for the London dockers during the Great Dock Strike of 1889, to demonstrate the more politically engaged work of the Church for social justice. This chimed with Bessie's long-held view that the most pernicious effects of capitalism on the working classes needed to be mitigated through co-operation and trade unionism as well as charity, and that Christianity should play a leading role in this movement. Marie believed her mother

was 'certainly a Socialist, for she regarded all men and women as equal, and proved her belief in many practical ways.'[85]

It appears Bessie found *The Flowing Tide* difficult to complete and she lost patience with the publishing process. Before the book was finished, she told Jeanette that she did not wish to publish again except anonymously. 'You know I do not care a d– about literary fame,' she wrote. 'I have more than I want, and I have seen so much of it.'[86] Yet at Jeanette's request she did publish, in 1904, one more signed volume: a slim collection of poems entitled *In Fifty Years*.[87] For this work, she selected twenty poems on religious themes from across her writing life, including three more recently-composed pieces which do not appear to have been published previously. The poems were dated and arranged in chronological order, beginning with pieces she had composed aged twenty and which had appeared in her first printed collection in 1852. The collection reflected significant continuities in her poetry, including her interest in capturing a sense of place. Often this attention was focused on celebrating long traditions of religious devotion embodied in places of worship (as in 'The Cathedral,' 'Carisbrooke Church' and 'The Lateran Cloisters') or specific landscapes ('The Coelian Hill' and 'On the Bridge at Poissy'). Her enjoyment at working with the medieval ballad form is also reflected in several poems, including 'The Monk of Marmouiter,' 'The Curé of Ploërmel' and 'The Massacre at Avignon,' full of dramatic legends of ghostly apparitions and spiritual faith in the face of the horrors of war. 'In Memoriam – S.G.A., July 1893,' dedicated to Sarah Atkinson, shows Bessie again using poetry to celebrate female friendship, this time marking the importance of a spiritual rather than literary mentor.

85. MBL, 1948, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 214.
86. BRP, letter to JK, November 11, 1899, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 228.
87. BRP, *In Fifty Years* (London: Sands & Co., 1904). The Preface describes the book as 'A slight record of religious thoughts, some of which are dated. Collected by the wish of a dear American friend.'

The chronological arrangement of the collection also encourages an autobiographical reading of the volume, as a poetic companion to her religious reflections in *The Flowing Tide.* From this perspective, Bessie can be seen charting, through her poems, the development of her religious thought, beginning with the youthful urgency of action in poems such as 'Warning' (which had been the first poem in her first collection), where 'Time rushing past me with the noise of wings, / Woke up my sleeping spirit' and the speaker urges ''Gainst he returning come, Soul, work and pray.'[88] A more acquiescent stance is prominent in later poems, where trusting to God's will is a frequent motif. Read as a whole, *In Fifty Years* makes clear the centrality of Bessie's faith to her art and her lived experience. Marie noted that Bessie 'rarely spoke of religion.'[89] *In Fifty Years* demonstrates the importance for her of poetry as a way to express her faith. It also confirms the shift in her poetic ambitions, from the Shelleyan poet-as-prophet or the politically-engaged poet in the mould of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, towards an interest in writing more explicitly devotional poetry.

Bessie explained to a friend that *In Fifty Years* had 'not really been published in the general sense; [it was] kept out of the "market" as too intimate to be advertised.'[90] It therefore made little impact on the literary world and appears only to have been reviewed in the Catholic press, where it was favourably received as a valued publication by a respected Catholic writer. The *Irish Monthly* welcomed the publication of 'this tardy and incomplete gathering of her poems' and described it as 'a holy, thoughtful, and musical little book,' while the *Tablet* declared 'There is more poetry in the sixty pages of this modest little pamphlet than

88. BRP, *In Fifty Years*, 15.
89. MBL, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 215.
90. BRP, letter to Emma Jane Catherine Cobden Unwin, June 13, 1904, West Sussex Records Office, Chichester, Cobden Mss 973/7.

in a cartload of average verse.'[91] This was not quite the end of Bessie's writing career, however, as she continued to seek out opportunities to make much-needed money from her pen. When Hilaire became the literary editor of the *Morning Post*, she offered her services as a reviewer, telling him 'I can tackle any work except mathematical science!'[92]

In fact, she had reached the stage in her literary career when her name as a writer was well-enough established that she did not need to produce further publications. In a *Manchester Guardian* report in June 1906 on a London dinner attended by a 'hundred and eighty-eight women writers,' one of the few attendees mentioned by name was 'Madame Belloc.' In a telling piece of gendered journalism, this report on a gathering of professional women writers focused on what the attendees had worn rather than on their literary standing. Bessie's 'black dress in perfect taste' was noted, as was 'her white hair and beautiful old lace head-dress' which made her 'the most picturesque figure in the room.'[93] Nevertheless, her presence at this dinner (and her name in the report) demonstrate that she maintained well into her seventies her connections with the worlds of literature and women's professional networking. Furthermore, the existence of these annual Women Writers' Dinners (first held in 1889) exemplifies the expansion and increased public prominence of such networking, in the half-century since Bessie's first efforts to promote women's employment rights.[94]

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91. 'Notes on New Books,' *Irish Monthly* 32, no. 369 (1904), 174. Statement from the *Tablet* quoted in a letter from Margaret Howitt to BRP, May 17, 1904, GCPP Parkes 7/3.
92. BRP, undated letter, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 228. HB was the *Post*'s literary editor from 1905 to 1910.
93. 'Our London Correspondence,' *Manchester Guardian*, 27 June 1906, 6.
94. The history of the Women Writers' dinners (originally the 'Literary Ladies' dining club) is outlined in Linda Hughes, 'A Club of Their Own: The "Literary Ladies," New Women Writers, and "Fin-de-Siècle" Authorship.' *Victorian Literature and Culture* 35, no. 1 (2007): 233-60, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40347133.

