

CATHERINE OSLER AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ROLE OF
WOMEN IN BIRMINGHAM 1868 TO 1924

by

TREVOR COTTERILL

A thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Centre for Midlands History and Cultures
College of Arts and Law
University of Birmingham
August 2024

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

University of Birmingham Research Archive

e-theses repository

This unpublished thesis/dissertation is copyright of the author and/or third parties. The intellectual property rights of the author or third parties in respect of this work are as defined by The Copyright Designs and Patents Act 1988 or as modified by any successor legislation.

Any use made of information contained in this thesis/dissertation must be in accordance with that legislation and must be properly acknowledged. Further distribution or reproduction in any format is prohibited without the permission of the copyright holder.

Abstract

This thesis explores the development of women's political and civic role in Birmingham in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth through a study of the life of Catherine Courtauld Osler (1854-1924). Osler was an affluent middle-class woman from a radical Liberal Unitarian background who became both the President of the Women's Section of the Birmingham Liberal Association and the President of the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society. She came to Birmingham in 1868 and lived in the city for the rest of her life. In 1873, she married Alfred Osler, a prominent Liberal activist and businessman. Her family connections in London enabled her to meet eminent and influential Liberal thinkers and activists including John Stuart Mill. As the mother of five children, Osler also led an active private life in addition to her public activities and engaged in extensive philanthropic work. This thesis will consider how her domestic life evidenced changes in women's role as wives and mothers during the period. She campaigned for women's emancipation for some fifty years and lived to witness the granting of partial suffrage for women in 1918. Her adopted city honoured her achievements by the commission of her portrait for the Museum and Art Gallery and by the conferral of an Honorary MA degree by the University of Birmingham. Although Osler is now a little-remembered figure, a primary aim of this study is to re-establish her as a major figure in the history of the city. In the course of this research, the first academic study of Osler, it became evident that the existing historiography relating to activist women in Birmingham is sparse. Concentrated exploration of Osler's life enables an assessment of the extent of her individual success in overcoming male prejudice for the benefit of her sex. The thesis also questions the extent to which Liberal politicians in

the city assisted women in their quest for political and civic recognition, particularly after the split in the Liberal Party in 1888 following the defeat of the Irish Home Rule Bill. It explores the nature of Birmingham politics and society, particularly Osler's relationship with Unionist politicians such as Joseph Chamberlain whom Osler opposed over women's suffrage, Irish Home Rule, the Boer War and Colonialism. This thesis also examines Osler's success as a suffragist in attracting support for her cause in the twentieth century against the competition of the more militant suffragettes. By following Osler's activities this thesis enables the extent of the change in the public position of women during the period to be better evaluated and understood.

The writing of this study has been made possible through the provision by Osler's descendants of much original source material in the form of her memories and journals - documents that have not previously been accessible for historical consideration.

Reviewed in tandem with newspaper reports and with archive material relating to the organisations with which Osler was associated, these sources have thrown fresh light on her activities and interactions with other family members and activists, both male and female. Aside from issues relating to women's rights, the new material provided by Osler's family has enabled a deeper and more nuanced understanding of her interest in both the Boer and First World Wars, her growing anti-war stance in general, her pacifist leanings and her opposition to censorship. Taken together with all other material presented, this study breaks new ground in the study of Osler in Birmingham during a period of great political and social change.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the staff in the Birmingham Archives and Collections at the Library of Birmingham for all their help in tracing and making available to me numerous archives and other material which were essential to my research. Similar thanks are due to the staff at the Library of the University of Birmingham and the Research Reserve for providing source material and many essential books for my research. Many thanks also to the staff at the Women's Library in London for their best efforts in providing relevant material on the National Women's Suffrage Society from their records and also to the Library of Manchester for searching out their relevant papers on the National Women's Suffrage Society from within the Millicent Fawcett Archive. I express my gratitude to the staff at the Archive Section of the University of Bristol for providing reports on the National Liberal Federation. I thank also Beverley McCulloch, the Archivist of the Oxford English Dictionary in Oxford, for searching out and providing a selection of Catherine Osler's suggested words for incorporation into the OED.

On a personal level, I am deeply indebted to Tamsin Osler and Colin Hayes, two of Catherine's Osler's great grandchildren, who supplied such immensely valuable material without which this thesis could not have been written. I would wish to express my thanks to Emeritus Professor Ruth Watts who supervised my dissertation on the developing role of women in the West Midlands from 1815 to 1918 as part of the MA in West Midlands History in 2016 and suggested that Catherine Osler would be a suitable subject for study. The thesis was copy edited for conventions of language, spelling and grammar by David Beattie whom I thank for his efficient and meticulous work. My grateful thanks to my

supervisor Malcolm Dick who, despite his efforts to provide a female supervisor to assist us, shouldered virtually the whole burden himself. His calm authority and support were helpful not least during occasions when the scale of the challenge threatened to overwhelm me. I offer similar thanks to my wife, Pauline, who has supported me unfailingly during the low periods and the innumerable hours during the seven years when I have been encamped in the 'den'. This is quite apart from her assistance with administration tasks and doing her best to cope with my IT shortcomings.

Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgments	iii
Contents	v
Chronology	vi
Abbreviations	x
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Chapter Two: The Early Influences, Family, Birmingham, and Unitarianism	34
Chapter Three: The Private World of Catherine Osler as Wife, Mother and Widow	58
Chapter Four: Osler and Philanthropy in Birmingham 1878-1920	95
Chapter Five: Feminism, and the Early Years of the Suffrage Campaign 1873-1900	139
Chapter Six: Women's Suffrage, Liberal Politics, Imperialism and the Boer War 1899-1909	170
Chapter Seven: The Later Stages of the Suffrage Campaign and Political Turmoil 1910 to 1914	207
Chapter Eight: The First World War and its Aftermath	242
Chapter Nine: Osler's Later Years and Legacy 1917-1924	289
Chapter Ten: Conclusion	316
Bibliography	l

Chronology

- 1854 Catherine Courtauld Taylor born in Bridgwater the eldest of five children of William and Caroline Taylor.
- 1866 Caroline signs John Stuart Mill's first women's suffrage petition.
- 1867 Catherine moves with her parents to Birmingham and lives in the city for the remainder of her life.
- 1867 William and Caroline shown as pew renters at the Unitarian Church of the Messiah.
- 1867-1868 Catherine has a prolonged stay in London with her aunt and uncle Clementia and Peter Taylor where she met John Stuart Mill and Joseph Mazzini.
- 1868 William and Caroline appointed to the Executive Committee of the newly formed Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society.
- 1869 Henry Crosskey becomes Minister at the Church of the Messiah.
- 1873 Catherine marries Alfred Clarkson Osler at the Church of the Messiah.
- 1874 Birth of Oslers' eldest son John Taylor Osler.
- 1875 Birth of Oslers' son Philip Clarkson Osler.
- 1875 Catherine makes her first recorded speech at a meeting of the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society.
- 1878 Catherine gives her first lectures for the Birmingham Ladies' Association for Useful Work.
- 1879 Birth of Oslers' son Julian Alfred Osler.

- 1881 Catherine becomes President of the Birmingham Ladies Debating Society and makes the inaugural speech.
- 1882 Catherine becomes a pew renter at the Church of the Messiah.
- 1883 Catherine elected by her ward committee to the Central Representative Committee of the Birmingham Liberal Association.
- 1883 Birth of the Oslers' eldest daughter Nellie Osler.
- 1885 Catherine becomes the Secretary of the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society.
- 1886 Birth of Oslers' daughter Dorothy Christine Osler.
- 1887 Catherine becomes a member of the Executive Committee of the Birmingham Ladies Association for the Care and Protection of Young Girls and head of the Moral Education Branch of the organisation.
- 1889 Catherine becomes President of the Women's Auxiliary of the Birmingham Liberal Association.
- 1891 Catherine gives her first lectures at the Birmingham Sunday Lecture Society.
- 1897 Death of Philip Clarkson Osler in a work's accident.
- 1898 Death of Catherine's mother, Caroline.
- 1900-1901 Catherine elected as President of the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society.
- 1903 Deaths of Alfred Clarkson Osler and Catherine's father William.
- 1904 Catherine becomes the first woman Vice-President of the Birmingham Liberal Association.

- 1908 Catherine elected to the Executive Committee of the Ladies Committee for Promoting the Election of women on Local Government Bodies.
- 1909 Catherine resigns as President of the Women's Auxiliary as a result of a potential conflict of interest with the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society.
- 1909 Catherine declines to stand for election as a Liberal candidate for Birmingham City Council.
- 1911 Publication of Catherine's books, *Why Women Need the Vote* and *The Book of the Home*.
- 1912 Catherine appointed to the Executive Committee of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies.
- 1915 Following the outbreak of the First World War, Catherine appointed to the Birmingham Citizen's Committee.
- 1918 A portrait of Catherine hung in the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.
- 1918 Women's Suffrage granted to some women including Catherine.
- 1918 Catherine declines the invitation to stand as a candidate in the General Election.
- 1919 An honorary MA degree conferred upon Catherine by the University of Birmingham.
- 1920 Catherine resigns as President of the local Committee for Equal Citizenship (the successor to the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society).
- 1923 Death of John Taylor Osler.
- 1924 Death of Catherine Courtauld Osler.

1928 Universal Suffrage for Women granted.

Abbreviations

BA&C	Birmingham Archives & Collections at the Library of Birmingham
BLA	Birmingham Liberal Association
BLACPYG	Birmingham Ladies Association for the Care and Protection of Young Girls
BLAUX	Birmingham Liberal Auxiliary
BLAUW	Birmingham Ladies Association for Useful Work
BLUA	Birmingham Liberal Unionist Association
BSEC	Birmingham Society for Equal Citizenship
BWSS	Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society
Civic Gospel	Gospel
DORA	Defence of the Realm Act
EFF	Election Fighting Fund
MOH	Medical Officer of Health
MEB	Moral Education Branch
NUWSS	National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies
NUWW	National Union of Women Workers
PNEU	Parents National Education Union
SWLF	Scottish Women's Liberal Federation
UDC	Union of Democratic Control
VD	Venereal Disease
WLF	Women's Liberal Federation
WSPU	Women's Social and Political Union

Chapter One: Introduction

This thesis evaluates the life and activities of Catherine Osler (1854-1924) in her adopted home of Birmingham using a mixture of archival material including Osler's family archive, and a variety of secondary sources. It provides a fresh appraisal of the development of the women's rights movement in the city by an examination of the activism of a progressive, upper-middle class Victorian woman, as a philanthropist, feminist, campaigner for female enfranchisement and the advancement of women's civic role in Birmingham's social and political life over a period of fifty years from 1870 to 1920. The availability of previously unused primary sources held by her descendants has added immeasurably to the scope and value of this thesis. For example, it has enabled a closer examination of the vital early influences on a young receptive radical mind together with a detailed study of her private life as a committed wife and mother. Further, it has provided an opportunity to explore the political activism of a progressive liberal thinker in Birmingham in opposition to Liberal Unionism from 1885 onwards, and her developing interest in issues of Imperialism, war and the peaceful settlement of international disputes within the context of Irish Home Rule, the Boer War and the First World War.

Osler and her parents moved from her birthplace Bridgwater, Somerset, to Birmingham in 1867 and she lived there for the remainder of her life. Her birth family, the Taylors, were progressive Liberals and supporters of the advancement of women's rights. The context and antecedents of her life will be addressed in Chapter Two. It is unsurprising, in view of that background, that Osler became a liberal political activist. She emerged as one of the key figures in moving women from the periphery of Birmingham and national

life in the 1870s, to a central role by 1920. Whilst Osler's career will be the central concentration of this study, Chapter Four, for example, enables the ambit of the thesis to be extended to compare and contrast Osler's own important work, with the increasingly sophisticated philanthropic contribution of two other women in Birmingham, Elizabeth Cadbury and Ellen Pinsent. They illustrate the extent of women's developing role in the field of women's and children's physical, mental and moral welfare. Although many women of the period tended to restrict their activities to the field of philanthropy, it was one of Osler's distinctive contributions to move beyond such a gendered confinement into a full public role.

