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Nineteenth-century Working Women as Readers & Activists

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Nineteenth-century Working Women as Readers & Activists

by

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NINETEENTH-CENTURY WORKING WOMEN AS READERS & ACTIVISTS

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ABSTRACT

Using autobiographical texts written by nineteenth-century working class women, I identify the most common reasons that nineteenth-century working class women read, as well as common obstacles to their reading and writing. My study builds upon previous studies of working class readers of both genders, which I extend by focusing on female working class reader/autobiographers, their strategies for obtaining literacy, and the impact their acts of literacy had upon their lives.

Literacy transforms lives. At the bare minimum, the ability to read increases a worker's employment opportunities. At its most transformative, the act of reading exposes readers to new ideas and new ways of seeing the world. In particular, the exposure to new ideas about different philosophies of governance, such as democracy, often leads to working-class readers challenging existing social orders, and is one reason why widespread literacy efforts were so contentious in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At that time, the upper classes debated whether the benefits of having a literate working class, creating the supply of educated workers needed to further fuel economic growth, was worth the risk of social or even political revolution that might occur if workers could read radical texts like Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (Murphy 32-33).

Kelly Mays summarizes the threat posed by reading when she writes, "By facilitating mental liberation, reading can function both as a means of resistance and as the prelude to public activism aimed at promoting collective social, political, and economic emancipation" (Domestic Spaces 344).

Prior studies of nineteenth-century working-class autobiographies conducted for the purpose of exploring acts of literacy, especially analyses of reading behaviors, reveal patterns of class-based as well as gender-based discrimination in efforts to attain literacy. Some of these barriers were prompted by fears of revolution and/or class conflict that were not entirely unfounded, as Mays makes clear: "at least some nineteenth-century working-class autobiographers thought literacy led not to embourgeoisement but to politicized forms of working-class and feminist consciousness" (When a Speck 112).

More recent studies that compare autobiographies written by nineteenth-century working-class men to those written by working-class women of the same time period show that while both working-class men and women experienced class-based barriers to attaining literacy, working-class women experienced additional barriers to education based on gender expectations (Domestic Spaces 358-359). To further explore these gender- and class-based expectations, I examine the autobiographies of twelve nineteenth-century working-class women, listed in Table 1 of the Appendix, for the purpose of elucidating the path to literacy of those twelve women, and how they used acts of literacy to change their lives. My study builds upon the previous studies of working class readers of both genders mentioned above, while focusing on female working-class readers/autobiographers and their strategies for obtaining literacy, by identifying and exploring four main reasons that these autobiographers decided to pursue literacy, and discussing the common obstacles to education faced by these women. I look at how the presence or absence of such obstacles determined the level of education that the autobiographers were able to attain. Finally, I explore the impact that the acquisition of literacy and access to education had upon the lives of these women, concluding with an analysis of the impact of gender bias on the utility of autobiographical writing as a source of historical and cultural information.

An understanding of the educational opportunities available to the nineteenth-century working class as a whole and for women in particular, along with the societal pressures to remain illiterate, is necessary to appreciate working-class efforts to attain literacy. Before the passage of the Education Act of 1870, educational opportunities for the working class were few and of dubious quality (Webb 333). The Sunday School

Society, established in 1786 by William Fox and based on an already locally successful model created by Robert Raikes, offered members of the working class an opportunity to become literate through the schools that they ran, but these schools had a religious and sometimes political agenda that influenced what skills were taught and the choice of reading material used in the classroom (Murphy 32). A strict religious agenda often limited reading materials to devotional publications that supported the state-sanctioned Anglican Church. The political agenda is evident in the decision to educate the working class with only the skills deemed necessary for their current station in life. Educating with an eye towards upward social mobility was not a goal; in fact, the creation of unwelcome, potentially dangerous class aspirations was a reason often given not to educate the working class (Murphy 32-33). Sunday schools, as the name suggests, met only once a week on Sundays. This limited time in the classroom was an additional factor in determining the skills that were taught; in the nineteenth century, being a reader did not necessarily mean that one was also a writer. This distinction between reading and writing as acts of literacy becomes an important consideration when an autobiography has been dictated to a scribe or editor because the author could not write. In autobiographies where the personal narrative is being delivered through the filter of an editor, a dampening of the authenticity of this record of lived experience occurs, as will become apparent during the discussion of the autobiographies of Nelly Weeton and Elizabeth Ham.

It is important to note that the curriculum for girls differed significantly from the curriculum for boys. Frequently, the curriculum for girls focused solely on domestic skills, such as cooking, needlework, knitting, and home economics, to the exclusion of

reading and writing (Mays 355). A frustrated Mary Smith writes, “Parents were prouder then of their daughters’ pieces of nedlework [sic] than of their scholarship” (30). This emphasis on the acquisition of domestic skills over academic subjects was a very real obstacle to literacy for nineteenth-century women of all classes. While the acquisition of domestic skills prepared some girls to earn money as household servants, the exclusion of more academic skills limited these girls to menial work that frequently paid a salary insufficient for their own much less their family’s support.

