LADY LAURA RIDDING (1849 – 1939): THE LIFE AND SERVICE OF A BISHOP'S WIFE

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Lady Laura Ridding (1849 – 1939)

Source: Hammerton, J.A., 'A Leader of Women. Lady Laura Ridding at Home,' in The Young Woman, Vol. VI, October 1897, p.151

Abstract

Victorian Anglican bishops' wives made a distinctive and important contribution to church and society, yet research into the subject remains fragmentary. This thesis is the first critical examination of the life and service of Lady Laura Ridding, wife of the Bishop of Southwell. It aims to show how she pioneered advances in extending the role and sphere of upper class women and forged new ground for social purity and the moral reformation of society.

The study is largely based on unpublished primary material, including Laura's autobiography and her diary. Following the introduction, chapter two discusses Laura's formative years, an under-documented area of autobiography. It also illuminates her role as headmaster's wife, exploring the possibilities and restrictions attached to such a position.

'Women's mission to women' in chapter four investigates how far Laura was incorporated into her husband's public work at a time when women were lauded as 'the Angel in the House.' It also examines Laura's social activism in the diocese and beyond, and how she conformed to certain ideological expectations, whilst transcending them in the public domain. I explore Laura's motivations in chapter five, in particular the extent to which she was driven by her faith.

In chapter six, Laura's life is shattered by the unfolding events of 'God's visitation,' referring to the First World War, and I examine her contribution to the war effort. Chapter seven summarises her impact on the world. Her commitment to the welfare of women and children in the diocese was outstanding and much of the work was sensitive in nature at a time when such work was still deemed inappropriate for a lady to undertake. Laura's example shatters the image of the frail, idle, upper class lady that so often confronts the reader of Victorian history and this study fills an important gap in Anglican ecclesiastical history.

Author's declaration

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University.

Signed: _ _____ Date: 28th July 2003

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Chapter One

Introduction

> …Max always insisted that a Bishop's wife as such had no official position; but I urged that his position gave her many opportunities which she should not neglect, and he agreed. I certainly thought that her first duty was to make the Palace a place where all were welcome, and a place from which the Bishop could do his work easily; but there was time too for a woman who could speak and organise to do much other work. Yet I often said that I thought Lady Laura Ridding and I had been instrumental in setting a standard as regard the work of a Bishop's wife which has not always been helpful. Women who had no special gift for it were increasingly expected to take the lead in movements and to speak at meetings; and excellent women caused themselves much misery by trying to do things for which they were not at all fitted.[1]

This extract from the memoirs of Louise Creighton, wife of the Bishop of London, generally regarded as the outstanding churchwoman of her time prompted me to find out who Lady Laura Ridding was, and why such a prominent churchwoman had written such words of praise.

Various books have been written over the years about wives of the Anglican clergy, but few have investigated the subject thoroughly. Little has changed since Janet Spedding wrote her thesis in 1975 on 'Wives of the Clergy. A Sociological Analysis of Wives of Ministers of Religion in Four Denominations,' arguing that "although there is historical material available, the definitive history of the parson's wife has yet to be written."[2] The body of literature for this period contains little about the roles, aspirations and contributions of eminent clerics' wives, and this study seeks to reconstruct, the missing half of Anglican ecclesiastical history, highlighting in particular their work for women and their interrelationships. Indeed regret was expressed by David Edwards, in the preface to his book on the leaders of the Anglican Church "that no women seemed prominent enough to merit

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[1] Covert, J.T., (ed), Memoir of a Victorian Woman - Reflections of Louise Creighton 1850-1936, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1994, pp.112-3

[2] Spedding, J., Wives of the Clergy. A Sociological Analysis of Wives of Ministers of Religion in Four Denominations, University of Bradford PhD Thesis, 1975, p.8

inclusion."[3] Whilst this study is not intended as a definitive history of the clergy wife, it is a broader investigation into the phenomenon of the great nineteenth century bishops' wives and more intimately, how Laura was positioned within this unique group of women. Research into and commentary about women's participation at the national ecclesiastical level has been at best fragmentary and at worst, non-existent. Clearly this study will extend significantly the knowledge of this remarkable woman, and an exceptional group of women, in particular Laura's contribution to the Church, to moral, religious and social thought and to the Women's Movement in this period.

In 1994 James Covert rekindled interest in the subject of clergy wives by publishing Louise Creighton's autobiography, and later he explored the relationship between her and her husband. This opened the gates again for research into the subject, facilitated by a rich bank of untapped primary source material, including Laura's unpublished memoirs and diaries. I have drawn heavily on the Selborne family archives. These writings offer a social commentary on the culture of the day. Specific reference has been made to Laura in two publications: in Pamela Horn's 'Ladies of the Manor' (1991) and more recently, Julia Bush's 'Edwardian Ladies and Imperial Power' (2000). Both touched on certain aspects of Laura's service; her work during the First World War and for the Christian imperialist agenda. Although Laura and other prominent bishops' wives have been obscured by research into the better-known Louise Creighton, this study writes the first critical examination of Laura's life-history. It aims not only to show how she conformed to certain role expectations, but more importantly how she transcended them in the public domain. As daughter of the Lord Chancellor and wife of the Bishop of Southwell, Laura gained unique insights into the lives of those in the highest positions of power in Church and Government. Yet she has been relegated to the footnotes of George's life, as Richard Holmes' essay in John Batchelor's book describes the wives of eminent men as being consigned to the position of "pale moonlight satellites around the planetary celebrity."[4]

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[3] Edwards, D.L., Leaders of the Church of England 1828-1944, Oxford University Press, London, 1971, preface, no page no.
[4] Batchelor, J., (ed), The Art of Literary Biography, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995, p.18

Research into women of the upper classes has been neglected until recently as this group were traditionally seen as "an unrepresentative, unprogressive minority."[5] K.D. Reynolds successfully argues that the study of British women's history has tended to focus on the experiences of women from the middle and working class, to the exclusion of the aristocracy.[6] This study aims to redress this imbalance by furthering knowledge into one of this group of privileged women. Much of her service was informed by the Victorian language of duty in which she was framed and her inherited aristocratic belief that she had a responsibility to those less fortunate than herself, in return for privilege and power.

I will also explore the extent to which Laura's clerical marriage was at once liberating and yet confining and in what ways the power of the ideology of 'separate spheres' influenced and controlled the roles she fulfilled. She was more than just a loyal wife and more than an 'unpaid curate.' She was an accomplished woman in her own right. In the preface to her book, Peterson argues that a recent development has been to focus scholarly attention on the wives of famous men[7] and also that the persistent stereotypes of the late Victorian lady need to be re-evaluated. This study seeks to show how Laura was more than a loyal wife to a prominent man, with many accomplishments of her own.

She was a pioneer, living at a time when a generation of women's lives were beginning to be transformed for the better, when women were working towards increasing participation in public affairs. She forged new ground for social purity and the moral reformation of society and took an interest in the welfare of young women in particular at a time when such work was still deemed inappropriate for a lady to undertake. I aim to illustrate that there was a middle way between the 'cult of sickness' image of upper class Victorian women and that of Anthony Trollope's terrifying character of 'Mrs. Proudie,' set against the background of Victorian writing that portrayed such images. Although Laura did conform to the overriding

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[5] Review of Aristocratic Women and Political Society in Victorian Britain by K.D. Reynolds by Julia Bush from University of Northampton

[6] Reynolds, K.D., Aristocratic Women and Political Society in Victorian Britain, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998, p.2

[7] Peterson, M. J, Family, Love and Work in the Lives of Victorian Gentlewomen, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1989, p.ix

upper-middle class ideology of the time, she was also above it, stretching the boundaries, both as a member of the aristocracy and as the wife of a bishop.

The rationale for this study is to assess, with special reference to Lady Laura Ridding, the ecclesiastical importance of bishops' wives in the turn of the century church as well as the distinctive contribution of this neglected group to society at large. Modern scholars have given little attention to this area of church history and yet in the Victorian era, society deemed the subject an area of importance. In 1897 a series of articles entitled 'The Wives of the Bishops' was included in the journal 'The Lady's Realm.' Further to this, an article entitled, 'A Leader of Women'[8] explored how much she had made the role of bishop's wife her own at a time when women were still trying to forge their way in the public domain. Laura is cited within the context of the development of the roles of the wives of Anglican bishops, and came into prominence at a special period in their history. Between Catharine Tait's pioneering role from the 1850's and the outbreak of the First World War, the wives of many leading ecclesiastics served at a particular time when their influence, both direct and indirect, was at its height. Laura and other strong characters flourished in such an environment of opportunity. Laura and her contemporaries were noted for successfully seconding their husbands in their missions. This was a remarkable achievement during the Victorian period.

My research was initially guided by a thorough examination of secondary sources that focus on women's history in the late Victorian and Edwardian era, within which the study will be located. Much of the research is based on unpublished primary material, including Laura's autobiography, her diary (kept between 1884 and 1939), together with a significant number of articles, letters and three biographies written by Laura. I have also gained access to documents relating to her public involvement in the Church. These include reports from Church Congresses and the National Union of Women Workers' (NUWW) conferences. Gerda Lerner argues that methodology can include studying the "actual experience

[8] Hammerton, J.A., 'A Leader of Women. Lady Laura Ridding at Home,' in The Young Woman, Vol. VI, October 1897, pp.149-152

of women in the past" through such mediums as journals and autobiographies.[9] I will offer a reading of Laura's life that has not been told before, driven primarily by a religio-historical methodology, whilst also informed by other disciplines. These will include an examination of Laura within the socio-political and cultural contexts of the period.

In addition I will investigate the conflicting demands of her public and private lives and the extent to which she was able to override the ideological expectations of the time. Following Reynolds' model, this investigation is not based solely on the ideology of 'separate spheres' that underpins many studies of British women.[10] As Reynolds argues, to do so is to ignore the true experience of many upper class women who took an active part in the ecclesiastical and political worlds.

There has been some discussion regarding the role of biography in history, and to what extent the biographer may be considered an artist rather than a historian. Historically much criticism has been levelled at the genre. The biographer may encounter a number of difficulties when writing the life of one's subject. These include ethical considerations, issues surrounding the fallibility of memoirs and problems of celebrity overriding careful research. The question of partiality versus completeness needs to be addressed, as well as how to position oneself in relation to the subject in order to present a challenging yet respectful picture of the person's life.

I am drawing heavily on Laura's 'Recollections,' two volumes of her life story, peppered with letters, pictures and newspaper cuttings. It has been argued that memoirs are the products of art and imagination as they are their authors' constructions and this can devalue the genre. However, this form of writing is certainly related to history. Laura started writing her memories when she was in her mid-sixties,[11] however her work illuminates the past of a great woman of religious history and the background against which she lived her life. Memoirs are

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[9] Lerner, G., The Majority Finds its Past – Placing Women in History, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1979, p.153

[10] Reynolds, K.D., p.220

[11] Laura started writing her Recollections on 19 February 1914, postponing her project between 26 November 1915 and 26 February 1917 in order to write two biographies and a novel. She finished in November 1925.

necessary to learn about the individual and collective past of women. Julia Bush urges caution when using memoirs, as with revelation comes self-concealment, but she acknowledges the importance of life history.[12] Sean Gill asserts, "the very existence of written material about a woman tells us that she was exceptional."[13] As long as the biographer remains cautious and accepts that the genre has its limitations and perils, the biography still has much value in historical terms. My study will highlight how this particular genre is at the cutting edge of historical research, not only in its use of important, unpublished documents, but also in retrieving the bishop's wife from church history.

Chapter two reveals Laura's formative years, an under-documented area of autobiography, the influences on the development of her personality including her parents, siblings, childhood friends and servants she came into contact with as she grew up in a country house. I will illuminate Laura's religious education and the influence of both her mother's Evangelical heritage and her father's Tractarian roots on her growing faith. Laura gently mocks her narrow-minded Evangelical relatives and lauds the spiritual heavyweights in her early years that shaped her religious upbringing, but she recalls how she always sought a spiritual calling. This she finally received through an organisation her mother worked for, and so began her work for women. The chapter ends with a jilted heart and a shaky start to the relationship between George and Laura.

In Chapter three, Laura embarks on her role as the wife of a headmaster of a leading public school, exploring the possibilities and restrictions attached to such a position. The idea that upper class women were to a certain extent above the ideology of 'separate spheres' is introduced in this section, and the advent of Laura's pioneering social purity and moral reformation work is revealed. Though tainted by the sadness of her inability to have children of her own, this period was one of the happiest in Laura's life. Here she forged her first great friendship with the wife of a bishop, Mary Benson, although she describes her trepidation at receiving George's call to the See of Southwell. The feelings of other great

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[12] Bush, J., Edwardian Ladies and Imperial Power, Leicester University Press, London, 2000, p.4
[13] Gill, S., Women and the Church of England. From the Eighteenth Century to the Present, SPCK, London, 1994, p.2

Victorian bishops' wives are also discussed in this chapter, in comparison with those of Laura.

Southwell was a newly-formed diocese when the Riddings took over the commission. Chapter four reveals the extent to which George sought to get to know his clergy and his diocese and how many new agencies had to be installed and renewed in order to raise the spiritual tone of its lay life. Mention is made of the historical context of the bishop's wife, including the pioneering extended service of Catharine Tait, and Laura's standing therein. At this time Laura was friendly with a number of bishops' wives, including Louise Creighton, Mary Benson and Augusta Maclagan, and reference is made to her network of female friends and their own fears and challenges. I will explore the liberating and restricting aspects of the position and how far these women were incorporated into their husbands' public work, at a time when the prescriptive literature of the day lauded women as the 'Angel in the House.'[14]

Laura seconded George nobly in his commission of his duties at Southwell, working hard for the women and children of the diocese. 'Women's mission to women' investigates Laura's social activism in the diocese and beyond. She discoursed on issues ranging from the importance of the mother, to working women's rights. This is despite the theological teaching of the established Church, confirming traditional ideologies of domesticity and femininity. Laura reacted to traditional interpretations by working as a public figure and social reformer within the framework of the Church and the family. She always stressed the need for a balance between home and familial duties and those in the public sphere, particularly urging upper class women to undertake public service in order to extend their sympathies and become better wives and mothers.

Laura stressed the Christian elevation of women and how this tenet could transform society. At the core of the family and as the keepers of family morality, women who led morally and spiritually strong lives could effect a positive change in society as a whole. Laura believed that women in the upper echelons of society

[14] Poem by Coventry Patmore

should lead by example and personal influence, filtering down through the class system. With privilege came a Christian duty and responsibility to those less fortunate than oneself. Broadly there were three main strands to Laura's work for women, encompassing shelters for deserving girls who headed for the large towns seeking employment, improvements in the administration of the Poor Law and social purity work. Nottingham's main industry was lace-making, which attracted an excess of single girls to the towns. Laura was concerned for the welfare of the factory-girl, addressing not only their moral and spiritual health, but also seeking to ensure that the factory owners considered their responsibilities to their employees.

Laura broke new ground through her institution of Southwell House for rescue and preventive work in Nottingham. Although she faced some criticism, she endeavoured to source funds and encouraged local support for the new project, again transforming local women's lives. As Poor Law Guardian for the Southwell Union, Laura worked tirelessly for improvements to the lives of the women and children who had been overlooked for so many years in Southwell Workhouse. She sought to increase the number of female Guardians and also the number of women participating in public affairs more generally, for example on School Boards and Parish and Rural District Councils. Laura's life charts the development of women's participation from humble parochial beginnings to integration as public servants and this is mirrored through her work for the National Union of Women Workers, an organisation she helped to found. The Union went on to play a major role in the development of a public voice for the Women's Movement, providing a forum for the exchange of ideas and information for women of all classes and bringing together a number of women's organisations under its umbrella.

As women's schemes of philanthropy became more sophisticated, some began to forge links with political societies. The question of the Franchise for women is discussed in chapter four. As a moderate suffragist, Laura believed that women should have the Vote in order to be able to have a voice in the decisions of government departments that affected women and children, but she was not a radical. 'Doves and dragons' refers to the two passions in her life - her intense spirituality and her interest and involvement in political and public life. I will question to what extent she was driven by her faith to work for women. Other

motivations include self-interest, wanting to feel useful, paternalism, patriotism and having to justify her position as the wife of a leading cleric. It could be argued that her work merely whitewashed over the social problems she sought to tackle. I will address how far her position in the establishment informed the mode of her social activism and to what extent it enabled her to participate in the public sphere. This chapter concludes with the resignation and death of George and her rejection by their successors. Also I will examine, with reference to some of her contemporaries, to what degree she felt the loneliness of widowhood, when one considers the extent to which she was involved in George's career. However, freed from clerical constraints, she was able to devote more time to her own public work.

Chapter six opens with Laura's exodus from Southwell back to Hampshire. Laura's life is shattered by the unfolding events of 'God's visitation,' as she referred to the First World War. Laura recalls the contribution she made to the war effort in a war diary, including her social purity work that she took up again as traditional standards of moral and sexual behaviour broke down during the conflict. Throughout this record she chronicles how she sees the war as a judgment on the poor spiritual health of the nations and how God would intercede and deliver them, with the power of prayer. She details how she is exhausted by the trials of the war, how rationing is a daily reminder but also how she is sustained and uplifted by her faith. The war took a heavy toll on the upper classes and the faith of the Selbornes was tested as they lost Laura's beloved nephew, Bobby, in the conflict and gave up their family seat, Blackmoor, as a military hospital. Laura also reveals her feelings at the loss of her sister Sophy and her good friend, Ben, and her reaction to her brother's interest in spiritualism. When the war ended Laura was in her seventies, yet she still sought ways to address the spiritual needs of the nation as the conflict had raised a number of issues, particularly on the state of the established Church, such as secularisation, disestablishment and the provision of clergy.

Laura not only offers a picture of her own life and service, but also a glimpse into the world of high ecclesiastics, including her opinion of some of the great church leaders and their wives. I hope to demythologise the image of the bishop's wife and the ancient stigma attached to such a position. Some of the blame for the misleading image can be laid at the door of Victorian novelist, Anthony Trollope,

whose comical creation of a bishop's wife, Mrs. Proudie, made a significant contribution to the negative picture. The following passage describes her position:

> The truth is that in matters domestic she rules supreme over her titular lord, and rules with a rod of iron… But Mrs. Proudie is not satisfied with such home dominion, and stretches her power over all his movements, and will not even abstain from things spiritual. In fact, the bishop is hen-pecked… This lady is habitually authoritative to all, but to her poor husband she is despotic.[15]

The wife of the ex-Archbishop of Canterbury, Eileen Carey, has written a book with her son Andrew about the lives of some of her contemporaries, describing them as the 'backbone' of the Anglican Communion. In the preface, she describes how she came across the idea for the book: "it was while travelling around the Anglican communion and meeting the spouses of many bishops that the urge to 'tell their story' gripped me."[16] I now want to tell the story of their forerunners who had no official position within the Church and yet had much indirect influence over affairs. Laura pioneered advances in extending the role and sphere of upper class women and the moral, social and spiritual reformation of women of all classes.

[15] Trollope, A., Barchester Towers, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991, p.22
[16] Carey, E., with Carey, A., The Bishop and I, Hodder & Stoughton Ltd., London, 1998, p.ix

Chapter Two

A mid-Victorian childhood

"I must have been a rather terrible child…"[17]

In her sixties, Laura became increasingly reflective, searching her memory for faces, events, and feelings connected to the past. In this vein Laura embarked on writing her reminiscences so that she could set down her story of the many rich and varied experiences she was privileged to live through. As the daughter of a former Lord Chancellor, and arguably the leading layman in the late nineteenth century Church, Laura was given a rare insight into the highest realms of political and religious life as a child. These insights would prove to be most valuable to Laura in her future role as the wife of the Bishop of Southwell, informing the rest of her adult life.

Commencing work on 19 February 1914, Laura set down her recollections in two volumes. Showing how much weight she placed on her childhood, the whole of the first volume was concerned with her life, from her birth in 1849 until her first meeting with George Ridding, her future husband, in 1876. From 1915 until 1922 the chronicle was in abeyance as "the horrible war came like a thunderbolt upon us," referring to the First World War. Prophetically, Laura continued, "…there may be crushing sorrow in front. I may not ever finish it. March 10, 1915."[18] But she did finally finish her recollections in 1926, at the age of seventy-seven. By this time she had been a widow for twenty-two years.

Laura's biography of her beloved sister, Sophia (Sophy), also served to illuminate details of her own early life, and it is armed with these tools that I will reclaim Laura's 'lost days of childhood' and tell her story. Biographers need to acknowledge problems encountered in their quest. Laura was writing up to seventy years after some of the events occurred. Did she misremember or even forget specific details about her life? It is my belief that John Burnett's words apply to Laura when he asserts, "the author…has painted a self-portrait which is more

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[17] Ridding, L.E., Recollections, Vol. I, p.26
[18] Ridding, L.E., Vol. I, pp.242-4

revealing than any photograph."[19] Laura was honest in her opinion of others. overtly stating whom she liked and disliked. She brought to the foreground those experiences she believed to be most significant in her early life, in particular what forces shaped and fed her character and personality. Laura wrote at length about her childhood, adhering to a certain set of themes that are recognisable in most autobiographies. These included her first memories, influences, religious beliefs, discipline, parental care and 'coming out' into the adult world. One can trace the line of Laura's intellectual, creative and social development in the three key areas that dominated her early life: the nursery; the schoolroom and society.

Laura's girlhood was played out in a very important period in history. She grew up at a time in the mid-Victorian decades when the ideologies of femininity, domesticity and the sanctity of family life were at their most pervasive. It was these ideological assumptions that underpinned the Victorian ideal of girlhood, as well as womanhood, which Laura and her female contemporaries strived to attain. Indeed this was the period directly before the Women's Movement had gathered momentum, when the ' Angel in the House' was queen of the home. Through the formal education structure, the prescriptive literature and the culture of the day, a distinction was created between the harsh world of industrial capitalism ruled over by the male, and the refuge of the home and the hearth where the woman was empowered. This is known as the ideology of 'separate spheres' in which a contrasting set of cultural values were attached to the masculine world of the public realm, and the feminine world of the home. Deborah Gorham maintains that the ensuing 'cult of domesticity' evolved as a direct response to counter the conflict created between the moral values of Christianity and the demands of hard-edged Capitalism.[20]

Thus the mid-Victorian concept of feminine girlhood was born, feeding on the values of virtue, innocence and meekness. The 'cult of domesticity' relied on the image of the "junior angel in the house" as much as the image of the ideal wife.[21] Girls growing up in the highest echelons of society, like Laura, were aware of the

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[19] Burnett, J, (ed), Destiny Obscure. Autobiographies of Childhood Education from the 1820's to the 1920's, Penguin Books Ltd., London, 1982, p.11
[20] Gorham, D, The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal, Croom Helm Ltd., London, 1982, p.4
[21] Gorham, D, p.50

opportunities attached to their position in life - all the benefits that money and status could buy. However they were also restricted by the very ideology that claimed to empower them as the moral guardians of society. Did Laura ever question this feminine ideal, was she ever frustrated by the constraints of the ideal daughter image conflicting with any personal ambitions she may have had to play a more public role? In what ways did this grounding influence her later beliefs and practices?

It is interesting to note that whilst Laura later became an advocate of women's political, educational and employment rights, she always retained a belief in the feminine values she received as she grew up, and this belief served to moderate her feminism both inside and outside the Church. This was also true of one of Laura's contemporaries and friends, the wife of the Bishop of London, Louise Creighton. Born in 1850, Louise was also raised at a time when Victorian ideologies regarding the proper place and role of women were at their most dominant, and though she went on to become a protagonist for the higher education of women, she always framed such feminist issues within the context of the family and the Anglican Church in which she had been raised.[22]

'Those houses were full of children, full of servants, full of furniture'[23]

Lady Laura Elizabeth Palmer was born on 16 March 1849 at 34 Upper Harley Street, London, the eldest child of Roundell Palmer, Earl of Selborne and his wife Lady Laura Elizabeth Palmer,[24] second daughter of the eighth Lord Waldegrave, an Admiral. In October of that year, Laura's uncle William spoke of his first niece as "good enough for the child of a future Chancellor."[25] This boded well for her future role in life. On April 13 Laura was baptised by her paternal grandfather, the Rev. W.J. Palmer at All Soul's Church in Langham Place, and so began her life in the Church to which she was to devote her life. Laura never saw herself as

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[22] Covert, J.T, p. xvi
[23] Hampshire Record Office (HRO), 9M68/73/37
[24] Roundell married Laura on 2 February 1848.
[25] Ridding, L.E., Vol. I, p.1

physically attractive and even as a child she describes herself as "an ugly baby,"[26] who wore ugly clothes and was "too solid for beauty."[27]

Laura was not a tolerant child, indeed she thought herself to be quite serious, lacking a sense of humour. This was, however, in the days when her optimistic view of the world was obscured by the grim brutalities of the Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny that were taking their toll on the British. She recalls the memories that these events stirred inside her:

> As a very young child, the eldest of a growing family, I recall the Crimea War, because a tall uncle in a huge bearskin on a farewell visit to my mother before embarking, flitted in and out of our house, never to enter it again, and confusedly with that memory were whispered talks in our nursery of horrible casualties… These early memories merged into what was a time of peace and prosperity, when we children enjoyed periodic flittings from our big London home to pleasant country homes full of crowded nurseries, troops of servants and over furnished rooms.[28]

At an early age, Laura showed evidence of her quick intelligence and inquisitive nature, conversing with a friend of her parents in 1857 on the imminent end of the world.[29] She could not abide peevishness or ugly manners in people, especially whining children, a trait she carried through to her adulthood, as she never did suffer fools gladly. Like other children, she was not averse to making mischief. With three sisters and a brother, younger than herself,[30] she had plenty of willing accomplices. She confides, "I did not always sin alone… I shall never forget the apples of Sodom which our dissipation made us eat."[31] Friends and servants made especially for easy targets. Laura recalled her impulse to slap "tearful cry-baby children. It was naughty to cry - and they looked so repulsive."[32] She also

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[26] 9M68/73/37, HRO
[27] Ridding, L.E., Vol. I, p.156
[28] 9M68/73/37, HRO
[29] Ridding, L.E., Vol. I, p.62
[30] Mary Dorothea Palmer was born in 1850, married the Earl Waldegrave in 1874 and died in 1940. Sophia ('Sophy') Matilda Palmer was born in 1852, married the Comte de Franqueville in 1903 and died in 1915. Sarah ('Freda') Wilfreda Palmer was born in 1854, married Mr. George Tournay Biddulph in 1883 and died in 1910. William ('Willy') Waldegrave Palmer was born in 1859, married Lady Maud Cecil in 1883 and died in 1942.
[31] Ridding, L.E., Vol. I, p.30
[32] Ibid., p.26

remembered slapping Margaret Brodie, the eldest daughter of Sir Benjamin Brodie, Waynflete Professor of Chemistry at Oxford, full in the face to stop her crying.

She admitted that her tongue was unkind and would unleash it on unsuspecting victims, especially her beloved governess, Miss Holder, who was an easy tease. Miss Holder was a kind woman, but not an intellectual, and Laura played on this, even as a child. In an effort to further her literary knowledge, Miss Holder had determined to read 'The Tempest' over the period of Lent. At the same time, Laura was reading the Epistle to the Corinthians, and she would deliberately interrupt her governess, knowing how hard Miss Holder struggled to concentrate, selecting beforehand the most complicated passages in the Epistles for her governess to put her own interpretation on![33] Of course her parents and grandmother rebuked her, and in time she learned valuable lessons in sobriety. Laura was not overtly emotional. She could never understand her younger sister, Sophy's, outbursts of emotion, but she had the capacity in her character for a strong sense of affection and sympathy for those who deserved it, both people and animals. Her emotions were controlled by something deep within her, so that she could remain rational and levelheaded and therefore in a position to be able to help. The particular personality traits that come through in her first volume are that she was a quick learner, a foolish talker, a fidget, but conscientious and full of boundless creativity. These were developed further as Laura unfolded the details of her education. What strikes one most are her strong beliefs at such an early age. Like her father before her, she was able to form opinions of people and places with clarity and confidence. Added to her brutal honesty, she could and did offend and injure people's feelings without intending to do so.

This can be illustrated in the opinion she took of the city and the country. In April 1854, from Upper Harley Street, the Palmer family moved to 6 Portland Place,[34] which was to remain their London home until 1895. They would visit the country for vacations and Laura's imagination then found the space to wander freely. She wrote and illustrated diaries of her domestic and foreign travels in which she became 'the editor' and family and friends became characters in the story they were

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[33] Ibid., p.120

[34] According to Laura, now 30 Portland Place.

acting out. They even took on pseudonyms, for example, Miss Holder was referred to as 'Friend of the Poor' and William Winter, their butler, was transformed into the 'Fourth Season'. A glossary at the end of one such work enlightened the reader as to their true identity and Laura added a few witty comments of her own about their personality, for example in the case of Winter she adds, "very bad pronouncer of the letter H."[35] Of her maid, Leah Turner, she records, "Abigail… A most excellent young woman born in Wiltshire. A good packer and dressmaker and very susceptible to sailors and landsmen and draughts."[36] This creativity contrasted directly with Louise Creighton who confesses of her childhood, "I was not an imaginative child and remember no imaginative games or fancies; we were too large and boisterous a party to leave room for dreaming."[37]

London represented captivity to Laura. She felt that her spirit was crushed in the city as there was no natural world to romance about it and she felt she had nowhere to escape to. She reveals how she "experienced sensations of horror and disgust on approaching London."[38] She expresses her revulsion of the great city, using strong language:

> I loved trees, flowers, meadows, clouds, sea, skies, and ugliness tortured me. The ugly jerry builders' homes, the drab hideous interior of All Souls' Church, above all the nightmare horror of the squalid sinister miles of crooked black tiled roofs and chimneys with smutty backyards, and spoilt desecrated suburban fields. All this nightmare down on which one looked from the railway carriage as one returned to London after the Summer holidays gave me positive nausea. I felt my heart gripped with miserable depression - spiritually ill with the melancholy horror of the unnatural ugliness of huge London.[39]

Despite her strong feelings, Laura worked in the East End, like her mother before her, trying to help those in need. This illustrates how much her feelings altered, with the lessons of experience and education under her belt. Laura reveals the extent of her mother's influence: "my mother had a genius for making us care for things she cared for – for unnoticeably turning our minds and thoughts into these

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[35] 9M68/63, HRO
[36] 9M68/62, HRO
[37] Covert, J.T., p.12
[38] Ridding, L.E., Vol. I, p.56
[39] Ibid., pp.54-6

channels and for using us for all sorts of minute services, so as gradually to train us to Social Service."[40] At the end of 1865, Roundell bought the Temple Estate in the Parish of Selborne, Hampshire, which was to become the family's country home. All that existed at this time was just a farmhouse called Blackmoor. Over ensuing years, Roundell built a Church (Blackmoor then became a separate parish), cottages for the villagers and lastly his own grand house. A new page was about to turn in Laura's early life. She adored having a country home of her own, and Laura's mother was thankful to God for such graciousness shown to her family.

'And you may see her heart shine through her breast'

At the heart of Laura's world were her parents, their influence emanated through the entire household and was felt by all they met. She inherited a combination of her parents' characteristics. From her father she gained religious depth and quick intelligence, and from her mother she learned to sympathise with people from all walks of life. Marion Lochhead disputes the traditional view that Victorian parents had a one-dimensional formal relationship and limited contact with their children. She argues that to maintain that Victorian childhood was universally unhappy or repressed, or conversely that it was wonderfully contented, is to negate the reality of the individual's experience. Rather she suggests that the Victorian norm was "parental authority with a touch of remoteness,"[41] and this appeared to be the relationship Lord and Lady Selborne had with their children, as strict but loving parents. As an active Liberal politician, Roundell had to spend much of his time in London when Parliament was sitting and Lady Selborne would often accompany her husband, leaving the children at Blackmoor under the protection and guidance of their servants. Despite these absences they both sought to be as involved in their children's development as much as they could and were never far away from the world of their children.

Whenever Lady Selborne had to leave her children at Blackmoor, she would send notes to them, to remind them of their duties. These were known as 'Mother's Laws'. In this way she felt she still maintained a direct hand in her children's

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[40] Ibid., p.132
[41] Lochhead, M, Their First Ten Years, John Murray, London, 1956, p.199

education and conduct on a daily basis. It is interesting to note that they were not 'Father's Laws' as Lady Selborne was directly responsible for her children's upbringing, under her husband's guidance. The ever-knowing, ever-seeing presence of God in their daily routine was evidenced in most of these 'Laws', examples of which follow from the years 1858 and 1859 when Laura was a child:

> My children are not to forget to give themselves plenty of time to say their prayers every night and morning with their eyes shut…
> My children are to remember that God sees them wherever they are…
> Laura must try and hold herself upright…
> Great care and thoughtfulness (to be taken) in saying prayers night and morning and about conduct in Church and responding…
> To do everything as well as you can, whether drawing, writing or work or gardening…
> Strive against selfishness in every shape…
> Let your watchword be: "Thou God seest me…[42]

The content of these rules revealed Lady Selborne's own evangelical background with its emphasis on a personal relationship with God. Conforming to the prevailing domestic ideology of the day, Lady Selborne was in charge of the home, and this included the children. Her husband deferred to her decisions about the children's upbringing and always upheld her authority. Lady Selborne was a firm, but loving parent. Laura was not allowed to sleep with any of her girlfriends, except with her sisters. Her mother became more exacting after Laura 'came out' formally in society but within this atmosphere of discipline and authority came security.

Lady Selborne looked after all of her husband's private business affairs, relieving him of this extra burden, on top of his political and religious work. She undertook the management of the house as well as the cellar, the stables and the farm. Lord Selborne expected his wife to keep the household accounts in a specific format that she found complicated to follow, but as the dutiful wife she was, she adhered to his system. Laura admired the way her mother took great care with regard to the domestic arrangements, later commenting that "she was the spirit of order."[43] She served as an excellent example to her daughters of the ideal wife, though Laura

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[42] Ridding, L.E., Vol. I, pp.101-3
[43] Ibid., p.318

later confided that she perhaps allowed the servants to bother her more than was necessary. Although her mother adopted many different roles, as household manager and guardian of family morality, wife of a public figure and charity worker, she was to her children the supreme ' Angel in the House'. Laura describes her mother, using quasi-religious imagery such as: "the intense reality and truth and sympathy shone through her," "these qualities lighted up her whole being,"[44] "those spiritual traits of character that shone through her face," and "her serene Madonna-shaped brow."[45] Laura "worshipped"[46] her mother. She greatly respected her father but she was a kindred spirit with her mother. She writes, "we understood each other absolutely… I grew to know exactly her point of view." This was in contrast to her relationship with her father, which she describes in the following terms, "I never felt that father did understand my point of view… I never had that knitted-in mental feeling with his mind that I had with hers."[47]

Laura's mother was brought up with a fine religious heritage behind her. Her parents were evangelicals of deep religious conviction. Lady Selborne's rigid evangelical inheritance influenced all that she did in life, even though she sought to break free from the bonds of her puritanical sisters, Mary and Elizabeth. Laura reveals that in the early days of her marriage, the two sisters "bullied her unconsciously… they felt it their duty not to let her feet err from the strict evangelical path of life."[48] They interpreted the tradition's cultural strictures of shunning theatres, cards, dancing and keeping the Sabbath faithfully more severely than their sister Laura, who eventually developed her own hybrid faith, influenced by her husband's broader Church sympathies. Her marriage thus intensified her own religious character.

Lady Selborne was not a great theological thinker, surprisingly the only work she read was the high Church Dr. Pusey's Commentary on the Book of Daniel, but her religion was pragmatic and real. Despite her household and familial duties, she was far-sighted enough to see the need for rescue work, at a time when the majority of her contemporaries were horrified by Josephine Butler's crusade, and in the face of

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[44] Ibid., p.312
[45] Ibid., p.314
[46] Ibid., p.50
[47] Ibid., p.52
[48] Ridding, L, E, Vol. I, p.322

her husband's hostility towards such work. Influenced also by Mrs. Ranyard's Biblewomen, and the beginning of Mission Settlement Work in London's poorest districts, Lady Selborne and three friends founded a Church organisation along similar lines in March 1860 in the East End of London. Along with its predecessors, the 'Parochial Mission Women's Association' (P.M.W.A) became a pioneering establishment. It sought to employ poor women who would be trained up and paid a basic salary, (with the guidance of the High Church clergy and the Lady-Managers among whom Lady Selborne was numbered) to educate their neighbours in habits of self-help and thrift that would ultimately raise their condition in life.[49]

For the remainder of her life, Lady Selborne continued to visit the homes of the poor in London and Blackmoor, offering encouragement and genuine sympathy to those she saw, "…she could not gush. She said very little in words of sympathy, but she poured selectly her sympathy over you."[50] This was despite poor health and constant fatigue, travelling to London with her husband, relieving him of his private business at home and tending to his welfare as well as that of her children, her servants and the villagers. Even Roundell's personal clerk once remarked that "Mr. Palmer is worse than useless to my ladyship, having no spare time at all,"[51] due to the heavy demands of his public work. In 1873 Lady Selborne underwent her first operation to remove an ovarian tumour. She concealed it from her family until the last moment, to save them from any unnecessary worry, but even this serious operation did not steer her from her path in life.

Her unaffected sense of truth and reserve meant that she was never "the urbane hostess of the world," like her relative Frances, Countess Waldegrave.[52] She disliked gossip and gushy talk and shrank from public speaking, however she did enjoy listening to those who could talk brilliantly. Laura inherited her mother's dislike of superficiality in people, describing the shrewd political hostess in 1874 she observed with her "young critical eyes:"

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[49] Selborne, R, Earl of, Memorials Family and Personal 1766 – 1865, Vol. II, Macmillan & Co. Ltd., London, 1896, p.353-4
[50] Ridding, L, E, Vol. I, p.326
[51] Ibid., p.5
[52] Ibid., p.320

> Frances, Lady Waldegrave, considered by smart people as a... fascinating leader of society, full of wit and charm and beauty, was to us repulsion and artificial beyond words...Golden dyed hair, arched blackened eyebrows, and massive pink plastered rouge on cheeks and lips - she and her friends repelled girls by their vivid artificiality. She talked in a thick Jewish voice and her talk was flashy and clever and punctuated...[53]

As the eldest child, Laura was charged with certain responsibilities that may have forced her to grow up quicker than her other siblings. Her mother relied on her for help with the younger ones, and when she 'came out' in society her help with household concerns intensified. In contrast to her daughter's experiences, the responsibility of being the wife of a public man weighed heavily on Lady Selborne's shoulders. At dinners she was expected to interact with some of the greatest minds of the day. She was concerned that she should answer with discretion, feeling under pressure to say 'the right thing.' Indeed she reveals to her daughter in a letter, "I feel it an awful thing sometimes to be Papa's wife and I felt all the responsibility of it on Wednesday evening..."[54] (with reference to a discussion between herself and W.E. Gladstone). Despite her fears of social expectations, Lady Selborne discharged her public duties with grace and dignity.

Early in her life Laura saw in her mother and father a model of the highest, most beautiful kind of love - married love. She commented on their complementary qualities, mutual love and trust. Where her mother lacked the powers of expression, Lord Selborne was a great speaker, and where he was found wanting a practical understanding of the human character, his wife had common sense and sympathy in abundance. What especially bonded them together was their intense belief in the reality and imminence of God in their lives and those of their children. Nothing was done without reference to the Lord, either asking for His help or offering up thanks. They expressed their spirituality in the everyday tasks they undertook. When the Liberal government resigned in 1866, Lord Selborne gave up his post as Attorney General and Lady Selborne expresses her relief to her eldest daughter, "now as all have resigned, your dear father will have some rest. He has

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[53] Ibid., p.336
[54] Ibid., p.219, 22 May 1868

been wonderfully blessed with health for his work and I think has honoured his Master in it."[55]

'Let us trust Him still'

Trusting in the Lord was a frequent theme that ran through Lord Selborne's writings. Indeed this very line was part of a poem he wrote to his wife on the occasion of their Silver Wedding Anniversary in 1873.[56] Laura's father, Roundell Palmer was born on 27 November 1812, the eldest son of ten children of the Rev. William Jocelyn Palmer.[57] William had held his living in the rural parish of Mixbury for nearly fifty years before retiring. As a child, Roundell had become acquainted with the lives and ways of the agricultural labourers with whom he lived day to day. He carried these life experiences with him as he pursued his education, firstly at Rugby, leaving after two years in order to become a Commoner at Winchester College. In the five years he spent at Winchester he witnessed a reformatory programme unfold at school, an ideology that Laura's future husband, the Rev. Dr. George Ridding, as Headmaster, would push to its limits. Roundell compared the harsh discipline received at Rugby with the caring atmosphere he found at Winchester. He recalls: "at Rugby… I had a taste of the birch-rod, in comparison with which the Winchester instrument of castigation was child's play."[58] In an interesting twist, Roundell's second Master, Charles Ridding, was to become Laura's future father-in-law.

In 1830 Roundell matriculated at Oxford, where he won a scholarship to Trinity College. Here, by a decision that was to influence his future career, he joined the Oxford Union, that nursery for politicians. To give some measure of its quality during his time, William Ewart Gladstone was its President and speakers included such morally robust men as F.D. Maurice and the future Cardinal H.E. Manning. In his autobiography entitled 'Memorials' he reveals how much he was influenced by this intellectually stimulating atmosphere at Oxford, "until I joined the 'Union', I

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[55] Ibid., p. 175, 26 June 1866
[56] Ibid., p.304
[57] W.J. Palmer died in September 1853.
[58] Selborne, R, Earl of, Memorials Family and Personal 1766 – 1865, Vol. I, Macmillan & Co. Ltd., London, 1896, p.76

had no political opinions beyond the hereditary Toryism of my father… but from that time I began to interest myself in politics."[59] Here he developed and practised the skills needed to hold his own in Parliament, speaking publicly in the face of fierce criticism and more importantly, increasing his capacity for original thinking. Roundell obtained a First Class degree, securing both a Scholarship and then a Fellowship at Magdalen College, before pursuing a highly successful career in Law. He found it difficult at first at Lincoln's Inn to penetrate the mindset of those in the Law profession, with its "dry bones of technical systems," coming as he did from the artistic "flowers of history, poetry and philosophy"[60] background that Oxford represented.

After a couple of years training, Roundell was called to the Bar on 7 June 1837. From his beginnings as a struggling barrister he would rise through the ranks of his profession to become arguably the greatest Church lawyer of his time. He spent many years in the House of Commons, first as the elected member for Plymouth in 1847, then in 1861 as member for Richmond. He argued for the maintenance of the established church and sought to extend equal civil rights and religious liberty to members of all classes. Such were his talents, Lord Palmerston offered Roundell the Solicitor-Generalship, which he accepted in June 1861. He received the customary knighthood that went with the job and became a Peer in 1865. Gladstone offered Roundell the opportunity to take his place in the Cabinet as Lord Chancellor first in 1868, but he refused the post because he could not support Gladstone's campaign to disestablish the Irish Church. So highly was his judgment and wisdom regarded that even after he was no longer a member of the Government, his advice was still sought, for example with regard to the Treaty of Washington. Roundell later accepted the Woolsack five years later in 1873 and thus became Lord Selborne. When Gladstone's ministry resigned on 9 June 1885, Roundell welcomed the end of the current Liberal government as he had become dissatisfied with public affairs.

Laura could never understand why people disliked politicians. She only knew the example of her father who pursued his political ambition with scrupulous honesty

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[59] Ibid., Vol. I, p.130
[60] Ibid., Vol. I, pp.199-200

and religious conviction at the heart of his drive. Although she did not connect as well with her father as with her mother, she adored him. In her domestic travel diary of 1871 she pronounces that he was a modest man, with no particular self-image:

> …Is supposed by some people to be a great man. His own opinion is that he is not a particularly good speaker, or a particularly clever lawyer or at all an influential politician or a peculiarly nice father or anything particular at all. In fact a very poor sort of creature. However most people differ from him in this opinion.[61]

To those who did not know him well he came across as a reserved man, distant and absorbed in thought but with his childhood agricultural neighbours in his mind he always tried to fight for justice and truth for all. To the end he was a passionate man.

Laura recollects with happiness the time when in 1872 she accompanied her father and mother, with her sister Sophy and brother Willy, to Geneva for ten weeks. This was to prove a sharp learning curve in her life experiences to date. Lord Selborne was asked to act as Counsel for the British Government before the Tribunal of Arbitration[62] at the Alabama Conference, historically the first arbitration session between America and Great Britain after the American Civil War. This was Laura's first visit to Europe and the impressions of Mont Blanc rising above the French Alps bit deep into her soul. In their free moments, she would sketch the landscape while Sophy botanised with her father and Willy caught fish, but Laura was there primarily to help her mother promote a spirit of friendship and hospitality between the parties of the two sides. For the first time, Laura felt the responsibility of the demands of public service, having to partake actively in discussions on such topics as politics and literature with brilliant conversationalists. She was especially touched to see the influence of both her father and mother that radiated through the younger members of both parties, as they "ruled a court of idolizers."[63]

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[61] 9M68/62, September 1871, HRO

[62] Arbitration was required between Great Britain and the U.S. after breaches of neutrality were claimed against Britain by the latter during the American Civil War of 1862-5.

[63] Ridding, L.E., Vol. I, p.290

What struck Laura most was the way in which her father showed the possibility of successfully combining the dragons of political life with the dove of an intense spirituality. The household would take its religious strength from Lord Selborne's lead. Theologically, he was influenced by two main sources of inspiration: his own clerical father's religion and the Tractarian movement he witnessed and imbibed at Oxford. His father was very much a member of the old school of low churchmen, a staunch Tory who questioned any traditions that relied too heavily on emotion, such as fervent Evangelicalism. Living as he did at a time when the Church was suffering from a lack of zealous servants, the Rev. William Palmer shared his spiritual wealth with his parishioners, serving his Lord well. Although Roundell's brother, Horsley, was ordained in 1851, it was to his sisters, in particular Emma, Dorothea and Emily (Pem), that he looked for guidance, remarking, "if ever young women led an angelic life on earth and had on their characters the stamp of Heaven, it was so with them."[64] His brother William was more extreme in his beliefs, Owen Chadwick calling him "a Tractarian fanatic,"[65] who finally went over to the Church of Rome.

Roundell was fortunate in spending his youth in Oxford at a time when it was at the centre of a new religious movement, which came to be known as The Oxford Movement. This was focused around a number of exceptionally talented young men who sought to reclaim the Church as a uniquely divine institution, independent of the State. This, they believed, was the catholic church of the first four centuries and regretted the Reformation. Roundell joined a select group of Oxford men who called themselves the "Patristic Association,[66] seeking to study the writings of the early Church Fathers. Despite his reserve, Evangelicalism also influenced his faith. He had spent years in the company of the best kind of evangelicals and was impressed in particular by their respect for the Bible and their vivid expressions of spirituality. In some of his future in-laws' attitudes he was to behold a narrower version of the tradition with which he was acquainted.

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[64] Selborne, R, Earl of, Vol. II, 1896, p.87
[65] Chadwick, O, The Victorian Church, Part I, SCM Press Ltd., London, 1992, p.202
[66] Selborne, R, Earl of, Vol. I, 1896, p.208-9

Laura recalls how, despite his pressing public work, her father was strict with regard to the Sabbath. Sundays were theoretically a day of rest, even though she writes that they were anything but that![67] His day was filled with Bible teaching and attendance at formal Church services. In his first days of marriage he began teaching young boys, and later he taught young men at Sunday School, continuing right up until he became Lord Chancellor. He would regularly lead the family and household in prayers in the reception hall at Blackmoor, additionally teaching his children and his staff on a Sunday. Indeed he took his responsibility to his staff so seriously that two days after the death of his wife he was back teaching his footman, William, his Confirmation lesson as usual.[68]

Roundell's quiet faith impressed all who met him, Laura describing their home as "a veritable school of Christian religion,"[69] such was the spiritual atmosphere that pervaded its walls. As a 'rock of strength', Roundell had an unshakable faith, and although he advocated religious tolerance, believing that dissenters and Roman Catholics should have equal civil rights with Anglicans, he also felt strongly that he himself would never attend a service outside the Anglican Church. On their many visits to Scotland, Roundell never once attended a service in the Presbyterian Church. This only served to focus his attentions on the Church he so loved and he became renowned as the leading layman of his day. Laura refers to Archbishop Benson's judgment of her father's life, who compared him to such great men as Sir Matthew Hale or Sir Thomas More.[70] After Gladstone's Ministry resigned Roundell devoted his life to defending the national church, taking a significant lead in the movement against Disestablishment. Not only did he publish articles on the subject, having carried out thorough research at the British Museum, the Vatican and Church House, but he also addressed conferences and meetings all over the country. After his wife died, his unmarried daughter, Sophy, became his constant companion.

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[67] Ridding, L.E., Vol. I, p.276
[68] Ridding, L.E., Recollections, Vol. II, p.136
[69] Ridding, L.E., Sophia Matilda Palmer. Comtesse de Franqueville. A Memoir, John Murray, London, 1920, p.3
[70] Ibid., p.3

Roundell's friends included a significant number of the leaders of the Church and State at that time. Both Laura's parents had wide intellectual sympathies and they encouraged their children to develop in the morally and intellectually stimulating environment of Blackmoor. Under her father's direct influence Laura was to develop an extraordinary interest in public affairs that enabled her, with confidence and intelligence, to take such a prominent part in the Church and society at their highest levels.

'There is no one like a sister and one never ceases missing them'[71]

Next to her parents, Laura's world was inhabited by her three sisters and her brother, Willy. They were her best friends, though in their younger days, they paired off with the sibling who was nearest their own age. In the case of Laura this was Mary. In a character sketch of 1871 she describes her younger sister in these terms: "Professor of Hairdressing and Dressing in general. Mistress of the Robes to many of her Aunts. A charming girl…"[72] When Mary married Lord Waldegrave in August 1874, Laura was still at home and felt the loss of her closest sister most terribly. In September of that year, the rest of the family went on one of their usual 'Scotch tours' and Laura describes how "I felt sick with dreariness at her loss…"[73] such was her loneliness, having shared their life together up to that point. After Mary's marriage, Laura cleaved to Sophy, her next youngest sister after Mary, who she describes thus: "tall, two long curls, plenty of flow of conversation… Very fond of riding if the horse could be dispensed with… full of sympathy for Shorthorns, ducks, poultry and pewopeners…"[74] Their relationship was one of "originator and builder,"[75] as Laura would hatch an idea in her creative mind, and Sophy would develop this idea, guided by her architect's plans. Years later, in 1912, when Laura and Sophy were middle-aged, Sophy acknowledged the special bond she had with her eldest sister after a visit together, "I loved my wee time with you as always. Sisters are on a plane by themselves and to be together is, as you have said

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[71] Bodleian Library (BL), 38M49/E6/87
[72] 9M68/63
[73] Ridding, L.E., Vol. I, p.366
[74] 9M68/63
[75] Ridding, L.E., Sophia Matilda Palmer, p.30

sometimes, a real joy."[76] Laura mentions little about her youngest sister, Freda, whom she was least close to.

For most Victorians, the bond between brother and sister expressed absolutely the ideal relationship between men and women, as it involved the emotional depth of a marriage, without being clouded by the issue of sexuality.[77] This was the relationship Laura had with her brother Willy.[78] They mutually adored one another. Willy made his eldest sister laugh. She recalls an incident when the family were in Geneva and Willy had brought his tutor with him during the summer holidays. Whilst introducing Mr. Geoghegan to the rest of the British party, he added, "he's awfully good-natured and if you ask him, will be delighted to show you the stump of his arm!"[79] He later inherited the power of speech from his father and a sympathy towards others from his mother and his deep spiritual nature shone through his political aspirations.

The Palmer children enjoyed the outdoors, inventing new games in a constant effort to combat the boredom associated with 'eternal croquet'. Some of their pursuits were not deemed suitable for young girls. Laura recalls that "Mrs. Rickards was "shocked" at "Rounders" and got them stopped - but not before we had a jolly paperchase… and running with young men was thought immoral."[80] Laura later reveals how she disliked sport, particularly football, which she sought to abolish. She wrote to her brother on 12 October 1875: "My dearest Will… Horrid football. I should like to bring a bill into Parliament to stop it. The danger is what I don't like. You may have no more arms or legs left if you go about kicking or getting kicked all about a stupid ball."[81] Laura had many varied gifts of imagination, which fed her creative mind. When they were younger the proud siblings disliked apologising to each other if they had been discourteous or mean to one another and so Laura came up with the word "Um," which, translated, meant "Do you forgive

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[76] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.371
[77] Gorham, D, p.44
[78] Willy was educated at Winchester College, leaving to attend University College, Oxford where he gained a First Class in History.
[79] Ridding, L.E., Vol. I, p.290
[80] Ibid., p.228
[81] MSS Selborne 112/7, BL

me? I forgive you."[82] Later they taught their respective spouses this secret code, which was particularly useful in public settings. In their newly built country home, the Palmers loved to put on plays and pageants. They were always getting up theatricals, involving the entire family and their closest friends. Each child was typecast in the role they most often played and for this Laura was usually "the haughty passionate or ridiculous old woman."[83] She never played the beautiful heroine, but rather the character-part. She would help to paint the scenery backstage. Printed programmes were drawn up, introducing the 'dramatis personae' – the Palmers and friends such as the Pole-Carews, the Waldegraves, the Brodies, and the Murrays. Past productions included the comic dramas, 'The Secret Agent' (1873) and 'The Jacobite' (1875) that were acted and received with great enthusiasm. Laura's nieces and nephews recalled how, as they were growing up, she continued to love to help them put on plays and act with them, donning silly accents where the part demanded. She always enjoyed 'playing the fool.'

The majority of girls from the upper classes in the mid-Victorian decades received an informal education in the setting of the home, not through any kind of institutionalised schooling at all, and this was the case for the Palmer girls. In consequence of this lack of standardisation, traditional views have argued that a gentlewoman's education was haphazard and superficial. Parents in wealthy households would separate those in the nursery from those who were old enough for a more formalised education in the schoolroom. Accordingly a girl would be taught to master social accomplishments, such as dancing, singing, sketching or playing a musical instrument, perhaps intermingled with a little French or Italian to impress the bachelor in search of a cultured wife. The prescriptive literature of the day reminded girls of the purpose of their education. They were to become amiable and useful companions and helpmeets to their husband, with the ability to run their household with efficiency whilst taking responsibility for their children's moral and practical upbringing. To curb the threat of the excesses of the public world, home education was favoured by those who could afford to employ a governess and/or tutors for their children. By so doing, their daughters would not be contaminated by the harsh reality that industrial Capitalism threatened.

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[82] Ridding, L.E., Vol. I, p.240
[83] Ibid., Vol. I, p.378

June Purvis refers to the influential writer, Elizabeth Sewell, who wrote about the nature of female education for the upper classes in Laura's day:

> The aim of education is to fit children for the position in life which they are thereafter to occupy. Boys are to be sent out into the world to buffet with its temptations, to mingle with bad and good, to govern and direct… Girls are to dwell in quiet homes… to exercise a noiseless influence, to be submissive and retiring… to educate girls in crowds is to educate them wrongly…[84]

Such ideas would have been circulating during Laura's formative years and a considerable amount of money spent on the Palmer girls' home education. Laura lived in a household where a rigorous education was highly valued, evidenced in part by her polished style of writing when just a young girl. Her learning far surpassed the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic, despite only a few hours devoted to formal instruction each day. A regular day would commence with prayers at 8:30a.m., followed by breakfast. Lessons would ensue after breakfast until midday and after lunch at 1:00p.m. the remainder of the day would be their own.[85] The afternoon would not be spent in idleness, however. Of course there was time for play, but the girls would also spend time listening to their mother reading aloud from Scripture, or if their father was at home, he would read such sturdy literature as Shakespeare's 'The Merchant of Venice,' or Sir Walter Scott's 'Ivanhoe.' The girls would also take time to read books of their own choosing. There is no hint that Laura found her classes frustrating or limiting, in fact she appeared to enjoy them thoroughly, that is apart from her dancing lessons that she detested.

Lady Selborne commented on her daughter's intelligence and eagerness to learn, recalling on a vacation to Aldeburgh "a… very loquacious old clergyman who… taught Laura… said "Bless me Ma'am, I wish I had taken out my watch. I never had a pupil to learn so quick!"[86] Girls endowed with Laura's sense and ability could receive a balanced and fulfilling education, under the tutelage of a wise

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[84] Purvis, J, A History of Women's Education in England, Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1991, p.65
[85] Ridding, L.E., Vol. I, p.187
[86] Ibid., Vol. I, p.143

governess. Laura's governess, Miss Holder, may not have been the most intellectual teacher, but she took time to plan her charge's education. Also she made lessons fun, she was not the "prunes and prisms" kind of governess seen in so much fiction.[87] The most significant omission in Laura's curriculum was science, though she did learn botany, a subject she pursued as she got older. In consideration of the fact that her education was intended to be useful, rather than academic, she received a rich training. M. Jeanne Peterson asserts that most gentlewomen were highly educated, despite the sporadic nature of their education, as they had so many subjects to choose from, barely differing from that of the leisured gentleman.[88] If they were to make a good union they needed to familiarise themselves with a wide range of knowledge.

Laura's experience of languages, both classical and modern, also revealed the depth of her learning. She pursued French, German and Italian, as well as languages that tended not to be studied by girls, those of Latin and Greek. Formal lessons in the schoolroom were supplemented by visits to the Crystal Palace, in her teens. Pamela Horn argues that even exceptional girls were intellectually dependent on the domestic ideology that pervaded their lives.[89] Laura never felt the need to reconcile any conflict between her personal ambition and the ideology that expected her to remain within the confines of the home and the family. No mention is made of her desire for a University education, but the habit of regular study she formed in her childhood served her well through her adult life, as she became a prolific writer.