The structure of the thesis will be to firstly set out the main aims of the study. It will consider the nature and content of existing studies of women in Birmingham and how this thesis enriches the very limited historiography of the development of women's social and political rights in Birmingham. It will seek to restore Osler's status from being largely unknown to arguably the most important pursuer of women's rights in Birmingham during her lifetime. There will be a consideration of the changing nature of Liberalism in Birmingham following the Home Rule crisis in 1885-1888 and how Osler sought on behalf of her sex, to counter the Unionist ascendancy within the city thereafter. This will lead to an appraisal of Osler's pursuit of women's emancipation opposed by the Unionist majority, and her need to counter the militant tactics of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) - the suffragettes - in pursuing the same end. Osler's increasing criticism of colonialism in the context of the South African conflict 1899-1902, and later the First World War becomes of increasing importance to her in the twentieth century. The

importance of her Unitarian allegiance will be considered for its influence on her feminist activities. The availability of material from her descendants enables an appraisal of her domestic role as a wife and mother and adds an important fresh dimension and contrast to her busy public life.

A literature review will discuss the present historiography on the various issues and assess the usefulness of the various texts to this study. The methodology will contain a biographical element but moves beyond that to become an analytical work of historical scholarship making use of a variety of sources whilst acknowledging the absence of important material. It will conclude with a review of the chapters which will explore the themes identified.

The Particular Aims of the Study

There are no detailed historical or biographical studies of the development of the women's rights movement in Birmingham, and there is a pressing need for a study such as this to provide fresh insights into the growth of women's political and civic role. There are doctoral theses on both Ellen Pinsent and Elizabeth Cadbury, but their main focus is not on feminist political activism. Pinsent was primarily a philanthropist who concentrated upon the development of facilities for women with mental health problems.¹ Elizabeth Cadbury supported women's suffrage but was predominantly a philanthropist in the field of children's physical welfare although she did become a city councillor from 1919 to 1922 and stood as a candidate for Parliament in 1923. Helen

¹ A. Brown, 'Special Schooling and the Feeble-Minded in Birmingham 1870-1914' (PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2008). See also Chapter 4 and R. Watts, *Women in Science, A Social and Cultural History* (Abingdon, 2007), p. 182.

Smith's thesis puts the case that Cadbury's involvement in women's political advancement was subordinate to her religiously motivated social maternalism.²

Investigating Osler's life has made it clear that she has become a largely forgotten figure in the history of the city despite being recognised for her work in her lifetime, both by the award of an honorary MA degree by the University of Birmingham and by the painting of her portrait to hang in the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

It is a major task of this thesis to restore Osler to the prominent position she deserves in the history of the city as a radical reformer and to investigate why she faced such opposition to her feminist views, how she confronted the obstacles to her campaigns and with what success she overcame them. This will require an analysis of the position of Birmingham in national politics and society particularly after the schism within the Liberal Party after the defeat of the Irish Home Rule Bill in 1885. Thereafter, Osler was in a minority on nearly every political issue. Firstly, as a woman she was faced with a still largely paternalistic society, which constantly thwarted her campaign for women's voting rights. Secondly, although her wing of the suffrage movement, the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society (BWSS), the suffragists, contained as many if not more adherents than the women of the WSPU, the latter's flair for spectacle and adoption of militancy attracted greater publicity in Birmingham after their establishment in the city from 1906 onwards. Thirdly, the remnants of the Gladstonian Liberal Party to which she belonged was, after 1888, constantly in opposition to and increasingly antagonistic towards the Liberal Unionists led by their charismatic leader, Joseph Chamberlain. Fourthly, Osler's

² H. Smith, 'Elizabeth Taylor Cadbury (1858-1951): Religion, Maternalism, and Social Reform in Birmingham, 1888-1914' (PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2012), pp. 228-275.

continuing support for Irish Home Rule, and increasing hostility to colonialism and military conflict was unpopular in Birmingham in opposition to the growing Imperialism of Chamberlain's Unionists, evidenced initially in the South African War 1899-1902, and later in the First World War. Fifthly, although Osler was profoundly religious, as a Unitarian she belonged to a non-conformist and largely liberal minority which, although influential within the city, was increasingly challenged in the years of Unionist and Anglican dominance.

A further aim of this thesis is to address the extent to which Osler was a progressive figure in her private life. Despite this thesis projecting her as a radical figure by dint of her upbringing and antecedents, the evidence in Chapters Two and Three show that she held traditional views on the sanctity of marriage and the central position of women as the bearer, nurturer and educator of the children of the marriage. Osler was married to Alfred Osler in 1873 at the age of nineteen. He was a wealthy businessman and by all accounts, the marriage was highly successful ending with his premature death in 1903. Two points will be considered. Firstly, the extent to which and by what means Osler was able to pursue her public work whilst catering to the needs of the five children of the marriage both before and after Alfred's death. Secondly, an appraisal of the nature of the Osler marriage to consider whether the advances in the public recognition of women's increasing role in civic life and international affairs were mirrored by changes to the nature of marriage in the Osler household and in society generally.

Literature Review and Significance of the Study

The breadth of Osler's activities has inevitably led to a consideration of several themes and the examination of a number of secondary sources. This section considers the limitations of present scholarship for this thesis and the need to supplement the existing historiography. To assist the reader, all the substantive chapters of the thesis will contain an individual literature review dedicated to the theme or themes of that chapter.

Women and General Birmingham Histories

Asa Briggs's study of Birmingham is of some age now but is still important in its description of the industrialisation of the city in the nineteenth century, and the political dominance of Joseph Chamberlain and the Liberal Unionists after 1888. However, little or no reference is made to women's political activities. For example, although it is mentioned that the first women were elected to the City Council in 1911, they are not named nor is any information given as to their party affiliation or their activities.³ The granting of partial voting rights to women in 1918 is dealt with in passing in one paragraph.⁴

The much more recent book by Roger Ward is equally deficient in ignoring any contribution by women to the politics of Birmingham or the political organisations to which Osler belonged.⁵ For example, there is no mention of the Women's Liberal Federation (WLF) founded in 1887, or Osler's election to the General Committee of the

³ A. Briggs, *History of Birmingham, Volume 2, Borough and City 1865-1938* (London, 1952), p. 129.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.223.

⁵ R. Ward, *City State and Nation, Birmingham's Political History c.1830-1940* (Chichester, 2005), pp. 179-180.

Birmingham Liberal Association (BLA) in 1883. Indeed, Ward devoted only two pages to the 1911 council elections and the women's suffrage campaign. In a recent history of the development of various aspects of Birmingham life, Ward contributed a chapter entitled 'Birmingham: A Political Profile, 1700-1940'. In a section entitled 'Rise up, women', the contribution consisted of twenty-four lines with a photograph of Osler's portrait in the Museum and Art Gallery. Most of the section described the violent actions of the suffragettes making only minimal reference to the constitutional suffragists. Additionally, he failed to mention that the partial female franchise was granted during the period covered by his chapter.⁶

Eric Hopkins's *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City* largely concentrated upon the economic and social life of Birmingham from 1850 to 1939, although political issues were not completely ignored.⁷ The political role of women was barely mentioned, and Hopkins, like Ward, placed his emphasis on the role of the WSPU in the suffrage movement. He wrote of the birth of the suffragette movement in 1903 in the context of the development of women's rights but made no mention of the suffragist BWSS founded in Birmingham in 1868.⁸ A few pages later, he wrote that votes for women 'came in the wake of the pre-war suffragette movement', again ignoring the contribution of the suffragists.⁹ In Hopkins's favour he did deal in more detail with aspects of social deprivation in the city and the work of women philanthropists to alleviate the incidence

⁶ R. Ward, 'Birmingham: A Political Profile, 1700-1940' in Carl Chinn and Malcolm Dick (eds.), *Birmingham, The Workshop Of The World* (Liverpool, 2016), pp. 159-191, pp. 180-181.

⁷ E. Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City 1850-1939* (Stroud, 2001).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

of prostitution and infant mortality both of which were major concerns of Osler in her philanthropic work in the city appraised in detail in Chapter 4.¹⁰ There was also an important section on the emergence of the Civic Gospel (Gospel), but without any mention of women's involvement.¹¹

A recently published book by Richard Vinen provides a detailed history of Birmingham from its early beginnings to the present. A five-page section outlining women's role in the public life of the city forms part of Vinen's fourth chapter which is perhaps unsurprisingly entitled, 'Chamberlain's Birmingham'. There are few if any fresh insights, but Vinen's assessment will be briefly referred to in Chapter Two.¹² It is worthy of mention that Peter Marsh's detailed and well-regarded biography of Chamberlain makes no mention of Osler or the general contribution of women to the politics of Birmingham.¹³

This selection of books confirms that male historians have consistently failed to acknowledge the contribution of women towards the political and civic history of Birmingham. It is one of the aims of this study to remedy that deficiency by examining Osler's career and placing it within the wider women's movement. This thesis supplements the welcome moves made in recent years by women and gender historians to add to the paucity of material identified.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 49-63.

¹² R. Vinen, *Second City: Birmingham and the Forging of Modern Britain* (London, 2022), pp. 91-95.

¹³ P. Marsh, *Joseph Chamberlain: Entrepreneur in Politics* (London, 1994).

Works on Women's History and Suffrage

A number of books and articles are referred to throughout this study to illustrate the work of women historians in bringing to prominence the careers of women whose contributions have been neglected. For example, in Chapter Seven the article by Lyndsey Jenkins on the life and work of Annie Kenney highlights the work of a working-class suffrage campaigner championed by the WSPU as a figure who broadened the reach of the movement.¹⁴ Reference can also be made to Chapter Nine where June Purvis's study of Emmeline Pankhurst is important for giving prominence to a suffrage campaigner who was a contemporary of Osler and embarked on a very different path.¹⁵ Further, consideration of the historiography is given in the section on Methodology which follows this section.

The most recent contribution to the historiography is Nicola Gauld's book (published in 2018) which provides a largely narrative account of the suffrage campaign in Birmingham.¹⁶ Unlike the previous studies examined, it is less about the city itself than the suffragist women like Osler who led the campaign on behalf of the BWSS and the suffragettes of the WSPU. Also, unlike previous works, it devotes full and equal attention to the two wings of the movement and the limited collaboration between them until the advent of unlawful militancy particularly from 1912 onwards. What it does not do in any detail is to look beyond the bare narrative of the movement to examine and discuss the individual motivations and aspirations of the participants and the wider feminist and

¹⁴ L. Jenkins, 'Anna Kenney and the Politics of Class in the WSPU in the 20th Century' *British History*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (2019), pp. 477-503.

¹⁵ J. Purvis, 'Emmeline Pankhurst in the Aftermath of Suffrage' in J. Gottlieb and R. Toye (eds.), *The Aftermath of Suffrage* (Basingstoke, 2013).

¹⁶ N. Gauld, *Words and Deeds, Birmingham Suffragists and Suffragettes 1832-1918* (Alcester, 2018).

gender issues which this thesis attempts to address. In contrast to the present thesis, Gauld's account is not primarily an academic study, but is nonetheless valuable in highlighting the role of individual campaigners.

The work of Sandra Stanley Holton in the 1980s remains important in questioning, for example, the extent of the alleged division between the suffragists and the suffragettes, the focus upon 'sensationalist' tactics, and the need to concentrate on the every-day activists and their connection to other political and social viewpoints. Osler and Birmingham are mentioned only once in the book in the context of the Prime-Minister's attendance at an important meeting in the City in 1909, which is considered at length in Chapter Six.¹⁷ The relationship with the Labour Party after 1912 was an important aspect of Holton's work, and its continued relevance to Osler's life in Birmingham will be considered in Chapter 7.

Ben Griffin's book is an important general contribution to the development of the profile of women in the later nineteenth century both within and in addition to women's involvement in the suffrage campaign. Griffin questioned why, rather than if, men's attitude towards women's rights changed in the later nineteenth century. He identified relevant themes, for example, the changing nature of marriage, the reaction against marital violence, and changes in religious doctrine.¹⁸ The slowly evolving changes in the relationship between men and women are a prominent theme of this present thesis

¹⁷ S. S. Holton, *Feminism and Democracy: Women's Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain, 1900-1918* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 49-50.

¹⁸ B. Griffin, *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain: Masculinity, Political Culture and the Struggle for Women's Rights* (Cambridge, 2012), particularly at pp. 51-64.

which supplements Griffin's work in concentrating on a particular woman in a specific location as the basis of the study.

Women in Local Government and Philanthropy

In her younger days, Osler had been involved in philanthropic work in the fields of infant welfare and the protection of vulnerable women. Until national voting rights were granted, and for women who had no wish to become involved in national affairs, participation in local government provided an avenue into a public role. Patricia Hollis's book on women in local government remains important in the discussion of the early women councillors in Birmingham, particularly Ellen Pinsent. The achievements of these women and the comparison between their work and Osler's are an important theme of this work.¹⁹

Helen Smith's PhD thesis centred on Elizabeth Cadbury's philanthropic work in improving the provision for the medical examination and treatment of children. A major theme of her thesis, as noted earlier in this chapter, was the emphasis on the furtherance of maternal and religious faithfulness as a priority over political advancement for women. It also displayed Cadbury's ability to overcome the reservations of local politicians to provide support for her plans.²⁰ Up until this present work there has been no academic recognition of Osler's philanthropic contribution to the promotion of women's welfare in the city, a role that will be assessed in Chapter Four.