The obstacles to literacy for female readers, especially those of the working-class, make their accomplishments all the more impressive. Some of these barriers to literacy were common to both genders of the working class, such as employer objections to employee reading. Many employers felt that if a servant was reading, then they (the employers) were being cheated because the employee was shirking his or her duties in order to read. Working men and women who were not employed as domestic servants and thus not under their employer’s surveillance for twenty-four hours of the day still faced significant class-based obstacles to literacy. According to Kelly Mays, these men and women worked long hours in shops and factories at exhausting tasks. The cramped and noisy conditions of their overcrowded homes, a result of the poverty in which they lived, made finding a quiet space to study during their limited free time challenging at best. Moreover, while working men were often supported in their studies by sympathetic mothers and wives, working women, lacking similar familial support, faced gender-based expectations that required them to work at unpaid domestic labor after completing a long

day of paid labor (Domestic Spaces 348-349, 353). Julia Swindells elaborates upon the interaction between the unequal division of domestic labor and the limited employment opportunities available to working women:

Material advancement through education is, for women, particularly illusory. The sexual division of labour is such that self-advancement through labour is not a possibility. In this sense, the pursuit of learning operates differently for working women and for working men. It is not only that sexual ideology prefers women to be ignorant rather than educated but the jobs and skills which might allow for self-advancement through labour are not available to women. This is what makes the women's commitment to self-improvement through learning, whatever their illusions, frequently courageous. (134-135)

In addition to the significant challenges of political and employer resistance and the cramped and noisy living conditions that made learning difficult, working-class women faced the additional gender-based burden of long hours of paid labor followed by long hours of labor in the home, reducing any leisure time they might have had, and increasing the odds against becoming educated. Both genders faced obstacles to literacy like political fears, employers' objections to education efforts as being a waste of time and a sign of employee idleness, the scarcity of reading materials, and the lack of time and a quiet space in which to read. However, as Kelly Mays astutely points out, while class discrimination hampered the literacy efforts of the working class as a whole, male working-class readers still enjoyed the privilege of their gender with respect to domestic

support for their efforts to obtain literacy. Female working-class readers faced the additional complication of gender expectations, with the resulting reduction of their free time caused by expectations that they would do the bulk of the work inside the home in addition to their paid labor outside of the home. Even if girls were allowed by their families to attend school, the curriculum for girls was so geared toward domestic labor that often reading was not taught at all. Instead, the curriculum concentrated on domestic skills like cooking and sewing, which was a source of frustration to these autobiographers. As Swindells points out, even if a working-class woman surmounted every class-based and gender-based obstacle to literacy, her newfound literacy did not create any new employment opportunities for her. The twelve autobiographers knew this and decided to pursue literacy anyway. They were indeed courageous and dedicated in their pursuit of an education. They had no other choice if they wanted to learn to read, to write, and to think independently.

Nelly Weeton's particular challenge that kept her from attaining the level of education that she desired was her widowed mother. For some women, parents rather than employers were the primary obstacle to reading and to education. Nelly Weeton's mother ran a school, and educated both Nelly and her younger brother, Tom. Nelly proved to be a better student than her younger brother, but Mrs. Weeton sent Tom away to pursue further learning, leaving Nelly to pick up what education she could as she helped her mother with the school. Although initially proud of her daughter's academic achievements, soon Mrs. Weeton started to worry about her daughter's prospects. Nelly Weeton wryly observes:

I showed so strong a predilection for reading and scribbling rhymes, that my mother, who had for some time been much delighted with what she considered my striking talents, and encouraged me with unbounded praises, began to think that I should be entirely ruined for any useful purpose in life if my inclinations for literature were indulged (Weeton 13-14)

Mothers like Mrs. Weeton stifled their pride in their daughters' accomplishments for what they considered to be their daughters' best long-term interests.

Several times in her letter books, Nelly Weeton laments her lack of education. Her careful recording of every letter she wrote is a testament to the importance Nelly Weeton placed on her writing. In her letters, she wrote of the literary ambitions that she felt were thwarted by her lack of education, the lack of parental and community support, and the lack of free time in which to develop her writing talent:

There was a time, when I think (may I say it without vanity?) something might have been done; I feel confident I could have risen to something higher, something greater, but such pains were taken by my mother to repress my too great ardour for literature, that any talents I then possessed as a child, have been nearly extinguished, and it is too late now to blow them into flame. . . . Living entirely amongst the illiterate, and unable to procure books, a dark cloud has invariably hung over me – I know little more than this – that I am very ignorant. (Hall n. pag.)