Self-education was another important, and often sidelined, aspect of the lady's education, particularly through reading. Laura considered reading to be a crucial influence that shaped her thoughts and opinions in her youth. Lady Selborne exercised a significant control over her daughter's reading material, choosing only those books that were deemed suitable for a young lady, though this was still substantial and wide-ranging, and Laura would read them in depth, not just skimming over their pages. Beginning with such tender literature as the tales of Hans Christian Anderson, Laura moved onto such hearty mental fare as 'The Daisy

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[87] Lochhead, M, p.65
[88] Peterson, M. J, pp.56-7
[89] Horn, P, Ladies of the Manor, Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd., Stroud, 1997, p.48

Chain' and other stories by Charlotte Yonge, her primary literary influence. As a committed Anglican, Miss Yonge's writings had a strong moral and religious undertone upon which she projected images of domestic and feminine girlhood.[90] Miss Yonge continued in the evangelical tradition of instructive didactic tales for children when she started a magazine specifically for the nursery and schoolroom in 1851 entitled 'The Monthly Packet.' This publication arose at a time when writings specifically for the 'daughter at home' were becoming increasingly popular. It is unclear if Laura read any works by authors who offered a more complex interpretation of femininity, such as George Eliot or Charlotte Brontë. Titles such as 'Mrs. Gatty's Parables From Nature,' 'Ministering Children,' 'Pilgrim's Progress,' and later the novels and poems of Sir Walter Scott and the plays of Shakespeare graced her bookshelves. These latter works enlivened in Laura a real love for history.

Any deficiencies in Laura's 'formal' education were complemented by the wider cultural background in which she was raised. Listening to the daily intercourse between her parents, great people in their own right, and that of the interesting flow of guests who constantly visited their homes in London and Blackmoor, she grew unconsciously in cultural wealth. Her world-view was shaped by the intellectual and artistic interchange she encountered especially in the conversations between her father and the prominent political and ecclesiastical dignitaries who visited him, people such as Edward and Lavinia Talbot (née Lyttelton), Bishop Samuel Wilberforce and Canon Scott Holland. She also heard great scientific men, Oxford Dons and Ambassadors, recalling "eager political and ethical talks." One of these visitors, Sir Drummond Wolfe, told Laura's fortune. Sarcastically, she writes, "the accuracy was miraculous. I was twice to be married, have a large family, be very rich…"[91] In 1865, Laura paid her first visit to the House of Commons, to hear her father deliver a speech. On this occasion, she was also privileged to hear Lord Palmerston and Mr. Gladstone speak.[92] She supped greedily on such oratorial treats.

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[90] Gorham, D, 'The Ideology of Femininity and Reading for Girls 1850-1914,' in Hunt, F, (ed), Lessons for Life. The Schooling of Girls and Women 1850-1950, Basil Blackwell Ltd., Oxford, 1987, p.44

[91] Ridding, L.E., Vol. I, p.350

[92] Ibid., p.161

'Prunes and prisms'

The next level of influence in her young life was the servants, nurses and governesses who surrounded her as she grew up. Many a time her parents would have to leave their children at home, while they visited London. So Laura and her brother and sisters became intimately acquainted with the staff that were there to serve and protect them, although not all of these people were trustworthy or of sound principles. She recalls an incident when their butler, Parnell, restrained her from leaving the nursery, "I was furious! All my pride and modesty was outraged by his odious familiarity. But, childlike, I never mentioned it to my mother or Petrie[93]... I think he was a bad man."[94] Like most memoirs of childhood, Laura's contains a great deal of detail about the staff that surrounded her, whose authority was supported absolutely by her parents. Laura would accept any punishment she was given, referring to her first nurse's "Solomonic discipline," but adding that "it was soon over and I suspect as wholesome and unpleasant a form as any can be."[95] When Laura was seven years of age, Nana's[96] stern punishment was replaced by 'Meme's'[97] sense of fairness and wisdom. She was well respected by all the Palmer children, especially Willy, who missed her terribly when he went away to Winchester College.

Laura's recollections of the servants at their London home were not congenial. With a great memory for specifics, she recalls their individual shortcomings:

> Mother had a succession of maids, whom we did not like, Heckford tiresome - Lowe foolish sentimentality personified - Sanders acrid and very self-satisfied. Once when she was brushing Sophy's hair and tore it Sophy remonstrated and Sanders replied, "I may have to brush your hair, Miss - but I am many steps nearer Heaven than you are!" We none of us wanted to go to Sanders' Heaven. Then there was a tearful slobbery widow Ann Wyatt, second housemaid, whom mother kept for

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[93] Elizabeth Petrie, a widow, entered the Palmers' service as their second nurse in February 1856. She remained in their service until her death in June 21 1881. She was buried beside Laura's parents.
[94] Ibid., p.46
[95] Ibid., p.34
[96] Lucy Pegg was her first nurse, nicknamed 'Nana'. She left the Palmer's service in 1856 in order to marry. Laura felt the loss most especially.
[97] This was Elizabeth Petrie's nickname.

charity. She took her starving and kept her for many years, until she became so impossible she had to go. Mother paid for her children's education in an orphanage and was most kind to her. Ann was an irresistible butt for youthful jokes. She was so green. Willy, when he was a tiny boy, once said to her: "Ann! Muddy says you are going to the dogs!" On which Ann, in torrents of furious tears, demanded audience with mother and wanted to know what a poor widow had done to cause her to think and speak so cruelly of her! When the basis of her woe was revealed mother said "Ann! Do I talk slang like that? And is it likely if I did think it, I should confide my suspicions to young Master Palmer?!!"[98]

Only upper-middle and upper class families were in a position to be able to afford a governess, and the Palmers were included in this select group. Miss Holder was not gifted with any great intellect, nor was she particularly inspirational, but Laura adored her. Freda, Laura's youngest sister, was the last to leave the schoolroom and Laura writes how a more capable teacher could have "relieved the fog," "Freda felt like an imprisoned martyr."[99] Laura, however, was intelligent enough to be able to counter the lack of ability on the part of her governess. Where Miss Holder lacked mental acumen, she more than made up for in fun. If there had been time at the Crystal Palace, on one occasion, Laura records that she would have entered the various silly races - sack, blindfold, egg and spoon and hopping races.[100] She truly enjoyed the company of children. Despite her lack of teaching skills, she made a deep impression on Laura, who calls her "a saint."[101]

Laura had two great consuming passions in her life as she grew up - writing and sketching. She had a natural flair for both, and from the age of nine she was writing and illustrating stories of her own. A constant flow of ideas would enter her head, eventually emerging as imaginative stories. She wrote in a letter to her mother in 1862, "please do not mind this scribble, but it is my thoughts that pour out of my head so fast that I cannot write fast enough…"[102] and later she would remark:

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[98] Ibid., p.44
[99] Ibid., p.264
[100] 9M68/2, 3 August 1863, HRO
[101] Ridding, L.E., Vol. I, p.120
[102] Ibid., p.139, 29 December 1862

> I have never had enough time to do all the things I had in my brain… I could not ever understand what was meant by having time on one's hands, having to kill time, I wanted thousands more hours to do all I wanted.[103]

One of Laura's earliest attempts was written when she was just eight years old, called 'The First Child,' the story of a boy who became lost in a wood and was helped by a bird. It was certainly not her greatest authorial moment, but as a debut, it was well written and lucid. By her mid-teens her writing was abundant, penning many poems, hymns and stories. Entitled 'Little Songs' in 1864, Laura put together an anthology of poems, dedicated to her mother, the principal of which were entitled 'Mariabella and the Pirate', 'Napoleon Bonaparte in the Island of Helena' and 'The Enchanting Moon'.

It is interesting to note that when Laura wrote to her evangelical Aunt Mary, to ask her to proof-read her latest endeavour, 'Clara Floweridge,' she had to emphasise the point that it was a book and not a novel so that her strict aunt would not disapprove! Also in this letter she writes that she is more aware that her skills are developing, both in writing and sketching, "it is much older than anything I have written yet, because you know, one's mind and thoughts grow too… The girl's arms are not now sausages..,"[104] referring to her poor attempts at illustration. Heavily influenced by Charlotte Yonge's tone and content, Laura sent some of her own papers to be included in 'The Monthly Packet.' Miss Yonge accepted them, responding with the kind words, "what a delightful treasure trove!"[105] Her first published story, entitled 'The Easter Moon' appeared in the magazine, having been accepted on 22 January 1874. Following this date she usually published a story for most Christmas editions of the journal. Laura owed much to the encouragement of such a wise and busy writer as Miss Yonge, whom she finally met on 4 September, later that year. Laura describes her as "fearfully shy,"[106] but that she was most kind to Sophy and herself. The critics were also kind to Laura on her first published literary outing. She refers to the 'John Bull' newspaper that commented how: "'The Easter Moon' is remarkable for its beautiful English, a rare virtue nowadays and its originality of

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[103] Ibid., p.164
[104] Ibid., p.159, 31 May 1864
[105] Ibid., p.359, 20 January 1874
[106] Ibid., p.362

conception in familiarising a scene in Holy writ with perfect reverence at the same time."[107] A critic of some note read another story she had written called 'Haberdasher's Hall' and a tract called 'Jenny's Room,' venturing to write to her mother that the former was "so highly polished" and the latter "most interesting."[108] The critic's name was William Ewart Gladstone - warm praise indeed from an ex-Prime Minister for a young authoress!

Laura's writings as a child could be split broadly into two categories: serious and instructive material and then satirical works, which were shown especially through the journals she kept of her domestic travels. When one surveys her illustrations, her keen sense of the ludicrous and the ironic seep through her witty comments. Her drawings are like caricatures in a cartoon. What strikes one most is her use of language and imagery to describe people and places, for example, aged sixteen, she depicts the 'Salisbury Craggs' in Edinburgh as "huge, rugged, cliffy mountains under which the city is curled up like a dog at its master's feet."[109] She is also a very good storyteller, her memoir is replete with anecdotes of amusing incidents she witnessed. The following are just a couple of examples, revealing her great sense of humour and powers of recollection. The first occurred when she had just 'come out' and was invited to one of the Queen's garden parties, accompanied by her father:

> 'Maria, Marchioness of Ailesbury', as she was called, was at it - a notable figure - one of the… very smart Grand Dames whom it always amused father to watch. She was waiting next to us for the Queen to pass, and her pinched waist, quivering sandy coloured corkscrew curls and smiling thin face were full of animation as we heard her telling a bosom friend about her Paris dress which she was wearing: "It is a new colour called 'The Dying Toad' and there is no other dress of this colour in England." "May that long remain the case!" father murmured to me![110]

The second amusing story recalls the antics of her great uncle William Whitbread, a formidable-looking gentleman with the kindest of hearts underneath, who could terrify nervous people:

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[107] Ibid., p.359
[108] Ibid., p.359
[109] 9M68/62, HRO
[110] Ridding, L.E., Vol. I, p.207

Another nervous lady, a Miss Dawkins, used at family prayers to afford us great joy. The ritual was very involved - a glass of water - Bible - prayer book commentary and book of family prayers - all played their parts in it, and pauses for sips of water and change from one book to another made the function difficult to follow... Invariably after a second long pause, Miss Dawkins would rise from her seat and kneel down, thinking the Bible lesson and commentary were over and the prayers about to begin. Uncle William always let her settle herself on her knees before he remarked in a loud voice: "Too soon Maria Dawkins. Please get up again!" a really severe ordeal under so many smiling pairs of eyes.[111]

Laura's artistic abilities did not confine themselves solely to written work, she was also a talented painter. From an early age she found it easy to draw, her talents stretching from the illumination of texts that demanded accuracy and method, to her penchant for landscapes that permitted her a freer hand. In particular, she loved to draw trees, believing herself to have 'descended from the dryads.'[112] Along with her friends, Annie Brodie and Mary Grey,[113] Laura started a drawing society, which they called the Graphic Society, in 1866. Their monthly subjects would vary, examples included 'Charity' and 'Any scene from Guy Mannering.' Laura would draw inspiration from the natural surroundings at Blackmoor, and when in London she would visit the British Museum for ideas.

"Thou God seest me"

As well as academic instruction, Laura received a religious education, developing her spiritual nature. Religion was tightly woven into the fabric of the family's backdrop. It fed and nurtured them as they struggled through life, and it acted as an adhesive to bond them all together as a family and as part of the wider society of servants and villagers. The Palmer children were taught the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith through the Scriptures and other reading material and spent the remainder of their lives striving to get closer to the 'truth,' seeking communion with their Lord. One aspect of their education stressed the need for morality based on duty and self-sacrifice. Laura recollects the internal conflict she felt over a question of different levels of morality when she was only four and a half years of

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[111] Ibid., p.178
[112] Ibid., p.4
[113] Sister of Edward Grey (1862-1933), Viscount Grey of Fallodon.

age. Thomas Dale, her uncle Horsley's butler, who was a man of absolute devotion to his master, always honest, would take a lump of coal out of Horsley's coal house and every evening, for thirty years, would take it home to use in his own hearth. In the test, she refers to this incident as 'an early case of conscience coercion.' In her young mind, she concluded that such conduct was dishonest, "'Thou shall not steal' was very plain, and that I knew."[114]

Laura's faith was a fusion of her father's Tractarian and High Church sympathies and her mother's evangelical roots. Her parents hoped to take the best elements from each tradition and amalgamate them into a reality where all Laura did sprang from her faith. Laura saw through the introverted evangelical view of the world and its criticism of worldly pleasures, but took from this tradition the vitality of its faith and the consciousness that God saw everything. She felt that the example of her parents was her first gift from God. She writes that, "they prayed over every step of their lives."[115] Lady Selborne put high standards of thought and behaviour before her at all times. She would listen to her children's Bible readings during weekday mornings before family prayers began and would question them on the true meaning of the text. Roundell believed that it was God's will that he secured the public positions he held as He had work for him to do. When he initially became Solicitor-General, his wife wrote to her eldest daughter that "we must pray to God that we do not get puffed up, but keep humble and ask God to give Papa health and strength and wisdom to serve God in his higher position."[116] Despite his heavy workload, he would regularly teach his children on Sunday afternoons, between Church services and Bible classes. They were instructed in Bible history and the doctrines of the Church.[117] Such a positive spiritual atmosphere could not fail to make an impression on Laura as a child, permeating everything she thought or did. She remembers feelings of sinfulness when she was spending so much time making up her own stories, rather than focusing her mind on higher things, "I wrote stories by the score… How much this interfered with real things I cannot say. May God forgive my sins in that way."[118]

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[114] Ridding, L.E., Vol. I, p.42
[115] Ibid., p.114
[116] Ibid., p.133
[117] Ridding, L.E., Sophia Matilda Palmer, p.7
[118] Ridding, L.E., Vol. I, pp.120-2

In an age when Sabbatarianism demanded that Sundays were kept as a day of rest, when activities were restricted, the Palmers followed suit faithfully. Lord and Lady Selborne wanted to keep the Sabbath sacred and so as little work as possible was executed by themselves and their servants were largely spared from their duties. Ironically, Sunday actually became a very full day indeed. Once a month the family would attend an early-morning celebration of the Eucharist, followed weekly by lessons at the Sunday School at which Laura later taught, morning and afternoon. This was Laura's first experience of working out her spirituality in a practical way. Matins would commence at 11:00a.m. and the evening service would begin at 7:00p.m. Directly after this service, they would sit down to evening supper, a Palmer Sunday institution at which guests would often drop in. Not one person in the household was neglected spiritually - Roundell would ask them to kneel down as he prayed with them. At Blackmoor he would often give a speech to the household, asking them to set good examples to their poor neighbours in the village, reiterating the rule that no one was to be found or heard of visiting the public house.[119] Formal religion was a duty they were happy to render, increasingly as the influence of the Tractarians brought beauty and ritual to their Church. Similarly, hymns also came into common usage.

Roundell was influenced by the Tractarian movement in Oxford as a student there. He loved hymns, how the greatness of God could be conveyed through this medium, using clever imagery and allusions and so, in 1862, he published his own compendium of hymns, entitled '<u>The Book of Praise</u>.' Laura recollects the bookshelves in her father's London study - a curious marriage of legal textbooks and hymnbooks standing shoulder to shoulder. He took the greatest trouble to ensure that the hymns he included were published in their original text, without modifications, as intended by their author. This compilation was well received, read and enjoyed by such people as Archbishop Benson and Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Even the Queen had a copy.

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[119] Ibid., p.187

Arguably, Roundell's biggest local achievement was the construction of the Church at Blackmoor, begun in 1867 and finally consecrated on 18 May 1869 by his good friend, Bishop Claughton, of Rochester. Since his family had purchased the Temple estate, Roundell believed he had received from God "many little tokens of encouragement,"[120] as he called them, giving signs that the right thing was being done, by taking possession of Blackmoor and building the Church for the glory of God. He truly believed they had been blessed. When a friend of Laura's realised they were building the Church prior to the house, she reflected, "how nice and different to the Jews where God reproved them in Haggai for neglecting to build His Temple." Lady Selborne reflected in a letter to her sister, Mary:

> I had never thought of this before at all, but on turning to Haggai, it was just the case in point and I felt so thankful that God had put it in my dear husband's heart to do that first as a sort of thanks offering for all His blessings on his practise.[121]

Roundell felt that he had been allowed to do something for God at last, as he witnessed the locals entering their own Church. He told his wife that he felt he could say with Simeon "Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,"[122] such was his contentment.

Laura was surrounded by an extended family of faithful relatives, particularly her mother's brother, Uncle Sam Waldegrave, the evangelical Bishop of Carlisle and her father's sisters; Aunt Emma and Aunt Pem (Emily) the latter who lived in a sisterhood. Also mentioned is his brother, Uncle Edwin, with whom Laura would spend hours discoursing on politics, religious matters and ethics as she grew into a young woman. Even though she did not necessarily agree with what she perceived to be the misguided narrow evangelical ways of her Waldegrave aunts, she could still appreciate their efforts to live lives of obedience, humility and self-surrender to their Lord. However she felt a real sense of the lack of beauty and art in their homes, in stark contrast with her Palmer relations who provided a "richer intellectual pasturage for us to browse in."[123]

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[120] Ibid., p.189
[121] Ibid., p.189
[122] Ibid., p.235
[123] Ibid., p.108

Aunt Emma Palmer was a real source of spiritual inspiration to Laura, hailing her "a most spiritual saint,"[124] "like a breath of spirit"[125] as she sacrificed her life to help those in need. She and her sister, Pem, always dressed in a very modest fashion, avoiding any bold colours or fuss. Of course, Pem wore the dress of her sisterhood, St. Cyprians, that was clumsy, scratchy and dragged on the ground, hardly practical for the menial tasks she would regularly carry out. When the founder of the Mission Sisterhood left, Pem became the 'Mother Superior'. Thus she spent her days working among the slums of Marylebone, trying to help teenage mothers and their infants at the Bethesda they ran and doing what she could to ease the condition of the aged poor who came to their Home. Ironically, Pem spent part of her time in wealthy districts, such as Portland Place, begging for scraps at the doors of the residents. She had many tasks to perform, visiting the sick, the poor and the fallen, but at night she would leave the sins of the world behind her as she entered her tiny cell where she would sleep and pray, the walls brightened up with devotional pictures. Often on a Sunday, when the family were in London, they would visit Aunt Pem, and Laura recalls another side to her aunt's personality - her sense of fun and mischief. She always enjoyed playing practical jokes on her brothers, Horsley and William.

Ecclesiastical visitors from the highest levels of the Church would visit her parents, part of Laura's wider cultural background. Deans Hook, Church and Stanley visited the Selbornes, as well as the Wordsworth brothers, Christopher and Charles, the latter whom Laura refers to as "the Don Quixote of the Church, a leader of forlorn hopes."[126] When in London she would listen to the oratorial panache of Canon Liddon. Here she experienced for the first time, what it was like to feel the electric atmosphere flowing through a crowd of people together, all sharing the same intense spiritual feelings. Laura formed opinions on such ecclesiastic heavyweights as the two Archbishops, A.C. Tait (Canterbury) and W. Thomson (York), who always struck her as pompous, representing the 'Church Established, rather than the Church Ecclesiastic,' but she was more inspired by Archbishops E.W. Benson and Frederick Temple, who she deemed to be more pastoral in their

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[124] Ibid., p.330
[125] Ibid., p.334
[126] Ibid., p.354

slants.[127] Such a wealth of spiritual influence in her life at so young an age showed her the path she wanted to take. She never wrote of any burning ambitions, but one thing is clear - she was waiting for a spiritual calling, just as her father had waited, and when the opportunity arose to help her mother at the Parochial Mission Women's Association, she thanked God for the chance to put her faith in action.

Armed with an arsenal of religious emotions, which had been stirred by those closest to her, Laura set to work from the age of seven, writing hymns like her father to aid her devotional life. She writes such lines as:

> "Sing praises, sing praises to God on high
> He has made all the earth and the sea and the sky
> Sing praises, sing praises, for God is e'er nigh." (1857)

Another hymn tells of the important missionary work being carried out in distant lands:

> "Far away! Far away!
> Where the negroe slave groans
> Under the pain of the whip
> And weight of the stones
>
> There it is that the missions
> have settled themselves
> in China and India
> And Afghanistan." (1858)

This hymn reveals her deep concern for the welfare of others. Again she refers to slavery in the following ode, and ultimately to her God:

> "He made the waves that splash the sand
> He made the lightening bold
> He made the elephant on land
> and the poor slave that's sold.
>
> And in His holy book we read
> We all are sinful men,
> and we that holy book must read
> to lead us to heaven.
>
> But best of all He sent His Son,
> His only son to die,

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[127] Ibid., p.358

for us a suff'ring life to run
and on the Cross to lie."[128] (1857)

'Open thy mouth wide and I will fill it'

This was Laura's Aunt Emma's advice to her niece before she was confirmed. Emma urged that Laura should be open to Him and receive Him in her life. Laura always held the reality of Jesus in her mind. When she was just twelve she wrote an intense letter to her mother, describing how much she loved "Jesus my Saviour."[129] She had a real grasp of the concept of a loving, ever-seeing, ever-present God. The turning point in her religious life came after her confirmation at her grandfather's church in Mixbury. Prior to this she remembers a distinct religious moment that arguably one could claim as her 'conversion experience.' This incident occurred on the back stairs of their London residence of Portland Place when she was only eleven or twelve. She recalls:

> A sudden flashing revelation of God's redeeming love came upon me and enfolded me as if in a blaze of light. I see the little tray of the nursery lift and the well of the stairs as I lent against the banister and repeated, sobbing, the wonderful words of Romans III: 23-27. Conviction of sin and of pardoning grace seemed to flow in upon me at that moment…[130]

Laura was confirmed on 6 March 1864, when she was almost fifteen years of age, by the Bishop of Oxford, 'Soapy' Sam Wilberforce, as she called him. It was a day of mixed emotions as she recalls having to wear a lilac dress with a solid white cap, upon her evangelical relations' insistence, against her own wishes. She wanted to wear a special white dress and a white veil. Together with some of the local girls who lived in the village and her nursery maid, Harriet Hitchcock, she went forward, "I remember the sobbing which made it hard for me to restrain myself at the altar rails."[131]

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[128] Ibid., p.45, 49
[129] Ibid., p.133
[130] Ibid., p.122
[131] Ibid., p.124

'Thou shalt notness'[132]

This was the overwhelming impression Laura had of her Uncle Sam Waldegrave, one of the Palmerston bishops. She loved and respected him, but she could not tolerate his narrow view of the world. In the moral revolution against untruth that he was fighting he would 'bowdlerize'[133] her favourite Anderson tales. Indeed he went one step further and rewrote whole chunks of one of her fairy stories, so that wherever the word 'giant' appeared, it was amended to 'the big man'; 'fairy' became 'lady'; 'dwarf' became 'little man' and 'witch' was altered to 'bad woman.'[134] Political correctness ahead of its time. Laura appreciated the evangelical tenet of the natural depravity of the human heart, but questioned the methods with which such a lesson was enforced. She painted an ugly picture of the homes of her Waldegrave relations:

> There was a feeling of negation and Puritanism, ugly base whitewash, absence of beauty and interesting books and opinions… Aunt Elizabeth 'collected'. Her collections were very repellent to look at - dull - poor beetles impaled on pins in rather dim glass-lidded cases lined with ugly grey paper. Missionary magazines with ugly woodcuts of unnatural-looking white teachers and black natives…[135]

Laura resented the Waldegraves' lack of scholarship and the drabness of their lives, which she believed should be a celebration. Mocking their prudery, Laura recalls how she would occasionally visit the home of her nursery governess, Miss Pontet:

> We used to go to tea there sometimes…and we played delightful unknown card games for forfeits. We never touched playing cards anywhere else in our childish days. The Evangelical influence banished them from any home belonging to the Waldegrave side. Granny played cards ecarté and cribbage – but these were "bedside games." We smacked our lips over the flavour of wickedness in Miss Pontet's, where we handled these tools of the devil and envied the Cecil and Russell children who knew their names! Lotto, too, was a lovely game – forfeits and

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[132] Ibid., p.108

[133] This term derives from the evangelical Rev. John Bowdler, who, in his quest to morally strengthen the country, would go through the works of Shakespeare and other great classics, amending any morally questionable sentences so that they were harmlessly pure to the reader.

[134] Ridding, L.E., A Nursery Library Seventy Five Years Ago, 9M68/73/27, HRO

[135] Ridding, L.E., Vol. I, p.108

> rewards – altogether our visits to Miss Pontet we delighted in."[136]

In the case of her Aunt Mary, Laura reacted against her constant surveillance when they visited, referring to her "intolerable espionage."[137] It was not enough for Aunt Mary to know that God could see everything in the home, she had to double check for Him that every crumb was eaten on their plates, every action studied for proper conduct and every article of clothing criticised as being too fancy, or too colourful. Thus we find the roots of Laura's prejudice against the Evangelical school of thought in the Church, in its narrowest forms, informed by those she met around her.

Ian Bradley asserts that the Evangelicals were so certain of their salvation and so pessimistic of the future of the unconverted that they had built up a wall of self-righteousness and spiritual pride.[138] They were concerned to keep themselves apart from those who were 'tainted.' New ideas such as 'Votes for Women' positively reeked of the work of the 'unclean.' When Lydia Becker knocked on the door of Laura's Grandma Waldegrave's house in Hastings, asking her to sign her petition in favour of the franchise, she was asked to get down on her knees and pray for forgiveness for her wickedness![139] Laura recalls an amusing story of one of her many visits to her Evangelical grandmother in Hastings, illustrating her narrow view of religion:

> That church had a Mr. Foyster for Rector. Another Church St. Clements a little further down the town had his brother for its curate in charge. Grandmamma did not appoint this second one, as she always declared his stammering was so bad he ought never to have been ordained. He could not say "Not" so we children always looked forward to the Ante-Communion service, as we enjoyed being told to "thou shalt… murder – thou shalt… steal etc." Grandmamma was patron of almost all the livings in and round Hastings. She ruled the Church with a rod of iron and any papacy or… puseyitish leanings had scant mercy from her! We were never allowed to enter Christ Church in Hastings… or the many dangerous High Churches in St. Leonards…[140]

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[136] Ibid., pp.74-6
[137] Ibid., p.372
[138] Bradley, I, The Call to Seriousness, Jonathan Cape Ltd., London, 1976, p.30
[139] Ridding, L.E., Vol. I, p.90
[140] Ibid., p.84

Another source of annoyance to Laura was the unrestrained Evangelical use of damning language such as 'clean' and 'unclean' and 'saved' or 'damned.' Her harp mistress, Miss Tonna, was a prime example, passing harsh human judgments on all she met. Laura does balance her opinion on this though, by stating that her parents would not have agreed with her on that point and that this was not solely confined to the Low Church camp. She also knew some High Church friends who adopted just the same judgmental spirit as her relatives and Miss Tonna.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the Tractarian movement was growing in strength, filtering its influence down to the schoolroom, and with the revival of worship came the renaissance of good works. Increasingly Laura felt her conscience awakened to the condition of the poor, through her contact with the Blackmoor villagers whom she visited, her Mixbury neighbours, through the influence of her Aunt Pem's experiences, as well as those of her mother in the East End of London. Laura taught seven local children at Sunday School, varying in age between eight and ten, giving her an insight into their world. She was also inspired through her reading material. Maria Edgeworth's book, 'Ministering Children,' which Laura read, went a considerable way to encourage its young readers to turn their thoughts to those in poverty. She learned to imagine the plight of others who did not live in the same class as herself. In this way she tried to identify with her servants, and always bore a concern for employees, in whatever field of life they lived.

One could ask if she considered challenging the existing social order, or if she just sought to treat the symptoms, rather than the structure that fostered sin and its resulting social problems. Perhaps she did not question it as a young woman, but later she would write that the attitude of most of the gentry in her day was "so imbued with caste feeling that they apparently felt it presumptuous to interfere with conditions which they regarded as imposed by Providence,"[141] and that we should not just placidly accept the poor conditions of humans or animals. The organised effort, co-founded by her mother, of the pioneering Parochial Mission Women's Association (P.M.W.A), went some way to try to find a lasting remedy for poverty at a local level, seeking to employ women from the lowest orders to go among their

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[141] Ridding, L.E., A Nursery Library Seventy Five Years Ago, 9M68/73/27, HRO

own kind and try to effect a change in their lifestyle and attitudes toward themselves. Lady Selborne had a way of making her children care for similar things to herself and so began Laura's training for her life of social service as she accompanied her mother on her visits to the Mission Women in the East End. By the end of 1888 there were 194 Mission Women in ten districts, such was the success of the scheme.[142] Besides encouraging working women to live lives of thrift and cleanliness, they were brought into direct contact with the parish clergy who worked in conjunction with the Lady Managers who oversaw the whole body, thus bringing more people into the fold through baptisms and confirmations. Lady Selborne worked as a Lady Manager at the Notting Hill Mission, and occasionally her children would accompany her there. When Lady Selborne died in 1885, flowers were sent by the various representatives of the Association and some of the working mothers even sent handmade cards to the family, such was the level of respect for Lady Selborne.

Laura's 'Wishes for 1870' included the following, "that the bright days may begin this year for the East of London and something be found for the poor there to live for." Another wish was that she could conquer her "vain longings and vanity."[143] On 30 January 1871, she received a letter from her friend, Laura Oldfield, which changed her life. Miss Oldfield asked if Laura would help the P.M.W.A., by becoming Honorary Secretary for one of their newest departments for the administration of supplementary help for the Association. This involved writing, copying and keeping accounts. Although this was an administrative role requiring patience and accuracy, Laura was thrilled to her core to receive the calling. She confesses:

> When I got this letter I went down on my knees in our bedroom and thanked God for the call… It gave me real work to do for the East End… Mother gave me three or four years before, a capital story in the Monthly Packet to read, about the East End, called, "Will no one do likewise?" That had a deep effect on me… After accepting Miss Oldfield's invitation, I used to go to her every morning to see if and what work she had for me. It

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[142] Selborne, R, Earl of, Vol. II, 1896, p.355
[143] Ridding, L.E., Vol. I, p.243

> was capital training and most valuable for my life afterwards as Headmaster's and Bishop's wife.[144]

Laura wrote advertisements for funds for the P.M.W.A. in her journals, renaming the Lady Managers 'Pamiwolamas,'[145] in her creative mind, taking the first two letters of each word to form this philanthropic tribe's name ('**Pa**rochial **Mi**ssion **Wo**men's **La**dy **Ma**nagers). At last Laura was gratified to find an outlet for the expression of her spirituality. She could begin to make her contribution for the betterment of society, refuting the idea that all gentlewomen sought lives of leisure, away from the harsh realities of life.

A new page of her life

It was accepted in society that when a girl reached the age of seventeen or eighteen she should leave the schoolroom and enter the adult world, armed with the social skills she had amassed there, in order to find a husband. This was known as 'coming out', and the symbol of this was her presentation to Court. For Laura, as the eldest child, this held both extreme delight and yet trepidation, as the first Palmer to take on the social responsibilities associated with such a step. Laura would no longer have her beloved sister, Mary, there to support her. She had to wait another year before Mary was old enough to complete her education. So, on 7 March 1867 she was presented to her family in the drawing room at Portland Place, practicing her curtseys before taking her place at Court. From this moment onwards she was expected to take on more social duties alongside her parents as a young lady.

Harking back to her Evangelical upbringing, Lady Selborne had strict ideas about chaperonage for Laura. Her mother often did not feel well enough to accompany her daughter, and her father was usually too busy. Without a suitable chaperone she was not permitted to attend any balls, dances or the theatre when she first came out. This may have gone some way to explain why it was nine seasons before she met her husband, and Laura felt her opportunities for meeting suitable men were

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[144] Ibid., p.267
[145] 9M68/63, HRO

severely limited by her parents' attitude. This was hardly the social life of a young lady of her rank and income. Rather she spent her time as a 'grown-up daughter' frequenting dinner and garden parties, 'at homes' and visits to country houses, supplemented by their lessons and charitable works, but gradually through these soirées she learned to socialise with new people and hold her own. She spent much of her time writing, when she was not helping with the P.M.W.A. A number of her compositions were accepted by her good friend, Miss Yonge, for her 'Monthly Packet' magazine, (1874 onwards) and also by 'The Powder Magazine' (1871 onwards). Between 1871 and 1881, eight of her essays were published, including two tracts for the P.M.W.A. and the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.).[146]

Laura greatly admired the works of Miss Yonge. In a review of Miss Yonge's writing in the 'Church Quarterly Review' of 1909, Laura writes:

> Other authors may be greater than she; but, as one of the radiant trio who led many of us for the first time into the fairyland of Romance, Miss Yonge, with the creators of *Ivanhoe* (sic) and *Kehama* (sic) will for ever in our eyes, stand crowned with Olympian glory.[147]

Titles of Laura's first published articles including 'The Beauties of English,' 'Knight-Errantry or the Red Cross, Knight and Una' and 'Haberdashers' Hall' were well-received considering they were her first attempts. Replying to the letter Laura sent to Miss Yonge, enclosing the first two articles, she answered positively:

> January 20, 1874, My dear Miss Palmer, I am delighted with both your papers. I did not write before as I wanted to read them aloud to my invalid friend and we enjoyed them very much… Una and her knight I like very much too and shall be glad to keep them and put them in… What a delightful treasure trove…[148]

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[146] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II, p.94
[147] Ridding, L.E., 'Short Review of 'C. M. Yonge. An Appreciation' by Ethel Romanes,' in Church Quarterly Review, Vol. LXIX, No.138, 1909, p.477
[148] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II, p.93

During this time as a young woman at home, she grew closer to a number of her female friends. In 1869, the Lyttelton family[149] moved into Portland Place, where the Palmers still kept their London home. Laura grew to become particularly fond of May, the youngest Lyttelton daughter and became embroiled in May's battle to marry Rutherford Graham, against the wishes of her family. Tragically, just as the family were coming around to the idea of their marriage, Graham died of diphtheria in 1872 and Laura shared in May's grief at this time.[150] Through the Lytteltons she became acquainted with the Gladstone children, their cousins, especially Mary Gladstone. She also grew to love the Salisbury[151]children, an intimacy that would prove to have more meaning later. Through her contacts she gained a perspective on some of the most important people of her day. Her best friend, Mildred Coleridge, daughter of Judge John Duke Coleridge, one of her father's friends,[152] wrote long letters to Laura in 1874 after she had received a visit from a very special guest, Cardinal Newman, as her mother was painting his portrait. Newman was also a dear friend of Laura's uncle, the Rev. William Palmer, who had also crossed over to the Church of Rome. Mildred described in detail his every characteristic:

> Dr. Newman is here - yes! Indeed he is… My dear, he is not the least what one would think - not a marble image, not a great majestic statue, but a gentle, shy, nervous creature, so sensitive and delicate, mind and body, that one's only idea is how to keep the air from visiting him too roughly, and how to keep one's movements subdued down to his toned key… His face is never in repose for an instant, expressions go rippling over it like wind over a cornfield…[153]

'As mud to diamond'

Another friendship began in 1867, when she befriended Arthur Walter, son of John Walter, editor of 'The Times' newspaper. By 1871, they had formed a close attachment with one another and Laura had ideas of betrothal in her mind when

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[149] Lord George Lyttelton, as the Endowed Schools Commissioner, was known for his role in reforming girls' education. His daughters, Lavinia (wife of Bishop Edward Talbot) and Lucy (wife of Lord Frederick Cavendish, Chief Secretary for Ireland) became prominent women in their own right.
[150] Ridding, L.E., Vol. I, p.304
[151] Lord Robert Cecil inherited the title, Marquess of Salisbury, and then became the Prime Minister (1885-6; 1886-92; 1895-1902). His daughter, Maud, later married Laura's brother, Willy, and became the Countess of Selborne.
[152] Ridding, L.E., Vol. I, p.350
[153] Ibid., p.351

suddenly he announced his proposal to another girl. She had no idea that he was even acquainted with this woman, let alone intent on marrying her. She felt crushed by such a cruel jilt. At such a miserable time, she drew strength from her mother, who was her confidante and adviser throughout life. She also had her intense faith, and God sent her the balance that was needed at this difficult time, as her first article was published by Miss Yonge, providing her with a source of celebration. She had to believe that God had someone better in store for her, and though this was not a test of her faith, it was a test of her character, but God had provided her with the ability to cope. Writing forty-three years after the event, she was able to reflect upon her lucky escape, with the help of God. She writes, "looking back on him and on the 'better' which God had in store for me, the comparison is as mud to diamond."[154] By this time, Laura had already met her 'diamond', some years earlier, in fact. The "right good man"[155] her mother hoped for Laura had already been snubbed by his future wife as she was angry that he had borrowed some of their family artwork.

The family visited Willy at Winchester College on a number of occasions, and in September 1867, they went to see their first play, 'Macbeth' performed by the boys. Here she met the Rev. Dr. George Ridding for the first time, the newly-appointed Headmaster who she described as "a keen-eyed, black-haired, eagle-faced man with an eyeglass and noble profile…"[156] He asked if he could loan some of the Palmers' watercolours for a College art exhibition. Having just relinquished some of her favourite paintings to an earlier exhibition, Laura was unhappy that Dr. Ridding was about to take them away again, and so refused to speak to him when he visited Blackmoor. Laura confessed that she had been a "beast" to George, but added that her view of him soon changed:

> …When he thoughtfully refrained from asking for the one (picture) he saw I minded losing most I felt bitten with compunction and mother explained to him why I minded. The result of this queer interview was so opposite to the way in which people ordinarily flattered him and made up to him, that it made him interested in me! I was henceforth haunted by a sense of having to

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[154] Ibid., p.280
[155] Ibid., p.369
[156] Ibid., p.230

> make up to him for my horrible savage rudeness. This laid a foundation not wanting in piquancy for future intercourse.[157]

'Seven Fat Years'[158]

Laura's father, Lord Selborne, became a member of the Governing Body of Winchester College in January 1875 and so visits to the College became more frequent. It was for the occasion of Domum Day[159] on 25 July 1876, that the Selborne family left Blackmoor for the College. Laura was overwhelmed by the beauty of Domum, the ancient splendour of the headmaster's house, and the feeling of deepening respect and love for her host. She wrote in her memoirs:

> I think George took his place in my heart first that night at Winchester… The beauty of the night was exquisite. The silent tower… and the feeling of intense reverence for it and George that flowed in on me standing there. His loneliness, his human magnetism, his kingship in the place…[160]

Laura left Winchester with the promise that George[161] would come to Blackmoor during the summer holidays. She revealed her growing feelings for the widower:

> I felt an acute drawing to George. His strength, sweetness, greatness, ability and loneliness had bitten deep into my consciousness…The beauty of Winchester made a magnetic background to George – His keen quick dark eyes and rather eagle face and the tone of his speaking voice remained in my mind.[162]

On the morning of 30 September later that year, Laura accepted George's hand in marriage. The wedding day was set for 26 October, little more than three weeks after their engagement. George's first wife, Mary Moberly, daughter of his predecessor at Winchester, had died in childbirth seventeen years earlier. George lost both his wife and his daughter exactly one year after his marriage.[163] Such

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[157] Ibid., pp.374-6
[158] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II, p.14
[159] Domum Day is the last day of the summer term, where a dinner is held for the outgoing boys.
[160] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II, p.1
[161] George Ridding was born on 16 March 1828, to the Rev. Charles Ridding, Second Master of Winchester College and his wife Charlotte. His mother died on 25 June 1832, when George was four years old. His father later died on 5 May 1871. He was educated at Winchester College and then Balliol College, Oxford where he gained a Classical First Class and Mathematical Second Class. He became a Fellow and then tutor of Exeter College, Oxford, and was ordained on 24 September 1854.
[162] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II, p.2
[163] Ridding, L.E., George Ridding. Schoolmaster and Bishop, Edward Arnold, London, 1908, pp.31-33

intense loneliness for so long went some way to explain why he was desperate for Laura's love and companionship and why he was so eager to set an early date for the wedding.

Laura's mother was particularly pleased with the match, and the correspondence between herself and George before the wedding day revealed the depth of mutual love and respect they had for each other. George wrote to Lady Selborne on 3 October, expressing his gratitude for Laura's love:

> Dear Mother of my best hopes, I do feel guilty of sheer robbery, with nothing to give you for your treasure when I carry it away. But I want her a great deal more than you do, and can't profess to repent of anything… I cannot tell you how deeply I feel your motherly admission into your nest, all the more for having been a waif and stray so long… but it has been very sudden for her, all of it - and the dear girl must have a little breathing time before thinking of her terrible venture in too practical a way.[164]

Lady Selborne wrote the following note to her eldest daughter on the morning of her wedding, expressing her great approval of the marriage, "As you are my firstborn and very dear to me I do thank God that you have a husband so completely after my heart in every possible way and of whom I shall grow fonder and fonder…"[165] In contrast her father took a little longer to be persuaded of his new son-in-law's attributes, particularly in light of his mature years. Over the next few weeks Roundell warmed to George, writing to his friend the Hon. Sir Arthur Gordon on 16 May 1877, "Ridding is a most accomplished, generous man, and, though a good deal older than his wife, still is in the prime of his manhood; and my own connection with, and love for, Winchester, makes that marriage in every way agreeable to me…"[166] Laura's sister, Sophy, also developed a warm relationship with George. On the occasion of the Riddings' sixth wedding anniversary, Sophy sent a letter to Laura expressing her feelings:

> Many happy blessed returns of tomorrow… I remember how we felt, Freda and I, as if the world was coming to an end, and an utter sense of despair that night when it was settled you would marry on October 26, though in a way it didn't, and we have pulled fairly along, yet we miss you as much as ever, and no one has been the same to Mother, I know. Still I am glad you married, as you say there is nothing like it! And, because in

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[164] Ridding, L.E., Annotated notes in George Ridding. Schoolmaster and Bishop, MSS.Eng.hist.d.185-6, p.156e, BL
[165] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II, p.11
[166] Palmer. R., Vol. I, p.459

> consequence, George and I have the supreme advantage of being pretty well acquainted with each other. I do love your George…[167]

'The hearth is not a stone, but a woman'[168]

As Laura had confided in her diary when she was asked to work for the P.M.W.A., she had been waiting for a call to service from God. Marriage was her ultimate call, the absolute expression of her faith. It was to open a world where not only was her mind enlarged, but her sympathies were extended through the empowering potential of her role as the wife of a prominent man. Her marriage would open the door to future possibilities, though hand-in-hand with certain restrictions, giving wings to the ideals of Christian womanhood and motherhood she held in such high esteem. Laura held a highly ideological view of her role as a married Christian woman. Despite her future work in the public sphere, and later adoption of leadership positions, her touchstone was always the centrality of domestic duties, household management and motherhood. The mistress was the hearth, the centre of the home, and as such, guardian of the family's morality. She was keen to advocate that women from the 'leisured classes' should set good Christian examples. In this way they would influence women (as the pivotal agents of social change) from the lower orders to lead purer lives, in turn influencing their own families, for the benefit of themselves and society. Laura commented on the influence women held in an article for the Women's Section of the 1887 Church Congress at Wolverhampton. She argued that "the home is the fountain-head of national life... the housemistress should be the centre of her home, radiating light and heat and blessing to its whole neighbourhood."[169]

Laura conformed to the ideology of separate spheres, using such phrases for women as "angels on earth"[170] and yet as a member of the ruling class, she was able to participate in public affairs without threatening her class or social position. She wanted to emphasise the point that women's work in the home could be so much more than the traditional one-dimensional and monotonous existence that women had endured for centuries. By viewing themselves in a more holistic way there was potential for women to play a multitude of roles within the prescribed ideology: as mistress; hostess; accountant; secretary; mother; lover and any other variations of

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[167] Ridding, L.E., Sophia Matilda Palmer, p.34
[168] Ridding, L.E., The Home Duties and Domestic Relations of the Educated Woman, 1887 Wolverhampton Church Congress, 9M68/73/7, HRO
[169] Ibid., p.1
[170] Ibid., p.6

the model. All these roles called on the different facets of women's spiritual, moral, intellectual and physical being. The role of helpmeet for her husband was not an idle or trifling position. Rather it was one imbued with critical importance. Additionally, as the guardian of family values, the wife was the 'character-trainer' of her children, particularly in the first ten years of their life. In an upper class family the mistress also had a responsibility for the welfare and instruction of her household staff and their families.

Many of Laura's published works were addressed to her fellow gentlewomen, placed as they were in ladies' journals. She advocated a wider education for ladies in order to realise their social responsibilities. Service outside the home was critical to this ethos and Laura encouraged ladies to take a wider interest in social issues affecting all classes. Reynolds argues convincingly that aristocratic women, though not exempt from the prevailing ideology of 'separate spheres,' were not expected to define their lives solely by their gender. Whilst middle class women were constrained by specific gender roles, there were no such simple divisions for the upper class lady who was not confined to a life of domesticity alone. Public service and the 'leisured ideal' could be reconciled as service was not considered to be 'work.' Rather, religion, education and philanthropy were considered to be extensions of the feminine sphere, deriving from women's maternal and moral obligations, challenging the notion of 'separate spheres' for their class. Reynolds believes that "the combination of class and gender gave aristocratic women a unique voice" and this legitimate feminine authority and social leadership enabled Laura to exercise a considerable degree of social power.[171]

On returning from their honeymoon in the New Forest, Laura relished the challenge of her new role as headmaster's wife at Winchester College. By this time Laura was twenty-seven and considered to be rather an old bride by upper class Victorian standards, but she had experienced life and her personality was mature enough to allow her to slip into her new role with ease. George was well loved by the boys, who affectionately nicknamed him 'Ja-Ra' because of his initials, and Laura was welcomed by both the boys and the staff. Laura was intensely happy there, excepting two incidents that she later retold in her recollections. They had a good life at Winchester. They spent time visiting such friends as George's first father-in-law, George Moberly, who was now Bishop of Salisbury; Charlotte Yonge at Otterbourne; Bishop and Mrs. Benson[172] (who was known to her friends as 'Ben')

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[171] Reynolds, K.D., p.102

[172] Born in 1829, Edward White Benson was appointed as the first Headmaster of Wellington College. He married his cousin, Mary, in 1859. After refusing the post of Headmaster of Rugby

at the Palace at Truro; Bishop and Mrs. Temple[173] at their London homes, Lord and Lady Tennyson and many other distinguished acquaintances.

In an account of her married life at Winchester she fondly remembers sensing her own youth, yet combined with a feeling of motherliness over the lives of the young boys who were away from their own families. She recalls, "I think living among so many young lives kept one young - really out of one's generation. The fun and effervescing freshness of boy life always flowing around acted like an electric bath."[174] Laura felt stimulated by her life at Winchester, running her own household and fulfilling her duties as headmaster's wife. This, furthered by the high level of intellectual interaction with her husband on the pressing issues of the day, both at school and on local and national levels, served as a sound training ground for her future work.

When scarlet fever broke out among a section of the boys, Laura acted as nurse, opening up their second home as a temporary hospital where, she recalls, the boys would play football in the corridors as they recovered.[175] Such happy memories were marred by the death of Martin Benson, the gifted son of Bishop and Mary Benson, from meningitis on 2 February 1878. The Bensons stayed with George and Laura during this tragic time, and later Laura recalls the faith and courage that they displayed after his death. Out of such tragedy, a great friendship and mutual respect arose between Laura and 'Ben'. The latter wrote after the event, "I can't speak of all you have been to us - you two dear ones. It seems to make us belong to each other, for ever. "Thanks" don't seem the right thing at all. We can only love you and thank God for you."[176]

During their time at Winchester, George and Laura had hoped to seal their love with a family of their own, but it was not to be. Laura recalls with sadness and regret the high hopes they had for children, and the three miscarriages she suffered. The first occurred after a carriage accident. On the second occasion she did not know she was pregnant, like so many women, maintaining her usual high level of duties and again the pregnancy ended. Her final pregnancy ended in miscarriage

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School in 1869 he became the first Bishop of Truro in 1877. He became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1883 until his death in 1896.

[173] Beatrice Blanche Temple (née Lascelles) married Frederick Temple on 24 August 1876. Frederick Temple, born in 1821 became Headmaster of Rugby School in 1858, Bishop of Exeter in 1869, Bishop of London in 1885 and Archbishop of Canterbury in 1896 until his death in 1902. Beatrice died in 1915.

[174] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.22

[175] Ibid., p.68

[176] Ibid., p.36

yet again after the fifth month and even though they still longed for children they did not try to conceive again, so traumatic were the previous episodes. Laura was lucky that her health did not suffer as a consequence of her miscarriages, as often these could be more dangerous than childbirth at full-term. They accepted it as providence, as "God's will," as Laura concedes, "God did not give us that joy."[177] Through her devotion to her husband and her involvement in her public work with the young she reached a level where she could accept her disappointment. She always sought to work out her maternal instinct through other avenues, explaining to a great extent why she enjoyed her contact with the Winchester boys and later with the friendless girls at Southwell so much.

It is interesting to contrast Laura with her friend Louise Creighton,[178] who confides in her own memoir how "I had had no passionate longing for children of my own,"[179] but she ended up having seven children. She would rather have pursued her studies and confessed she was disappointed that she could not have pursued her student tendencies.[180] This explains her support of the campaign to promote women's higher education. Indeed it could be argued that the arrival of her own children was a distraction from her chosen goals. Just as Laura established her Graphic Society as a teenager, sending off drawings every month, so Louise was a member of the Self-Help Essay Society and later set up her own society when she became disenchanted with the group in her late teens. This was the start of their tendencies to found and lead organisations. She thoroughly enjoyed sending off her essays and receiving critical feedback, but this ended when she married Mandell.[181]

It was whilst at Winchester that George and Laura met the influential Ellice Hopkins[182] and Josephine Butler,[183] two of the greatest proponents of the social

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[177] Ibid., p.44, pp.76-80

[178] Louise Creighton (née von Glehn) was born on 7 July 1850 and married Mandell Creighton in 1872. Mandell was born in 1843 and educated at Merton College, Oxford, where he became a Fellow and tutor. They spent nine years at a living in Northumberland before he took up the dual posts of Canon of Worcester in 1885 and Dixie Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Cambridge. In 1891 he became Bishop of Peterborough and in 1897 he became Bishop of London, where he remained until his death in 1901. Louise died on 15 April 1936.

[179] Creighton, L., Autobiography, Creighton Family Papers, Oxfordshire

[180] Covert, J.T., p.54

[181] Ibid., p.29

[182] Jane Ellice Hopkins (1836-1904) tried to prevent the exploitation of working class women and children being used as prostitutes by men from the upper classes. She worked within the Church of England Purity Society and the White Cross Army, which was set up in 1883.

[183] Josephine Butler (1828-1906) married an Anglican clergyman, George Butler. She was particularly concerned about prostitutes, leading her to study the consequences of the Contagious Diseases Acts (CDAs) of 1864, 1866 and 1869. These Acts permitted the compulsory examination of any prostitute in a garrison town suspected of having venereal disease. Women found to have the disease could be imprisoned.

purity movement within Anglicanism. They believed that the epidemic of prostitution could be defeated by insisting that men specifically should live their lives according to strict Christian codes of morality. This was in contrast to the alternatives of state regulation and direct action against the 'victims' of such double standards of sexual morality - the women.[184] These two women greatly influenced the future preventive and rescue work for women that George and Laura would organise, lead and patronise.

The year 1879 proved to be decisive in the commencement of their rescue and preventive work for women locally. Josephine Butler lived close to the Riddings, and Ellice Hopkins had been invited by them to speak at a meeting to save the existing refuge in Winchester from closure, and breathe new life into it. This initial meeting bore fruit and soon Colebrook House was provided in Winchester under the banner of Miss Hopkins' Association for the Care of Friendless Girls as a shelter home for girls and young women.[185] This shelter home awoke a sense of responsibility and social duty in a number of local gentlewomen to look after the sinful and fallen women in their city.

Laura describes how such pioneers as Mrs. Butler faced problems from critics within the church establishment who claimed that she knew and said far too much for a woman of her social rank. Indeed she recalls how one leading ecclesiastic suggested she was:

> …A woman full of indecent… horrible knowledge of things which no modest woman should know, much less speak about, in fact as one to be classed with Mrs. Besant[186] and other filthy-minded polluters of public morals…[187]

Such a contentious issue as sex was always going to provoke criticism from some men and women, who regarded the work of these early lay women as unbefitting a lady's station in life. Not only were such women overtly challenging the ideology of separate spheres and the attendant Christian teaching that women were the helpmeets of men, by speaking out publicly, but they were also speaking on issues that endangered the propriety and decency of the 'Angel in the House' image. In these times it was difficult to undertake such work as there were many prejudices to overcome and hazards to evade, yet women such as Laura certainly knew about

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[184] Gill, S., p.99
[185] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II, p.46
[186] Annie Besant (1847-1933) was a supporter of the women's movement in England, especially of the female suffrage.
[187] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II, p.46

sex, sexual vice and prostitution and Laura would have discussed the issue with George. It was feared that such work would 'unsex' ladies. However Reynolds' contention that upper class women were not defined purely in terms of their gender, unlike the middle classes, challenges this argument.

In the face of such opposition, George and Laura continued to support the social purity movement. Laura later reflected that the only crime these women committed was in working ahead of their time. They pioneered the way forward in the social purity crusade and inspired others to consider their own responsibilities for themselves and to other women, and following on from this, to society. Laura supported Mrs. Butler's agitation for the repeal of the CDA's and later George spoke out publicly on the issue. Following the success of her work at the shelter home, Laura helped to set up a preventive training home called Connaught House, where rough girls could learn the basic skills required for employment in domestic service and other suitable occupations.

Laura's time at Winchester served as a training ground for the growth of her ideas and experiences on work for women. Though she served mainly in a leadership and figurehead capacity, she was also privy to insights into the lives of those far removed from the upper class culture she had grown up in, sights she would never forget. One particular recollection stayed with her from the year 1883, of the sight of housing conditions in a Southampton slum. A 'rescue case' called Louisa Hack had insisted on leaving the shelter home in Winchester to return to her family in Southampton. These were Laura's memories as she accompanied the girl home:

> She was like a half-savage rat. She hurried me away from the railway station, into lower and lower streets near the old city sea wall. Then rushed up a filthy staircase of a filthy house and burst into a room, foul, fetid, a brown-coloured bedding from dirt, bedstead in corner unmade, a table with scraps of food on it and soiled degraded-looking mother and family huddled round it. I faintly explained that Louisa Hack refused to stay with us, so I returned her to her mother. Not a word from them… Louisa said nothing. She slipped in among them. It felt like throwing another toadstool onto a fungus heap. Horrible impossible circumstances for decency. The sight bit like acid into my recollections.[188]

Her repetition of the word 'filthy' and her use of alliteration - 'foul', 'fetid', 'filthy' serve to stress her horror of the scene as it unfolded before her. All her senses were

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[188] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II, p.86

attacked by the unfamiliar smells, sights and sounds of the slum dwelling. In addition to her shock, her sense of failure was most evident. Laura took a personal interest in the welfare of many girls who entered the homes. This experience served to reinforce the reasons why other homes were urgently needed, to remove such girls from these "impossible" conditions and place them in accommodation where they were surrounded by decent food and shelter and the positive influence of Christian ladies like Laura. This was her first visit to a slum, but certainly not her last. Such vivid instances gave names and faces to the general social problem that women such as Laura faced in the fading decades of the nineteenth century. It was also during this year that George was approached with a view to accepting the position of Dean of Exeter, but he felt no calling to leave his work at the College in exchange for what he saw as the 'leisure' of a Deanery.[189] He needed to work where he felt he could be useful.

At Winchester, George had built up his reputation as 'the re-founder of the ancient school', such were the widespread reforms he had introduced for the benefit of the boys. He had shown a model to other headmasters of the great public schools of how to organise a school efficiently and win respect along the way. He had commanded the school for sixteen years, but shortly after receiving a visit from Mr. and Mrs. Gladstone on 13 November 1883, his life was soon to change. The Gladstones were visiting the local Liberals, and George and Laura gladly offered their house to be used as a meeting-place. Gladstone was greatly impressed by George and remembered him when the new See of Southwell was being created, requiring a new bishop to oversee the organisation of the diocese.