¹⁹ P. Hollis, *Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government 1865-1914* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 392-461.

²⁰ Smith, Elizabeth Taylor Cadbury, Chapter 4, pp. 203-209.

Methodology and Sources

This thesis is a work of historical scholarship rather than biography. In its simplest form, a biography might become a narrative of the main events in a life from birth to death without a detailed evaluation of the worth and importance of the life. Whilst the methodology employed in this thesis includes a biographical component in conveying the essential facts of Osler's life and work, it is coupled with an appropriate analysis of her public work, for example, and the importance of venue. It is a study of an important female activist whose life's work uncovers much about later Victorian and Edwardian culture, society and politics in Birmingham. A variety of primary sources are employed, including private papers, publicly available archival sources and printed material. Much of the source material includes Osler's own writings which are used to illustrate the society in which she lived and sought to change for the benefit of women. The study considers not only her actions but also her thinking and how her views and attitudes developed in the light of the changing social and political context. Her life and work fit readily into a biographical methodology which shows her moving between the public and private spheres and engaging with a variety of individuals and organisations to challenge the patriarchal society into which she was born. Equally, it examines the constraints she was under as a woman and the strategies she used in attempting to overcome those obstacles.

A historiography has developed over several decades since the 1970s in the study of women's history. Historians have used biographical studies as a legitimate research tool in exploring how the lived experiences of women could illuminate and explain their

motivations. Barbara Caine, June Purvis and Carolyn Steedman are but three of the historians whose study of women in history has been strongly gendered with a concentration on the lived experiences of those who would have been termed as prominent or important by being, for example, writers, intellectuals, the wives of important men in public life and those who displayed womanly 'higher attributes'. June Purvis gives the example of the nineteenth century studies of the 'upper-middle class spinster Florence Nightingale' portrayed as the 'Lady with the Lamp', without commenting on her 'ambition, ruthlessness and iron determination'.²¹ Caine argues that by the 1970s there was a shift in female biography to include women who may not have achieved national prominence, but whose involvement in, for example, feminist and philanthropic issues, gave 'shape and meaning to their lives and to those who read their written and oral contributions'. It involved 'a critique of the gendered assumptions and stereotypes evident in the past'.²² This trend was accentuated by the inclusion of more personal material which had previously been disregarded, such as surviving letters and diaries collectively described under the heading 'life writing'. These came to be seen as important for the insights they provided into women's lives, and the light they shone on those lives within the 'broader culture of the period'.²³

June Purvis has written about the more obviously political background to biographical writing in women's history and the difficulties of women's voices being heard. In echoing Caine's tracing of the developments of women's history in the 1970s, Purvis emphasised

²¹ J. Purvis, *Women's History: Britain, 1850-1945* (London, 1995), pp. 2-3.

²² B. Caine, *Biography and History*, 2nd Edition (London, 2019), pp. 44, 101.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.

that for her, the importance of a distinctive 'feminist history' was linked to the movement for women's liberation.²⁴ The nature of the development of women's rights and the challenge to continued subordination has continued and developed. It highlights the importance of the publication of the individual and collective experiences of women. Purvis has remained influential and was the founder of the long-running *Women's History Review* which set out to publicise 'a range of feminist perspectives'.

Carolyn Steedman's biography of Margaret McMillan is of interest firstly in writing about a woman who was a close contemporary of Osler, and like her left a limited amount of primary material with which to furnish a detailed study. Unlike Osler she was of humble origins and a supporter of the labour movement and socialism. She is remembered today principally for her writings about her work in early childhood education. Steedman uses a biographical approach to raise issues concerning 'the history of British social and political culture', in particular the nature of working-class childhood, the role of women 'in local and national political life' and the importance of the socialist movement in making connections 'between material life and cultural life'.²⁵

The usefulness of a biographical methodology to this study is plain. Osler's activities were largely of local importance within Birmingham during her lifetime and the concentration on local sources including her own writing has enabled this study to emphasise the importance of bringing the lives of women such as her to wider prominence and to

²⁴ J. Purvis, 'From 'women's worthies' to poststructuralism? Debate and controversy in women's history in Britain' in J. Purvis (ed.), *Women's History: Britain, 1850-1945* (London, 1995), pp. 6-12.

²⁵ C. Steedman, *Childhood, Culture and Class in Britain: Margaret McMillan, 1860-1931* (New Jersey, 1990), pp. 10-11.

demonstrate the ability of an individual woman 'to illustrate or reflect broad historical change'.²⁶

Aside from Osler herself, three contrasting PhD theses by Barbara Bowring, Susan Thomas and Katharine Isles give examples of the breadth and versatility of a biographical methodology to the framing of local studies not only of neglected women but also men. Barbara Bowring's thesis examined the life of Ann Yearsley, a working-class woman born in Bristol in 1753, who aspired to make a career as a published poet.²⁷ Bowring's study posed two main research questions. Firstly, with what success did Yearsley overcome her disadvantages to become a writer? Secondly, to what extent did she become a significant cultural figure during her lifetime?²⁸ Bowring's methodology was to use a biographical case study to place Yearsley in the context of her time, and to answer the first research question by examining her published work, and highlighting key aspects of her character and personality from such biographical information as could be uncovered relating to 'class, gender, patronage, print culture' and her home in Bristol.²⁹ She could then seek to establish Yearsley's 'poetic identity' which enabled her to thrive in an alien social environment. Bowring was aided by previous studies and literature about Yearsley. By adding her 'construction' of Yearsley from these sources to other information, such as her physical environment, status, connections and the status of print culture during her

²⁶ Caine, *Biography and history*, p. 5.

²⁷ B. Bowring, 'From Penury to Published Poet: the Cultural Journey of Ann Yearsley' (PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2018).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

lifetime, Bowring was able to answer the second research question by building a picture of Yearsley's life and significance 'in the literary landscape of her time'.³⁰

Susan Thomas's thesis on the life of George Edmonds is illustrative of the use of a biographical approach to the life of a little-known man. Thomas was dealing with a man of the lower middle-class who was born in Birmingham in 1788 and lived his whole life in the city. She used his life as a device to investigate the social structure and radicalism of early nineteenth-century Birmingham. Her research highlighted the significance of his home city, his family background and his character. Thomas had no family archive to assist her study or any personal account by Edmonds of his life. She had to rely on other accounts and a range of alternative sources, for example, newspaper articles, obituaries and memoirs. Thomas acknowledged the difficulties of writing about lesser-known people and the adoption of the historical 'turn' in biographical writing, using sources and examining the ways in which an individual is influenced by and impacts upon the surrounding culture. Thomas specifically referred to the thesis on Yearsley as a helpful comparative source.³¹

Katharine Iles's study centred on the life of Sabrina Sidney provides an example of the range of subjects which can be explored using a biographical method. It is an unusual and complex study, but for this work it will suffice to describe it as an analysis of the life of a modestly situated woman, who lived in eighteenth-century Birmingham and was the subject of a social experiment by Thomas Day, a member of the influential Lunar Society.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 30.

³¹ S. Thomas, 'George Edmonds and the development of Birmingham radicalism' (PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2021), pp. 12-14.

The significance of her life for this thesis is that although much has been written about the importance of Day's work, very little was known about Sabrina herself. Iles's thesis not only rescued Sabrina from complete obscurity but enabled her to utilise Sabrina's life to add substantially to the historiography of eighteenth-century Birmingham society, in terms, for example, of issues of gender, class, the social position of women in the period of study, and the role of the Lunar Society during the Midlands's enlightenment.³²

Despite obvious differences of chronology, occupations, background and sex, the versatility of the biographical approach illustrates the usefulness of the method in rendering the lives of these subjects. Osler lived more recently than Yearsley or Edmonds, but still long enough ago to be unknown to any living person. The sources to be discussed in the next section include details of the organisations to which she belonged, and much autobiographical material giving snapshots of her younger life, followed by her adult life in the form of memoirs and journals. The extent to which these are reliable will be questioned as they self-evidently concentrate on her own view of her private and public world and there is limited evidence of what others thought or said about her. There are no other substantial studies or literature about her life, hence the need for this thesis so that her importance to the history of her time can be examined and assessed by means of what the previous studies have described as a 'reconstruction' of her character and personality.

³² K. Iles, 'Constructing the eighteenth-century woman: the adventurous history of Sabrina Sidney' (PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2012).

In embarking upon this study, the uncovering of sufficient relevant source material has been challenging. Osler had a relatively low profile outside her adopted city and although she was a prominent person within Birmingham, as a woman she would have struggled to achieve the prominence of male activists. Research has succeeded in uncovering three principal sources of information. Firstly, the extant archives of the private organisations, charitable and otherwise, to which she belonged and, in some cases headed, for lengthy periods of time. Secondly, surviving articles and reports in newspapers and magazines to which she contributed throughout her career. Thirdly, her own writings, in her two published books, and, with thanks to the assistance of her surviving descendants, the two volumes of *Memories of our Life*, and two personal Journals of which details are given later in this Chapter under 'Osler's Writings'. The unpublished and previously unused sources are central to understanding Osler's personality and life experiences.

Archives

Osler was a member of a number of philanthropic, political and women's rights organisations through which she assisted women in Birmingham and furthered the causes which were at the forefront of her activism in the city. The two most important philanthropic organisations were the Birmingham Ladies Association for Useful Work (BLAUW) with which she was involved from 1878 to 1903, and the Birmingham Ladies Association for the Care and Protection of Young Girls (BLACPYG) for which she worked between 1887 and 1905.³³ Both archives are located in the Library of Birmingham and

³³ Birmingham Archives & Collections at the Library of Birmingham (BA&C), L41.2 *Archive of the Birmingham Ladies Association for Useful Work* and L41.2, *Archive of the Birmingham Ladies Association for the Care and Protection of Young Girls*.

provide detailed yearly records of their activities and of significant interventions by Osler. They point to the variety of her philanthropic work. The BLAUW was concerned with women's physical health during pregnancy and after childbirth, with a view not only to aiding women's well-being but also to combating the high incidence of infant mortality. By contrast, the BLACPYG was concerned with the moral welfare of generally poorer women and aimed to lessen the likelihood of destitution and a resort to prostitution. Unlike the BLAUW it was heavily religiously motivated. The efficacy of Osler's work for these bodies is addressed in Chapter Four. It is noteworthy that the reports were written by committee members, and the voices of the women they endeavoured to assist were rarely heard, making it difficult to gauge the effectiveness of the interventions or how welcome they were.

Both the BLAUW and the BLACPYG were affiliated to the Birmingham Branch of the National Union of Women Workers founded in 1887. Osler was a committee member and sometime Vice-President of the Union. It was initially a purely philanthropic body which acted as an umbrella for a large number of organisations concerned with the welfare of women. There is a substantial archive including the quarterly magazine which described the extensive range of issues discussed.³⁴ In the twentieth-century reports there is a marked change of emphasis in the increasing prominence given to a more political assertion of women's rights. Osler wrote several articles for the magazine over the years

³⁴ BA&C, L41.2 *The Archive of the National Council of Women (formerly the National Council of Women Workers)*.

and the archive is an important resource for tracing the development of women's concerns and activities in Birmingham.

Turning to Osler's political and women's suffrage work, the research has been hampered by two deficiencies in the source material. No archive has been located nor substantial records discovered either for the BLA or the women's branch of the Association, the Birmingham Liberal Auxiliary (BLAUX), of which Osler was President from 1889 to 1909. Fortunately, there was some press coverage of the meetings of the BLAUX, and these will be considered later. The reports show how Osler used the local press to raise women's awareness of the need for political engagement in public debate. Much the same can be said of her activity as President of the equivalent organisation in Leicester, of which she was President for several years.