In spite of the many challenging obstacles they faced, all twelve autobiographers did achieve literacy, and in some cases became life-long learners. In the course of my study, four common purposes for reading emerged among these twelve women: entertainment; spiritual development for oneself or others; political development (to educate oneself about a cause); and self-improvement with the object of improving one's economic or social situation. Other critics have previously identified each of these common reasons for reading in prior studies. However, I felt a more quantitative analysis was indicated due to the gender-based expectations which constrained working-class women's aspirations. Another reason for further analysis is that working-class women did not always exhibit the same reading motivations and behaviors compared to working-class men. In Table 2 of the Appendix, I quantify the relationship among these common reasons for reading. Women generally tended to read mostly for entertainment, for spiritual development, and for social and political involvement, rather than for the purpose of personal economic advancement.

Most of the reading done by the women in the sample I studied was done for pleasure, with the majority of reading for entertainment being done by the women at the lower end of the working class; it makes sense that the women who worked at the most mundane jobs and who lived in poverty would need a form of escape from the drudgery of their daily lives. An excellent example of this type of escapist reading is Ellen Johnston, the self-titled *Factory Girl*, who clearly found relief through indulging in romantic fantasies. In her autobiography, Johnston recalls, "Mine were not the common trials of every day life, but like those strange romantic ordeals attributed to the imaginary

heroines of ‘Inglewood Forest’” (5). Having read all of Sir Walter Scott’s works, Johnston internalized those ideals, casting herself as a heroine in her autobiography, and romanticizing her difficult life as a factory worker, a survivor of sexual abuse, and an unwed mother. The conditions under which Johnston lived were rather horrific, even by nineteenth-century standards. The works of Sir Walter Scott, combined with her own poetry, provided a source of adventure, romance, and excitement to offset an otherwise grim existence. While the other autobiographers I studied mentioned books that they enjoyed reading or mentioned reading as an activity that they pursued during their few hours of leisure, only Johnston used her reading so obviously as an escape from reality. Johnston also derived inner strength and a fighting spirit from Sir Walter Scott’s books, revealing that from Scott’s fantasies she “resolved to bear with my own fate, and in the end gain a great victory” (7). Later in life, this fighting spirit served her well when she filed suit against her employer for a week’s pay when she was unfairly discharged without proper notice. She won the case (14). Johnston concludes her autobiography with the hope that it “may prove a means of social and intellectual enjoyment to many, and also help to relieve the incessant toils of a factory life” (15). Here we see Johnston’s implied acknowledgement that reading can provide an escape from the harsh reality of factory work, further evidence of how Johnston used acts of literacy for self-empowerment.

Ellen Johnston wrote her autobiography as part of a larger volume containing a collection of her poetry. Her autobiography is written in the form of a long letter addressed to “Gentle Reader” (3). Johnston begins her autobiography by stating that she is writing it “on the suggestion of a friend, and the expressed wishes of some subscribers” (3). Johnston encountered discrimination and mistreatment for being an unwed mother. Her autobiography is upbeat and indomitable in tone, yet her actual story is rather tragic. Johnston had to cope with her father’s suicide, endure brutal beatings from her mother, along with probable sexual abuse at her step-father’s hands, as well as abandonment by her baby’s father. In her autobiography, Johnston alludes to the “mystery of my life” (9), which most likely refers to the sexual abuse by her step-father. In a proactive act of literacy, Johnston uses her personal narrative as a tool to mitigate harsh judgment of the unfortunate events of her life, and consequently, unsympathetic judgment of her poetry, by including the autobiography as a preface to her collected works to explain that she had been “falsely accused by those who knew me of being a fallen woman” (10).

Personal or community spiritual development was the second most common reason for these women to pursue literacy. Rose Allen’s mother read the Psalms aloud to comfort Rose during an illness. Elizabeth Davis, Mary Smith, and Jane Andrew all testified that they received great personal comfort from their reading of the Bible and other religious texts. Looking back on the period after her mother’s death, Marianne

Farningham reflects, "Reading was my chief consolation, and I had not much time for that. My father gave us two monthly magazines published by the Sunday School Union, the "Teacher's Offering," and the "Child's Companion"" (44). At this time in her life, when she was twelve years old, Marianne's father forced her to leave school to keep house for the family. The expectation that Marianne would leave school to care for her family was predicated on the unspoken, but understood belief that her education was interruptible because education was a luxury, not a necessity, for female children. The cessation of her education troubled Farningham greatly: "My ignorance was a constant burden to me, and I tried many devices to lessen it. Fond of reading as I was, I did not really enjoy the study of lesson-books, but I strove to make myself learn from them" (46-47). After Farningham accidentally set fire to her room during a secret late night study session, her father agreed to send her back to school on a part-time basis. Farningham's surreptitious scholarship was an act of literacy that also functioned as a form of rebellion at these gender-based constraints on her pursuit of education. Farningham read the Sunday School publications for the entertainment provided by the stories, of course, but also in conjunction with her self-education efforts as a way to cope with the grief of her beloved mother's death and as a channel for her anger at the devaluation of her intellectual development by her father.