The Riddings were staying with Archbishop and Mary Benson at Addington when George received the letter on 6 February 1884 from Gladstone, asking him to be nominated, with the approval of the Queen, as Bishop of Southwell. Gladstone wrote:

> It is an acknowledgement of the distinguished work you have done, but is also more; and I trust that you will find, in the work of a bishop, opportunities for applying to practical purposes… your energy, your devotion to your sacred calling, and the large and tolerant spirit which binds together for the good of the Church the various orders of men and shades of sentiment found within her borders…[190]

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[189] Ridding, L.E., George Ridding…, p.151
[190] Ibid., p.95

Laura describes how they both saw the proposal as a thunderbolt out of the blue that rocked their happy existence at Winchester. After time spent in prayer for God's guidance, George accepted the offer, interpreting it as a call from God to which he was to respond. God had placed this sacred work at the feet of George and he recognised it as His will. The organisation of a new diocese would be much more complex than work in a diocese which was already established. Arguably a headmaster was the best man for such a task. However, his decision was not taken without certain reservations. In a letter to his father-in-law, George revealed his apprehension in undertaking the role:

> It was rather startling to me, but I have written by this post to accept the charge… I can't say that I feel a bishop at all - But I will do my best, poor as it may be and must hope and pray that I may be enabled to do the work effectively in God's name.[191]

This was a common feeling of trepidation shared by a number of George's contemporaries. When Mandell Creighton was offered the Bishopric of Peterborough in 1891, his first episcopal post, his widow Louise comments in her recollections on his hesitancy:

> Of late years people had frequently said that Max (Mandell) was sure to be a bishop some day, and this had made him dread the possibility of such a fate. Walking one day… he spoke of it and said, "I should like to have a petition put in the Litany that I may never be a bishop." Then he added sadly "And the worst of it is that I believe I should be a very good bishop."[192]

On 13 May 1891 Augusta Maclagan[193] wife of William Dalrymple Maclagan reveals her husband's doubts on his offer to become the Archbishop of York from the See of Lichfield. She confides in her diary, "the definite offer has come but he is even more uncertain than he was."[194] Also Frederick Temple confesses in a letter to his son, Frederick Charles, how reluctant he was to accept his translation from London to Canterbury, "Fulham Palace, 24 October 1890, My dear, dear Fred, We are to go to Canterbury. I did not wish it, but I do not feel it right to say no…"[195]

Laura particularly felt trepidation as she was to exchange her joyful life with the boys and staff of the College for a new diocese she had never even heard of, "…it

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[191] Ridding, L.E., Annotated notes in George Ridding…, p.152a
[192] Covert J.T., p.94
[193] The Hon. Augusta Maclagan, née Barrington, (1836-1915) married William Dalrymple Maclagan on 12 November 1878, his second wife.
[194] Diary entry for 13 May 1891 , Maclagan Family Papers, Oxon.
[195] Unpublished letter, Temple Family Archives, Wiltshire.

was as if he was being asked to fly to the moon…",[196] she confesses. The diocese of Southwell was founded for the purpose of relieving the existing dioceses of Lincoln and Lichfield, and comprised the counties of Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. Although she was reluctant to leave the College and the many friends they had made, she did accept that it was a calling for George and for herself to continue their good work elsewhere, armed with the skills they had amassed at Winchester. In a letter to her mother she reveals how she had resigned herself to the reality of the change:

> We have tried so hard to leave it to God to guide us into the truth in this matter and so I trust it is His guiding that has made it shew itself to George as a call which with God's help he could respond to. These are not his words but mine - but you know a work like the organising of Southwell is so different to the work of most dioceses, that it is really the only one which I think he would ever feel at all his sort of work. I do hope it is right - so much.[197]

At Winchester George had revitalised the old school and they had commenced pioneering new work for local young girls and women. They were ready to accept the next challenge, daunted though they both felt.

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[196] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II, p.98

[197] Ridding, L.E., Letter written to Lady Laura Selborne on 12 February 1884, loose in unpublished recollections, Selborne Family Papers, Hampshire.

Chapter Three

'Out of paradise into the wilderness'[198]

"I will not cease from mental fight
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land"[199]

The press enjoined that George was a good choice for bishop. 'The Times' wrote on 13 February 1884:

> Not less fortunate is the selection of Dr. Ridding as the first occupant of the new See of Southwell. For the proper organisation of an entirely new bishopric special qualities are required - an energetic temperament, an organising faculty…and of these qualities few better proofs could be given than the successful administration of a large school…[200]

Laura's position as wife of the bishop was also heralded by a local newspaper in the new diocese, as her reputation went before her:

> Nor must the social aspect of the question be forgotten, and those who know, or have heard, by repute, of the graceful hospitalities dispensed by Lady Laura Ridding at Winchester, are justified in predicting that Mrs. Selwyn and the Hon. Mrs. Maclagan - from whom the clergy of Derbyshire have experienced so many kindly courtesies - will find a worthy successor in the estimable daughter of the Earl of Selborne… who is the fitting help-meet of our future diocesan.[201]

With the huge task that George faced in forming the new diocese out of virtually nothing, without funds, without a Chapter House and with little sympathy from the neighbouring dioceses of Lincoln and Lichfield, he was plunged into a difficult position. He used to say that his job in bringing together the two counties of Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire was akin to a clergyman called upon to join a couple in marriage, each of whom, when asked, said "I won't."[202] The two counties were separated from their mother dioceses because of the overwhelming pressure of the size and population of Lincoln and Lichfield, rather than as a result of any

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[198] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II, p.98
[199] Blake, William, Jerusalem, Selected Poems and Prose, Holt Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1970
[200] Nottinghamshire Archives, DD594/3, Nottinghamshire Record Office (NRO)
[201] Ibid., Derbyshire Advertiser, (n.d.)
[202] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II, p.319

particular enthusiasm in the area itself. As Cosmo Gordon Lang[203] later reflects on the early days of the diocese, "the ecclesiastical union of Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire was one rather of compulsion - at the best of reason - than of affection, and it must be said that the mother dioceses sent their daughter out with the scantiest dowry."[204]

In 1884 the new diocese had a population of 853,125. This grew in twenty years to become the fifth largest in the Southern Province with a population of nearly 1,100,000.[205] There were 466 incumbents and 181 curates.[206] The diocese comprised both large industrial towns and vast areas of agricultural land further north. Thus one found a wide selection of classes interspersed with each other; the country squire with the agricultural labourer and the factory owner with the mill-hand. Laura gave an overview of the main industries in the diocese to reveal the richness of occupations within its borders:

> The spinal cord of Southwell Diocese, the Erewash Valley, glowed from Nottingham to Sheffield with the furnaces of mines and iron foundries. Ashbourne Valley supplied London and other great markets with dairy products. The High Peak district was prosperous with cotton mills, quarries and lime works. While Derby employed an army of men in its vast railway works, the female population of Nottingham exceeded the male by 10,000 on account of its chief lace-making industry.[207]

Responding to God's call was not easy. They did not choose the easy option in Southwell, but they both felt God's hand upon their work. With the help of her sister Sophy, Laura moved from Winchester to the Midlands after Easter. Everything had to be accomplished in a hurry. They chose to live in Thurgarton Priory, a former Augustinian House situated three miles from the Cathedral. George chose to live here as the railway station was close by, thus enabling the bishop to move around his diocese with ease. A number of specific problems revealed themselves to George on the commencement of his work. The population of the manufacturing towns in particular was growing at a rapid rate, and the need for more Church provision would have to be resolved swiftly. This would require funds and the machinery in place through which such reforms could be actioned.

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[203] William Cosmo Gordon Lang (1864-1945) was Archbishop of Canterbury from 1928-1942.
[204] Lang. C.G., 'Jubilee of the Diocese. Recollections and Reflections of the Foundation and Earliest days of the Diocese,' in Hacking, E., (ed), Southwell Diocesan Magazine, 1934
[205] Ridding, G., Letter to A.J. Balfour, 13 August 1904, MSS Eng. Hist.d.185-6, BL
[206] Ridding, L.E., Annotated notes in George Ridding…, p.160a
[207] Ridding, L.E., George Ridding…, p.157

Such apparatus was not available to him and he had no diocesan officers to help him. Christopher Wordsworth, son of a former Bishop of Lincoln, wrote to George on 19 February 1884, before he took up his post at Southwell, to congratulate him, but added that the local aristocrats and manufacturers had done little for the Church, and that the general tone of Nottingham's lay life was base.[208] He explained how much of a burden this had been to his father, John Wordsworth.[209] George would have to harness the lay life of the diocese and shake it to its roots. He needed to be inspirational and inject energy into its religious life. Renewal was the keyword. George would have to implement an all-encompassing programme of new agencies that could reach the people and he would need the support of his clergy in order to do this.

George's first job was to get to know his clergy and his diocese. After he was installed at Southwell Cathedral on 29 May 1884,[210] Laura described how George preached a most eloquent sermon in Nottingham on the following day. He wanted to get amongst the locals and learn to understand them. Bishop Wordsworth, with High Church 'reserve,' had always remained slightly aloof from his diocese, but George, from the first, sought to remedy this imbalance. On the next day he travelled to Derby and again spoke to the people in that town. Many stopped to listen, and by and by George was enriched through their love and trust. George and Laura met many classes of people during their first few weeks, and at one such luncheon party held in their new home in Thurgarton, they were introduced to various local farmers and their wives. Laura retells an amusing story of mistaken identity at this event, as she was looking for George:

> To my horror I saw (but could do nothing) George leading the way to the top of the table with the charwoman on his arm! He said afterwards her face seemed familiar and he had imagined she was the chief farmer's wife! In true British style, she sailed on with the air of being entitled to ducal honours…[211]

So began his great Mission to the diocese, and his promise to visit every parish.

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[208] Ridding, L.E., Annotated notes in George Ridding…, p.153a
[209] The Rev. Dr. John Wordsworth was Bishop of Lincoln between 1869 and 1885.
[210] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.106
[211] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.114

"The lady-bishop"[212]

Laura watched with pride as George was enthroned in his new Cathedral, but she was already concerned about the role she was to play in the diocese. Launched into the maelstrom which accompanied the installation of a new bishop, she felt excluded, "pushed out,"[213] from the formal proceedings, away from her husband whose companionship she had hitherto depended on, yet she also felt the pressure of "living in the public eye with Derbyshire and Southwell critics microscopically watching every movement"[214] as she was forced into a more public role. She felt a restriction in Southwell that she had not felt at Winchester. When they returned to Winchester that summer, she described her feelings of liberation from what she perceived as the "strait-bonds of the new diocese."[215] At Winchester her roles as hostess, helpmeet and 'mother' were played on a greatly reduced platform. At Southwell her actions were accountable to the people of two counties. The same feelings of frustration were shared by her friend, Louise Creighton, when she also became the wife of a bishop.

When Mandell was initially installed as Bishop of Peterborough from the Canonry at Worcester, Louise confessed in a letter to her friend Kathleen Lyttelton,[216] to her feelings of resentment towards the mundane lifestyle and enforced separation from her husband. Both their duties had increased so it was hard to make time for each other, but whereas Mandell was spending time in the company of leading ecclesiastics, Louise saw herself as condemned to a period of social exile away from the stimulating life she had enjoyed at Oxford and Cambridge:

> 19th April Peterborough 1891… I feel horribly stranded and cut off from all my old moorings… I am more than ever possessed with a sense of the difficulties of leading a spiritual life, difficulties which seem to me being a bishop's wife increases a thousandfold… It is the tiresome separation of the wife from the husband's work which bothers me. He may have ordinations and quiet days in which he cares for the souls of others; all that the wife has to do is to feed their bodies. He goes about giving new energy to the spiritual life of the diocese and the wife stops at home to look after tidying… a stupid big Palace and garden

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[212] Trollope, A., p.254
[213] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.106
[214] Ibid., p.112
[215] Ibid., p.114
[216] Mary Kathleen Lyttelton was the wife of Arthur Temple Lyttelton who was formerly Master of Selwyn College, Cambridge, and later Suffragan Bishop of Southampton.

> and to pay tiresome calls. Well I suppose I shall find out what it all means some day if I try to see light somewhere…[217]

These comments revealed her desire to expand herself intellectually, spiritually and socially and her frustration at the role expectations of traditional interpretations of the ideology of domesticity. As a newcomer, she had not yet discovered the multi-dimensional opportunities that the position of bishop's wife could bestow upon her.

It is interesting to note the similarities in language between Louise's frustrated comments and those of Augusta Maclagan's daughter Theodora ('Dora') on her mother's own practical struggles at Bishopthorpe, the official residence of the Archbishop of York. Her comments were written in a disjointed note form to prompt her delivery of a speech at a club near Bishopthorpe on 14 March 1957:

> House large and <u>v. old</u>…Wonderful live in big house? Some points; but no fun for mother to run… <u>old</u> as well as <u>big</u>. Constant repairs (roof, pipes etc. not "all mod con." And <u>Official</u> home not like private one. Hardly ever have it to selves: 20 ordinands – doz. Bishops (but v. good company, ordinands <u>not</u>) – big dinner party (officers finding Father fellow soldier). In summer big garden parties – 300-400; no outside catering then. Heavy job for Mother; good staff, but that too brought anxieties. 16 servants end 19th cent. Now 2 or 3 and daily help – house half shut…[218]

The background to Louise's frustrations were somewhat different to those of Augusta, the former agitated by her enforced separation from her husband and the lack of sufficient cultural and intellectual stimuli. Augusta, alternatively, was agitated by the sheer volume of work she was expected to undertake. On occasions she was known to entertain over three hundred clergy and their wives.[219]

Her diary entries were peppered with expressions of her fatigue at the close of each heavy day. On one occasion she reveals how she had struggled to sit through another evening of entertaining, "…I was so done out with fatigue I could hardly sit through the evening…"[220] Again she confided, "went to Celebration at 8. Matins 11. Big lunch at 1.30. Special service 3… Bp Wakefield preached in the evening,

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[217] Covert, J.T., p.98
[218] Unpublished notes, Maclagan Family Papers, Oxon
[219] Diary entry for Tuesday 9 July 1895, Maclagan Family Papers, Oxon
[220] Diary entry for Tuesday 10 July 1894, Maclagan Family Papers, Oxon

good but I was too tired to listen."[221] The recurring servant problem particularly vexed Augusta. With a large household staff under her personal management she frequently found cause for concern. She writes, "Hymn practice in Chapel, but all the heart is out of it and everything else, I have such terrible suspicions that all is going wrong again among the servants."[222]

Revealing the extent to which upper class women were expected to adhere to certain role expectations, Edith Davidson[223] also clearly found elements of her new role as clergy wife at Windsor both tedious and constrictive, in contrast to the exciting childhood she had known at Lambeth. As her biographer remarks, "it must be confessed that occasionally Mrs. Davidson found it a little irksome to be classed entirely with the married, and therefore middle-aged, of whom in those Victorian days a certain staidness was expected."[224] She wanted to transcend the prescribed limits of womanhood and extend herself in love and sympathy in the community. It is interesting to note that Louise and Laura, who arguably set the standard for the roles of later bishops' wives, both had misgivings at the beginning of their new lives. They sought new ways to express their spirituality, now that they felt their relationships with their husbands had changed as they saw less of them and their own established duties had increased.

In order to evaluate the role Laura played as a bishop's wife, it is important to study this role from its various historical, sociological and cultural perspectives. Here the focus will be on the special position of such wives, and how they differed from others in the high level of incorporation into their husband's work. How far was Laura integrated in George's work, did she have a separate existence of her own and did she have an official position within the Church, or just acted at the level of an unpaid assistant? Consideration must also be given to the extent to which Laura adhered to the stereotypical images of the clergy wife in its three main developmental stages: as the 'Lady of the Manor,' the helpmeet and the unpaid curate.

In literature the character of the clergy and bishop's wife tended to be represented as a comic figure enduring mockery from the other characters. Authors such as

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[221] Diary entry for Thursday 3 May 1894, Maclagan Family Papers, Oxon
[222] Diary entry for Monday 5 March 1894, Maclagan Family Papers, Oxon
[223] Edith Murdoch Davidson (née Tait) was born on 7 December 1858 to Archibald Campbell and Catharine Tait. She married Randall Davidson, her father's Chaplain on 12 November 1878. She died on 26 June 1936 with no children to succeed her.
[224] M.C.S.M., Edith Davidson of Lambeth, John Murray, London, 1938, p.58

Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters and even Charlotte Yonge offered comic glimpses into the life of the mistress of the parsonage. Anthony Trollope's depiction of Mrs. Proudie at Barchester continually alluded to her masculine qualities and struggle for dominance over her husband with such comments as:

> Mrs. Proudie was all but invincible; had she married Petruchio, it may be doubted whether that arch wife-tamer would have been able to keep her legs out of those garments which are presumed by men to be peculiarly unfitted for feminine use.[225]

Although this is a caricature of a bishop's wife, most literary characters have their basis in reality, and the picture drawn of Mrs. Proudie revealed much about the attitudes of the public that prevailed at the time. The reader would have understood and appreciated the joke. Initially published in 1857, at a time when the ideology of separate spheres was at its height, the image of the bishop's wife as just a female version of her husband in her pastoral and ministerial duties, would have been a radical concept in a world where the roles of the sexes were still strongly defined and divided.

Catharine Tait's legacy had not yet been realised at this time. Indeed Margaret Watt asks of her readership, "Is not Mrs. Proudie herself a much more famous personage than Mrs. Tait, who must have been exactly her contemporary as wife of the Bishop of London?"[226] Catharine[227] was married to A.C. Tait, Bishop of London and later Archbishop of Canterbury.[228] She set the standards of extended service for those bishops' wives who succeeded her. Before her trailblazing ministrations, bishops' wives fulfilled the 'Lady of the Manor' and 'helpmeet' duties, but as the clerical occupation became more professional during the early decades of the Victorian era, the role of unpaid curate evolved. Catharine accepted the idea that as the wife of a professional man, whether scholar or clergyman, her position incorporated certain responsibilities to her husband's work in addition to own her domestic duties.

Like Laura, Catharine also became a headmaster's wife, although at Rugby, where she not only took an interest in the boys' welfare, but also assisted her husband in the effective execution of his duties. She carried out research for many of his

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[225] Trollope, A., Vol. II., p.70
[226] Watt, M., The History of the Parson's Wife, Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1943, p.113
[227] Catharine Tait (née Spooner) was born in 1819 in the parish of Elmdon, Warwickshire, of a clerical family. She married A.C. Tait on 22 June 1843. She died in 1878.
[228] Archibald Campbell Tait was born in 1811 and educated in Edinburgh before entering Balliol College, Oxford, where he became a Fellow in 1834. He became Headmaster of Rugby School in 1842, Dean of Carlisle in 1849, Bishop of London in 1856 and Archbishop of Canterbury in 1868 until his death in 1882.

articles and lectures, but it was for her position as financial manager and accountant for the entire school that she gained most respect. She continued to observe this role throughout their life, to the praise of bank officials in London who acknowledged her excellence in church financial matters.[229] While at Carlisle, a garrison town, Catharine came across conditions of extreme poverty and misery of which she had never been made aware. She broke away from the traditional Cathedral 'etiquette' observed by the clergy and their families, opening her door to the poor and needy as a place in which they could find solace and sympathy. She also set up a revolutionary system of pastoral visiting, where no system yet existed.

During Archie's episcopate in London, apart from her usual duties, Catharine Tait founded the Ladies' Diocesan Association, a key organisation in London that brought together individual women workers collectively and systematically under the banner of the diocese. She also set up an orphanage in Fulham for the orphans of the 1866 cholera epidemic whose parents had died.[230] M. Jeanne Peterson referred to Bishop Tait's acknowledgement of what he called "her and my duties."[231] This intimated the notion of a shared professional life, contrary to the belief that husbands and wives generally kept their lives separate from one another. However, the position of the clergyman and his wife was unique.

Catharine's influence as a force for good was particularly felt as Lambeth had been without an archbishop's wife for twenty years. Between 1848 and 1868, Archbishops Sumner and Longley had been widowers when appointed to the Primacy. She took her traditional duties one step further by organising and leading establishments for the welfare of women and children at a time in the mid-decades of the century when the proper place for women was still at the centre of the home. Catharine still conformed to certain role expectations but she also successfully transcended them into the public domain. She visited every episcopal home in England and made intimate friends with other episcopal wives, thereby acknowledging bishops' wives as a special separate social category.

All this was despite the intense tragedy of losing five daughters in six weeks in 1856 to scarlet fever, leaving only her son Crauford and her daughter Lucy. Many upper- middle class families had to deal with the devastating loss of children, but the loss of so many in such a short period of time was unusual. This episode revealed the extent of Victorian gentlewomen's private grief, but also the way in

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[229] Peterson, M.J., p.183
[230] Benham, W., Catharine and Crauford Tait, Macmillan and Co., London, 1879, p.56
[231] Peterson, M.J., p.181

which many couples shared their loss together, calling upon their faith to see them through such a crisis. Catharine believed that she was placed in her position by the providence of God, and that she should use her deep Christian faith and all the powers available to her to help those who were placed in less fortunate positions in life. Her spiritual insight and the capacity to take something positive from such tragedy was truly remarkable. Without neglecting any of her domestic, maternal or social duties, she sought to extend her work for Christ beyond the boundaries of her home. She truly pioneered the role of bishop's wife.

One writer, Mrs. Richardson, argues that the example of Catharine's work and spirit certainly vindicated the principle of a married clergy in the Church, if ever that were required.[232] Catharine worked at a time when the pastoral side of the clerical ministry was undergoing much change during the beginning of the nineteenth century and the clergy had less time to give to this aspect of their service. Successive bishop's wives now had a forerunner who had stepped into the role of supplementary vicar. Catharine was hardly a "lioness in her den,"[233] or "despotic,"[234] like Mrs. Proudie. Rather "her ready sympathy and her indefatigable activity"[235] hallmarked her work and character.

It is interesting to observe that the clerical family reflected absolutely the ideal of gender relations in the patriarchal family structure, highlighting the different, yet complementary nature of the roles each sex played. Gill argues that changes in the roles played by laywomen in the Church were reflected in the evolution of clergy wives' tasks.[236] Their entry into the public sphere, through the channels of philanthropy, education and religion, particularly from the mid-nineteenth century, mirrored women's increased involvement in the Church more generally, and indeed in society at large.

A number of nineteenth century novels painted the picture of the bishop's wife, struggling to attain pious respectability. Theirs was a life of comfort and high social rank, far removed from the reality of the life of those women who followed the example of Catharine Tait. As history shows from the time of the Reformation, the clergy wife was always a figure to be poked fun at, along with the ranks of

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[232] Richardson, A. Mrs., Women of the Church of England, Chapman and Hall Ltd., London, 1907, pp.274-275
[233] Trollope, A., Vol. I., 158
[234] Ibid., p.22
[235] The Guardian, 4 December 1878, p.1673
[236] Gill, S., p.221

maiden aunts and mother in laws.[237] However such misleading images continued to inform its readership well into the twentieth century. The unusual historical background of bishops' wives will be briefly outlined in order to assess their typicality.

'Wife or worse'[238]

The debate surrounding clerical marriage has raged since the days of the early Christian Church. In her unpublished thesis entitled 'Wives of the Clergy,' Janet Spedding highlights the main factors in this discussion, commencing from the affirmation that there was no special injunction that officials in the early Church should remain unmarried.[239] But it was not until the time of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century that the clerical wife was truly born. She stepped into the role which had been played by mistresses, the so-called 'priestes woman,' and so her reputation was tainted by this historical legacy from her very inception. Spedding argues that the Church authorities were keen to reject clerical marriage per se, rather than as a result of the argument that the priesthood should remain chaste. Confidences could be bought at a price to keep the clergy mistress a secret, but a wife was harder to conceal.[240] So by the time of the Reformation it was deemed acceptable that a priest might keep a woman, but it was scandalous that he should take a wife.[241] In such a climate as this, the legitimate claims for a wife were pressed by some sections in the Church, with Martin Luther as a leading advocate of clerical marriage. For years Queen Elizabeth I's attitude towards clergy wives as little better than whores did much to influence the Church's view of priestly marriage.[242]

Under these conditions the clergy wife emerged as a "by-product"[243] of the reawakening debate on clerical celibacy. So from the sixteenth century onwards, the clerical wife had to justify her existence and recognition was slow in coming. Those who denied her rights argued that she hindered the clergyman's work, and that this was a disadvantage to him, and to the parish in turn. At the time when the clergy first started to marry, this argument may indeed have been sustained, as the

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[237] Watt, M., p.196
[238] J.D., in Keable, G., (ed), Such as we are: Parson's Wives and Parsons, Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., London, 1967, p.42. 'J.D.' refers to Anthony Bax's chapter of the same name in his book entitled The English Parsonage.
[239] Spedding, J., p.82
[240] Watt, M., p.9
[241] Spedding, J., p.83
[242] Keable, G., (ed), p.42
[243] Spedding, J., p.83

economic circumstances of the clergy were such that it would have been difficult to sustain themselves and a family on their modest income. This would have made it nigh impossible for a clergy wife to make a comfortable home for her husband and family.[244] Spedding argues that the re-introduction of the debate on clerical celibacy in the first half of the nineteenth century, as raised by J.H. Newman and others involved in the Tractarian Movement, raised these issues again in the Church's consciousness.[245] Since 1604 clerical marriage was enshrined in civil, as well as ecclesiastical law, and yet there were still quarters of the Church who questioned the need for such an institution for their brothers.[246]

With such a heritage, Victorian clergy wives felt that they should demonstrate that they were an asset to their husband, rather than a disadvantage. Added to this was the nation's increased social conscience, most notably a legacy of the evangelicals. Instrumental in the early years of the nineteenth century, this movement instituted the conservative middle class ideologies that continued to inform the remainder of the century, and yet it also gave women the opportunity to enter the public domain as moral crusaders. Such constraint and yet freedom was reflected in the position of the clergy wife. Against the background of Victorian piety, women's involvement in the pastoral side of their husband's work fitted well. This interest in the position of the clergy wife was awakened just before Catharine Tait ministered at Fulham and Lambeth. As the first archbishop's wife in twenty years, and in the light of this debate, her work may have been influenced by the need to justify her position. However this would have been secondary to the overwhelming Christian obligation she felt to extend her influence in the world.

Another reason behind the increased attention on the position of clergy wives in the mid-Victorian years was the evolution of the vocation as it became more specialised and professionalised. In the late eighteenth century the gentleman and the clergyman were indistinguishable, such was the status conferred by the occupation. This changed in the early 1800's as the parson's role became professional. As he did so, other professionals stepped into the more traditional roles he had previously played, with the birth of a police force, and doctors and teachers stepping into the breach. Brian Heeney refers to Russell's definition of the clergyman's revised 'charter role,' which comprised three main components:

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[244] Ibid., p.98
[245] Ibid., p.404
[246] Watt, M., p.28

leadership in public worship, preaching and pastoral care.[247] As the clergy focused more on the first two dimensions, clergy wives could gain access to the charter role through the dimension of pastoral care. This included visiting sick and bereaved families, teaching at Sunday School, organising local clubs for women and children and more generally providing a bridge between the clergyman and his parish.

In this manner, the clergy wife began to assume the role of unpaid curate, fulfilling those areas of the pastoral side of her husband's ministry that he could no longer focus enough attention on and bridging the gap between himself and those to whom he ministered. This was in addition to her more traditional roles of 'Lady of the Manor,' dispensing charity and sympathy amongst the poor and sick, and that of helpmeet. The helpmeet image implied no more than this, based as it was in the Judeo-Christian teaching that Eve was created out of Adam's rib for his benefit.[248] The unpaid curate image went one step further, to include administrative, social and pastoral duties in the list of acceptable tasks for the cleric's wife. In Gladys Keable's book, Ceridwen Higginson argues that the vicar's wife was the "mother-figure" of the parish and following this bishop's wives could be viewed as the mother figure of the diocese. This was exactly the view Laura took of her role.[249] The experience of clergy wives differed greatly from that of their lay sisters as they had a unique position in society. The Church legitimised their service outside the home beyond the limits of mere passive support in the field of religion, education and social service. In this way they enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy where the interests of women and children were concerned.

Another aspect of the clergy wife's unique position, compared to other wives, was that she was expected to have a personal faith of her own. Not only should she love her husband, but she should love God and His Church. In this respect she was incorporated into her husband's work on two levels: in practical terms and through spiritual belief. In an article written by Laura in 1901 on the qualifications she believed were required in order to become a good clergy wife, she stresses this latter point. The first qualification she identified for potential clergy wives was "the grace and guidance of God."[250] She went on to stress the need for a genuine love of human nature and the ability to be able to extend oneself in sympathy to

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[247] Heeney, B., The Women's Movement in the Church of England. 1850-1930, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988, p.78
[248] Spedding, J., p.98
[249] Higginson, C., in Keable, G., (ed), Such as we are: Parson's Wives and Parsons, Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., London, 1967, p.17
[250] Ridding, L.E., 'The Girl Who Should Marry a Clergyman', in Woman at Home, May 1901, Vol. XI, No. 92, p.161

people from all classes and cultures. She also emphasised the requirement that she should love her husband's work. In such an all-absorbing relationship, this was perhaps the key requirement. In the same article, Laura quotes from a fellow-speaker at the Shrewsbury Church Congress, who argued that the ministry was a vocation for clergy wives as well as for their husbands. Thus, "...(it) is not a 'business' or a 'profession.' It is a life, and the life must be 'hid with Christ in God.'"[251]

It was not always easy for some committed wives to feel the same depth of feeling that Laura experienced. Augusta Maclagan reflected on her own occasional struggles with fatigue. With two children of her own and two step-children to care for, in addition to running Bishopthorpe, entertaining clergy and ordinands, as well as making time for her own public service, it was difficult for her to feel the reality of her faith at all times. After a visit by some "quiet ladies" for dinner in 1894 she confides in her diary, "went to bed feeling very tired and headachy and not at all open to deep religious impressions."[252]

For most wives, working with their husbands was a whole way of life. Much of this centred on the dimension of belief in their work, but also on the focus on the home as their husband's place of work. This meant that clerical visitors would enter their private domain on business. The clergy wife would try to create a spiritual atmosphere in which her husband could work at home, and sought to ease her husband's workload by ensuring that all domestic matters were attended to by herself, often including the household accounts and secretarial duties. Such a demanding way of life where she was so incorporated in her husband's work could not be found to the same extent in other occupations.

It could be argued that Laura's high level of incorporation into George's work smothered her own individuality, her personality and her drives and ambitions, confining her to a life which was not her own. Yet her role had a flip side as it could also serve to liberate her, permitting her access to the public sphere. John Wolffe suggests that religion was a major factor in the subordination of women, that Christian teaching in the Bible underlined the ideologies of separate spheres and domesticity for women.[253] Gill also argues that the female members of clergy families were not expected to act autonomously, as they were so highly involved in

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[251] Ibid., p.163
[252] Diary entry for Monday 26 February 1894, Maclagan Family Papers, Oxon
[253] Wolffe, J., 'The End of Victorian Values? Women, Religion and the Death of Queen Victoria,' in Women in the Church, Sheils, W.J. and Wood, D., (eds), Basil Blackwell Ltd., Oxford, 1990, p.482

their husband's/father's work.[254] He refers to Eileen Baillie's autobiography, 'The Shabby Paradise,' in which she described her years growing up as the daughter of an East End Anglo-Catholic priest. Baillie summed up the role expectations of her mother, the good clergy wife, she "should be entirely functional, like a good, strong chair to be sat upon."[255] In this respect she gave more of herself than any other wife and it is interesting to establish to what extent she was able to express herself in other ways.

'How was I to find myself?'[256]

The use of inanimate objects to describe the role of the clergy wife was utilised by Laura herself, who suggested that as a clergy wife she should be a "comforting machine," and a "well-bucket" to draw refreshment for those in need.[257] In many respects the clergy wife conformed to the 'Angel in the House' ideal, articulating such feminine virtues as self-sacrifice and compassion. Mary Benson ('Ben'), wife of Edward, was a good example of how even the wife of a bishop could become so integrated in her husband's work that she had no separate existence of her own. Louise Creighton, public campaigner and arguably the most prominent laywoman in the first three decades of this century affirms this contention:

> I believe that the wife of a public man has many peculiar difficulties. She is not really free to be herself. She has always to consider her husband's position, and the effect that what she says or does may have upon it; and so in a sense she can never be really herself as far as the outward world is concerned, and may be called upon to let some of her powers lie dormant. But she has abundant compensation, and certainly I never regretted for a moment that I had to consider Max's position in all I did.[258]

Louise, however, was able to strike the balance between work for Mandell, and work for herself, what she called 'abundant compensations,' but this proved to be more difficult for Ben. Edith Davidson also reflected on her place in her husband's life before he was enthroned at Lambeth, "certain duties she must, of course, carry out both in London and in the diocese, but the first thing in her life must be the Archbishop's life."[259] But again she was able to achieve a balance as she took over her mother's duties when she died in 1878, taking a special interest in the creation

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[254] Gill, S., p.139
[255] Ibid., p.221
[256] Benson, E.F., Mother, Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., London, 1925, p.41
[257] Ridding, L., The Girl Who Should Marry…, p.163
[258] Covert, J.T., p.113
[259] M.C.S.M., Edith Davidson…, p.123

and maintenance of Christian organisations devoted to helping the poor. Her husband supported her in this.

Not until Ben's sons read her diary did they appreciate the extent to which she negated herself, her behaviour and even some of her own ideas. In separate biographies written by her children, she was described in various analogies as an object for their father's use, for example her son Fred described her as "a garment for another."[260] Ben herself confides in a letter to a friend how lost she felt after the death of her husband:

> I feel exactly like a string of beads, always on one string, worn, carried about till they seemed as if they had some real coherence. In a moment the string was cut; they rolled to all the corners of the room, a necklace for glory and beauty no longer, but just scattered beads. Who will string my life together once more?... how was I to find myself?"[261]

Ben enjoyed the responsibilities of running a great house, she enjoyed the social side of her role, as well as the personal relationships she developed with her children and with God, yet she had never enjoyed an individual existence of her own. Her life was an example of how incorporation into one's husband's work could be taken to extremes. Her life lived for Edward was the ultimate self-surrender for another. This was one of the disadvantages inherent in the unpaid curate dimension of the clergy wife's roles. Edward totally relied on the support of his wife and Ben was Edward's sole secretary and his adviser on most things. She would always check his public speeches before he delivered them. Fred recalled that when his parents made a tour of French Churches, Ben kept a journal of all those aspects of the trip that interested Edward, not herself.[262] She saw herself first and last as a wife and a mother but did not venture into the world of public service like so many of her contemporaries. In contrast to Ben's complete surrender to Edward's needs, Mandell Creighton granted his wife, Louise, her own public life which followed on from the extension of herself into Mandell's pastoral ministry:

> My great desire was to help Max in every possible way in his work, but he would never let me slave for him and opposed any desire of mine to act in any way as his secretary. He always wished me to lead my own life and do my own work, though of course he constantly asked me to do little things for him...[263]

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[260] Benson, E.F., Final Edition, Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1940, p.10
[261] Benson, E.F., Mother, p.41
[262] Ibid., p.19
[263] Covert, J.T., p.103

It should be conceded that much of the restrictive nature of Ben's relationship with Edward was due to his explosive and dominating personality, as well as the self-giving humility in her own character which sought to spend herself on those around her, without thinking of the consequences to herself. David Edwards refers to Edward's "dictatorship" over his family and how this continued to have a hold over them despite his death.[264] During a "delicious" visit to the Bensons in Truro in 1881 Laura comments on "their enthusiasm - the overflowing Methodist prayer-meetings, the foundations and building of the Cathedral… the eager missionary aloof life" they led.[265] But she later confides that when she visited them at Addington, Edward "was his own rather unapproachable dignified alarming self… one who threw himself into the part (and isolated grandeur) of the Archbishopric in a way which puzzled one as to how to get beyond the barriers."[266] Louise also confesses, "I began to feel the charm of Mrs. Benson though I did not really get to know the Archbishop at all."[267] Laura describes how Ben's own personality shone through when amongst her female friends, "Ben was, as always, her own absolutely real self - rather aloof from the Archipiscopal atmosphere which oppressed, while it exhilarated her."[268] This comment also illustrates the double-sided nature of the role of bishop's wife - at once liberating and yet restrictive.

After 'the string was cut' Ben confessed that she had never really loved Edward.[269] He had determined to marry his second cousin when she was just eleven years of age, and after a wait of seven years Ben married him when she was eighteen. Peterson refers to Ben's lack of sexual satisfaction with her husband and regret at not feeling "what women ought to feel."[270] This is in contrast to the relationship between Mandell and Louise Creighton. Louise confesses in her recollections, "he was a very ardent lover."[271] Laura did not mention the sexual aspect of her relationship with George, other than that they adored each other despite the twenty-one year age gap between them. Augusta Maclagan intimated in her diary how she missed sharing a bedroom with her husband William, who spent large periods of time sleeping in his own room. Her entry for 15 June 1887 confides, "he came back to my room after an absence of three weeks, to my great joy, but he was too

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[264] Edwards, D.L., p.204
[265] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.74
[266] Ibid., p.96
[267] Covert, J.T., p.117
[268] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.96
[269] Benson, E.F., Mother, p.12
[270] Peterson, M.J., p.77
[271] Covert, J.T., p.40

restless to sleep and after tossing incessantly till 4, he returned to his dressing room. I had not said a word of my longings, so I could not blame myself."[272]

As the years passed, and after the birth of three sons and a daughter, Ben always sought to relieve Edward of as many of his burdens as possible, and to please him as far as she could, especially during his periods of depression. Her ready acceptance of her husband's judgements was out of the desire not to disappoint him. Whilst she was indeed an influential working partner with Edward, it was on his terms, and for him. Yet through her work as an 'incorporated wife' Ben felt a real sense that she had been given a meaningful role in life. She did not regret sharing her husband's mission as she was able to utilise her talents in one direction, demanding a real strength of character.

Catharine Tait's pioneering work in the public sphere went some way to challenge the existing assumptions about the passive role of the clergy wife, highlighting instead its positive, public side, and the liberating aspects of the role. Although Wolffe's contention that religion played a large part in the subordination of women was true in many ways, at the same time Christianity served to emancipate clergy wives from the bonds of their constraint as it encouraged them to imitate Christ and go out into the world and make a difference. In this way the role of the clergy wife is interesting as it challenges the very values it appeared to endorse. Laura was able to feel useful, with a very real, if unofficial place in the Church. The wives of bishops held an intangible influence, but their links with national ecclesiastics remained limited. This is reiterated by the author of an article on the Bishop of Chichester:

> The author reminds the reader that a bishop's wife has no precedence of any kind except courtesy by arguing that Mrs. Wilberforce sometimes wrongly received post addressed to: "Lady of Chichester," "Lady Bishop," etc. Perhaps the greatest anomaly is the fact that the wife of the first peer of the realm should not be created a peeress, for the Primate of all England has a unique position and in a lesser degree, the same may be said of his wife.[273]

The clerical family was held up as the model of the traditional patriarchal family and yet in many ways it challenged existing ideologies of domestic femininity as it transcended the domestic sphere. On a personal level this double aspect could

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[272] Diary entry for 15 June 1887, Maclagan Family Papers, Oxon
[273] Pitcairn, E.H., 'The Right Rev. Ernest Wilberforce, Lord Bishop of Chichester', in The Lady's Realm, 1902, p.592

create tension between balancing the public roles that came to them through their special position and the essential qualities of femininity inherent in the ideal of Christian womanhood. To a large extent the work of women such as Augusta Maclagan, Mary Benson, Louise Creighton and Laura, came through their marriages to clergymen, and so their undertakings on behalf of women and children were a positive extension of their roles. Not only did these women marry the man, but they also married the vocation.

The fact that their husband's work was based at home also clearly opened up a range of possibilities for the clergy wife, despite its demands and constrictive space. Ben worked as Edward's sole secretary and other clergy wives worked, unpaid, as their husband's clerical assistant, a role Laura undertook on an ad hoc basis as George had the full-time assistance of his chaplain, Edward Were. As volunteers they could transcend the limits set by existing ideologies, but paid work would have constituted an official career and additionally for titled women this would have equated to 'work,' against the ideal of the leisured classes. Voluntary service was performed for the glory of God and the improvement of society. The element of "vicarious female involvement" in their husband's professions went a long way to explain why these women were permitted a voice in the public realm, though perhaps in an unofficial capacity.[274] How far Laura was George's partner in his religious work, how far they shared a joint vocation, or if she just remained at the level of assistant now needs to be established. Heeney refers to Dora Freestone, who wrote in 'An Ideal Minister's Wife' in 1932 how "the wife is just as much a necessity to the Church as the minister himself."[275] I shall consider if Laura placed a higher value on her public work above that of her role as domestic regulator and whether the definitions of the 'Angel in the House' image were fixed or flexible.

The Church Congress of 1896 witnessed a debate on the issue of clerical marriage, to establish how far wives were considered partners in their husband's work, or whether their duties remained at a purely secondary level as assistants, and to what degree they exerted direct influence over official church matters. In highlighting the historical origins of the position, the developments of the role have been illustrated and consequently Laura can be fitted into the scale of integration. George encouraged his wife in her public service for the women and children of the diocese. Indeed she was a leader of women. In the same way Mandell Creighton was supportive of his wife's endeavours, however it is important to reiterate the

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[274] Horn, P., p.13
[275] Heeney, B., p.24

point that although they were viewed as mother figures of the diocese, their efforts were limited to extensions of the moral and maternal roles they were enjoined to play.

Augusta Maclagan's daughter, Dora, recalled several years after her mother's death how this active bishop's wife, very much of the same mould as Laura and Louise, forsook her own needs in favour of her husband. Dora's few disjointed notes elucidates her mother's background and character briefly:

> Mother – Berkshire and London. Lover of gardens and flowers. Busy (many guests, diocesan meetings). Taught us: prayers, Sunday Collect and Catechism… Everything second to father's wishes and needs.[276]

Also in a letter Augusta addressed to "my poor harassed darling" while they were still at Lichfield before York she concludes, "and in every possible… way you may rely on the untiring cooperation and devotion of one whose title to honour will be that of your fellow helper. Your own A."[277] This final sentiment could be reiterated by any of Laura's contemporary bishops' wives. Although many were extraordinary women, they still thought of their husbands' interests before their own. Yet with their husbands' support and a strong character, some pursued active lives of their own accord. Such a scale of integration ran from the most passive interpretation, using the example of Ben, with no separate existence of her own, through her own admission, through the roles of confidante, assistant, 'unpaid curate,' to that of working partner, and ultimately to the position where they were respected as public women in their own right. Louise Creighton achieved this final stage in the development.

It certainly needs to be acknowledged that the late nineteenth century witnessed a period of "hyper-activity,"[278] for the clergy wife. Her duties were unparalleled before or after this time. Heeney offers a further explanation in that from the 1850's to the 1930's, the clergy wife was able to combine successfully both domestic assistance and parochial leadership, compared to her predecessors, because she had the help of servants, and clerical families had fewer children.[279] At the turn of the nineteenth century, the clergy wife was expected to fulfil the

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[276] Unpublished notes, Maclagan Family Papers, Oxon
[277] Unpublished letter, undated, Maclagan Family Papers, Oxon
[278] Spedding, J., p.409
[279] Heeney, B., p.26

traditional elements of her 'Lady of the Manor' position, such as attending to the needs of the poor and sick, but by the close of the century she was expected to make a much more active contribution to her husband's work through the role of unpaid curate. It was in the closing decades of the century that the outlook, character and duties of the clergy wife particularly developed.[280] Women were becoming increasingly conscious of the social consequences of the industrial revolution - the extreme social problems in the towns and especially the grinding misery in the slums that Laura witnessed so vividly.

Clergy wives at this time were often at the forefront in organising schemes for the relief of poverty and neglect, some working hard in the background and others taking on a more public position. They raised profiles on public platforms, they commandeered meetings in the committee room and facilitated work through their fundraising skills. Some women went further to write practical and ideological works, articles and tracts, alongside the great biographies of their husbands. There was only one limit to their functions, and that was the one imposed by Holy Orders. The main danger they faced was the threat of professionalism, hence the image of the interfering, organising clergy wife, with her nose in all parish business that one finds so often in the pages of literature.[281] In her introduction to the 1996 edition of Jane Austen's 'Mansfield Park,' Kathryn Sutherland refers to "the managing Mrs. Norris,"[282] Austen's creation of the endlessly interfering, frugal and hypocritical clergy wife, whose "love of money was equal to her love of directing."[283] This was the backdrop against which Laura and her contemporaries worked. Although the novel was published much earlier in the century, in 1818, Austen's powerful images still continued to inform the reading public throughout the century.

Although essentially the same role, the distinction needs to be made between the clergy wife and the bishop's wife. The latter held an exalted social position and certainly in the case of Laura and her contemporaries, demanded the talents of an exceptional woman. In an article published in 1897 entitled, 'The Wives of the Bishops,' the author, probably the writer Mrs. Sarah Tooley[284] who had written several other articles on bishop's wives for the journal, acknowledged the hard work and example of the present-day bishops' wives:

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[280] Watt, M., p.98
[281] Ibid., p.100
[282] Austen, J., Mansfield Park, Penguin Books Ltd., London, 1996, p.xi
[283] Ibid., p.9
[284] Mrs. Tooley (died 1946) was a journalist and author who contributed many articles to leading magazines and periodicals. Her publications included Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe and The Personal Life of Queen Victoria.

> Trollope's picture of Mrs. Proudie, though a marvellous piece of character-drawing, is by no means typical of the English lady who becomes nowadays the wife of a bishop. The English Church owes a debt to such high-minded and devoted women as Mrs. Tait, Mrs. Alexander, and many more, both dead and living…[285]

Amongst those women listed were great names in the history of the Anglican Church. Strong and benevolent women such as Beatrice Temple, Louise Creighton, Edith Davidson,[286] and Laura were named. These women made many inroads for the improvement of women and children's welfare through the long list of public work they engaged in.

They were founders, organisers and promoters of preventive and rescue work, social purity and health and welfare campaigns. But they also worked amongst the rank and file, visiting workhouses, shelters, hospitals and slums, to name but a few projects. The extent to which Laura worked to maintain the status quo between the classes, the motives for her work, and how far, if at all, she sought to change the social structure will be highlighted. Louise Creighton, for example, wrote in her autobiography, "I felt then as I have often felt since that we need to learn how to make poverty beautiful."[287] This paternalistic statement does not seem to tally with her experience of the extremes of wealth and poverty she witnessed at first hand in the parish of Embleton where she lived in Northumberland, and again later in the great See of London.

Louise went some way in her memoir to explain further the special position she found herself in, when Mandell accepted the post of Bishop of Peterborough, as the wife of a new bishop. She acknowledged that she could no longer share in her husband's life as she had done previously as a clergy wife as both their responsibilities had now increased and Mandell was often away from the Palace, pursuing diocesan matters.[288] It has been suggested that this was partly as a result of the loss of the cultural and intellectual friendships she had made at Oxford and Cambridge.[289] She thrust herself into her religious and social work, partly in order

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[285] 'The Wives of Bishops,' in The Lady's Realm, 1897, p.287

[286] Edith Davidson was the wife of Randall Thomas Davidson. He was born on 7 April 1848. He was educated at Harrow and Oxford, where he met Crauford Tait, son of A.C. Tait. After his ordination in 1875 he became Resident Chaplain at Lambeth in 1877, followed by Dean of Windsor in 1883. He was appointed Bishop of Rochester in 1891, Bishop of Winchester in 1895 and eventually Archbishop of Canterbury in 1903 until his resignation in 1928. He died in 1930.

[287] Covert, J.T., p.101

[288] Ibid., p.99

[289] Ibid., p.169

to combat this deficiency. Her tasks largely came to her as mistress of a grand house, as ecclesiastical hostess and as leader of women's diocesan associations. She writes about the rich and diverse society she found herself mixing with:

> First there was the great ecclesiastical world outside, the Bishops and other leaders I got to know by degrees. Then there was the busy life of industrial towns, such as Leicester and Northampton, and the still more unknown life of the smaller manufacturing towns… Then there were the large number and great variety of clergy and their wives… able and cultivated, narrow-minded and limited in outlook, besides county families, manufacturers, big tradesmen. My outlook was immensely enlarged…[290]

Louise always argued that the position of bishop's wife held certain opportunities at its kernel. Whilst at first she may have had to accept the vicarious fulfilment which her husband's position offered her, rather than self-fulfilment, as time passed doors were opened to areas of life to which she would not have had access.[291] An example of this was her scope to participate in the discussions in the Church Congress Women's Section with fellow wives. Both Laura and Louise made advances in their roles even in their own lifetimes. Adding such skills as platform-speaking and organising and leading diocesan and national associations to their traditional functions, the bishops' wives in the late nineteenth century ranked amongst the most influential women in the Church. This was at a time when the debate on women's rights was brought to the attention of Church and national government.

George and Laura heralded many positive achievements during their twenty years at Southwell, turning the two vast counties into a coherent diocese with a thriving lay life. This was not accomplished without much hard work and hardship along the path. Where George took the lead, Laura competently seconded him in building up the new diocese, taking the lead particularly in issues affecting women and children. When he arrived in 1884 George aimed to get to know his diocese and become a recognised figure. This in itself was no easy feat, but by 1887 the Riddings had visited every parish church and most of the chapels. By 1892 George had held a service in every parish bar eight.[292] In their marital partnership both found their work and travelling exhausting, maintaining a sedulous schedule of writing, speaking, visiting, organising and promoting societies plus entertaining clergy and their wives.

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[290] Covert, J.T., p.100
[291] Ibid., p.118
[292] Ridding, L.E., George Ridding…, p.178

Their success at Southwell was marred by the deaths of Laura's parents, her mother in 1885 and her father in 1895. Laura's mother, Lady Selborne, had struggled to fight cancer after a short period of time, but when she lost her battle Laura was devastated by the loss of her kindred spirit. George was a great comfort as Laura recalls, "George was so sweet and loving to me. He knew what mother and I were to each other and how I ached for her. I had no goodbye from her which some of the others had."[293] When Laura returned to Blackmoor she vividly recalled how her father thanked God for blessing them with such a wonderful wife and mother:

> Darling father prayed a beautiful prayer there with us, thanking, blessing God for all she was to us, praying that her perfect example might go on leading us. He was bowed, aged, very calm, sweet almost happy – visibly upheld by God.[294]

Chief among the tributes came a letter of condolence from Queen Victoria who wrote: "Dear Lord Chancellor… Dear Lady Selborne was always so kind and showed such true sympathy in every event which concerned me, ever since I had the pleasure of knowing her, that I feel truly grieved at her loss… Victoria R.I."[295] Louise Creighton also acknowledged the significance of her relationship with her own mother after her death, "I doubt if one ever fully realises the place one's mother fills in one's life till she is gone."[296] In response to Lady Selborne's death, Laura found comfort in Christ's teaching, reiterating, "…the Resurrection must be…"[297]

On 17 June of that same year, Laura and her sisters watched their father take his seat on the woolsack for the last time as Gladstone's ministry had resigned on 9 June 1885. After his wife's death, Roundell continued to labour in defence of the Church. He also wrote his 'Memorials' with the help of Sophy, who was still unmarried. Earlier she likened her father to Sir Thomas More. Lord Selborne died on 4 May 1895 after a brief illness, and Laura describes how "the nation was mourning with us."[298] In addition to a telegram received from the Queen, the

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[293] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II, p.136
[294] Ibid., p.138
[295] Selborne, R., Earl of, Memorials Personal and Political 1865 – 1895, Vol. II, Macmillan & Co. Ltd., London, 1898, p.161
[296] Covert., J.T., p.79
[297] Diary entry for Thursday 16 April 1885, 9M68/5, HRO
[298] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.226

Bishop of London, Frederick Temple, wrote the following powerful tribute in 'The Guardian' eleven days later:

> It would be impossible to estimate the loss which the Church has sustained in the death of Lord Selborne. No one at this moment could take his place or do what he has been doing, and, if he had lived, would have continued to do... In the defence of the Church he had weight and influence which no one could approach. His mastery made him unanswerable in the controversy...[299]

In the House of Lords and in Convocation speeches were made in recognition of his great character and contribution to the nation. With the loss of her parents, Laura now cleaved to the two most important men in her life, her husband and her brother.

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[299] Selborne, R, Earl of., Vol. II, 1898, p.423

Chapter Four

'Women's mission to women'[300]

New impetus was certainly injected into Southwell. By 1904 sixty new churches and twenty-one Mission Chapels had been newly erected.[301] In an age when societies, guilds and associations were rising up all around the country, more than sixty organisations were established during their time at Southwell.[302] Laura stressed the need for social agencies in the diocese. She acknowledged that there were some pitfalls attached to instituting so many organisations, but she explained her position by arguing, "because too much gas can suffocate us, is no reason why we need deny ourselves the use of its light and heat."[303]

It was important to retain as much of the original impetus and energy as possible in the life of each agency, in order to combat the red tape and officialdom of endless committees. Laura tried to look at new ways of tackling problems, pioneering organisations to help those who were overlooked by society, for example the opening of Southwell House to keep 'fallen women' off the streets of Nottingham. Creating 'light and heat' for so many different causes, Laura gave an example of the time she spent working on different committees in one year - 1901 - totalling thirty eight committees. These covered Southwell, Nottingham, Derby and on a national level in London.[304] Included in her list were the Woman's League and the Mothers' Union,[305] the Girls' Friendly Society,[306] the Church of England Temperance Society and the National Union of Women Workers.[307] Laura felt that service on such boards was especially important for middle and upper class women

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[300] Lewis, J., Women and Social Action in Victorian and Edwardian England, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1991, p.308

[301] Ridding, L.E., Annotated notes in George Ridding…, p.183a

[302] Ridding, L.E., George Ridding… p.175

[303] Ridding, L.E., 'The Tone of the Village. A Paper on Preventive Work in Villages,' in The Helping Hand, No.3, June 1891, p.9, HRO

[304] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.283

[305] The Mother's Union was established in the 1870's by a bishop's wife, Mrs. Sumner, to encourage parents to take an active part in their children's religious upbringing. Starting as an Anglican parish organisation, by the 1890's it had grown to a national level.

[306] The GFS was founded by Mrs. Townsend in 1874 as a national organisation for the instruction of young working- and lower-middle class girls in religious ideals and domestic skills. Emphasis was laid on duty to parents and employers.

[307] The NUWW was formed in the mid-1880's as a non-political organisation of middle-and-upper class women with the aim of helping working women. In 1918 its title changed to the National Council of Women of Great Britain and Ireland (NCW).

at home, in order to teach them the value of considering all sides of a question and broaden their previously narrow horizons.[308]

Like Laura, Sarah Tooley, who was author of an article on the Bishop of Lichfield and his wife, Augustus and Mrs. Legge,[309] argues that for the latter, her public service emanated from the home.[310] Dora Freestone contends that for a wife of a clergyman to be successful in her mission "that treasure of a Woman's Life "The Home" must in all cases take second place."[311] Freestone did not mean to imply that the home should be neglected, rather that it was impossible for her to focus her attentions on fulfilling all household duties. Laura believed that ladies should only embark on work outside the domain of the home once those domestic duties had been undertaken. She argued for balance between the two worlds, but as Reynolds argues, her path was facilitated by her exalted social status on both practical and ideological levels. In this, her opinions were shared by her best friend, Kathleen Lyttelton, who wrote specifically on the subject, as Laura had discussed in her article entitled, 'Should Married Women Engage in Public Work?'

Kathleen argues that women from the upper sections of society lacked conviction. She explained that as life was a struggle for working women in a mill or factory, working in close confines with similar-minded women, they formed their own opinions or convictions on all matters. In contrast, gentlewomen who led protected, dull existences at home, succumbing to the 'temptations of idleness,' were uneducated and untrained to think of anything or anyone else outside their comfort zone.[312] As to the argument that public service challenged family life and unsexed women, Mrs. Lyttelton explained that on the contrary, it exercised the wholly womanly qualities of sympathy, perception, resourcefulness and perseverance.[313] Additionally, the greater knowledge and duty furnished women with more skills to take home to their familial situation.[314]

Laura's opinions on the subject changed very little as she grew older and she incorporated the benefits of married women engaging in public affairs into an unpublished novel she wrote during her widowhood in Hampshire. 'The Justice

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[308] Ridding, L.E., 'Should Married Women Engage in Public Work?', in Woman at Home, Vol. IV, Part 20, May 1895, p.111
[309] Miss Fanny Louisa Stopford-Sackville married Augustus Legge on 3 January 1877
[310] Tooley, S., 'The Lord Bishop of Lichfield', in The Lady's Realm, p.680
[311] Freestone, D., An Ideal Minister's Wife, Arthur H. Stockwell Ltd., London, 1932, p.4
[312] Lyttelton, K. The Hon. Mrs., Women and their Work, Methuen and Co., London, 1901, pp.11-12
[313] Ibid., p.97
[314] Ibid., p.10

Room'[315] was written in the style of Charlotte Yonge, her literary inspiration. A moralistic tale, the unfolding story centres around the life of the heroine, Cecy, charting her marriage to an older, narrow-minded man called Sir Gilbert Ives of the 'old set.' The action takes place between 1890 and 1914, key years of activity in Laura's own lifetime. Unsurprisingly, Cecy shares a number of similarities with her creator – she is progressive, a young idealist with modern ideas who tempers her thoughts and actions, so as not to appear too radical. It could also be argued that the character of Cecy was modelled on Laura's sister, Mary, who married Lord Waldegrave. Much of the plot revolves around the clash between Cecy's progressive world and Sir Gilbert's conservative beliefs.

Cecy obeys her husband, despite him seeking to regulate her thoughts and behaviour, but as she matures, Sir Gilbert reluctantly permits his wife to participate in active social service in the locality. In the same mould as Laura, Cecy starts out concerned about the conditions of their tenants' cottages. Whilst Sir Gilbert viewed such talk of reforms and social changes as dangerous and revolutionary innovations, Cecy acknowledged a gap between the outlooks of the two generations. She had been raised to consider her social, political and parochial duties outside the home. As an upper class lady she took her responsibility towards social reform seriously. She mentions the work of the Mothers' Union, the Girls' Friendly Society, Poor Law Guardians and the County Nursing Association, just some of the numerous organisations Laura was personally involved with.

Laura raised the argument that an active public life led faithfully in conjunction with duties at home was healthy for women of leisure and benefited the whole of society. Like Kathleen Lyttelton, Laura observed that women needed to avoid "the same familiar routine of dull ease and feudal isolation."[316] Laura also steered Cecy in the direction of interaction with those of lower classes to herself, justifying such action with the argument that inter-class knowledge prohibited any revolutionary tendencies the workers may harbour. With a greater understanding between the classes, the French revolution was less likely to be repeated and less suspicion would dispel any hostilities.[317]

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[315] The 'Justice Room' was a real dark, panelled room at Laura's maternal Grandmother's house in Hastings. As children they visited the old 'Mansion House' frequently and Laura recalls, "curiously enough it is the one haunt of childish days which I often visit in dreams." (Ridding, L.E., Vol. I., p.80)

[316] Ridding, L.E., The Justice Room, Selborne Family Papers, Hants, p.108

[317] Ibid., pp.143-4

Cecy's marriage to Gilbert produced two children. Her beloved son, Rupert, might well have been a representation of Laura's favourite nephew, Bobby, who was killed in action during the Great War. Rupert joins the Christian Social Union, having visited his College Mission Settlement. He announces, much to his mother's pride, "my notion is that we should all be mixed up together, a real democratic fizz."[318] Rupert's views changed greatly under his mother's influence after his father's death as he reflected on his isolated childhood under his father's hand. He observes, "in Pap's time we lived such feudal isolated lives that we naturally looked on ourselves as Heidsieck and everybody else as ginger ale,"[319] an interesting analogy.