Fortunately, there is a large archive of the WLF containing the reports from 1889 held at the University of Bristol.³⁵ Osler was a member of the Executive Committee and a Vice-President, and the records are essential to demonstrate her contribution to the large variety of debates about women's issues over many years. Full debates are recorded as are details of resolutions forwarded to Government. The annual meeting in Birmingham in 1901 is particularly illuminating, showing Osler leading or participating in debates on women's suffrage, peace and arbitration, the conduct of the Boer War, and housing provision for the working-class. A persistent theme in the records is the debate as to whether women's suffrage should be adopted as an identified aim of the WLF. For more

³⁵ University of Bristol, Special Collections, DM1193, *Minutes and Reports of the Women's Liberal Federation 1889-1912*.

traditionally minded women, there was a fear that such a move might have led to the absorption of the WLF within the suffrage movement. Chapter Five records how a successful resolution from Osler to adopt suffrage as an aim led to a split in 1893 and the formation of a rival organisation which likely impacted on its effectiveness.

Another aspect of the recognition of women's political and civic rights is shown by the surviving minutes of the Birmingham Women's Local Government Association, previously the Society for Promoting the Election of Women on Local Governing Bodies, 1907-1921.³⁶ Osler was prominently involved in the formation and promotion of the body. The minutes reflect the frustration of Osler and others in attempting to find women prepared to come forward as candidates in local elections prior to the first women being elected in 1911.

A good proportion of the reports of the annual meeting of the BWSS have survived although there is a large gap from the inaugural meeting in 1868-9 until 1884, after which they are continuous until 1918. They resemble other collections in being restrained, generally unrealistically optimistic and largely anonymous. However, they are an invaluable resource for tracing the suffrage movement in Birmingham from small beginnings, through a period from 1886 until 1899 when reports became biennial owing to a lack of activity, to a period of accelerating growth under Osler's Presidency from

³⁶ BA&C, *The Minutes of the Birmingham Women's Local Government Association 1907-1921*.

1901 until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 when the Report for that year shows there were 4,572 members in Birmingham alone.³⁷

In addition to these local records, Osler was elected to the Executive Committee of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) in 1912, and was active in that body until 1918, during the critical late stages of the long suffrage campaign and the years of the First World War. The records are particularly important for focusing on Osler's input into two earnest debates largely ignored by her parochial local society. Firstly, they report on the arguments for and against the support of the Labour Party following the failure of the Conciliation Bills in 1912. Secondly, there is detailed coverage of Osler's important role in the deliberations of the NUWSS recorded in 1915 leading up to and resulting in the split between the militarists and the pacifists on the Executive Committee on war aims and peace terms. The records are partial and somewhat disordered. They are also split between two locations, the Women's Library in London, and the Fawcett Archive in the Manchester Central Library. Nonetheless, they contain highly relevant material on the two very important issues referred to above.³⁸

Press Reports and Periodicals

This section will consider printed and digital sources in newspapers, the women's press, and other outlets used in the body of the thesis. In the case of the BLAUX the press reports of the meetings are the only located records of the body's existence. Similarly,

³⁷ BA&C, L76.12, *Archive of the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society and its successor the Birmingham Branch of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship, 1869-1918*.

³⁸ The Women's Library, London, *Reports and Minutes of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS)*, and the Archive Section of Manchester Central Library, *Extracts from the Millicent Fawcett Collection*.

Osler was the President of the Leicester Women's Liberal Association from 1893 to 1904, and in the absence of official records, the reports in the *Leicester Chronicle* contain detailed notes of her Presidential speeches. The most popular newspaper in Birmingham during the period of study was the *Birmingham Daily Post*. In her thesis, Michelle Shoebridge counsels us to be mindful of political bias in that the *Post* was a Liberal newspaper until 1886 when, following the schism over Irish Home Rule, it became a supporter of Joseph Chamberlain and Unionism.³⁹

The Women's Digital Library has a number of articles written by Osler in the *Women's Suffrage Journal*, including what must have been some of her earliest written contributions to the suffrage cause between 1875 and 1883. They are important in giving a picture of Osler's early years in the suffrage movement and her youthful commitment to the women's cause. It also contained Millicent Fawcett's obituary of Osler in *The Woman's Leader* on 26 December 1924, which provides a portrait of her friend's part in the suffrage campaign in Birmingham and describes the general hostility of the city which was seen as an anti-suffrage stronghold. A letter written by Osler to *The Woman's Leader* in September 1920 criticised the Amritsar massacre in India and questioned the continuance of colonial rule by Britain.

The only source the writer has discovered containing an interview with Osler is in a popular monthly magazine of the time, *The Woman at Home*. In an article headed 'Ladies of Birmingham', a journalist interviewed not only Osler, but a number of other prominent

³⁹ M. Shoebridge, 'The Women's Suffrage Movement in Birmingham and District 1903-1919' (MA thesis, Wolverhampton Polytechnic, 1983), pp. 3-4.

women in the city in 1894. The interviews provided a rare opportunity for Osler and the others to express their thoughts on their lives in the city with a degree of informality. In Julia Copus's recent biography of the poet Charlotte Mew, the magazine is described, in a quote taken from the *Spectator*, as a 'melange of letterpress and illustration, fact and fiction, cookery and dress, marriages and nursery chatter, specially adapted....to the comprehension of women'.⁴⁰ In particular, the article illustrates Osler's early years in Birmingham and her visits to her relatives in London. It seems that the magazine was so popular that, when introduced in 1893, its initial print run of 100,000 sold out within days, and further copies had to be printed.

Osler's Writings

Osler wrote two published books entitled respectively, *A Book of the Home (Home)*⁴¹ and *Why Women Need the Vote*⁴² (*Vote*). Additionally, the writer has received on loan from Osler's great-granddaughter two volumes of Osler's memories, entitled *Memories of our Life*⁴³ (*Memories 1*), and *Memories of our Life Part 2*⁴⁴ (*Memories 2*), the first covering her life from childhood until the death of her husband in 1903, and the second from 1904 until her death in 1924. A further loan from the same source comprises a journal of dated entries from July 1905 to September 1924 (*Journal 1*), along with a second journal containing dated entries from 24 January 1918 to 22 September 1924 (*Journal 2*).⁴⁵ The 'Dedication' to *Memories 1* suggest that it was originally meant to be seen only by her

⁴⁰ J. Copus, *This Rare Spirit: A Life of Charlotte Mew* (London, 2021), pp. 120-121.

⁴¹ C. C. Osler, *A Book of the Home* (Place of publication unknown, 1911).

⁴² C. C. Osler, *Why Women Need The Vote* (Place of publication unknown, 1911).

⁴³ C. C. Osler, *Memories of our Life* (Birmingham, 1904).

⁴⁴ C. C. Osler, *Memories of our Life Part 2* (Unpublished).

⁴⁵ *Journal 1* and *Journal 2* are unpublished.

children, although it seems to have later received wider circulation. *Memories 2, Journal 1* and *Journal 2* are handwritten and seemingly unpublished. It is likely that, save for the family, this thesis writer is the only person privileged to have had access to them. The issue for this section is to evaluate their reliability and value. They cannot be treated collectively, as they were written at different times for different purposes. Each will therefore be separately evaluated.

As Osler made clear in her preface to *Home*, most of the individual chapters consisted of 'little essays' conceived over a period of time and originally written to be delivered 'face to face' to 'various audiences' and adapted to different 'environments and circumstances of class'.⁴⁶ The book makes the case for traditional English home life which she saw as fundamental to a good life and perceived as being under attack from unnamed sources termed by Osler as 'intellectual crusaderswaging war on most of the idols of the British nation'.⁴⁷ In a succession of chapters, she examined married life, the upbringing and education of children both moral and intellectual, life in adversity, and preparation for later life and death. The book is not about the women's rights campaign but reflects Osler's feminist vision of a fulfilling family life. Within those terms it is a useful and informed source for discussion of her private world and how it may have influenced her public work.

Vote was a manifesto in support of female voting rights. It is, subject to minor alterations, a collection in book form of fourteen articles written by Osler in 1910, for the *Common*

⁴⁶ *Home*, p. 10.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Cause, the official organ of the NUWSS. It is in two sections, the first setting out the disadvantages to women of the absence of voting rights, and the second stating the benefits to women and society generally of voting rights being granted. It is not original in its ideas nor is it couched in radical terms. It is reasonable to speculate that the publication was intended to garner as much publicity as possible for the cause at an important juncture in the suffrage campaign. As an agenda for the suffrage movement, it is a well-informed and useful source. Its final chapter melds with the message of *Home* in foreseeing a harmony within society of its constituent parts. Rather than female subservience, she envisioned an 'ideal of equal comradeship and free service' in both the private and public sphere.⁴⁸

Memories 1 is the only source for Osler's youth and her married life. It is an example of autobiographical 'life writing' and as discussed earlier, it was printed and published for 'private circulation only'.⁴⁹ In the 'Apologia' at the beginning of the book Osler gave her own view of its purpose. It was not a family biography, but a record of the 'life-history' of her family, which will have 'real value' for the future as an 'honest record of ourselves'.⁵⁰ In the Dedication she referred to the contents as 'imperfect memories', stating that she had used letters where possible, to avoid the sadness of the 'retrospective narrative' of former days.⁵¹ She confirmed the use of 'an immense collection' of letters to her mother retained by Osler as furnishing 'much of the material for these recollections'.⁵² The

⁴⁸ *Vote*, p. 54.

⁴⁹ *Memories 1*.

⁵⁰ *Memories 1*, p. vii.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. v.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

narrative covers the period from her early years in the 1850s, to her husband's death in 1903. The marriage itself was of thirty years' duration. It is likely that in compiling her memoir, aside from the letters which have not come to light, she had to rely mainly on her memory. As she anticipated, it is highly probable that, at the least, there would be errors of recollection as to dates and the content of conversations. Of the sixteen chapters, only the first two are predominantly about Osler. The remaining chapters concentrate upon the marriage and are pre-eminently a celebration of Alfred Osler's life, rather than that of Osler herself. Given Alfred's recent death at the time of writing, it is unsurprising that some imbalance of contribution between the marital partners is manifest, but it is the cause of a degree of frustration for the historian hoping for a greater prominence of Osler herself. However, whatever its shortcomings, *Memories 1* is an extremely significant source, both as the only record of her early and married life, and as a repository for her thoughts and ideas. An appropriate degree of caution should be exercised to guard against any degree 'of rose-tinted' with reference to her marriage. Chapter Three of the thesis shows Osler as a proponent of a more equitable approach to the marital state, and it is consistent with that insight that she would have wished to portray her marriage as a very close personal and political partnership.

Memories 2 is a different source. It is handwritten and unpublished. It covers her life from 1904 until her death in 1924. It is not an easy source to use in that the material is haphazardly laid out and the writing sometimes difficult to read. As with *Memories 1*, it covers a lengthy period, and the impression is that much of it was written in the latter years of her life when her thoughts may have been less coherent and ordered than in

earlier days. Unlike the earlier volume, it is not laid out chronologically but consists of a mixture of narrative sections, interspersed with copies of letters to and from her family and many other people. The structure is thematic, ranging from the private lives of her children, to the major public issues of the suffrage campaign and the First World War. Subject to the familiar cautions around inaccuracy of recollection, it is an account of the private and public life of a progressive public figure, and an essential source for her life as a widow and activist.

The two journals were written in diary format with sporadic dated entries on various specific topics. They are more introspective in nature, and curiously, there is much duplication of entries between *Memories 2* and *Journal 2*. They are referred to frequently in the individual chapters of this study, to illustrate Osler's thoughts on private issues and public events, mirroring the social and political changes that were unfolding in the first two decades of the twentieth century. There is much coverage of family issues, principally the children and her grandchildren, religion and morality. These private thoughts impinge upon public events, such as the achievement of partial suffrage which is the final entry in *Journal 1*. *Journal 2* is much concerned with the ending of the First World War and her despair at the Treaty of Versailles, the continuing conflict in Ireland, her increasingly pacifist outlook and opposition to Imperialism. In that context, Osler's article in the *Hibbert Journal* is important in encapsulating her views on censorship and the treatment of conscientious objectors during the war years.⁵³ Subject to the usual

⁵³ C. C. Osler, 'The Terror of Ideas', *Hibbert Journal*, Volume 22, no. 3 (1923-24), pp. 574-585.

caveats, the journals are an invaluable source for Osler's thoughts and actions in the later years of her life.

Chapters

The biographical background to this study determines that the format of the thesis is mainly although not wholly chronological. Chapter Two is a context chapter which considers the critical importance of location and influences in shaping Osler's future career. It contrasts her early years in the small town of Bridgwater, and the great significance for her later achievements of the relocation of her family to the growing metropolis of Birmingham and the affluent suburb of Edgbaston when she was aged fourteen. The Chapter considers the importance of the Gospel during Osler's early years in the city and the predominance of the Liberal Party. It examines the influence of the wider family and important persons she met as a young woman. It looks at the influence of the Unitarianism of her parents and wider family, and in particular the importance of the liberal Unitarian minister Henry Crosskey in Birmingham.

