4 Authorising Herself
The Political Pen of Beatrice Webb

Helen McCarthy

In 1873, fifteen-year-old Beatrice Potter started writing a diary. The early entries were a mix of impressions from overseas travels, notes on current reading matter, and unremitting self-criticism. 'I am getting decidedly self-satisfied, conceited and selfish', she wrote in a reflection typical of this period: 'Half the time I spend in building castles in the air, instead of examining myself.'[1] A decade on, the diary still brimmed with introspection, but Beatrice was now using it to document her social work in East London, including – in 1886 – her first publication: a signed letter to the *Pall Mall Gazette* on the problem of unemployment. Three articles followed in *The Nineteenth Century* which drew on material from Beatrice's investigations for Charles Booth's mammoth survey of *Life and Labour of the People in London*; and after that came a historical study of the Cooperative movement in England. The latter subject was chosen by Beatrice against the better judgment of both Booth and the economist Alfred Marshall, who advised she tackle the more appropriately feminine subject of women's wages instead.[2] From 1892, the year of Beatrice's marriage to the Fabian socialist Sidney Webb, the diary became, to a substantial degree, a record of the couple's famous production-line of books, reports, and articles on subjects ranging from trade unionism and the Poor Law to social research methods and Soviet communism. During the First World War, Beatrice started plundering the diary for material to fill a planned autobiography, the first volume of which appeared in 1926 as *My Apprenticeship*, covering her life before Sidney. A second volume, *Our Partnership*, was published posthumously and recounted the first twenty years of the Webb marriage. Beatrice made her final entry in the diary on 19th April 1943, almost seventy years after

[1] Diary, 23 September 1874. Unless indicated, references are to the typescript diaries that have been digitised and are available at: https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/browse#webb-typescript

[2] Diary, 3 November 1888; 8 March 1889.

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making her first, and just eleven days before her death at the age of eighty-five.

Beatrice Webb's life was long, and it was lived by the pen. Her co-authored work with Sidney has been widely studied by historians of socialism, industrial relations, and the welfare state, whilst her diaries and autobiography have attracted successive biographers as well as literary and feminist scholars interested in gendered modes of life-writing.[3] In this chapter, I bring these analytical frames together by considering how Beatrice Webb might help us to think about genres of political writing, with a focus on her earliest publications as a budding social investigator in the 1880s and her later works of autobiography. The answer, I suggest, lies in the intimate analytical work which her unique archive, with the diary at its heart, allows us to do. These sources provide exceptional insight into the choices that Beatrice made in the pursuit of public recognition for her ideas through writing, and the personal, affective contexts which shaped those choices. Like the interview data discussed in Chapter 12 on post-war social science, the diaries illuminate the subjects that Beatrice tackled, the voices that she adopted, and the audiences that she had in mind, as well as the paths that she turned away from. As scholars have previously noted, for Beatrice, 'authorising' herself in the world of late-Victorian social and political thought meant rejecting feminised modes of social knowledge and relegating novelistic literary self-expression to the private, confessional realm of the diary.[4] In other words, dilemmas over genre were never solely about writing. They signalled Beatrice's larger intellectual ambitions as well as the gendered constraints which contained them.

[3] The literature on the Webbs is too extensive to list here in full, but for biographical treatments, see: Margaret Cole, *Beatrice Webb* (London, 1949); Kitty Muggeridge and Ruth Adam, *Beatrice Webb, A Life* (London, 1967); Barbara Caine, 'Beatrice Webb and the "Woman Question"', *History Workshop Journal*, 14 (1982), pp. 23–43; Deborah Epstein Nord, *The Apprenticeship of Beatrice Webb* (Basingstoke, 1985); Jane Lewis, *Women and Social Action in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Aldershot, 1991), chapter 2; Carole Seymour Jones, *Beatrice Webb: A Life* (London, 1992); Royden Harrison, *The Life and Times of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, 1858–1905, The Formative Years* (Basingstoke, 1999). For literary perspectives, Ann Ardis, *Modernism and Cultural Conflict, 1880–1922* (Cambridge, 2002), chapter 1; Valerie Sanders, *The Private Lives of Victorian Women: Autobiography in Nineteenth-Century England* (New York, 1989), chapter 6.

[4] Nord, *Apprenticeship*; Ardis, *Modernism*; Gabrielle Mearns, '"Long Trudges Through Whitechapel": The East End of Beatrice Webb's and Clara Collet's Social Investigations', 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 13 (2011) doi: https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.634; Samuel Hynes, 'The Art of Beatrice Webb' in Samuel Hynes, *Edwardian Occasions: Essays on English Writing in the Early Twentieth Century* (London, 1972), pp. 153–72; Ira Bruce Nadel, 'Beatrice Webb's Two Voices: *My Apprenticeship* and Victorian Autobiography' *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 2 (1976), pp. 83–96.

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The present essay develops this perspective by attending in close detail to the evolution of Beatrice's political pen from the mid-1880s to the early 1890s, and by considering how her identity as a writer changed in the 1920s through *My Apprenticeship* (1926) and the posthumous publication of her diaries. I suggest that Beatrice's early contributions pushed against the gendered knowledge claims favoured by late-Victorian feminists, whilst *My Apprenticeship* eschewed the self-effacing norms of much autobiographical writing by elite women between the wars, staking a place instead inside the perimeter fence of political life-writing, the male-dominated field discussed by Richard Toye elsewhere in this volume. Yet the later publishing history of the diaries, alongside her treatment by popular biographers, made Beatrice's identity as a *political* writer inherently unstable.

I

The worlds of Beatrice Potter's childhood and youth were awash with the written word. Her father, the timber merchant and railways magnate Richard Potter, allowed his nine daughters free run of the large library at Standish, the family's mansion nesting in the Cotswolds. The diary tells us that in the 1870s Beatrice was consuming a diet of Shakespeare, Goethe, W. E. H. Lecky, Victor Hugo, Ruskin, and Mill, alongside Harriet Martineau, whose autobiography she greatly admired, and the novelist George Eliot. She was not sent to any of the academically focused girls' schools opening up in this decade, nor later to the women's colleges in Oxford, Cambridge, or London, but her education was substantial, conducted mostly at home by private tutors under the watchful eye of Beatrice's scholarly mother, Lawrencina.[5] The family entertained many intellectual guests at their London and country residences, most notably the philosopher Herbert Spencer, with whose work Beatrice became very familiar. Yet she was ultimately expected, like her sisters, to enter Society and make a good match. This set up the conflict between intellectual ambition and familial duty which would preoccupy much of Beatrice's interior life as a young, unmarried woman.