Though the novel lacked depth, the pattern of Cecy's life mirrored Laura's own, combining both progressive and moderate elements in her thoughts and actions. As a member of the establishment, Laura was no radical. Whilst she advanced modern ideas in regard to women's rights in society, writing a number of articles on the subject, she did not join party auxiliaries such as the Primrose League or the Women's Liberal Federation. As a committed suffragist, Laura sought to work within the traditional framework of the church and the family. By remaining within the establishment, exceptional women of Laura and Louise's calibre were provided with sufficient meaningful outlets to satisfy their own fulfilment. As a conformist, Laura's actions were legitimised by society and in this way she could influence her worlds indirectly, rather than by using a radical approach that would have alienated the majority of the establishment.

It is also important to reiterate the fact that Laura was not dissatisfied with the status quo. Esther Shkolnik, writing in 1987, argues that the majority of women during the late Victorian and Edwardian years who were involved in the women's movement used socially acceptable tactics, but that this arena has largely been ignored by modern historians.[320] Shkolnik also observes that political hostesses, much like their ecclesiastical sisters, were "far more conventional in theory than they were in fact."[321] Like Laura, the great political wives of the late nineteenth century acted in response to their conventional place in society. Not seeking to supersede her traditional roles, Laura used her position to pursue her own interests, facilitated by her status as a lady. Laura managed to straddle both worlds

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[318] Ibid., p.310
[319] Ibid., p.310
[320] Shkolnik, E.S., Leading Ladies. A Study of Eight Late Victorian and Edwardian Political Wives, Garland Publishing Inc., New York, 1987, p.9
[321] Ibid., p.576

successfully – not only did she remain within the accepted limits of femininity, she was also able to achieve in the public world. Yet much in Laura's actions was unconventional.

It could be suggested that service on numerous councils was just a tiresome formality for Laura, but as an influential and charismatic personality, willing to serve, she was valued greatly as a public speaker, and enjoyed the fellowship with her sisters in the battle of good against evil as a servant of the Lord. Frank Prochaska makes the important point that the strong faith of such women as Laura imposed its own code of work on all they engaged in, which society reinforced.[322] For Laura this meant that she had a Christian obligation to respond to the numerous appeals on her time from various quarters to attend social engagements, assemblies, and charitable endeavours. Demands were continually made on her time. The following is a sample of an average working day, taken from 25 March 1892, revealing the depth of her service for others, and the extent to which she worked in the public sphere, in addition to her duties around the Priory:

> First early into Nottingham for Southwell House Rescue Work. To Hope Lodge Prevention Home. Lunch with Mrs. Thornton and attended Woman's League Committee at All Saints… and a talk over Girls Evening Home with Miss Shaw the worker…[323]

In comparison, it is interesting to note how Louise Creighton found her incessant duties frustrating as she felt she could not see one task through to its conclusion and yet she became resigned to the fact that she had to accept her position and all that it brought with it. She confides:

> The circumstances of my life made it impossible for me to take up any one thing and go into it thoroughly. I had to be ready to be interested in anything and everything. Sometimes I felt it very unsatisfactory, and longed to have the opportunity to get to understand any one thing thoroughly… I felt that my fate was to be a maid-of-all-work, to try and bring people together and to grease wheels wherever I could.[324]

In the course of her work for women, Laura met some interesting characters from all walks of life, and recounts a number of amusing stories in her recollections. She always retained the capacity to see the lighter side of life, as well as the darker side,

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[322] Prochaska, F., Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth Century England, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1980, p.162
[323] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.191
[324] Covert, J.T., p.123

with a ready twinkle in her eye. This trait never deserted her as she grew older. Laura recalls how she overheard the ensuing story whilst visiting Derby:

> Mr. Chancellor told us of two old women, one ninety, the other seventy, mother and daughter who were bedridden and "doited in their wits" and who were overheard saying one to the other as they lay side by side in their bed: "Be you the mother of I or I the mother of you?" They had quite forgotten."[325]

Within five years of their installation at Southwell the local press were congratulating the Riddings on their reinvention of the episcopate in more wholesome ways.[326] By 1897, commentators remarked on Laura's genuine popularity amongst the Midlanders, who acknowledged the good work she had undertaken in Southwell since her arrival.[327]

One of her main skills was her ability to speak publicly, whether at a small mother's meeting, or on the platform at the annual conference of the National Union of Women Workers or Church Congress. This was certainly an element of leadership in Nonconformist worship, but was less evident in Anglican devotions. Laura admitted that the art of conversation was the one element of her social accoutrement that she felt needed to be developed as a young woman. Whilst at Winchester she resolved to become a fine conversationalist, an art which she did indeed learn to master in time.[328] Public speaking held no fear for Laura as she never lacked the confidence or the ability. She would get up on any platform and address those who gathered to listen to her. She was renowned as a fine speaker, with "an excellent platform manner,"[329] and Sir John Hammerton[330] observed, "it is indeed a pleasure to hear Lady Laura speak, there is music in her voice."[331]

Laura always led by example, and 'encouraged' her colleagues to take to the platform. In contrast, Edith Davidson was one of a minority of bishop's wives to whom public speaking did not come easily.[332] Louise Creighton recalls the

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[325] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.154
[326] Ridding, L.E., Annotated notes in George Ridding…, p.160a
[327] 'The Wives of the Bishops', p.291
[328] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.77
[329] 'The Wives of the Bishops', p.291
[330] Sir John Alexander Hammerton (1871-1949) was a respected author of his day.
[331] Hammerton, J.A., p.150
[332] M.C.S.M., Edith Davidson…, p.138

following in her autobiography, with reference to the Central Conference of Women's Church Work:

> We all felt that Mrs. Davidson must be the president, but she was never inclined to come forward or to take a prominent position; and she did not care about speaking in public. She was beloved and trusted by everybody and anything she did she did well and with grace and charm; and she had her own ideas, and I think must have realised consciously or unconsciously very well her own limitations. It is a clear proof of our love for one another and our trust in one another that we worked together for many years in what was really an anomalous position. In most ways I was I suppose the real leader and she the apparent leader. She presided at our conferences and at most of our committees as a rule, and I sat beside her. I do not know how it struck other people… but it worked very well…[333]

Gertrude Gow, Vice-President of the NUWW was a great friend of Laura's, but even she did not escape the lashings of Laura's sharp tongue. Mrs. Gow recalls how Laura wrote to her, telling her that she could not make her planned speech at Hope Lodge as she was suffering from laryngitis, and that Gertrude would have to take her place. Mrs. Gow replied that she could not oblige as she did not speak publicly, to which the indefatigable Laura answered, "I did not ask you if you would speak. I said you were to!"[334] After this episode Mrs. Gow endeavoured to learn the art of public speaking and in the future she made many addresses by Laura's side.

Laura certainly did not suffer fools gladly and neither did her friend Louise Creighton, whose 'alarming' reputation went before her. Both women had much in common. Neither woman tolerated silliness and were known for their direct-mindedness. Such moments of straight talking were referred to by the Creighton family as 'Creightonisms.'[335] But, as Edith Davidson's biographer acknowledges, Louise did have her lighter moments.[336] Laura enjoyed a real sense of the ridiculous, as evidenced in the amusing anecdotes she recalled. Louise's biographer, James Covert, defended his subject by arguing that she had been misrepresented and misunderstood by commentators and that her personality was

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[333] Covert, J.T., p.148-9
[334] Gow, G., 'Then and Now,' in Women in Council, October, 1932, p.223
[335] Comments given in face-to-face interviews with the author by Mrs. Kisty Creighton, Oxon.
[336] M.C.S.M., Edith Davidson…, p.128

much more complex than the narrow judgments imposed on her by critics in the past. He writes, "this also seems an unfair characterisation because contemporaries who knew her best saw, beyond the occasional sharp word and stern look, a rather shy, sensitive, cultured, complex personality who was righteously charged and intellectually honest - often to a fault."[337]

At this juncture, it is important to acknowledge the general background of the Church against which Laura and her contemporaries worked. In the nineteenth century much of the opposition to the Women's Movement came from the established Church, backed up by its significant anti-feminist lore. Despite this, women began to take an increasingly active involvement in church life, what has been identified as "the feminization of the Church."[338] Heeney highlights the reasons behind this, suggesting that the pro-woman movement looked to a liberal interpretation of Scripture upon which the 'antis' built their argument. This was facilitated through the new discipline of Biblical Criticism.

Major strides were made in women's education during the nineteenth century that had improved their position in the Church and society more generally.[339] Emily Janes, an Honorary Secretary of the NUWW and friend of Laura's, pointed to the influence of two movements in the Church which had led the way in changing women's assessment of definitions of duty and religion. During the two preceding centuries women's perspective had rarely been extended beyond their immediate surroundings. This was mostly due to their deficient education and training and the modest size of the towns in which they lived. Miss Janes refers to the "shock of the Evangelical revival,"[340] paying tribute to pioneering evangelical women such as Hannah More and Sarah Trimmer for inspiring other women to teach in Sunday Schools. Secondly Miss Janes points out that the Tractarian Movement, with its emphasis on the devotional life, had encouraged women back into the Church.

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[337] Covert, J.T., Out of the Shadows: A Reassessment of Louise Creighton, 1850-1936, 1995, Creighton Family Papers, Oxon
[338] Gill, S., p.77
[339] Heeney, B., p.1
[340] Janes, E., 'On the Associated Work of Women in Religion and Philanthropy,' in Burdett-Coutts, Baroness, (ed), Woman's Mission. A Series of Congress Papers on the Philanthropic Work of Women, Sampson, Low, Marston & Co. Ltd., London, 1893, p.134

As women took a greater part in Church work and in secular charitable endeavours, they grew in self-awareness. Provided they worked as unpaid volunteers, their position was legitimised, informed as these women were by the middle class ideologies of the day that equated paid work with social and financial poverty. English churchwomen went on to perform lay work in many fields of life and clergy wives commandeered the army of volunteers who worked within the established Church, penetrating institutions which had always been the bastion of male dominance previously, such as the workhouse.

Spiritual welfare

Before embarking on a comprehensive evaluation of Laura's public work, I need to establish where she drew her inspiration from and what fed her desire for service. For Laura, God was her point of reference. He was the great reality, the ever-present force in her work, in His work. Her active work was informed by her devotional life. Everything else emanated from God's guiding hand in her life. At Laura's funeral address on 26 May 1939, her cousin Edwin Palmer, Bishop of Bombay,[341] spoke of the Palmers' infectious faith. He observes, "religion is sometimes learned, but far more often caught. Laura Ridding caught it from her parents… the religion which she caught from her parents was nurtured on prayer and Bible and Sacrament, on all that the Church provides for its children."[342] Laura's own diaries and memoirs reinforce this truth.

Laura turned to God during the low points in her life, for example when she miscarried three times and when she sought guidance in leaving Winchester, but she also carried on a dialogue with God on a daily basis. She never stopped asking for God's guidance and her diaries reveal how much she was sustained by the power of God in her life. When she was driving to the NUWW Conference at Portsmouth in 1909, she was struck by 'nausea and suffering,' but as she describes the unfolding scene, "I put myself before God. I made the act of spiritual

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[341] The Right Rev. Edwin James Palmer (1869-1954) was the son of Roundell's youngest brother Edwin and was therefore Laura's cousin. He served as the Bishop of Bombay between 1908 and 1929.

[342] Palmer, E.J., Address at the Funeral of Lady Laura Ridding, 26 May 1939, MSS Selborne 115, BL

communion and asked to be given strength to get through the evening. God upheld me. The nausea disappeared. By faith I was brought through and never again did those horrible symptoms assail me…"[343] Laura compared communion to receiving refreshment through spiritual nourishment with His body and blood. Thereon the communicant was sent out into the world again with renewed strength.[344]

Laura was aware of the increasing threat of secularisation in society, and she wrote articles addressing this concern. She wanted to make people aware that religion was not just something one 'did' on a Sunday and described how it had become detached from people's everyday lives. She reinforces this point by illustrating it with the following analogy:

> Life and death are real enough, and so in a certain way is, possibly, religion; but they appear to look upon it as the white frillings inside a coffin rather than the cloak to wrap around them while they walk by day, or the blanket to shelter them at night.[345]

On the occasion of Willy's impending Confirmation, Laura wrote to her brother on 25 October 1874, when she was still unmarried. She offered advice on his momentous decision, warning Willy that faith was a constant fight. Using militaristic language, Laura describes how at Confirmation God calls upon his child to stop and think before entering His service, "so at that time God enlists each one of us in the sight of His whole church – in His Great Army" and "we choose, I mean – by God's grace, to be on His side – for the world in His great battlefield." Laura observed that even the small things in life were a struggle, but by succumbing to temptation in whatever form – reading a bad book, using rude words or indulging in food – was helping the Devil and not offering a positive Christian example. She admitted her own personal struggles, referring specifically to her own and Willy's tendency to lie in in the mornings:

> There is the enemy at once. I do try by God's help, to conquer that sin, for it is sin. It is self-indulgence and it is letting the devil gain a victory at the very beginning of the day, the time which ought to be begun with God. I think it is in those horrid

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[343] Diary entry for 18 October 1909, 9M68/29, HRO
[344] Ridding, L.E., Letter to Earl of Selborne, MSS Selborne 112/3-6, BL
[345] Ridding, L.E., 'The Tone of the Village…,' p.8

> sneaking faults (I mean by sneaking that will come tempting me to such little sins as one counts them) that God's cause is betrayed by us over and over again.[346]

She concluded her advice by asking Willy to remember always that a Christian has responsibilities and should set a good example to others, thus furthering God's cause. Laura's focus on the 'small' temptations betrayed her father's Tractarian influence. Through her association with the Mothers' Union she encouraged mothers to train their children's souls, to speak to them about God everyday. She taught that habits of prayer, Bible study, worship and holiness should be learned by example and reinforced by discipline.[347] Of this group, Laura placed special significance on the first two aspects. In another article, Laura acknowledged a spiritual debt to the influence of the Evangelicals and the Tractarians, her mother's and father's religious backgrounds respectively. The former taught her the value of a sense of personal religion and responsibility before God, and the latter recovered a sense of continuity with the Church of God throughout the world. Laura also recognised that, writing as she was in 1910, society needed to return to the power of prayer for support and direction. She asked God for a new outpouring of His Holy Spirit upon His Church at this difficult time when the world was going through so much change.[348]

Laura held a practical view of religion, and could not understand the mentality of snooty ecclesiastical dignitaries who would not 'lower' themselves to accommodate the layman. Laura was a good judge of character and no one escaped her criticism if she believed it was warranted. In a letter to her mother on 22 September 1884, whilst touring with George around one of the rural Deaneries, she observed this phenomenon:

> It is very odd how stiffened the Ecclesiastical mind becomes. Archdeacon Balston with whom we have been staying is stuffed up in every pore with preconceived Ecclesiastical views of things, faultless in theory, but paralyzing (in) action when they have to touch the lay mind…[349]

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[346] Ridding, L.E., Letter to Earl of Selborne, MSS Selborne 112/3, BL
[347] Ridding, L.E., 'God's Gifts. On the Training of the Soul,' in Parents' Review, Vol. X., Part 1, January 1899, p.34
[348] Ridding, L.E., 'Is it in the Power of the Upper Classes to Raise the Standard of Home Life and to Elevate Public Opinion?', in Mothers in Council, No.78, April 1910, p.73
[349] Ridding, L.E., Annotated notes in George Ridding…, p.204k

George, by contrast, made himself and his faith accessible to the people, in order to show them a better life. Laura's faith was no stagnant, spent force, rather it was alive and invigorating. She acknowledged the strength she had personally received from George's great Missions around the diocese.[350] For her, anything could be achieved with faith.

With God the Creator strongly in her mind, Laura always took an interest in the natural world. She wrote an article on 'Our Duty to Animals' in 1901 in which she detailed the inadequacies she saw in humanity's treatment of animals. She was not vegetarian but she did question the amount of suffering animals endured before they were slaughtered. She believed that people should demand frozen meat over cruel live imports, which she describes as "fevered live foreign meat." She also reminds her readers that, "we are Christians, not scalp-hunters."[351] Education was required if parents were to teach their children to protect and be kind to all creatures.

Even as George was dying and after his funeral her thoughts turned to the beauty of their last summer days together. She used analogies drawn from nature to illustrate or reinforce a point, asserting that if young chicks had the courage to make that first leap of faith out of the nest and into the air, then humanity could follow their example.[352] Laura believed that every aspect of the individual could be trained, and this included the soul. She argued that during one's lifetime, the human soul was restrained like a bird's wings inside its nest, but after death, as the fledgling makes its first attempt to fly, so the soul flies onto greater experiences. Over the course of a lifetime, one could train one's soul just as one would discipline one's body or mind. She writes cynically, "it sometimes seems as if such a person's soul must rattle like a dried pea inside them. It is so shrunken from what it was meant to be in such a casket."[353] Spiritual athleticism was required, and like all other exercise, it was not easy. Laura admitted that in many respects prayer was harder than action.

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[350] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.206
[351] Ridding, L.E., 'Our Duty to Animals,' in Lloyds News, July 14 1901, p.14
[352] Ridding, L.E., The School of Souls: Thoughts for War Time, Mowbray & Co. Ltd., London, 1917, p.31
[353] Ridding, L.E., 'God's Gifts…', p.36

This theme was pursued by the Rev. J.P.F. Davidson, in a book to which Laura was also asked to make a contribution. He held that too much time was spent by individuals on the active dimension of their existence, and not enough time was afforded to the devotional life. Indeed he warned the church workers he was addressing in the book of the threat of their detachment from union with Christ. He suggested they make certain checks to prevent this from occurring. Firstly the worker should undertake only a certain amount of practical work, leaving aside sufficient time each day for their devotions. Secondly time should be set-aside for prayer. Lastly the worker should review the balance between time spent on their active and devotional lives occasionally and keep it in check.[354]

Under the guidance of her distinguished father and compassionate mother, it is unsurprising that she acquired an interest in public affairs. She was an original advocate of 'girl power' in the 1890's. As Lewis explains, there was a double-edge to 'women's mission to women,' based as it was on the premise that as the keystone of the family women caused many of the day's social problems, but that they could also be the saviours of family morality. It is interesting to note that more focus was placed by women such as Laura on the mismanagement and misconduct of the working class wife, rather than on her husband. Laura believed that if skills of motherhood were used more effectively they could solve many of society's ills, and she worked hard for such organisations as the Mothers' Union and the Woman's League to effect this change. Laura was often inspired by the example of her husband in her work for women. Just as he had been influenced by Miss Hopkins and Mrs. Butler, Laura would often rely on George's judgement in such matters. At the 1890 Church Congress in Hull he delivered a paper entitled 'Women's Work Among Women,' [355] applauding their efforts.

As for Laura herself, she classed her work for women under three broad headings, which she called the "three strands of the 'golden string.'"[356] They were:

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[354] Davidson, J.P.F., 'Spiritual Life the Power of Spiritual Work,' in Keymer, N., (ed), Workers Together for God, A.R. Mowbray & Co., Oxford, 1898, p.2
[355] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.184
[356] Ridding, L.E., 'Women - Their Needs and Helpers,' in The Newbery House Magazine, Vol. VIII, Part 2, February 1893, p.140

1. 'Strengthening the Steadfast'
2. 'Comforting and Helping the Feeble'
3. 'Raising the Fallen'

In an article entitled 'Women – Their Needs and Helpers,' she made a comprehensive attempt to highlight the positive work being undertaken by women for women, though it was bogged down with dry statistics. Broadly, shelter, support and training were needed. Under the first heading of help for able-bodied and deserving girls and women, Laura called for more provision of temporary shelters for girls who gravitated towards the big towns, seeking employment, with no skills to offer and no accommodation in which to stay. In the same breath she commented on the vast surplus of women in England and Wales, the figure she quoted fell just short of one million, according to the 1891 census.[357] Large crowds of young single women in the towns attracted temptation and trouble, excesses that Laura sought to curb.

In the second section, she sought to 'aid the sick, protect the weak and alleviate the distress' and the misery of those who were suffering. She looked for better ways to administer the Poor Law. She particularly sought to help those who were most in need, as identified by Laura as the mentally ill, children who were victims of parental neglect and women in eastern countries who were confined within the limits of Zenana.[358] She talked in terms of striving to obtain the ideal of rebuilding a new Jerusalem, to which all these efforts were aimed. She reiterated the dangers of crime and vice in the world, and how they threatened to bring down civilisation. Laura saw the role of churchwomen as God's builders in this great project. She was just one of many forewomen, guiding the work. This was why work in the third section was so important, defined under two headings: helping those in danger and rescuing those surrounded by sin and vice – her social purity work. However she was painfully aware how small their efforts were in the grand scale of social deprivation.

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[357] Ibid., p.141
[358] Ridding, L.E., 'Women - Their Needs and Helpers,' in The Newbery House Magazine, Vol. IX, July 1893, p.90

Many Englishwomen were working hard for their fellow sisters, but this was not enough, in Laura's own words, "those whom it is able to reach are like the fish within the nets of the fishermen compared with the shoals in the ocean."[359] Though she acknowledged the major gap between need and support, she did not offer an alternative to the small-time efforts of individuals, no comprehensive national scheme of relief. She wanted to inspire the readers of these ladies' magazines to go out into the world and make a difference at a parochial level. She suggested that women should arm themselves firstly with courage and then with their own positive influence to effect a change in those who fell short of Christian standards of living and conduct.[360]

'Raising the fallen'

One of the most important aspects of Laura's public service was her moral welfare work, particularly in Nottingham where immorality was rife both in the streets and behind closed doors. Dr. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury, visited Nottingham on 26 February 1935 to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of Southwell House.[361] Addressing those gathered there, he refers to the moral welfare work undertaken as "redemptive work, "[362] such was its importance. Laura uses the analogy of sickness to describe society's moral problems, referring to it as the "moral disease."[363] It was alive and contagious, spreading from town to town, surviving on the life-blood of low moral standards.

In an article she wrote addressing the problem of raising issues of public morality, she questioned what God was calling her generation to do. Her answer to this was to establish exactly where society was healthy, and where it ailed. She offered a number of reasons behind the sickness, including the spread of materialism in the world, with the related consequence of a diminished social consciousness of the Divine. She also referred to the mal-distribution of wealth and the base influence

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[359] Ridding, L.E., 'Women - Their Needs and Helpers,' in The Newbery House Magazine, Vol. IX, No.6, December 1893, p.656
[360] Ridding, L.E., 'Our Service to the Commonwealth,' in Friendly Work Magazine, Vol. II, April 1903, p.61
[361] Southwell House was the rescue home Laura founded on 25 November 1885, in Nottingham.
[362] Nottinghamshire Archives, DD1038/16, NRO
[363] Ridding, L.E., 'Is it in the Power of the Upper Classes…?', p.73

of modern conditions, such as corrupt literature, the 'desecration' of Sundays, and the increased incidence of divorce.

Laura argued that those in the upper echelons of society could not effect the same change in public opinion that they had succeeded in achieving in previous generations, as the depravity had spread so deep into the very heart of the nation, starting with the core of the family: the mother. Co-operation between the classes and increased attention to devotions were her answer. She truly believed that the nation needed to be informed of its divine inheritance and become conscious of the sin and judgment that would come in the future if changes were not made now. Holiness and righteousness were her buzzwords. Humanity needed a 'consciousness of the need for personal holiness and a conviction of the reality of the presence and fear of God.'[364]

This is where women could reign supreme, as guardians of the nation's morality. They also had to be made aware of their commission as the Empire's "spiritual mint-masters."[365] Just as many British coins had fallen below standards of required weight and quality, so Christian ideals had also become devalued. Laura charged women throughout the Empire with the duty of raising existing moral standards and public opinion through 'holiness of life, justice and honour.' She offered to organise lifelines through which women could effect a change through the formation of societies for the purpose, and through the exertion of their own personal influence.[366] She argued that societies were useful and necessary, but she placed more stress on women's personal ability to influence others for the good of society. However women needed to look to their own characters before attempting to illuminate others.

Laura, in turn, was most influenced by George, who placed a high standard of thought and conduct before him at all times. Laura refers to his addresses to women in Nottingham, and how he would preface his talks by explaining that the Sermon on the Mount did not teach doctrine or theology, rather the Beatitudes

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[364] Ibid., p.75
[365] Ridding, L.E., The Call of the Empire, 9M68/73/14, HRO, p.4-5
[366] Ridding, L.E., 'The Tone of the Village…,' p.8

taught its readership to examine their consciences.[367] This was an important lesson to learn. It could be argued that Laura was too idealistic in her answers to social problems, but she had been raised in the Palmer family with the determination to strive to attain high ideals at all times. Under God's direction she trusted that these ideals could be reached. God's city on earth would need strong foundations, based on a sound morality. Only then could true 'peace and healing and holiness' be ushered in.

Laura wrote articles on the importance of securing a healthy public opinion on social questions and its prevailing momentum to change people's thoughts and habits. She observes, "public opinion is like a bell; all sorts of metals and precious ores must be fused together before it yields a clear note…"[368] This referred to her conviction that individuals from all classes needed to work together to educate public opinion in order to transform existing thought and practices. In this way the public was encouraged to discuss important topics such as employment issues relating to fair wages, moderate working hours and health and safety at work. She was always aware of the power of the individual. Perhaps this led her to visualise social reform in too narrow a context.

Laura's own sentiments may be reflected through one character's comments in 'The Justice Room,' especially as it was written in her latter years after consideration. Mrs. King, Cecy's friend and fellow Poor Law Guardian, asked her as they were leaving the workhouse one day: "don't you sometimes leave the Board almost brokenhearted Cecy? I do. I feel as if we were just poking around, while there is a mountain of suffering and disease, of stupidity and bumbledon needing to be blown up." With her usual assurance Laura, through the words of Cecy, replies that there may be a 'mountain of suffering,' but it is "a mountain which faith alone can remove and cast into the sea… This workhouse needs a lot of prayer…."[369] If Laura's sisters could attain high moral standards in their families, the nation would be raised higher, thus linking the individual and the family to the nation and the Empire. Women were the key to this renewal.

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[367] Ridding, L.E., Annotated notes in George Ridding…, p.202a
[368] Ridding, L.E., 'The Guardianship of Working Girls,' in Official Report on the Church Congress at Exeter, 1894, p.261
[369] Ridding, L.E., The Justice Room, pp.143-4

Laura used various means to illuminate the 'Truth' to those women who were blinded by ignorance, as she saw it. She wrote moralistic tales that were published in ladies' magazines to show the superficiality of many people's lives. One tale, entitled, 'The Prince's Spectacles,' was written in the simple style of a fairytale. The narrative describes how Prince Aletheiades was given a coming-of-age gift - some magic spectacles - through which he could see falsehood in thoughts and words and acts. 'Truth', in the guise of a beautiful woman, came to him, and the Prince dropped to his knees in awe, crying: "Lady… thy terrible gift has filled my eyes with pain. It has revealed to me the great vanity of my life, the mysterious workings of thoughts and deeds. I cannot return to my old false life. Let me fight for thee here in the hottest post of danger! Grant this in mercy."[370] 'The Lady's Vision' was written by Laura very much in the style of Charles Dickens' book, 'A Christmas Carol.' The Spirits of Conscience and Imagination showed the mistress of the house the real hidden lives of those who worked below the stairs, her servants, in order to communicate her responsibility to ensure their sound welfare and moral education.[371]

One aspect of Laura's work to raise the moral standard in society, was her social purity work in the episcopate. For Laura this was more than just a social problem. Sustained, as always, through faith and prayer, she was fighting the battle to restore the uncontaminated moral inheritance that God had bestowed on humanity through the Gospel of Christ, eighteen hundred years earlier, and was now being threatened.[372] Through the links they had established back in Winchester with Mrs. Butler and Miss Hopkins, George and Laura realised that the key to uplifting the diocese's morality was through a sustained campaign against vice led by the purity movement.

Laura was breaking new ground in the late Victorian years and laboured in the face of prejudice from some of the more respectable quarters of society who believed

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[370] Ridding, L.E., 'The Prince's Spectacles,' in The Lady's Realm, Vol. VI, 1899, p.212
[371] Ridding, L.E., 'The Lady's Vision,' The Official Report of the Annual NUWW Conference at Liverpool, 1891, HRO
[372] Ridding, L.E., 'The Woman's League,' in The Parents' Review, Vol. II, Part 5, July 1891, p.382

that rescue work was not always suitable for ladies to discuss. Dr. Daphne Glick details one example of this kind of negative response in her book, highlighting the history of the National Council of Women. A certain Mrs. White wrote:

> I was asked to address a drawing room meeting at an important residential place not far from London at which the leading inhabitants as well as Social Workers were present. No rescue work was going on, and the meeting was unanimous as to the urgent need for it. It was decided to call a large and important Public Meeting to explain the situation and try to raise the necessary funds. A week or two later I received a despairing letter saying that the feeling that the subject was 'not nice' was so strong in the place that a meeting much less a Public Meeting was impossible unless I could persuade some important personage to come and preside, whose presence would override the slogan of 'not nice.'[373]

Women were the means through which society could be placed on a steady foothold once more. Laura believed that as the defenders of the home, the representatives of influence and the founders and disseminators of familial and community values, women were the agents of positive social and spiritual change. Thus, those impure and fallen women who corrupted their family's value system needed to be identified and encouraged to transform their lives. Laura explained how the influence of one individual, one 'raindrop' as she called them, could effect the general moral tone of the whole nation. As raindrops fall from every roof and flow from every gutter, they run into the streams, then into the rivers, and eventually into the sea - the national life. No locality was untouched, no class above reproach and this is how Laura sought to effect a national change.

Laura offered three main reasons why women ended up on the streets working as prostitutes. Firstly she identified lawlessness as a cause of a lack of a concept of the sacredness of marriage. This was followed by the influence of greed, as female labour was usually poorly paid. Lastly she argued that sloth resulted in a lack of motherly guardianship of children and servants for those women who had their own selfish interests at heart.[374] Laura wanted to raise moral standards of sexual behaviour for both sexes, not just for women, which is why she supported Mrs.

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[373] Glick, D., The National Council of Women of Great Britain, NCW of GB, London, 1995, p.203
[374] Ridding, L.E., 'The Woman's League,' p.382

Butler's campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts (CDA's). Gill reinforces the point that the social purity crusade was indeed a "distinctly religious form of early feminism,"[375] but before women could help others, they had to purify their own lives first. Laura believed in introspection, reflecting upon one's own life. She also believed in the power of the individual to affect a change in society. If each person took responsibility to raise their own moral standard, the whole Empire could be raised out of the darkness. She writes, "if we each swept our own bit of the pavement in front of our doorstep, the whole town would be clean,"[376] short-sighted and idealistic but she had conviction.

In 1897, Laura stepped up her support of the social purity movement, chairing and addressing meetings on the repeal of the CDA's. Designed as a public health measure to curb the spread of sexually transmitted disease in the armed forces, Mrs. Butler saw them as an example of the sexual double standard in society that granted men their sexual freedom, whilst condemning the victims - prostitutes - for their behaviour. Laura describes one such meeting that she chaired on 2 December 1897. She supports the opinion of one of the speakers, Dr. Gray: "he sternly, firmly inculcated chastity as the one absolutely wholesome, necessary duty of man. A passage worth remembering as it came as a medical, not moral dictum - to young men. No religion about it - simply natural commonsense which if disobeyed, nature revenges."[377] Although Laura stressed the moral side of the debate she was not naïve, well aware that the troops on the ground would not cave in to moral pressure alone, but that additional scientific arguments might make the difference. This was in contrast to George, who stressed the moral aspect of the campaign alone at all times.[378]

The central focus of the purity movement was the belief that the sinner belonged to God, just as much as the righteous, and that those who were 'lost' in society had to be reclaimed. As Laura herself acknowledged, this was often a long, drawn-out process, requiring perseverance, not a quality to be found in all the faithful, but a

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[375] Gill, S., p.103
[376] Ridding, L.E., 'Our Service to the Commonwealth,' in Friendly Work Magazine, Vol. II, March 1903, p.46
[377] Diary entry for 2 December 1897, 9M68/17, HRO
[378] Diary entry for 17 May 1897, 9M68/17, HRO

quality to be found in many women. Many crusaders would not give up on lost souls, and as Prochaska notes, they found themselves amongst the lowest in society who had slipped through the net of district or institutional visiting.[379] The aim of such women as Laura was to heal the suffering and transform the habits and lives of this 'underclass' through the powerful influence of the Christian message.

It was to this end that George and Laura spearheaded a number of diocesan associations such as the Southwell Mothers' Union and the Woman's League. In 1888 Laura founded both societies in the diocese, with the support of George behind her. She sought the co-operation of all classes in the Christian elevation of women in mind, body and spirit.[380] One of the aims of the Woman's League was to encourage the educated woman to recognise her responsibility to her poorer sister and society.[381] Wealthy women were not excluded from the mission. Laura wrote an article entitled 'A Mission to the Rich,' with the assistance of her sister, Freda, in the Church's 'Guardian' on this subject. They write:

> Christ treated the condition of the rich as of greater gravity than that of the poor… such teaching has never been given to great numbers of the very rich… Wheat and rye, rich and poor, are equally of God's creation. He wills that nothing be wasted, and that both harvests should be reaped…[382]

For Laura, the spiritual life was just as important as the physical, if not more so. But with all her talk of building a new Jerusalem, one has to question whether her ideals were just unobtainable, romantic dreams, or if they truly had a practical application. I would argue that she believed that, armed with her faith as strong as iron, she sought to spread the Christian gospel throughout the nation, ultimately raising the spiritual tone of society. Although she wrote many ideological articles, hers was a faith worked out in action. She saw the reality of society's problems at first hand. She witnessed the lives of neglected children, prostitutes, factory girls and she saw that their circumstances could change through action, not just words, and to this end she devoted a large measure of her time to institute numerous social agencies throughout the bishopric and beyond.

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[379] Prochaska, F., p.182
[380] Ridding, L.E., George Ridding…, p.194
[381] Nottinghamshire Archives, DD748/11, NRO
[382] Ridding, L.E., & Biddulph, S.W., The Guardian, 7 January 1910, p.33

One successful example of Laura's ideals working in action was her foundation, presidency and support of the Southwell Woman's League. She had been one of the founding matriarchs of the national society, having spent much time in meetings throughout 1885 with such distinguished women as Ben, Miss Hopkins, Miss Beale[383] and Mrs. Fawcett,[384] a leading proponent of the pro-suffrage movement.[385] Though based on firm religious principles, its message aimed to reach all women, no matter what their belief system, in order to raise, purify and strengthen womanhood. Its agenda focused on issues of marriage and family life. Its threefold concerns were:

1. To guard the sanctity of marriage.
2. To maintain the purity of home life.
3. To carry out one's responsibilities, whether in the capacity of a parent, teacher or employer, faithfully.

More generally, its aims were to extend work for women and assist them in this as well as encouraging poorer women to live a Christian life. This would be achieved through the establishment of a network of mothers' meetings, temperance associations, and other parochial and philanthropic agencies.[386]

Through the League, Laura's goal of incorporating women from all walks of life together in the common bond of sisterhood was being realised as members included the ranks of wives of professional men, teachers, miners' wives and shop workers. Drawn from both counties, the list was wide, totalling six thousand members in 1895.[387] In contrast, Louise Creighton was less keen to mix with working women. She confided in her memoirs how her upbringing did not take account of people from different social backgrounds. Life at home, as a girl, was intense and Louise and her siblings grew up intolerant of others. She explains "each of us only to like people or pay attention to people "of our own kind" as we called them."[388] This compared with Laura's more privileged background, mixing with her poorer

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[383] Dorothea Beale was a pioneer in the movement for women's education.
[384] Millicent Garrett Fawcett (1847-1929) was one of the militant suffragettes in the 'Votes for Women' campaign.
[385] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II, p.142
[386] Ridding, L.E., 'The Woman's League,' p.383
[387] Hammerton, J. A., p.150
[388] Covert, J.T., p.43

neighbours at Mixbury and Blackmoor and especially through spending much of her childhood in the presence of their servants. In this way she learnt the responsibility and duty that came with privilege.

Laura suggested that an alternative copy of the Woman's League's obligations should be drawn up using elementary language in a format that could be easily comprehended by those uneducated women among their ranks.[389] Other than this, there was no distinction between members. On a practical level, the Woman's League united the various diocesan organisations for women under one banner, providing a precious link between the separate agencies. Members embarked on rescue, preventive and preservative work, what Laura called the 'golden string,' encompassing all the elements she valued in women's mission to women.

The Woman's League incorporated a broad cross-section of efforts under its standard, including vigilance work, shelters, industrial training homes, the GFS and the Mothers' Union. Laura gave an example of its effectiveness in Derby in September 1901. After the Derby Mission, the Woman's League approached the Derby Magistrates with regard to dancing and other related entertainment that was encountered in the town's public houses. As a result, 132 licences were refused to public houses.[390] Laura personally felt strongly about this particular subject, writing an article in 1902 entitled 'Counter-Attractions' which sought to address the local problem. She felt that these establishments were dens of iniquity and young single women who frequented them with their friends were influenced by their corrupting attractions and clientele.

The Woman's League was instrumental in setting up evening recreation rooms for lonely factory girls to curb the need to frequent such establishments. It created shelters for servant girls who came to the hiring fairs in the local towns and had nowhere else to go. Decent hiring rooms were set up in response to this need. It also established vigilance committees to monitor the licentiousness of local fairs.[391]

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[389] Ridding, L.E., 'The Woman's League,' p.384
[390] Ridding, L.E., Annotated notes in George Ridding…, p.194a
[391] Ridding, L.E., 'The Tone of the Village…,' p.10

Laura describes the 'abominations' she witnessed at the three day long Nottingham Goose Fair:

> Hideous photographs, quack papers, immoral books, picture shows and human shows and toys so… horrible that they accounted for the mysterious stream of pollution that spread among the children wherever fairs were held. These vile things sold by the hundreds. The prostitutes stood around the bad stalls, like those in the Baptistry pictures…[392]

Laura announced that within three years of the League's intervention in the fairs, most notably in Nottingham where the most corrupt were held, the diocese was practically free from the worst shows and amoral hawkers, to the relief of the decent showmen.

It was clear that great church work for the purification of the spiritual life of the diocese had been prompted by the Ridding partnership. Lincoln diocesan leaders such as Wordsworth had despaired of Nottingham's spiritual destitution, hailing it 'Corinth', and 'Babylon.'[393] But it soon became evident that the good work was paying dividends and the general tone of the diocese in many areas had been raised significantly.

'Comforting and helping the feeble'

Rescue work was popularised during the Victorian years, as a systematic attempt to keep prostitutes off the streets and inside refuges that had been provided by public and charitable institutions. As Prochaska points out, women had become increasingly well organised through their philanthropic endeavours, founding their own associations for rescue work,[394] Laura included. Many had spent their 'apprenticeships' visiting the local workhouse and asylum in various capacities and this prompted their future interest in regenerative work. Laura recognised the need to guide and train the women in the refuges to a better life. Visitors were encouraged to strike up friendships with these women, to write to them, to visit

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[392] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.170
[393] Ridding, L.E., Annotated notes in George Ridding…, p.180a
[394] Prochaska, F., p.189

them and keep in contact with them when they left the shelter.[395] What mattered to Laura was the positive influence of the visitor on the reformed character.

In an article entitled 'Women at Work,' Laura highlights the six marked stages of the development of rescue work as she saw it:

1. The establishment of Houses of Mercy.
2. Management and classification. Laura identified the specialisation of need, for example she stressed that women of depraved character should not mix with girls who were easily influenced.
3. The development of rescue work. Laura ascertained three causes that stimulated current interest in such work:

i. The agitation for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts by Mrs. Butler.
ii. Miss Hopkins' foundation of the Ladies' Association for the Care of Friendless Girls.
iii. The active rescue work being undertaken in the great East End/West End London Church missions which was the deepest influence.

4. The co-operation of unions and societies.
5. The training of workers.
6. The study of the causes of immorality.[396]

Rescue work could take many forms, both individual efforts and those of public and charitable institutions, but Laura spent most of her time either at Southwell Workhouse or at Southwell House.

Laura recalls 1885 as a special year of new beginnings in their rescue work, less than one year after they arrived at Southwell. Bishop Temple, the present Bishop of London, and his wife Beatrice attended an evening meeting with the Riddings. Laura recalls Temple's powerful words, "God let our waxen ears and dull eyes wake the awful curse of intemperance; and now that we are accepting that responsibility, as a reward He allows us to see this second horror of impurity in our

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[395] Ridding, L.E., 'Women at Work,' in The Treasury, Vol. III, No. 20, May 1904, p.176
[396] Ibid., p.170

midst."[397] Over the next few years they cemented their relationship with the Temples and visited them at Fulham when they were in London. Laura characterised the Temples in the following fascinating descriptions: "He (like a great lion-headed man) and George were very old friends… She was the sweetest… fat restful hostess anyone could desire. A delightful blend of outward aspect of grande dame and pew opener - with a naïve malicious kindly shrewdness of spirit."[398] Laura also spoke at a number of women's meetings on the subject of rescue work required in the diocese.

Despite her affiliation with a network of societies and her frequent involvement at board level, she was still able to see the individual, the personal side of the work. Like the story of Louisa Hack, the personal history of another rescue case, Pansy Radcliffe, remained in her memory. Pansy was a middle class girl, born to a respectable mother. Indeed she had been confirmed in Southwell before the new diocese was created. However events in her life turned when her mother died and her drunken father took a barmaid as a stepmother to Pansy. Pansy grew up unrestrained and wild, rebelling against such a union, resulting in her father turning her out of his house. She went to live with a friend of her fathers, but after bearing his son and putting up with his many lovers, she left him. At the age of eighteen she was left destitute and forced to feed herself and her son, drifting into prostitution firstly in Sheffield and later in Nottingham. Here she was visited by members of the Southwell House committee who took pity on her soul. After six months, Pansy changed her lifestyle while she was living at Southwell House and eventually left in order to embark on a respectable job in a tearoom.[399] Some of Laura's successful girls kept in contact with her, even several years later. One now middle-aged farmhand rescue case wrote to Laura every Christmas to let her know how she had settled into a fulfilling life of domestic service in Nottingham.[400]

Despite the successful conclusion of individual cases such as that of Pansy Radcliffe, Laura acknowledged sadly that the rescue efforts fell far short of the

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[397] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II, p.128
[398] Ibid., p.142
[399] Ibid., Vol. II, p.187
[400] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle; Thoughts about the War, Part I, August 4 1914 - December 28 1916, p.63, HRO

work needed. She suggested that efforts could also be extended to target railway stations, statute hiring fairs, seaports and watering places.[401] Whilst district visiting was a very valuable system, there were those women in society who could not be visited, such as the residents of prisons, workhouses, asylums, orphanages and hospitals. To relieve this problem, women pioneered a range of institutional schemes that complemented home visits.[402]

Any woman who could not support herself automatically fell back on the charity of the Poor Law. Under the terms of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, each parish had its own poor law union, comprising a board of guardians for the administration of relief. Such boards had responsibility for the welfare of the most vulnerable in society - for orphans, the sick, the mentally ill, the unemployed, the widowed and the poor. The union workhouse was the last port of call for those with no alternative, whom Laura refers to as "this great army of incapables."[403] Widows, for example, were frequent residents of workhouses, left in a state of destitution after their husband's death.[404] Despite the gendered nature of philanthropy, where men mainly served on the committees of such institutions, but did little in the way of practicalities, Prochaska points out that women of means and influence such as Laura used their position to get through the doors of such male preserves of power. Clergywomen in particular could gain access to such institutions. Women soon realised that they could offer the male board of governors their skills of domestic management, sympathy, and could speak the language of the working class matrons and nurses. With the door ajar, they extended their influence and increased their public service.[405]

Facilitated by the 1870 Elementary Education Act and the Local Government Act of 1894, women's direct participation in public affairs increased as the century wore on. They saw themselves installed on Poor Law boards, school boards and parish and town councils in an administrative capacity. Women who had previously played the 'Lady of the Manor' or 'Lady Bountiful' roles in the

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[401] Ridding, L.E., 'Women at Work,' p.176
[402] Prochaska, F., p.138
[403] Ridding, L.E., 'Women - Their Needs and Helpers,' July 1893, p.95
[404] Crowther, M. A., The Workhouse System 1834-1929, Batsford, London, 1981, p.34
[405] Prochaska, F., pp.141-3

community, slipped easily into these new 'official' roles.[406] Laura was delighted with the progress of women in the provision of the new Poor Law and welcomed the increase in the number of female guardians. Before 1875, not one female guardian existed in England, but by 1893, when she was writing, that number had increased to 148. From the position in 1875, this seemed like a great advance, such was the gross inequality. Laura was horrified that this 'motherly work' was not being undertaken by more women for the benefit of the babies, children and female paupers in the workhouse. She argued that even those who most fervently advocated the superiority of men as guardians surely could not deny this fact.[407]

At a local level, Laura recorded the inauguration of the first female Poor Law guardian who was elected in Nottingham in 1892. She recalled the town's gradual acceptance of such women officials, satisfied with the work undertaken by women at Southwell House and in the maternity wards of the Workhouse.[408] In December 1894, Laura was returned unopposed as Rural District Councillor for Thurgarton, and with it went the position of Poor Law guardian for Southwell Union, which was newly created after the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834.

It was two hundred and thirty years before the provisions made in the old Poor Law of 1601 for the relief of the poor were questioned and the Poor Law Amendment Act was passed and acted upon. Before this time, individual parishes were responsible for the 'outdoor relief' of paupers, the sick and the elderly. This involved such measures as paying allowances or rents and handing out piecemeal items such as coal and clothes to those in need. As the growing costs of such a scheme escalated, a Royal Commission was instituted to investigate the national problem of the treatment of the poor and the sick. The Commissioners recommended a number of improvements to the existing Poor Law, one of which was the unionisation of the workhouse system that already existed in many areas. This established six hundred unions of parishes and Southwell Union was just one of these. The work undertaken on behalf of the Union was overseen by elected

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[406] Horn, P., p.167
[407] Ridding, L.E., 'Women - Their Needs and Helpers,' July 1893, p.95
[408] Ridding, L.E., Southwell House, Nottingham. A Short History, from an address given by the said Mrs. Ridding on 26 March 1915, p.5-6, Southwell Minster Library.

guardians such as Laura. Thus 'outdoor relief' was overtaken by the workhouse as the sole form of welfare for the most vulnerable in society.[409]

The Workhouse at Southwell was commissioned in 1824 by the Rev. John Becher (1770-1848), a local clergyman. In order to keep down costs that were related to the implementation of the existing Poor Law, the workhouse introduced a revolutionary but severe 'welfare' system, which was taken up all over the country after the Poor Law Amendment Act. Up to 158 inmates from 49 local parishes inhabited the workhouse at any one time, but during Laura's time at Southwell the number had diminished to around seventy by 1891.[410] For those who lived there the reality was harsh, as families were split up and men, women and children were divided. They were even forbidden from speaking to each other.[411] The inmates were further divided into the 'upper class', the sick and weak, who were judged to be 'guiltless and infirm' and the 'lower class' who were tainted with the label 'idle and profligate.'[412] Each class of poor had to live according to a specific regime. For the able-bodied poor, life was particularly difficult as they had to perform the most laborious and menial tasks. Becher, along with his colleague, George Nicholls, who became a Poor Law Commissioner after the 1834 Act, believed they had created 'The Anti-Pauper System' which was a significant development in the area of the care of the poor.[413] They believed that the workhouse system was created to care for the feeble, but that it should act as a deterrent, rather than a place of shelter for the lower class of poor, thereby encouraging them to look after themselves.[414]

The design of the workhouse, set out like a prison, was recreated nationwide, and it is interesting that the building still exists today. The National Trust has embarked on a £1.5 million programme to restore the unchanged building to its original state so that visitors can have some idea of the conditions the residents endured. The workhouse was headed by a Governor - the large Boardroom can still be seen, including the beautifully carved table over which decisions were taken. Day to day,

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[409] The National Trust Conservation Plan for the Southwell Union Workhouse, July 1998, p.11-12
[410] Ibid., p.14
[411] Withers, B., Bramley, (June 1987), Nottinghamshire Archives, NRO
[412] The National Trust Conservation Plan for the Southwell Union Workhouse, p.15
[413] Nottinghamshire Historian, No.59, Autumn/Winter 1987, p.3
[414] The National Trust Conservation Plan for the Southwell Union Workhouse, p.12

the Master and Matron were in charge of residents' needs. They, in turn, were responsible to elected guardians such as Laura and inspected by Assistant Commissioners who reported their findings to the Poor Law Board in London.[415] As such, the guardians played a crucial role, monitoring the work practices of the staff and overseeing the general welfare of the inmates.

Through her new duties as guardian, Laura was able to resolve some of her longings for children of her own, to work out her maternal instinct. She followed the pattern set by Mrs. Tait's formation of St. Peter's Orphanage and Mrs. Butler's work for the welfare of children. Both these women had lost children and sought outlets for their maternal feelings. It is interesting to note that most of Laura's work was semi-maternal in nature. Laura describes her first visit to the workhouse in December. It was a bitterly cold day and she remembered seeing the aged female residents dressed only in short sleeve dresses, cut in a style which was popular sixty years earlier.[416] She spent many long visits at the workhouse and at the asylum, where she observes such scenes as the following: "Patients sit in narrow galleries, in groups, doing nothing. Some so gross, so irritable, angry, confidential… sobbing, lethargic, fierce, sly. Many are near relations of the Queen…"[417] She sought to find suitable occupations for the inmates.

As Poor Law guardian, Laura enjoyed a wide range of new duties. Her experience as domestic manager of her own household proved invaluable as she oversaw the physical requirements of the residents, and monitored the supervision of the staff. Laura was elected at a time in the history of the workhouse when the emphasis was shifting from deterring and managing the unemployed to caring for the sick and infirm. To this effect, an infirmary was built on the site in 1871, and later a maternity ward was added, raising levels of care.[418] When Laura made her initial visits in 1894 she was concerned to procure better clothes for the paupers. In the winter months, she observed that no one possessed a nightgown and the girls wore no undergarments. When she suggested to the Matron that the women needed long

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[415] Ibid., p.12
[416] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II, p.222
[417] Diary entry for 4 December 1897, 9M68/17, HRO
[418] The National Trust Conservation Plan for the Southwell Union Workhouse, p.14

sleeves, this woman replied that it was "against the law" for them to have them. Laura overruled such nonsense, as she saw the situation. She spoke to the Chairman, and the deficiencies in clothing were soon addressed. This kind of observation was more effective coming from a female guardian.

On attending the children's mealtime, she was horrified to discover that they had their tea in the same mugs as their gravy broth, and nothing at all to drink. Again the officious Matron piped up that the children could ask for water if they so wished, but Laura could see the children knew better than to ask the staff to make a special trip to the water pump for them. Again Laura spoke to the Inspector and the situation was remedied, as she recorded that enough water was provided at dinnertime so they no longer had to ask. Underneath the women's wings of the workhouse they worked in the domestic quarters. Laura noted the poor working conditions for the women in the laundry-room. They stood ankle-deep in water as they worked. Laura spoke to the relevant authority about possible improvements, and soon the laundry arrangement was properly fitted, with raised floorboards for the residents to walk on.[419] Through her influence and position as guardian, she could address such problems and make suggestions for change to the Board of Governors. In addition to the lasting effects of her suggested improvements, Laura believed that the personal Christian example of women such as herself on the inmates was wholesome and healthy.

Bill Withers reflects that the official records, though biased, indicated that the residents were not unhappy in their situation, although the enforced separation of families was a harsh condition to bear.[420] Laura did what she could in her capacity as guardian to ease their situation. Throughout her diaries she raised a number of issues, most of which were difficulties in the internal arrangements of the workhouse, but many reforms were implemented. She felt strongly that although they were residents of the workhouse, there was no reason why they should be treated without decency and civility by the staff who were there to care for them, in humane living and working conditions. She made no reference to the division of families however.

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[419] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II, p.223, 225
[420] Withers, B., Bramley, June 1987, Nottinghamshire Archives, NRO

'Southwell House is a fort of the Lord's army'[421]

Laura went on to fulfil her duties as Poor Law guardian for ten years until after George's death in August 1904. At this time she had the joy of seeing another woman co-opted in her place, having persuaded the men in authority, through her example, that a female guardian was of the greatest use.[422] In addition to this, Laura's crown and glory at Southwell was her work at Southwell House. From its inception George and Laura were the guiding forces behind such a scheme. They not only injected the home with energy, but they collected funds and addressed dignitaries and inmates alike. As ever, George lent his support, despite his own heavy workload. This charitable institution was founded to combine rescue, preventive, maternity and street work under one roof in Nottingham.

The foundation and development of Southwell House highlighted the amount of work Laura put into her public service. Granted, she had no children of her own, but as the wife of a hard-working bishop, she had to balance this work with the discharge of her existing domestic tasks and the many duties attached to her role. In 1885 Laura composed an appeal that was extended to the women in the diocese to consider what steps they could take towards rescue and preventive work in the great towns. Out of this appeal, the Woman's League and the Mothers' Union were formed locally, and Southwell House was started as a centre in Nottingham for rescue and preventive work. Meetings had been held earlier that year, with the formation of a committee to initiate a plan for the protection of children and young women who came to the great town seeking employment. Laura was voted President of the Southwell House Committee, a post she retained for nineteen years.[423] The erection of a new rescue home was proposed. Laura describes the entire process through which the home was conceived, funded, constructed and sustained.

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[421] Ridding, L.E., Southwell House…, p.10
[422] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II, p.328
[423] Ridding, L.E., Southwell House…, p.2-3

In July of 1885, an appeal for subscriptions for this new venture was issued in the local press. The initial sum of four hundred pounds had to be raised. In a letter to editors Laura acknowledged the current existence of homes where working girls could lodge and homes where servant girls could shelter safely, but she referred to the lack of provision for refuges for rescue cases, 'the feeble' and 'the fallen,' some of the most vulnerable in society. She stressed that until a proper rescue home was built locally, such work would be 'paralysed.' It was only a temporary measure for those who lived in daily contact with sin, after which time they could move on to a training home, then be released once more into the community, armed with the necessary skills to be able to contribute fully as citizens. She ends her letter with the plea:

> May God save our town of Nottingham from the awful responsibility of knowing the need and not doing its utmost to fight in this battle on the right side, the side of the weak and the oppressed. The words of the battlecry of the slave war ring in my ears…[424]

On 25 November 1885 Southwell House opened its doors. This was followed by a week's intense rescue mission to which between two hundred and three hundred girls came to the service teas.[425]

The committee determined that, with God's help, great works could be performed. Laura felt a holy influence upon the work. Like the Woman's League, the home was built on undenominational religious foundations. Before each session of the committee, their chaplain, Canon Were, would conduct a service in the Prayer Room. By 1887 another preventive home was started in Derby, called Hope Lodge. Few records survive on this new organisation, founded by Laura and her colleagues, but it left Southwell House in Nottingham completely free to take in rescue cases solely.[426] This arrangement between the sister homes continued until 1900, when it was decided to merge the two once more under the roof of Southwell House. Laura went to the rescue home most days. As President, her involvement could have remained at the level of a figurehead for the organisation, but she did much more than just address prominent members of Nottingham society. She

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[424] Nottinghamshire Archives, DD594/3, Nottingham Journal, 24 July 1885, NRO
[425] Ridding, L.E., Southwell House…, p.3
[426] Ibid., p.4

confided in her memoirs that she even went 'begging' for money at the offices of the Lace Market where the wealthy lace manufacturers worked, to fund the continuing work.[427]

Run by the Southwell House committee until 1982, its length of service bore witness to the strength of its work for women and children in the diocese. Christopher Weir refers to casebooks, dating from 1886, revealing the wide range of residents it housed through its long history.[428] Laura would have encountered a number of different social conditions and moral attitudes contrary to her own lifestyle and belief system. Cases came from all parts of the diocese, but the majority were from Nottingham. They came from many different sources: through the police, the clergy, church women and even from older prostitutes who were also working on the streets.[429]

One such case was that recorded of Agnes Hessell. Hers was a typical story of many of the women who ended up at the home. Following the death of her parents, and after a career on the stage, Agnes was found 'on the streets' of Nottingham. Having been admitted to Southwell House on 4 September 1888, it was registered on 10 October a year later that she had found gainful employment as a laundress near Manchester.[430] Laura could recall many instances where girls were known to be doing well after a period spent at the temporary rescue shelter. By the time Laura retired from the committee, 1,568 girls had been admitted, three quarters of whom were rescue cases. Of these, one quarter were under the age of eighteen.[431] Speaking fifty years after its inception, Archbishop William Temple spoke of the sensitive nature of the work, and how hard it must have been to convince people to overcome their prejudice and lend their support to the scheme. He remarks, "these pioneers who started the work fifty years ago and to whom our debt of obligation cannot be paid, were launching out on an uncharted sea and they had to mark the rocks for those coming after them."[432] Women such as Laura were charting the

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[427] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II, p.152
[428] Weir, C., Women's History in the Nottinghamshire Archives Office 1550-1950, Nottinghamshire County Council Leisure Services, 1989, p.37, NRO
[429] Ridding, L.E., Southwell House…, p.9
[430] Weir, C., p.38
[431] Ridding, L.E., Southwell House…, p.8
[432] Nottinghamshire Archives, DD1038/16, NRO

waters with such work for others who followed. Lessons were being learnt for future schemes of national welfare. Such work was not glamorous as women came face to face with such extreme conditions of moral, spiritual and physical degradation. Meanwhile, George was also breaking new ground in Southwell. He initiated addresses to women only. These were the first lectures given to 'women only' in Nottingham, and as Laura recalls, "they caused horror in the breasts of many husbands!"[433]

As a postscript to the good work performed at Southwell House, it always remained true to the original spirit in which it was intended by George and Laura. Since its birth in 1885 it has known many incarnations, including that of training home and moral welfare centre (1932); hostel for unmarried mothers (1965) and probation hostel for girls on bail (1974). Dr. Temple observed that nothing could be more Christian-like than the work undertaken by such pioneering women.