Chapter Three considers and contrasts Osler's devotion to her home life and family with her busy public role. It evaluates the significance of her wealth and status, and her determination, with the help of servants, to lead a life of public activism. It examines to what extent her marriage to the wealthy businessman Alfred Osler, and the upbringing and education of the children, can be considered as an example of the changing nature of marriage and parenting in later Victorian times and the position of women in society. It also discusses the effect of Osler's unexpected bereavement, and the extent to which the change of status to widowhood and single parenthood affected her later years.

Chapter Four explores Osler's early role as a feminist philanthropist, and the wider implications of her activity for her later civic work. It examines Osler's work in endeavouring to reduce the high incidence of child and maternal mortality and considers her involvement with a rigidly non-interventionist local authority, and her eventual conclusion that an active approach from the authority was needed. It also assesses her very different philanthropic work in seeking to affect the moral outlook of predominantly poor women to save them from a potential life of prostitution by persuasion and example. Another key theme, manifested by her opposition to the provision of school meals, was her resistance to what she saw as the fettering of individual responsibility. The increasing professionalisation of philanthropic work in connection with children's and women's health is also considered by reference to the work of Elizabeth Cadbury, Ellen Pinsent and Josephine Butler.

Chapter Five is the first of three chapters which examines Osler's involvement with the long campaign for women's voting rights and political and civic advancement. A broadly chronological approach is adopted as being the most appropriate way of evaluating the protracted nature of the campaign and Osler's role within it. It enables an evaluation of the separate phases of the struggle, and the different issues that arose throughout the period. The first phase up until 1900 considers the early development of Osler's feminist philosophy, her realisation of the scale of opposition to women's suffrage at the time of the debate surrounding the Third Reform Act, and the personal significance for Osler and Liberalism in Birmingham of the schism within the Liberal Party in 1886-8 which resulted in Birmingham becoming a Unionist anti-suffrage city. It examines the significance of

Osler's leadership role in the founding in the 1880s of women's liberal organisations within the city such as the WLF and the BLAUX to continue the fight for women's rights outside suffragism.

Chapter Six covers the period up until 1909 and considers the first years of Osler's presidency of the BWSS and the presence of members of the WSPU in the city after 1906. Her attitude towards them is analysed, together with an assessment of their impact upon the suffrage campaign. Osler's increasing disillusion with the failure of the Liberal Party under Herbert Asquith to pursue suffrage is assessed, together with the effect of her eventual resignation from her leadership of the BLAUX. The chapter also examines Osler's growing opposition to the Imperialist and colonialist policies in Birmingham under Joseph Chamberlain's influence. Her opposition to the conduct of the Boer War and Chamberlain's campaign for tariff reform is highlighted together with Osler's growing interest in the peaceful arbitration of international disputes.

Chapter Seven covers the period until 1914 and the outbreak of war and considers the importance of Osler's own publication *Vote* on women's suffrage written in 1910, comparing it with books produced by other campaigners up to the outbreak of the First World War. It assesses her local activities in directing the suffrage campaign in its later years, her strong reaction to the defeat of the Conciliation Bill in 1912 which extinguished the chance of women's suffrage. It assesses her reluctant agreement to the developing relationship of the suffragists with the Labour Party engineered by Millicent Fawcett, and her strong opposition to the outbreak of serious violence by the suffragettes in 1912. It analyses the consequences of Osler's election to the National Executive of the NUWSS in

1912 and her critical stance on the Election Fighting Fund set up to support Labour election candidates where appropriate.

Chapter Eight is devoted to Osler's developing thoughts and concerns during the First World War and its aftermath. Her welfare work with women through the BWSS and the local Citizens' Committee and the beneficial effect on the suffrage campaign are considered. A key theme of this chapter is her developing opposition to the War and any resort to arms, and her joining of the Union of Democratic Control regarded by its opponents as a pacifist organisation. Her important support for Millicent Fawcett after the schism within the NUWSS following the resignation of the pacifist Committee members in 1915 is discussed at length. Osler showed herself as a woman of principle on several fronts as expressed in her support for a minority view in opposing the conflict and its aftermath; her pacifist leanings and unwavering endorsement of free speech against government censorship; her advocacy for the liberty of conscientious objectors, and strong opposition to the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. Her increasing opposition to colonialism was exemplified by her questioning of colonial rule in India and her welcoming of partial Home Rule in Ireland.

Chapter Nine consists of a consideration of the effectiveness of Osler's role during the period between the granting of partial suffrage for women in 1918 and her retirement in 1920. It is divided into three sections. The first concentrates on the initial period from March 1917 to the General Election of 1918 when Osler and her fellow activists were coming to terms with partial emancipation and the limitations on its effectiveness displayed by the argument over the use by British soldiers of brothels in France. The

second covers the 1918 election, the lack of success, and the steps taken to improve performance through the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (formerly the NUWSS). It included a definite programme, a change of leadership from Millicent Fawcett to Eleanor Rathbone and a move towards a concentration on policies geared to women's domestic and maternal responsibilities rather than a concentration on complete gender equality. The last section examines Osler's increasing pessimism and despair at the social developments which she found unpalatable. It moves beyond Osler's time whilst estimating and paying tribute to her legacy and contribution to ultimate success and examines the legislative progress for the benefit of women in the 1920s.

Chapter Ten concludes the thesis by evaluating the main findings of each individual chapter. It assesses the wider significance of this thesis and areas of potential further research, for example, an attempt to unearth the untold stories of other women of a different class in a comparative survey.

This thesis is the first detailed study of the development of the women's rights movement in Birmingham in later Victorian and Edwardian times. It is also the first study of the life of Catherine Osler as a public activist in the advancement of women's civic role in the social and political life of Birmingham. The previously unknown primary sources from Osler's family not only reveal a wealth of detail about Osler private life as a wife and mother at a time of social change but also provide valuable insights into her public life as a political and feminist campaigner.

Chapter Two: The Early Influences, Family, Birmingham, and Unitarianism

The purpose of this chapter is to evaluate the importance to Osler's later career of her childhood and early adulthood experiences and considers as a research question the extent to which those experiences determined the course of her future life and career as a political activist. Four particular areas of study are taken into account: the importance of Birmingham as her home from 1868 until her death in 1924; the influence of family and wider acquaintances both in childhood and early adult life; the impact of liberalism in Birmingham on her developing political, feminist and cultural views; and finally, the extent to which religion and her Unitarian non-conformity, were significant to her development. Osler arrived in Birmingham with her family at a time of great optimism and economic growth traditionally associated with the dominance of Joseph Chamberlain, an entrepreneur and at that time, an advanced Liberal, a Unitarian and an advocate of women's voting rights. The history of Birmingham's development in the days of the Civic Gospel (Gospel) has been the subject of considerable study. This thesis reconsiders that history, chiefly through a concentration on Osler's own writings, with a view to furnishing her own perception of the period from a woman's point of view.

The predominant influence in Osler's early life was her birth family, the Taylors. They were a radical Liberal family, and the importance of her parents, and her uncle and aunt Peter and Clementia Taylor in London, together with the prominent Liberal politicians and thinkers she met at their London home are assessed. Alfred Osler, whom she met soon after her arrival in Birmingham in 1868 and whom she married in 1873 was of

paramount importance until his death in 1903. He was a successful industrialist, a budding Liberal politician and office-holder within the powerful Birmingham Liberal Association (BLA) and a fellow Unitarian. He and like-minded citizens including Joseph Chamberlain ensured that Birmingham was a Liberal city until the 1880s. A feminist slant is placed on these times by reference to Osler's own recollections of the period.

Osler's religious faith was profound if unorthodox. The influence of the Unitarians, a relatively small group numerically, but a powerful and predominantly Liberal group within Birmingham, was considerable. Henry Crosskey was the Minister at the Unitarian Church of the Messiah from his arrival in 1869 until his death in 1893. This study suggests he would have been a moderate but real influence upon Osler. He was himself a Liberal supporter and an early male advocate of women's rights. Osler was able to use the Church not only as her place of worship, but as a vehicle for the promotion of her feminist agenda.

Osler was not a native of Birmingham but lived there from the age of fourteen until her death aged 70. Using her own writings, supplemented by a selection of secondary sources, this chapter places Osler in the context of those early optimistic years for progressive middle-class women within the city.

The Importance of Birmingham to Osler's Future

Osler had no connection with Birmingham before her family moved there in 1867. Hereinafter, it will be referred to as a 'city', although it was not formally designated as such until 1889. On their marriage in 1852 Osler's parents set up home in Bridgwater in

the West Country, probably because her mother Caroline (1820-1898) was a native of that region. By contrast, her father William Taylor (1826-1903) was a wealthy London businessman and manufacturer. In 1861, the Taylor family was wealthy enough to employ four servants, a cook, a housemaid, a nurse, and an under nurse.¹ Bridgwater was a modestly sized town with a population of between 10,000 and 11,000 in the 1850s.² There is no evidence of a substantial industrial base, nor has research unearthed any indication of radical political activity or a significant non-conformist religious presence. William Taylor had joined a wine business after his marriage but it was 'never at all congenial to him'.³ Whilst Osler did not recollect her childhood as unhappy, it was clear that her father, whom she described as an 'extreme Radical' who almost alone amongst their friends in the town supported the North in the American Civil War, came to dislike the 'extremely corrupt' Bridgwater.⁴ Why William chose to move to Birmingham is not known although its growing importance as a trading and business centre was surely relevant. If the move was beneficial for William, for Osler it was life changing. Indeed, without it, her public career might never have flourished. An example of an important early benefit was the provision of some education at a local private day school in the city which gave her 'companionship with other girls of my own age'.⁵ This contrasted with her

¹ Census records. England. Bridgwater, Somerset. 7 April 1861. TAYLOR, William (head). Piece Number 1624. Folio 105. Schedule Number 23. Enumeration District Number 6. P. 6. <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/> (Accessed: 02 April 2024).

² J. F. Lawrence, *A History of Bridgwater* (Chichester, 2005), p. 164.

³ *Memories 1*, p. 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

assessment of the 'succession of daily governesses' in Bridgwater who were 'simply dull'.⁶

Birmingham was a flourishing city at the time of the move. In 1871 the population was 344,000, an increase of nearly fifty per cent compared to 1851.⁷ It is noteworthy how many other prominent people in this chapter were likewise not natives of the city. Joseph Chamberlain was from London originally, Henry Crosskey was invited to the city from Glasgow, and from an earlier generation, Thomas Osler, Alfred's grandfather, had by coincidence also originated from Bridgwater and came to Birmingham in 1807 with a view to starting a business.⁸ Osler herself, when interviewed about her antecedents, was keen to emphasise that she 'always considered herself as belonging to Birmingham', even though not born there.⁹ Whilst Osler's life has not hitherto been the subject of historical study, there is scholarship which has illustrated the importance of the city as a locality for families such as the Taylors. In his history of Birmingham, Asa Briggs stressed the presence of a strong tradition of religious non-conformity in the city, including the Unitarians.¹⁰ The importance of her faith will be discussed in detail in a later section.

The recent book on the history of Birmingham by Richard Vinen includes a chapter on the growth of the city in the nineteenth century and confirmed the importance of the strong non-conformist presence of prominent families in the city, and the pre-eminence of the Calthorpe family, particularly in Edgbaston. Vinen devotes a section of five pages to the

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁷ E. Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City 1850-1939* (Stroud, 2001), p. 98.

⁸ J. P. Smith, *Osler's Crystal for Royalty and Rajahs* (London, 1991), p. 7.

⁹ S. A. Tooley, 'Ladies of Birmingham', *The Woman at Home* (October 1894), pp. 445-455, pp. 447-449.

¹⁰ A. Briggs, *History of Birmingham, Volume 2, Borough and City, 1865-1938* (Oxford, 1952), pp. 1-2.

role of women such as Osler in the public life of the city. He suggests that women played a larger part in the life of the city than 'their sisters in any other part of the country' due to the strong family links and the assertiveness of the middle-class women in Edgbaston who lived remotely from the business part of the city as further explained in the following paragraph. These families also benefited from the educational opportunities after the opening of the non-conformist Edgbaston High School for Girls in 1876 which was almost certainly attended by Osler's daughters, as discussed in more detail in the next chapter.¹¹

Eric Hopkins examined the growth of industry in Birmingham and, with relevance for this study, the particular importance of the brass industry. Osler's father wished to return to work in manufacturing, and on arrival in Birmingham William became a partner in a bedstead manufactory.¹² By 1850 Birmingham 'led the world in the manufacture of brass'.¹³ Brass bedsteads had become fashionable and their manufacture lucrative. For example, between 1865 and 1886, the output of bedsteads had increased from 5,000 per week to 20,000. As late as 1889, three-quarters of the bedsteads made in England were made in Birmingham.¹⁴ William was only in his early forties when the family came to Birmingham and may have worked in the business for several years. This can only have increased William's wealth, the extent of which is unknown. It was likely to have been substantial although there is no trace of a will having been admitted to probate.