This conflict was palpably evident in the mid-1880s, by which time Beatrice was working for the Charity Organisation Society (COS) as a lady rent collector at Katharine Buildings in East London, a newly built

[5] The best account of Beatrice's family life is found in Barbara Caine's collective biography of the Potter sisters, *Destined to be Wives: The Sisters of Beatrice Webb* (Oxford, 1986).

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'model' dwelling for the working classes.[6] Voluntary work offered a welcome occupation and purpose for late-Victorian spinsters, but in Beatrice it stirred an impulse to study social and economic conditions systematically, seeking to understand the causes of poverty and destitution rather than merely administering relief. It was on the basis of knowledge acquired through first-hand observation of her tenants in Limehouse that Beatrice wrote a letter to the *Pall Mall Gazette,* then in its activist-investigative phase under the editorship of W. T. Stead, on the problem of unemployment in East London. Stead wrote back asking permission to publish it as an article, to which Beatrice readily assented, pasting the letter into her diary under the words: 'A turning point in my life'.[7]

In this somewhat serendipitous way, Beatrice Potter became a published author, her letter appearing as 'A Lady's View of the Unemployed at the East' on page eleven of the *Pall Mall Gazette* for 18 February 1886. Author and editor alike invoked an authority which would have been wholly legible to late-Victorian readers: the claim of the middle-class philanthropist to 'know' the poor through personal contact and intuitive sympathy.[8] In the opening line, Beatrice took pains to state her credentials 'as one who is personally acquainted with many of the "unemployed"', and later, 'as one who has lived among this people'. This formulation mirrored Stead's editorial framing, which stated that 'Miss Beatrice Potter, like other members of her family, has had much actual experience among the poor in the East-end of London.' This was a reference to the older Potter sister, Kate, who persuaded Beatrice to take her place at Katharine Buildings in 1884 on the occasion of her (Kate's) marriage to the Liberal politician Leonard Courtney.

Yet reading on, we find Beatrice's article pushing beyond this familiar philanthropic genre, the author explaining that, in addition to studying 'a small but representative section' of the unemployed, she has 'taken some trouble to learn the industrial condition of that part of London, and to understand the remarkable change which has taken place in that district

[6] For a full account of this work, see Lewis, *Women and Social Action,* chapter 2, and Rosemary O'Day, 'Caring or controlling? The East End of London in the 1880s and 1890s' in Clive Emsley, Eric Johnson and Pieter Spierenburg, eds., *Social Control in Europe: Volume 2, 1800–2000* (Columbus, 2004), pp. 149–66.

[7] Diary, 13 February 1886.

[8] The best account of this feminised culture of philanthropy is Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870–1918* (Oxford, 1993). See also Jane Lewis, 'Social Facts, Social Theory and Social Change: The Ideas of Booth in Relation to Those of Beatrice Webb, Octavia Hill and Helen Bosanquet', in David Englander and Rosemary O'Day, eds., *Retrieved Riches: Social Investigation in Britain, 1840–1914* (Aldershot, 1995), pp. 49–66.

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during the last fifty years'. Drawing on this deeper knowledge, Beatrice presented an analysis of the causes of worklessness in East London – which she located in the pull upon outside labour of the district's ready supply of casual employments – and argued against any extension of public works or outdoor relief. Such measures, Beatrice concluded in the imperious tone of the late-Victorian reformer, would merely 'augment the evils of an already overstocked and demoralised labour market'.[9]

The conventional principles of political economy expressed here signal the considerable distance which Beatrice's politics would travel before she could write in a diary entry for February 1890: 'At last I am a socialist!' But her letter is also noteworthy for its courage in addressing a general labour market subject. Although women's visibility within economic thought was growing, the contributions of figures such as Ada Heather-Bigg, Mary Paley, Clara Collet, and Millicent Garrett Fawcett were, at this time, mostly restricted to subjects relating to women's employment and wages.[10] In moving outside this feminised intellectual cordon, Beatrice was conscious of doing something that was unusual and perhaps socially inadvisable for the unmarried daughter of a Tory industrialist. These personal stakes were raised higher when Joseph Chamberlain, then President of the Local Government Board, wrote to Beatrice congratulating her on the article and asking what she thought the Liberal administration ought to be doing about the unemployed. Her reply was prickly and self-deprecating. 'Is it not rather unkind of you to ask me to tell you what I think?' she wrote back:

> It is a ludicrous idea that an ordinary woman should be called upon to review the suggestions of Her Majesty's ablest minister, especially when I know that he has a slight opinion of even a superior woman's intelligence in these matters (I agree with him) and a dislike of any independence of thought.[11]

The context of Beatrice's earlier history with Chamberlain is crucial for understanding this terse reply. Beatrice had met recently widowed Chamberlain at a dinner party in 1883 and found herself instantly attracted to him. A troubled and protracted courtship unfolded throughout which Beatrice wrestled with difficult emotions. Her passion for

[9] 'A Lady's View of the Unemployed at the East' *Pall Mall Gazette*, 18 February 1886, p. 11.

[10] Michèle A. Pujol, *Feminism and Anti-Feminism in Early Economic Thought* (Aldershot, 1992).

[11] Beatrice Potter to Joseph Chamberlain, Chamberlain papers, JC 5/59 1-2, and reprinted in Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie, eds., *The Diary of Beatrice Webb, Vol. 1, 1873–1892* (London, 1986), p. 155.