'The universal mother'[434]

Motherhood was the most important part of women's mission in life. However Heeney points out it had an interpretation for women that went further than just the biological sense. This was particularly so for the clergy wife. Laura herself acknowledged that a major qualification to be a good clergy wife was the principle of motherhood, which could be exercised implicitly through her pastoral work.[435] John Wolffe suggests that women's involvement in the public sphere was a natural outworking of their motherly instincts and qualities, particularly in light of Queen Victoria's image as the supreme exemplar of Christian motherhood.[436]

The reality was that working class mothers often had to leave their elder children in charge of the young ones, while they worked to feed and house the family. Laura refers to 'the poverty-box,' the Derbyshire slang word for the cradle, as the enforced absence of the mother would often result in illness and destitution among her family. This was one issue Laura felt strongly about changing. If adequate

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[433] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II, p.149
[434] Heeney, B., p.25
[435] Ridding, L.E., 'The Girl Who Should Marry…,' p.163
[436] Wolffe, J., p.494

nurseries were provided where the poorest working mothers could leave their babies while they laboured, such consequences could be avoided.[437] This was one example of Laura's concern for mothers, and children who needed to be mothered.

In a report publicised in the 'Nottingham Guardian,' dated 30 March 1885, Laura presided over a meeting of the Ladies' Association for the Care of Young Women and Girls. At this meeting Laura was quoted as saying:

> The care of our girls should be a subject of interest to all women; that although there was a tendency for the different ranks of society to get farther apart, there was a bond of sisterhood between the lady of high rank and the most degraded among women, and harm came from ignoring this… A motherly protection was needed everywhere.[438]

In 1885 this was still a radical public statement from the wife of a bishop. Phrases such as 'bond of sisterhood' ring of early feminist language. In an article written in 1894, she later speaks of "our working sisters."[439] Laura was most interested in women using their God-given maternal puissance to effect changes in society. Women were the guardians of moral values. They were the sex chosen to raise the nation through the positive example of good Christian women.

Laura had much to say on the care of young girls, especially as it became an issue in the locality. Whilst Derby employed mostly men in its railway works, Nottingham's female population exceeded the male by ten thousand on account of its famous lace-making industry.[440] Young, ignorant and silly girls came from the countryside to the great manufacturing centres to seek their independence and gain employment as shop-girls, factory workers, domestic servants and in other related occupations. With no experience of the towns they were "swallowed up by that all-absorbing boa-constrictor,"[441] which was the tempting influence of the town culture. Laura saw the wisdom of safe lodgings where young girls could stay, and refers to this as "motherly work."[442]

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[437] Ridding, L.E., 'Women - Their Needs and Helpers,' July 1893, p.90
[438] Nottinghamshire Archives, DD594/3, NRO
[439] Ridding, L.E., 'The Guardianship of Working Girls,' p.261
[440] Ridding, L.E., George Ridding…, p.157/8
[441] Ridding, L.E., 'The Guardianship of Working Girls,' p.258
[442] Ridding, L.E., 'Women - Their Needs and Helpers,' February 1893, p.142

Writers such as Miss Christian Douglas argued that female factory-hands were the worst character of girl, and Laura agreed that they specifically needed to be taken in hand, particularly in an industrial centre. Miss Douglas remarked that such girls shared a particular set of characteristics in common, chief of which was an independent spirit, followed by a lack of self-control, abhorrence of correction in manners and morality, lawlessness in public places and the requirement to work in pairs, with other, equally obnoxious girls. She suggested that the answer was to steer these girls into secular clubs where they could engage in meaningful conversations with like-minded friends. The key was to teach Christ in all things.[443]

Through her work in the great towns of the Midlands, Laura went to the root of their unrestrained behaviour by looking at the factory-girl's typical working day. Starting work at 6:00a.m., breakfast was not served until 8:00a.m. From the time she started work until she left around 5:30p.m., or later, the factory hand would remain at the loom, or in the match, lace, button or confectionery factory. Here Laura discovered that they were exposed to many potential health and safety risks. Although some moral-minded factory owners endeavoured to minimalise the hazards, more often than not provisions for eating and sanitary arrangements on the factory floor were far from adequate. Most workers had to eat their lunch outside the building as few factories provided dining rooms and regulations barred employees from eating on the factory floor. In addition to this Laura was concerned about the tainting influence of 'moral pollution' from filthy-mouthed colleagues that could cloud easily influenced young minds.

At the end of their working day they would head back to their lodgings for tea, after which time there was a tendency to spend the evening in bad company, making a nuisance of themselves in public places. In 'respectable' lodgings, girls were expected to return by 10:30 or 11:00 at night. So between tea and this time they had to make their own amusement. Laura stressed the point that after a day spent in the confines of the factory floor, they felt liberated in such places as the variety

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[443] Douglas, C., 'The Factory Girl,' in Keymer, N., ed, Workers Together for God, p.183

palace, the dancing saloon and, of course, the public house. Sunday was spent in much the same manner, save for a lie-in, perhaps followed by an excursion somewhere. Only those girls who attended evening clubs or Bible classes thought to attend Church on the Sabbath.[444]

On a wage of seven to ten shillings a week, of which six to nine shillings was spent on board alone, little could be saved for the future. Laura was most concerned for the moral, spiritual and physical welfare of this class of girl. Nothing endeared her to the life of a factory girl. So she set about heading the movement that had already begun in pockets for the institution in Nottingham of evening clubs and homes for such girls. This was reported by a local newspaper, 'The Globe,' on 24 October 1885:

> Lady Laura Ridding has no doubt quickly discovered that, in a large manufacturing centre such agencies for girl-rescue must be numerous indeed if any headway is to be made against the flood of immorality… These (girls) are engaged at the factories all day but in the evening their occupation is gone and they look about them for amusement… They are conscious only of a desire to be entertained, and for entertainment they must needs go out of doors. Once there, they are in the midst of temptations from which they do not find it easy to escape… hundreds go to the music halls and absorb vicious suggestions at every pore, others find their way into the public houses…[445]

The strong use of such language as 'vicious suggestions' illustrates the depth of the writer's feelings on the subject. The evening club was offered as an alternative meeting place to the 'dangerous amusements' currently provided.

The first evening club for girls was opened in Nottingham in 1879. Writing in 1893, Laura congratulated local women on the fourteen additional clubs that had opened in the town since that year. Other towns in the diocese also made headway in this field. Laura only knew of their existence in London and in twenty-six other provincial towns.[446] She welcomed the provision of rooms where counter-attractions could be offered in the form of wholesome meeting points and educational classes. A selection of refined amusements on offer in these homes

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[444] Ridding, L.E., 'The Guardianship of Working Girls,' p.259
[445] Nottinghamshire Archives, DD594/3, NRO
[446] Ridding, L.E., 'The Guardianship of Working Girls,' p.263

included a varied programme of entertainment, such as dancing and concerts. Girls could also learn a variety of useful womanly skills, from sewing to singing. Laura understood human nature and the desire to find a soul-mate and so she suggested that halls should be provided where young girls could meet their beaus away from the perils of the streets - with the concession, "fun and love-making they will have, even if they starve to get them. How dare we leave them to draw their waters from poisoned sources?"[447] Again, although the clubs were not founded on any particular sectarian principle, they were underpinned by a moral and religious theme. Sometimes a brief religious service would be held at the close of the evening.

Laura also suggested improvements in the industrial responsibility of the factory owner and his spouse, to change the culture in which their factory-girls worked during the day. Proposed remedies were on both practical and ideological levels. Firstly Laura wrote about the duty of guardianship upon the owner and his senior staff. She suggested that an educated female superintendent, with the assistance of forewomen, could ensure that suitable eating and sanitary arrangements were met, that women of questionable characters were not employed and that medical facilities were available if required. She also reminded the wives and daughters of the aforementioned owners of their duty of 'motherly Christian care' upon the working girls, just as they had a responsibility for their own domestic servants.[448] Laura contended that the provision of a dining room was not a difficult proposal to adopt, but where a lack of space prevented this, rooms adjacent to the factory could be hired where girls would pay twopence a week in exchange for access to hot water and somewhere to heat up their lunch.[449]

Laura went on to reassert her belief that public opinion should be used to change existing thought, practices and structures. The public should be made aware of the need for changes in employment legislation to allow for moderate working hours, fair wages and better working conditions. It was the role of women like Laura to educate the public on the reality of the situation. She also believed that factory girls should be guarded from the bad influence of their low-minded companions through

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[447] Ridding, L.E., 'The Guardianship of Working Girls', p.263
[448] Ibid., p.261
[449] Ibid., p.262

their attendance at girls' evening clubs, and through the use of such societies as the Girls' Friendly Society.[450] Intercourse with ladies of culture and education could raise the tone of their characters.

In a paper she presented at a meeting for girls over sixteen at the Bradford Church Congress of 1898, entitled 'Friendship,' Laura discusses the subject of 'friend culture.' She goes on to argue that girls cannot determine their own destiny, but they can choose those friends who accompany them along the path of life. As Laura had learnt from her father, one cannot underestimate the power of obtaining a sound footing on the right path from an early age. Roundell writes:

> If I were asked what I thought the first, second and third requisite of a successful and noble life, I should say, and reiterate, a good conscience. There is no… power greater than the simple, straightforward, unselfish energy it gives and those who contract bad habits in their youth can never be the same men afterwards. They may recover themselves so far as to escape total debasement, they may follow in later life the calls of virtue, but they are handicapped in the race, and they would probably be glad to sacrifice any object of worldly desire in order to undo the past, if that were possible.[451]

This he wrote in a letter to his son, Willy, in November 1870, stressing the value of leading as pure and upright a life as he possibly could, above the qualities of ability and attainment. Laura internalised her father's lesson and sought to teach factory girls in particular the basics of duty and discipline in order to lead a dutiful Christian life as a fully contributing citizen of the Empire.

In comparison with domestic service where girls could potentially work under the tutelage of a wise mistress, factory work provided no such guardianship and motherly care, and so she regarded it as the worst training ground for marriage and motherhood. This was a theme that Laura pursued at the 1894 NCW Conference at Glasgow, where she presented a paper on 'The Conditions of Domestic Service from the Mistress's Point of View.' Compared to other livelihoods, Laura believed that domestic service, despite its bad reputation, rivalled them all in its life-training for future domestic work in the home. Most girls who entered the occupation came

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[450] Ibid., p.261
[451] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II, p.46

from the lowest ranks in society, but their position afforded them an education, whilst receiving a fair wage and board and lodgings.

As well as the outward advantages of domestic service, through its regular meals, respectable rooms and so on, service in a good Christian home that was managed by a respectable Christian mistress was the best example for young girls, with its influence of well-educated social intercourse, culture and refinement. As the mistress of a household herself, Laura identified a handful of disadvantages to the job, and some possible solutions. To the problem of boredom, she suggested that mistresses should seek to vary their charge's roles. The lack of recreation time prompted Laura to ask women to remember that their servants were only human and needed reasonable time set aside for this purpose, though she warned them to monitor their domestics' friendships with others. Lastly, Laura acknowledged that domestic service was littered with petty rules and how a number of mistresses ruled with a rod of iron. Laura reminded these women that they were instructing these girls in life-lessons and were responsible for the development of their characters. Caring guardianship was the key to an enjoyable and educational period of service.[452]

Laura was always extremely proud of their successes with these girls in the various organisations she patronised. She recounts the content of one letter received by a friend from a girl emigrant whom she had befriended: "Dear Madam, I hope this finds you as well as it leaves me. The ship is in the middle of the Red Sea, and it is fearfully hot. I am in a terrible state of melting all day long! But, honoured Madam, I know you will be pleased to hear that I am still a member of the Church of England!"[453] Successes such as this confirmed the lasting effects of Christian influence and example on the transformation of characters.

One of the main reasons behind the establishment of girls' evening clubs in the locality was the influence of the public house and the increasing social problem of intemperance. Laura laid much of the blame on young people's drive to gather together in groups in rowdy surroundings, what she termed as "this preposterous

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[452] Ridding, L.E., 'The Conditions of Domestic Service from the Mistress's Point of View,' pp.50-7
[453] Ridding, L.E., The Guardianship of Working Girls,' p.264

instinct of gregariousness."[454] She also argues that the social aspect of the pub-culture was especially appealing to those who had spent eleven or twelve hours on the factory floor. This was particularly hard to fight. She put herself in the position of the young, rejecting previous philanthropic endeavours to create diversions to the pub, the music hall and the street parade, where alcohol was consumed.

What was needed was somewhere warm to meet friends and lovers. They also needed variety: whist, bagatelle, dancing, concerts, billiards and ping-pong. Those women who listened to her address were asked to lend their support to the foundation of rooms for the establishment of sober counter-attractions to the pub. Laura was a realist, but she also emphasised the need for a balance in the lives of the young between recreation and work. Mothers needed to instruct their children to apportion their time wisely for each. She reminded them that suitable amusements should ennoble and not degrade their participant.

The Mothers' Union and the Girls' Friendly Society were two of the most important Christian organisations for women at the close of the Victorian era and Laura was affiliated to both of them. The latter was founded in 1874, based on the principles of purity and friendship. The aim of the society was 'to save the purity and honour of girls, to protect them from temptation and to bring them to Christ.' It also stressed the significance of womanhood's active participation in God's service, in its entirety. This did not just mean women from the upper classes, but every woman had the right to make her contribution.[455] Thus working class members were brought under the influence of an upper class supervisor who would then go out and influence their friends and family.

Laura articulated some women's concerns that the GFS just sought to 'whitewash' their characters, but as she replies, it was not to be their main interest, "it was not the whitewashing of the sepulchre, or the cleansing of the outside of the platter that our Saviour blamed, it was the leaving the uncleanness within."[456] The society sought to help girls find respectable employment, safe lodgings, and suitable

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[454] Ridding, L.E., 'Counter-Attractions,' in Temperance Chronicle, May 1902, p.220
[455] Townsend, Mrs., 'The Girls' Friendly Society,' in Keymer, N., (ed), Workers Together for God, p.175
[456] Ridding, L.E., 'The Tone of the Village…,' p.9

amusements for their recreation time, while extolling the virtues of the home and the family. Laura was attracted to the society's underlying religious and moral maxims, but also to the 'semi-maternal' relationship the supervisors would strike up with their charges, as highlighted by Pamela Horn. As the first Anglican organisation to be run by lay women, its success was significant. [457]

Laura's moderate feminist stance was situated within the context of home and family life. All her public service and work for women emanated from this central focus. Laura held a sacred view of the sacrament of marriage. This religious as well as civil contract was not to be entered into lightly, or conversely, ended lightly. She contributed a piece on the question of the ethics surrounding the ending of engagements for the 'Woman at Home' magazine in 1897. She argues that if either side changed their mind, it was their duty to break off their engagement as she warned, "foolish engagements often drift into miserable marriages."[458] Equally Laura opposed the extension of divorce facilities for the minority, at the expense of the majority. She argued that public opinion should not accept extension of the grounds for divorce as inevitable, though she did concede that for some unfortunate couples, divorce was indeed a last option, but that it should not be made easier to obtain.

To Laura, divorce shook the very foundations of the entire family system, certainly the institution of marriage as witnessed in American society after its relaxation of the divorce laws. Divorce did not just affect the couple, it had an impact on both families, and ultimately on the health of society. "Marriage… is the supreme test of men and women,"[459] Laura asserts, a mutual sacrifice. She believed that easy divorce could lead to experimental marriage. Laura and her peers subscribed to the view that too much attention was focused on divorce, rather than on marriage and training for marriage.

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[457] Horn, P., p.128-9
[458] Ridding, L.E., 'Is It Ever Justifiable to Break Off an Engagement?', in Woman at Home, No. 48, September 1897, p.1018
[459] Ridding, L.E., 'On Certain Aspects of Divorce,' in Church Quarterly Review, Vol. LXXI, No.142, January 1911, p.424

The ideal of Christian motherhood and the divinely appointed mission of mothers was also affirmed by Laura. Motherhood was sacred work and therefore of the utmost importance, which is why women were to take their roles seriously.[460] Women from all classes, rich and poor, needed to learn the skills to be able to teach their children such lessons as religious instruction. However Laura believed that motherly instruction should go beyond these spiritual parameters into intellectual, philanthropic and patriotic areas. Instruction for mothers could be obtained through membership of a branch of the Mothers' Union, as well as local mothers' meetings for the poorest of women. Laura urged that time should be set aside at the close of such meetings for prayer and a scripture reading, through which they could be restored in strength and comfort.[461]

For Gill, the Mothers' Union externalised all the conservative Christian constructions of motherhood of the day.[462] Laura spoke at the annual conference in 1903, asserting that the society had the double role of mother-training and child-training. She likened the role of the mother to the role of the gardener - both were assigned different tasks, but they both had to wait for the fruit to flower.[463] Laura often uses analogies drawn from nature in her writing, in acknowledgment of her Creator God. Primarily within the first ten years of a child's life, mothers held the monopoly on influence over their children. Influence was the key weapon they held in their arsenal. Laura warns women, "you cannot avoid having your share of influence anymore than you can avoid using it. The very fact of your being women gives it to you."[464] Laura nicknamed such strength of influence "mother-power."[465] She believed that even young girls could influence their peers. The best way to influence others was through the example of their own pure, honest lives. However, although Laura saw marriage and motherhood as the chief role for women, she did not believe it was the only vocation women could take up.

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[460] Ridding, L.E., 'Work Among Mothers,' in Keymer, N., (ed), Workers Together for God, p.170
[461] Ridding, L.E., 'Work Among Mothers,' p171-2
[462] Gill, S., p.103
[463] Ridding, L.E., 'On the Individual Work of Every Member of the Mothers' Union,' May 1903, p.38-9
[464]Ridding, L.E., 'Influence,' in Draper, E.A., (ed), Life's Possibilities. A Book for Girls, A.R. Mowbray & Co., Oxford, 1899, p.97
[465] Ibid., p.98

Laura believed that women should be encouraged to serve on public affairs committees, such as the boards of Poor Law guardians, but especially on local school boards, where their influence was particularly required in relation to children. Education was a subject dear to the Ridding family. Having been a Headmaster at Winchester College, George had many pronouncements on the subject, even at Southwell. Laura continued this interest. When the new Local Authorities were being created, she took up her pen for the cause of the inclusion of women on school boards. As always, she backed up her argument with official reports that revealed statistics on the inadequacies of the current state. These reports demonstrated that women were excluded from the committees of County Councils and County Boroughs.

Laura wanted to ensure that the welfare and interests of girls were guaranteed at all levels in the process. She argued that as there were so many female teachers and teaching assistants, it was especially important to have their interests represented by a woman on the school board. She continued that men could not efficiently address certain problems, such as the adequate provision of secondary schools for girls, the selection of (mostly female) teachers, careful scrutiny of sanitary arrangements and 'mothering' of pupil teachers and young teaching assistants.[466] She believed that women's experience of child-rearing and domestic management was urgently required on school boards. She acknowledged the work of such trailblazers as Dorothea Beale who had pioneered the development of women's education in the nineteenth century, arguing that women were owed places on school boards in recognition of this national service.[467]

After taking advice, Laura formed the Committee for Securing the Presence of Women on Secondary Education Authorities through her position as chairman of the Legislation Committee at the National Union of Women Workers. She wrote on behalf of her colleagues on the Committee, suggesting four proposals for the implementation of their objectives:

1. Make an amendment to the wording contained in Clause I of the Education Bill, replacing the word "may" provide for inclusion in

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[466] Ridding, L.E., 'Women on Educational Authorities,' in Contemporary Review, Part 421, January 1901, p. 112
[467] Ibid., p.115

the Education Committee persons, male or female, who are not members of the Council" with the word "shall."

2. Educate the public to consider the question of women's relation to the organisation of education.
3. Educate local and central authorities to adopt fairer policies on the co-option of women to School Boards.
4. To enlist suitable female candidates who would be ready to step into such roles.[468]

In relation to this last point, Laura encouraged women to take up the cause themselves, to educate themselves so that they were ready to take up such positions. Not only would women have a voice so that they could effect changes at schools, but Laura believed they would also gain on a personal level, particularly learning the lesson of the responsibility of training children.

'Powerhouse of energy'[469]

"Go on daughter, for you are on the right road. We all wear the same livery."[470] Laura referred to this pronouncement from Saint Fra Pedro de Alcantara to Saint Teresa in recognition of the development of the collaboration of women in social and spiritual agencies in the late nineteenth century. This revealed the extent to which the public had grown to recognise women as citizens and individuals in their own right. It became clear to women such as Laura and Louise Creighton that as a result of the growth of organisations by women for women, an arena was needed for women to exchange information and ideas with one another and to meet, support and learn from each other, under the broad remit of the promotion of the social, civil, moral and religious welfare of women.[471] The National Union of Women Workers became the focal point for this alliance of women. As one of the founding matriarchs of such an organisation, Laura was able to combine her interest in those religious and political issues that caught her attention. Laura's strong political family ties cannot be over-emphasised as her father was Lord Chancellor, her brother was High Commissioner for South Africa and her sister-in-law was the

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[468] Ibid., p.111-2
[469] Ridding, L.E., 'Women's Work: The NUWW,' in The Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Review, No.15, April-June 1913, p.284
[470] Ridding, L.E., 'Presidential (Local Committee) Address of Welcome,' Report of the Conference of the NUWW held in Nottingham, 22 October 1895, p.7
[471] Ridding, L.E., 'The NUWW,' in The Times, 25 June 1910, p.6

daughter of the Marquess of Salisbury who was Prime Minister from 1885-6 with further terms from 1886-92 and 1895-1902.

Laura recalled the early days of the Union, how it was created out of a conference of rescue and preventive workers and her own part in its formation. In 1885 a group of women workers, including Ellice Hopkins, conceived the idea of a conference where mutual knowledge and help could be of invaluable assistance to their colleagues in their arduous efforts. Out of this meeting the first conference at Barnsley was initiated, taking place in 1889 and out of this conference the seed of the future Union was born. A Central Conference Committee was formed and over the next five years conferences were held in Birmingham, Liverpool, Bristol, Leeds and Glasgow. These conferences provided the earliest opportunities for women of different classes to gather together and exchange their experiences of philanthropic work. At the Nottingham Conference in 1895, which George and Laura hosted, the Union's title, constitution and aims were framed.[472]

The title 'National Union of Women Workers' (NUWW) remained until it was changed in 1918 to the National Council of Women of Great Britain and Ireland (NCW). In the same year of 1895 the Nottingham branch of the NUWW was established, with a view to forging links with existing organisations for women throughout the diocese. In this way the organisation promoted women's issues through the dissemination of ideas and material, on a local level. From this time onwards it earned the reputation as an 'umbrella' for women's organisations. Branches grew up all around the country as the Union evolved and intercourse between the various branches was encouraged. Not only was the Union considered a "powerhouse of energy" as consensus among the membership tackled such difficult issues as white slave traffic, but it was also a "storehouse of information on women's questions."[473] Louise Creighton was elected as the first President and there were ten Vice-Presidents, including Ben, with a further sixteen executive members, including Laura and Mrs. Sidney Webb. The organisation was commanded by the Council and the Executive Committee, its life-blood was its

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[472] Ridding, L.E., 'The Early Days of the NUWW,' in Women in Council, June 1932, p.1
[473] Ridding, L.E., 'The NUWW,' p.6

branches and specific issues were tackled through the sectional committees and their affiliated societies.

The following statement of objectives elucidated the position of the new Union, set up for the purpose of:

> The encouragement of sympathy of thought and purpose among the women of Great Britain and Ireland; the promotion of their social, civil and religious welfare; the gathering and distribution of serviceable information; the federation of women's organisations and the formation of local Councils and Unions of Workers.[474]

Laura's role in the birth and development of the Union marked her jump from philanthropic work to her undertakings on behalf of public bodies. She prepared and presented a range of papers to conference, as a confident writer and speaker on a variety of issues affecting women. Her early papers tended to focus on the responsibilities of employers to look after their female employees, from the factory-owner's wife's indirect hand to the direct influence of the mistress over the domestic servant. Laura appeared to have been liked and respected, if not a little feared, by her friends and colleagues in the Union. Miss Mary Clifford, Vice-President in 1895 and President between 1903-5, expressed the following sentiment in a letter after the 1892 Conference at Bristol, "Lady Laura Ridding was as always so very nice."[475] Miss Emily Janes, one of the founding members and Secretary of the Union for many years, paid tribute to the influence of Laura and Louise, "it was in Nottingham in 1895 that the Central Conference Council grew into a 'NUWW of Great Britain and Ireland,' largely owing to the exertions of Mrs. Creighton and Lady Laura Ridding."[476] It is interesting to see the way women confidently and eloquently addressed conferences in comparison with their earlier sisters. The Union played a major role in the development of a public voice for the Women's Movement and its subsequent expansion, addressing such issues as Women's Suffrage, the legal regulation of women's labour, Poor Law difficulties and the creation of the Women's Police Force.

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[474] Glick, D., p.6
[475] Williams, G, M., Mary Clifford, J.W. Arrowsmith Ltd., Bristol, 1920, p.186
[476] Ibid., p.184

Dr. Glick, Archivist of the NCW as it is now called, offers three reasons why the Union was so well respected. She points to its thoroughness of investigation, its open-mindedness and its authoritative voice for women.[477] Women from all walks of life attended the annual conferences, including teachers, district nurses, deaconesses, Poor Law guardians and church workers for such organisations as the GFS, the Mothers' Union and the Salvation Army. Political, social and religious differences were put to one side by members as the focus was shifted onto the pressing moral, educational and industrial questions of the day which affected women as a separate social category from men. Laura refers to the spirit of "interdenominationalism,"[478] rather than undenominationalism, inherent in the Union. She wanted members to pray and ask for guidance in all their personal endeavours as "God's instruments"[479] in order to help forward God's Kingdom on earth.[480] She wanted to "lift people's eyes from their daily lives toward Heaven."[481]

The NUWW encountered a number of problems and a measure of criticism at the start of its evolutionary journey. Laura acknowledged that it was difficult for the Committee to convince the public of the Union's wider aims - to discuss philanthropic, social reform, education and industrial questions. Laura rebuts, "it was not a glorified servants' registry, nor an agency of respectable lodgings and boarding homes." She referred to a leading newspaper that wrongly interpreted the word 'Workers' in the title 'NUWW' to represent just those women who were engaged in manual labour, that exclaimed, "How vastly the number of talkers exceed that of real workers!"[482] Laura defended the Union by arguing that no section of women in the working world was untouched by their influence. She did concede that the work of the Union was primarily educational, with the common purpose of raising awareness of women's issues on both a local and national levels, but Laura and her colleagues did much more than just talk. She was active as chairman of the Legislation Committee between 1899-1910, which she had to drop when she became President in 1910. This sectional committee considered legislative proposals and measures, for example changes that could be made to

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[477] Glick, D., p.24
[478] Ridding, L.E., 'The NUWW,' p.6
[479] Ridding, L.E., 'Presidential (Local Committee) Address of Welcome,' p.4
[480] Ibid., p.2
[481] Ridding, L.E., 'The NUWW,' p.6
[482] Ridding, L.E., 'The Early Days of the NUWW,' p.9

existing legislation on poor industrial conditions. She had inherited her father's sound legal mind and this helped her to address those legislative problems that came before her. She did not hesitate in pressurising the lawmakers where she thought improved legislation would advance the welfare of women and children.[483] Mrs. Ramsay Macdonald[484] was Laura's secretary on the committee, showing the calibre of women involved in the various sectional committees that met to discuss such issues as education, morality, public health and rescue and preventive work. From the first, Laura had always been an active member of the sectional committees, those specialised committees that were devoted to specific areas of concern for the Union. Indeed Laura was a member of the first sub-committee, the Literature Sub-Committee that was formed in 1895, alongside Mrs. Sidney Webb, Kathleen Lyttelton and Emily Janes.[485]

The Union was always intended as a forum for the exchange of information and the sharing of difficulties about women's work for women and so to a large extent much of the criticism from the print media was unfair, but as with all pioneering ventures, criticism was to be expected. The Union was successful in many of its practical applications - much of its work was experimental, groundbreaking or inspired some other organisation to take action. No issue which affected women and children was left untouched in relation to industrial conditions, public health, education, morality and rescue and preventive work. Successful results included the establishment of public health visitors, feeding children at school, increasing the number of female prison wardens and investigations into the conditions of women who worked at home and in the sweated industries.[486] The Union brought public attention to, and investigated a number of these controversial issues.

Members would come together at their annual conference and leave at the end of the week with a positive consciousness of having been inspired to continue their work in their own locality, renewed by the contact and social intercourse with other like-minded sisters.[487] Ultimately they were working towards the common goal of

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[483] 'In Memoriam Lady Laura Ridding,' in Women in Council, Vol. XVII, No.5, June 1939, p.78
[484] Ramsay MacDonald served as Labour Prime Minister in 1924 and from 1929-35.
[485] Glick, D., p.121
[486] Ridding, L.E., 'The NUWW,' p.6
[487] Ridding, L.E., 'Presidential (Local) Address of Welcome,' p.2

the empowerment and encouragement of womanhood, although members differed in their opinion of the form this would take. Not all women in the Union were pro-suffrage. Indeed this proved to be a contentious issue for members as the new century unfolded. The Union sought to remain open-minded until it announced its clearly pro-suffrage stance in 1910. Suffragists sat next to anti-suffragists at meetings. Louise Creighton was a key opponent of the campaign for the franchise for many years, having put her name to 'An Appeal Against Female Suffrage' that was published in 'The Nineteenth Century' magazine in June 1889 alongside such women as Lady Frederick Cavendish (née Lyttelton), Beatrice Webb[488] and Mrs Humphry Ward. Louise later announced her secession from the anti-suffrage movement publicly in 1906 with the following explanation for her change of heart:

> I believed then that it would be a real advantage that educated women should be in a position to exert their influence on public affairs without belonging to any political party. But when women began to join the Primrose League and the Liberal and other political associations, and to take part in Parliamentary elections, I came to see that if they meant to do this, they had better have the responsibility of the vote… I did not take, however, in consequence, any active part in suffrage work, and have never done so.[489]

Through her work with the NUWW Laura gained her greatest friendships with such prominent women as Mary Clifford, Louise Creighton and Kathleen Lyttelton. In her memoirs she expresses how much she had learnt from her work at the Union, amongst the presence of such distinguished women as Louise Creighton:

> It brought splendid electric force into my woman's work and made my mind and understanding sympathies grow enriched. One learnt all the best methods of chairmanship etc. from the ablest women's minds of England. It was an enormous privilege being one of the inner band of them.[490]

Beatrice Webb comments in her diary on the proceedings of the 1897 Conference in Manchester, revealing her high regard for the bishops' wives and their overwhelming support for the Union:

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[488] Beatrice Potter Webb (1858-1943) was a social economist and wife of Sidney James Webb, a prominent socialist.
[489] Creighton, L., 'Reminiscences of the NCW,' in Women in Council, January 1933, pp.8-9
[490] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.190

> Usual large gathering of sensible and God-fearing folk - dominated by the executive of Bishops' wives, who give to the proceedings an atmosphere of extreme decorum and dignity…The Bishops' wives are a nice lot -… In spite of their piety, they are large-minded - take broad views and have the pleasant manners of the great world. They are, in fact, "gentlemen" to deal with…[491]

As well as its educational function, Laura stressed the many practical aspects of the NUWW's work. At a time when social and moral questions were being raised regarding women's work in the public domain and its compatibility with family life, the Union took a keen interest in their working conditions. Attention was drawn to the ways in which working class women could empower themselves industrially and politically to improve their social and financial position in society.

During Laura's twenty years at Southwell, accompanying George to the vast majority of parishes in the diocese, she witnessed at first hand the conditions of those working in the great mining and factory towns of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. Those she met included miners' wives, mechanics' wives, factory and warehouse workers and shop employees. In her position as chairman of the Legislation Committee, Laura studied the current laws regulating work in factories and workshops, where many local Southwell women were employed. She refers to statistics that revealed that a million and a half women were engaged in such employment,[492] acknowledging the need for their protection via appropriate legislation to regulate the number of hours they worked and the conditions in which they laboured.

Laura wrote an article in 1894 for the Exeter Church Congress, entitled 'The Guardianship of Working Girls,' and her work for the NUWW raised her interest once more in the industrial responsibilities of employers and their wives to protect those in their care. She sought to address such problems as overcrowded conditions where women worked, unlawful hours of work, work in temperatures which were either too hot or too cold and work in dangerous or unhealthy conditions. She asked employers to make basic provisions for their employees, such as dining

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[491] Webb, B., Our Partnership, Longmans, Green & Co., London, 1948, p.134-5
[492] Ridding, L.E., 'Our Service to the Commonwealth,' in Friendly Work Magazine, February 1903, p.23

rooms in factories.[493] Laura's Legislation Committee became one of the most important sectional committees in the Union, performing valuable work on behalf of women workers.

One example of her success was in the campaign to secure women's position on the Secondary Education Boards. She led an NUWW deputation that petitioned Parliament and County magnates at a time when members were apathetic about work on public bodies.[494] She secured the support of a number of MPs and many leading women. As a direct result of the intervention of the NUWW, women's position was indeed secured on educational bodies. On 16 April 1902 Mr. Hobhouse and Sir Richard Jebb undertook to bring in a clause to ensure the presence of women on local educational boards and encouraged their colleagues to vote for it. This they did and the clause was incorporated into the Act.[495]

By 1932 there were eighty branches of the NUWW, now called the NCW, representing 150,000 women, thus showing the extent of the Union's membership and influence.[496] This influence had grown immensely since its inception in 1895. Focusing on the wider picture, the various resolutions passed by the sectional committees went a long way to help change public opinion. Issues such as women's work conditions and wages received coverage and were debated in the public arena as well as before Parliament and Government departments.

Laura was elected President of the NUWW for two consecutive terms in 1910 and 1911. She was elected at the Portsmouth Conference in 1909, and discloses in her diary her concern for her physical capacity to serve, "I only hope I shaln't make an awful mull of it - not from brain - but from body weakness."[497] By this time she was in her sixties. She found her presidential work heavy and tiring, with the endless round of appeals and articles she had to write for the newspapers on behalf of the Union and addressing meetings at branch and central levels. In her second term of office she worked hard on the Health Insurance Bill, sending deputations to

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[493] Ridding, L.E., 'The Home Duties and Domestic Relations of the Educated Woman,' p.4
[494] Glick, D., p.11
[495] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II, pp.264-6
[496] Ridding, L.E., 'The Early days of the NUWW,' p.127
[497] Diary entry for 21 October 1909, 9M68/29, HRO

the Prime Minister David Lloyd George. Laura confided that at the end of her terms of office how she was relieved to step down. She assesses her contribution thus: "my presidential address did well on 'Public Opinion'. I got through my little speeches very well... Then home with relief of having shuffled my Presidential mantle onto Mrs. Alan Bright's shoulders."[498] In spite of this she later reflected that she had learnt much from her NUWW experiences, not just on practical and theoretical levels, but also on a personal level - how fortunate she was in her own situation, such a luxury as retrospection affords one:

> NCW has helped me to feel a deeper gratitude for the happy circumstance of my own life, and to realise more fully the magnificent valour with which so many women, handicapped by the circumstances of very different lives of hardship and strain, have faced the struggle and have laboured to make life better, not only for themselves and their own families, but for the rest of the world.[499]

Again in 'The Justice Room,' the novel that mirrored much of her thinking, Cecy acknowledged how lucky she was to live such a privileged life without hardship. She exclaims "what blind, ungrateful bats we are,"[500] reflecting Laura's beliefs.

One woman who thought highly of Laura's contribution as President was Lady Louisa Knightley,[501] who confided on a number of occasions on how well she believed Laura spoke. In her diary of 1910, at the Lincoln conference, Louisa writes:

> Lady Laura made a most statesmanlike speech, really fine, on the Suffrage question and we carried, I seconded, a vote of confidence in her by an overwhelming majority. It ought to have been unanimous but the Suffragists were not generous... Lady Laura's presidential address was admirable.[502]

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[498] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II, p.368
[499] Ridding, L.E., 'The Early Days of the NUWW,' p.13
[500] Ridding, L.E., The Justice Room, p.152
[501] Lady Knightley (1842-1913) was wife of Conservative MP Sir Rainald Knightley. She worked hard on behalf of political and feminist causes, including the Primrose League, the Girls' Friendly Society and the NUWW.
[502] K2921, Vol. XLV, Northamptonshire Record Office

She regretted the loss of a fine President when Laura made her parting speech at the Glasgow conference in 1911, referring to her as, "Lady Laura Ridding our, alas, retiring President."[503]

Laura's first Presidential paper, entitled 'Discipline and Development,' at the Lincoln Conference in 1910, embodied her ideals and aims for education. She offered a short criticism of the main educational theories propounded over the modern period, discussing their merits and pitfalls. She concluded her paper by arguing that new theories were not necessarily better than the old ideas, for example the idea that discipline as well as development should have a role to play in modern systems of education.[504] In the following year she had to address the usual criticism again that the Union was "academic and useless,"[505] with no relevance to the modern conditions of life. Laura sought to vindicate the Union of this charge with the assertion that the organisation's primary function was to educate and alert public opinion to the working conditions of those women who had no public voice in factories, workshops, in domestic service, shops and at home who needed their guardianship. It also sought to remind employers and their families of their responsibility to care for the welfare of those engaged in their employment. Overall it sought to raise the profile of womanhood on a national level.

Laura's papers for conference over the years reflected the Union's adaptation to the changing conditions in society, covering such subjects as health, education, industrial conditions, marriage and the Empire. In 1891 she presented 'The Lady's Vision' to the conference at Liverpool, raising the issue of employers' responsibility towards their employees. In 1892 at Bristol she returned to the theme of 'Marriage and Married Life' and in 1894 at Glasgow her thoughts turned to 'The Conditions of Domestic Service from the Mistress's Point of View,' where she tried to raise the profile of this favoured occupation for young girls. She argued that it provided excellent life-training skills for their future roles as wife, helpmeet, and mother when compared with other jobs. She also gave pointers to mistresses as to

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[503] K2922, Vol. XLVI, Northamptonshire Record Office
[504] Ridding, L.E., 'Discipline and Development,' in The Parents' Review, Vol. XXII, No.3, March 1911, p.171
[505] Ridding, L.E., 'Public Opinion,' The Official Report of the Annual NUWW Conference at Glasgow, 1911, p.4

how to make their charges' service more enjoyable and respectable so that they could gain positively from their contact with a good Christian family.

After the 1895 conference at Nottingham where she made her local Presidential address of welcome, she presented a paper at the 1898 conference at Norwich. Here she raised the subject of 'The Work of Midwives and Maternity Nurses - the Need and Organisation in Rural Districts.' In this document she propounded a whole scheme, offering advice on all aspects of the potential project from the management of public relations and how to handle county dignitaries, to the question of preparing the villagers for such a new development in local healthcare. Laura believed that the lives of many mothers and babies could be saved in the future if midwives and maternity nurses were trained and utilised in the locality. Such a measure would involve lobbying County Councils to encourage the establishment of Nursing County Associations. At Brighton in 1900 Laura wrote about 'Women on Educational Authorities,' a subject that was very close to her heart, and in 1902 at Edinburgh she presented a paper entitled 'The Relations of Amusements to Life.' In this paper she raised the question of whether amusements ennobled or degraded one and the merits of 'rational amusements,' the kind which she suggested for girls' evening homes. She went on to discuss the ethics of amusements and how the time spent on recreation should be in proportion to the time spent on work and devotions.

In 1909 at Portsmouth Laura wrote an article on 'The Call of the Empire,' calling for women throughout the domains to ask themselves what they could do for the Empire. Laura's brother, Willy, had spent time in South Africa as High Commissioner between 1905 and 1910 and Laura visited him between November 1908 and May 1909. She kept a diary of her experiences and when she returned she scribed the paper for conference. In an idealistic paper she hoped for the unification of all racial groups in the new union under one nation and asked her listeners to pray for such an accomplishment to be achieved.[506] But Laura discerned that the native question was the most difficult to solve and questioned how to deal with "the yoking together of this unevenly matched pair, the European

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[506] Anon., 'The Union of South Africa and the Native Question,' in The Church Quarterly Review, No. CXXXVI, July 1909, p.259

racehorse and the African ox, so that together they shall safely and successfully draw the State wagon along the rough and unknown road of the future."[507]

Laura used paternalistic language to describe the relationship between the black and white races. She believed that whilst the white race were endowed with a larger intellectual and mental capacity, the black race could be educated so that no obstacle should stand in their way to get any kind of job if God so granted him the gifts to accomplish the tasks before him. She observes that "the white man is the racial adult; the black man is the racial child,"[508] and equated the black native with the white child. Therefore the responsibility rested on the white race for their black brothers and sisters as they were blessed with greater intelligence, much the same as the British upper classes who had responsibility to care for those under them. Following on from this she argued that the natives should not receive the franchise as "the inconsequence of a child's mind would make his vote a danger to the State,"[509] especially as British women were still fighting for the vote back at home. She firmly believed that there should be no inter-marriage between the races as they were so different. Each race should climb Heavenwards on parallel paths, but not on the same path.

In consequence of her belief that white and black races were at different stages of civilisation, the whites achieving advancement before the blacks, she believed that their interests should be safeguarded by the South African Government, just as legislation was put in place in Britain to protect its children. She observed that the 'slave-owner mentality' still pervaded Boer thinking about their fellow-countrymen. She went on to argue that not only did a large section of this group despise the natives as semi-human, closer to the animal world than humanity, but that the black worker was no more than a "breathing machine" for their Capitalist masters.[510] She strongly believed that the natives should be treated with manners and respect and that, as with the treatment of children, they should be protected, guided, educated and loved. Although she believed they should be taught English, she also stipulated the need for them to retain their cultural identity in all its rich

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[507] Ibid., p.260
[508] Ibid., p.266
[509] Ibid., p.273
[510] Ibid., p.262

variety, ahead of her time. She raised the important point that missionaries had gone to South Africa to Christianise the natives, but how they had only succeeded in Europeanising the black races instead. Christianity did not equal European civilisation. She writes, "it apparently passes the wit of the average mission teacher to grasp the fact that his Whitehall Education Code, with iron bedsteads, knives, forks, tablecloths, coats and trousers, are not necessarily bound up with the Creed and the Ten Commandments," and later, "it is clear that these conceptions of the Kaffir as a pariah, an ape, a machine, an embryonic imitation-European are utterly wrong."[511] She believed that the South African Church could be enriched by the best elements of their racial traits and qualities, but instead the Church was losing out.

Laura was keen to win the respect and admiration of Louise Creighton for her writings as she was gifted with great intelligence herself, an author of popular history in her own right. However in this instance Laura records in her daily journal how Louise was unimpressed with 'The Call of the Empire,' because she did not care for its content. She recalls, "not a word of praise from Mrs. Creighton. She says: "I hate the empire and all its works."""[512] It is clear that Louise and Laura shared the same opinion on most subjects after Louise changed her mind over the franchise question to become pro-suffrage, but they were not apprehensive about speaking their minds if they disagreed with something the other had said or written.

Laura was opinionated and not overtly emotional, although those people who knew her well revealed her inner emotional side in private. Moreover she could be sympathetic, but only to those she believed deserved it. The international arm of the NUWW, the International Council of Women, was founded in 1888, to enable women from all over the world to meet together to discuss questions affecting their interests. In particular they discussed issues surrounding the family and the commonwealth.[513] Lady Ishbel Aberdeen was later elected as President in 1893 when she went to Canada with her husband who had just become Governor-General. In her philanthropic endeavours Lady Aberdeen was well respected. One

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[511] Ibid., p.264-5
[512] Diary entry for 21 October 1909, 9M68/29, HRO
[513] Anon, 'The Woman's International Conference,' in The Lady's Realm, 1899, p.91

commentator observes, "Lady Aberdeen's reforming enthusiasm is tempered by a modicum of Scotch caution."[514]

Laura's own judgment was less flattering. After one meeting she records the following observation: "awful meeting at the W.I. (Woman's International) to hear Ishbel Aberdeen… She dragged on through a dreary off the point speech for nearly an hour."[515] When the ICW first suggested an affiliation between the NUWW and itself. Louise and Laura, both leading lights in the Union, were reluctant to see their organisation become the National Council for England. They were concerned that the NUWW would become absorbed by the ICW, losing its autonomy. Daphne Glick refers to Louise, who argues that, "the danger of big international gatherings is that they are apt to degenerate into mere talk, sometimes wild and incoherent talk."[516] Laura vents her own concerns:

> Horrid comm. (sic) meeting at W.I. to discuss NUWW's Constitution with Ishbel and her hordes of wild women. Find the Political (i.e. only root and branch political, nothing philanthropic tucked in) odious. They're very antagonistic to NUWW because they are not on it. I mean their political societies. Louise Creighton perfectly splendid in tone, temper and humour.[517]

Despite their reservations, the affiliation was completed in 1898.

One of George's ordinands, W. Keble Martin, recalls in the 1960's the impression Laura made on him in his autobiography. He became a curate in Beeston, Nottinghamshire, as he had always lived in rural Devon and wanted to gain experience in a big industrial parish while he attended Cuddesdon Theological College between 1901-2. Martin notes that Laura shared his interest in nature and how on one occasion she invited him over to see some birds' nests in her garden at the Priory. He also remembers how "she insisted on our calling her "Aunt" Lolly. She was a very able bishop's wife and was on all sorts of diocesan committees."[518] He concludes his character sketch by explaining, "she was a bit masterful and saw

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[514] Ibid., p.92
[515] Diary entry for 19 July 1897, 9M68/17, HRO
[516] Glick, D., pp.162-3
[517] Diary entry for 21 July 1897, 9M68/17, HRO
[518] Martin, W. Keble, Over the Hills, Michael Joseph Ltd., London, 1968, p.56

that they (ordinands) were on the station, which was very near by, at least fifteen minutes before the train was due. She was very good to me. And I occasionally went over to Thurgarton Priory, where they lived, for a happy day in the country."[519] Not only do these observations reveal Laura's strong personality, but also her capacity to 'mother' those charges with whom she came into contact, always searching for a maternal role.

The bishops' wives, including Laura, also took a leading part in the Women's Section of the Church Congresses. At the time, it was considered inappropriate for women of Laura's elevated social status to engage in meaningful conversation with men alone. Therefore their bonds of female friendship had a special meaning for one another. Laura depended on her network of close relationships with other bishops' wives for both practical and more importantly emotional support. Any political or feminist differences were transcended through their spiritual bonds and their commitment to social action and though they may not have always agreed with one another, they were privy to some of the greatest female minds of the day. Laura recalls with fondness how she met Louise and Ben at the 1899 Church Congress and how informally they had shared their earliest recollections:

> I told about my slapping children down the street because they looked cross and ought not to, she (Louise) interpreted that as forecast of the 'Missionary Spirit.' Ben told her earliest recollections, sitting on the nursery floor intensely miserable at being herself and not someone else. Another of hers was meeting people along the road and longing to ask them each if they were happy. Then we got on likes and dislikes of people. Louise says her intuition builds up a theory of everybody, the first time she sees them and she can't alter from that view of them… Mrs. Benson and I both… wait, build it up cell by cell…[520]

Laura voiced her opinions of some of her contemporaries. Mention has already been made of her respect for Beatrice Temple and Louise Creighton. She also enjoyed the company of the Davidsons. She writes of them in 1885, "the

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[519] Ibid., p.56
[520] Diary entry for 2 July 1899, 9M68/19, HRO

Davidsons are so so nice. Real friends. Full of kindness. A very happy visit."[521]

Laura reveals her opinion of the Maclagans[522] on visiting them in Lichfield:

> The Lichfield visit was amusing and trying. One felt Maclagan to be so sanctimonious - such a small tyrannic unsympathetic nature. She (who was an old friend of Mixbury days, one of Uncle Horsley's ideals,... patronized me with gushing maternal affection.)[523]

Laura confides in her autobiography how she disliked "the Barrington girls," including Augusta, future wife of the Archbishop of York, as a child. She continues, "their father was a great ally of Uncle Horsley's and we were therefore designed to be friends. We thought them supercilious and disdainful and disliked them."[524] Fortunately Laura changed her opinion of Augusta in latter years, but then she confessed she had not been a tolerant child.

Brief though some comments may be, they highlighted how Laura welcomed the network of friendships with other bishops' wives through and after her years at Southwell in the unique role she found herself playing when she married George. Laura's special relationship with Ben through Martin Benson's tragic death at Winchester cemented them together in a meaningful way. She writes, "it always gives me the feeling of blessedness to be with Ben. She is so rich and ripe and satisfying"[525] and refers to her as "beloved Ben."[526] During Lady Selborne's last illness and after George's death, Ben was there to comfort and support Laura, bound together as they were by their experience at Winchester.

The number of women involved in national ecclesiastical matters was small, so they knew one another. They were joined together sharing their husbands' missions, but their characters and confidence differed. While strong personalities flourished under the advancing circumstances for women on the public stage, weaker ones were still supported by the love of their laity and sustained by their

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[521] Diary entry for 1885, 9M68/5, HRO
[522] William Dalrymple Maclagan was Bishop of Lichfield, Chester and Worcester between 1878 and 1890 when he became Archbishop of York. William married his second wife, the Hon. Augusta Anne Barrington (1836-1915)in 1878 after his first wife, Kate, died in 1862.
[523] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.102
[524] Ridding, L.E., Vol. I., pp.58-60
[525] Diary entry for 1912, 9M68/32, HRO
[526] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.304

faith, content to work in the background. In her series on the wives of bishops in a ladies' journal, Sarah Tooley observed that, broadly-speaking, there was a distinct division among this group between those women who belonged to the "militant" section of bishops' wives and those who worked under the banner of "non-militant" wives. Included in the first section were Laura, Louise and Augusta Maclagan, though they were far from 'militant.' Mrs. Tooley inferred that these women were confident platform-speakers, happy to take the lead in movements. The second grouping included such women as Edith Davidson, Lady Mary Glyn (wife of the Bishop of Peterborough) and Fanny Legge (wife of the Bishop of Lichfield.) They preferred to avoid platform-work, choosing instead to work quietly and unobtrusively in connection with the various diocesan organisations.[527]

Laura took a prominent part at a number of Church Congresses. Owen Chadwick highlighted the historical background out of which the first Church Congress took place in the form of a small gathering in November 1861 at Kings College, Cambridge. In the following year the Congress was arranged at Oxford, which was open to the public, with representations made by both the clergy and the laity. From 1863 onwards women were permitted access to the sessions, though it was still not customary for them to take an active part in the proceedings.[528] Laura made her first address to Congress at Wolverhampton in 1887. Here she presented 'Home Duties and Domestic Relations of the Educated Woman,' a paper devoted to the centre of a woman's life, as she understood it - the home. It revealed a highly ideological view of the married Christian woman in the home as commanding officer of her domain, delegating household tasks to her troops. She beseeched the educated woman to set a good example to her children and to women lower down the social scale. She also stressed how it was her duty to help the poor. Sound methods and measured consideration, not emotion, were the arms she should take up against the enemy of poverty and its allies of suffering and death. The paper adhered to traditional biblical teaching on the role of woman as helpmeet for her husband. Laura always worked within the framework of her prescribed social role and duties. Laura sent a copy of the paper to her father and he replied on 29 November 1887 with the following comments: "I read your address at the Church

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[527] Tooley, S. A., 'The Primate of All England,' in The Lady's Realm, 1903, p.655
[528] Chadwick, O., The Victorian Church 1860-1901, Part II, SCM Press Ltd., London, 1992, p.362-3

Congress with *extreme* (sic) satisfaction and I think that it would do good, if separately published…"[529] In their correspondence, Roundell would disagree with his daughter if he believed criticism was necessary, so this comment was praise indeed.

Arguably Laura's most successful Congress address was in 1894 at Exeter. Her article entitled 'The Guardianship of Working Girls' solicited positive criticism from her peers and indeed, from the press. Her friend, Beatrice Temple, chaired the Meeting of Women Members of Congress. In this stark piece, Laura presented the reality of a factory girl's working day, which was a long day. Throughout the day many temptations revealed themselves to young girls engaged in such labour, both at the factory and outside on the streets in the evening. She furnished a plan of girls' evening clubs with the assistance of the factory owners and their families to provide elementary provisions for their workers, in response to this sample day. She hoped this would reduce the risk of girls slipping through society's net downwards into the poverty trap. 'The World' newspaper reports on Laura's paper, with the following compliment: "if the Church Congress had done no more than produce Lady Laura Ridding's exquisite contribution to "servant girl literature" it would not have been held in vain…"[530] In 1896 her paper at Shrewsbury addressed the subject of 'Influence,' speaking as she did at the Girls' Meeting. She pursued this theme in her 1898 essay entitled 'Friendship,' urging her young addressees to choose their friendships wisely. She advised that healthy life-choices depended on prudent friendships.

Towards 'elevation'

Through such channels as the NUWW and Church Congress, women had access to indirect power and influence, but this was not enough for many women like Laura. Louise Creighton changed her opinion in favour of suffrage as she believed that if women were going to take an active part in political life anyway then they should be given the responsibility for this through the vote. Women such as Laura and Louise had progressed from their extensive local charitable work to positions on

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[529]Selborne, R, Earl of., Vol. II, 1898, p.278
[530] Ridding L.E., Vol. II, p.219

public bodies. Indeed it was through social action that they began to take an interest in the political sphere. June Hannam argues that in reality it was very hard to distinguish between women's philanthropic and political motivations and action.[531] Laura had tasted such positions as Poor Law guardian and District Councillor for Thurgarton. Prochaska refers to their charitable efforts as the 'lever' which opened doors of public work to women, through which they not only gained organisational and platform experience, but also increased their interest in issues of government, administration and the law.[532] Increasingly women proved their right to citizenship as they stepped up their social involvement, a key aspect in the fight for the franchise.

Contact with poverty and extreme social conditions heightened women's interest in local political issues, especially as they were refused access to the vote. As the public accepted their locally based welfare work, women were given access to greater realms of indirect power. From the 1870's privileged women found themselves elected on school boards, boards of guardians, parish councils and as the century progressed, on county councils. Laura enjoyed the exercise of real influence over the new Poor Law social policy, but she could not be party to policy-making.[533] As the management of social welfare moved more into the realm of national government, women who had taken positions of responsibility under the banner of charities had to make the choice whether or not they also wanted to move in this direction.

Prochaska points out that the first societies set up to raise awareness of the Votes for Women issue were originally just extensions of philanthropy.[534] The range of skills women had amassed in charitable organisations such as the NUWW were utilised to administer these new associations, for example they learnt how to raise money, look after the accounts, speak publicly on platforms and meet on committees, however they also highlighted the shortcomings in women's knowledge and experience.

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[531] Hannam, J., 'Women and Politics,' in Purvis, J., (ed), Women's History, Britain, 1850-1945, UCL Press Ltd., London, 1997, p.221
[532] Prochaska, F., p.227
[533] Hannam, J., p.225
[534] Prochaska, F., p.228

Not all women took kindly to the issue of the enfranchisement of women. Many were content with their charitable roles and did not want the burden of the vote, but amongst the majority of Laura's peers, it became an important issue to ensure their continued participation in work to try to alleviate society's ills. Most women were not obsessed by the topic, who like Laura, and eventually Louise, viewed their new interest as merely an extension of their existing work, but increasing numbers of Laura's contemporaries, not least her own sister-in-law Maud, were joining the new political associations for women to take an active part in political work. As Gill points out, the Women's Movement was in no way uniform, especially in the final years of the nineteenth century,[535] and this was reflected in the NUWW. The issue was not purely a one-dimensional question of women's rights and women's suffrage, for those women on Boards of Guardians or school boards for example, but it was also about empowering those in need. Laura argued that she did not seek political power for her own benefit directly, but rather she hoped the franchise would enable herself and her sisters to have a say in issues affecting women and children. An example of this is that she submitted a paper in June 1900 for the Pan Anglican Conference in London entitled 'White Slave Traffic Suppression,' against the injustices of sweated labour in which these vulnerable groups worked. Through greater contact with the State, women would have more clout to try to deal with such social issues.

This introduction is in no way intended to represent a comprehensive history of the Women's Movement in England, rather I hope to offer an overview of the movement and Laura's involvement in this. In 1918 the vote was finally extended to women who were thirty years of age and over and by 1928 legislation was passed offering it to women over the age of twenty-one.[536] This legislation had only been secured through years of campaigning, reaching its pinnacle in the early 1900's by those predominantly in two camps: the suffragists (moderate) and the suffragettes (militant). Just as there were those women who did not want the vote, so a number of men were advocates of Votes for Women. The crusade did not exist in a vacuum, it was waged hand-in-hand with the fight for issues that had been

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[535] Gill, S., p.103
[536] Weir, C., p.52

raised by the NUWW, including higher wages for women and improved employment rights. Indeed women's work amongst disadvantaged women only served to bind them closer together.

The roots of the Women's Movement are found in the 1860's when a number of local councils amalgamated under the banner of the National Society for Women's Suffrage in 1868. Over subsequent years the issue gained public attention and in 1906 a whole session was devoted to the question at the annual NUWW Conference. Here Louise Creighton publicly announced her change of heart. But the question was far from settled amongst the ranks of the membership. Even in 1907 the decision for representatives of the Union to attend a suffrage meeting and demonstration was only carried by one additional vote.[537] By the following year however, the Union was represented at a public demonstration for the Franchise and by 1910 the Union was clearly pro-suffrage.

Anglican women such as Laura and Louise were caught in the middle between the overtly pro-suffrage line of the NUWW and the hostile stance of the Church to the militant campaign. The radical agitations of the Women's Social and Political Union contingent, led by the Pankhursts, did little to ease the situation and Laura, as a constitutional suffragist, remarks in her memoirs how she believed their activities were turning people away from the movement. She writes, "1912. Suffrage agitations loom large in politics this year… The Militant Suffragettes full of arson and lunatic destruction. Maddening public feeling…"[538] This was a change from 1907 when Laura had earlier voiced her concerns that not enough action was being taken to forward their claims for the vote. She argues:

> In Vanity Fair the show that has the biggest drum outside its door fills the quickest. We have stood on the steps playing the flute till now, and our booth has remained empty. Now that they are banging away with the drumsticks, the audience appears to be crowding in.[539]

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[537] Glick, D., p.13
[538] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.370/380
[539] Ridding, L.E., 'Ought Women to Have the Suffrage?', in The Woman at Home, March 1907, p.572

Arthur Marwick agrees that whilst the suffragettes' actions were positive initially, bringing the issue to the attention of the public between 1905 and 1910, after this date their actions served to be counter-productive.[540] Louise Creighton was of the same opinion as Laura, later describing in her autobiography how her change of mind over the issue had come about partly through increasing numbers of women joining political associations, as well as through the antics of the militant wing, "the wild performances of the suffragettes also influenced me. I thought that they needed to be steadied by responsibility."[541] Laura was asked to contribute to a tract entitled 'Ought Women to Have the Suffrage?' by the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, under the leadership of Millicent Garrett Fawcett, which she did.