Time was marching on, however, and Marie and Hilaire's careers increasingly eclipsed their mother's. The *Review of Reviews,* in its 'Hundred Best Books of 1904,' noted that 'She who was Bessie Parkes, and has long been Madame Belloc, deserves hearty congratulations this autumn on the almost simultaneous appearance of the first novel of each of her two children.'[95] Bessie regarded the literary success of her children as 'consolation' for her own unfulfilled ambitions as a writer, which she felt she had not achieved because of the all-encompassing grief she had felt at Louis's death, 'which attended all my life; hammered me together - and broke what might have been a fine literary career.'[96] She followed Marie and Hilaire's careers closely and was proud of how they had 'made out,' even though she was aware, as Hilaire became increasingly well-known, that some people now took an interest in her only because she was his mother.[97]

Hilaire's public profile was raised both by his prodigious output as a writer and his short-lived political career: he was elected the Liberal Party MP for South Salford in the 1906 General Election. By entering Parliament, he became part of the world with which his English grandfather had been closely associated, and to which Bessie herself had once had many connections, amongst parliamentarians sympathetic to her campaigns. Bessie acknowledged this continuance of the Parkes' tradition when, after Hilaire's maiden address in the House of Commons, she wrote addressing him as 'my dear Chip off our old Block.'[98] Yet although Bessie was always proud of her son's achievements, their political outlooks did not necessarily coincide. On the subject of women's suffrage, Hilaire's views reflected the influence of Henry Manning (who had become his spiritual mentor) rather than his feminist mother. He declared that the female franchise was 'immoral,' on the

95. 'The Hundred Best Books of 1904,' *Review of Reviews*, November 1904, 539.
96. BRP, letter to JK, 1910, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 239.
97. BRP, letter to HB, July 27, 1909, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 238.
98. BRP, letter to HB, May 10, 1906, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 235.

grounds that 'bringing … one's mothers and sisters and wives into the political arena disturbs the relation of the sexes.'[99] When the question of giving a limited group of women the parliamentary vote was considered by Parliament in 1910, Hilaire's contribution to the Commons debate made clear his conservative attitude. He chivalrously praised women's intelligence and the important moral influence of 'the wife and the mother' but argued that enfranchising women householders would give political power to 'every woman who has quarrelled with her husband and is keeping a separate establishment; … every one of that sex who has a grievance against her Creator.'[100]

This misogynistic view of women went against all Bessie's sensibilities, yet she tactically refrained from direct criticism of her son. She wrote to Hilaire that 'I have bought the Verbatim record of your suffrage speech … and greatly admire it … without adopting all your conclusions. I should like to see certain grades of educated women admitted to the vote.'[101] While support for enfranchising 'certain … educated women' was a more conservative stance than the one Bessie had taken back in 1879, it is important to note that Bessie did continue to support women's suffrage and was not swayed by the rhetoric of her outspoken son.[102] While she did not actively participate in suffrage campaigns, she encouraged and supported others in their endeavours. Helen Blackburn, in her account of the suffrage movement, described Bessie as a 'pioneer' who, 'after giving much strenuous work and good writing to the *Englishwoman's Journal*, passed from the scene of active co-

99. HB (n.d.), quoted in Wilson, *Hilaire Belloc*, 164–65. HB's anti-feminist views are also discussed in Parker Kinch, 'We Who Strive': 931-2.
100. HB, Parl. Deb. H.C., vol. 19, col. 97-98, July 11, 1910. Although the Bill was defeated, Hilaire's vocal opposition to the women's suffrage cause led to an abrupt end to his parliamentary career. Suffragist activists put pressure on his local Liberal Party association to deselect him in favour of a pro-suffrage candidate, with the result that he lost the Party nomination and withdrew from the December 1910 election. He never returned to Parliament. See Jo Vellacott, *From Liberal to Labour with Women's Suffrage: The Story of Catherine Marshall* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 105.
101. BRP, letter to HB, July 10, 1910, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women,* 236.
102. For a discussion of the influence of Hilaire's antifeminist reputation on interpretations of Bessie's biography, see Conclusion, below.

operation on her marriage … Nevertheless, she still watches the progress made, and has given the present writer helpful information.'[103]

Marie described herself as being 'in close sympathy' with her mother on women's rights and 'from childhood … a keen suffragist' who took part in suffrage processions with her young daughter.[104] In 1913 she was vice-president of the Women Writers' Suffrage League, which campaigned for women's equal enfranchisement with men.[105] The League provided 'a base within which women writers could … construct a sense of female agency by giving public voice to communal problems.'[106] In this it followed the spirit of Bessie's work at Langham Place over fifty years before. Marie was also a founding member of the Society for Women Journalists and throughout her career she encouraged and supported aspiring writers.[107] In her writing, including her fiction, she explored debates about women's domestic and social roles, just as Bessie had done.[108] Although Hilaire's anti-suffrage stance echoed that of leading Catholic clerics, Bessie and Marie did not find their support of the suffrage cause conflicted with their faith. Like many other Catholic women, they felt justified in defying clerical opposition to the suffrage campaign.[109]

Bessie maintained to the end of her life a keen interest in the world around her, reading widely in literature, politics and religion. She regularly travelled from Slindon to London to attend meetings (including those of the Catholic Reading Society) as well as to hear

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103. Helen Blackburn, *Women's Suffrage: A Record of the Women's Suffrage Movement in the British Isles* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1902), 49.
104. MBL, n.d., quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 236.
105. Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement*, 712.
106. Sowon S. Park, 'The First Professional: The Women Writers' Suffrage League,' *Modern Language Quarterly* 58:2 (1997): 186, https://doi.org/10.1215/00267929-58-2-185.
107. MBL, *Where Love and Friendship Dwelt*, 147.
108. Warkentin, introduction to *The Lodger*, xviii; Warkentin, introductory note to *Short Stories by Marie Belloc Lowndes: A Monstrous Regiment of Women* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), 1.
109. Elaine Clark provides an account of some of these women, particularly those associated with the Catholic Women's Suffrage Society, in 'Catholics and the Campaign for Women's Suffrage in England,' *Church History* 73, no. 3 (September 2004): 635-65, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4146569

concerts and visit friends. These included Lucy Field, one of her teachers at Leam School to whom she had been so devoted in her teenage years. Lucy now lived alone in Hampstead on very limited means and Bessie travelled regularly to see her. When Lucy died in 1909, aged eighty-nine, an anonymous obituary appeared in the *Times* bearing the hallmarks of Bessie's writing style and her loyal friendship: 'Miss Field was a woman of remarkable personality, and she retained her strong intellect to the last. She will be much regretted, not only by the members of her own family, but also by many old pupils and other attached friends.'[110] Another rekindled friendship was with Margaret Howitt, the younger daughter of Bessie's beloved mentor Mary Howitt and, like her mother, a convert to Catholicism later in life. Surviving letters from Margaret to Bessie show how much this old friend valued Bessie's correspondence, their shared reminiscences of people and places from their past, and Bessie's news of her children and grandchildren.[111]

Bessie was an attentive and affectionate 'Grannie,' supporting Marie and Elodie by frequently having her grandchildren stay with her, even though she found this exhausting and felt she was not by inclination 'devoted to children.'[112] By 1904, Marie and Freddie had three children, Charles, Elizabeth and Susan, while Hilaire and Elodie had five: Louis, Eleanor, Elizabeth, Hilary and Peter. While Marie and Freddie raised their family in London, Hilaire and Elodie moved out of the capital to establish their family home near Bessie in Sussex, firstly in Slindon before buying a property at Shipley, near Horsham. This choice reflected both Hilaire's love of Sussex and his close relationship with his mother. When Elodie fell seriously ill in December 1913, Hilaire asked Bessie to drive the fifteen miles from Slindon to Shipley to be with them. When Elodie passed away on 2nd February

110. 'Miss Field,' *Times*, June 18, 1909, 11. Bessie's continued affection for Lucy Field is also attested to by the copy of *La Belle France* held at Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library, Museums and Press, which is inscribed 'Miss Lucy Field In Memoriam La Celle St. Cloud with the author[']s love.'
111. Margaret Howitt, letters to BRP, 1891-1922, GCPP Parkes 7/30a-35.
112. BRP, letter to JK, April 23, 1901, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 233.