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Chamberlain ran deep, but marrying him, she believed, would mean abandoning all intellectual ambition. It would mean being 'absorbed into the life of a man whose aims are not my aims; who will refuse me all freedom of thought in my intercourse with him; to whose career I shall have to subordinate all my life, mental and physical'.[12] Receiving Chamberlain's letter in 1886 thus stirred feelings which were complicated: 'when I saw the Great Man's handwriting I was ominously excited', Beatrice wrote in the diary. 'I knew it was the old torture coming back again.'[13]

The peculiar mix of intellectual self-confidence and paralysing insecurity with which Beatrice tackled her writing projects in the 1880s did not originate with the former mayor of Birmingham, but Chamberlain's insistence on 'absolute supremacy' intensified her internal conflicts, lending them a heightened emotional, erotic even, charge. This was clear from Beatrice's fluctuating mental state during the summer following publication of her letter in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, when she started drafting an essay on 'The Rise and Growth of English Economics'. Beatrice's canvas was impressively broad:

> This first part deals with the origin of the science and its expression in Adam Smith in his twofold nature of scientific investigator and social reformer. The second part will open with the question: how was this impassioned crusade of the eighteenth century against class tyranny and oppression by the few transformed into a science representing the employers' gospel of the nineteenth century?[14]

But having completed the draft a month later, Beatrice began to question the seemliness of attempting such a weighty subject. 'I wonder whether, if it is published', she asked the diary, 'it will be thought very conceited?'

> It isn't so. I can't help my ideas taking a positive form and, if I try to express them in a hesitating way, I am only affected.… It is this hopeless independence of thought that makes my mind so distasteful to many people; and rightly so, for a woman *should* be more or less dependent and receptive.[15]

Chamberlain, undoubtedly, was one of the 'people' she had in mind in this passage, which should be read in the light of Beatrice's ongoing agonies over the courtship, which would not be decisively terminated for another year. As biographers have noted, Beatrice was much preoccupied during this period of her life with the situation of unmarried women of the middle and upper classes. Her mixed feelings about Chamberlain – 'the deadly fight', as she put it, 'between the intellectual

[12] Diary, 16 March 1884. [13] Diary, 6 March 1886. [14] Diary, 8 August 1886.
[15] Diary, 14 September 1886.

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and the sensual' – fed a general undecidedness about the widening sphere of education, professional work, and suffragism into which many women of her class were now stepping.[16] She admired the active spinsters of the COS, whilst remaining doubtful that 'a working womanhood with friendship and not love' could deliver true fulfilment.[17] Conversing on this subject with the philosopher Frederic Harrison, Beatrice offered the view that 'if unmarried women kept their feelings alive, did not choke them with routine idleness, practical work, or with intellectualism, though they must suffer pain, they were often for that very reason more sympathetic than married women'.[18] This is a revealing statement, given Beatrice's personal circumstances when she made it: still rent-collecting at Katharine Buildings whilst drafting highbrow essays for prospective publication. She was, to all intents and purposes, already leading a life of practical work and intellectualism, if not routine idleness. Again, the diary reveals the depths of Beatrice's ambivalence as she grasped for a public identity and voice through her pen.

Beatrice never published 'The Rise and Growth of English Economics'. She sent the 'little thing of my own' to Charles and Mary Booth, whose lukewarm reception confirmed her sense of 'ignorant self-confidence' for attempting 'a critical essay after two months' study!'[19] By December, Beatrice was reading Karl Marx in French translation and working on an article which would demonstrate 'that the proper subject matter for economic science is human nature'.[20] In February, she once more felt 'the suicidal effect of giving way to intellectual ambition and to strong feeling'.[21] Yet, unknown to Beatrice, she was on the brink of a significant new chapter of her life in early 1887. By March of that year, she had joined Charles Booth's mammoth poverty survey of London as an investigator, with a special remit to study conditions of labour in the East End docks. This work led to the first of three notable publications in

[16] Diary, 10 December 1886. For this context, see Gillian Sutherland, *In Search of the New Woman: Middle-Class Women and Work in Britain, 1870–1914* (Cambridge, 2015), and Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850–1920* (London, 1985).

[17] Diary, 28 September 1886.

[18] Diary, 28 May 1886.

[19] Diary, 18 September 1886.

[20] Diary, 20 December 1886.

[21] 5 February 1887. Like 'The Rise and Growth of English Economics', Beatrice's article on Marx was never published, despite a broadly positive endorsement by the historian Edward Beesly, to whom Charles Booth sent it in March 1887 (see diary entry for 12 March). Nonetheless, in an end-of-year reflection, Beatrice described paper as having been 'squashed by Professor Beesly's unfavourable criticism', suggesting again the depth of her intellectual insecurities (see editorial note in MacKenzies, *The Diary of Beatrice Webb, Vol. 1*, p. 225).

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The Nineteenth Century, one of the most prestigious periodicals of the era – versions of which later appeared in volume one of Booth's nineteen-volume *Labour and Life of the People* (1889–1902).[22] Beatrice would at last become a 'public person' and in the process face new dilemmas as a writer.

II

Beatrice's first article, 'The Dock Life of East London', appeared in print in October 1887 and has been closely analysed by the historian Rosemary O'Day, who describes it as 'a somewhat colourless contribution'.[23] O'Day takes Beatrice to task for an inadequate use of statistical data, poorly documented personal observations, and failure to properly attribute facts and opinions. These criticisms of Beatrice's research methods are not unjustified, yet O'Day arguably underplays Beatrice's status as a budding investigator on her first foray into the field and the psychic weight of writing for publication after so many false starts and under the cloud of Chamberlain's disavowal of feminine intellect. 'Dock Life' and the two articles which followed help us to see how Beatrice was feeling her way in the late 1880s. She was only too aware of her lack of prior experience, compounded at this juncture by the burden of attending to Richard Potter, whose health was badly deteriorating. 'As the observation will necessarily be disjointed and incomplete', she wrote of her work for Booth at the end of March, 'it will serve more to clear my own ideas than to form definite pictures of life. My education is yet to come.'[24]

As a piece of writing, 'Dock Life' is often stiffly descriptive, yet it is far from colourless, as the following examples illustrate. Describing the organisation of labour at three docks (London and St Katharine, West and East India, Millwall), Beatrice notes men running up and down 'like the inhabitants of an ant-hill burdened with their cocoons'; later, she imagines the 'fine lady who sips her tea from a dainty cup' quite oblivious to fact that the leaves have been 'trodden into their case by a gang of the

[22] 'The Dock Life of East London' *The Nineteenth Century* (October 1887); 'East London Labour' *The Nineteenth Century* (August 1888); 'Pages from a Workgirl's Diary' in *The Nineteenth Century* (October 1888), pp. 301–14. Versions of these essays appeared as 'The Docks', 'Tailoring' and 'The Jewish community' in Charles Booth, ed., *Labour and the Life of the People, Vol. I* (London, 1889).