The majority of suffragists who joined this organisation were either upper or middle class ladies like Laura and many enjoyed the support of liberal men such as George. Laura's active involvement in the Union was limited, although she was invited to take a more prominent position in the organisation, as she was committed to other causes.[542] An example of Laura's moderate support for the Franchise, can be found in a card she wrote to a representative of the NUWSS in response to her request for a literary contribution. Laura replies:

> I shall feel honoured if my little dialogue can be of any use. Please print if you think it can be used and I should be glad to have some copies as I am presiding at an "informing" meeting at Winchester in 10 days time. It might be well to send me some literature of the style of Mrs. Fawcett or Mrs. Lyttelton? not of the more violent writers. I know most ladies who will attend this meeting will be of Miss Lonsdale's section therefore gentle persuasive logic is what would avail.[543]

Despite Laura's reservations about the antics of the extremists, she was influenced by the opinion of her sister-in-law, Maud Selborne (née Cecil),[544] who had married

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[540] Marwick, A., Women at War 1914-1918, Fontana Paperbacks, London, 1977, p.25
[541] Covert, J.T., p.146
[542] Ridding, L.E., Letter written to a lady in the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, 13 November 1907, Fawcett Library.
[543] Ridding, L.E., Card written to Miss Palliser from the NUWSS, 3 April 1907, Fawcett Library.
[544] Maud was daughter of the Conservative Prime Minister, the Marquess of Salisbury who served three terms of office between 1885-86, 1886-92 and 1895-1902. She was also cousin of the Prime Minister who followed Salisbury's last term, A.J. Balfour. She became President of the Conservative Women's Suffrage Society, working towards the promotion of women in politics.

Willy in 1883, though their ideas occasionally differed. Laura adored them both. Maud, eldest daughter of the Marquess of Salisbury, was involved in the inception of the Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Association. Pamela Horn notes how Maud's political heritage ran through her veins. She discussed political strategies and policies in letters to her husband, commenting on her support of the campaign for the enfranchisement of women. Like Laura, Maud was also a strong-willed woman and had much to say on the subject, reflected in her becoming President of the Conservative Women's Suffrage Society. While she was still engaged to Willy, who was a firm Liberal supporter, she wrote to him explaining how she would always remain committed to her Conservative beliefs. She did not subscribe to the mid-Victorian view that women should be submissive, rather she advocated women's independence and advancement, particularly in light of the increasing educational opportunities which had opened up for women.[545] Willy was Honorary Vice-President of the organisation.

Having managed to keep this issue off the agenda of the Church Congress in 1912, the following year the Conference at Southampton discussed the topic under the heading 'The Kingdom of God and the Sexes.' Laura attended the Congress and later commented on some of the papers presented there that dealt with the ideals of womanhood and the ideals of manhood in an article she wrote under the same heading. Laura refers to one speaker, Mrs. Luke Paget, wife of the Bishop of Stepney, who using the new engendered language, raised the new ideal for women of "sex consciousness…a realisation of sisterhood, of womanhood…"[546] Laura acknowledged that the Women's Movement had led to an enlarged feeling of sisterhood and a greater sense of social duty amongst women. She agreed that the relationship between the sexes was complementary, but separate and distinct.

The support of both men and women was required in the Women's Movement, just as George had always supported women's work in the public sphere. Women such as Laura and many of her more moderate contemporaries did not come to the issue from the basis that they wanted equality with men, rather that the sexes were

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[545] Horn, P., p.86
[546] Ridding, L.E., 'The Kingdom of God and the Sexes,' in Winchester Diocesan Chronicle, April, 1914, p.58

different and complementary and that women had different qualities from men to bring to the political table for a more balanced political life.[547] Yet this was also exactly why opponents of suffrage voiced their objections. For Laura it was important that the true meaning behind the Women's Movement should not be misconstrued by the Church as an endeavour to gain full equal rights with men. Behind their efforts lay the fundamental Christian principle that women were not of inferior value to men.

In her article, Laura also raises the point that the Church had gravely ignored the opinions of women for many years, and yet God had chosen the co-operation of women in His grand design, so now women should be permitted to involve themselves further in Church work and debates armed with an improved education. For women who wanted a greater direct say in Church affairs, this was not fulfilled until 26 February 1919. When the new National Assembly met in 1920 for the first time, it had 646 members, of whom 357 were lay and out of these, 40 members were women, Louise Creighton and Maude Royden[548] included. This was certainly an achievement for women who wanted greater participation in Church government, however, Gill referring to Heeney concedes, it was not so much a victory for Church feminism, rather that the Church was put in a difficult position after the Parliamentary Reform Act of 1918 was passed, giving women over thirty the right to vote and stand as MPs.[549] As the Church was supposed to be representative of society it could not exclude women for much longer and on this issue the Church lagged behind society.

In 1917 the Rev. B.H. Streeter and Edith Picton-Turbervill published a book entitled '<u>Woman and the Church</u>,' in which they argued for the opening up of the debate of woman's place in the Church. They advocated women participating more fully in the ministry of the Church, certainly in a pastoral capacity, and those who were gifted as public speakers could make a real contribution to the life of the Church if they were granted licences to preach. They concluded their comments

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[547] Lewis, J., p.7

[548] Maude Royden (1876-1956) was an unconventional and controversial advocate of women's suffrage and women's ordination. Unable to preach in the Church of England, she worked as Assistant Minister at the Congregationalist City Temple and then set up the Guildhouse with an Anglican priest, Percy Dearmer.

[549] Gill, S., p.209

with the observation that the question of women's admission to the priesthood should be postponed until the majority of members decided they wanted change. They acknowledged that that time was not yet upon them. Although Laura did not directly give her opinion on the issue, it is clear from her writings that she agreed with Louise Creighton and did not support a move.

Through the ages women's position in the service of God had become relegated to the side-lines, as compared with those women in the Church of the first two centuries and the early Middle Ages.[550] Mrs. Picton-Turbervill argues that the debate was not just about women's rights, but about the Church giving a balanced message to the world. This was not only through the masculine medium, but also through the female, as the whole of humanity was made in the image of God, not just one half.[551] In rejecting the spiritual equality of women she argued that the Church was guilty of giving an incomplete service to God, in opposition to Christ's teaching and even that of St. Paul. She raises the point that more attention was being placed on 'feminine' qualities such as compassion and tenderness, revealing a more perfect, balanced view of the Godhead, referring to the 'Father-Motherhood of God.'[552]

Church feminism had been gaining momentum since the 1890's and churchwomen responded to this in one of two ways, as identified by Heeney. Either they reacted to challenge authority, for example, as Maude Royden sought to do, or they tried to convince authority that this new energy of women's active participation within the Church was a valid force, as Laura and Louise were trying to do.[553] Although a moderate Anglican feminist, Laura worked within the Church establishment. She used the existing machinery to effect a change. Laura wanted to encourage women's independence and individuality, but not at the expense of home life and the family unit. She was aiming for the 'elevation' rather than 'emancipation' of the female sex. Despite her forward-looking stance, in an article on Laura, published in 'The Young Woman,' J.A. Hammerton comments that Laura seemed

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[550] Streeter, B.H., & Picton-Turbervill, E., Woman and the Church, T. Fisher Unwin Ltd., London, 1917, p.33-4
[551] Ibid., p.38-9
[552] Ibid., p.46
[553] Heeney, B., p.89

far removed from the traditional image of the 'new woman' with her advanced ideas.[554] Laura was more measured in her response to the debate.

In the article written in 1897 Laura admits that she wanted women's suffrage to come gradually, and not for all women at once. The vote was only for the educated woman who had the discretion and the responsibility to use it wisely, a viewpoint that most upper class ladies took. The Parliamentary Franchise was the natural extension of women's right to vote for Parish Councils, School Boards, Boards of Guardians and Town Councils. In the same way, as women had proven themselves capable on these Boards, so they should be given the opportunity to use the vote. Even though Laura concedes in another article how some women aspired to attain such grand positions as Judgeships and Diplomatic Posts in the future,[555] she maintains she did not want women to become MPs.[556]

For Laura, the vote was the most important vehicle for women to be able to directly influence those departments that legislated for women's interests, paying particular attention to the social and industrial conditions in which women lived and worked. Without political power there were limits to their work. She was also concerned to secure the sympathetic consideration of those in the foreign and colonial departments for British women living in the colonies. Laura wanted to secure the vote for women to protect the interests of women through Government departments and legislation, stemming from her involvement in the NUWW and the conditions she had witnessed in her capacity as bishop's wife. She went so far as to confess:

> For my own part, I have no burning desire to be entrusted with a vote, but I do want men's interests to be awakened in some of those women's questions; and if women's suffrage did this, it would be bound to produce an immense amount of good. That would be the great advantage that would follow the extension of the franchise to women, as it would induce in our legislators a more lively interest in women's questions.[557]

The early date of this article (1897) should be considered in this statement as her viewpoint evolved and she later joined Maud's Conservative and Unionist

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[554] Hammerton, J.A., p.150
[555] Ridding, L.E., 'The Early Days of the NUWW,' p.10
[556] Hammerton, J.A., p.151
[557] Ibid., p.151

Women's Franchise Association. In addition her influential friend, Louise Creighton, was still maintaining her anti-suffrage stand at this time, until she changed her viewpoint in 1906.

Louise later explains in her own memoirs how she regretted signing the petition against female suffrage in a prominent journal:

> As regards Suffrage, I believed that it would be of great advantage to have a large body of intelligent and thoughtful opinion that stood outside party politics. I have always hated everything that was concerned with (political) parties. But my best friends and fellow workers did not share my opinions. Kathleen (Lyttelton) was always very keen for the Suffrage and distressed that I did not work for it…
> …At the request of Lord (James) Bryce… Mary Ward and I got up a protest, or rather manifesto, against female Suffrage which appeared in the Nineteenth Century. I think this was a mistake on my part. Those who signed it did so from very different points of view and many who really were only known as the wives of their husbands were amongst the number…[558]

Louise makes the important point how upper class women did exercise considerable influence, but that in most cases this sprang from their social position and status as the wives of prominent men. Ironically Louise was one of the few ecclesiastical hostesses who could claim influence in her own right.

Louise's change of opinion over the female suffrage question still had its consequences years after she changed camps. Laura confides in her diary how she believed that Louise lacked credibility for the suffrage cause:

> Louise insists on speaking for Suffrage at Mrs. Fawcett's great meeting on Feb 2nd… I hope all these departures won't do NUWW hurt. She seems to me to want restraint. Courage she has always had. Prudence she despises…[559]
> …To Hampton Court. Had a talk over the Queen and Suffrage questions with Louise Creighton. She <u>can't</u> take in the harm it would do for <u>her</u> to speak at a Suffrage Meeting just now. But she has loyally stuck to what Mrs. Prothero and I have done in (with her leave) withdrawing her name from the speakers. She

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[558] Covert, J.T., p.145
[559] Diary entry for Thursday 22 January 1914, 9M68/34, HRO

> has a curious incapacity (is it the root of her Radicalism?) for seeing points which she despises…[560]

In 1907 Laura wrote a tract, as requested by the National Union of Suffrage Societies, in reply to the question, 'Ought Women to Have the Suffrage?'[561] Other contributors included Mrs. Fawcett, Mrs. Thomas Hardy and Louise Creighton. Laura's tract took the form of a dialogue between the master and the mistress of the house, where the latter answered the former's concerns about the Votes for Women issue. It revealed the development of Laura's thought on the subject since her pronouncements in 1897 when George was still alive. She argues that the vote was just a natural progression of women's development, as women already owned property of their own and were qualified to vote in towns and the countryside. When the husband asks his wife how Parliament related to women, she replies that legislation concerned women and children as well as men, in particular those laws regarding health, education, marriage, inheritance, property, lunacy and the Poor Law. This was Laura's main argument.

Laura argues that as women were the experts on domestic affairs, they should be given the vote as Parliament mainly dealt with such matters. Women needed a voice so that issues that affected them could be heard. Any fear that the vote would in some way 'unsex' women was rejected with the argument that their existing public duties had not done so. More importantly, the emancipation of women was a way of fulfilling one's social obligations, through the extension of women's public roles.

On 18 May 1909 Lord Curzon, leader of the National League for Opposing Women's Suffrage addressed a meeting, raising fifteen specific reasons why female suffrage should not be granted. In an unpublished response, Laura replied directly to each of Lord Curzon's criticisms with a corresponding witty verse. Lord Curzon argued that activity in the political sphere would take women away from their families and maternity, which was their 'highest duty.' He also raised the point that women's judgment would never match a man's as they did not have the balance of

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[560] Diary entry for Wednesday 10 June 1914, 9M68/34, HRO
[561] Ridding, L.E., 'Ought Women to Have the Suffrage?', in The Woman at Home, March 1907, pp.568-573

mind or the right training, as compared with a man. He concluded his address by contending that the return of a British Government, voted in by a large female contingency, would weaken the nation in the eyes of foreign powers.

Laura responded with such verses as:

> …Twelve valid arguments drawn from laws of sex and Heaven.
> One read great Queen Victoria's Life: and then there were eleven!
>
> Eleven valid arguments, that Votes are but for men
> A woman-householder seized one: and so she made them ten!…
>
> Nine valid arguments, shewed forth the dangers to the State
> One died of inconsistency: and so left only eight!…
>
> Seven valid arguments, based on views of Indian Sikh
> One disappeared behind the Purdah, leaving only six!…
>
> No valid argument will lie of all the great fifteen
> They all have vanished into dust as if they'd never been.[562]

Laura was quick to use humour in many situations, especially where she saw a prig at work.

The outbreak of the Great War did much to further the cause of the Women's Movement. On the front cover of the last edition of 'The Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Review,' when it halted publication during the conflict, Laura's sister-in-law, Maud Selborne, argued that if women were added to the electorate it would strengthen the forces for peace. This was echoed by other female contributors to the journal.[563] The war served to force changes in the position of many women, what Arthur Marwick calls a "unique and concentrated experience for women"[564] as their menfolk joined the citizen army. As men were conscripted, increasing employment opportunities opened up for many women. Mrs. Fawcett, President of the NUWSS, argued that women should use this unique

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[562] Ridding, L.E., 'Fifteen Valid Arguments for the Grant of Female Suffrage,' 9M68 73/19/2, HRO
[563] Selborne, Countess of., The Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Review, No.22, January-March 1915
[564] Marwick, A., p.163

opportunity to prove themselves worthy of citizenship, and suspended agitations in order to support the war effort.

Chapter Five

Doves and dragons

Laura's active ministry for the welfare of women and children spanned twenty years at Southwell and it certainly did not end when George died in 1904. It is important to establish the motivations behind her work, and who benefited most from it - herself or those she helped? A number of complex considerations for women's involvement in philanthropy have been offered by social commentators. Jane Lewis suggests that self-interest was a major factor. Some women of leisure and means wanted access to the world beyond the dull routine that the household and the family offered them. The worlds of charity and philanthropy were one acceptable bridge into the public sphere. Lewis stresses that the appetite to do something challenging and stimulating outside the home should not be underestimated.[565]

As Laura found through her contact with others in the organisations she joined and led, the network of female friendships offered to women such as Laura provided a much-needed sense of community, especially after they were widowed. Laura was a widow for thirty-five years, as was Louise, and Ben was a widow for twenty-two years. The strength of their bonds can be evidenced through Ben's close relationship with Lucy Tait, Edith Davidson's sister. Ben's son, Fred, writes of "the completeness with which Lucy Tait was my mothers…" and "Lucy Tait, the friend of her heart."[566] In a further book about his mother he explains:

> My mother's intimacies and emotional friendships had always been with women; no man, except my father had ever counted in her life and this long love between her and Lucy was the greatest of all these attachments. It was impossible to think of them apart.[567]

Laura saw her friendships as one of the greatest gifts from God. The bishops' wives who were closest to her were also committed to ushering in the Kingdom of

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[565] Lewis, J., p.10
[566] Benson, E.F., Mother, p.199 & p.201
[567] Benson, E.F., Final Edition, p.12

God and often these sophisticated connections could sustain campaigns as they crossed paths in an almost incestuous fashion.

Prochaska agrees with Lewis that through their public work, women could be delivered from the shackles of their "stitch-stitch-church-stitch routine of female existence."[568] Also women such as Laura wanted to feel useful to society and looked for an appropriate outlet through which to express themselves. Philanthropy offered the opportunity to fulfil one's social and moral obligation and make a difference, but the reality of charity work was often unpleasant. Troops on the ground encountered such conditions and coarseness of manners as they had never witnessed before. Yet many women continued to battle in such poor conditions and in the face of opposition. Despite her labours and experiences with individual cases, Laura's skills lay in organisation and discourse. Such work did give them the organisational and public speaking skills they lacked, but Laura felt strongly that she had a special mission in society as a citizen with a full contribution to make. She was moved by so much more than the urge to do something useful with her leisure time, facilitated by her position as the wife of a bishop.

The conspicuous desire to control the lower classes and maintain the status quo is another suggested reason for women's public work. In the class-ridden society in which Laura lived, where philanthropists held a hierarchical view of society, this was a real consideration. Gill comments how many Anglican women from the upper echelons of society believed that their charity work was God-given and that they could make class differences "more acceptable by softening their contours through kindness."[569] Laura hinted at this herself through her character of Cecy in 'The Justice Room.' Cecy argues that inter-class dialogue could foster understanding, preventing the workers from rebelling. Kathleen Lyttelton argues along the same lines as Laura, writing "it may be true that the English love a lord and lady, and that there is a certain patronizing element in much of our work amongst the poor. But, on the other hand, there is something to be said even for this."[570] Kathleen inferred that there was less talk and fear of anarchism in England

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[568] Prochaska, F., p.11
[569] Gill, S., p.137
[570] Lyttelton, K., p.80

as compared with other countries such as France. She believed that this was true of the different English classes who came across each other so often that an understanding developed. Reynolds contends that churches and schools sought to reinforce the existing social hierarchy, so Laura, as a cog in the establishment machine did not wholly represent the model of the 'new woman.' Indeed Reynolds goes further by suggesting that upper class women worked in the public sphere because of their exalted position. Paternalism ensured continuance of the stability of society.[571]

Lewis refers to Eileen Yeo who argues that women extended their sphere of action to the public domain at the expense of the poor. Many were reduced to paupers and the suggested solutions to day-to-day social problems merely whitewashed over the cracks of a far deeper problem. It could be argued that if these women could paper over the most obvious hardships, perhaps they would feel less of a sense of class guilt. Again the character of Cecy raises this point in 'The Justice Room,' the novel Laura wrote that revealed much about her attitude towards social problems and those that prevailed at the time. It could soothe one's troubled mind: "social service proved the anodyne which it often becomes to the perplexed philanthropists whatever its effects may be on the objects of his ministrations."[572]

Overall, Lewis does not take such a cynical view of women's individual efforts at charity. She believes their motives stemmed from their desire to encourage even the poorest and weakest in society to make their contribution as citizens of the Empire.[573] Prochaska agrees that the motive of class guilt was not very powerful, especially as many women worked very hard in often depressing and alien conditions that they could have chosen to avoid. Women did work hard to alleviate poverty and raise moral standards, but they also wished to do so without threatening their own position in the grand scheme of things.[574] This was true of Laura. Their motives were complex and not as clear-cut as some commentators have suggested. There would have been an element of class guilt in Laura's motivations to improve the conditions in which women lived and worked, but she sought the co-operation

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[571] Reynolds, K.D., p.71
[572] Ridding, L.E., The Justice Room, p.190
[573] Lewis, J., p.307-8
[574] Prochaska, F., p.125

of all women in this grand project. As a moderate feminist she saw the whole female sex over and above any one particular class of woman. They shared a common experience through the same ministry, whether in the capacity of the Lady of the Manor, administering local relief, or the working woman in the slums. This was borne out by her strong affiliation to the Woman's League and the NUWW.

Laura, as wife of a leading ecclesiastic and daughter of a titled man, was a member of the ruling elite. Coming from such a privileged background as she did, one has to question whether she really could comprehend and relate to the lives of those women she sought to help. Undoubtedly as one who only sees selective parts of another's existence, it is never possible to grasp the full reality of their life. This was true of Laura, and yet through the various roles she undertook she gained a true insight into the lives and culture of those women from the opposite end of the social spectrum, especially in her capacity as bishop's wife. Laura raises the point in an article for the Mothers' Union that many educated Christian women had internalised certain class prejudices against women in other classes, despite their new-found 'enlightenment.'[575] Such prejudice was deep-rooted in the culture of all classes and hard to abandon, but she urged her readership to make the change and reject their feelings of class exclusivity through education, by studying the political and social questions that affected the interests of all classes, as she did.

As the primary educators of their children in their formative years, women had a duty to raise them with an understanding of the wider picture as issue-conscious citizens. Informed of the lives of those in other classes, there was the potential for it to filter down through the class system. Laura believed that women had a responsibility to teach their children intellectually as well as morally and spiritually, as Louise Creighton had done with her own children. Great causes and conflicts and the key intellectual questions of the day needed to be explored further between mother and child, as Laura had done with her parents. Laura started with her own kind, gentlewomen, as she could speak their language and understood their habits of thought, action and culture.

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[575] Ridding, L.E., 'On the Individual Work of Every Member of the Mothers' Union,' p.43

Through her involvement with such organisations as the Woman's League and the NUWW and as a member of the establishment, Laura felt she fulfilled her moral responsibility and social duty to regenerate women of all classes. She envisaged a future where a regenerated and respectable working class and morally and socially responsible middle-and-upper class stood together on issues of national importance. Laura wanted to coax the educated woman she knew so well into action on behalf of those classes of women who had no access to a formal education. Laura argues that contrary to creating class distinction, public service could destroy all class and economic barriers for the common cause of bringing in the Kingdom of God,[576] qualifying this statement with the following analogy:

> We read how the famous ancient bells were made of rosy copper, glistening tin, precious gold and virgin silver, with zinc and other metals all melted down together in certain proportions. All these rare and common metals were needed to yield the one true note, to peal forth one deep full tone.[577]

It appeared from her writings that she did want to break down the class barriers, while maintaining her own position. With the mutual co-operation of women from all classes, as the moral and social agents of the family who passed on their value systems to their children, they were charged with the responsibility to raise the general moral tone of society. This could not be achieved by women from the higher classes alone. Certainly this philosophy underpinned the Woman's League, who sought to recruit from the lower classes. Members included forewomen and servants of a senior level in its ranks.[578] Laura appreciated the value of training women of lower social rank as Church Army nurses, Bible-women and Parochial Mission women. They could go amongst their own kind, speaking plainly, used to their customs, belief systems and culture, working as an interface between such women and their own supervisors who came from more privileged backgrounds (as Laura's mother had been a supervisor for a number of years for the PMWA). Laura asserts that the old contention that the upper classes set the fashion in society still held true, but that in addition to this old interpretation the co-operation of all classes needed to be secured to heal "the whole body" as "it cannot be dispersed by the

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[576] Ridding, L.E., The School of Souls…, p.39
[577] Ridding, L.E., 'The Tone of the Village…,' p.12
[578] Ridding, L.E., 'The Woman's League,' p.383

action or influence of the brain alone. Every limb, every muscle, must be exerted to expel the poison and to bring back a healthier condition."[579]

Always seeking to present a balanced picture, Laura did not forget the needs of her own class as she also raised the importance of a religious mission to the professional and upper classes, who had often been neglected by missionaries. In an article in 'The Guardian,' with the assistance of her sister, Freda, Laura writes about the plight of rich men such as Dives and his friends who were "starving in their lack of spiritual experience."[580] Christ had taught that the condition of the rich was far graver than that of the poor and so she called labourers to evangelise to the rich.

Another element to take into consideration in establishing Laura's motivations for her public service is to question to what extent she was trying to get to the root of the wider causes of social and moral problems and how far she just masked them by dealing with just the symptoms on a more superficial level. It was always going to be hard to strike the balance between urgently required assistance of a practical nature and long-term strategies to eradicate poverty and its associated ills. Prochaska argues that women workers achieved a great deal of good despite their initial lack of training and the resistance of unsympathetic men who served on many of the boards of charitable and public institutions. However, without access to direct political power through the medium of the vote, women could only make a difference to society up to a certain point. They could not change structures and so their solutions were often no more than just palliatives to the problems they encountered. Their work tended to be practical rather than theoretical for the same reason and their efforts usually addressed current and individual difficulties, rather than long-terms goals.[581] As far as she could, Laura tried to address long-term strategies for the elevation of the female sex in her articles and tracts, especially in connection with her work for the NUWW, but rarely were her answers more than solutions to local problems. At her Address of Welcome at the 1895 NUWW Conference in Nottingham she advises her listeners not just to think of the vast

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[579] Ridding, L.E., 'Is it in the Power of the Upper Classes…?', p.74
[580] Ridding, L.E., & Biddulph, S.W., The Guardian, 7 January 1910, p.33
[581] Prochaska, F., p.18

masses of "hideous troops" who needed assistance throughout the country. Rather she suggests they should help individuals in smaller, more manageable groups, bearing out Prochaska's comment.[582]

Gill refers to Deborah Gorham who suggests that the social purity campaigners never grasped the power that poverty held over prostitute's lives. It was very easy for ladies of leisure to tell them to change their lives, but life after prostitution in the days when programmes of national welfare were still in their inception was hard.[583] Laura's contemporary, Beatrice Webb, became disillusioned with the limits of philanthropy, turning instead to the idea of state intervention. In comparison, Laura was more the typical individualist of the old school of philanthropy who treated poverty in a more spiritual rather than scientific manner. Few women besides Beatrice moved beyond the realm of social reform into that of the theoretical study of the superstructure, so Laura was not unusual.[584] Although Laura was not critical of the class structure and the extremes of poverty and wealth that the Industrial Revolution had created, she did try to encourage the educated woman to erase her class prejudice with regard to her poorer sisters. She also believed strongly that feminine influence could lift the tone of society if her fellow sisters worked together.

Laura was armed with faith and sympathy, but she did not just hold the romantic idea that she could change society with these weapons alone. With time, and in view of women's participation in local government, she accepted that women needed the voice that the vote would give them to effect more long-term changes. For all his criticism of the individual and short-term endeavours of philanthropy, Prochaska raises the important point that if women workers such as Laura had not worked to try to alleviate social ills, there would have been no respite for thousands of suffering individuals. Poverty and sickness was so widespread that any relief, however small-scale, could not be cast aside. Prochaska maintains that, "abstract debates about the value of charity were often out of place. The visitors who came across such scenes did not have the time, indeed the detachment, to question the

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[582] Ridding, L.E., 'Presidential (Local Committee) Address of Welcome,' p.3
[583] Gill, S., p.102
[584] Prochaska, F., p.133

nature and the ultimate result of the relief they provided."[585] Women working on the frontline, as well as fund-raisers and organisers, had to deal with much criticism from the quarters of "masculine officialism"[586] even though they themselves were slow in offering an alternative system of relief. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, these voices grew less conspicuous, especially in light of the support of such sympathetic men as George Ridding.

Prochaska goes so far as to comment on how charity workers made a huge contribution to the stability of nineteenth century society, but prior to 1918, as women and as volunteers, they could only really dispense temporary relief.[587] Despite the potential for abuse, Prochaska argues that the evidence reveals a picture where the benefits far outweighed the disadvantages, concluding with the powerful comment that "charity could not pauperise a starving child and the dead are rarely hypocrites."[588] Laura's work at the NUWW alongside the great female minds of her day went some way to influence her thought. Her good friend, Emily Janes, argues that they should address causes, as well as outcomes. She warned that the Union "must fence the precipice at the top before she provides an ambulance at the bottom."[589] In an article published in 'Macmillans Magazine' in January 1880 entitled 'Dustyards' Laura's favourite sister, Sophy, describes one visit she paid to the Parochial Mission Women among the dustyard workers. She concludes her article by acknowledging that her efforts just touched the surface with regard to the sea of suffering in the world, but resolved: "these first visits should encourage us to go on, and to look in this, as in wider fields, for a fuller harvest in God's good time."[590]

Laura acknowledged that the home was crucial as the nucleus of national character, where habits and ideas were formed, but women needed to expand their education so that they were informed about the great debates of the day. She also noted how, like Emily Janes, individual assistance was best administered with knowledge of

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[585] Ibid., p.115-6
[586] Ibid., p.222
[587] Ibid., p.137
[588] Ibid., p.135
[589] Janes, E., 'On the Associated Work of Women in Religion and Philanthropy,' p.145
[590] Ridding, L.E., Sophia Matilda Palmer…, pp.57-8

the great causes from which the misery stemmed.[591] In her article entitled 'Women at Work,' Laura includes the 'Study of the Causes of Immorality' as a sub-heading in the developmental stages of her plan for rescue work, though she called for a study of the causes of sin. She argued that people in positions of responsibility had much to answer for in respect to this. Parents, employers, landlords and public authorities had a responsibility to look after the welfare of those in their care and that involved an increased understanding of their charges. [592] Laura's activities in the public sphere may not have gone far to erase problems inherent in the social structure, but she provided temporary relief and hope for many, as well as promoting women's interests on local and national levels. This in itself made a positive contribution, among others, to the profile of the Women's Movement in general, both in the Church and in society.

Modern circumstances had produced the demand for women to participate in wider social service than their immediate surroundings permitted. As Gill highlights, many feared that the social structure was beginning to fail as a consequence of industrialisation, the expansion of cities and growing conflict between the classes.[593] Prochaska believes that the efforts with which women workers responded to the 'national calamity,' which faced their fellow men and women should not be underestimated. Seeking to dispel the myth of the perfunctory efforts of the volunteer, he argues, "we have been dealing with more than a small band of amateurish ladies, who to fill out their idle hours passed out peppermints."[594]

There were few public social services organised in a systematic and national way in the nineteenth century and the work of the bishop's wives went some way to fulfil this need. After Queen Victoria's death in 1901 the new century ushered in Liberal optimism for social reformation, but problems were still mostly addressed at a local level. It is interesting to chart the development of the voluntary organisations Laura was involved with from their amateur beginnings with a religious basis to their mature systematic culmination in the twentieth century. Prochaska writes about the

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[591] Ridding, L.E., 'On the Individual Work of Every Member of the Mothers' Union,' p.44
[592] Ridding, L.E., 'Women at Work,' p.174
[593] Gill, S., p.136
[594] Prochaska, F., p.223-4

"grafting of social science methods" onto such ingenuous bodies as time passed and their business evolved from charity to social work.[595]

More specific to Laura's position, another motive which has been propounded by Janet Spedding, was the concept that clergy wives felt they had to justify their existence in the light of their historical and theological background. Ever since her appearance during Elizabeth I's reign, the clergy wife's position was marginal. The legal position of clergy wives was finally secured in 1604 and yet as Spedding argues, the matter was still far from resolved in practical terms.[596] As raised earlier, the debate on clerical celibacy was reawakened in the Church of England in connection with the Tractarian Movement. Celibacy was held up as the preferred route for the priesthood, and conversely it was implied that married clergy were less effective in their vocation, hence Catharine Tait's expansion into the public sphere. The wives of bishops who succeeded Catharine certainly followed her lead, and evolved further still. Also Laura would have been motivated by a desire to be a good wife to her husband and to help promote George's career.

Lewis argues that women of Laura's rank felt the overwhelming desire to lead useful lives, a primary motive for their active participation in charity and public work. A major element of what Lewis identifies as the "language of duty" of the period were women's obligations, as opposed to women's rights. Glick illuminates Louise Creighton's true feelings on the suffrage debate that reflected her sense of duty as a fully participating citizen. Louise writes an article in 1897, before her switch to the pro-suffrage lobby, explaining her decision to back the anti-suffrage movement:

> What is especially needed by women at the present time? I know that many will not seek far for the answer but will at once say: 'The Parliamentary Suffrage, and Oxford and Cambridge Degrees.' Do not be afraid; I am not going to discuss either of these questions. They share the common danger that they lead women to think more of their rights than of their duties… Above all we must never so fight for our rights that we neglect our duties. I know well that some believe so firmly that the giving

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[595] Ibid., p.132
[596] Spedding, J., p.87

> of the Suffrage to women will at once sweep away most of our difficulties, that they feel justified in making that their first, their main object. But in the meantime, as there seems little immediate prospect of the satisfaction of their desires, we may well consider what else is especially needed by women.[597]

In the same way, Laura was grateful for the opportunities to fulfil her moral and social sense of duty at Southwell.[598]

Duty was a word she uses frequently in her papers. She describes how one grew to learn the importance of duty to others as one progresses through life. Duty was owed to those who ministered to others, to fellow-citizens and to 'victims of sin and pain.'[599] Her acknowledgment of her status as citizen as well as wife implied her active service not only to her immediate family and friends, but beyond, to those in the local community, and to the nation. The link between the individual, the community and society was an important connection, especially for those who considered themselves to be part of the Christian priesthood of believers, and Laura believed that work for the family in the realm of the home was too narrow and should be supplemented by service in the wider community.[600]

In a series of articles Laura wrote in 1903 entitled 'Our Service to the Commonwealth,' the March edition focused on this fundamental motive for her public service, calling ladies of leisure to such work by drawing attention to their citizenship. She suggests that women should render service on public committees and boards, with the argument that "it is God and the Commonwealth who call capable women to give this service now."[601] The consequences of ignoring their public duty was grave indeed as many people would suffer in response to their apathy. She always encouraged women to take a more active part in Church work than they currently undertook.

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[597] Glick, D., p.197-8
[598] Hammerton, J.A., p.150
[599] Ridding, L.E., 'Our Service to the Commonwealth,' February 1903, p.22-3
[600] Ridding, L.E., 'Should Married Women Engage in Public Work?', p.111
[601] Ridding, L.E., 'Our Service to the Commonwealth,' March 1903, p.45

Wider still than service to the community, Laura urges her readers to share in the 'service of patriotism'[602] and spoke of the 'Call of the Empire.'[603] Writing in 1903, two years after Queen Victoria's death, Laura writes about the Empire and how patriotism, religion and philanthropy were all interlinked together. She argues that the Empire had been given to the British by God in order to raise the children of the Empire to work towards the common goal of bringing in the Golden Age.[604] She also interpreted Christ's pronouncement of duty to one's neighbours as applicable to wider than just one's own circle of family and friends.[605] Laura urged those educated women she addressed to heed the calls of the Empire. As the "spiritual mint-masters" of the Empire, women were under a special moral obligation to oversee its standards of morality. Holiness and righteousness were the key words to remember as those at home were encouraged to offer up prayers for satisfactory female emigrants to enrich the colonies in which they found themselves.[606] Laura referred to Britain as the "wise mother,"[607] occupying a parental standing in relation to the colonies and their inhabitants.

She went on to remark that one had a duty to pray for the rulers as well as the ruled and that an interest should be taken by women in foreign missions in such territories as Australia, Canada, China, India and Africa, chastising those who begrudged offering their prayers and assistance towards such missions. She ends one article vociferously with strong words against what she saw as:

> The awful deed of crucifying our Lord afresh, and putting Him to an open shame in the eyes of the Mohammedans and heathen races… by the idle hands of trifling women, who, by their self-indulgence, flirting and folly, make the Christian religion hateful in the sight of the grave, horrified, pagan onlookers.[608]

She could tolerate nothing worse than 'the idle hands of trifling women.' Women should start with their role as homemaker, manager and mother, but should extend their education and knowledge of the world beyond the four walls of their homes.

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[602] Ridding, L.E., 'Our Service to the Commonwealth,' May 1903, p.71
[603] Ridding, L.E., 'The Call of the Empire,' pp.1-8
[604] Ridding, L.E., 'On the Individual Work of Every Member of the Mothers' Union,' p.44
[605] Ridding, L.E., 'Our Service to the Commonwealth,' February 1903, p.22
[606] Ridding, L.E., 'The Call of the Empire,' pp.4-7
[607] Ibid., p.5
[608] Ridding, L.E., 'Our Service to the Commonwealth,' May 1903, p.71-2

Laura's own personal circumstances adhered to Julia Parker's five-fold model of factors that contributed to her public service activities. Firstly her family encouraged her to take an interest in social and political issues. Secondly the strength of her family relationships were such that she was supported by George, her parents and her siblings to do her duty. Laura also conceived her maternal and moral roles to have a wider application. As a woman she believed she had specific responsibilities and the confidence she drew from her family background encouraged her to challenge certain prejudices. Fourthly, as a believer, she observed the Anglican stress on Christian duty and lastly she sought to fight injustice in the world where she could, a quality inherited mostly from her father.[609] Parker also notes that, out of the ten women she studied, six remained single and four were married and that the married women did not bear many children, as was the trend at the time. She deduces from this that, to some extent, social service was an alternative to child-rearing.[610] When Cecy's young son, Rupert, told his mother that he was glad he was not poor and belonged to what he called "big people," Cecy replied, "big people have to live up to their calling."[611] Laura therefore believed that patronage and service was the duty of the rich in return for privilege and power, though Laura was not motivated by a desire for ecclesiastical glory. This may have been a by-product of her service, motivated by purer intentions.

Above anything else, Laura was motivated by her faith in God, a faith which had been nurtured over many years as a child and young adult at Blackmoor with her parents, and later at Winchester and Southwell under the direction of her husband, George. The motives behind her public work were complex indeed, and one can draw out elements of each as suggested above in Laura's case, but one can distinguish the common thread of her overwhelming sense of trust in God running through her life's writings. She would pray for guidance and direction, and would try to respond to His calls. In her position as the wife of an eminent bishop, Laura was well-placed to supervise and encourage work for women and children and the weakest and most vulnerable in society. To argue that she engaged in such activity

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[609] Parker, J., Women & Welfare. Ten Victorian Women in Public Service, The Macmillan Press Ltd., Basingstoke, 1988, p.4
[610] Ibid., p.6
[611] Ridding, L.E., The Justice Room, p.234

merely as an antidote to childlessness and the limitations of domestic life would be too facile. Her faith and her day-to-day life were so interweaved that it coloured all she thought and did and elucidated why she worked so hard.

Laura's life and her faith were inseparably bonded together. Referring in an article to the low morality of some people who lived in rural districts, Laura describes "their rustic Christianity" and argues that:

> In such places religion somehow seems to have got curiously detached from everyday life in the people's minds. Life and death are real enough, and so in a certain way is, possibly, religion; but they appear to look upon it as the white frillings inside a coffin rather than the cloak to wrap around them while they walk by day, or the blanket to shelter them at night. Such a religion is not even a veneer, it has never encrusted them.[612]

In the eulogy at her funeral in 1939, the Bishop of Bombay speaks of her intense faith and the great influence of her parents in the following terms:

> God was the great reality. They brought up their children accordingly. It was a pious Victorian home, in which the piety was real and deep. The religion which she caught from her parents was nurtured on prayer and Bible and Sacrament, on all the Church provides for its children. She drew on those sources of strength throughout her life… God, the great reality, gave to her work a certain intensity which overcame the anxieties which it constantly caused her. It was His work and He was behind her in it.[613]

Lewis offers the more cynical exegesis that middle and upper class women ministered to the poor and destitute in order to save their own souls, rather than those they ministered to.[614] Laura's motives were not so selfish - she had witnessed at first-hand the narrow attitudes and behaviour of her evangelical Aunt Waldegraves, who went to extremes to ensure their souls were secured a place amongst the faithful few. She understood that the moral standard throughout the Empire, starting at home, would have to be raised significantly before the Kingdom would be heralded in. This required the co-operation of all, not just the chosen few.

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[612] Ridding, L.E., 'The Tone of the Village…' pp.7-8
[613] Palmer, E.J., 'Address at the Funeral of Lady Laura Ridding…,' p.2
[614] Lewis, J., p.11

Heeney agrees that strong religious conviction proved to be a major inspiration for women's work for social causes. Certainly in Laura's case, philanthropy and religious work were hardly indistinguishable from each other as they were appropriate outlets for her faith. Much of her work was characterised by her concern to tend to the welfare of the soul as well as the body. The Christian faith placed a moral obligation upon the faithful. In this way, Christianity could emancipate women from certain aspects of the powerful high Victorian ideology of femininity that confined women to the home, as much as it could subordinate women through a traditional interpretation of its teaching on the role of women, as suggested by Wolffe.[615]

Women had to make sacrifices but Scripture also afforded women opportunities to go out into the world and transform society, armed with love, in imitation of Christ, and to this end Prochaska called such women workers 'disciples.'[616] Philanthropy could provide a legitimate outlet for the Christian values of love and sacrifice to be worked out in the world.[617] Laura herself suggests in her article, 'The Girl Who Should Marry a Clergyman,' that the church worker should see Christ in every member of the parish and that this should be the inspiration behind her charitable endeavour.[618] Armed with the power of Divine Grace, she worked out her spirituality through her work for others, as well as through the relationships she built up, and through her writings.

Roundell Palmer was arguably the most prominent layman in the Church in the late nineteenth century, and he taught his children to love and respect the Church. Both Laura and her father sought to defend the establishment of the Church and took their roles as Church workers seriously. In a paper that Laura penned in 1916, 'The Churchmanship of Women in the Last Seventy Years,' she charts the history of the churchwoman in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, acknowledging the rich and varied work that women had undertaken. She describes this process as "this

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[615] Wolffe, J., 'The End of Victorian Values? Women, Religion and the Death of Queen Victoria,' in Women in the Church, Sheils, W.J. and Wood, D., (eds), p.482
[616] Prochaska, F., p.16
[617] Gill, S., p.131
[618] Ridding, L.E., 'The Girl Who Should Marry a Clergyman,' p.163

opening of her gates,"[619] reflecting adeptly how churchwomen responded to the shift from the individualism of Evangelicalism and Benthamism of the early nineteenth century to the more collective principles of the Broad Church and the Tractarians mid-century.

The nation's conscience was awoken to its responsibilities to the plight of the outcast and downtrodden in society. An example of this was through the Tractarian's doctrine of the Church and the brotherhood of all its members in the Body of Christ that encouraged people towards active social service. She also praises the influential work of the Christian Socialists who laboured in the slums of London. Interestingly, rather than lauding the efforts of the evangelicals for their part in kick-starting efforts towards social regeneration earlier in the century, Laura chastises them for their focus on personal salvation at the expense of the welfare of others.

She looked to the history of the 'Lady Bountiful' image that was mocked when she was writing, but she pressed the point that these women were the groundbreakers, the 'New Women' of their day who responded in their own limited way to the challenges that were brought to their attention. Relief was dispensed on a much smaller scale than in the latter years of the century, but it was a start. Laura illustrates how her early Victorian sisters had no major concern for Church questions or with the well being of those in other classes or races, other than those in their own set. She also embraced the revival of Anglican Sisterhoods in 1845, referring to them as 'pioneers.'

Laura identifies the Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny as two events that prompted women of Laura's class into public service as, "the birth-pangs of a new era of spiritual energy, which broke down the fence that had previously confined women's sympathies within its own narrow circle."[620] In addition to this, the development of the principle of collectivism had provoked women to take a more active line in the work of the Church during the 1860's, 70's and 80's. Women

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[619] Ridding, L.E., 'The Churchmanship of Women in the Last Seventy Years,' in The Guardian, 20 January 1916, p.70
[620] Ibid., p.70

inaugurated their new co-operation with such work as district-visiting, by missions to specific sections of the community, such as prostitutes, factory-workers, friendless girls and through work in the public and charitable institutions in which Laura took an interest.

Improvements in women's education had also made a significant contribution to women's work outside the home. Instruction in Girls' High Schools, Women's Colleges and Training Colleges from the 1860's onwards gave girls the confidence to leave the confines of their own circle. Laura also commends the writings of such women as Charlotte Yonge and Elizabeth Sewell in this way. It was only when women were accepted on public committees with men and permitted to make public addresses to the Church Congress that Laura appreciated how far women`s work had progressed since her early Victorian sisters began to show an interest in extending their sphere of influence. Laura concludes the article with her thoughts on the future of women's work for the nation and the Church in the twentieth century (she was writing in 1916). She was optimistic for the future, but feared the spread of secularisation. Fewer women were attracted to work for, or worship in, the Church. Laura suggests that women were being enticed away from their traditional roles as wife and mother by the charms of materialism and all that it promised. With the increasing pressures of work, women also had less time to devote to the exercise of the soul through the various channels of prayer, worship and Bible-study.

Laura's deep affection for the Church inspired her to service. She refutes the claims of disestablishment and disendowment of the Church in a tract for the Church Committee for Defence and Instruction. In this public relations exercise she argues that people should not vote against the Church because their parson was lazy or ineffective. Rather, they should relate their concerns to their bishop, who would endeavour to address them as best he could. On a positive note, Laura offers reasons why the institution was still sorely needed by society. As well as preaching the Gospel to the poor, it provided a comprehensive list of services to the nation: worship, religious teaching, sacraments and pastoral ministration in every town and village in the country. Laura questions who else could satisfy these requirements if the Church was disestablished and pleaded that if the nonconformist churches

sought to demonstrate what better systems they could offer the nation, in place of the Church of England, let them do it now, before the Church was gone and these successive schemes revealed to be ineffective. She concludes the tract with the following warning, "any fool can throw a pearl into the sea, but all the world's navies cannot fish it out."[621]

Overall, Laura promoted the benefits of active participation in public work, whether in a philanthropic or public capacity, whether in the field or in a commanding position. It is interesting to note that Laura enjoyed the use of military metaphors in her writings. She envisaged her work for women as a war against those forces that conspired to keep the most vulnerable sections of society in moral, spiritual and physical poverty, and she was one of the commanding officers. The era in which Laura lived was a time of great change for women, socially and legally. Born in 1849, when the ideologies of femininity and domesticity were at their pinnacle, she benefited from the advances made in women's education, witnessing the progression of the state of womanhood through the transition from the domestic realm, through the charitable and then public domains, to full enfranchisement and citizenship for some women. The ideology of separate spheres was still perpetuated as the new century dawned, but women were on the way to winning further legal rights. Laura was unquestionably part of this change.

Of critical importance in understanding Laura is the fact that she sought to redefine, not challenge her traditional role outside the home. She saw Christianity as a faith of action, which not only improved society but also benefited women on a personal level. Laura believed women's biggest hurdles were their own complacence and nonchalance. The world was not rife with compassion fatigue. Women who made the initial leap of faith into action on behalf of others would be blessed with an increased self-confidence, awareness and respect that their traditional role within the family alone could not provide. This was in addition to the wealth of skills and responsibility they could receive, as well as the knowledge that they were making a difference to society.

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[621] Ridding, L.E., 'The Booking Clerk of Blunderrue,' 9M68/73/8, HRO, p.12

Laura firmly believed that women's active participation in public work would enrich their lives through another fertile source of education. If they took up work in the right spirit, it would not interfere with the course of their family and domestic life, but rather "ripen and improve it… the home gains by its mistress's service in a broader sphere."[622] They could use their gathered wisdom to discharge their own domestic duties more effectively and teach those under their guardianship to have a wider view of life. She believed the benefits of such work far outweighed the disadvantages as it broadened their horizons away from the narrow scope of the hearthside. As well as the obvious physical aspect, it also stretched the mind, affording a great source of mental training through their interest in public affairs. As Laura found for herself, public service could extend one's network of friendships, encourage sympathy with one's husband's interests and concerns and ultimately raise one's entire moral basis.[623]

Laura believed that the consequences of not embarking on such service were grave indeed for her fellow sisters. She writes:

> Those who shirk it suffer <u>loss</u> (sic). They go through life with crippled, undeveloped faculties as their punishment, just as the conscript who mutilates himself by cutting off his fingers or toes, to escape the duty of service as a soldier suffers for his act all his life.[624]

For after involvement in such work as Laura and her peers discharged, women wore down those narrow features particular to womankind which life in the domestic sphere alone nurtured. These Laura identifies as the "feminine sins of morbidity, frivolity, self-concentration (and) narrowness."[625] Not only could it offer them a whole new world-view, but it also gave them a sense of justice, sisterly love and pity which they did not have before, combating the introspective nature of their domestic life. An increased interest in the great political and social questions of the day affected the interests of all classes. Laura suggests that women should study the effect of such issues as the marriage laws, overcrowding in the large towns and the employment of children. As it was, writing in 1903, Laura argues that the

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[622] Hammerton, J.A., p.152
[623] Ridding, L.E., 'Should Married Women Engage in Public Work?', p.111
[624] Ridding, L.E., 'Our Service to the Commonwealth,' February 1903, p.22
[625] Ibid., p.22

majority of women in the country were still ignorant about these and other significant topics that affected them, and were still passing inherited class prejudices down to their children.[626]

Laura considered public work to be the crowning glory of a woman's education. She perceived that a rounded education comprised two equal parts: book education and service education. Women from the upper echelons of society received a formal book education as they were growing up, to varying degrees, as Laura did, through tutors and a governess. However Laura appreciated the value of public service in sealing a woman's education. She had learnt from her mother's involvement with the PMWA that experience outside the home could enhance her family life. But Laura emphasised that the key to success was balance.

Women could participate only so far as propriety would allow, and the duties of a bishop's wife were an acceptable arena into which women could transcend the domestic boundaries, as was true of most forms of philanthropy. Despite this Laura was adamant that domestic duties should not be neglected in favour of public service.[627] Heeney refers to Louise Creighton who was of the same opinion, as was her husband, that a career outside the home was compatible with good motherhood, if taken up in moderation.[628] However little value could be placed on the service of those women who engaged in public work at the expense of their traditional roles, although these were the exception rather than the rule as Laura noted, roles which underpinned the welfare of the nation.[629]

Not only was women's work beneficial to the individual women themselves and their immediate family, but Laura believed it was also an essential role for members of the established Church to play. Laura protests:

> A narrow life... undisturbed by the cry of the suffering, sinning world without, is absolutely unchristian, and is lived in flat contradiction to the spirit of Christ who taught us to be burden-bearers of other people's troubles... And then, instead of her

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[626] Ridding, L.E., 'On the Individual Work of Every Member of the Mothers' Union,' p.45
[627] Ridding, L.E., 'Should Married Women Engage in Public Work?', p.111
[628] Heeney, B., p.85
[629] Hammerton, J.A., p.152

> sympathies crawling round and round on a cabbage-leaf sort of space like a caterpillar, they would fly like God's beautiful birds from one land to another, carrying with them the blessings of prayer and help to all they meet; and there would be no room left in that girl's heart for the vague discontents and selfish desires which so often end in a dreary monotony of existence, making its victim ill in body and soul.[630]

Her belief in the transforming nature of public service for women who were already seen as the repositories of moral and social power, was strong, especially in bringing Christ's Kingdom ever nearer. When one had transformed oneself into a self-full, rather than selfish individual, then one could begin to transform one's environment and begin to improve the domestic situations of others.

Laura's determination to encourage other women to participate in the public domain as well as the private was to be admired, but one needs to address the question of how she could reconcile her commitment to social action with her adherence to traditional Anglican teaching and the powerful ideology of separate spheres which insisted on women's adherence to their gendered responsibilities as wife and mother and the proper place of women within the home as modest individuals. At first glance Laura and her close friends who were bishop's wives appeared to challenge the powerful ideologies of the time, and yet when one reads their public and private thoughts one can gain an appreciation of their great respect for the domestic and maternal positions they were expected to embrace. This was certainly true for Louise and Ben. Although Louise articulated frustration in her journal on becoming a new bishop's wife at Peterborough, she understood that her public duties emanated both from her unique position as clergy wife, but also from the firm belief that such an 'education' would enhance her home life and broaden her outlook. Exposure to new experiences and thoughts gave her an insight into other people's lives outside the Palace walls, and ultimately widened the truths she passed onto her children and household.

Laura was able to take a prominent part in public affairs as she had no children, and her search for a maternal role in the work she undertook went some way to explain why she devoted so much of her time and sympathy to the plight of girls and young

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[630] Ridding, L.E., 'Our Service to the Commonwealth,' February 1903, p.22

women. Her public work was a natural expression of her maternal qualities. In seeking such a role, and in pursuit of her ultimate goal of bringing in the Golden Age, she was thrust into the wider world. Prochaska describes the tension that caused some public women such as Laura to rethink their involvement in public causes. He highlights the double-edge of the problem, where the 'feminine' and maternal qualities of self-sacrifice and compassion, the 'snare' of subordination which kept many women confined within the constraints of the domestic sphere, were the very attributes that could justify their emancipation into the slums and the world of politics.[631]

Laura justified her own participation through the argument that as a woman, as an agent of social change and a guardian of morality, and in her peculiar position as unpaid curate, she had a responsibility to regenerate society. She was the link between the individual family and the wider community. Laura writes about her thoughts on the subject thus, "women are the moral guardians and spiritual vessels for the betterment of society. If women lead base, sinful lives, society as a whole will be reduced."[632] Laura was not alone, as June Hannam argues that a 'significant minority' of women took an active part in public affairs in the nineteenth century, despite the deep influence of the ideals of domesticity and femininity on the Victorian psyche.[633] To a great extent these public women pushed the boundaries out for others through their work initially in the 'acceptable' arena of philanthropy, Laura included. From this starting point, they branched out into all areas of public life, until they finally achieved the franchise for some sections of women in 1918. Although Laura did not reveal the extent to which she sought a glimpse of the public world outside as she was growing up at Blackmoor, she was clearly ecstatic to receive that first call to help the PMWA as a young woman at home. She drew much of her inspiration from the Scripture she read, to go out and minister in the world, and the opportunities which George's double-roles afforded her served to erase any doubts in her mind.

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[631] Prochaska, F., p.225
[632] Ridding, L.E., 'The Woman's League,' p.385
[633] Hannam, J., p.218

The very ideology that sought to keep women within the realms of the home and family also empowered them to leave its confines and use their influence and compassion in the world to effect a change in society through a wide range of campaigns for social and moral reform. This could also be argued of the traditional Christian instruction that put forward the view that woman was sinful and subordinate to man, and yet she was encouraged to use her compassion and moral influence to minister to those in need in the parish of the world. Victorian families believed in the importance of cherishing the home as a haven of rest and tranquillity away from the world of Capitalism without. It was also acknowledged that the 'Angel in the House' was more receptive to religious and moral influence precisely because she was separated from the harsh reality of the market outside. Within the boundaries of the domestic sphere it was believed that women were not exposed to temptation and bad influence, where they could sustain the Christian family value system. However, paradoxically, as women sought to extend their moral and spiritual influence in the world, their mission took them out of the 'safety' of the home into the public sphere.

Gill cites evangelical theology, though conservative and restrictive, in how it shaped definitions of femininity and what it meant to be a woman, as the major force behind Christian women's participation in the great social and moral campaigns of the Victorian era. They could justify their involvement with the argument that they were merely extending their maternal, moral and spiritual influence into a wider context, with philanthropy as the appropriate medium for such a progression. Gill also refers to David Bebbington, who argues that the evangelical faith did more than feminism to facilitate women's first steps into the public domain.[634] As a noblewoman, Laura was also bound less by the constraints of the prevailing ideologies.

Laura believed in the powerful influence of the wife and mother who played a key role within the family unit, through the socialisation and religious training of her children. Children usually received their basic Christian moral standards, their first ideas about God and their sense of religious and social duty from their mothers.

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[634] Gill, S., p.79

Laura sought to harness this influence and use it in the campaigns she waged against immorality, poverty and secularisation. Prochaska notes that other women such as Florence Nightingale and Josephine Butler had already made this "familial leap" from the home to the organisation[635] and Lewis argues that women were inspired to make that leap through their sense of social maternalism.[636] Laura believed that women enjoyed a unique socially regenerative and religious nurturing power that their husbands did not possess, furnishing them with a special mission.

Gill highlights the economic reasons behind women's entry into the public sphere. In an increasingly industrial society, the State relied on women to look after the male workers in order to keep them healthy and capable of work, but also at a time when there was no national social service, women were needed to look after the underclass of the poor, the old and the outcast.[637] Through the transferral of their special domestic management and maternal skills to society, optimism grew that society's sickness, caused by industrialisation, could be cured and restored to full health once more. Laura reveals her interpretation of women's unique transforming social power in one of her articles, explaining that "the 'Angel in the House' was also an angel spirit, a messenger going forth into the darker world beyond in order to make the hearth glow brighter at home."[638]

It is also important to stress that Laura was only ever a volunteer - unpaid, untrained and an 'amateur.' This comes back to the image of the clergy wife as unpaid curate, assisting her husband in his duties, on his terms. Laura worked in the late nineteenth century at a particular time before the Liberal government of 1906-14 had begun to explore the possibility of state intervention in matters of national welfare, in contrast to the individual solutions she offered in the voluntary sector. As a member of the upper class she could still wield significant, though indirect power and influence over colleagues and members of the great societies she represented. Not until after the Great War was her public platform reduced.[639] To a lesser extent did she assert any real influence over those in power, although her

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[635] Prochaska, F., p.141
[636] Lewis, J., p.201
[637] Gill, S., p.232
[638] Ridding, L.E., 'Should Married Women Engage in Public Work?', p.111
[639] Lewis, J., p.310

position as a leading bishop's wife and daughter of the Lord Chancellor and especially her work with the NUWW brought her into contact with policy-makers. Laura could exercise direct influence over the women and children whose interests she sought to safeguard and promote, but she still respected those men such as George who held the ultimate positions of authority.

In this discussion of Laura's involvement in the public sphere it is important to note that her role as bishop's wife was the single most significant factor which afforded her the opportunity to take such an active part in women's passage from home to charitable and public institution. As always, Laura sought to maintain a balance between her public and private duties, but the former always derived from the latter. Laura saw herself as subordinate to George, but not in the sense of inferiority. She understood the word 'subordinate' to mean 'different' and 'complementary.' In this way she had different roles to play from those of George. As Davidoff and Hall explain, the separate spheres of men and women were not seen as hierarchical as the contribution of women in the home was of equal importance to that performed by men in the public domain, precisely for the numerous reasons mentioned above.[640]

Laura shared the possibilities of involvement in George's work. Her relationship with George, her writing and her activities in Church and other organisations gave her a space in which to work out her spirituality, as well as recognition in local and national spheres. She was able to exercise her literary and organising abilities through the various philanthropic initiatives. As Davidoff and Hall go on to argue, religion was the means of access to a world where women were valued, one public arena where women were not refused an intellectual outlet. It did not matter if they had no life outside the home as it was their religious power that truly counted.[641] This is in contrast to Wolffe's contention that religion was the key factor in women's subordination over the centuries as Scripture had been interpreted to appear to sanction. To varying degrees both statements are true.