1914, he sent a telegram telling Bessie 'I shall need all your help.'[113] He never recovered from Elodie's death, wearing black for the rest of his life and never remarrying. Bessie shared in his grief, writing to Jeanette that 'You know I really loved her. She came to me first very young, at 19.'[114] Bessie's love and support was vital to Hilaire and his children at this time of crisis and in the years to come. Bessie and Hilaire wrote to each other almost daily until near the end of her life.

As rumours of war between France and Germany grew stronger in the coming months, Bessie feared the worst, remembering the horrors she had witnessed in the conflict between the two nations four decades before. Once war was declared, she was convinced that the Germans would be defeated as 'they cannot possibly stand against all Europe and the Russians coming up behind.'[115] Marie's daughter Susan came to stay with Bessie to escape possible bombing in London and Bessie enjoyed her company, describing her to Jeanette as the cleverest of her grandchildren and a 'very bright young woman.'[116] She also enjoyed, soon after her eighty-eighth birthday, making the effort to visit Hilaire's youngest sons at their boarding school; 'I braved the intense heat yesterday … and I trundled down to Bognor to see the dear little men. I think they were very glad to see me, and I tipped them half-crowns, and cuddled them.'[117]

The war took its toll on Bessie's family, as it did for so many others. Marie's son Charles signed up for the army as soon as he was eighteen in 1916 and was hospitalised by a wound sustained in his first battle in Flanders. He was awarded the Military Cross for 'exceptional gallantry' and returned to the front. He spent a weekend with Bessie while on leave in

113. MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*, 179-80.
114. BRP, letter to JK, February 3, 1914, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women,* 247.
115. BRP, letter to HB, August 27, 1914, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women,* 246.
116. BRP, letter to JK, February 14, 1912, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women,* 249.
117. BRP, letter to HB, July 12, 1917, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women,* 250.

February 1918. Hilaire's oldest son, Louis, was a sapper at the Somme where he suffered gas poisoning in August 1917. When he recovered, he joined the Royal Flying Corps and in August 1918 his plane went down near Cambrai. He was reported missing a few days later and for several months the family held out hope that he had been taken prisoner and was alive, before they received confirmation of his death. Meanwhile Marie and Freddie received news from France in November 1918 that Charles was close to death with typhoid fever. They drove from Calais to Rouen 'in a captured German staff-car' and found him in time to bring him home and slowly nurse him to recovery.[118]

After the war, the pace of change was rapid in all aspects of society, including women's rights. Bessie lived long enough to witness key legislation enshrining women's political and legal rights. Some British women gained the parliamentary vote in 1918 and in 1919 restrictions were removed which had prevented women being jurors and magistrates and entering the professions. The 1923 Matrimonial Causes Act enabled women to sue for divorce solely on the grounds of their spouse's adultery, as men had long been able to do. There is no record of Bessie exercising her right to vote for the first time in the December 1918 General Election, but it is hard to believe that she would not have done so. Despite her advancing years, she remained alert and mobile for a while longer. In July 1919, aged ninety, she travelled by train with her maid, Daisy Hersee, on an 'expedition' to Cornwall to visit Margaret Howitt, whom she had not seen for fifty years and who (aged eighty herself) 'came running to meet me on the Platform' when they arrived.[119] She hoped to travel to the United States the same year, but could not go. She was still keen to write and mentioned in a letter to Margaret in October 1921 that she was planning a piece entitled

118. Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women,* 248, 251; Wilson, *Hilaire Belloc*, 236-7.
119. BRP, letter to Millicent Ludlow, July 28, 1919, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women,* 252.

'Trafalgar Square,' describing her childhood memories of the area as a 'thick wood' where she sat making 'yards of daisy chains.'[120]

It was in the next few years that Bessie began to decline physically and mentally. Jeanette visited her during a trip to England in 1922 and found her frail and weak. Marie asked Jeanette not to mention travelling, as Bessie 'would at once make plans to go with her, in order to get to La Celle-Saint Cloud, for she still believed she was a hale women of sixty.'[121] By 1923 Bessie was no longer able to read or write and relied heavily on Daisy, who wrote to Jeanette on her behalf: 'She kisses your photo most days and often looks at various ones of you and your family and talks of you but does not seem to think of letters. … Madame is very much a child now - good and lovable but so different.'[122]

By early 1925 she had 'failed rapidly, recognising people but losing the thread of what was said to her.'[123] She was eventually bedridden and on 20th March she fell unconscious. She died quietly in her sleep three days later, less than three months before her ninety-sixth birthday. Hilaire, for whom Bessie had been a constant source of support, took comfort in her peaceful passing and his belief that she had been happy in her later years:

> I am profoundly grateful that she had so prolonged a life of complete and unbroken happiness. For the last 35 years she lived in her own way, quite contented on the tiny income which survived the wreck of her fortune and seeing all whom she desired to see and in absolute peace and plenitude. Her death was consonant with all this. It is rare indeed that such long happiness and such a quiet passage out of this detestable world is granted. It was a reward.[124]

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120. This comment is mentioned in a letter from Margaret Howitt to MBL after BRP's death, March 30, 1925, GCPP Parkes 7/36.
121. Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women,* 253.
122. Daisy Hersee, letter to JK, October 29, 1923, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women,* 253.
123. HB, letter to his son Hilary, March 1925, quoted in Wilson, *Hilaire Belloc*, 303.
124. HB, letter to a friend, March 27, 1925, quoted in Joseph Pearce, *Old Thunder: A Life of Hilaire Belloc* (London: HarperCollins, 2003), 225.