[23] Rosemary O'Day, 'Before the Webbs: Beatrice Potter's Early Investigations for Charles Booth's Inquiry', *History,* 78 (1993), pp. 218–42, quote at p. 225. See also Rosemary O'Day, 'Women and social investigation: Clara Collet and Beatrice Potter' in Englander and O'Day, *Retrieved Riches,* pp. 165–200.

[24] Diary, 30 March 1887.

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great unwashed'. The docks, Beatrice observes in a striking phrase, are undergoing a period of rapid development: 'All things are in the process of becoming, and the yesterday vies with the today as a foreteller of tomorrow.' There are flashes of shrewd social commentary in her portrait of the upwardly mobile foreman, who goes home to 'one of those irreproachable houses furnished with the inevitable bow window, and perchance with a garden'. Finally, Beatrice's writing is highly embellished when describing the drinking and gambling habits of the ordinary dockers. Casual employment drags men into 'the low level of monotonous excitement of the East End street', making them 'the sinners of East-end society'. Utilising the language of degeneration and contagion common within late-Victorian social thought, Beatrice laments 'the pitifulness of this ever-recurring drama of low-life – this long chain of unknowing iniquity, children linked on to parents, friends to friends, ah, and lovers to lovers – bearing down to that bottomless pit of decaying life'.[25]

The moralising artfulness of these passages complicates O'Day's suggestion that Beatrice adopted a plain prose style to avoid 'sensationalism' of the kind associated with Henry Mayhew's classic 1851 work, *London Labour and London Poor*, which Beatrice read over the summer of 1887 and thought 'overloaded with descriptive detail'.[26] The problem with O'Day's claim is that the diary implies that Beatrice drafted her article *before* reading Mayhew. In August, she was looking ahead to her next piece of work for Booth on the sweating system in London's tailoring trades and had resolved 'to make it more of a picture than my article on "Dock Life" – to dramatize it'.[27] The diary records that Beatrice was spending her days reading unspecified works of 'English literature' in order 'to discover the secret of great writing, whether prose or poetry'. The answer, she decided, was 'the art of presenting pictures to the mind … the conception of the whole work should be a representation of life'. It was in the light of this judgment that Beatrice pronounced Mayhew's work 'good material spoilt by bad dressing'.[28] In other words, Beatrice did not scrimp on colour, texture, and detailed description in 'Dock Life' to signal her seriousness of purpose (and, as I have suggested, the prose was not in any case as restrained as O'Day implies).

[25] For degeneration in late-Victorian social thought, see Richard Barnett, 'Education or degeneration? E. Ray Lankester, H. G. Wells and *The outline of history*' *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part C: Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 37 (2006), pp. 203–29

[26] Diary, 29 August 1887.

[27] This entry, which is ambiguously marked 'August [?] 1887', proceeds the entry in which she discusses Mayhew (29 August).

[28] 21 August 1887, 29 August 1887.

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On the contrary, 'making pictures' was, she believed, the key to effective writing, and whilst Beatrice did not feel that she had fully achieved this with 'Dock Life', she nonetheless detected 'a steady rise in literary capacity as my diary shows', and saw 'no reason why I should not rise further'.[29]

Beatrice's spirits were lifted by the positive if modest reception for her article when it appeared in the autumn: a 'very favourable notice' in the *Daily Telegraph*, she recorded, and a useful discussion with John Burnett of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, who 'had read my "Dock Life" and was evidently more inclined to treat me seriously'.[30] By then, her investigations of the tailoring trades were well under way, involving a demanding schedule of interviews with inspectors, employers, and workers, which she carried out with the assistance of George Arkell, another member of Booth's team.[31] Between them, they amassed a huge amount of data on wages, prices, working hours, and production processes, which Beatrice presented in radically different registers in her second and third articles, published respectively as 'East London Labour' and 'Pages from a Work-Girl's Diary' in August and October 1888. Again, we can turn to the diary to understand Beatrice's practice as a writer, which she now conceived as intrinsic to her newly chosen vocation of research and observation. 'How must I equip myself for this new life, the outward form of which will be literary expression?' she asked herself in October 1887:

> First and foremost I must be warm-hearted and just. No one can write that which they *are not*. No one can perceive and calculate the larger currents of thought and action, unless their mind be dominated by far-reaching and far-seeing sympathy.[32]

This statement complicates claims made by Deborah Nord about how the register adopted in 'Dock Life' and 'East End Labour' suppressed 'feelings of sympathy and identification' in favour of masculinised objective distance. Nord sets these texts apart from Beatrice's novelistic – and hence feminised – style in 'Pages'.[33] Yet despite the differences, all three essays

[29] 1 November 1887

[30] 14 October 1887; 18 October 1887. In November, Beatrice was invited to address a meeting of dock labourers in Canning Town, where she 'enjoyed the first experience of being "cheered" as a public character' (27 November 1887). In the final entry of the year (13 December 1887), Beatrice notes how her publication has improved her status with the Potters: 'A very pleasant feeling to all my family – my position with them improved by the success (relative to their appreciation of me) of my article.'

[31] Arkell's contribution and Beatrice's methods are described in O'Day, 'Before the Webbs'.

[32] 1 November 1887.

[33] See Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (Ithaca, 1995), p. 191.

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can be understood as experiments curving towards the same objective, which was to develop an authoritative expert voice. We might view Beatrice's efforts as a late-Victorian version of the 'writing for influence' approach pursued by social scientists in the later twentieth century.[34]

'East London Labour' was, in Beatrice's own estimation, 'a horribly stiff bit of work', and she feared 'it will be too much matter-of-fact for the taste of the general public'.[35] 'I knew I could not make it brilliant', Beatrice wrote in August once the article appeared, but she was nevertheless 'glad that the general opinion is that it is *sound work*. To be thought a sound and conscientious worker, with ability guided by conscience, is my one ambition. I do not care to be thought "talented" or brilliant.'[36] This was disingenuous, as the literary ambition of 'Pages' would shortly prove, but even within the data-heavy paragraphs of 'East End Labour' we find Beatrice striving to 'make pictures' using the racialised tropes which patterned late nineteenth century debates about low pay.[37] Following an introductory exposition of the problem of sweating in the tailoring trades, Beatrice invited her reader to imagine a morning coat made by 'an English journeyman tailor' for a quality West end outfitter, and then to turn their mind

> to the coat of a Jewish contractor. Take the material in one hand, the lining in the other. Pull them apart. Why, it is not a coat at all – it is a balloon. Snip the two or three hidden tacks at the base of the collar, and even this opens out and loses all individual form. Fill it with light gas and hermetically seal the pores of the stuff – and behold! 'the thing' floats up to heaven, formless and without shape, never again to trouble its owner or the English tailor.