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[640] Davidoff, L & Hall, C., Family Fortunes. Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850, Hutchinson, London, 1987, p.115
[641] Davidoff, L & Hall, C., p.148

Laura's recollections revealed the depth of her emotional relationship with George, in which she invested so much. Marriage certainly did not hinder Laura's self-development as she married a right-minded individual who permitted her her own independence. Indeed it opened many doors for her. As George's wife she exerted only indirect power and yet she was his professional partner to a large extent, in her involvement in his ecclesiastical and social work. Not only did she act as his confidante, adviser and assistant, but she also shared in the important work of entertaining visitors at the house, particularly clergy and their wives. This last aspect of her role was a crucial part of her duties, as Peterson explains, "she fostered goodwill, and she provided a second pair of ears and eyes, observing, evaluating, and judging the character and condition of the students, the parish and its residents, or the clerical hierarchy, the better to advise her husband... in the work he had to do."[642] This became even more important when George became a bishop. It is no wonder that so many clergy wives wrote their husband's biography after their death.

Laura's involvement in George's professional life ran to more than just copying and proofreading his work, to that of research assistant and editor. One example of this was her contribution to George's article on the Coal Lockout in Southwell of 1893. George did everything he could to help resolve the situation as he recognised the devastating impact of the stoppage by the miners on the rest of the community. He visited the most affected parishes in the diocese, speaking to owners of the collieries, the agents and the Trade Union leaders. He spoke in the markets to the miners and visited their soup kitchens, hoping to make them feel that he genuinely cared. The strike lasted for sixteen weeks. In her journal, Laura describes how they worked together to write an article entitled, 'Some Reflections on the Recent Stoppage in the Coal Trade as affecting the Diocese,' from information they had gathered from the one hundred parishes engaged in mining.

Laura herself acknowledged that advances in women's education had resulted in the frequent participation of women in their husband's work in a way they had never dreamt of earlier in the century, what she identifies as the increased

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[642] Peterson, M, J., p.173

"intellectual equality between husband and wife."[643] However, while she enjoyed a certain degree of power and authority in the organisations set up for the interests of women and children, she was still dependent upon her father, her brother and her husband for her status and prosperity, maintaining their ultimate authority in her life. Edwin Palmer refers to this in his address at her funeral, "God had made her with a gift for obedience, and He gave her first a father and then a husband whom it was a privilege to obey... Those who saw her in the years following his death, know how sadly at sea she was when she had no one to obey."[644]

As the daughter of an Earl and the wife of a bishop, Laura's social rank conferred upon her a certain level of respect and standing among her friends and colleagues. However, as Hammerton observes when he interviewed her for the article in 'The Young Woman,' "she has that in her which raises her to a position of dignity and importance such as rank does not always give."[645] Her participation in the public sphere did not unsex her as she always spoke and behaved with the utmost refinement. Although a 'leader of women,' she had no great ambitions for a separate career of her own. It was her personality, combined with George's generous nature and her desire for a calling that shaped the direction her work would take.

Her strength of personality, and the lighter moments which come through her witty and humorous autobiographical reminiscences, also go a long way to explain her popularity among her contemporaries. As her cousin remarked, "all found in her society something individual, arresting, amusing or encouraging."[646] She was very much a product of the late Victorian period in which she lived, when strong educated women promoted the profile of women through the extension of their domestic roles into the wider society. The picture of Laura which emerges contrasts with persistent traditional images of Victorian ladies as poorly educated, idle girls, who grew up into docile and dominated mothers, merely observers of the world outside the home. Not only does this picture of Laura and her

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[643] Ridding, L.E., 'The Kingdom of God and the Sexes,' p.60
[644] Palmer, E. J., Address at the Funeral of Lady Laura Ridding..., p.1-2
[645] Hammerton, J.A., p.149
[646] Palmer, E. J., Address at the Funeral of Lady Laura Ridding..., p.3

contemporaries seek to challenge this assumption, but it also constructs a positive profile of the distinct social grouping comprising bishop's wives.

'A glorious hot summer day...'

This is how Laura describes the day on which George, with her assistance, drafted his resignation letter to the Prime Minister, Arthur Balfour, on Saturday 23 July 1904. George had held his episcopal office in Southwell for twenty years. Throughout this time his health was never excellent, and he had suffered a number of bouts of illness. During the Easter of 1904 he preached services in the Minster, worked on Confirmations and began to prepare for his Synod in June, in spite of terrible exhaustion. Over the following weeks his condition deteriorated to such an extent that he had to give up any thoughts of the Synod and his discussions turned to the question of his resignation in light of his ill health. There were no doubts. He was seventy-six years of age.

Laura recalls the day thus:

> A glorious hot summer day with gardens looking so so sweet and fragrant. George... signed the deed of Resignation of the Diocese for which he had worked twenty years and done so much. He looked beautiful but very weak. He did it in silence... None of us spoke. I prayed all the time God bless him, God bless him, as I had done all those years during his confirmation services...[647]

George justified his actions in the Southwell Diocesan Magazine on 27 July 1904 to the diocese. His lasting relationship with Southwell was one of friendship. He also wrote to Mr. Balfour, the Prime Minister, to announce his intention of resigning in October of that year. Balfour responded to George with the following kind words, "I am extremely grieved to hear both of your resignation and of the cause which has led to it. You will be very hard to replace..."[648]

George died on 30 August 1904 before his resignation took effect. Laura describes how she clothed his body in scarlet robes and placed his hands on his heart as he

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[647] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.315
[648] Balfour, A.J., Letter to George Ridding, 15 July 1904, MSS Eng. Hist.d.185-6, BL

had so often held them in the past. The funeral took place on 3 September. His coffin was inscribed with the text, "I will go forth in the strength of the Lord God and will make mention of thy righteousness verily." Laura recalls the strength she drew from her faith at this difficult time, "the sense of God's presence in Thurgarton Priory through those last days was very wonderful. So unmistakeable. So strong. So absolute..."[649] Over the ensuing weeks, Laura received over a thousand letters of sympathy referring to his great influence and force and the love and reverence held for the bishop. Laura refers to an article published in the 'Nottingham Guardian' in October of this year on George's character and achievements, which gives due acknowledgement to Laura as his companion and partner, "he was foremost in calling out women's work; and in this he was ably seconded by Lady Laura Ridding."[650]

On 13 September it was formally announced that Bishop Hoskyns was to succeed George as bishop. The handover did not go smoothly. Laura describes how firstly the Hoskyns ignored her, not sending her any word of sympathy, and then only wrote regarding practical matters. She refers to them privately as "Prussian conquerors" in their conduct.[651] In a letter from Laura's nephew, Bobby,[652] to his Aunt Sophy on 29 September he describes Laura's poor appearance and demeanour as she visited Winchester College, "Lolly did not look well and was very much worried, but that is only natural as she is worried by not having found a house, by winding up affairs at Thurgarton and by the cold and unsympathetic and unnecessary business letters of her successor Mrs. Hoskyns."[653] Laura had such an intense feeling of loneliness as she packed up to leave Thurgarton to find a new house. She writes in her recollections, "I felt travelling through a strange land, of suffering, loneliness, bewildering misery. So ended 1904."[654]

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[649] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.321
[650] Ibid., p.319
[651] Ibid., p.324
[652] Robert Stafford Arthur Palmer was born on 26 September 1888, the second son of Laura's brother Willy and his wife Maud. 'Bobby,' as he was known by the family, was killed in action in Mesopotamia on 21 January 1916.
[653] Palmer, R.S.A., Letter to Sophia de Franqueville, 29 September 1904, MSS Selborne 110-113, BL
[654] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.326

'Sadly at sea'

As Laura left the Priory for her solitary return to Hampshire, it was with great sadness that she said goodbye to her life in Southwell. She had arrived there twenty years earlier, a young headmaster's wife, apprehensive about her new life as the wife of a bishop, away from Winchester College and 'her boys.' However it was not long before her natural flair for leadership and organisation led her down new avenues and she soon made many dear friends. George relished his new role and with Laura at his side, he achieved remarkable results in the diocese: spiritual, social and educational improvements. Parting from the ladies at Southwell House was especially difficult as they had achieved so much good work since its inception. At her farewell meeting, Laura was presented with a miniature of George to remember them by.

Laura was assisted in packing up her house by her good friends from the NUWW, Miss Clifford and Gertrude Gow, and her sister Mary. Laura departed from Thurgarton alone, her husband interred in the grounds of his beloved Minster, and Laura with intense feelings of being driven out of the diocese by her insensitive successors. In contrast, after Mandell's death, Louise was granted an apartment in Hampton Court Palace, as the wife of a dignitary. Laura spent her final months in Southwell preparing George's unfinished last Charge for publication, with the help of some of his friends, including the Bishop of Derby. On 29 March 1905 the Charge was sent out to the diocese and friends and was well received by such notable clerics as Archbishop Benson and the Bishop of Chester. Despite this section of support, Laura recalls that Bishop Hoskyns, George's successor, "never thanked me for it or uttered a word about it,"[655] yet another sign that she was being snubbed by the new bishop and his wife. In contrast to this situation, Louise respected Bishop Arthur Winnington-Ingram (1858-1946) who succeeded Mandell as Bishop of London after his death and reveals, "as for the man chosen, I had a great affection for him."[656]

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[655] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.330
[656] Covert, J. T., p.133-4

After ten years, Laura was still incensed at her treatment at the hands of the Hoskyns. After a visit to Southwell House in 1915 she pens the following observations in her journal:

> Mrs. Hoskyns is "Church-mad," Mrs. Field says. There is nothing she will help unless it is solely and entirely Church. She refused to go to a huge meeting of girls about the war because it was for all girls - not only Church. She won't help… Patrols - because it's not Church. She is really mad? He never should have come to such a diocese. He is unhappy over the Nonconformity etc. of Nottingham and his only remedy is to try and make it a High Church town! Such hopeless muddling. Mrs. G- says the old condition of secularity has reverted. What it was before our time - what it grew out of… the Church clergy and women are nonentities. The truth is this Bishop has not planted strong men about - and several have left - He does not attract the brains of broad churchmen.[657]

Laura found it difficult to let go of the diocese George and she had built up from its sickly roots in 1884, only to release it because George was ill. Louise had taken on the reins from another extraordinary bishop's wife, Beatrice Temple. This was in contrast to Laura who had no predecessor and therefore may have felt more protective of what she perceived to be <u>their</u> diocese. Indeed she was proud to report in her diary after her sister-in-law had visited Southwell in 1914, "Lady Maud says that in Nottingham George is still "The Bishop" and also I am the woman Church leader."[658]

On 6 January 1905, she spent her first night at her new house in Wonston.[659] 1905 was to be another difficult year for Laura as her brother, Willy, was appointed High Commissioner of South Africa and would soon be leaving, and Laura describes the appointment as "a great blow."[660] Willy's children[661] were the family she never had and she thanked God for them, revealing, "she (Maud), Willy and their children

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[657] Diary entry for 25 March 1915, 9M68/35, HRO
[658] Diary entry for 30 March 1914, 9M68/34, HRO
[659] Wonston is a small Hampshire village, close to Winchester and near the Selborne family home at Blackmoor.
[660] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.328
[661] Mabel Laura Georgiana Palmer was born on 6 October 1884. She later married Charlie Howick, 5th Earl Grey on 16 June 1906. 'Top' was the family name for their eldest son, Roundell Cecil Palmer, who later became Viscount Wolmer. He was born on 15 April 1887 and married Grace Ridley on 9 June 1910. Robert (Bobby) Stafford Arthur Palmer was born on 26 September 1888. William ('Luly') Jocelyn Lewis was born on 15 September 1894 and married Dorothy Loder on 13 May 1922.

are the dearest, most lovable family in the world for which thank God indeed."[662] Yet out of her sorrow came great joy, as she reveals in her recollections, "one comfort and joy came to me in Wonston, at once proving to be a real home help for Top and Bobby.[663] Willy and Maud decided that their two eldest sons should remain in England to complete their education, made easier as Laura lived close to Winchester College. Top and Bobby were guarded in Winchester under the watchful eye of their 'Aunt Lolly.' In this way Laura could make herself useful to the family as surrogate mother to Willy's boys, a role she gladly and willingly assumed as she had also undertaken at Winchester College. In 1908 she writes, "I had the joy of all Willie's boys being here constantly,"[664] and in the following year, "The beloved Palmer boys were constantly here through 1909-... It was an immense joy to me that Wonston should be such a home to them."[665]

With no children to continue his name, George's death had more significance to Laura. Over the years she confides her great loss to the pages of her daily journal: "Sunday August 30, 1914: Ten years ago my darling died today - It feels like centuries ago"[666]; "Thursday 30 August, 1934: Today darling George died thirty years ago - All these thirty years I have had to flounder through life without him."[667] It was inevitable that Laura would be left widowed some day as George was twenty-two years Laura's senior. Her widowhood lasted for thirty-five years, longer than the twenty-eight years she was married to George and yet it is interesting that she only devoted a small part of her autobiography to this last part of her life. This was also true of Louise Creighton's recollections. However, through their widowhood, the bishops' wives, especially Laura, Louise and Ben were united through a common bond, what Laura identifies as "the widowhood bond."[668] Widowhood held special significance for the wives of clerics, who had spent so much of their lives incorporated in their husbands' life and work.

Clergy wives worked on a number of levels, commencing with that of domestic and emotional support to their husband and as examples to the community, to the dimension of parochial leadership. The next important jump was to leadership on a

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[662]Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.328
[663] Ibid., p.333-4
[664] Ibid., p.340
[665] Ibid., p.348
[666] Diary entry for 1914, 9M68/34, HRO
[667] Diary entry for 1934, 9M68/54, HRO
[668] Diary entry for Wednesday 4 April 1917, 9M68/37, HRO

national level. This development was most in evidence in the late Victorian parsonage. However it should be clarified that even at the most advanced end of the scale of incorporation, these were never 'dual-careers.'[669] Rather the clergyman and his wife shared, to varying extents, in his single career. In this way, they were bound to each other by more than love alone. Kathleen Lyttelton once observed of Louise that married life meant more than anything else to her and that she never fully separated herself from Mandell's work to have an independent self.[670] It is then not hard to comprehend the strength of union these women felt with their husbands, how they missed them when they had to travel, and how keenly they felt the loss when their husbands died.[671] Apart from the obvious emotional loss of their husbands, they also missed the duties that had come to them through their marriage to clergymen.

Louise Creighton writes in her memoir, years after Mandell died, of how strongly she felt the need to be wanted, to be useful again:

> My loneliness was always being felt in new ways. There were hours sitting out in some beautiful country when it seemed to come over me and be almost unbearable… Companionship has always meant so much to me, and also the feeling that I was wanted… Now in my old age, the feeling that there is nothing for me to do and that I am no longer wanted is often hard to bear…[672]

Ben refers to this "burden of nothingness"[673] after the death of Edward. How forcefully she felt the loss of her former duties:

> …Now there was for her nothing except leisure, and how it wearied her! The economy of this small establishment was all there was of domestic duty, whereas before she had the complete control of two very large houses… With his death had come not only the emptiness caused by his loss, but now, when she had to make her own life, the emptiness of having nothing that she need do…[674]

Augusta Maclagan repeated how lonely she felt after her husband, William, passed away in 1910. She writes in her diary such lines as:

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[669] Peterson, M.J., p.166
[670] Creighton, L., Autobiography, Creighton Family Papers, Oxon
[671] Edward White Benson died on 11 October 1897. Mandell Creighton died on 14 January 1901.
[672] Covert, J.T., p.138-9
[673] Benson, E. F., Mother, p.64
[674] Ibid., p.64

> No visitors. Life is very silent and very triste...[675] The utter silence of my life is very depressing…[676]In the aft.(sic) I sat in darling Wm's (sic) room and it made me very miserable. It is so inconsistent for not one moment do I wish him back in this sad world, but little things remind me so agonizingly of my loss.[677]

George, Mandell and Edward died while holding episcopal office. For their widows the additional worry presented itself that they no longer had a home and had to search for somewhere new to live.

Besides the loss of a partnership, widows often forfeited a certain degree of their social status as their situation was determined by that of their husband. As a bishop's wife, a public woman in her own right and as a 'Lady,' Laura's social standing diminished little, however she had always relied on the support and advice of the male members of her family, and so the commission passed to Willy. As Pamela Horn observes, the death of a husband often meant withdrawing oneself from the world, as Queen Victoria had reacted to the death of Albert. This was in addition to feelings of solitude, especially after many years of widowhood. Using Laura's friend, Lucy Cavendish, as an example, Horn explains how in the forty-three years after the brutal murder of her husband, Sir Frederick Cavendish in 1882, Lucy never regained her life back fully.[678] In contrast, Laura found her way again, with the help of her public work and through an active participation in Willy's family. Laura did not allow herself to wallow in self-pity for long and by 1905 she had already commenced gathering materials together to write George's biography.

Initially, after Mandell's death, Louise alludes to strong feelings of isolation: "there were dreary times sitting on the hills alone, when what I had lost and the life before me seemed to weigh very heavily on my spirit,"[679] and the great tragedy of her bereavement, but with time these feelings eased. Louise summarises adeptly how widows coped with their loss, "in a sense I have grown accustomed to be alone, but in another sense I never shall."[680] Laura also grew to accept her loss, conceding, "I grew used to widowhood and loneliness. Other people grow used to an unhappy

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[675] Diary entry for Monday 1 March 1915, Unpublished Maclagan Family Papers, Oxon
[676] Diary entry for Tuesday 2 March 1915, Unpublished Maclagan Family Papers, Oxon
[677] Diary entry for Wednesday 23 November 1910, Unpublished Maclagan Family Papers, Oxon
[678] Horn, P., p.109-110
[679] Covert, J. T., p.135
[680] Ibid., p.139

marriage. There is nothing we cannot get used to."[681] Augusta Maclagan sought God's help: "life is a heavy burden. Dear God give me patience to bear it."[682] With bereavement came freedom and autonomy from the restrictions their husband's clerical work entailed on them. For Laura and Louise Creighton this signalled a significant increase in the amount of public work they became involved in, for example, Laura assumed the presidency of the NUWW between 1910 and 1911. Louise had already served one term in 1897, but she served a further two terms after Mandell's death in an effort to keep herself busy.

Laura was keen to be wanted, to be useful and she also admitted that she found widowhood dull as she no longer had the opportunity to mix with the many interesting diocesan characters she was acquainted with at Southwell, partly because of the war, partly because of her age and partly because she was alone. During a visit to her sister, Mary, in 1917 Laura observes:

> Mary and I have delightful talks from 6:30 to 7:30 each evening in my bedroom. I do miss the interesting talks with intellectual minds so much. Partly deafness, also non-intellectual guests - means one comes here for the sole and only outing of the year… I think that is one of the great voids and blanks of widowhood and widowhood-in-retreat on account of the war means books, not living people - for one's uplifters and educators. I don't wonder at lone women growing narrower…[683]

Laura never lost her sense of humour, even as the years passed. When Mary was awarded the honour of Dame of the British Empire for her Red Cross Work, Laura writes in her diary: "query? What money bribe did W *(Waldegrave)* give to Treasury (sic) to buy this honour for her?!!"[684]

At Hampton Court, Louise lived with her four daughters,[685] her sons[686] having already left home. Although she welcomed the privilege extended to herself and her family to move into such a distinguished establishment, Louise complained about her loneliness in her new home. Most of the other families living there were

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[681] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle, Part I…, p.15
[682] Diary entry for Tuesday 19 October 1915, Unpublished Maclagan Family Papers
[683] Diary entry for 22 September 1917, 9M68/37, HRO
[684] Diary entry for Saturday 8 June 1918, 9M68/38, HRO
[685] Beatrice (1872-1948); Lucia (1874-1946); Mary (1880-1952) and Gemma (1887-1959).
[686] Cuthbert (1876-1963); Walter (1878-1958) and Oswin (1883-1917).

affiliated with the armed forces and so she felt isolated despite the advantages. However, they did make friends with one family and this furnished Louise's recollections with some lighter moments:

> Mrs. Sherston was a delightful lively young woman with four children. They told us afterwards that when we first came, they had been wondering what we were like when one day they heard our children, who were cleaning their bicycles in the little yard on which one of their windows looked, were quarrelling; and one of them called out to another "You stinking hog." At this the Sherstons concluded that the Creightons were the right sort.[687]

Over the next few years, Laura tried to keep herself busy by involving herself in the community's public affairs, by maintaining her links with the NUWW and her friendships with the other bishop's wives, in particular Louise, Ben, Kathleen Lyttelton and Beatrice Temple, and through her interest in the Selborne children as they grew up. Before Ben died on 17 June 1918, Laura makes some sad observations about her good friend as she grew older:

> To Tremains till Monday. Mrs. Benson was in four years strangely shrunk, her face pinched up, grown small like Aunt Elizabeths and she is quite <u>thin</u> now. It seems as if her personality had so changed; with such a changed outer woman. She was always aged I thought, in mind. More tired. The strain of Maggie's death just a week ago - upon her... Talked about National Mission. Read her SMP (Laura's book on Sophy). She likes it - we strolled in lovely woods every evening.[688]

The bishop's wives always rallied round each other whenever there was a death in their families.

Within a few months of George's death, Laura began to gather together materials in order to write his biography. To this end she discussed her plan with friends such as Louise, who had already published the biography of her own husband, who died in 1901. Laura published some of George's collected Charges under the title '<u>Church and Commonwealth</u>' in 1906 and her publishers, Arnold, were keen to follow this with George's biography. In 1912 she went on to publish his Charges

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[687] Covert, J. T., p.138
[688] Diary entry for 26 May 1916, 9M68/36, HRO

on church defence questions under the title, 'Church and State.' Laura respected Louise's ability as a great writer and would have been influenced by her intellectually and commercially successful biography to write her own version of George's life. She also sought an occupation that would fill her days with recollections of her darling husband. In 1907 Laura describes how her whole time was absorbed in writing 'the Life.'[689] On March 17 of the following year, the biography was published, entitled 'George Ridding, Schoolmaster and Bishop.'

The reviews were very good and thirty-one years later, one lady wrote a letter of admiration to the author, which Laura kept amongst her papers:

> Dear Lady Laura,
> I venture to write and tell you how much I have enjoyed reading - for the third time - the Life of the Bishop. In these difficult times it helps one - first to know that such a life can be lived - secondly to read again his wise and holy words. How one would like to know what he would have said about our troubles of these days.
> The interest of the book is so great and has again given me many pleasant hours and leaves one asking why do not more people write books like that. It is a perfect book, only it seems rather presumptuous for me to say so.
> I just want to thank you, and of course want no answer.
> Yours…Violet Martineau.[690]

Christopher Dilke, in an assessment of the history of Winchester College, later compliments her ability thus: "Lady Laura, a woman of disciplined intelligence… survived him to write a biography which remarkably combines high accuracy with pious devotion."[691]

Laura visited Willy and Maud in South Africa for several months between 7 November 1908 and 13 May 1909. As with most of her previous foreign trips, Laura kept up a regular diary in which she entered her experiences. Julia Bush studied these papers in detail and concludes how Laura "was very much the working lady imperialist rather than a mere tourist."[692] Laura took a keen interest

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[689] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.338
[690] Martineau, V., Letter to Laura Ridding, 19 February 1939, MSS. Eng. hist. d.185-6, BL
[691] Dilke, C., Dr. Moberly's Mint-Mark: A Study of Winchester College, William Heinemann Ltd., London, 1965, p. 76
[692] Bush, J., p.114

in the conditions of the natives, socially and spiritually, as always keen to promote moral and social reform. Bush argues how Laura's visit helped to persuade her to promote the female Christian imperialist cause in England, having delivered speeches to the Mothers' Union and the Girls' Friendly Society in South Africa.[693] Bush recalls one particular incident in Laura's bedroom in South Africa, reinforcing Laura's feisty character, although a mature widow. Laura was reading in bed and got up to place a strong-smelling vase of honeysuckle outside the window. As she did so, she saw a man standing on the sill, who had been watching her. Laura recalls how, though frightened, she was ready for an encounter with this stranger with "a sunshade and umbrella by my bed to fight with."[694]

On her return home she published an article in the 'Church Quarterly Review,' entitled 'South Africa and the Native Problem' in which she discussed the importance of striving to bring the various racial groups together. She penned illustrated letters to her family and friends, as she had always done, revealing her interest in other peoples and cultures (see Appendix). Later in October 1909 she delivered 'The Call of the Empire' at the NUWW Conference at Portsmouth, a paper that received much praise.

Laura's regard for the empire had always run deep and this was furthered by the appointment of her cousin, Edwin James Palmer (Jem), to the See of Bombay between 1908 and 1929. Laura worked on behalf of the Bombay Diocesan Association, as Vice President, drawing attention to such issues as women and Zenana and helping to raise funds to send to the diocese. Laura used her name and her influence to write to prominent people to ask for donations. Just as at Southwell, Laura would happily ask wealthy people for a contribution. The following is one such example:

> My dear Mrs. Wickham,
> …I have screwed up my courage to write to you to beg for a very urgent special appeal made by our cousin, Dr. Palmer, the Bishop of Bombay. The appeal… for the Slum Church in Bombay City explains in his words what this urgent need is. It really means that our London slum problems have arisen out

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[693] Ibid., pp.220-1
[694] Ibid., p.114

> there in that… city. We in England are trying to raise £1500 for him… £460 is already raised but it is grinding work trying to get the help, as so few people seem to realize the needs of India. If you will help us, I shall indeed be grateful.[695]

Her interest in work for foreign missions was also kindled by her attendance at the Pan-Anglican Conference in 1908, along with Louise, both presiding over meetings for the Women's Section. Laura published a paper on 'White Slave Traffic Suppression' in June 1908.

The year of 1910 was a mixture of sadness, joy and hard work for Laura. On October 4, Laura's sister Freda died from cancer after several months of suffering. Indicative of her Victorian background Laura unfolds the tragic deathbed scene between Freda and her only son 'Downy:'[696]

> September 28th she began to sink. It was so intensely touching - She herself told Downy that she was dying; and then, when he was crushed, she made some joke and set him laughing! The pathos of it. She suffered awful pain, meningitis at the end. She was unconscious for many hours before the death which took place at quarter to six in the evening of October 4th. Her intensely strong will to live over her birthday and her wedding day, October 3rd, kept her alive and all that morning she was quite herself - then restlessness and fits of unconsciousness set in.[697]

Immediately after the funeral, Laura had to leave to preside over the annual NUWW Conference at Lincoln in the first of her terms of office as President. This was also the year in which King Edward VII died on 7 May. However this was tempered by her joy at her nephews' accomplishments, and in particular the marriage of Willy's eldest son, 'Top,' to Grace Ridley. Also during this busy year, Laura founded and headed up a new organisation with her niece's husband, Charlie Howick,[698] against the disestablishment of the Church of Wales.[699]

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[695] Ridding, L.E., Letter Mrs Wickham, 16 February 1913
[696] Freda married George Biddulph, a distant cousin of their father, and gave birth to an only son. Victor Roundell George Biddulph was born in 1897, but was tragically killed fighting at the Somme on 15 September 1916. His family name was 'Downy.'
[697] Ridding, L. E., Vol. II., p.360
[698] Maud and Willy's daughter, Mabel, married Viscount Howick on 16 June 1906, becoming Countess Grey.
[699] Ibid., p.366

Suffrage disturbances drew Laura's attention in 1912, as did her church defence work with Willy, Bobby and Top. She also affords a paragraph on the 'Titanic' disaster:

> April 16. "The Titanic," called "the Millionaires Boat" crashed against an iceberg and only 700, out of 2500 passengers and crew were saved. It seemed an inconceivably awful disaster. (We had not then suffered the Submarine brutalities of the war.) It was awful, except for the splendid self-sacrifice of the captain, crew, most of the men. As they went down the Band played: "Nearer my God to Thee."[700]

The following year saw a continuation of her work for church defence, the Bombay Diocesan Association and a visit to her sister Sophy and her husband Franquet[701] in France, while she was attending the International Women's Council Conference in Paris. The suffragette disturbances worried Laura as a moderate supporter of the franchise for women. So came the year of 1914: "It was high summer, the weather was unusually warm and the August Bank Holiday beckoned."[702]

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[700] Ibid., p.374

[701] Franquet, the Comte de Franqueville, married Sophy on 16 February 1903. They lived in Passy near Paris until her death in 1915. From 1860-1879 the Comte was a member of the French Council of State and Director of the Catholic University in Paris.

[702] Condell, D., & Liddiard, J., (eds), Working For Victory? Images of Women in the First World War, 1914-1918, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1987, p.4

Chapter Six

God's visitation[703]

Laura recalls the day the First World War broke out:

> It was glorious weather when from July 23 onward, the awful European War cloud enveloped us. By July 29, the Colonies had all announced their fierce determination to stand by us. On August 1, Germany was at war with France; and France had appealed to us for help… On Aug 4th we were at war.[704]

In Laura's 1916 article on the historical endeavours of women on behalf of the church, she acknowledged that women's role would have to change, now that the war was upon them, "our peace-time energies are suspended; but among the urgent services demanded of Englishwomen in this awful day of God's Visitation stand the duties of repentance, resignation, faith and hope."[705] She regarded the war very much as judgement on the nations from God.

From the very start of the war, Laura kept up a special war diary, which she entitled her 'War Chronicles,' in addition to her regular diary. Like other middle-aged women, Laura felt that she could contribute to the war effort in part by taking an active interest in the unfolding events, and absorbing herself in the daily developments. Her recollections of the Great War start on 4 August 1914, ending with Armistice Day on 11 November 1918. She commenced her records on plain A4 writing paper, interspersed with newspaper clippings and war poems, but as the war progresses and she describes the domestic hardships borne by the housewife, forced to cope with increased rationing, her journal was written on the reverse of old records she had kept from her Southwell days, as fresh paper was in short supply.

The year had begun with the question of Irish Home Rule foremost in the headlines. No one was expecting a war in Europe, and when the news reached ordinary citizens that the Austro-Hungarians had given Serbia an ultimatum, following the

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[703] Ridding, L.E., 'The Churchmanship of Women…,' p.70
[704] Ridding, L, E., Vol. II., p.388
[705] Ridding, L.E., 'The Churchmanship of Women…,' p.70

assassination of their heir, most people were not particularly interested. When Germany then declared war on France and Russia, Laura records her call for divine help in her regular diary, "May God bear us through it. Such a hideous experience England has never had and Europe only once."[706]

Laura goes on to describe how, despite the horror of a war unfolding before her. life still continued as usual:

> The ultimatum to Germany to stop invasion of Belgium or we should declare war expired at 7(?) p.m. and now we too are at war with her. Mr. Plumpton and his boy to tea. The whole day feels like a nightmare. The horror of the whole state of things. One thing is splendid. Parliament is as one band of brothers - no sides - no parties.[707]

This was in contrast to her concerns at the close of 1913 that politics was in a state of turmoil, "we were at a political crisis. The country in a chaotic state; nobody governing it; no power in either Houses of Parliament; and everything in confusion. The outlook was black…"[708]

Laura interrupts her autobiography with the following statement, made in red ink:

> The horrible war came like a thunderbolt upon us Aug.15 when I had written thus far. For months the strain has been so horrible, that I had no power to write. Now I am going to take it up again, but there may be crushing sorrow in front. I may not ever finish it. March 10th 1915.[709]

Laura echoes these foreboding sentiments in her first chronicle of the war, writing, "I could not write. My brain felt sucked up by the War." She goes on to describe her feelings, prescribing images to the onset of the war as a dark, uncertain force spreading across the country. She confides:

> One feels so weak in body. The awful horror that hangs over one night and day… the extraordinary experience of being suddenly shorn of the peace in which all our elderly lives have

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[706] Diary entry for Sunday 2 August 1914, 9M68/34, HRO
[707] Diary entry for Tuesday 4 August 1914, 9M68/34, HRO
[708] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.382
[709] Ibid., p.242-44

> always been wrapped - the safety - the security - the certainty vanishes.[710]

Her feelings at the very start of the war were best summed up in the following entry, revealing her fears about the might of the German Army:

> We are at war. People are stunned. They don't know what it means. They only know that a gigantic Juggernaut Army, supposed to be invincible is let loose on Europe by one man who could have stopped it and apparently is full of black lust of conquest.
> The first realisations of the nightmare horrors before us made me and numbers of other women feel ill - bodily nausea and nerve distress - "My heart was in the midst of my body even like melting wax" describes the horrible sensation… It was devilish in its careful cynical development.[711]

People at all levels of society were affected by the shock of the war. One of Laura's friends had visited the Archbishop of Canterbury and his wife, Edith Davidson, and revealed how when the war commenced they "were both so ill from nerves… they were actually sent away by their Doctor for some days," explaining, "he`s a courtier-diplomat-pessimist…"[712]

With the exception of the voluntary effort organised by influential women such as Laura, the majority of British women did not notice any immediate changes in their lives. However one is most struck in Laura's records by her observations of how quickly life and the landscape was quickly changing once war was declared, from the cessation of singing of simple country-folk, to the trains continually rumbling past Winchester carrying equipment and troops to Southampton and Portsmouth: "in the evening some joyous singing in chorus heard along the road. It was the harvesters… It was strange and good to hear songs. One hears no shouting or laughing anywhere. Nobody smiles."[713] She also observes the change in her surroundings:

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[710] Diary entry for 10 August 1914, 9M68/34,HRO
[711] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle. Part I…, p.3
[712] Diary entry for Monday 28 June 1915, 9M68/35, HRO
[713] Diary entry for Saturday 15 August 1914, 9M68/34, HRO

> Winchester is strangely altered. It is swarming with troops. Great gun carriages, motor lorries laden with ammunition and baggage - long strings of ungroomed, muddy horses and a river of khaki men pour through each narrow street - block the roads, submerge the grey-haired ladies and quiet folk till it seems full of nothing but young lithe limbed soldiers and young adoring girls.[714]

The First World War was a very different experience for women in comparison with preceding wars. A minority of women had served as nurses in previous wars, for example during the Crimean War, but never had such vast numbers of women identified so closely and so personally with a war. The key to their changed experience was the nature of the fighting force. Rather than a professional army trained for killing and combat, the British Army was made up of ordinary men, a citizen army. So, as their menfolk joined up to play their part in the service of the nation, so women sought to play their part too. From the start of the war, women used their new-found organisational skills to form committees to help in the war emergency as its scenes unfolded.

Women did not just seek to help the troops, but they also formed organisations to look after those women and children left behind by their men, and who needed protection. The call to women was the same throughout the land: "Every woman, as well as every man must do something to help the Country through the present crisis."[715] In a later edition of The Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Review, the Hon. Mrs. John Bailey asserts, "what we ask is just to be allowed to help and to serve the State; not to live apart in the sheltered ways of safety while men fight and die outside, but to take our part in the common work and, if need be, in the common danger."[716] These outcries were taken from the journal that Laura read and contributed to, the organ of the Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Association (C&UWFA), over which Laura's sister-in-law, Maud, presided.

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[714] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle. Part I..., p.6
[715] Sloan Chesser, E., 'War and Woman's Sphere,' in The Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Review, No. 22, Jan-Mar 1915, p.7
[716] Bailey, Hon. Mrs. J., 'Women's Work in War-Time,' in The Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Review, No. 23, July-Sept 1915, p.30

While the State asked British men to sign up and make their sacrifice for their country, women were left to organise themselves at home. At a time when the agitation for Votes for Women and the antics of the suffragettes were only just being replaced by the primacy of the war, Mrs. Bailey added that the mid-Victorian adage that "men must work and women must weep" illustrated how far women's position in society had progressed since that time. Gentlewomen such as Laura had learnt to organise themselves with energy and sacrifice, through their social and political efforts. These organisational skills were utilised in the patriotic fervour that followed the outbreak of war as Laura's contemporaries hastily established voluntary organisations that small numbers joined initially.

After the initial shock of the conflict, women shared in their menfolk's enthusiasm for the war, which most believed would be over by Christmas. After years building up an arsenal of organisational knowledge and experience in various suffrage societies, respectable women like Laura were only too willing to support the war effort and make provisions for the women and children left behind at home. Laura formed an Emergency Committee for the village of Wonston where she lived. She notes her observations, "a parish meeting on the war in Victoria Hall. It was a curious and enlightening sight. I never knew there were so many men in Wonston parish."[717] She goes on to describe how a General who spoke at the meeting lectured on the war and what the consequences would mean for England, "he said too that if we were beaten, the appalling fine we should have to pay - and that until it was paid, German garrisons would be set in England." As well as sitting on a number of war committees in Winchester, Laura was also elected President of the Relief Committee in Wonston. One of her first tasks was to order ten tons of coal at summer prices for distribution to the needy in the winter months.[718] As a widow herself, Laura took a special interest in the welfare of what she called, "my Sutton Scotney widows,"[719] from the village next to Wonston.

In the first weeks, strong individuals such as Laura organised local groups and committees to do what they could, but in the ensuing months and as the war

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[717] Diary entry for Wednesday 12 August 1914, 9M68/34, HRO
[718] Diary entry for Saturday 22 August 1914, 9M68/34, HRO
[719] Diary entry for Thursday 4 March 1915, 9M68/35, HRO

deepened the government arranged the establishment of efficient uniformed women's auxiliary military organisations. The Voluntary Aid Detachments, First Aid Nursing Yeomanry, Women's Volunteer Reserve and the Women's Emergency Corps were all grouped under this umbrella. Laura was sixty-five when war broke out, at the end of her public career, so most of her war work was of a local, voluntary nature. This was less glamorous than medical work, however Laura's influence was felt mostly among women and children, as it had always been. Laura's great-niece, Lady Anne Brewis,[720] recalls Laura's continuing influence in the diocese, despite her lay position, and how she played a prominent part in the social and charitable activities of the county. She was affectionately referred to in some quarters as 'the Bishop of Winchester' as she liked to interfere in diocesan matters.

With the outbreak of war, Laura launched herself into action, as she always did, ready to organise, ready to direct, ready as a figurehead. Ten days before the declaration of war, Laura joined the Council for Combating Venereal Diseases and this also kept her busy throughout the duration of the war. The NUWW postponed its 1914 annual conference, in order to concentrate on its contribution to the war effort. Instead, letters were sent to all the major women's organisations, inviting them to attend a meeting where they could share information on war work. At a local level, Laura worked on behalf of the NUWW, taking an interest in patrol work.

As always, Laura was active on a number of committees during the war, what she lovingly refers to as "my eternal committees."[721] She could make herself feel useful, serving on the fourteen committees she counted up, in addition to her existing commitments and her work for the Red Cross. These included: the Patrols Committee; Mothers and Infants' Welfare Committee; Patriotic Welcome Hall Committee; Hampshire Women's Agricultural Committee; Women's Crusade and Soldiers and Sailors' Families Association - in all twelve new societies were established during this time.[722] She was also one of a group of ladies who started

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[720] Comments given in face-to-face interviews with the author, 1998-2001.
[721] Diary entry for Friday 21 June 1918, 9M68/38, HRO
[722] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle, Part II, 1 January 1917 – 31 December 1917, HRO

the Sutton Scotney and Wonston Women's Institute on 17 April 1917, where women could meet and exchange information. She was the first elected chairman and in honour of this, presented a bottle steriliser to the organisation, serving on the committee until November 1929.

One could question the reasons why Laura served on endless committees and whether as Arthur Marwick suggests, with their husbands, brothers and sons away from home, women sought companionship for each other through their affiliation with a voluntary society.[723] This may have been a by-product of women's support for such organisations, but for Laura, as a lonely widow with no children of her own, she sought to fill her days by using her best skills: speaking, directing others and organising schemes. Behind such work, however, were the more important objectives of alleviating distress and suffering wherever she found it, of bonding women together in a common cause for the war, and spreading the message of the gospel. Laura's was not the intellectual faith of her friend, Louise Creighton. Laura's was a 'warts-and-all' belief in God's power and protection.

This was reflected through her intense belief that the Lord would sustain them through these fearful days, and she uses powerful imagery to illustrate her belief:

> First intercessory service at Sutton Scotney…As I knelt there the horrible battlefield came before me shedding terror of pitiful wounds and slaughter and then I saw a great tall cross with our Lord on it towering above the poor bodies… It felt like the brazen serpent aloft among the dying Israelites. If Christ is there - we can endure this awful cataclysm so suddenly, like an earthquake come among us.[724]

Laura's initial reaction to the war reflected the experience of most women in the country from all classes in society, shock and fear at first, steadied by the immense feelings of patriotism and war excitement, to maintain a good morale at home amongst her fellow-women whilst supporting their brave men who left England to fight on a foreign soil. It could be argued, when one reads through her comprehensive narratives of the war, that her enthusiasm for the war could not be reconciled with the spirit of Christianity with its emphasis on peace and love.

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[723] Marwick, A., p.142-3
[724] Diary entry for Monday 10 August 1914, 9M68/34, HRO

Laura answers this charge in her exposition entitled 'The Passion of Peace,' published on behalf of the Mothers' Union.

In this paper, she argues that the qualities of self-sacrifice, courage and service displayed by troops at the Front were Christian virtues. She held that conscientious objectors were merely "pacifist dreamers" as "the peace of our Saviour was not won by refusing war. It was won by passion, by battle, by self-sacrifice until death, by victory."[725] Upper class women like Laura maintained a 'stiff upper lip' attitude, supporting their menfolk as they left to take up their posts as officers in the British Army. Ladies such as Lady Betty Balfour in 'The Conservative and Unionist Women's Review' advised her readers to bear any personal losses without demonstrative emotion and this seemed to be the general sentiment.[726] Another writer in the same journal advised that women should moderate their feelings between the extremes of sentimentality on the one hand, and revenge on the other.[727]

In addition, Mrs. Sloan Chesser advised her readers to consider the ethical side of the war. She encourages her readers to follow the progress of the war as it unfolded, with the petition, "the first duty of every intelligent woman is to study the history of the war and to have a clear idea in her mind as to its cause, because there is a very pressing need for a healthy public opinion at this time." Lady Balfour also appealed to the untrained woman to follow the war closely in order to devote their thoughts and prayers to the troops.[728] Laura answered these pleas by keeping a daily chronicle of the hostilities as they unfolded. However, in August 1914, the heavy losses lay in the future and the aristocracy, like other classes, were eager to sign up for action. The leaders of the churches supported recruitment campaigns. Indeed Bishop Winnington-Ingram spoke to women in October 1914 at Church House, asking them to encourage their menfolk to join up, with their blessing behind them.[729]

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[725] Ridding, L.E., 'The Passion of Peace,' (written on behalf of the Mothers' Union, no date), p.210
[726] Balfour, B, 'War and Women,' in The Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Review, No.21, Oct-Dec 1914, p.410
[727] Sloan Chesser, E., p.7
[728] Balfour, B., p.410
[729] Marwick, A., p.94

During this same month Laura was asked by a member of the gentry to support the local recruitment campaign, which she undertook willingly.[730] With their men away, women from the upper echelons of society were invited to 'do their bit' for the war effort and take Belgian refugees into their homes, a worthy cause at the start of the war, along with the Belgian and Serbian Relief Fund. Laura expresses feelings of regret as she made the decision not to take in any refugees: "Mary says I must not try to take in any Belgians. I feel not able to do it, as I am all alone and so overworked. I hope I'm not sinning by shirking it."[731]

On the positive side, Laura observes how the different pre-war sections of society united together for the common cause of halting the enemy: political parties, suffragettes, trade unions and classes. The support of the colonies also drew the Empire closer together, in what Laura calls, "the brotherhood of the Empire." She continues, "if she (Louise Creighton) is beginning to love, instead of "hate the Empire" the war is making a valuable convert to imperialism."[732] Women of different classes also unified under the British flag. On the front cover of the 'Conservative and Unionist Women's Review' for October to December 1914,[733] the following statement was printed, urging women to put aside their suffrage work while the war was on:

> There are no Conservatives and Liberals, Suffragists (constitutional and militant) or Anti-Suffragists among us now. We are simply British women, prouder than ever of our Country and of the magnificent spirit that has arisen among us since it was found that peace could only be maintained at the price of dishonour. Now none are for Party but all are for State…

Women began to display solidarity and organise themselves as they had never done before. Laura observes the "newly spun bands of sympathy between classes"[734] and prayed that such partitions dividing humanity would be destroyed when the war finally ended. She writes in her article on 'The Passion of Peace:' "if a peace made after this (St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians) pattern is to be won by the war, if nations and classes are to be linked in brotherhood, many frontiers and partition

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[730] Diary entry for Wednesday 21 October 1914, 9M68/34, HRO
[731] Diary entry for Tuesday 27 October 1914, 9M68/34, HRO
[732] Diary entry for Tuesday 8 December 1914, 9M68/34, HRO
[733] The Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Review, No.21, Oct-Dec 1914
[734] Ridding, L.E., 'The Passion of Peace,' p.212

walls will have to be destroyed."[735] She asked for the prayers of all Christian women towards this end.

'The sacrifice will bring its blessing'

As the Great War began to exact its tragic toll on the British Army, women were drafted in as nurses to cope with the unprecedented number of casualties. Women were mostly attracted from well-to-do backgrounds as they were unpaid and so had to be financially self-sufficient, however women from other classes also joined up. Since 1910 the War Office Scheme for Voluntary Aid Detachments to the Sick and Wounded (VADs) complemented the Army's existing medical service and for women with a desire to make a formal contribution to the war effort, medical work offered the appropriate channel. Nursing did not challenge dominant ideas of femininity or womanhood as it fitted in with women's traditional role as carer for the sick, although it was deemed to be more exciting than other war work. Additionally it was a perceived to be a more "romanticised role" than others forms of voluntary work, but for women who grew up against the background of the growth of the women's movement it offered an opportunity to participate in the war directly for the first time.[736]

As Marwick highlights, infantrymen were subjected to the horror of machine gun fire and explosives in the trenches at the Front. A consequence of this form of warfare was the high number of casualties, which the Army medical staff and VADs endeavoured to cope with. By September 1916 there were 8,000 VADs nursing in military hospitals.[737] For the first time women were publicly hailed as courageous, and exceptional nurses were awarded military honours, as the image of womanhood was strengthened by the traditionally masculine quality of bravery. Women's medical role in the war was lauded by observers such as Mrs. Sloan Chesser, who argued that women played a 'better' part in war than men as they saved life, rather than took it.[738]

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[735] Ibid., p.211
[736] Condell, D., & Liddiard, J., p.21
[737] Marwick, A., p.83-4
[738] Sloan Chesser, E., p.7

The war did much to advance women's position and confidence in society. As men were universally conscripted after May 1916, many women were afforded new employment opportunities, albeit temporary, in the public realm. Through the various war organisations, through nursing and in the munitions factories over a million and a half more women were in paid employment at the end of the war, as compared with those at the start. However this was only temporary as over two thirds of these women had left their jobs by 1920.[739] Despite this, women's solid contribution to the national war effort had served to convince opponents of women's right to the franchise to concede some ground, though not complete adult suffrage.

On 6 February 1918, women over the age of 30 were given the Vote. Most importantly, the Victorian image of the sheltered, frail, woman at home had been undermined by their contribution to the war effort as women of all classes worked together. This opened the floodgates for further progress. The General Election in December 1918 returned a Coalition Government, led by David Lloyd-George, a supporter of women's rights. They brought in a Sex Disqualification Act that allowed women to take part in jury service, the magistracy and the legal profession. In 1928 women over the age of twenty-one were given the Vote.[740]

As the number of casualties increased over the weeks and months of the war, the military hospitals could not accommodate all the sick and injured troops. Additional infirmaries and rest homes were required and to this call many of the upper classes responded by offering their large homes. However, as Pamela Horn adds, many landed families had already given their sons and were unprepared for the great transformation that the war was to make to their lives as they knew them; "yet in the days that preceded that fatal declaration there had been few premonitions among the inmates of most country houses that the comfortable world they had known was about to disappear forever."[741]

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[739] Marwick, A., p.162
[740] Ibid., p.160
[741] Horn, P., p.194

In 1915, Blackmoor, the family seat of the Selbornes, was offered by Maud and Willy to the War Office as a hospital, but as willing as Laura was to help the war effort, she was most concerned that the contents of the beloved home of her childhood would "all go smash,"[742] more particularly as Maud, self-appointed manager of the project, did not prepare and execute the plan as comprehensively as Laura would have liked. Laura adored her sister-in-law, but she grieved at the lack of thought and care taken over her family home: "Top said Maud has "a kink against doing things properly."... She is reckless about all things of value. She certainly has a curiously anarchic mind."[743] This was certainly something Maud corroborated. Not only did she make the domestic decisions, but she also revealed a rebellious streak in her nature. After she arrived in South Africa with Willy, she confides to her brother Bob, "it is rather a nuisance, but here I find myself on the side of everything radical,"[744] and later, "I am rapidly getting a downright revolutionist."[745] However despite her reservations, Laura did help Maud and the servants turn Blackmoor into a hospital: the Drawing Room, Dining Room and Smoking Room were all turned into wards to house twenty five soldiers, five Red Cross nurses and any of the family.[746] This she accepted as "sacrifice is the law of God for us today and so we must be ready and cheerful."[747]

Over the period of a fortnight she assisted in the packing-away of precious items, in the cleaning and tidying of furniture and rooms, despite Maud's often frustrating opposition:

> The House is filthy. Servants bustling about in a most unbusinesslike way. Nobody but me thought it necessary to air the new bedding but persuaded Maud to have that done... Maud insisted on having five top rooms uncovered as "germs do not reach up there!!!" Dust etc. does not matter apparently. It's really all crazy.[748]

Elite women such as Maud wanted to feel that they were being useful, but as men signed up to fight at the Front, women's way was not so clear and so by

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[742] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle, Part I..., p.19
[743] Diary entry for Tuesday 13 April 1915, 9M68/35, HRO
[744] Rose, K., The Later Cecils, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1975, p.297
[745] Ibid., p.298
[746] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle. Part I..., p.19
[747] Diary entry for Saturday 27 March 1915, 9M68/35, HRO
[748] Diary entry for Wednesday 21 April 1915, 9M68/35, HRO

contributing their homes and their time, landed women could feel that they were making a valuable contribution.

During the early days of the war Laura learned that her dearest sister, Sophy, was ill. After years alone, Sophy married an acquaintance, a French aristocrat and scholar, on 16 February 1903, the Comte de Franqueville. The family referred to him as 'Franquet,' and she lived in France with her husband at their home, Chateau de la Muette, in Passy, near Paris. Laura records her feelings of shock in her recollections when Sophy announced her intention to marry Franquet, and refers to the union as "Sophy's extraordinary marriage," as she had accepted his proposal "with appalling sacrifice and agony" "and against all her judgement."[749] Laura later reveals her uncertainties about the marriage. She writes: "Sophy… happy with a man, so narrow, so unjust, so mean, so tactless in many ways. Yet she <u>was</u> happy with him."[750] This was the sister to whom Laura turned after Mary (her nearest sibling in age) married Lord Waldegrave. Additionally, Franquet was a committed French Catholic and Sophy was a devoted Anglican. This also served to fuel Laura's discontent.

Sophy was a deeply spiritual person, selfless and always thinking of others, which is what made it so hard for Laura to accept her sister's deterioration, following an operation for cancer in February 1915. Sophy and Laura had a unique relationship as they grew older. George had also admired his sister-in-law greatly. After her mother died Sophy looked after her father, tending to his needs, especially in his latter days. Laura records how her sister survived on just 6½ hours sleep over a period of ten days, when nursing their father's last illness. Sophy assisted the successive Blackmoor ministers in their duties, and continued to hold her Sunday Men's Reading class for villagers, until her marriage in 1903. This remarkable woman also had an interview with Pope Leo XIII in 1899 with her father.[751] Laura had commenced her autobiography on 19 February 1914, and during visits to la Muette she had shown her recollections to her ailing sister, who was very interested

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[749] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., pp.294-296
[750] Diary entry for Saturday 9 June 1917, 9M68/37, HRO
[751] Ridding, L.E., <u>Sophia Matilda Palmer…</u>, pp.59-60

to read its contents. Laura felt increasingly that she was writing her memoir for Sophy, that soul who appreciated her work.[752]

Sophy died of heart failure, following a further operation for cancer on 28 October 1915. To Laura's deep regret, she did not receive the telegram from France. notifying her of Sophy's death, until the day of Sophy's funeral on the 30 October. As she felt after the death of George, her sorrow overwhelmed her and in her first war chronicle she describes her loss:

> What a greyer world, a duller world it will be to us without her… I just feel dulled. Stunned. Stupid. Unable to write - This sorrow and loss in the midst of this time of strain is like a blow on top of one's head - first stupifying one. Every feeling of sharp acute sorrow seems scared by the war strain.[753]

During 1916, Laura ploughed her energies into researching and writing Sophy's biography. Not only did this ease her intense feelings of loss, but it also channelled her attentions away from the morbidity of the war, "an opiate"[754] as she calls it. Franquet approved of the scheme, although he wanted to make some minor amendments to the text. Although she admitted that the biography diverted some of her attention away from the strains of the war, she acknowledged that without God's help and with the strength she drew from Holy Communion, she would not have had the mental strength to finish it:

> It has been the heaviest task I have ever undertaken - for times… have made it absolutely impossible to write. The tension, the mental suffering have exhausted me <u>beyond</u> bearing now and again. I have been sustained by fresh access of strength and rest in God.[755]

Later, when she had finished the biography, and it was published by Arnold, she confessed to the difficulties she faced writing Sophy's life story at the height of the war. Indeed she could not bring herself to enjoy any of her old familiar pastimes – writing and painting. She writes, "war strain and war committees seem to exhaust one's brain and it is not pressure of application to write. When things are critical I

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[752] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.339
[753] Ridding, L.E., <u>War Chronicle</u>. Part I…, p.56
[754] Diary entry for Thursday 23 March 1916, 9M68/36, HRO
[755] Ridding, L.E., <u>War Chronicle</u>, Part III, January 1 1918 - December 31 1918, HRO

feel palsied about composition - as if a heavy weight prevented mental breathing."[756]

Laura was particularly drawn to the prevention and cure of a number of social and moral problems that were thrown up during the course of the war. Edwardian society was still based very much upon the strict moral foundations of its Victorian forebears and Laura was experienced in educating the vulnerable and fallen. The issues that Laura and others sought to address were predominantly sexual in nature, such as the rise in incidences of venereal disease and an increased number of children born outside wedlock. By 1918 the rate of illegitimacy had risen by 30% compared to the figure before the war began.[757] Marwick refers to this over-concern that was stirred up by some of the women's voluntary organisations, including the women's patrols set up by the NUWW, as "moral fuss."[758]

This was borne out by some of the criticisms Laura set out in her diaries. As a lady from the high Victorian period, the immodesty of current fashions riled the prude in her, which she believed went some way to explain the relaxation of sexual behaviour. She writes the following passage early in 1914:

> Present fashions are according to fashion books and satirical papers indecent to an unbelievable degree. Nothing above the waist except thin folds covering the bosom… Skirts slit up to show as much leg as possible. No sleeves. Bodice open down to the waist and skirts clinging so tight that it's like a sheath… What all this immodest heathen folly portends, one can't tell. It's odious.[759]

Excerpts such as this go some way to reveal how conservative Laura remained, despite many of her progressive ideals.

The Edwardian era, with its Victorian undertones, was beginning to draw to a close when the war began in 1914, marked by significant changes in traditional moral and social standards of acceptable behaviour, particularly for the young. The nature of the family group changed as men and women left the home to work for the war

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[756] Diary entry for Thursday 6 June 1918, 9M68/38, HRO
[757] Marwick, A., p.104
[758] Ibid., p.117
[759] Diary entry for Saturday 7 March 1914, 9M68/34, HRO

effort and this led to an increase in casual sexual relationships and the consequent breakdown of some marriages. One positive outcome of the disintegration of conventional standards of behaviour was the improvement in health education that grew out of the problems caused by the displacing effects of the war.[760] Laura still believed in the legacy of the purity movement and the belief that it was the duty of her upper class sisters to lead by example and re-educate those in the lower echelons who were in ignorance.