Almost all of Bessie's contemporaries had passed away long before her. Even Emily Davies, the only other member of the 1866 suffrage petition committee to live long enough to see women gain the vote in 1918, had died in 1921. Margaret Howitt, when sending her condolences to Marie on 'the loss of your very gifted & remarkable mother,' wrote that 'To me her departure leaves a great blank - a sort of landslip … a feature of seventy five years of my existence gone.'[125]

Bessie had once remarked that she had 'lived in so many worlds that I hardly know where I belong. I have lived in politics, in philanthropy, in literature, with English nobility, with tailors and sempstresses, with people of every shade of Faith and unfaith.'[126] Her obituaries acknowledged these wide-ranging facets of her life, listing the many illustrious literary figures to whom she was connected but also paying tribute to her own literary and political achievements. The *Times* noted that 'All her life she wrote,' listing several of her later publications and commenting on the 'curious elusive charm of all her writing … which charmed all cultivated readers.' But it also recorded other aspects of her 'singularly interesting' life, including her role in the 'first petition ever presented to Parliament asking for some measure of woman suffrage.'[127] The *Daily Mirror* published a photograph of an elderly Bessie; the accompanying caption also noted her role in the 1866 suffrage petition.[128] The *Tablet* commented that 'In the passing of Madame Belloc … there goes out from among us one of the most interesting as well as one of the most charming Catholic women of her period. … Long before the rise of the modern suffragist organizations she was an ardent worker for the feminist cause.'[129] News of her death was even reached the American press, where a paper in Northumberland, Pennsylvania reported that the

125. Margaret Howitt, letter to MBL, March 30, 1925, GCPP Parkes 7/36.
126. BRP, letter addressed to 'My precious dear,' November 9, 1903, GCPP Parkes 3/6.
127. 'Madame Belloc,' *Times*, March 24, 1925: 10.
128. Newspaper clipping dated March 25, 1925, GCPP Parkes 11/10.
129. 'Et Cetera,' *Tablet*, March 28, 1925, GCPP Parkes 11/12.

‘granddaughter’ [sic] of Joseph Priestley had passed away. Sadly, given Bessie’s dedication to the writing of poetry, this was the only obituary to refer to this aspect of her writing, describing her as a ‘poetess.’[130]

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These tributes demonstrate the public interest in Bessie and the respect expressed at the time of her death for her long and note-worthy life. Her feminist activism was recollected, nearly sixty years after she stepped away from that role to embrace marriage and motherhood. Her later career, as a writer of reminiscences and reflections on the worlds in which she had lived, were also recognised as worthy of record. Nearly a century later, Bessie’s significance - as a feminist, a writer and a woman who witnessed and experienced much in her long life - deserves to be better remembered.

130. Cutting from unknown newspaper, GCPP Parkes 11/11.

Conclusion

Bessie once rejected Jeanette Kelsey's suggestion that she had lived a 'wonderful' life, writing 'I do not think so, dear. I have not planned my life, but when I have seen a clear duty and heard a clear call I have been able to respond instantly without looking to consequences; and this is why barriers have fallen before my steps.'[1] Responding to the call of duty provided Bessie throughout her life with the 'steadfast aim' she had first sought as a teenager. Like many women of her time, religious duty and a sense of responsibility for others came before personal ambition. Rather than limiting what she could achieve, it drove her to fight for women's rights and to act where she saw suffering. It also gave her the strength to endure terrible personal loss. Her contribution to dismantling the barriers of sexual discrimination benefitted and inspired her daughter's and subsequent generations of women. Yet, as this thesis has demonstrated, this is one part of her wider and longer biography, shaped by the same determined and pioneering spirit, which enabled her to ultimately achieve individual success and personal contentment as well as to initiate historic change.

After Bessie's death, her daughter Marie sought to preserve her mother's legacy. Interest in chronicling the history of the women's movement burgeoned around the time universal parliamentary suffrage for women was achieved in 1928, as evidenced by the popularity of Ray Strachey's *"The Cause,"* published that year.[2] Strachey's account of nineteenth-century feminist campaigns recorded Barbara Bodichon's efforts to achieve legal, professional and educational advances for women but only fleetingly acknowledged Bessie's contributions to the movement, not even referring to her role as editor of the *EWJ*.

1. BRP, letter to JK February 18, 1906, quoted in Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 238.
2. Ray Strachey, *"The Cause": A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain* (1928, repr. London: Virago, 1978).

Marie wrote several accounts of aspects of her mother's life, the first of which highlighted Bessie's significance as a central figure amongst the women campaigners whose efforts 'transform[ed] the lives of literally millions of their fellow countrywomen, then living and unborn.'[3] Marie's accounts of her parents' courtship and marriage and her own early life each touched upon Bessie's feminist activism;[4] however, her chronicle of Bessie's life before her marriage, which dealt with this more extensively, was never published.[5] After Marie's death, her daughters, Susan Lowndes Marques and Elizabeth Iddesleigh, assumed stewardship of Bessie's legacy, commissioning Margaret Compton to write a biography of Bessie (again never published),[6] before depositing an extensive collection of Bessie's papers at the archive of Girton College, Cambridge in 1982. More recently, Susan's daughter, Ana Vicente, writing as Emma Lowndes, assumed responsibility to 'conclude the unfinished project,' drawing upon the Girton archives and other family papers to write her own account of Bessie's life, with the aim of 'shar[ing] the itinerary of a woman who was committed to the never-ending task of improving the world at large by improving women's lot.'[7] This thesis builds on all this work and is indebted to the careful collation of available archival material provided by Lowndes' memoir.

This passing-on of Bessie's life story through her female descendants models in miniature the generational, quasi-familial shape of the women's movement itself, with women acting as maternal mentors to younger women, and each generation creating its own versions of the political and artistic sisterhoods within which Bessie found inspiration and support. Scholarly interest in Victorian feminism and the Langham Place Group resurfaced as the

3. MBL, 'Some Little Known Beginnings,' *Catholic Citizen*, February 15, 1932, 10. The *Catholic Citizen* had originally been the newspaper of the Catholic Women's Suffrage Society.
4. MBL, *I Too Have Lived*; *The Young Hilaire Belloc*; *Where Love and Friendship Dwelt*.
5. MBL, 'Before She Found Arcadia,' unpublished typescript and notes, c. 1945, GCPP Parkes 16.
6. Margaret Compton, 'Prelude to Arcadia: The early life and friendships of Bessie Parkes,' unpublished typescript, GCPP Parkes 15/70.
7. Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women*, 5-6.