In some situations, the autobiographer's concern was not only for her personal spiritual development, but also for the spiritual development of others in her community. Miss Sarah Martin exemplified reading for the spiritual development of others. A working-class woman who took it upon herself to visit prisons in order to teach young male prisoners to read, Martin's rationale was that by being able to read morally improving religious material, prisoners would learn how to be upstanding citizens who would not return to prison:

Whilst frequently passing the gaol, I felt a strong desire to obtain admission to the prisoners to read the Scriptures to them, for I thought much of their condition, and of their sin before God; how they were shut out from the society whose rights they had violated, and how destitute they were of that scriptural instruction, which alone could meet their unhappy circumstances . . . I did not make known my purpose of seeking admission to the gaol . . . until the object was attained, so sensitive was my fear lest any obstacle should thereby arise in my way . . . God led me, and I consulted none but him. (9)

Successive prison wardens and benefactors supported her work, which gradually expanded from reading the Scriptures to prisoners to teaching prisoners to read devotional texts. Martin carefully chose the books that she thought would be most beneficial for the boys in her classes. Religious tracts geared toward young people comprised the core of her curriculum. Because these books aimed at the young reader, they usually contained numerous woodcut illustrations. As Rogers notes, "The

significance of Martin's books for the boys lay more in their material and aesthetic appeal, and in the experience of sharing stories, than in their didactic content" (58). By all accounts, the boys looked forward to Martin's visits and enjoyed the stories she brought to them. However, few of the boys stayed out of prison. Despite her best intentions for their spiritual development through reading "improving" works, Martin's boys ignored the moral messages of the readings she selected for them and extracted just the entertaining element. Although her efforts to reform the boys were not as successful as she could have hoped, it is clear that Martin used reading as a tool to facilitate the spiritual redemption of these troubled members of her community.

In an act of literacy that further demonstrates a concern for the spiritual development of others, Jane Andrew wrote her memoir in order to convey a moral lesson. An invalid beginning in her mid-twenties, as well as a devout Christian, Jane Andrew wrote her autobiography as an exemplar for others of Christian fortitude in the face of suffering and illness. Having been asked multiple times to write about her life and her faith, Andrew finally wrote her autobiography in her late seventies with the expressed hope that "the Spirit of the Living God may take of the things of Jesus and reveal them unto many souls, or any soul, who may read it!" (43). Her autobiography was published and offered for sale with the proceeds going toward "the support of Mr. Robert and Miss Jane Andrew," indicating that financial gain was an additional motive for Andrew to

become an author, along with her avowed sincere desire to share her experiences and testify to God's support during her lifetime of suffering. From her autobiography, we learn that the Bible and other religious writings were a great source of comfort to her during times of stress and illness. Unlike the other autobiographers I examined, Andrew does not write at all about a love for reading and for books. Instead, we see in her account of her actions and experiences that she used publications like the Gospel Standard and the Bible as sources of comfort and guidance on a daily basis. For Andrew, reading was simply a tool to be used for personal spiritual comfort; writing was the means she chose for providing spiritual comfort to others.

Some autobiographies, like much of the popular fiction of the day, tried to disguise moral instruction in the guise of entertainment. Composed in stilted prose and containing many tropes from popular fiction geared towards working-class readers, Rose Allen's *Autobiography of a Lady* reads more like an example of a standard morality tale for working-class girls and their employers than an autobiography. For that reason, combined with the fact that authorship on the title page is ascribed to "A Lady", its authenticity as a work of non-fiction autobiography is sometimes questioned. The plot of the story is conventional as well. An idyllic childhood precedes the death of her father, with the resulting financial hardship forcing Rose to go into domestic service. A gentleman she meets while in service falls in love with her, but the gentleman's guardian opposes their marriage due to Rose's lack of a fortune. After proving her worth through hard work and patient endurance of the requisite number of trials, all difficulties are

resolved; fortunes are found to reward the dutiful and the pious. When the story closes, Rose has the leisure to write her autobiography now that she has “two nice servants”, and primly admonishes:

Very strong are the mutual bonds of duty and obligation between servants and their employers . . . very pleasant may their mutual intercourse be rendered, when servants give themselves up with heartiness and good-will to the performance of their various duties; and when their employers remember that kindness and consideration are as much due to the feelings as is attention to their bodily comfort, or the punctual payment of their wages. (162)

This “sugar the pill” strategy of fictionalizing for the sake of providing moral instruction sometimes backfired. Mary Ann Ashford wrote her *Life of a Licensed Victualler’s Daughter* after reading a fictionalized account of the life of a servant girl; Ashford states in her preface that she thought the “real truth” of her life was at least as interesting as the heroine of the “founded on facts” novel she had read. Ashford’s decision to write a rather lengthy autobiography in response to her disappointment that the servant girl’s story was fictionalized indicates how strongly she felt that she had been duped by her reading experience. Ashford used autobiography subversively as a way to give voice to her actual lived experience as a servant in reaction to the betrayal she felt from the fictionalized account of a girl who supposedly worked as a servant:

I procured the “Life of Susan Hopley,” and felt disappointed at finding it to be a work of fiction. It occurred to me that my own life – not merely “founded on facts,” as is sometimes expressed, but the real truth – might afford amusement to matter-of-fact persons. (iv)

Ashford continues, “Seventeen years of my life have been spent in service; but as that is not the third part of fifty-seven, I considered that the best title I could give it, would be what it really is – the Life of a Licensed Victualler’s Daughter” (iv). Although at first glance, it appears as if Ashford is being overly pedantic by emphasizing that the greater part of her life was not spent in service, which would make a title like the *Life of a Servant Girl* inaccurate, this moment can be interpreted as Ashford using an act of literacy to resist the fictionalized account of a servant girl’s life by being strictly accurate when naming her own work “what it *really* is” [emphasis mine].

Kelly Mays notes that the inability to discern fact from fiction was a common reading experience among the self-taught working-class autobiographers she studied (115); Mays considers this confusion to be part of the path to a moment of “great change” in the intellectual development of the working-class reader, whereby the reader transitions from a passive consumer of content into a more discerning, more scholarly type of reader (117). Yet this does not seem to be what happened in Mary Ashford’s case. There is no evidence in her autobiography that she changed what or how she read. Instead

of becoming a different kind of reader, or in other words, instead of consuming content in a different and deeper way, Ashford simply created her own content in a powerful act of literacy for the purpose of asserting the authenticity of her lived experience.

Researching social issues in an effort to prepare for political activism is a third common reason that the autobiographers pursued literacy. Widely available and affordable, political pamphlets and treatises were popular reading material, and were used by readers to guide their political activities. Readers also read widely on various topics to improve their living conditions. For example, the women of the Co-operative, memorialized by Margaret Llewelyn Davies, would attend lectures and read materials on construction, economics, and sanitation to develop their understanding of these subjects and to provide support for their efforts at lobbying for changes to improve their working or living conditions. Mrs. Layton found that the lectures she attended and the reading she did as part of the Co-operative Building Society came in handy when she finally built her own house:

At that time I attended a course of L.C.C. lectures on Health and Sanitation and so got to know about drainage, damp courses, ventilation, etc. So I decided to have a house built with all the latest drainage, etc., and I surprised the builder very much with my suggestions. (Davies 47)

In addition to surprising the builder of her house with ideas for modern drainage culled from her reading, Mrs. Layton surprised her husband by putting the house in her own name. Her reasoning was that she had saved all the money to purchase the house out of her wages and through her own efforts, and therefore the house belonged by right to her. Her husband was not happy about this unusual decision, but Mrs. Layton was

adamant. In addition to helping Mrs. Layton to save for a home and educating her as to the best way to build it, the reading materials and educational activities provided by the Guild, particularly the literature of the women's suffrage movement, prompted Mrs.

Layton to seize the personal agency necessary to insist that the house bought and paid for through her independent activities be owned by her and not by her husband. Her Guild reading continued to motivate Mrs. Layton's educational activities, as she describes:

"Then I learnt in the Guild that education was to be the worker's best weapon, and I determined if it were at all possible that my son should have as good an education as I could give him" (Davies 49). Through her reading of Guild literature, Mrs. Layton learned that education could provide a path out of poverty for her child, and she acted accordingly, taking advantage of every opportunity to educate her son.

Mrs. Layton recounts in her autobiography that she liked to read what she called "trashy books" as a child, yet she gave up reading for entertainment after her brother was fired for reading on the job; she too feared being fired if she were caught reading when she should have been working. Later in life, Mrs. Layton regrets her earlier sacrifice; she writes wistfully, "I have often thought how different my life at that time might have been if I had had a good book lent me to read and that I could have read it openly" (Davies 27).

Mrs. Layton is clearly well aware of the transformative nature of reading. She knows that, with more structured education and further exposure to great literature, she might have been able to pull herself out of a life of relentless work and poverty. Regardless,

Mrs. Layton took advantage of every educational opportunity that came her way, no matter how small: "I also used to write to my brother who was a schoolmaster, and he would answer and return my letter corrected" (29). Mrs. Layton also read medical books on her own and volunteered to assist physicians so that she could learn midwifery (43). She never was able to achieve her dream of becoming a licensed midwife:

several doctors advised me to go in for midwifery, but I could not go into hospital for training. The fees were a bar to me. . . . I should have to be away from home for three months. This was quite impossible for my husband's health needed all the care I could bestow on it . . . I had no money . . . it was impossible to save. So I had to content myself with being a maternity nurse, but I always hoped I should ultimately become a midwife. (43)