However, the census record for 1871 showed the family living at 10 Chad Road in

¹¹ R. Vinen, *Second City: Birmingham and the Forging of Modern Britain* (London, 2022), pp. 69-95.

¹² *Memories* 1, p. 10.

¹³ Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, p. 16.

¹⁴ W. C. Aitkin, in S. Timmins, *The Resources, Products and Industrial History of Birmingham and the Midland Hardware District* (London, 1866), pp. 624-627.

Edgbaston with William describing himself as an Iron Merchant and Manufacturer. For a family of six, the census showed three servants, a Ladies Maid and Domestic Servant, a Cook and a Housemaid.¹⁵ Edgbaston was the most affluent suburb in the city. In his history of the suburb, Terry Slater described it as the 'Belgravia of Birmingham' where the city's 'elite' lived in 'splendid isolation' from the lower classes. Any development was controlled by the powerful Calthorpe family which owned four-fifths of the parish.¹⁶ Plainly, Osler's wealth and prospects were enhanced by the family's move to the city. They were boosted further by her marriage to Alfred Osler in 1873 (see Chapter Three). The newly married couple also lived in Edgbaston and Catherine was able to live in wealth and comfort for the rest of her life. It would have been open to her to have led a leisured life as many of her class did, but she chose a different path of activism, as succeeding chapters will illustrate.

The Influence of the Taylor Family in Birmingham and London

Most of the information about Osler's parents come from her own writings. They demonstrate a loving relationship with both parents. Shortly after her marriage she described her early home life as of a 'kind rare indeed' in displaying 'undimmed affection and concord'.¹⁷ She set great store on family life as Chapter Three will demonstrate. Her experiences suggested that a settled home life was a stabilising element in what was, on

¹⁵ Census records. England. Edgbaston, Warwickshire. 2 April 1871. TAYLOR, William (head). Piece 3082. Folio 61. Schedule Number 188. Enumeration District 13. P. 45. <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/> (Accessed 02 April 2024).

¹⁶ T. Slater, *Edgbaston, A History* (Cheltenham, 2002), pp. ix, 25-28.

¹⁷ *Memories* 1, pp. 26-27.

occasions, a turbulent career. Later in this chapter, her parents' role in the early years of the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society (BWSS) is considered.

Osler's aunt and uncle, Clementia Taylor (1810-1908)¹⁸ and Peter Taylor (1819-1891)¹⁹ were a paramount influence on the young Osler in two respects. Firstly, as their Oxford Dictionary of National Biography entries reveal, they offered a different location as they resided at Aubrey House in London where Osler paid at least one extended visit during her childhood and adolescence and was there exposed to their radical political views. Secondly, their home was a haven for radical thinkers and politicians of the time whom Osler would have met and talked to at an impressionable age. Clementia was of humble birth and worked as a governess prior to her marriage. By contrast, Peter was a partner in the Courtauld family business, and his wealth and contacts aided him in engaging with radical causes and providing funds and, on occasions, accommodation to dissident figures. Peter was the progressive Liberal MP for Leicester for many years after his unopposed election in 1862. Clementia was a prime mover in the preparation and presentation of the first petition for women's suffrage in 1866, and, as a member of the Married Women's Property Committee from 1876 to 1882, was heavily involved in the moves leading to the passage of the Married Women's Property Act 1882 which greatly increased the rights of married women over their own property. Peter championed many

¹⁸ Crawford, Elizabeth. "Taylor [née Doughty], Clementia (1810–1908), women's activist." Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. 23, September 2004. Oxford University Press. Date of access 26 Dec. 2023, <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-45468>>

¹⁹ Ruston, Alan. "Taylor, Peter Alfred [PAT] (1819–1891), politician and radical." Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. 05 January 2012. Oxford University Press. Date of access 26 Dec. 2023, <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-27070>>

progressive causes, for example, women's suffrage, church disestablishment, payment of MPs, the abolition of military flogging, republicanism and the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Legislation. Aside from voting rights the latter issue was of great importance to women. The legislation was an attempt by the State to curtail the incidence of prostitution in garrison towns by providing powers for the detention, internment and periodic inspection of women suspected of being prostitutes. Women saw it as degrading but also discriminatory as there were no equivalent provisions for men. The long and ultimately successful campaign for repeal is fully discussed in Judith Walkowitz's book.²⁰

Osler made a lengthy visit to the Taylors in 1867-8 at the time of the family move to Birmingham and, fortunately, she left a valuable account which throws light on her view of the visit and its consequences as they appeared to her at the time, and subsequently. The stay must have been of some duration and indeed she indicated that the childless Taylors wanted to make the visit permanent. However, their lack of sympathetic understanding of youthful needs eventually caused her great unhappiness and she 'was allowed to return home'. During her stay, she described 'strenuous work' from a governess, in 'Aunt Mentia's library', whilst Mentia worked 'unremittingly'. Osler, at that young age, 'frankly' admitted antagonism to most of her 'causes especially Women's Suffrage'. When Clementia took her to a public meeting addressed by John Stuart Mill in support of his bid to include women's suffrage in parliamentary legislation, she occupied herself in writing an 'irreverent skit' on the proceedings. Subsequently, she accepted her behaviour was unforgivable, particularly as her aunt had presided at the meeting in 'an

²⁰ Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society* (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 90-136.

agony of shyness'.²¹ The contrast between her early and later view of Mill and the visit is stark and good evidence of retrospective influence. Mill's book, *The Subjection of Women*, was published in 1869 not long after her visit. Its criticism of the 'subordination of one sex to the other' and its replacement by 'a principle of perfect equality' was a pioneering text for women's rights.²² Osler summed up her mature view of that visit to the Taylors in *Memories 1*, when she looked back on it as one of the most 'educational and character-forming influences' of her life. In retrospect, the visit left an 'indelible impression' on her, which she wished had been prolonged.²³

The Taylor's home was not only a rendezvous for progressive liberal thinkers, but also a haven for 'leaders of unpopular causes'. The Italian patriot, Guiseppe Mazzini (1805-1872), spent much of his life as an exile in England from 1837 onwards, and much of it, according to Osler, was spent with the Taylors as 'devoted and generous supporters'. Towards the end of his life Osler met him at Aubrey House. Whilst, as with Mill, she 'little enough' 'then knew or cared' as a child and young woman for his 'aims, aspirations and politics', his 'noble and saintlike personality' attracted her. The 'reverential affection' for him she subsequently 'learned to cherish with the sanction of reason'. She regarded him as the 'greatest human being' she ever met.²⁴ In her interview with the *Woman at Home* magazine in 1894, she explained that she had 'worshipped' Mazzini as a child. He had the 'saddest and most patient face' she ever saw.²⁵ Osler's regard for Mazzini was not

²¹ *Memories 1*, pp. 10-12.

²² J. S. Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (London, 1869).

²³ *Memories 1*, pp. 10-11.

²⁴ *Memories 1*, p. 11.

²⁵ Tooley, 'Ladies of Birmingham', p. 448.

difficult to understand as the policies he espoused were in tune with many of Osler's mature views. He was an idealist who believed in universal suffrage, women's liberation, free education, freedom of conscience, and compassionate rather than aggressive nationalism. He wanted an end to war and foresaw a European common market within a federal union. If further proof was needed of the regard of the Taylor and Osler family for Mazzini, reference can be made to a book that appeared in 1874-5, shortly after his death. It was published, as a legacy, at the behest of the Taylor family, with a preface by Peter Taylor. It contains two of Mazzini's essays together with a memoir written by Emilie Ashurst Venturi, his friend and translator. It has been made available to the writer by the family, and the inside cover contains an inscription showing it to have been a Christmas present from Nellie, Osler's younger sister, to Alfred Osler, in 1874. The last page of the second essay, entitled 'On the Duties of Man', saw Mazzini advocating one of his fundamental principles, the unity of the human family, by the emancipation of women and the working man. For women who are 'one half of the Human Family', their exclusion 'by a singular contradiction' excludes them from the great unity, against which they should protest 'on every occasion and by every means'.²⁶ There can be little doubt that the receipt and consideration of this book influenced Osler at a time when her serious work for women's suffrage was just commencing.

This section has demonstrated the importance of Osler's wider family and their many connections in her development as a young woman. In some cases, the extent and depth of their influence only became evident to her in retrospect. In the case of Mazzini, it

²⁶ E. A. Venturi, *Joseph Mazzini* (London, 1875), p. 391.

became a form of hero-worship based upon a short-lived relationship between a young woman and a mature man, but which continued long after his death. The next section will take the emphasis back to Birmingham from 1868 onwards, and examine the effect on Osler of three issues, the early involvement of Osler and her family with women's rights, the importance of Liberalism, and the influence of Henry Crosskey with regard to the Gospel and Unitarianism. This thesis suggests that the early years from 1868 onwards were particularly important for Osler's further development and the future of the city which was from then the permanent home of Osler and her family.

The BWSS was founded in 1868 and Osler began the journey from the juvenile indifference manifested in the previous section to active engagement with the suffrage movement together with her family. Liberalism became the dominant force within the city. Gladstone formed his first administration in 1868, and Joseph Chamberlain, then a progressive Liberal, was active within the city, in connection with the development of the Gospel which will be discussed below, and the reform of the city's institutions. In 1869 Henry Crosskey arrived in the city as the new Minister at the Unitarian Church of the Messiah. He influenced the Church by his teaching and was an important mentor to Osler who recognised him as an important campaigner for women and Liberalism.

The indefatigable Clementia Taylor actively encouraged the formation of women's suffrage societies from 1867 onwards. In April 1868 one of the earliest, the BWSS, was founded in Birmingham as a result of Clementia writing to Osler's mother Caroline, urging its foundation within a short time of the Taylors arriving in Birmingham.²⁷ The report of

²⁷ N. Gauld, *Words and Deeds: Birmingham Suffragists and Suffragettes 1832-1918* (Alcester, 1918), p. 7.

the Society for 1868-69 showed William Taylor on the Executive Committee, and Caroline as Treasurer. They were both shown as subscribers, together with Osler herself, then aged fourteen. Interestingly, John Stuart Mill added his weight to the Society as a subscriber although having no direct association to the city. By 27 May 1868, a petition containing over a thousand signatures urging votes for women was presented to Parliament by the Society, in the person of John Bright, a prominent Liberal MP in Birmingham and ironically an opponent of women's voting rights.²⁸ Clearly the Taylor family were prominent in the early period of the Society's existence and thereafter there was gradual expansion. A suffrage meeting on 5 December 1871 was attended by other prominent citizens including George Dawson, an important originator of the Gospel, and Henry Crosskey.²⁹

A full discussion of the progression and effect of the suffrage movement in Birmingham and Osler's pivotal role within it begins in Chapter Five, but the brief account above reveals an active Society from the outset that included the input of prominent male Liberals. This section will conclude with an indication of Osler's early contribution and also that of her mother Caroline whose involvement has not previously been given prominence. Nicola Gauld's book highlighted a speech made in January 1874 by Caroline at a National Suffrage Society conference in Birmingham, where she praised the election of women to the new School Boards established by the 1870 Education Act, shortly after some women were granted the municipal vote by the Municipal Franchise Act 1869. The work of Eliza Sturge, a veteran suffrage campaigner, in canvassing for the elections was

²⁸ BA&C, L76.12, *The Archive of the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society 1868-69*.