fields of women's history and feminist history developed out of the Women's Liberation Movement from the 1960s. This historiography, drawn upon in this thesis, acknowledges Bessie's central importance to the feminist networks of the mid-nineteenth century but also often focuses on her cautious approach to campaigning, presenting her as a conservative force within these networks. In the 1990s, Bessie was also portrayed in radio and television drama-documentaries, in two series retelling the stories of pioneering women from history: *A Lady's Portion* (1994) and *Free-Minded Albion's Daughter* written by Lavinia Murray (1999).[8] Murray's script, closely based on letters between Bessie and Barbara, dramatises their youthful friendship, capturing their enthusiasm for the cause of women's rights but also the humour and sense of fun that shines through this correspondence. In contrast, many accounts of Bessie's life and work present her as serious and humourless. For example, in Emma Donoghue's fictional version of the Codrington divorce trial, *The Sealed Letter* (2008), Bessie is depicted as determined to protect the *EWJ*'s reputation at all costs. She refuses to discuss divorce in the *Journal* as it is 'a dangerous subject. We could seem to be associating ourselves with women of doubtful reputation,'[9] and is keen to disassociate herself from Emily Faithfull as much because she finds her lesbianism distasteful as out of a desire to distance the *EWJ* from the scandal in which Faithfull has become embroiled. These versions of Bessie's life are inevitably partial, using specific details of her biography to construct a dramatic narrative. Other accounts contain an element of hindsight, suggesting a connection between Bessie's later withdrawal from high-profile activism (and Hilaire's vocal antifeminism) and those aspects of her writings which expressed disquiet

8. *A Lady's Portion*, part 2 of *A Skirt Through History,* BBC2 Television, May 13, 1994. *Free-Minded Albion's Daughter,* part 1 of *Sirens of Fleet Street*, BBC Radio 4, first broadcast 1999.
9. Donoghue, *The Sealed Letter,* 113. Bessie also appears briefly, and very unflatteringly, in Patricia Duncker's novel *Sophie and the Sibyl* which weaves facts from the final years of Marian Lewes's life together with a fictional love story. Bessie is named as one of the 'scroungers, parasites … [and] vultures' who 'gathered in force' after George Lewes's death, looking to 'touch the rich lady for cash, while she's in a vulnerable state.' See Duncker, *Sophie and the Sibyl* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 242. The account of Bessie's loan request provided in this thesis demonstrates that this portrayal is undeserved.

about the direction of the women's movement and society more generally.[10] The account of Bessie's life presented in this thesis has sought to interrogate these existing narratives. Extracts from her private papers discussed here provide glimpses of different aspects of her character, including her wit, her self-deprecation and her delight in the company of her friends. Furthermore, through a more detailed exploration of the development of Bessie's feminist consciousness (building on Rendall's study of her youthful friendship with Barbara[11]), and by examining her lived experience as an often-beleaguered public figure at the heart of the women's movement, I have offered a more nuanced explanation for her decision to step away from public life and seek fulfilment in her faith, family and literary writing.

Bessie's biography seems, at first glance, to divide into two distinct parts, her public status as a campaigner before she married in sharp contrast to her world after she prioritised her responsibilities as a wife and mother. However, the fuller examination I have presented here, of the events of her later life, reveals the significant continuities between these two parts, in her consistent support for feminist principles and radical politics, and the centrality of her concern for the poor and suffering to both her public activism and her private philanthropy. Applying the methodology of feminist biography, placing Bessie's subjective experience at the centre of this analysis, has enabled me to foreground how her feminist political consciousness developed in relation to the personal influences of family and

10. For example, Sophia van Wingerden argues that 'Bodichon and Davies left the suffrage campaign, not out of lack of sympathy with the cause, but to continue their work in opening higher education to women' while Bessie, 'despite her work for women's employment, believed that most women would and should remain homemakers ... and dropped out of the women's movement following her marriage.' The suggestion here, that Bessie, unlike her fellow activists, *did* come to 'lack sympathy with the cause' of women's emancipation, is accompanied by a comment on Hilaire's stance on women's rights: 'Ironically, in contrast to feminists such as Richard and Emmeline Pankurst, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson and Millicent Garrett Fawcett, whose children grew up to become active suffragists, Parkes was the mother of the writer Hilaire Belloc, who not only opposed women's suffrage, but women's higher education as well.' See Wingerden, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain*, 1866– 1928 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 11, 186.
11. Rendall, 'Friendship and Politics'.

friends, as well as the wider political, social and cultural environments within which she lived.

One significant aspect of this analysis has highlighted the importance of her father's role in facilitating Bessie's feminism. Joseph provided his daughter with a good academic education, demonstrated to her how political reform could be achieved through networking, and using his own networks of influence in support of her activism. This, together with his money, which enabled Bessie to devote herself to this activism, unpaid, is a noteworthy example of how nineteenth-century feminism benefitted from the support of sympathetic men. (The contributions of other male supporters of women's rights cause, including Henry Brougham, George Hollyoake and George Hastings, are also acknowledged in this thesis.) At the same time, Joseph's concern that the young Bessie should not become a 'bluestocking,' his criticisms of her work and his sometimes-overbearing involvement in her personal life encapsulate the dominant patriarchal attitudes against which the women's movement battled.[12]

Furthermore, I interpret the positions Bessie took on specific issues as responses to events and experiences, rather than reflecting her intrinsic character or beliefs. I have shown how her decision as the *EWJ*'s editor to avoid radical topics (such as divorce and suffrage) can be viewed as the learned pragmatism of a young woman seeking to protect herself and her periodical against hurtful attacks, backlash and economic risk, rather than reflecting any personal disapproval on her part. Her increasing unease at married women's employment outside the home, often cited as indicative of her conservative outlook, also emerged, I have

12. For discussions of the importance of supportive fathers to nineteenth-century feminists, see Olive Banks, *Becoming a Feminist: the social origins of 'first wave' feminism* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986) and Sally Alexander, *Becoming a Woman and other Essays in 19th and 20th Century Feminist History* (London: Virago, 1994), 143-5.

demonstrated, from what she observed on her travels, of the reality of life for the mass of working-class women, which she came to see as more important than the individual emancipation for a few privileged women of her own class. This development in Bessie's feminist outlook is significant both because it highlights the range of feminist positions on married women's work that continued to exist within the women's movement, long after Bessie stepped aside from activism, and also because, as I have argued, it was part of her critique of industrialisation and liberal individualism that increasingly marked her political standpoint. While she looked to her father's generation of political reformers, for justifications of individual rights which could be appropriated to support the rights of women, it was cooperative and communal models of society which she came to admire most, including the Catholic Socialism of her adopted faith.