A few lines down, Beatrice's imaginary middle-class consumer is addressed again:

> Walk behind the wearer of a sweater's coat; if the material be light, it will sway to and fro with a senseless motion; if heavy, it bulges out first here, then there.… Presently the coat hangs on its owner's back like linen on a clothes-line.

This image prompts an informal aside and rare attempt by Beatrice at humorous punning:

> I speak, of course, to the connoisseur of his own and others' clothing. To the Philistine who sees nought but colour and cut, my description may seem unwarranted. Exactly the man whom the cap (or coat) fits (?) will not put it on!

[34] See the essay by Butler, Elliott and Lawrence in this volume.
[35] 6 June 1888, 28 June 1888. [36] 6 August, 1888.
[37] See David Feldman, 'Jews in the East End, Jews in the Polity, "The Jew" in the Text' *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 13 (2011) doi: https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.630.

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Whether this raised a smile on the lips of the reader of *The Nineteenth Century* is not known, but it offers further evidence of how Beatrice's writing continued to evolve with each new publication.

Her next effort, 'Pages from a Work-Girl's Diary', appeared just two months later and has been the subject of detailed study by literary scholars as well as by historians.[38] Briefly, the fourteen-page article is written as a first-person narrative recounting Beatrice's experience of posing as a poor tailoress inside a Jewish-owned workshop in Mile End. The text describes Beatrice's two days undercover in colourful detail, comprising evocative descriptions of urban spectatorship as she moves through the streets of East London, an interior monologue charting the physical and emotional pressures of maintaining her disguise, plus a great deal of speech quoted verbatim from her employers and co-workers. Drawing directly (with some notable edits and omissions) from the diary, Beatrice's writing carried a freshness and immediacy which made it a hit with readers of *The Nineteenth Century*, although she was characteristically ambivalent about its true quality. 'There is nothing in it but bright description of an audacious adventure', Beatrice wrote in August 1888 ahead of publication, later reflecting on how the article's success

> has been out of all proportion to the literary merit. It was the originality of the 'deed' that has taken the public, more than the expression of it. However, it seems clear that the little literary faculty I have is of the narrative and picture-making form.[39]

The fictional style with which Beatrice wrote a purportedly authentic account of her investigatory work is what makes 'Pages' of interest to literary scholar Ann Ardis, who frames the text as ethnographic, a mode which allowed Beatrice to engage her reader with narrative strategies whilst preserving objectivity: 'She writes novelistically without writing a novel or a short story. She fictionalizes the diary account so as to shape it to the conventions of participant-observer ethnography, while at the same time avoiding the charge of "telling stories."'[40] Beatrice, as Ardis argues, regarded fiction as a genre in which women's contributions, unlike those of great male writers like Balzac, Flaubert, and Goethe, were coded as domestic or sentimental; hence her efforts to place distance between her own writing and 'novelistic discourse'.[41]

Nevertheless, as the diary reveals, doing so was a wrench. Writing was a creative outlet for Beatrice, a compulsion even, hence the millions of

[38] Ardis, *Modernism*, Mearns, 'Long Trudges', Nord, *Apprenticeship.*
[39] Diary, 14 September 1888. [40] Ardis, *Modernism,* p. 27.
[41] In 1882, Beatrice considered writing 'an article on Balzac, whose extraordinary power of analysis always attracts me'. Diary, 14 September 1882.

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words scribbled into the diary over the course of seven decades. The problem of form weighed heavily as she 'hammered' at 'East London Labour', in summer 1888 followed by the 'cheap thrill' of 'Pages'. A year later, she was still undecided as to what kind of writer she wished to be. 'There is intense attractiveness in the comparative ease of descriptive writing', Beatrice noted in the diary:

> Compare it with work in which movements of commodities, percentages, depreciations, averages and all the ugly horrors of commercial facts are in the dominant place, and *must remain so* if the work is to be worthwhile.… Still, I have in my mind some more dramatic representation of facts than can be given in statistical tables and in the letterpress that explains these – some way of bringing home to the hearts of the people, rich and poor, those truths about social organisation that I may discover – illustrations of social laws in the terms of personal suffering, personal development, personal sin.[42]

In the same entry, Beatrice confessed her 'vulgar wish to write a novel!' That derogatory adjective and exclamation mark convey neatly the lowly position which Beatrice accorded fiction (or, at least, fiction written by women) in late-Victorian hierarchies of knowledge.

Nord views this turning away from novel-writing as a wider phenomenon amongst intellectually inclined women in the 1880s, when 'it seemed possible for women safely to abandon fiction and express themselves in other literary forms'.[43] And yet, it is difficult to square this statement with the emerging genre of 'New Women' fiction, 'exposure' fiction, and the increasing tally of socialist–feminist novels by such writers as Isabella Ford, Katharine Glasier, and Beatrice's second cousin, Margaret Harkness.[44] Harkness was one of several women from Beatrice's world of social investigation who crossed literary genres in their efforts to describe, explain, and critique urban poverty. Their number included Clara Collet, Beatrice's co-investigator on Booth's team, who was a close friend of the 'New Woman' novelist George Gissing and penned an unpublished novel about degenerate working-class motherhood in East London; and Clementina Black of the

[42] 30 September 1889 [43] Nord, *Apprenticeship*, p. 142.

