

Downwardly mobile

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Ellen Ross, editor

SLUM TRAVELERS

Ladies and London poverty, 1860–1920
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wages and expenditure, and to see where greatest need lay. Many of them discovered that family culture, and the behaviour of husbands and wives, were key factors in whether a family flourished or sank into Poor Law and charity dependency. *Round About a Pound a Week* (1913) by Maud Pember Reeves (1865–1953) is today the best-known example of this acute understanding of working-class money matters (the book was rescued from obscurity by Virago in 1979). Ross reproduces three extracts from Reeves, who defends the working man in the face of “all that social reformers expect of him when they theoretically parcel out his tiny income”.

Many less-remembered female commentators were making similar discoveries, and Ross has done an admirable job of reclamation of these mostly undeservedly obscure writers and thinkers. She provides a deft biographical sketch for each of them, placing them within the many and various strands of social and political activity across the sixty years covered. Among them is Anna Martin (1858–1937), who was attached to the Methodist-influenced Bermondsey Settlement, and spent her life from 1900 among the poor of Rotherhithe. In her journal article “The Irresponsibility of the Father” (1918), Martin portrayed wives as breadwinners in

their own right, as well as ingenious household managers; she pointed out that the amount of wages that a paterfamilias chose to give his wife had been overlooked by previous (male) economists, and that this rendered largely irrelevant State plans to ameliorate child poverty solely through male wage and labour regulation. Both Martin and Reeves noted the deprivation many working-class women endured as consumerism increasingly permeated the culture of the poor, from around 1900. In the “monotonously and drearily decent” streets of the upper working class – where “a dull aloofness seems to be the order of the day”, wrote Reeves – many wives were going hungry in order to be able to keep up appearances.

For the most part, these writers avoid grandstanding and abstract theorizing about the poor. *Slum Travelers* is a treasure trove of fresh voices, and contains striking images and atmospheres of “the submerged tenth” in London. Margaret McMillan, in 1908, described a group of slum children as “all blue-eyed, dark eyelashed and with very pale anaemic and dirty faces, all pretty, and giving an impression of trampled flowers”. Margaret Harkness’s 1889 exposé of the exploitation of London’s barmaids revealed the culture of the “subterranean hotels” (London Underground station bars), where girls worked eighty-six-hour weeks (on their feet), ill-fed, having their wages regularly docked, and enduring constant sexual pestering that their managers told them to humour. Hind-sight suggests that many of the views expressed by these women observers were correct, but they were drowned out by the louder calls of male reformers such as William Beveridge. Clara Grant (1867–

1949) claimed in 1911 that the most effective assistance to the poor came from bodies that were non-denominational, locally based and small in scale. Council-estate planners of the 1950s and 60s would have done well to consider the anonymous account of “A Lady Resident”, who moved into a philanthropic tenement building in 1889; she noted how large, impersonal blocks of flats tended to destroy the neighbourly feeling so important to poorer communities.

Ross’s selection reflects the broad range of motivations and political sympathies among the slum travellers. A significant number were clergymen’s daughters who had had early experience of parochial visitation; many types of Protestantism and of secularism are present here. As might be expected, various shades of socialism are represented, but so too are the anti-suffrage, anti-feminist ladies who believed that while social activism was a woman’s sphere, Parliament and policy-making should be male preserves. What also comes across powerfully is the thrill of poverty, and the escape that social exploration offered to many middle- and upper-class girls and women driven to the brink of madness by the boredom of their enforced idleness. Ross believes that many of them feared the Lady Bountiful stigma; or worried about being dismissed as judgmental busybodies, invading a poor woman’s home brandishing soap and a sermon. The clear sense of superiority of some of these contributors towards the objects of their gaze makes us uneasy (it revolted many at the time, too); and we can snigger at the likes of Honnor Morten (1861–1913), overestimating the quality of floor-covering in the slums during a lecture on hygiene in which she exhorted the working classes to let the sunshine flood into their homes, “whether the carpets suffer or not”. This would have been a poorer book had Ellen Ross excluded the material that has given philanthropy such a bad name.

Did male and female social explorers experience London slums differently, Ellen Ross wonders in “Adventures Among the Poor”, her introductory essay to the twenty-four pieces collected in *Slum Travelers: Ladies and London Poverty, 1860–1920*. Ross detects a tendency in some women’s reports towards euphemism, self-deprecation, an avoidance of statistical and legislative data and discussion of “the bigger picture” (for fear of encroaching on domains perceived to be male). She also notes a light, anecdotal touch that sometimes lends a feel of fiction to factual accounts. It is easy to overemphasize the part played by gender, and there is plenty of material in the book which, if the attribution were removed, could easily deceive a reader attempting to detect the writer’s sex. Beatrice Webb’s account of the time she spent undercover as a seamstress in a Mile End sweated-labour workshop in April 1888, for example, sets down the fact of constant swearing (the use of “the inevitable adjective”) and alludes to incest in the families of some of her co-workers. Mary Higgs’s 1906 report “In A London Tramp Ward” records the smells, sights and sounds of vagrants in the Casual Ward, and mentions her own vomiting. Euphemism was not peculiar to females in these decades; male social explorers including Friedrich Engels and Charles Booth knew that too much plain-speaking and explicitness was likely to alienate much of the readership they wished to inform and persuade.

Nevertheless, many of Ross’s selected authors do reveal a distinctly female attitude to poverty (and its alleviation) because of their greater access to, and close observation of, family and marital dynamics. By living and working among the poor, gaining the trust of wives and mothers, asking the right questions and listening carefully to the replies, female philanthropists were able to write sophisticated analyses of working-class