This approach to Bessie's biography shows how her feminist principles were forged in the fire of her lived experience and continued to be reconfigured, as life events brought new challenges and forced her to re-evaluate her priorities. It is not possible to say what Bessie might have gone on to do, had she not been widowed so soon into her marriage or had not then lost the security of her wealth while her children were still dependent on her. These biographical facts are pertinent, I have argued, to understanding the ways she chose to put her feminist ideals into practice through her philanthropy and in her writing which celebrated women, just as her feminist critiques of the inequality of marriage and divorce laws had earlier contributed to her ambivalence at accepting Sam Blackwell's proposal of marriage and traditional ideas of womanhood. Examining Bessie's biography from birth to death has enabled me to provide evidence of the range of ways that her feminist outlook connected with her public actions and the decisions she took in her private life. While I have sought to provide an accurate account of Bessie's significance as a leading figure in the women's rights movement, I have also aimed to demonstrate the valuable evidence

contained in her well-documented life before, alongside and after these achievements, of a woman's lived experience of the female life-cycle of spinsterhood, marriage, motherhood and widowhood through a near-century of social, political and cultural change. In these ways this thesis provides an example of how a feminist biography of one woman 'can provide insight into the general situation of women,' as well as 'expanding our knowledge of individual feminists and … broadening our understanding of the many diverse forms of feminist belief and commitment which existed at any one time.'[13]

In presenting an account of Bessie's life which demonstrates this interweaving of the personal and the political, the private and the public, this thesis has foregrounded two themes - her religious faith and literary career - which have been previously underexamined, and which I have shown to be closely connected. I have traced the origins of Bessie's earnest spiritual outlook back to the strong sense of religious duty instilled in her at school together with her Romantic poetic aesthetic, which prized spiritual sentiment and experience. In this context, I read her conversion to Catholicism not as an abrupt break with her past but as an evolution of her religious outlook. Examining the emotional and personal factors which influenced her decision to convert also focuses attention on what the Catholic Church meant to her, thereby providing a counterbalance to those criticisms, from her contemporaries and later scholars, which identify a contradiction between feminist principles and submission to the patriarchal hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. Her continued support for women's rights, including suffrage, demonstrates that she did not find her faith antithetical to her feminism. This focus on Bessie's subjective experience of her faith fits with recent historical scholarship on the role Christianity played in inspiring and supporting women in their feminist activism, rather than assuming it promoted 'a style

13. Caine, 'Feminist Biography and Feminist History,' 251, 259.

of femininity that was oppressive' to them.[14] I have also shown how Bessie's writings about the Catholic Church, notably *Historic Nuns* (1898) and *The Flowing Tide* (1900), provide evidence of her perception of this Church as a site of female agency, feminist practice and radical responses to the social problems of the day. These depictions of her Church are far-removed from outsiders' assumptions that it was a conservative, reactionary faith, to which she retreated out of disillusionment with her earlier radical politics.

This aspect of my research also demonstrates the merit of exploring private matters of 'faith and devotion, spirituality and Christian selfhood,'[15] instead of focusing primarily on how religion affected women's actions in the public sphere. Through examining the evidence of Bessie's personal letters, I have shown the profound impact on her spiritual outlook of Adelaide Procter's death (and the example Adelaide provided her, of a woman who found strength, comfort and purpose in her Catholic faith), as well as the frustrations Bessie increasingly felt as factional tensions (including religious disagreements) grew amongst her friends and colleagues at Langham Place. This personal biographical context complicates Bessie's public explanation that it was purely her admiration for the 'active well-ordered charity' of her new Church which convinced her to convert.[16] It thereby provides a case study of the importance, for women at this time, of their religious identity and place within a shared faith community, for private succour as well as in motivating their public work.

The relationship between religious faith and literature's engagement with spiritual truths has been central to this thesis's exploration of Bessie's career as a writer. Here a biographical focus, considering private letters and journals alongside her published work, has enabled me to provide an account of Bessie's pursuit of a professional life as a writer

14. Twells, 'The Innate Yearnings of Our Souls': 309.
15. Ibid., 310.
16. BRP, quoted In MBL, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*, 7.

and the importance to her of poetry as an expressive artform. As a career which could be pursued without leaving home, and which could be fitted around the needs of others, writing was one of the first paid occupations which middle-class women took up in increasing numbers in the nineteenth century, so that, in Bessie's words, 'the female sex [became] a very important element in the fourth estate.'[17] My account of Bessie's forays into different literary and journalistic genres, and her efforts to see her work published and received positively by critics, demonstrates the seriousness with which she pursued her ambition. Through examining critical responses to her work, I have shown how she became a respected literary figure in her own day, highlighting telling examples of the gendered conceptualisation of literature within which her writing was received and how her identity as a woman writer sometimes coloured how her work was received.

In particular, I have traced how the development of Bessie's conception of herself as a poet, influenced in turns by Shelley, Barrett Browning and Adelaide Procter, is reflected in the different forms of her poetry. The limited interest Bessie's poetry has received in recent years has tended to focus on examples of her work which link explicitly with her feminism. Leighton and Reynolds, for example, include four of her poems (including her ode to Barrett Browning and the exposition on women's rights from 'Summer Sketches') in their 1995 anthology of Victorian women poets and comment that her poetry 'is most pleasing and accomplished when she uses it to argue on her special theme of women's rights.'[18] However, by placing these overtly feminist works within the context of Bessie's biography I have shown that this was a short-lived part of her poetic output and that evocations of place and expressions of religious faith were the most consistent themes of her work. The

17. BRP, *Essays on Women's Work*, 121.
18. *Victorian Women Poets,* ed. Leighton and Reynolds, 348. Bessie's odes to Barrett Browning and Procter are also included in *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets: An Oxford Anthology*, ed. Isobel Armstrong, Joseph Bristow and Cath Sharrock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 510-12.

appearance of her poem 'The Cathedral' in almost all her poetry volumes, including the first in 1852 and the last in 1904, is, I have argued, emblematic of her abiding use of poetry as a way to articulate her religious belief and the comfort she found in her faith. In this way poetry moved from being a focus of her attempts to achieve personal acclaim to a means by which she could harness her literary abilities to her sense of religious duty to do good in the world. The bibliography of Bessie's writing which forms part of this thesis shows the wide extent of her output over her long life. It also demonstrates how she embraced genres deemed conventionally feminine, such as devotional poetry and literary memoir, sometimes using them to foreground the achievements and abilities of women, as well as staking her claim on behalf of women in fields of writing assumed to be the rightful preserve of men, such as politics and polemic.

The thread which links all these facets of Bessie's biography is her talent for friendship and the collaborative networks of women which shaped each stage of her life, beginning with her happy memories of her school days. Although this thesis is a biography of one woman, it has sought to foreground how this life was situated within a web of interconnecting networks of women friends, allies, artists and workers. The concept of sisterhood, articulated by Bessie, Barbara and Anna Mary Howitt in their imagined 'Associated Home' of female artists, became the organising principle of the women's rights movement centred on Langham Place. Women working collaboratively together was the hallmark of these endeavours, just as it has been for generations of feminists in the following centuries. These networks facilitated the progress of the movement, both in the dissemination of ideas and arguments and in terms of accessing the money, influential contacts and skilled workers needed to turn these feminist ideas into reality. Bessie regarded the *EWJ* as important because it provided a focus for these networks of feminist activity and because it was a public demonstration of what women could achieve when they worked together. When this

endeavour began to fracture, she turned to other forms of sisterhood, in the work of women in the Catholic Church and in the female-centred family she found in with the Bellocs. Her network of female friends of faith, many of them Catholic, who supported her in her later life was another example of the sisterly camaraderie which she had always valued so highly.