[44] Ardis lists under the latter heading Jane Hume Clapperton's *Margaret Dunmore; or, A Socialist Home* (1888); Constance Howell's *A More Excellent Way* (1889); Isabella Ford's *Miss Blake of Monkshalton* (1890); Katharine Glasier's *Husband and Brother* (1894) and *Aimee Furniss, Scholar* (1896); and Gertrude Dix's *The Image-Breakers* (1900). See also Chris Waters, 'New Women and Socialist–Feminist Fiction: The Novels of Isabella Ford and Katharine Glasier' in Angela Ingram and Daphne Patai, *Rediscovering Forgotten Radicals: British Women Writers, 1889–1939* (London, 1993), pp. 25–42. Interestingly, Harkness published her novels under a male pseudonym, John Law (See Ellen Ross, *Slum Travellers: Ladies and London Poverty, 1860–1920* [London, 2007] p. 91)

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Women's Industrial Council, whose 1894 novel, *An Agitator*, dealt with themes of low wages and labour unrest.[45]

This impresses upon us the oddness, rather than the obviousness, of Beatrice's disavowal of 'feminised' modes of literary expression at the end of the 1880s. For other middle-class women of a socially progressive outlook, sexual difference was a resource for making claims upon the public sphere, and they pinned their authority upon it.[46] As Ellen Ross has shown, this was expressed through feminised styles of writing about poverty, which, alongside fiction, drew on missionary narratives and travelogues and deployed anecdote, pathos, and self-deprecation to engage the emotions of readers.[47] These effects can be found fleetingly – or, in the case of 'Pages', fulsomely – in Beatrice's published writings between 1886 and 1888; yet she came to reject the model of womanly expertise being staked out by contemporaries, despite its growing presence and power in late-Victorian public culture. After finishing her work for Booth, Beatrice demurred at his request that she conduct a study of women's industrial labour, determining instead to write a history of the Cooperative movement.[48] She stood by this decision when challenged by the economist Alfred Marshall during a visit to Cambridge in spring 1889. 'With that disagreeable masculine characteristic of a persistent and well defined purpose', she wrote in the diary, 'I shall stick to my own way of climbing my own little tree.'[49]

Undoubtedly, Beatrice's personal history and complex psychology offer part of the explanation for her resistance to the advice of these two distinguished public men. We might point to the lingering trauma over Chamberlain, to her continuing ambivalence towards the prospect of 'glorious spinsterhood' and, relatedly, to feminism (it was around the time of the Marshall visit that Beatrice signed Mary Ward's high-profile Anti-Suffrage Appeal).[50] Most important of all, in February 1890, Beatrice met a 'remarkable little man with a huge head on a tiny body'

[45] On Collet, see Mearns, 'Long Trudges'.

[46] Such gendered claim-making was an aspect of women's politics in the early nineteenth century and persisted well into the twentieth century. See Kathryn Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens: Women, Gender and Political Culture in Britain, 1815–1867* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 47–55; and Lisa Berry-Waite, 'The "Woman's Point of View": Women Parliamentary Candidates, 1918–1919', in David Thackeray and Richard Toye, eds., *Electoral Pledges in Britain since 1918: The Politics of Promises* (Cham, 2020), pp. 47–69.

[47] Ross provides a brilliant flavour of this rich body of writing in *Slum Travellers*.

[48] 3 November, 1888.

[49] 8 March, 1889.

[50] Barbara Caine unpacks Beatrice's complicated feelings about feminism in 'Beatrice Webb and the "Woman Question"'. It might be further noted that Beatrice enjoyed the intellectual autonomy afforded by a private income, unlike figures such as Collet or Black, who were self-supporting through their investigatory work and writing.

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called Sidney Webb at a dinner with the Booths. Their marriage in July 1892 altered the course of Beatrice's life and of her writing career, which subsequently became moored to a project of co-authorship in which Sidney's dry, itemising prose style tended to dominate. Yet closer scrutiny of the diary reveals that Beatrice's break from the 1880s world of feminised expertise was not quite as sudden nor as total as this biographical slicing of pre- and post-Sidney phases would suggest.[51] '"Female labour" *shall* be one of my principle [*sic*] inquiries of my life,' Beatrice wrote after her lunch with the Marshalls in 1889, 'but I will not undertake it at present'. And indeed she returned to the subject in 1896 with a Fabian Society pamphlet on *Women and the Factory Acts;* and again in 1914 through a series of shorter pieces on women in industry in *New Statesman*; and five years after that, Beatrice wrote a lengthy minority report for War Cabinet Committee on Women in Industry, appointed to explore the problem of men and women's wages after the war.[52]

These publications did not experiment with style in the manner of 'Pages', and privately Beatrice continued to experience cravings for literary self-expression. The novel-writing itch returned in February 1895 whilst the Webbs were in the midst of 'stiff work on trade unions'. Beatrice conceived of a piece of speculative fiction set sixty years into the future in which 'the fully-fledged woman engaged in a great career should be pictured just as we should now picture a man'. As before, her sense of taking illicit pleasure in creativity is telling:

> The truth is I want to have my 'fling'. I want to imagine anything I damn please without regard to the facts as they are … I am sick to death of trying to put hideous facts, multitudinous details, exasperating qualifications into a readable form.… But before I can have this debauch I have a grind before me that must be got through, however little I like it.[53]

[51] Samuel Hynes is simply wrong to write that after January 1890 there were 'no more yearnings towards literary work … Fabianism had entered her life, and driven out the novel and George Eliot'. See 'The Art of Beatrice Webb', pp. 153–72, quote at p. 157.

[52] Mrs Sidney Webb, *Women and the Factory Acts* (1896); 'Introduction' to Special Supplement on Women in Industry, *New Statesman*, 21 February 1914, Vol. II, No. 46, i–ii; *Report of the War Cabinet Committee on Women in Industry* (1919, Cmd 135). For the latter, see Cléo Chassonnery-Zaïgouche, 'Is Equal Pay Worth It? Beatrice Potter Webb, Millicent Garret Fawcett and Eleanor Rathbone's Changing Arguments' in K. Madden and R. Dimand, eds., *Handbook of Women's Economic Thought* (London, 2018). See also Dave Lyddon, 'Beatrice Webb and Equal Pay: Foreword to *The Wages of Men and Women: Should They Be Equal?*' *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 31/32 (2011) pp. 181–200 and Pujol, *Feminism and Anti-Feminism*, chapter 4.