Mrs. Layton was not the only woman in the Guild interested in political activity. Mrs. Wrigley, a plate-layer's wife, is an excellent example of a woman who educated herself for the purpose of challenging the status quo. An active member of the Women's Co-operative Guild, Mrs. Wrigley read mainly newspapers along with co-operative literature to research issues like women's suffrage. She writes, "I joined the Suffrage, because having had such a hard and difficult life myself, I thought I would do all I could to relieve the sufferings of others" (65). For Mrs. Wrigley, education, whether formal or informal, was a tool to change unfair social conditions, such as the oppression of women

and the lack of women's suffrage. Mrs. Wrigley also participated in the pacifist movement after World War I, connecting this effort with the struggle for women's rights: "I don't think we should have had war if the women could have had the vote before, and a voice in it. There's no mother or wife in England nor Germany that would give their loved one to be killed. Now we are working for peace" (65). Mrs. Wrigley had five sons, so war, with its threat of terrible personal loss, had a direct impact on her life. Four of her sons served in World War I. Anxious that such a horrific and bloody war never happen again, women like Mrs. Wrigley read, distributed, and, in some cases wrote anti-war pamphlets, engaging in acts of literacy intended to solve serious social problems. In common with Mrs. Layton and Mrs. Wrigley, more and more female members of the nineteenth-century working-class recognized that with literacy and education came power and the potential to effect societal and political change.

Although some employers saw reading as a distraction from work, other employers were sympathetic to the educational needs of their employees. Mrs. Wrigley recounts, "Seeing as I could not read or write, my master and mistress took an interest in me and paid for my education at the night school for two years" (59). In Mrs. Wrigley's case, learning to read proved to be a life-changing event. Literacy enabled her to read political tracts, and inspired her to take political action in order to change conditions that she felt were unjust, which was precisely what aristocrats feared, as I mentioned earlier. Mrs. Wrigley describes the importance of reading, no matter how circumscribed:

I can't say that I have read many books as I have had no time. What I have read has been Guild and Co-operative literature and newspapers, for I have learnt a great deal through newspapers. As far as politics go I am very fond of history. I like to go back to the olden times and to know more of our forefathers, and I get a lot out of my Bible. (65)

Both Mrs. Layton and Mrs. Wrigley used reading to obtain the knowledge necessary to improve their living conditions as well as to agitate for social change.

None of the autobiographers I studied expressed just one reason for reading. Their decisions for pursuing literacy were complicated, and often dependent upon and determined by familial and employer support. Mary Smith exemplified working-class women's multiple reasons to pursue literacy. A voracious reader for her entire life, her literacy developed along a path that was similar to one that other women followed. As a child, Smith read mainly for pleasure. Gradually she started to read more for spiritual development, having been raised in a non-conformist household in which religious issues were of great importance. Mary Smith loved her independence and chose not to marry in order to preserve that independence. An intelligent woman with the practical need to be self-supporting, she decided to become a governess after "as is often the case with women, even the most capable and energetic, the one small event of my brother's marrying had left me without occupation" (5). Now her reading took on the added role of self-improvement in order to increase her employment opportunities; this was the fourth main reason that the autobiographers I studied decided to pursue literacy. Every skill that

Smith acquired, such as mathematics and geography, helped her to obtain better positions, eventually enabling her to open her own school. During one desperate period of unemployment, Smith learned French with an eye toward obtaining a position as a governess:

I looked over all manner of advertisements, seeking an assistant teacher's or preparatory governess's situation alas! I had no accomplishments . . . no music, nor singing, nor dancing; no German, Italian, and very little French . . . I was simply an uncorrupted girl, with a plain education, who knew thoroughly grammar, geography, practical arithmetic . . . I was brimful of knowledge . . . gathered from my vast and multifarious reading in history, science, and literature. But . . . every advertisement I read . . . required music and French, and the various accompaniments of what was called "genteel education." (169)

Using her literacy to acquire the skills necessary to improve her financial circumstances, Mary Smith relied on reading for self-empowerment, and to gain and maintain control of her life.

Mary Smith did not just read to improve her teaching skills. Keenly interested in politics, she read a variety of pamphlets to determine her positions regarding important issues of the day, such as public capital punishment and the abolition of slavery. For Smith, reading was a means of self-advancement and a way to become better informed, as well as a source of pleasure.

Mary Smith wrote her autobiography as a stand-alone volume that appears to be intended to justify her creative and employment decisions, although she never expressly states why she is writing her autobiography, as many of the other autobiographers do. In the course of her narrative, Smith illustrates her poetic technique, and explains why she chose to write poetry instead of prose. Smith corresponded with Jane and Thomas Carlyle, both of whom felt that Smith should focus on her prose over her poetry. Jane Carlyle, when asked by Smith to criticize her verses, responded, “they are full of thought and sense, and deficient in music” (311). Apparently Carlyle agreed with his wife’s assessment, because she quotes him as saying, “Well, they are just what you said. The young lady has something in her to write, but she should resolve on sticking to prose” (312). Smith used personal narrative to contextualize the impact of class-based and gender-based constraints on her writing, explaining that she decided to write poetry instead of prose because she could write poetry while doing other tasks, such as housecleaning:

engaging my mind, while my hands were fully occupied, I began to regularly pursue my own thoughts, with great zeal and delight . . . my capacity to do so seemed to grow again with every opportunity. I composed in this way many trifles, as mere mental exercises. The action improved and quickened my mind. (140)

By necessity, Smith needed to work to support herself. An intelligent and educated woman, Smith worked as a governess and later as a teacher. Smith often found her work

to be lacking in mental stimulation; poetry was a pleasurable and challenging activity that she could engage in even when she was doing the most mundane of tasks. She had so little leisure time after teaching her charges, cleaning the schoolroom, planning and grading lessons, and mending for the family who employed her that she needed to multitask in order to attain the intellectual stimulation she craved.