No biography can claim to be comprehensive or definitive, as selections must be made, some details foregrounded and others minimised or omitted, in order to present a coherent narrative. Indeed, embracing this 'biographical uncertainty' has become an accepted part of the genre.[19] Recognising such contingency is an inevitable part of any attempt to construct a version of Bessie's long, eventful and well-documented life within the space available. There remain, therefore, several avenues for further research which might build on the work presented here. I have explored Bessie's poetry primarily through the lens of biography - identifying where she draws upon aspects of her life in her poetry and also where details of her poetry illuminate parts of her life - but this does not preclude other approaches to investigating this body of work. The more extensive bibliography of her writing collated here represents a valuable resource, as a case study of a woman's negotiations with the literary cultures and gendered literary marketplace of her day, and the differing conceptions of the role of the poet available to her. I hope this will be interrogated further by scholars of women's writing.

By bringing together a wide range of evidence from Bessie's private papers and published writing, this thesis also opens up possibilities for further investigation of the feminist networks of her day. Bessie's extensive correspondence, much of it held in the archives of Girton College, Cambridge, is a rich source of insights into the relationships between her networks of female friends and colleagues, of which only a small part has been examined

19. Lee, *Body Parts*, 6.

in this thesis. The women of the Langham Place Group deserve more detailed examination than has been completed to date, both as individuals and collectively. A collective biography focused on 'the interdependence and social construction of identities'[20] would be a fitting way to investigate the first formalised feminist network in Britain, which laid the foundations for the generations of feminist campaigners who came after. It is also the tribute of which Bessie would likely have most approved. As a friend, journalist, poet and writer of memoirs her instinct was to put others in the spotlight ahead of herself, celebrating the talents and achievements of the women whose friendship she cherished. Nevertheless, I hope that this account of her individual biography, by placing the theme of friendship at its centre, represents a fitting tribute to a woman whose gift for friendship played such an important part in her own life and the history of the women's movement in Britain.

20. Booth, *How to Make it as a Woman*, 9.

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Appendix A: Timeline of key events

2 June 1824	Joseph Parkes marries Elizabeth Rayner Priestley, eldest daughter of Joseph Priestley of Cradley, Staffordshire.
20 July 1825	Joseph Priestley Parkes born, at the family home, 20 Temple Street, Birmingham.
16 June 1829	Bessie Rayner Parkes born, at the family home, 20 Temple Street, Birmingham.
January 1833	The Parkes family move to 21 Great George Street, Westminster.
Autumn 1836	Bessie begins to attend Leam School, Warwickshire.
Summer 1845	Bessie leaves Leam after her 16th birthday. She travels to continental Europe for the first time, with her parents.
Autumn 1846	Priestley Parkes diagnosed with tuberculosis. Parkes family move to Hastings for Priestley's health and become neighbours of the Leigh Smith family.
1847	Bessie meets Samuel Blackwell.
1848	Bessie's first published poem, 'Progression,' appears in the *Birmingham Journal* in May.
1849	Bessie meets Elizabeth Blackwell.
1850	Priestley dies 26 June. Bessie and Barbara travel unchaperoned around Europe, August-September. Bessie first meets Marian Evans in Coventry.
1851	Parkes family move to 2 Savile Row, Mayfair. Bessie's friendship with Adelaide Procter begins around this time.
1852	Bessie meets Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning at the Procters' home. *Poems* published.
1854	Marian Evans and George Henry Lewes elope to Germany and set up home together. Bessie meets Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal. Sam Blackwell proposes marriage. *Summer Sketches and Other Poems* published. *Remarks on the Education of Girls* published anonymously.

1855	Bessie and Barbara establish the Married Women's Property Petition Committee Anna Jameson's lectures 'Sisters of Charity' and 'Communion of Labour' given privately at Elizabeth Jesser Reid's house. (They are published in 1855 and 1856.) Second (extended) edition of *Poems* published.
1856	Married Women's Property Petition presented to Parliament in March. Bessie visits the Courtauld Silk Mill at Halstead, Essex and meets Mary Merryweather. Bessie meets Isa Craig in Edinburgh and begins writing for the *Waverley Journal*. Third edition of *Remarks on the Education of Girls* published, bearing Bessie's name for the first time. *The History of Our Cat Aspasia* and *Gabriel* published.
1857	Bessie travels alone to Algiers to join Barbara in January. Her return journey (May-July) takes her through Italy and France. Matilda (Max) Hays' relationship with Charlotte Cushman in Rome ends; Max returns to England. Barbara marries Eugène Bodichon in London in July. Bessie becomes editor of *Waverley Journal* in July and moves its offices to 14A Princes Street, London.
1858	The English Woman's Journal Company is established. The first edition of the *EWJ* is published in March, with Bessie as editor. The Parkes family move to 17 Wimpole Street, Marylebone.
1859	The *EWJ* offices move to 19 Langham Place. A Ladies' Institute is established on the premises. The Society for Promoting the Employment of Women (SPEW) is established by Jessie Boucherett and Adelaide Procter. Bessie joins the committee.
1862	Bessie steps down as editor of the *EWJ*. Emily Davies is acting editor September 1862-April 1863.
1863	Bessie temporarily resumes the editorship of the *EWJ*, until Elizabeth Eiloart is appointed. *Ballads and Songs* published.
1864	Adelaide Procter dies, 2nd February. Bessie is seriously ill with scarlet fever in March. The first number of the *Alexandra Magazine* appears in May. Bessie is baptised into the Roman Catholic Church in July. Emily Faithfull is involved in the Codrington divorce trial which begins in August. *EWJ* merges with *Alexandra Magazine* in September.