²⁹ Gauld, *Words and Deeds*, pp. 9-10.

much praised and, in 1873, she became the first woman elected to the School Board in the city.³⁰ Inevitably, in her speech, Caroline referred to the absurd anomaly which enabled women to make decisions affecting children, whilst giving them no voting rights over matters affecting themselves. Gauld argued that for the young Osler, the dedication of those such as Caroline, Eliza Sturge, Osler's lifelong friend Millicent Fawcett who visited Birmingham several times in these early days, together with those she met at Aubrey House, must surely have had an impact on her as she reached maturity.³¹ The point was made in the earliest speech the writer has found by Osler dating from March 1875 when she was aged only twenty-one. She addressed a meeting of the BWSS in support of her proposal for the adoption of a petition to Parliament demanding women's voting rights. It was a typically robust address attacking the idea that women should not have voting rights because they could not fight in battles. She concentrated on the battles women could fight against, 'ignorance, dirt, disease, crime' and its consequences or, as she graphically put it, the difference between fighting 'smallpox or small arms'. Quite apart from the fundamental human right to vote, the absence of voting rights meant that women's concerns were not given serious practical consideration in Parliament. For her, the denial of women's rights over their earnings or their children rendered Parliament a 'Select Committee for the Suppression of Women'.³² The style and content of the speech are illustrative of Osler's journey from an uninterested adolescent

³⁰ Gauld, *Words and Deeds*, p. 11.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³² Women's Library, London, 6th Annual Report of the BWSS, *Women's Suffrage Journal* (3 March 1875).

at Aubrey House, to the forthright, effective and radical orator committed to the suffrage cause, having no doubt benefited from the influence of those who surrounded her.

Liberalism, The Liberal Association and the Gospel

Osler recounted that her public work began in earnest after her marriage in early 1873.

This section looks at the genesis of the Gospel and considers the extent to which Osler supported it and was influenced by and benefited from it. She described 'fighting a town council election' within a few months of her marriage.³³ In *Memories 1*, she noted a change in local governance from men who generally were interested only in 'keeping down the rates', to a municipality which, through the Gospel, was seeking to bestow on the public, advantages and benefits they could not have achieved alone. In a retrospective article by Alfred Osler in 1902, and quoted by Osler in *Memories 1*, he wrote that these new men were supported by 'moral leaders' such as John Bright, George Dawson and Henry Crosskey who encouraged 'a higher life and a nobler thought'. The fruits of such endeavour would promote a 'desire for self-improvement individually and in the community, from which the distinction of Birmingham grew'.³⁴ These words encapsulated an important aim of the Gospel, namely the provision of the tools which enabled the populace, by their own endeavours, to improve their lives.

However, these men were not simply benevolent thinkers. Lying behind the support for the Gospel was the powerful BLA with its business ethos. As a contemporary commentator noted, Birmingham was 'a business city run by businessmen on business

³³ *Memories 1*, p. 29.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

principles'.³⁵ Osler herself talked of the BLA as having been reorganised chiefly by Joseph Chamberlain as a powerful 'caucus' which ensured that 'Liberalism and Liberal policy were everything'. 'The Tories (though always struggling pluckily) had a very bad time of it'.³⁶ Osler was clearly suggesting by those words the support for the Gospel came through the power of the BLA. Interestingly, it was the only mention of Chamberlain in her discussion of the Gospel. At this stage of his political career, Chamberlain was a progressive Liberal and women's suffrage supporter. When she came to write *Memories 1* in 1904, her view of Chamberlain, by then a Liberal Unionist and anti-suffragist, was very different and may have led her retrospectively to minimise his contribution.

A more favourable view of Chamberlain's influence in a contemporary source was expressed in the words of Dr. R. W. Dale, a prominent Birmingham cleric and supporter of the Gospel, contained within a subsequent biography of Crosskey. He agreed with a common view that George Dawson was predominantly responsible for the creation of the Gospel. However, he felt that Joseph Chamberlain was more to be credited for taking it forward, with his great powers of communication and enthusiasm. His many contacts within the city added strength to the Gospel and Chamberlain was himself associated with Crosskey's Church of the Messiah, at the time when he was an adherent of Unitarianism. Crosskey was a preacher of the Gospel and found the atmosphere of the meetings 'exhilarating - almost intoxicating'.³⁷

³⁵ Briggs, *History of Birmingham*, p. 30.

³⁶ *Memories 1*, p. 32.

³⁷ R. A. Armstrong, *Henry William Crosskey, His Life and Work* (Birmingham, 1895), pp. 249-251.

A full account of the benefits of the Gospel for Osler and her fellow citizens would go beyond the bounds of this work. The importance of Unitarianism for Birmingham and the Gospel will be looked at in the next section, but for an academic assessment of the benefits of the Gospel the work of Eric Hopkins is instructive. He described Chamberlain as a businessman who had become rich as a screw manufacturer; aside from his work for the BLA, he served as Lord Mayor from 1873 to 1876 when he became a Birmingham MP. He adopted a business approach to municipal work resulting in important reforms to the city's services during those years.³⁸ They included the council taking over the local gas and water supplies by 1875, a Medical Officer of Health being appointed in 1872 and, by 1875, 3,000 contaminated wells being closed. Also, in 1875 the Birmingham Improvement Scheme was introduced with a view to slum clearance, and the construction of Corporation Street with shops and business premises. Birmingham was gaining a reputation as 'a centre of municipal collectivism'. It was an undeserved accolade insofar as it may have implied the adoption of what some later called 'gas and water socialism'.³⁹ There was a 'strong commercial element' to Chamberlain's schemes, and any clearance of slum dwellings was for the benefit of 'private enterprise'.⁴⁰ Linda Jones wrote of Alfred Osler admitting in 1893 that the Council could not house the poorest, but only 'the better class of working people'. She saw the Gospel as 'an entrepreneurial gospel' which could increasingly be seen as a 'holding action against the

³⁸ Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, p. 54. See also Peter Marsh, *Joseph Chamberlain: Entrepreneur in Politics* (London, 1994), particularly pp. 78-102.

³⁹ Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, pp. 56-57.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

forward march of municipal trading and municipal socialism'.⁴¹ The strong Unitarian presence in Birmingham, in particular the role of Henry Crosskey and Unitarian women, was also seen as an important contributor towards the development of the city.

Osler, Crosskey and Unitarianism

The Unitarian Church was important not only as Osler's place of worship, but also as a source of identity and a vehicle for her pursuit of her liberal beliefs and the advancement of women's rights in Birmingham. According to Briggs, although small in number as a percentage of the population, the Unitarians, were more important than the Quakers in promoting the political and business life of the city.⁴² For example, many Unitarian families such as the Chamberlains, Kenricks, Taylors and Oslers were active in business as energetic entrepreneurs, and in a trading city such as Birmingham, they were likely to be prominent. This section evaluates, with the assistance of three principal sources, the influence on Osler of the Unitarians and Henry Crosskey who from 1869 to his death in 1893 was the Minister at the Church of the Messiah where she worshipped. The light it throws on her life and work in the city supplements the existing historiography of the period from the 1870s onwards.

Ruth Watts has written a seminal book on the Unitarians covering the later eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century. There is particular emphasis on women's education, a very important issue for Unitarians and the need, as she perceived it, for a book concentrating on women's rights prior to 1860. It was then, she argues, that

⁴¹ L. J. Jones, 'Public Pursuit of Private Profit? Liberal Businessmen and Municipal Politics in Birmingham, 1865-1900', *Business History*, Volume 25, Issue 3 (1983), pp. 240-259.

⁴² Briggs, *History of Birmingham*, pp. 1-2.

Unitarians 'sowed seeds' which affected women 'and their position in society'. It examines the interrelated issues of gender, education and influence from a 'pronounced egalitarian' viewpoint and contends that Unitarians expanded the perceptions of women's capacities which 'helped open the door to female emancipation'.⁴³

Watts's book covers a different period of history from this thesis and predates the arrival of Osler and Crosskey in the city, but it provides useful and erudite context to the emergent women's movement. It argues convincingly that Unitarians had a radical belief in women's intellectual abilities which fitted them for an equal place in society with men and raised their expectations of life. The book has little to say on the issues which were of overriding concern to Osler, for example, women's suffrage, Liberal politics, colonialism and war as they post-date the period of study. However, two subjects which would have resonated with her were the developments in women's education and family life. Watts is an acknowledged expert on the history of education and Chapter 3 will utilise her knowledge in exploring Osler's interest in her own children's education in the last years of the nineteenth century. The developing but very gradual change in the nature of marriage following the development of women's rights discussed by Watts will also be considered in Chapter 3.

Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's study of middle-class life was important in its depiction of different aspects of society between 1780 and 1850.⁴⁴ As with Ruth Watts's

⁴³ R. Watts, *Gender, Power and the Unitarians in England 1760-1860* (Harlow, 1998), pp. 8, 9. Reference can also be made to Kathryn Gleadle, *The Early Feminists: Radical Unitarians and the Emergence of the Women's Rights Movement, 1843-51* (London, 1995).

⁴⁴ L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family Fortunes, Men and Women of the English Middle-Class 1780-1850* (London, 2002 edition).

book, the period of study precedes that of Osler's active life, nor is it principally a study of Unitarianism, but it is of relevance in concentrating on various aspects of the life of middle-class women and considering how it may point the way forward to change during Osler's active life from the 1870s onwards. It will examine three areas, women's role in the Unitarian Meeting, women's domestic role, and what harbingers of change, if any, were manifest in those roles for the next and future generations.

The evidence shows that throughout the period of study, the members of the two bodies responsible for the running of the Meeting, the trustees and the vestry, were all men; all 'official positions' were held by men; subcommittees appointed to enquire into particular issues were all men and even the singers in the choir were all men.⁴⁵ Whilst there is a suggestion that some women might have had limited voting rights within the Meeting and could achieve some prominence particularly in small congregations, the tenor of the book is of rigidly separate gendered spheres.

The authors also conclude that there was a preference for domesticity in marriage rather than activism even amongst progressive women. For example, they examined the life of Harriet Martineau, a politically active mid-century middle-class Unitarian. As an unmarried woman she would have been expected to favour and encourage individual fulfilment but equally saw 'home and family' as 'the most satisfying' for middle-class married women. She had little appetite for a 'division of labour within the family' and accepted that women needed to be educated to be 'good wives and mothers'.⁴⁶ Thus, it

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

is again argued that women and men had distinct roles within married households; women achieving fulfilment through domesticity, leaving men with largely unencumbered working lives. Succeeding chapters of this study will show how Osler rejected the constraints foreseen by Davidoff and Hall and successfully managed her dual role as activist and mother to lead a full life outside the home environment.

The book ends in the year of publication of John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor's book, *The Enfranchisement of Women* in 1851. It poses the question whether middle-class feminism was 'quiescent or non-existent' or witnessed middle-class women fighting for 'their place in the world'. In either view it was 'their daughters and granddaughters' who found the means to express and eventually overcome their subordinate position.⁴⁷ This thesis argues that Osler was one of those descendants who by their efforts changed the position of women in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Helen Plant's article is the most significant of the three sources in foregrounding the influence of women Unitarians connected to the Church of the Messiah and the development of 'a feminist network' linked to the 'feminist gospel' espoused by Henry Crosskey.⁴⁸ Her study is important in taking account of the books discussed earlier in this section and also includes direct reference to Osler and her work in conjunction with Crosskey. Plant employs a local study of Birmingham to illustrate Crosskey's contentions; the importance of a Unitarian group of men and women in promoting a feminist agenda; and using religious beliefs to promote a theology of feminism. Although the basic tenet of

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 454.

⁴⁸ H. Plant, "'ye are all one in Christ Jesus': aspects of Unitarianism and feminism in Birmingham, c. 1869-90", *Women's History Review*, 9:4 (2000), pp. 721-742.

Unitarianism had been its denial of the Trinity, it had developed in the nineteenth century under the influence of Joseph Priestley and later James Martineau. Major edifices of traditional Christian belief such as atonement for original sin, the virgin birth, the resurrection, and miracles, along with the literal truth of the Bible were challenged. The Unitarian emphasis was on rational thought and disapproval of hierarchical structures, and practices such as tithe collection.⁴⁹ Crosskey's predecessor, Samuel Bache, the long serving Minister at the Unitarian Church of the Messiah in Birmingham was a traditionalist who opposed Martineau's modern teaching. Importantly, by 1868, he accepted that he had lost the support of the Meeting and resigned, to be replaced in 1869 by Henry Crosskey under whose leadership modern Unitarianism in Birmingham developed.⁵⁰

Crosskey is an important figure in this study both as a progressive Liberal figure as well as a Unitarian Minister. He was also a longstanding supporter of the advancement of women's rights. In 1861, in a lecture entitled 'The Position of Women', he had set out his vision that women as well as men should fulfil their own lives in accordance with their 'characteristics' and capabilities. There should be no prejudicial barriers, and an expansion of educational opportunities for women should lead them to a broader range of occupations and public involvement.⁵¹ Helen Plant's research highlights Crosskey's work for women in Birmingham after his appointment and expands our knowledge of the

⁴⁹ E. Bushrod, 'The History of Unitarianism in Birmingham from the Middle of the Eighteenth Century to 1893' (MA thesis, University of Birmingham, 1954), pp. 48-52, 96.