As usual, Laura was sympathetic to the plight of the single mother and her illegitimate child on a practical level, but she still considered such behaviour to be sinful, confiding "Oh! These miserable sins and unhappy illegitimate babies."[761] Equally as pressing was the problem of venereal disease which Marwick refers to as "an ominous shadow lurking on the consciousness of Edwardian society."[762] Louise Creighton served as one of only three women on a Royal Commission comprising fifteen members which was instigated in 1913 to address the 'Contagious Diseases.'[763]

When the Report finally published its conclusions in 1916, it called for more public education and openness on the subject, contrary to the Edwardian moral canons of modesty and ignorance.[764] Laura also took a keen interest in this subject, as did her favourite nephew, Bobby. Both made addresses on the subject, advocating a war on fornication, the sin that was at the root of all the problems and stressed the need for more self-control, as sustained by the Church. Laura emphasises how "boys and girls need treating from (the) earliest in self-restraint and obedience to God`s laws of purity and health."[765] Laura was very proud that she had also served on a commission set up to tackle the problem of venereal disease in London, even before Louise had been asked to sit on the Royal Commission, comprising "seven medical men and me…"[766]

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[760] Sloan Chesser, E., p.7
[761] Diary entry for Friday 16 February 1917, 9M68/37, HRO
[762] Marwick, A., p.20
[763] Covert, J.T., p.144
[764] Marwick, A., p.120
[765] Diary entry for Wednesday 14 August 1918, 9M68/38, HRO
[766] Diary entry for Thursday 15 October 1914, 9M68/34, HRO

'The turning of the screw'[767]

Marwick refers to the height of the war between 1916 and 1918 as 'the turning of the screw,' a useful analogy to describe the tightening grip the war placed on the nation's war-weary throat. The optimism shared by Laura and others in 1914 for a quick end to hostilities had faded and the feelings of enthusiastic patriotism soon gave way to war fatigue. The war effort was about to step up a gear as people's sense of what was 'normal' had shifted in this time of great change. Laura perceives this transformation in her diary, writing on 26 October 1916, "our wedding day forty years ago. It might be four hundred years ago for the catastrophic change in England and Europe's outlook in this year 1916 from 1876."[768]

Not least were the political changes of 1916. The Asquith Coalition government, which was marked by a combination of government and voluntary action for the war effort during the first two years of the war, came to an end in December 1916 when the Lloyd-George Coalition government ousted their inadequate predecessors and set forth a plan of increased direct State action.[769] Laura was exhausted by the trials of the war, but continues to relate the details in her war journal, nourished by the spiritual sustenance she received through the Eucharist:

> I went to early Holy Communion and as I knelt at the Altar, it came upon me with a sudden flash that in partaking of the body and blood, I was being made partaker, partner of the suffering and sacrifice of Christ. The partaking pledged one to that. It lifted all this anguish up into Divine Glory. One "took" deliberately, knowing that it involved this acceptance of a share of the Agony. It felt like preparation strengthening for some new strain and pain lying before us.[770]

In a revealing passage, Laura expresses the changes in her attitude to the great monster of war and how it affected all that she thought and did:

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[767] Marwick, A., p.83
[768] Diary entry for 26 October 1916, 9M68/36, HRO
[769] Marwick, A., p.83
[770] Diary entry for Sunday 14 February 1915, 9M68/35, HRO

> It's curious to notice one's mental attitude in these four months. When the war first began, one can scarcely breathe. The nightmare horror oppressed one day and night. One heart in the midst of one's body was… like melting wax. One suffered physical nausea. Then followed the stage of shrinking shivering under the horror of the German Hate… Gradually (as I suppose the early Christians did under the atmosphere of Hate in the Persecutions), one realized that God's power was the antidote… so long as we did not hate back - were not infected by it.
> Now one lives in a dull, heavy state of expectant quiet readiness for any terror - rest in God's mercy and belief that He will work some great blessing out of this war. It is like the state of widowhood. One had got to get used to the tension, I suppose one gets like that when one accepts a mental malady.[771]

It is interesting to notice the language she uses to express her absolute belief in God's power in the world to see them through.

Marwick notes a distinct change in people's feelings after the Battle of the Somme had taken its massive casualty toll. On the first day of the conflict alone, 20,000 were killed and 40,000 were wounded on 1 July 1916.[772] Laura continues to idealise in her writings, using symbolic language in her chronicles, yet as the casualty lists swelled with the names of men in the village, Laura, like other women, became embittered by the reality of the tragedies that were unfolding in front of her. More especially during the cold winter months at home, Laura's thoughts turned to the situation in the trenches, "Tuesday November 17th, 1914. Icily frosty. What it must be in the trenches."[773]

Laura describes visiting the son of a friend, aged twenty-two, who was disabled by a piece of shrapnel in his skull that could not be removed:

> …So dangerous an operation they dare not operate yet they fear it will gradually press upwards into the brain. He has paralysis but that seems mending. He can walk quite well, though he falls about and he is recovering the use of his arms and hands he hopes. He looks beamingly cheerful, feels no pain, but his memory is bad and one does not quite gather whether his brain is normal or not. He represents <u>millions</u> of men who in the prime

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[771] Diary entry for Friday 11 December 1914, 9M68/34, HRO
[772] Marwick, A., p.169
[773] Diary entry for Tuesday 17 November 1914, 9M68/34, HRO

> of youth are then maimed forever. It gives one a hideous feeling as to the accumulated efforts of this horrible devil war.[774]

Such a personal insight into the consequences of the war added to her feelings of horror. Living near the railway line, she heard the constant procession of trains rumbling past, filled with the wounded returning from the Front, to be replaced by 'fresh' men and supplies travelling back down again.

The incessant trains continued during the night, so it was hard for Laura to escape the reality of the situation. She was particularly conscious of the number of officers who were losing their lives, compared with previous wars.[775] According to Laura, the world order she was raised in was disintegrating, a sign from God. Further, when Nicholas II, Tsar of Russia, and his family were murdered in 1918, Laura reflects, "the Bolshevists make Marat and Robespierre seem gentle Quakers in contrast to their butcheries."[776] In the light of the rot of the war, Laura modified her interpretation of the more fierce Psalms which she had always regarded as unchristian: "I think we can understand their anguish and cry for help now and vengeance for innocent blood shed as we could not before."[777]

Amongst such desolation and destruction, Laura sees the beauty and peace of nature's healing hands touching the scarred battlefields during the summer of 1918. As always, Laura saw light and shade in all situations. Painting an almost romantic picture of the scene, like C.S. Lewis's mythical land of Narnia returning to springtime after endless winter, Laura sees her creator God's signs in nature:

> The unspeakable condition of the battlefields - the obscenity, horror of destruction and filthy desolation. "Hell"… indescribable in ghastly putrification and wounds - shredded mutilated skeletons of woods - forests of barbed torn wire - hundreds of pools of green and scarlet slime in craters - fields that have been torn to pieces and fallow for two and a half years. Now this summer are described as having suffered the most wonderful change in Nature's healing hands. She has spread a "vast patchwork quilt" over the dead. Great masses of purple thistle, yellow sow thistle, toadflax, tansy, mustard, willowherb,

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[774] Diary entry for 21 February 1917, 9M68/37, HRO
[775] Diary entry for Monday 28 June 1915, 9M68/35, HRO
[776] Diary entry for Friday 6 December 1918, 9M68/38, HRO
[777] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle. Part I…, p.15

> poppys, blue cornflowers and chicory, white ox eyed daisies, yarrow, with self sown turnips, cabbages, onions, sugarbeet, flax: descend trenches like hanging gardens…[778]

All this she describes without ever having visited the trenches, although she was a keen recorder of the war and Willy, her brother, had visited the Front.

At home she also found comfort in the natural world, in her garden, where despite the conflict the birds still visited, the sun still shone and the flowers still blossomed. The Riddings had always been keen gardeners and Laura enjoyed nothing better than strolling around her garden. Although she welcomed company, she despised crowds, which is one reason why she disliked London so much. She had always grappled with the disparity between her "repulsive horror of living in a crowd" whilst trying to internalise the Christian sense of brotherhood.[779] But here in her garden she could escape for a moment.

At a domestic level the consequences of war were felt particularly hard by the housewife, who had to feed herself and often a large family on the meagre rations permitted to every householder by the state. The early Victorian virtue of thrift came into its own again as women were forced to contend with rising food prices. This was particularly true in the large towns. Laura lived in a small Hampshire village but she was a widow, with a small income, so she also had to learn to economise. In 1918 she describes the various privations she had to tolerate, including constraints on food, clothing, fuel, and even on paper and light.

Laura complains about the scanty amount of food rations permitted:

> 2½lb meat, ¾lb sugar, 4lb bread (including flour for cakes, puddings, etc.) for each person a week. Sugar is hardly to be got. Meat we can quite manage, but everybody finds the flour and bread allowance extremely difficult… In wintry weather like this, people need more stoking and no fruit or eggs are available as substitutes.[780]

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[778] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle. Part II…, 8 August 1917
[779] Diary entry for Tuesday 18 June 1918, 9M68/38, HRO
[780] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle. Part II…

Despite the hardship she felt, she was still able to see the more humorous moments amongst all the austerity. Looking retrospectively on war rationing, in 1918, Laura recalls an amusing story she had been told: "One thinks of the saying reported of a Viennese, who said at table d'hote to a friend dining with him: It's not that I object to eating rat. What I dread is "the substitute for rat!"[781]

The war impacted on every area of life and Laura reflects her feelings of constant misery as the war stretched to its fourth year:

> To us in England, this fourth year brings the final strain of endurance. The consciousness of war is a veritable mental torment. One's mind has, for three years, felt imprisoned, unable to get out, away from the… perpetual consciousness of war. Like hay, garlic, paraffin, its presence penetrates, tastes everywhere. Monotonous daily reminder in every meal in absence of bread, sugar, cream - in the enormous cost of what one does have …in empty churches, strained tempers, sickening newspapers, labour-fever, in the perpetual thud of gun and troop-laden trains through the nights, in humming aeroplanes gliding across the skies…in the monotony of dull agony in one's prayer intercessions daily, nightly, in expectant ache of trite incessant news of horrors and death, in a dull sense of creeping age; in hunger for the faces of our precious dead…we have need to pray for Endurance and Fortitude. The strain would break one but for belief in Our Father, God the Father Almighty.[782]

The shortages impacted on the publication of the 'Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Review,' which Laura regularly subscribed to. In the April to June 1916 edition, the executive committee announced on the front page that they would cease their activities until the conclusion of the war as "two publications are more of a luxury than a necessity, especially as they do not now deal with the suffrage question, for which purpose they were originally intended."[783]

In addition to the rationing, Laura was frustrated by some of the lazy staff that she employed. As always she did not mince her words, referring to one housekeeper as "a flabby, lazy, superlatively foolish failure in every way." Not surprisingly she relieved this woman of her duties very soon afterwards. Laura was not a woman to

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[781] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle. Part III…
[782] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle. Part II…, 19 August 1917
[783] Arran, W., The Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Review, No.27, Apr-Jun 1916

tolerate slapdash behaviour. She demanded a high level of respect from her servants, and she remembered those who served her well. She left provisions in her will to those faithful few who served her to the end, including £200 to her gardener Frederick Marshall, £160 to her chauffeur Charlie Yates and £150 to her cook Mary Abbott.[784]

'Seven smileless months'[785]

Laura observes during the early days of the war that the pattern of people's usual behaviour had changed. People rarely smiled anymore. She recalls how, when visited by a beaming newly married couple, it was a strange sight to her. She discloses her innermost feelings in her war journal, "I feel as if I wear a mask and as if one was literally groping one's way… through the Valley of the Shadow of Death."[786] Everyone was touched in some way by tragedy and loss.

Increasingly, Laura refers to Britain waging a holy war against 'the enemy' and her distinction between the German army and the devil became blurred. As the conflict heightened, Laura's language of war held more and more apocalyptic and overtly religious overtones. A popular belief was the assertion that Edwardian England had been selfish and narrow and that God was punishing the nations for their moral bankruptcy. In 1914 Laura comments, "one rests in God's mercy believing that He will work some great blessing out of this war. The Son of Man is coming in the Clouds in Power and Great Glory. It is the end of a world period and God will give us a new Earth out of the destruction."[787] Laura's vision throughout the war was encompassed in an article for 'The Guardian,' when she writes, "through the thick darkness and devastating fires they see in the burning heart of the anguish the form of the Son of God."[788] Laura acknowledges the way the country was already unifying towards a common purpose under such grave adversity in a way in which it had not come together before.

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[784] M440, Microfilm Box p.681, HRO
[785] Diary entry for Friday 26 February 1915, 9M68/35, HRO
[786] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle. Part III…, 1918
[787] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle. Part I…, p.10
[788] Ridding, L.E., 'The Churchmanship of Women…,' p.70

The war made people take time out to think about the wider picture, and Laura believed that the massive loss of life was going some way to redeem and purify the nations in the eyes of God. In her article, 'The Passion of Peace' which she wrote for the Mothers' Union, Laura compared the incongruity between worldly peace, what she called "the black travesty of the world's peace"[789] and the Lord's divine peace: "I have written a very difficult article... comparing ordinary, human peace with our Lord's gift of Divine Peace - the latter entailing battle, sacrifice, death, the breaking down of partitions and all consequent surrender of privileges."[790] After the conclusion of the war, she hoped Europe would try to revitalise itself and build a new social structure based on justice and peace. Only now was humanity beginning to learn these valuable lessons as it focused on the self-sacrifice of its young men.

'Strive for the Truth unto death and the Lord God shall fight for thee.'[791]

Laura conceded that she, along with the rest of society, had omitted to thank God for the peace and security which she had known for so long and taken for granted, but she trusted in God's providence. He had interceded in human history in the past and now, when humanity needed His help, she questioned impatiently how long it would be before God acted again: "when will God go among the poor and needy and overthrow the cruel pride of Prussianism?"[792] However Laura put her faith in the God she had always trusted.

After the hostilities had ceased, she learned in 1923 how during the 1918 push, the authorities determined that the Air Force would destroy the Black Forest in Germany. In preparation to eliminate such a target, Wolmer Forest, next to Blackmoor, was chosen as the practice target, without the knowledge of the Selbornes. It was revealed to a stunned Laura that eight different attempts had to be aborted at the last minute when adverse weather affected flying conditions. The final attempt was ordered for 11 November 1918, and again at the final moment the mission was cancelled as the armistice was announced. Laura interprets these turn

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[789] Ridding, L.E., 'The Passion of Peace,' p.210
[790] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle. Part II..., 27 June 1917
[791] Ecclesiasticus 4:28, King James Bible Apocrypha
[792] Diary entry for Tuesday 17 August 1915, 9M68/35, HRO

of events as an explicit example of God's guiding hand and later reflects, "it really looks like God's intercessing Providence having protected the beloved place."[793]

In 1914, Laura knew early on that the decision of the British to enter the war was wise, with God's sanction, revealing her hopes for the future. There was some sense of order amongst the ensuing chaos. She comments how "God made our duty clear"[794] and how the positive response of the British colonies to the call for support was another sign: "the Colonies are magnificent. Loyal support pouring in. God gives one clues in these ways."[795] Laura writes philosophically about the ethics of the war as it unfolded in 1915:

> If He means our nation to do work for His purposes here on earth, if our nation is acting justly, self-sacrificing - then He will save and deliver it and other Nations as fully and tenderly as He saves and guides the individuals who compose the Nations.[796]

Laura was always highly idealistic and she held a strong belief that after the experience of war had ceased, the nations, including England, would progress to become more upright, uniting through Christ in divine peace. She ends 'The Passion of Peace' optimistically with the following excerpt: "…the passion of peace will win its reward… a reward of real union of opposing forces and qualities; for 'riches wedded to poverty, help to suffering, knowledge to ignorance is the mystical union of Christ to His Church…'"

Through such trials as the death of her favourite nephew, Bobby, Laura waited expectantly for God to intervene and the war to conclude. But the wait was hard to bear, even for the ever-trusting Laura: "I suppose God's "due time" is not yet reached. One wonders why. The Cup of Suffering has been so drained by the Nations."[797] During the summer of 1918, as the war was drawing to a close, Laura comments on the bountiful harvest that England had not known for many years. Laura interprets this event as God's sign to His people that peace was coming. Through all the horrors of war Laura's faith never diminished:

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[793] Ridding, L.E., Postscript to War Chronicle. Part III…, 13 January 1924
[794] Diary entry for Friday 14 August 1914, 9M68/34, HRO
[795] Diary entry for Wednesday 5 August 1914, 9M68/34, HRO
[796] Diary entry for Saturday 15 May 1915, 9M68/35, HRO
[797] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle. Part II…,

War plunged the Empire into red hot reality... Then the horrors of German bestiality, massacres... defilings, violations, devilry. unbelieved by Maud and so many - slowly forced on their acceptance by the Bryce Reports.[798] Then the agony of distrust of the Government - of bereavement - of the atmosphere of determined hate and conquest. Then bewilderment as to whether after all the Allies deserved victory. Then slowly finding, through doubt and despair, the love of Christ "the Suffering God" is behind all the horror and will win in the end...we are on his side.[799]

By September of 1918 Laura praises God for the Allies' victories, "God is granting us victory," she writes.[800]

From the outset, Laura envisaged the war in terms of the might of the British Empire pitched against the strength of the German Army. After May 1917, America also joined the Allies in the fight against the enemy. Laura describes their entry, using lovely imagery in illustration: "America is still like a kite, hovering in mid-air, liable any moment to be battered down by a gust onto the field of war, or to drop into peacepool."[801] The strength of Laura's language to describe the Germans revealed her deep hatred for the nation. This was heightened by Sophy's letters from France, in which she depicted scenes of sufferings and terror for the ordinary French people and that of the Belgians. Laura was not isolated in her intense feelings of animosity towards Germany, which were intensified by the gas poisonings, what Laura calls "the devil gases of the last German fiendish invention,"[802] the sinking of the Lusitania and the publication of the Bryce Report, creating an atmosphere of vehement anti-German feelings among the British.

Following her study of Nietsche's works, Laura reveals that the Allies must crush the Germans as he wanted to rise up and install a new world order in place of Christianity: "He has a horrible mind. His hatred of our Lord because of His Pity is terrible... it is this cult of cruel brute force he wishes to take the place of Christianity as the World Religion - to be established by the German Warriors in

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[798] The Bryce Report was published in 1915, revealing German atrocities.
[799] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle. Part II...,
[800] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle. Part III..., 24 September 1918
[801] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle. Part II..., 1917
[802] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle. Part I..., p.21

their World Empire - May God spare the earth such horror."[803] She was obsessed with the idea that if the German Army defeated the Allies then the British would become slaves and the Christian faith would be replaced by another world-view. She writes on Thursday 22 October 1914, "Lille battle rages. So does Kaiser's wicked hatred of England - To get Calais and England is his obsession."

Maud confided to Laura how, when speaking to General Smutts,[804] he revealed that he had attended a German University and described how every German soldier led a double life: "at home he may be a kind father and husband and lead a blameless life. But he is taught when he enters the army that he must absolutely discard all moral humane religious influences. Obedience and brutality are his sole duties."[805] Laura and her contemporaries bought into the propaganda and continued to reproduce, whilst expanding, stories of German atrocities and treachery, describing the enemy variously as 'the huns' and 'the devils.' One such example is her description of the German forces as they withdrew. She records on 24 March 1917:

> The German Retreat is still going on. As they go they smash, burn, destroy everything. They poison the wells and water supply - they kill or take away all the stock - they cover pictures and treasures with excrement… They take away the men and girls with them as slaves - leaving the aged, sick and little children homeless, starving, destitute.[806]

Although the Bryce Report did reveal instances of German cruelty and crimes. Laura's fertile imagination could not be overlooked. She always had a tendency towards exaggeration in most of her writing and this is best illustrated in the following passage:

> Met at Mrs. Westbrook's, her son whose jaw was blown to pieces… He says the atrocities he has seen he can never forget. The worst of all for haunting him was a young girl whose breast had just been cut off by a Boche. His sister in law nursing at the Front had to prepare a German officer prisoner for an operation and had to search his pockets… In one she found ten babies' fingers!![807]

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[803] Diary entry for Saturday 24 October 1914, 9M68/34, HRO
[804] General Smutts represented South Africa at the War and Peace Terms Conference in London.
[805] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle. Part II…
[806] Ibid.
[807] Diary entry for Thursday 21 November 1918, 9M68/38, HRO

This was just two of the ways myths circulated, especially among the groups of women who gathered together.

On a personal level, the war took its toll on the Selborne family, as with the families of most of the inhabitants of the English country houses. By the close of the conflict Laura could list the deaths of thirteen friends and relatives, excluding those of acquaintances. The upper echelons of society may have celebrated their good fortune in life, but in this war, the percentage of officers from the upper classes who were killed was alarming. Laura's nephew, Bobby, described in his letters how one troop after another filed out of the trenches to meet the enemy, often knowing they were going to meet their deaths, and yet they continued to face this consequence rather than allow Germany to ground her feet on England's shores.[808]

In an article for the C&UWFA, Maud compares the publicly perceived "pomp and circumstance of war" to the "real hideousness" and asked the readership to look beyond "all this sparkle and glitter and think of the hundreds of thousands of brave young lives cut off in their prime…" By this time her two eldest sons were serving in the army, and Bobby especially detailed in his letters how, as a Christian, he struggled with the tension between his personal beliefs and doing his duty for his country. Maud used the journal to voice her opinion that wars did not solve problems, and that if women secured more of a public voice, then public opinion would change and conflict would not be viewed in a glamorous light. She goes on to argue, "it is not possible to put an end to war by war. Doth Beelzebub cast out Beelzebub? On the contrary, war breeds hate, and hate breeds war."[809]

This was borne out by thousands of mothers around the country, wondering if their sons and husbands would return as the war advanced. So the initial Selborne feelings of patriotism and excitement when the war broke out were soon overtaken by those of bitterness and horror. As Laura admitted, she regarded her nephews, Top and Bobby, as surrogate sons. After George died and she returned to

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[808] Diary entry for Friday 20 August 1915, 9M68/35, HRO
[809] Selborne, Countess of., 'The Reality of War,' in The Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Review, No. 23, July-Sept 1915, p.29

Hampshire to live, the boys spent many hours sitting with their 'Aunt Lolly,' and she would re-live her expectations through their lives. So when it was announced that they had joined the 6th Battalion of the Hampshire Regiment, and were leaving for India, the family had mixed feelings about the posting.

She records how she felt sick and yet their mother, Maud, celebrated the fact that they were being sent to India, rather than a more hazardous arena in Europe. In her usual idyllic way, Laura compared Bobby to a young St. Michael in his uniform, upholding popular images of young knights of old going into battle.[810] Neither of her nephews wanted to become soldiers, and Laura interpreted this as real sacrifice for their country. As Top and Bobby embarked on their long journey on 2 October 1914, Laura 's pride gave way to feelings of dread, especially as so many officers were being reported as killed. She writes on Sunday 4 October: "all day wrestled in prayer for the boys on their journey... May God keep them from perils by sea - perils on land - evil of soul or body."[811]

By August of the following year, Bobby had sent a telegraph to his father Willy, to let him know that he was leaving his brother and India for the Euphrates in Mesopotamia. An intensely Christian man, Bobby found it particularly hard to resolve the conflict in his heart between what God wanted him to do, and the demands of the British Army. The loss of life was hard to bear and following the family literary tradition, one of his poems was published in 'The Times,' describing his feelings. It opens:

> How long, O Lord, how long, before the flood
> Of crimson -welling carnage shall abate?
> From sodden plains in West and East the blood
> Of kindly men steams up in mists of hate.[812]

Tuesday 25 January 1916 was the day that Laura had dreaded since the boys had left England's shores. She received a telegram from Willy with the following contents: "Cable. Bobby wounded in Battle of 21st. Know no more." Over the next few days the family waited for more news but this was not forthcoming, so

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[810] Diary entry for Wednesday 30 September 1914, 9M68/34, HRO
[811] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle. Part I..., p.6
[812] Palmer, R.S.A., The Times, 15 October 1915, p.49

Willy used his influence to travel to Port Said to find out more information on Bobby's condition, and where he was being treated.

While he was there he wrote a touching letter to Laura, who was just as desperate to find out how badly Bobby was injured, acknowledging her pivotal position in their lives and family. He refers to his sister as "you who have been a second mother to my boys and whom they love so tenderly and devotedly, you know, and you know that a purer holier boy has never walked this earth since Christ died for us than my Bobby. Therefore I know that, whether he is alive or dead, or whatever he may have gone through the everlasting arms of his God have been round him."[813] Members of the family framed Bobby in a language almost canonical, Laura especially so.

An armistice was declared so that both sides could collect the wounded and bury their dead, and to this effort a line was drawn over which neither side was to cross. Clearly Bobby was not found on the Allies' side. Therefore Bobby was still on the Turkish side and a prisoner of war, if he was still alive. During this agonising time, Laura was distracted from completing her recollections of Sophy and her thoughts turned to the plight of her nephew and his family. It was now ironic that when her sons received their orders, Maud had consoled herself with the good fortune they had not gone to the Front in France.

After the anxiety of nearly two months' uncertainty, on 13 March, Willy received a telegram from the German Red Cross at Port Said with the news they had all dreaded: "Turkish Red Crescent reports that Captain Palmer was captured, grievously wounded, but died before reaching hospital." Bobby was killed on 21 January 1916 on the Tigris. Laura confides in a letter to Willy how she could not imagine life without Bobby and how hopeless Maud felt with her husband still hundreds of miles away, but she was consoled in her grief in the knowledge that God had called him to higher service beyond his earthly life:

> …I think God needed our pure holy Bobby… It looks as if with all these thousands and thousands of thoughtless young lives

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[813] Diary entry for Saturday 5 February 1916, 9M68/36, HRO

> pouring through the gate of death hour after hour, God who always uses men for the help of men, having in our Lord taken the nature of man upon Him, to save man was deliberately now calling his noblest most faithful young servants so as to help these other young souls. It is so deliberate and we know the mercy of God so we believe it is for some real service they are taken.[814]

Laura continued to use heroic imagery, mythologising Bobby as her heroic knight, but in reality Bobby's death followed the tragic trend of the war of heavy losses sustained by the peers of the realm and their sons. Almost one in five were killed, under the age of fifty.[815] Women dealt with their grief in a number of different ways but all felt their loss keenly. Laura describes her sister-in-law's reaction akin to protecting an open wound from being touched - she disliked anyone talking about his death. She was particularly distressed at the tragic waste of his life and service to the weak and oppressed, in particular the Purity Crusade.[816]

Several months later, Maud was still mourning the loss of her son, but she told Laura that on the day of his fatal wounding, she was comforted by the recollection that a vision of Bobby appeared before her and "…he said to her that something, "a very good thing had happened to him." Whether he meant the wound (so as to save him from having to kill others which he hated) or death – she cannot tell as he may not have died that same day or hour."[817] Laura's response was to research and publish a biography of Bobby's short life, as was her wont. This biography was the third she had written and she became an efficient researcher. Laura's obituary in 'The Times' confirmed her ability as a biographer asserting, "these biographies are excellent both in proportion and arrangement and exhibit a rarer quality, a curious flair for what was interesting."[818]

The exacting toll of the war prompted Laura to re-evaluate her ideas on death and the after-life. She argues that Purgatory was a "crude ogrish (sic) doctrine."[819] Furthermore, she believed that while 'spiritual souls' assimilated smoothly into

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[814] Ridding, L.E., Letter to Earl of Selborne, 14 March 1916, MSS Selborne 139. BL
[815] Horn, P., p.197
[816] Diary entry for Monday 3 April 1916, 9M68/36, HRO
[817] Diary entry for Tuesday 22 February 1916, 9M68/36, HRO
[818] The Times, 23 May 1939, p.18
[819] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle. Part I…, p.58

their new life after death, the path was not so clear for those 'mottled souls'. Laura was confident that the after-life was not some "shadowy lingering of consciousness as a pale flicker of existence." Rather, it was a more virile development of one's earthly life, as she had also argued in her article entitled, 'God's Gifts. On the Training of the Soul.'[820] This conclusion was reached after an episode where Willy had dabbled with spiritualism and mystical Christianity.

In her second chronicle of the war, Laura comments on the extent to which spiritualism prevailed throughout the land as countless families lost their sons, what she deemed to be "an inevitable result of this new intimate acquaintance with death."[821] Under the severe pressures that grief made on its victims, families such as the Selbornes turned to spiritualism for comfort. A committed Anglican, Willy had always turned to more traditional outworkings of faith for strength, but after reading a copy of Sir Oliver Lodge's book 'Raymond,'[822] Laura describes how her brother claimed he had communicated with Bobby through a medium, following his initial scepticism. This also flew in the face of the criticism by the leading Bishop Winnington-Ingram who criticised both Lodge's book and spiritualism in general.

Laura observes how aged Willy had become in the months following Bobby's death - his face more lined, his countenance less peaceful. She supported his experimentation with spiritualism, despite the disapproval of Willy's remaining children, Top and Mabel. During May 1917 Willy had communicated by letter with Sir Oliver Lodge and arranged to meet for an evening. Laura reveals the unfolding events of their first meeting that he shared with his eldest sister at her request:

> He had written to Sir Oliver Lodge after reading 'Raymond'; and with the two daughters and Lady Lodge he had a curious experience, trying to test if it were Bobby who they described as come with Raymond. It might easily have been telepathy. But that for a table to rap out is extraordinary... He has been to séances. He has now felt Bobby's personality there.[823]

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[820] Ibid., p.59
[821] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle. Part II..., Friday 25 March 1917
[822] In 1916 Sir Oliver Lodge wrote Raymond, the recollections of his son, who was killed in 1915. For many people, Lodge's scientific reputation gave credence to their belief in spiritualism.
[823] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle. Part II..., 8 May 1917

The conclusion Willy reached helped Laura to form her own opinions of the after-life. Without needing to question their Christian belief they agreed that after death the personality survived and that as the spirits did not mention the war. as terrible as it was on a daily basis, it was nothing compared as it was with Eternity.

In her efforts to support the progression of the established church, Laura took a real interest in the spiritual welfare of the troops, furthered by letters she received from family and friends in the forces. Some reported on the lack of adequate chaplains and their efficacy, while others described how despite this shortage, men were turning to God in the face of the terrible war. She comments on the religious revival that was pervading the Army and Fleet, ever the romantic:

> One of the most wonderful sparks struck out by this war is the way in which at the front quite ordinary commonplace boys write home and speak of how there they are learning to believe that 'death is only a phase – that life goes on – a new life like at birth,' that it is not an end at all, but rather a beginning.[824]

Contrary to Laura's positive assertion that the war had revived the nation's religious feelings, Marwick argues that despite individual or anecdotal cases, there was no comprehensive and straightforward religious revival. Moreover. the religion of the average Briton was more likely to be a belief in the supernatural expressed outside institutionalised religion.[825]

The whole issue of the nation's spiritual needs concerned Laura, along with Willy and Louise Creighton. Late on in 1916 the National Mission of Repentance and Hope[826] was formed by the leading lights of the Church and Laura and Louise took a keen interest in its development. Additionally, the Life and Liberty Movement[827] grew out of the Mission. Through such organizations, the Church of England sought to address the spiritual needs of the nation during the war. Laura entered into a dialogue with Louise at her home in Hampton Court over the National

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[824] Ibid., 26 June 1917
[825] Marwick, A., p.292
[826] The National Mission contributed towards the passage of the Church of England Assembly (Powers) Act of 1919 that created the first National Assembly. Louise Creighton was a charter member of this from 1920 until 1930.
[827] This movement supported increased self-government as a means to further reform of the established church.

Mission. She suggests that an additional word should be inserted to the title - 'the National Mission of Comfort, Repentance and Hope. She believed that God would have sought to comfort those in distress before calling them to repentance. She ends with the comment, "I think clergy unhuman (sic) sometimes."[828]

The wife of a leading ecclesiastic, Laura was always ready to criticise the imperfections of the clergy. In particular she was a great advocate of the clergy communicating with their parishioners in the vernacular as she wanted God's message to reach as many people as possible. This was a recurring theme throughout her writings as she marvelled at the ways in which the addresses of some clerics were interesting but hardly suitable for the poorly educated. At Southwell, George had always tried to tailor his sermons to his audience, without patronising them. Laura even chastised herself on occasions. In her diary for 1885, after addressing a Girls' Friendly Society meeting, she complains, "my speech was stupid – too pretentious."[829] Laura observes that the nature of their position of authority led some to become absorbed in their own self-importance, outside the minds of those they wished to instruct.

On two occasions she criticised local clergy for their use of difficult theological concepts in sermons delivered to a congregation of mixed intellect:

> Nowadays theological terms are a stumbling block. Atonement. Incarnation – and such terms repel. The parts must be stated in modern terms. They feel these archaic – not throbbing with life…[830] Lenton Bible Class at S. Lukes. What on earth is the good of telling poor semi-educated people so emphatically that 'Heaven is not a place, but a state.'[831]

Laura and Willy discussed the future of the church they loved so dearly, agreeing that British Christians had relied on the traditions of the church for too long, on what she identifies as "our religious 'capital,' feelings, customs bequeathed by forefathers." She believed that Christians, including herself, needed to inhale fresh

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[828] Diary entry for Wednesday 23 February 1916, 9M68/36, HRO
[829] Diary entry for Wednesday 11 November 1885, 9M68/5, HRO
[830] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle, Part II…,
[831] Diary entry for Wednesday 6 March 1918, 9M68/38, HRO

ways of thinking about their faith in order to take the church forward when the war ended.

Willy was proactive in his defence of the church, helping to set up the Church Assembly and self-government of the Church. Indeed he served as Chairman of the House of Laity from 1920 until 1942. The Selbornes had always denounced any attempts to disestablish the church and Willy in particular was one of the leaders who helped to successfully oppose the two Disestablishment Bills that the Liberal government introduced in 1894 and 1895. As the new century progressed, attention was turned to the issue of self-government, rather than defence. Laura also worked hard in this direction, serving on a number of committees in Southampton. She supported the demand for the church, rather than the increasingly secularised government, to make its own decisions. David Cannadine, in his discussion of the decline of the aristocracy's influence in the life of the nation, argues that for men such as the second Lord Selborne, religion was not just a conviction of their personal faith, but that it also enabled them to work out their increasingly frustrated political ambitions through another outlet.[832] Through the Church Assembly, Willy could combine his two fields of action: democracy and church affairs.

'Thank God and take courage'

Laura chronicled the events of the war on paper despite the rationing of such items. When the Armistice was finally signed at 11:00 am on the 11th day of November 1918, Laura details her thoughts and feelings at the end of such a destructive period:

> One feels stunned with the realization. It is beyond speech. The Church bells were ringing a peal tonight – such a peal as we have not heard for 4½ years… One will not get back the elasticity of 4½ years ago… The strain and agony lasting so long has dug deep in.[833]

She reveals how her first impulse was to go to the nearest church and thank God for delivering the nation from the grip of war, describing how "we cannot even feel

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[832] Cannadine, D., The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1990, p.497

[833] Diary entry for Monday 11 November 1918, 9M68/38, HRO

what we would express – we are dazed spectators of what God is doing. We stand stunned and watch and thank God."[834] She continues in the same vein: "the London Peace Procession was a wonderful sight… At the back of this was the realization of how it was "God," not we, who delivered us – How many millions have made the sacrifice for us?"[835]

Laura comments on the paradox of her feelings at the close of 1918. Her overwhelming sense of joy and relief was tempered by her intense feelings of sadness at the terrible losses sustained, and more close to home, her thoughts turned to the deaths of her nephews, Bobby and Downy:

> So this strange wonderful year ends. The strangest, most agonizing, most changing, most comforting and faith assuring year that has ever been – It has certainly been a year of Christ's coming – to judgment – to salvation – to comfort and life – for the poor anguished earth.[836]

During the war 745,000 British soldiers were killed and over 1½ million were wounded.[837] Laura details in her chronicle the great number of officers that lost their lives, compared with those of other ranks: 37,876 officers and 620,822 other ranks were killed; 92,664 officers and 1,939,478 other ranks were wounded; 12,094 officers and 347,051 other ranks were missing.[838] On a personal level, over the duration of the war some of Laura's closest allies and family died, including her sisters Sophy and Freda, her good friend Beatrice Temple and her great friend Ben.

When Ben died on 17 June 1918, Laura committed the following words to her journal, revealing the depth of her place in Laura's heart:

> Beloved Ben, Mrs. Benson died this morning. A swift painless end – such as she wanted if allowed… It is the withdrawal of such a staff and help the greatest my soul has had since 1876, except from George. George. She. Jem have been my soul-helpers and I do long for the help of her glorious stalwart faith; which makes one's own wobbly faith seem infantile in its

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[834] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle. Part III…, 17 November 1918
[835] Diary entry for Sunday 20 July 1919, 9M68/39, HRO
[836] Ridding, L.E., War Chronicle. Part III…., 1918
[837] Wilkinson, A., The Church of England and the First World War, SCM Press Ltd., London, 1978. p.171
[838] Diary entry for Wednesday 20 November 1918, 9M68/38, HRO

> shortcomings, besides hers. Poor Lucy Tait. I am so sorry for her.[839]

The loss of her family felt like a desert in her life. When the consignment of Bobby's belongings arrived from India after his death, included were presents for all the family "to await my return," he wrote. Laura aches, "how one hungers and thirsts for them."[840]

The established church emerged from the close of the war still viewed outwardly and ceremonially as the church of the nation, yet numbers attending church were falling away, as Laura noticed in her own parish church. This went some way to explain why the church instituted a programme of reform. The war also heralded a decline in the influence of the church. Yet Archbishop Davidson was consulted all through the First World War, compared with Archbishops Lang and Temple who were rarely updated by Churchill during the Second World War.[841] Problems not only revealed themselves in the church, but also emerged in society as it tried to come to terms with demobilisation.

Laura highlights other peacetime problems including a disintegration of the social fabric, a series of strikes, even the rise of Communism in Russia concerned her. Laura ends her autobiography with the following prophetic words:

> Since the war, I have worked on at what I could do with age and deafness handicapping. I have written much, but one feels so aged that it is as if the poison of sorrow for the 42 who died from this parish alone, had chilled one's blood. It was an awful experience to live through the war. I trust none of our darling children will have to endure such years, in this time.[842]

Six years after the war ended Laura speaks of her fears as a Labour Government was about to take the seat of power. In a postscript to her war chronicles she comments:

> Jan 13, 1924… The misery, agonies, bloodiness, poverty, suffering… condition of Europe since Nov 11, (*19*)18 is past

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[839] Diary entry for Monday 17 June 1918, 9M68/38, HRO
[840] Diary entry for Saturday 2 June 1917, 9M68/37, HRO
[841] Wilkinson, A., p.292
[842] Ridding, L.E., Vol. II., p.388

> belief. These six years have been terrible. And here in England we are on the Eve of a Labour Government, with all the risks and dangers of ignorant doctrinaires and Communist quacks to govern us… May God deliver England from wreckage!

These were strong words, but then Laura always was a conservative at heart.

Up until the very last, Laura busied herself with writing. Between 1934-5, whilst in her mid-eighties, she was still persevering in trying to secure a publishing deal for her work entitled '<u>Macarius</u>,' detailing the history of the Eastern Church. Murrays and Oxford University Press declined with the objection that the subject was too narrow to cover the expense of publication.[843] She also spent 1935 preparing George's papers to give to the Bodleian Library, Winchester College and Southwell diocese. Increasingly her thoughts turned to the subject of old age. She wrote an unpublished article on 'Old Age and the Wear of Time Teach Many Things,' sending it to Louise Creighton for her comments. Laura details how frustrated she felt that although her mental faculties remained vigorous, her body would not respond to "this tyrant of old age." However she never feared death: "the Christian realizes that death is as necessary as life had been, for the fulfilment of all the unexplored latent powers of his being. For what, after all, is personality. Personality is the possibility of mirroring God."[844] Louise agreed with Laura's observations. Laura's sister Mary died only a year after Laura wrote to her in 1932, likening death to "growing up when one is a child, mysterious and strange, and to be looked forward to…"[845]

By the 1920's, Laura was in her mid-seventies, no longer able to serve on national committees, though she kept up her local work in Hampshire. Increasing deafness made it hard for her to attend conferences, and even church services caused her difficulty. A villager from Wonston recalled how latterly she used a large ear trumpet to keep up with conversations. Laura questions, after a particularly difficult session for the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, whether she should give up her committee work altogether. However she learned to be thankful, "God give me grace to be jolly and contented over this falling veil. I've

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[843] Diary entries for 27 April 1934 and 26 April 1935, 9M68/54-55, HRO
[844] Ridding, L.E., 'Old Age and the Wear of Time Teach Many Things,' 9M68/73/25, HRO
[845] Diary entry for Monday 5 September 1932, 9M68/52, HRO

had fifty-five years acute perfect hearing and ten more of gradually increasing deafness."[846] Despite her hearing problems, she still saw the humour in certain situations. After one church service she writes:

> What is the good of an old deafy like me trying to hear sermons. The scraps that floated to me this morning from my dear, but inarticulate, rector were, "clothed in khaki and potatoes"... "we are now attacking the second stomach"... and remarkable statements like that.[847]

In latter years Louise Creighton was Laura's sole surviving contemporary, but she lacked Laura's vitality. In her diary, Beatrice Webb describes the sad visit she paid to Louise on 5 October 1930:

> Louise is hopelessly crippled and creeps about the house. Her mind is clear, and old age and helplessness have softened her outlook on the world: she has lost the censoriousness of her vigorous and public-spirited youth and prime of life. But she is desperately lonely and bored with existence, hurt that the young people no longer care to come and see her.[848]

Laura had moments of loneliness, but she always tried to resist the enemy of a dull existence. Louise Creighton died on 15 April 1936 and her ashes were buried in St. Paul's Cathedral, a fitting tribute to a great lady, as Covert concludes, "a remarkable woman, a fascinating person in a fascinating era."[849]

Laura continued to surprise people. One gentleman from Wonston village recalled how, when Laura decided to replace her horse and carriage with a motor vehicle, rather than buying a Rolls Royce or similar car, she bought a Model T Ford instead. She did become increasingly fussy and her deafness frustrated her family, Willy often calling her a "fussbox." He would often describe his eldest sister in the following terms, "dear Lolly is in great form, but also in a great fuss."[850] To the end, her impassioned character did not wane. She complained to Willy about the slapdash work of road workers and Willy describes this to Maud: "I should not

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[846] Diary entry for Thursday 11 June 1914, 9M68/34, HRO
[847] Diary entry for Sunday 7 March 1915, 9M68/35, HRO
[848] Webb, B., The Diary of Beatrice Webb, Vol. IV. 1924-1943, Virago Press Ltd., London, 1985, p.342
[849] Covert, J.T., Out of the Shadows...
[850] Selborne, Earl of., Letter to Countess of Selborne, 9 September 1932, MSS Selborne 102/58, BL

have thought it possible for a clever woman to have talked such rot as she did about the roads; she really is not sane on the subject."[851] Also:

> ...Lolly complains of her foot, which swells like mine, but is otherwise in great form. She keeps Mary and me in fits of laughter as she tells brilliant stories of their youth which Mary is quite unable to corroborate. The weather is very hot, but Lolly still wears an amazing quantity of clothes and only goes out in a fur coat.[852]

Laura's great-niece, Lady Mary Howick, recalled how the family affectionately laughed at their matriarch for wearing so many petticoats.

Despite her advancing years, Laura continued to enjoy getting into mischief. Willy writes to his wife with the following amusing exploit:

> Lolly appeared with a very chocolaty face. Grace asked her where she had been. She said to the kitchen and that Mrs. Mallett had given her a chocolate biscuit. Billy, with a profound knowledge of his sister's character, went straight to my study and found my chocolate draw*(er)* open and the box quite empty...[853]

Laura died on Monday 22 May 1939, following a series of attacks of bronchitis. She was ninety, the last of a generation of great Victorian bishops' wives. After her death an unfinished document was found in her desk by a family member. Laura was writing her '<u>Reminiscences</u>,' commencing on her last birthday. She writes, "ninety years today. Ninety years ago an ugly baby was born to my parents..." She ends mid-sentence appropriately with the words, "the years passed on..."[854]

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[851] Selborne, Earl of., Letter to Countess of Selborne, 11 June 1914, MSS Selborne 102/114, BL
[852] Selborne, Earl of., Letter to Countess of Selborne, 6 July 1930, MSS Selborne 106/94, BL
[853] Selborne, Earl of., Letter to Countess of Selborne, 28 September 1921, MSS Selborne 104/65, BL
[854] Ridding, L.E., 'Reminiscences,' 9M68/73/37, HRO

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

Laura Ridding is cited within the context of the development of bishops' wives, and came to prominence at a unique period in their history. Between Catharine Tait's pioneering role from the 1850's and the outbreak of the First World War, the wives of many leading ecclesiastics served at a particular time when their influence, both indirect and direct, was at its height. Laura and other strong characters such as Louise Creighton flourished in such an environment of opportunity. Laura and her contemporaries were noted for successfully seconding their husbands in their missions and this was a remarkable achievement during the Victorian period. Indeed their exalted position in society warranted a series of articles entitled 'The Wives of Bishops' in a leading ladies' journal, Laura included. A further article written about Laura, subtitled 'A Leader of Women,' explored how much she had made the role her own at a time when women were still trying to forge their way in the public domain. With Lord and Lady Selborne as parents it is not surprising that Laura developed an exceptional interest in public affairs. She was born into a family which provided a national elite, part of the governing class, and could not fail to be an interesting subject for study.

In this study I have attempted to meet the need for more research into the lives of women from the upper classes. Laura was a member of the aristocracy as the daughter of the Earl of Selborne, considered to be one of the leading laymen of the nineteenth century, and as such, she had access to the highest corridors of power. Much of her service was informed by the Victorian language of duty in which she was framed and her inherited aristocratic belief that she had a responsibility and duty to those less fortunate than herself in return for privilege and power. Indeed much of her writing stressed the need for people in positions of responsibility to take their commission from God seriously, including employers, parents and even the white race over the black in the Empire.

Laura's influence was most keenly felt in the diocese of Southwell where she made an outstanding contribution on behalf of women and children. Although she did

work successfully at a national level, for example as one of the leading lights of the NUWW, her lasting contribution to the newly-forged diocese was more significant as she established a wealth of new agencies for women and children, ground-breaking, and with little financial support or manpower. Laura's unique position differed from the wives of other bishops as she had no forerunner. She had to forge out a totally new role of her own and this carried additional pressures with it. Louise Creighton became the wife of the Bishop of London, and as such her role entailed a vast amount of work in arguably the largest see outside Rome. Augusta Maclagan, wife of the Archbishop of York, confessed to struggling in looking after two great houses in addition to her diocesan duties.

The demands placed on Laura were different to those placed on these two women, but Laura relished the challenge, seeking what she saw as her calling from God: she rarely complained in her journal of the difficulties she faced, though she was daunted by the task she faced when they first arrived. With George as her strength and guide she was largely successful in many of her ventures. When the amount of work undertaken by a wife in this period is considered, it is remarkable how much work for the women and girls in the diocese was accomplished by Laura Ridding. She was also able to strengthen George in his own difficult endeavour to combine together into one diocese two counties that had never had anything ecclesiastical or civil in common. It would not be too strong to argue that her contributions on behalf of the women and children of the diocese equalled those of her husband and enabled her to stand outside his shadow.

It could be argued that Laura's answer to many of the social problems in Southwell was too parochial and that her belief in the power of the individual to effect a change was too shortsighted, ignoring the deeper causes of such deprivation. Before 1918 women were limited by not having the Vote, and so Laura and her contemporaries made a start by organising such schemes of relief, offering respite to thousands whilst developing a public voice for women along the way. The diocese was renowned for its great manufacturing centres and Laura worked hard to address problems specific to this area of industry, for example she sought to make improvements in the current employment legislation to protect women workers. Much of her time was spent on the issue of the protection of women at work.

Laura was given a unique opportunity by George to share in the women's work of the diocese, and two of the many social agencies she established, The Woman's League and Southwell House, show how far-reaching her influence was felt and how important her pioneering moral welfare work was at the time when few solutions were being offered. Her establishment of organisations that sought to bring women from different social classes together under the banner of their common bond as women and mothers to exchange information and ideas was also unprecedented at a local level.

Although Laura offered many progressive ideas about women's place in society, she was not the classic model of the 'new woman' portrayed in the literature of the day, indeed she was mostly conservative. She was not critical of the class structure, but she did encourage greater dialogue and understanding between the classes in order to erase class prejudice. Much of her writing argued that the Christian elevation of women of all classes, including her own class, and the ensuing positive feminine influence could morally and spiritually regenerate society if all worked together. Ideas and habits were formed in the home, so women were the key to this improvement. Directed towards the upper classes, Laura's writing stressed the need for ladies to take their position in society seriously as they were Christian examples to women lower down the social structure. She believed strongly in the power of public opinion to change existing thought and practices, working from the top downwards.

Laura set up The Woman's League in the diocese, a pioneering undertaking that was lauded in the 'Englishwomen's Year Book' of 1900. Also Laura fought prejudice and faced opposition from her own kind when she pioneered work at Southwell House, a rescue home for local women and girls. She was working at a time when rescue, preventive and social purity work was still in its infancy. At the turn of the century, rescue work was still considered, by some, as an unsuitable topic even to be discussed by a lady of birth such as Laura, despite her role as the wife of a bishop.

Much of the work she undertook was sensitive in nature and she would have found it difficult to convince her peers to overcome their prejudice and lend their support to such schemes as Southwell House. Laura acknowledged to her brother at his Confirmation that being a Christian was not the easy option. Risks and sacrifices would have to be taken in order to give one's faith a practical application. This she did at Southwell when she 'begged' for money from the offices of the Lace Market in Nottingham so that she could continue her work on behalf of the rescue home.

In connection with Laura's moral welfare work at Southwell House. William Temple, the later Archbishop of Canterbury, acknowledged the many hurdles she would have had to confront in order to achieve her goals:

> It is quite easy, of course, to uphold high principles, and then let yourself get hard and difficult and censorious. That is being a Pharisee. And it is quite easy to become widely sympathetic to everybody, and to take care never to say anything that is not sympathetic in order not to upset anybody's feelings. That is being worldly. But to uphold high principles for yourself and others and then when they fall below those high standards to be and to feel in yourself that you are being full of sympathy towards them and glad to be so is very difficult. That is being a Christian.[855]

Laura was also instrumental in raising a number of issues including women on secondary education boards, women on Boards of Guardians administering the new Poor Law and increased employment rights for women workers. Laura addressed the issue of women working on public bodies at a time when the NUWW still worked largely on issues that affected the domestic sphere.

Under her parents' influence Laura's interests combined the religious and political and some of her proudest achievements were undertaken for the NUWW, a movement that combined the two. As one of the founders and earliest leaders, Laura's energy largely contributed to the success of the organisation that still exists today. Her work on its behalf gave meaning to her life particularly after George's death in 1904. The NUWW played a major role in the development of a public voice for the Women's Movement, where such cutting-edge issues as the regulation

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[855] Nottinghamshire Archives, DD1038/16

of women's labour and women's suffrage were raised and later debated in Parliament.

Laura did not so much seek the emancipation of women, rather the elevation of women, emphasising their inherent moral and spiritual nature particularly in relation to the family. She did not seek universal women's suffrage and certainly did not favour the election of female MP's, but she was conscious that women should be given more rights in the spheres in which they worked – domestic and increasingly public domains. She had witnessed at first-hand how the many female lace-workers in Nottingham needed legislation to address the issues that affected them as workers. She also sought to address their moral and spiritual needs.

Laura believed that there was much that women could undertake on public bodies that men were not adapted to, for example in relation to guardianship of the female residents of the workhouses. The Vote for responsible and educated women would influence the different State departments which legislated for women's interests. thus it would "induce in our legislators a more lively interest in women's questions," Laura argued.[856] Laura took a prominent part in connection with the Church Congress from 1887, offering a number of interesting papers to the Women's Section. She was also a vocal advocate for women's rights, but as always, her conservative background informed much of her thinking. After an interview with Laura, one writer explained how despite her progressive ideas, "her ladyship is as unlike the so-called "new-woman" as one could well imagine."[857]

Laura offered a balanced voice, framing the role of women within the context of the two spheres that were most dear to her heart - family and the church. She witnessed many changes within the church and in society at large as her life spanned ninety years across the Victorian and Edwardian eras. She illustrated to married women in particular, that it was possible to successfully combine loyalty to the home and family with a public life, years before this became accepted wisdom. Laura encouraged married women to engage in public work as she believed that it

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[856] Hammerton, J.A., p.151
[857] Ibid., p.150

would improve their home life. Again, balance was the key to success as she sought to redefine rather than challenge women's traditional role in the home.

Laura was able to reconcile her commitment to social action with her adherence to traditional Anglican teaching on the place of women in the home by applying the maternal role more widely. The 'Angel in the House' was also an angel spirit, a messenger going into the world 'to make the hearth glow brighter.' Women were homemakers and mothers primarily who needed to extend their knowledge, education and service into the wider world. As the "spiritual mint-masters" of the Empire, women were charged with the responsibility to oversee moral standards

When Laura first arrived in Southwell she found her clerical marriage confining, after the 'freedom' as the wife of a headmaster. She found that her every move was under observation and that she had to watch what she said and did, but soon this gave way to feelings of liberation as she was incorporated in George's career. To a large extent she was able to share in George's mission, certainly at a pastoral level, but she was more than just a loyal wife – she was an accomplished woman in her own right. This gave her life content and meaning, especially as her greatest disappointment was having no children. It could be suggested that her work was an antidote to childlessness as she sought semi-maternal roles in the work she undertook. 'Aunt Lolly' 'mothered' her own brother and sisters while growing up; the boys at Winchester College away from their own parents; the Southwell ordinands and the evening club girls away from their own families. However Laura was motivated ultimately by her desire to fulfil her Christian mission.

Laura was a willing participant in George's ecclesiastical career and accepted both its scope and limitations. She ably seconded her husband at Southwell, as evidenced by the press comments when she left the diocese, as did the other wives, though some in a quieter manner. She did not seek a career for herself, but worked to promote George's interests. Dora Freestone argued how a good marriage was the key to a clergyman's success, commenting, "the wife is just as much a necessity

to the Church as the Minister himself."[858] This may go too far, but the debt bishops owed to their wives cannot be underestimated.

As John Ruskin's exposition on the place of women in 'Of Queen's Gardens' (in 'Sesame and Lilies, 1863) continues to inform students of Victorian women's history today, Laura's example successfully illustrates how we have gone beyond the simplistic understanding of the ideology of separate spheres. As the wife of a bishop she was permitted access to the public realm in ways that other women could not as she extended her feminine sphere from the confines of the home. She worked in the church and society for the moral, spiritual and intellectual elevation of women, traditionally considered as 'feminine domains.' Also, as Reynolds argues, as a member of the upper classes Laura was exempt to a large extent from the prevailing ideology that held more sway for middle class women.[859] Her social status dictated that Laura did not have to operate in just one 'separate sphere,' rather she was able to intertwine her public and private lives as she was incorporated in George's career, to a large extent a joint vocation. She believed that she had specific obligations to those beneath her and wrote an article on the power of the upper classes to elevate public opinion. Her status as a lady freed her from some of the constraints of the prevailing middle class ideologies of separate spheres and femininity.

Up until she died, friends and colleagues remarked on her unfailing powers of mind, despite her failing hearing. Laura was always self-confident, some might argue that she was 'alarming,' like her friend Louise Creighton, though she was the least self-conscious person her family knew, which is why she was so absolutely herself. But her confidence enabled her to challenge convention, such as instituting Southwell House. Her cousin, the Bishop of Bombay, eulogised at her funeral how her judgements could sometimes be incorrect, but that she was fortunate to be guided by her father, her husband and then her brother, who steered her in the right direction.

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[858] Freestone, D., pp.11-12
[859] Reynolds, K.D., p.221

What was most remarkable about her personality were her vivid perceptions and delightful sense of humour. Her ability to see the lighter side of life and the humour of a situation is evidenced throughout her diary and autobiography. The writer of her obituary in 'The Times' observes how:

> There was in her an unexpected element: she exhibited unaccountable foibles, which seemed to enhance rather than disfigure an essentially kind and really interesting and powerful personality, as occasional grotesqueness enhances some of the greatest classical art.

The writer continues how Laura was afforded "a keen sense of the ludicrous" and they were accurate in this observation, but her eccentricities endeared her to people.[860]

Laura wrote the following to her brother at his Confirmation:

> I think God means us to show our cause by example almost than everything… At the last Day I always think our Example will be the Greatest Talent of all that God has given us and the one He will ask the strictest account for…[861]

Laura's own example shatters the image of the idle, frail, upper class lady that so often confronts the reader of Victorian history. Laura's influence and pioneering spirit came from her religious faith, the centre of her world, and the Anglican emphasis on Christian duty. Hers was a 'heart religion,' unlike the more intellectual religion of her friend Louise Creighton. Laura was less influenced by what she called the 'Church Established' as championed by Archbishops Tait and Davidson, but rather by the 'Church Ecclesiastical' of Archbishops Benson and Frederick Temple. One cannot underestimate the power of her belief that "faith alone can remove and cast into the sea the mountain of suffering and disease."[862] She was unique in that there was a spiritual dimension to her work that she believed should underlie all demands for change. In particular she believed that the Christian elevation of women could transform lives. She wrote in terms of building up the nation's spiritual muscle through the infiltration of the home, and that in this way a new Jerusalem could be built on earth. She reiterated the point that the

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[860] The Times, 23 May 1939, p.18
[861] Ridding, L.E., Letter to Earl of Selborne, 25 October 1874, MSS Selborne 112/3-6, BL
[862] Ridding, L.E., The Justice Room, pp.143-4

spiritual aspect in life was often ignored and that this needed to be exercised, but she was often too idealistic in her writing. Laura believed that the First World War was a judgement on the nations' failing moral standards and that the massive loss of life was going some way to purify them. When the conflict ended, she believed that God had delivered the nations, such was God's power in the world.

Laura made the most of the increasing opportunities opening up to women at the end of the century, facilitated by her status as a lady and as the daughter of the Lord Chancellor and as the wife of a public man. Her life of service charted the laywoman's development within the church as she became more organised and sought to take more of a decision-making role. As confident as Laura became at public speaking, she was unlike Maude Royden and did not support women's ordination, seeking instead to work for churchwomen's rights within the existing framework of the church. It is important to summarise to what extent she held an official position within the church. Certainly she was a force among laywomen. As the wife of the Bishop of Southwell she took a leading part at the Women's Sections of a number of Church Congresses, influencing other women in the church to go out and make their contribution within her much-loved institution. One cannot underestimate the extent to which she loved the established church and sought to encourage women to work within its existing machinery.

Her example and indirect influence convinced the church authorities that women's work in the church was a positive, powerful force that was here to stay, although it remained at an unofficial level for many years. Laura did not have a direct influence on decision-making within the church but, as with the other wives of bishops, she did exert a positive influence on her husband's career, and this would have impacted greatly on the church in an indirect way. Although Laura had no official position within the church, she was more than a lay-worker and more than an unpaid curate, facilitated by her unique position in a newly-formed diocese to be built up from scratch.

Her obituary ended with the following words:

> Lady Laura Ridding did much in her life. But what counted was what she was. No one who saw much of her could fail to have a renewed and enlarged sense of the possibilities of human nature and of the power of the Christian religion to direct, sweeten and harmonize a full, varied and spontaneous life.[863]

Mrs. Aubrey Richardson refers to Laura as "a Lady of birth and ecclesiastical influence,"[864] but it is her cousin, one of Laura's 'soul-helpers,' Edwin Palmer, who sums her up best, celebrating her broad capacity for sympathy and love for her neighbour: "she was a <u>great</u> lady of the Victorian age – always the great lady, but that was not all – if Bunyan had had to describe her, he would have called her, "my lady Great Heart.""[865]

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[863] <u>The Times</u>, 23 May 1939, p.18
[864] Richardson, Mrs. A., p.280
[865] Palmer, J., <u>'Address at the Funeral of Lady Laura Ridding'</u>, 26 May 1939, MSS Selborne 115, BL

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