1865	Joseph Parkes dies suddenly of pneumonia, 11th August. Final edition of the *Englishwoman's Journal & Alexandra Magazine* appears in August. Bessie ends her relationship with Sam Blackwell in November. *Essays on Women's Work* published.
1866	Bessie works on the organising committee for the petition for women's suffrage, which is presented to Parliament. Profile of Bessie appears in *Portraits of Men of Eminence in Literature, Science and Art* in May. *Vignettes* published.
1867	Bessie and Barbara stay at the home of Louise Swanton Belloc in La Celle St Cloud, near Paris, where Bessie meets Louis Belloc. Bessie and Louis marry in London, 19th September.
1868	Marie Adelaide Elizabeth Rayner Belloc born in London, 5th August *La Belle France* published.
1870	Joseph Hilaire Pierre René Belloc born in La Celle St Cloud, 27th July. Franco-Prussian war begins in July; Bessie, Louis and children move to London in September. Married Women's Property Act is passed. *Peoples of the World* published.
1871	Franco-Prussian war ends; Bessie and Louis return to France. Josiah Parkes dies, leaving Bessie £20,000 and the lease of 11 Great College Street, Westminster.
1872	Louis dies suddenly of heatstroke, 19th August. Bessie and children move to Great College Street in the autumn.
1877	Eliza Parkes dies, 10th October.
1878	Bessie loses the bulk of her financial capital in April and moves to Slindon, Sussex in July. George Henry Lewes dies in November.
1879	Bessie's statement advocating women's suffrage is included in a pamphlet of the Central Committee of the National Society for Women's Suffrage.
1880	Marian Evans Lewes dies.
1881	Louise Swanton Belloc dies in November.
1889	Bessie is declared bankrupt; an announcement appears in the *Times,* 2nd March.

1891	Barbara Bodichon dies, 11th June.
1895	Bessie meets Jeanette Kelsey. *In a Walled Garden* published.
1896	Marie marries Frederick Lowndes, 9th January. Bessie travels with Hilaire to the United States and visits Joseph Priestley's house in Pennsylvania. Hilaire marries Elodie Hogan in San Francisco, 15th June.
1897	*A Passing World* published.
1898	*Historic Nuns* published.
1900	*The Flowing Tide* published.
1904	*In Fifty Years* published.
1914	Elodie dies, 2nd February. Marie and Frederick's son, Charles Belloc Lowndes, sent to Flanders; awarded Military Cross for 'exceptional gallantry.'
1918	Hilaire and Elodie's son, Louis Belloc, killed in air battle near Cambrai, 26th August. Representation of the People Act grants the franchise to all men and some women, enabling women to vote in the General Election in December.
23rd March 1925	Bessie dies at her home in Slindon, aged 95 years.

Appendix B: Summary of research dissemination

Publications

'"We who strive for the foundation of a principle": feminism and suffrage in the biography of Bessie Parkes Belloc,' *Women's History Review* 29, no. 6 (November 2020): 916-939. https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2020.1745399.

Conference papers and panels

'"No place for women"? The feminist life of Bessie Parkes Belloc (1829-1925) within the Roman Catholic Church', at the 'Gender, Religion and Power' conference, The Bedford Centre for the History of Women and Gender, September 2019.

'Women's rights, women's voices: the poetry of Bessie Rayner Parkes', at 'Radicalism and Reform in the Long Nineteenth Century: The London Victorian Studies Colloquium', Royal Holloway, University of London, April 2019.

Led workshop roundtable discussion on 'Backlash', as part of 'Writing Activism: an early career workshop', TORCH: The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities, February 2019.

'"Striving for the foundation of a principle": the women's suffrage movement viewed through the biography of Bessie Rayner Parkes Belloc', at the Women's History Network Annual Conference, University of Portsmouth, August 2018.

'"What good I may do in the world will have been in consequence of their teaching": Leam House girls' boarding school, Warwickshire in the 1830s-40s and its influence on Bessie Rayner Parkes', at the Education in the Long Eighteenth Century seminar, Institute of Historical Research, London, December 2017.

'Still asking "Why feminism?" - researching the biography of Bessie Rayner Parkes Belloc (1829-1925) in the light of Sally Alexander's Becoming a Woman', at the 'Contemporary British History Now' Conference, Kings College London, September 2017.

'Writing a biography of a female "Man of Eminence": issues arising from research into the life and writings of Bessie Rayner Parkes Belloc (1829-1925)', at 'Life History and Life Writing Research: Critical and Creative Approaches', Brighton and Sussex Universities Postgraduate Conference, June 2017.

Public Engagement

Delivered talk on Bessie Parkes Belloc, as part of Ada Lovelace Day celebrations, Lewisham Unitarian Meeting House, October 2018.

Delivered talk on Bessie Parkes Belloc as part of 'The Lost of Portsmouth and Sussex', event for the Being Human Festival, Wymering Manor, Portsmouth, November 2017.

Appendix C: Research ethics review

FORM UPR16

Research Ethics Review Checklist

Please include this completed form as an appendix to your thesis (see the Research Degrees Operational Handbook for more information

UNIVERSITY OF PORTSMOUTH

Postgraduate Research Student (PGRS) Information			**Student ID:**	**UP828463**
PGRS Name:	**Deborah Ann Parker Kinch**			
Department:	**SASHPL**	**First Supervisor:**	**Dr Paraic Finnerty**	
Start Date: (or progression date for Prof Doc students)	**1 October 2016**			
Study Mode and Route:	Part-time ☐ Full-time ☒	MPhil ☐ PhD ☒	MD ☐ Professional Doctorate ☐	

Title of Thesis:	**Seeking a 'Steadfast Aim': A Cultural Historical Biography of Bessie Rayner Parkes Belloc (1829-1925)**
Thesis Word Count: (excluding ancillary data)	**79093**

If you are unsure about any of the following, please contact the local representative on your Faculty Ethics Committee for advice. Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the University's Ethics Policy and any relevant University, academic or professional guidelines in the conduct of your study

Although the Ethics Committee may have given your study a favourable opinion, the final responsibility for the ethical conduct of this work lies with the researcher(s).

UKRIO Finished Research Checklist:
(If you would like to know more about the checklist, please see your Faculty or Departmental Ethics Committee rep or see the online version of the full checklist at: http://www.ukrio.org/what-we-do/code-of-practice-for-research/)

a)	Have all of your research and findings been reported accurately, honestly and within a reasonable time frame?	YES ☒ NO ☐
b)	Have all contributions to knowledge been acknowledged?	YES ☒ NO ☐
c)	Have you complied with all agreements relating to intellectual property, publication and authorship?	YES ☒ NO ☐
d)	Has your research data been retained in a secure and accessible form and will it remain so for the required duration?	YES ☒ NO ☐
e)	Does your research comply with all legal, ethical, and contractual requirements?	YES ☒ NO ☐

Candidate Statement:

I have considered the ethical dimensions of the above named research project, and have successfully obtained the necessary ethical approval(s)

Ethical review number(s) from Faculty Ethics Committee (or from NRES/SCREC):	**ETHICS-10296**

If you have *not* submitted your work for ethical review, and/or you have answered 'No' to one or more of questions a) to e), please explain below why this is so:

Signed *(PGRS)*:	D A Parker Kinch	**Date:** **23 June 2021**

UPR16 – April 2018