Mining autobiographies for information about reading habits and choices of reading material requires an extra measure of caution during interpretation. Referencing a major problem for the critic when doing a close reading of an autobiographical text, Helen Rogers warns against a too literal interpretation of autobiographical accounts of reader experiences. Roger cautions: “autobiographers tend to be selective in their recollections of reading, emphasizing books that confer cultural capital and disavowing low-brow literature” (58). In essence, there is a problem of discerning between an autobiographer’s actual reading experience and her aspirational reading. To reduce the distraction of aspirational reading from authentic acts of reading, I use the definition of reader experience provided by the Reader Experience Database (RED), 1450-1945, a project of the Open University that seeks to collect reader experiences of Britons over five hundred years. RED defines a reader experience as “a recorded engagement with a written or printed text — beyond the mere fact of possession.” Daniel Allington offers more detailed advice for literary analysis of autobiographical texts:

What has been questioned . . . is the idea that we can get to the truth of a text’s reception via a literal interpretation of anecdotes of reading. What

has been advocated instead is the interpretation of anecdotes of reading as pieces of written discourse embedded in culturally specific narrative traditions, drawing on historically specific cultural materials, and shaped both by the anecdote-writer's rhetorical purposes and by his or her anticipation of the anecdote-reader's response. (27)

Applying Allington's advice, we can see that these nineteenth-century working-class women were crafting narratives of their life stories. As with any autobiography, the story may or may not be literally true. However, the veracity of the narrative becomes less important when we look at the autobiography as "a piece of written discourse", reading the text for what we can learn about the historical and cultural moment in which it was written instead of reading it as a strictly factual account. In the cases of these twelve autobiographies, the authors' narratives reveal the practical and emotional impacts on their writing of the constraints imposed by class and gender bias in nineteenth-century British society; an obvious example is Nelly Weeton's memoir. Her "Retrospect" is an act of literacy staged as a rebellion against the gender-based constraints imposed on Nelly by her community. It was written as a message of explanation and justification for the daughter from whom her estranged husband had separated her when Nelly left their marital home, where she had been beaten and starved. Her husband opted instead to have his daughter raised by his mistress. The marriage property laws of the time not only permitting this injustice, but also prescribing it, Nelly Weeton used an act of literacy in the form of personal narrative to claim some measure of vindication and justice by

writing to explain her decision to leave the family home in order to redeem herself in the eyes of her child.

These twelve autobiographical works serve as records of the reading patterns, the living conditions, and the daily activities of nineteenth-century British working-class women. These women wrote, or in some cases dictated, their autobiographical accounts for a variety of reasons. Some of these women had published other literary works during their lifetime, and felt that an autobiography was necessary to satisfy the demands of their readers. Ellen Johnston and Mary Smith both published poetry that enjoyed modest popularity; both published their personal narratives in part as explications of their poetry. Marianne Farningham wrote her autobiography after a long career as a writer, journalist, and teacher at the request of friends who “expressed a wish that I should myself tell the story of my life” with the “hope that it may be useful, especially to girls and women who are timid as to the years before them and the duties they have to face” (ix). Margaret Llewelyn Davies solicited Mrs. Layton and Mrs. Wrigley’s autobiographies for her history of the Women’s Co-operative Guild, *Life as we have Known it*. Jane Williams solicited a personal narrative from Betsy Cadwaladyr, who adopted the name Elizabeth Davis to accommodate the people who had difficulty pronouncing her Welsh name. Williams explained her purpose for publishing Cadwaladyr’s story:

The narrative of a pure-minded woman, of thorough integrity and of dauntless resolution, and one to whom the Bible formed the chart of life,

cannot be altogether useless to society; although like every other record of real experience, it affords matter for warning as well as for example. (v)

Supporters of Sarah Martin's charitable work asked her to dictate an account of her life for much the same reason – as an educational example of Christianity in practice. In contrast with the autobiographies of Rose Allen and Mary Ann Ashford, these narratives privilege the instruction gained by a good example over the entertainment value of a good story. In all twelve cases, these autobiographies are acts of literacy that allow their authors to gain a measure of control over their written legacies that was not always granted to them over their daily lives.

Some of the memoirs discussed here were published during the authors' lifetimes.