[53] Diary, 1 February, 1895

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III

In the 1920s, Beatrice got her fling, but she got it not through writing novels but autobiography. Her first contribution to the genre, *My Apprenticeship*, was published in 1926, when Beatrice was sixty-eight and a prominent public intellectual, and was followed by the posthumous publication of a second volume, *Our Partnership* (1948). *My Apprenticeship* covered the years 1858 to 1892, narrating the author's childhood and youth, her training as a social researcher, and her eventual conversion to socialism, drawing heavily on material from the diary. This Beatrice began to re-read and edit during the First World War, a task which she found both pleasurable and therapeutic. By February 1920, Beatrice was spending 'spare hours in the later afternoon and evening typing out my diary, a task which amuses and interests me vastly. I find all sorts of interesting facts and impressions, not to mention the development of my own inner emotional and intellectual life, which I had completely forgotten'.[54] In its review of the book, the *Manchester Guardian* drew attention to this textual hybridity, describing *My Apprenticeship* as 'the fully documented history of the mental development of that extremely able young society woman Miss Beatrice Potter, drawn from a rich series of diaries kept from the age of ten'.[55] The *New York Times* called it a 'Log-Book of a Mental Voyage'.[56]

Was Beatrice's turn to autobiography in the 1920s a pivot back towards the novelistic ethnography of 'Pages', a belated reunion of private and public selves? Or should we see *My Apprenticeship* as a new intervention into the burgeoning genre of political life-writing whose effect over the twentieth century, as Toye suggests, would be to enforce an 'elitist, London-centric, and largely white male-centric view of what politics is about'?[57] Nord offers one kind of answer by locating the book's literary significance in its adoption of the classic Victorian form of spiritual crisis and conversion, with Beatrice emulating the style of male life-writing luminaries such as J. S. Mill and Thomas Carlyle. 'Like them', Nord writes, 'she regarded her work to be emblematic of her life, and regarded her own spiritual and intellectual development as the essence of her existence'.[58] The groundbreaking qualities of *My Apprenticeship* sharpen

[54] 25 February 1920. [55] 'New Books', *Manchester Guardian*, 25 February 1926, p. 7.
[56] Evans Clark, 'Beatrice Webb's Log-Book of a Mental Voyage', *New York Times*, 28 March 1926, p. BR6
[57] See Chapter 1.
[58] Nord, *Apprenticeship*, pp. 14–15. See also Sanders, *The Private Lives of Victorian Women*, p. 160; Ira B. Nadal, 'Beatrice Webb's Two Voices'; and Martin Hewitt's brief discussion in 'Diary, Autobiography and the Practice of Life History' in David

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further when we contrast its authorial voice to the self-effacing discretion with which late-Victorian and Edwardian elite women wrote their lives for inter-war audiences curious about the century now passed. As Julia Bush has shown, with titles such as *Reminiscences* or *Time Remembered,* these texts presented their authors as eye-witnesses to the public deeds of great men with whom they had the privilege of being connected through family or marriage. Beatrice's close contemporary, Lady Frances Balfour, opened her two-volume memoir, published in 1930, with the assurance that she had 'no intention of laying my friends on their own dining room tables, and there dissecting them' and instead wished to record 'the memories, and, above all, the Hero landmarks which have marked life's highway'.[59]

Whilst Bush identifies hidden agency in this genre of elite, feminised life-writing by 'reading between the lines', Beatrice's ego is in plain sight to the reader of *My Apprenticeship*. In other respects, however, Beatrice's status as a political autobiographer was not so very different from that of Bush's by-standing aristocrats. Like them, Beatrice never held elected office and, as a woman, was voteless until 1918, after which Sidney pursued a parliamentary and ministerial career, turning Beatrice into a political spouse.[60] On a number of occasions, Beatrice gained official standing of her own by sitting on statutory bodies, beginning with the Royal Commission on Poor Laws (1905–9), for which she wrote a celebrated minority report.[61] Nonetheless, like her aristocratic contemporaries, Beatrice's political influence lay mostly through her proximity to powerful men, a dynamic established during her privileged Potter childhood and sustained through the regular salons that she hosted with Sidney at their Westminster home, funded by the private income that Beatrice continued to receive from her family.

Amigoni, ed., *Life Writing and Victorian Culture* (Aldershot, 2006), pp. 21–39, especially pp. 31–32.

[59] Julia Bush, 'Ladylike Lives? Upper Class Women's Autobiographies and the Politics of Late Victorian and Edwardian Britain' *Literature and History* 10 (2001), pp. 42–61, quote at 45.

[60] He served as Labour MP for Seaham, 1922–31, President of the Board of Trade, 1924, and Colonial Secretary, 1929–31. This followed service on the London County Council as representative for Deptford between 1892 and 1910.

[61] She joined a number of wartime committees, including: from 1916, the Statutory Pensions Committee which granted supplementary pensions to discharged and disabled men; from February 1917, the government's sprawling Reconstruction Committee, for which Beatrice was invited to serve on the panels for Local Government and the Control of Industry; and from August 1918, the War Cabinet Committee on Women in Industry for which Beatrice wrote a minority report recommending that all workers receive the 'rate for the job'. See Cole, *Beatrice Webb,* pp. 132–34.

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In Toye's hierarchy of who is most important and therefore most publishable as a political life-writer, Beatrice Webb thus sits several rungs below the high-ranking male politicians of her era, including many who dined at her table and supplied pen-portraits for the diary. Whilst Beatrice was hard at work on the follow-up to *My Apprenticeship*, Lloyd George was negotiating lucrative publishing and serialisation deals for his *War Memoirs* on both sides of the Atlantic. When *Our Partnership* finally appeared in 1948, it competed for attention with volume one of Churchill's *History of the Second World War*, the literary rights for which were estimated to be worth upwards of eighteen million dollars.[62] There *were* cases of female memoirists commanding large advances, such as that paid to Margot Asquith, wife of the former Liberal Prime Minister, whose two-volume autobiography was published in 1920 and 1922, having been bought for 'a considerable sum' and serialized in the British and American press.[63] Asquith tore up the rule book on elite female life-writing in a very different way from Beatrice, courting controversy for the candour and irreverence with which she depicted living members of the governing classes. A stern review in the *Times* warned that Asquith's memoir 'will be cited by our domestic Bolsheviks and accepted by many ignorant workers as proof that our statesmen and politicians and the circles in which they move live lives of philandering frivolity'.[64]