Other memoirs remained unpublished while the authors were alive. Nelly Weeton's work, for example, comprised seven volumes that contained copies of almost every letter that she ever wrote, in addition to the short memoir already described. Of her writings, only two "letter books," as she referred to them, and the "Retrospect" survive, the rest of the volumes having been burnt as rubbish. None of Nelly Weeton's writings were published until well after her death. Elizabeth Ham wrote a popular book called *Infant's Grammar*, which was never out of print during her lifetime. Unfortunately, because Ham sold the book to a publisher for a lump sum, the book's sales enriched the publisher instead of Ham. Despite the popularity of *Infant's Grammar*, Ham lived in obscurity and poverty.

Her journals met with a fate similar to the letter books of Nelly Weeton. Only a fragment of Ham's autobiographical writing was ever found, leaving an incomplete record of her life.

The autobiographies of Nelly Weeton and Elizabeth Ham shared similar editorial experiences, as well, since the editors of both autobiographers were men who thought it necessary to excuse and ruthlessly prune the "ramblings" of their subjects. Eric Gillett, Elizabeth Ham's editor, gave her autobiography the title *Elizabeth Ham, by Herself 1783-1820*, apparently without a trace of irony. Gillett comments rather patronizingly in the Preface:

Most women talk their autobiographies. Very few have had the patience to write them. This may be due to modesty, discretion, or shyness. More probably it is because their sex has a notable dislike for direct expression, except in intimate conversation. Elizabeth Ham, whose autobiography I have the fortune to present in this book, did not suffer from any such inhibitions. In fact, to compress it to within reasonable limits, it has been necessary to omit nearly fifty thousand words of almost maudlin self-pity and inconsequential gossip. (7)

The extreme level of pruning Gillett felt was necessary for Ham's manuscript to be publishable exemplifies the ruthless scrutiny and unabashed misogyny to which female autobiographers were often subjected. Fifty thousand words is a significant amount to prune from what is a relatively short text. We are left to wonder how our analysis of this

act of literacy, and the resulting conclusions drawn about the historical moment, would change if those fifty thousand words, representing Ham's actual lived experience, had been included.

In contrast, Jane Williams's editorial treatment of Elizabeth Davis's narrative was rigorous without being patronizing. Williams writes:

Footnotes have been added in order to identify persons, to verify facts, to correct exaggerations, and to show the probability of some statements . . .

The important matter contained in the Appendix tends both to place the public services of Mrs. Davis in a just light, and to prove the worth and weight of her public opinion upon a great public question. (v)

In Davis's case, the editor has done the legwork needed to document and footnote her subject's claims, rather than dismissing the more outlandish claims out of hand as mere exaggerations; in fact, many of the more outlandish claims ended up being confirmed to be true. Respectful editing validates the lived experiences of these women and the acts of literacy embodied in their autobiographies.

Even when subjected to over-zealous editorial intervention and condescension, these autobiographical writings, whether book-length or frustratingly short fragments of a life, have proven to be rich sources of information about the reading habits and living conditions of these nineteenth-century working women, along with when, why, and how they learned to read. Most of the autobiographers I studied initially started reading for entertainment. Those who did not initially read for pleasure usually had parents or other

authority figures who prohibited “frivolous” reading, instead encouraging reading of a religious nature, or prohibiting any reading at all. Prohibition of reading, however, did not keep these women from reading, although there was a tendency for those readers who first read religious material to stick with that type of more serious, spiritual reading as they matured. As these autobiographers matured, their reading progressed to take on the more complicated role of self-education, either to prepare for political or civic engagement or for the improvement of their employment prospects, regardless of the absence of jobs to reward them for their hard-earned skills. Literacy also gave these autobiographers a way to improve their living conditions by agitating for social change. Thoughtful consideration of the significant gender-based barriers to literacy confronting working women makes their achievements all the more impressive. However and whatever they chose to read, literacy empowered these women to utilize the genre of autobiography as a way to leave behind records of their lives that are now rich sources of information about nineteenth-century culture.

APPENDIX

Table 1: Demographic information about the autobiographers

Name	Country	Occupation(s)
Rose Allen	England	Servant
Jane Andrew	England	Farm worker
Mary Ann Ashford	England	Servant
Betsy Cadwaladyr (a.k.a. Elizabeth Davis)	Wales	Servant; ship's steward; nurse
Elizabeth Ham	England	Servant; governess
Mary Ann Hearn (pen name: Marianne Farningham)	England	Author; journalist; Sunday School teacher
Ellen Johnston	Scotland	Factory worker; poet
Mrs. Layton	England	Servant; nurse; midwife; laundress
Sarah Martin	England	Teacher; dressmaker
Mary Smith	England	Teacher; servant; governess; poet
Nelly Weeton	England	Governess
Mrs. Wrigley	Wales	Servant

Table 2: Reasons for Reading

Purpose for reading	# of readers
Entertainment	9
Spiritual development of self or of others	6
Development of political views	4
Improved employment opportunities	3

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