Beatrice steered clear of this path. Margot Asquith's fate at the hands of the press might have been in mind when she wrote in the diary in February 1923: 'there is a certain morbid tendency in writing this book – it is practically an autobiography with the love affairs left out – the constantly recurring decision of what degree of self-revelation is permissible and desirable'.[65] One subject definitely proscribed was the entanglement with Chamberlain, who is described in *My Apprenticeship* as merely one of several important political figures encountered by the author in the 1880s. Beatrice's close friend George Bernard Shaw thought this reticence on sexual matters 'funny in these shameless psycho-analytic days' and urged that she find a means of 'telling everything that has a documentary value without telling anything at all in Margot's way'.[66] Rejecting this advice, Beatrice chose to write nothing about the affair, possibly out of

[62] George Egerton, 'The Lloyd George 'War Memoirs': A Study in the Politics of Memory'. *Journal of Modern History*, 60 (1988), pp. 55–94; David Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill fighting and writing the Second World War* (London, 2004), p. 62.

[63] Mark Bonham Carter, 'Introduction', in *The Autobiography of Margot Asquith* (London, 1962), p. xxvii.

[64] Egerton, 'The Lloyd George "War Memoirs"', pp. 67–68.

[65] Diary, 9 February 1923.

[66] See Shaw to Beatrice Webb, 14 April 1925, in Alex C. Michalos and Deborah C. Poff, eds., *Bernard Shaw and the Webbs* (London, 2002).

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regard for Sidney's feelings or because the infatuation now seemed embarrassing given her considerable public stature.[67]

These tensions over Beatrice's relationship to the genre of political life-writing took a new turn in the years following her death. Margaret Cole, a Fabian Society colleague, edited two volumes of the diaries in 1952 and 1956, picking up where *Our Partnership* left off by covering the period from 1912. The first volume included an introduction by William Beveridge, who had worked with the Webbs before the First World War, for whom the diaries were of major interest because they showed 'in intimate frank detail how things get done, or do not get done; how men in public life behave to one another; how they should and should not behave'.[68] It was through appraisals like this that Beatrice's diaries gained their reputation as *political* diaries, representing a storehouse of insight into the personalities and processes behind early twentieth-century policy-making.

And yet this identity was not stable. To the 1956 volume, Cole added an appendix which narrated Beatrice's affair with Chamberlain by quoting selectively from the earlier volumes of the diary (to which, as a trustee of the Webb estate, Cole had special access). Beatrice's involvement with Chamberlain was, according to Cole, already widely known 'but the details were lacking', and these details, she argued, threw 'interesting light both on Chamberlain and on the girl to whom he directed his attentions'.[69] Cole was a fierce guardian of Beatrice's legacy as a serious social and political thinker, which may explain why she did not publish the relevant diary extracts in their entirety.[70] Kitty Muggeridge, Beatrice's niece, published a biography of her aunt in 1967 which included a much longer account of the fated courtship.[71] Only in

[67] 28 November 1880; Beatrice's close friend George Bernard Shaw thought that her 'finger-on-lip attitude' was 'Victorian'. See Shaw to Beatrice Webb, 14 April 1925, in Michalos and Poff, *Bernard Shaw and the Webbs*, p. 203.

[68] Margaret Cole, ed., *Beatrice Webb's Diaries, 1921–1924* (London, 1952), p. xviii.

[69] Margaret Cole, ed., *Beatrice Webb's Diaries, 1924–1932* (London, 1956), p. 311.

[70] Helen McCarthy, 'The Socialist Lives of Beatrice Webb and Margaret Cole' in Geraint Thomas and Paul Readman, eds., *Culture, Thought and Belief in British Political Life since 1800: Essays in Honour of Jonathan Parry* (Martlesham, 2024).

[71] Muggeridge and Adam, *Beatrice Webb*. The authors appear, like Cole, to have had special access to the manuscript diaries, then held at the London School of Economics. The diaries became generally available to researchers at some point in the early 1970s, following the lifting of access restrictions on the entire collection of Webb papers (known as the Passfield Papers) agreed with Sidney's official biographer, labour historian Royden Harrison. Harrison was commissioned to write the biography in 1966, although the volume that resulted was the first volume of a double biography of the Webbs and appeared in print some thirty years later: see *The Life and Times of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, 1858–1905* (Basingstoke, 1999). For the agreement with Harrison, see copy of letter from Sydney Caine to William Robson, 19 December 1966, in Margaret Cole Papers, Nuffield College, Oxford, G1/2/8.

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1982 were Beatrice's own words published in full in volume one of Jeanne and Norman MacKenzie's landmark four-volume edition of the diaries. These disclosures coincided with and helped to speed a revisionist turn amongst biographers of Beatrice Webb, who were more minded, on the one hand, to centre the love affairs left out of *My Apprenticeship*, and on the other, to bring the tools of feminist literary and historical analysis to bear upon the diaries.[72]

This latter scholarship, comprising the work of Deborah Nord, Barbara Caine, and others, has been foundational for the present essay, producing new insights into Beatrice Webb as a writer, thinker, and woman of her times. I have used their work as a starting point for thinking about the relationship between 'political' writing and other genres of writing, especially life-writing. As we have witnessed, in her earliest publications and through the later autobiographical voice, Beatrice's pen could be both intimate and distancing, moving back and forth between 'subjective' and 'objective' registers. Yet every word put into print, from a 'Lady's View of the Unemployed' to the celebrated *My Apprenticeship*, was for Beatrice a tiny advance towards becoming someone of consequence who had something to say, and who was determined to say it in her voice and no one else's. She reminds us that political writing, of whatever genre, always carries this authorising function, and Beatrice, thanks to her extraordinary diary, allows us to see it in play.

[72] For the former, see Elizabeth Harman Pakenham Longford, 'Beatrice Webb's "Other Self"', *History Today*, 33:2 (1983) 28–32; Seymour Jones, *Beatrice Webb*. Jeanne MacKenzie also drew on the diaries *A Victorian Courtship: The Story of Beatrice Potter and Sidney Webb* (London, 1979), and Peter Clarke quotes briefly on the Chamberlain affair in the bibliographical notes to *Liberals and Social Democrats* (Cambridge, 1978), p. 305.

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