⁵⁰ Ibid. pp. 48-52.

⁵¹ H. Crosskey, 'The Position of Women', *The English Women's Journal*, Volume 6, No 35 (1 January 1861), pp. 289-297.

scope of Osler's work by reference to his two principal points. Catherine Osler and her family were seen as one of the most important of the family groups together with the Kenricks and the Chamberlains who supported Crosskey in making the Church 'a centre of feminist activists'.⁵² For example, he instituted lectures for women on religion to provide intellectual stimulation. As one who had a strong interest in geology, he gave lectures on scientific advances such as 'Modern Science and its Relation to Religious Problems' which given the times was likely to have included Charles Darwin's theories of evolution.⁵³ This was in addition to his Presidency of the BWSS from 1876 to 1890. Plant emphasises the role of Crosskey in 'stimulating' the involvement of Unitarian women with the suffrage movement. Her research showed that in 1885, for example, half of the BWSS Committee and all its officers were members of the Church of the Messiah. The activities of Osler and her family were highlighted, and Plant considered Osler as Crosskey's 'most consistently energetic colleague in local feminist ventures'.⁵⁴ Regrettably, no evidence has survived in Osler's own records of any discussions between her and Crosskey. Despite this lack of direct evidence, it is suggested that Crosskey was likely to have been a significant influence upon Osler particularly in the early years of her active life. She would have met him at Church functions, as she was a regular attender at the Church until his death in 1893 and was herself a pew renter from 1882 onwards. Aside from Church activities, these families were mainly active Liberal supporters and interaction would have taken place between Unitarian women at meetings of the Women's Liberal Federation.

⁵² Plant, 'ye are all one in Christ Jesus', pp. 721-742, p. 725.

⁵³ For extended consideration of Crosskey's scientific researches, reference can be made to Richard Acland Armstrong, *Henry Crosskey, His Life and Work* (Birmingham, 1895), Chapter 10, pp. 307-365.

⁵⁴ Plant, 'ye are all one in Christ Jesus', pp. 726-727.

The ideal of equality of the sexes and the importance of men and women working in partnership were a constant theme for both Crosskey and Osler. He envisaged a blending of the male and female before God free of biological determinism. Plant suggests that such a viewpoint constitutes a negation of the concept of 'separate spheres' as envisaged by Davidoff and Hall.⁵⁵ Osler was a profoundly religious woman despite her rejection of much traditional Christian teaching and ritual. She sometimes used a religious analogy to emphasise her suffrage message. In 1880, for example, Osler had urged women to seek the franchise on the basis of 'explicitly Christian ethics', so they could act unselfishly and with 'zeal for the good of others'.⁵⁶ The importance of religion, albeit of an unorthodox nature, is a key factor in understanding her life and work. The moral compass pervades her involvement in women's suffrage and politics and her growing pacifist leanings. By the time of Crosskey's death in 1893, she was well established in her public career, in some measure due to his help and support.

Conclusion

This chapter has concentrated principally on Osler's early life in laying the ground for her subsequent public career as a pioneering woman campaigner. Five particular influences have been explored. Firstly, the importance of Birmingham as a suitable base for her activism during the period. The move from Bridgwater to Birmingham was crucial to her future in exposing her to a growing liberal metropolis at a time of exciting social and political developments. It was the springboard for her future life. Secondly, she was the beneficiary of wealth both from her birth family and the family of her future husband,

⁵⁵ Plant, 'ye are all one in Christ Jesus', p. 733.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 735.

which enabled her to live in a salubrious part of the city and to pursue her activities without having to work. Thirdly, Osler had the benefit of a further source of support from her father's family in London. The Taylors were themselves a radical family, and Aubrey House provided a lively meeting place for gatherings of influential radical people such as John Stuart Mill and acted as a haven for dissidents such as Mazzini, who faced censure for their views. Whilst she may have been too young to fully understand the issues discussed, Osler was never in doubt as to the value of this family connection. Fourthly, the issues raised in this chapter suggest the beginning of important changes in the governance of Birmingham, the influence of the Gospel, and the position of women within civic society. By reason of her background, wealth and personality, Osler was ideally positioned to be part of this unfolding history. Fifthly, Osler had a steadfast if unorthodox religious belief which was a source of comfort and inspiration to her. The Unitarians were a small minority in Birmingham but had a disproportionate influence in the life of the city and a strong base of activity at the Church of the Messiah. The presence of Henry Crosskey as the Minister from 1869 onwards, was likely to have been an important influence upon Osler, not only in her spiritual life, but as a mentor and supporter in her public life, particularly in her campaign for women's rights.

Taken as a whole, these concluding remarks constitute an addition to the existing historiography of Birmingham as a welcoming venue for radical liberal reformers including forthright women such as Osler and illustrate the strength of Unitarian influence within the city. The next chapter will consider whether the progressive social and political changes identified were mirrored by developments in the private lives of

women as mothers and wives. The nature of the Osler marriage will be considered in that context.

Chapter Three: The Private World of Catherine Osler as Wife, Mother and Widow

Whilst Catherine Osler lived a busy and fulfilling public life in Birmingham, she was ever mindful of the importance of a stable, private family life with her husband and children. The aim of this chapter is to explore her domestic world and investigate what it reveals about an upper middle-class marriage and the raising of children in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The availability of original primary material permits a fresh appraisal of the marital state amongst the middle classes during this time. Osler married Alfred Osler (Alfred) in 1873. There were five children of the marriage which ended with Alfred's unexpected death in 1903. He was a successful businessman, and she was an activist campaigning for an advancement in women's rights. The evidence suggests a very contented marriage. A number of issues arise for investigation. Firstly, the origins of the marriage itself and the importance of the background of the Taylor and Osler families joined by the marriage. Secondly, the nature of the marriage, the respective roles of the parties within it and the importance of wealth, status and class. Thirdly, the particular roles of the parents in the upbringing, education and moral instruction of the children and, in view of the demands of Alfred's business and Osler's activism, the extent to which female servants were employed within the household, and Osler's attitude towards them. Fourthly, the effects upon Osler of her bereavement at the age of forty-nine.

Literature Review

The marriage of Alfred and Catherine took place in the later Victorian period at a time when, it is suggested, the nature of the marital relationship was beginning to change. A

number of secondary sources are of assistance in examining the various issues identified. Jeanne Peterson analysed a series of upper middle-class marriages, spanning the period of the Osler's marriage.¹ The extent to which wealthy women in Peterson's study appear to have accepted subordination and companionship within marriage suggests that Osler was not typical of such 'gentlewomen' and her conclusions will be analysed particularly in relation to wealth and status. By contrast, Lucy Bland's article asserting the more trenchant objections to contemporary marriage by some women in the 1890s, goes beyond Osler's views and throws light on the limits of her radicalism.² On a similar but distinct issue, Philippa Levine's article on the drawbacks of marriage for some progressive women is helpful in assessing Osler's position.³

The education of the two daughters is of significance as they grew up at a time when many girls of their class still did not undertake formal schooling. Three issues arise, which school did they attend and why, what were they taught, and to what extent was their education important for their futures. Ruth Watts has written an article which places Birmingham at the forefront of educational reform for girls and is the author of the ODNB entry for Alice Jane Cooper, the first headmistress of Edgbaston High School for Girls which the girls probably attended.⁴ Watts also authored an ODNB entry of Edith Creak,

¹ M. J. Peterson, *Family, Love and Work in the Lives of Victorian Gentlewomen* (Bloomington, IN, 1989).

² L. Bland, 'The Married Woman, the 'New Woman' and the Feminist: Sexual Politics of the 1890s' in J. Rendall (ed.), *Equal or Different: Women's Politics 1800-1914* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 141-164.

³ P. Levine, 'So Few Prizes and So Many Blanks: Marriage and Feminism in Later Nineteenth Century England', *Journal of British Studies*, Volume 28, No. 2 (April 1989), pp. 150-174.

⁴ R. Watts, 'Educating Girls and Women', *History West Midlands*, <https://historywm.com/articles/educating-girls-and-women> (Accessed: 30 December 2024) and Watts, Ruth. "Cooper, Alice Jane (1846–1917), headmistress." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. September 22, 2005. Oxford University Press. Date of access 30 Dec. 2024, <https://www-oxforddnb-com.bham-ezproxy.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-51748>.

the Headmistress of King Edward VI High School for Girls founded a few years later and enables a comparison to be drawn between the schools and the headmistresses.⁵ There is some debate as to the content and radicalism of the education offered. In that regard, reference will be made to Carol Dyhouse's book analysing the extent to which these schools together with others offered a feminist education compared with the more recent article by Helen Sunderland which concentrates on women's suffrage in the classroom.⁶

Laura Schwartz's recent book on the tensions which might exist between women activists and their servants and how, in Osler's case, they might have developed during her married life and widowhood, helps to shape the discussion of the Osler marriage.⁷ In another recent addition to the historiography, Maggie Andrews and Janis Lomas assess the ways in which bereaved women suffered from their loss but may also have ultimately drawn inspiration from it.⁸

Background to the Marriage

The celebration of the marriage in 1873 brought together the Taylor and Osler families. The origins and antecedents of the families were different and, as discussed in the previous chapter, neither were natives of Birmingham. In their differing ways both

⁵ Watts, Ruth. "Creak, Edith Elizabeth Maria (1855–1919), headmistress." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. May 25, 2006. Oxford University Press. Date of access 30 Dec. 2024, <https://www-oxforddnb-com.bham-ezproxy.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-51760>.

⁶ C. Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up In Late Victorian And Edwardian England* (Abingdon, 2013). H. Sunderland, 'English girls' schools and women's suffrage' in A Hughes-Johnson and L. Jenkins (eds.), *The Politics of Women's Suffrage* (London, 2021), pp. 163-190.

⁷ Laura Schwartz, *Feminism and the Servant Problem: Class and Domestic Labour in the Women's Suffrage Movement* (Cambridge, 2019).

⁸ M. Andrews and J. Lomas, *Widows: Poverty, Power and Politics* (Cheltenham, 2020).

families had command of substantial resources by the time of the marriage, a factor that ensured more than sufficient provision for the married couple themselves and (latterly) their children. Some discussion of the wealth and status of the parties to the marriage is important in positioning them within Birmingham society and assessing to what extent the marriage reflected and enhanced Osler's status and influence within later Victorian Birmingham.

Chapter Two looked at the result of the move to Birmingham by the Taylor family in 1867-68, and the new business venture by Osler's father William Taylor following the relocation. During the research for this thesis, the writer received from one of Osler's great-grandchildren, a large, 700-page, history of the Taylor family, privately published in 1875 by Osler's uncle, Peter Taylor. The history revealed documentary evidence of the family formerly known as the Taylards of Huntingdonshire, a landed family with antecedents back to at least the sixteenth century. The genealogy traced the intermarriage with the Courtauld family in the late eighteenth century.⁹ Peter Taylor joined Samuel Courtauld and Co in the late 1830s and later became a partner. The wealth from this connection enabled him to promote radical causes, as revealed in Chapter Two. It is highly likely that William Taylor and his family benefited from the family connection, and although in the absence of a will there is no information as to his wealth, it is probable that he was able to provide financially for the Oslers.

⁹ P. Taylor, Compiler and Editor, *Some Account of the Taylor Family* (printed for private circulation, London, 1875), pp. 692, 699.

However, the connection was not only about money, but also family tradition and memory. Jeanne Peterson wrote about the Victorian family habit of preserving continuity and ensuring the immortality of their forebears, by the names given to child descendants.¹⁰ Hence, Catherine Osler's middle-name was 'Courtauld'. Further, Osler addressed the same issue in the Apologia to her *Memories 1*, when she expressed her pride in the family ancestry recorded in Peter Taylor's chronicle. The particular Taylor line came to an end after the death of Osler's only male sibling Peter Alfred Taylor in 1872. The only possible way for the name to continue was in 'the secondary order' through her eldest son, John Taylor Osler. However, Osler looked beyond the name and felt it more important to hand down in writing the family values of 'honest integrity', 'stubborn loyalty to conviction' and 'keen intensity of purpose' which had marked the Taylor ancestry through 'stormy episodes' in the 'country's history'. She did not forget her husband's family which should stand 'united' with the Taylors, to provide a heritage 'which our children may be proud to possess, and jealous to guard'.¹¹ Those words were written when Osler was 50 years old and mourning her husband's death. The importance of pedigree, status and the family were emphasised. It was a dignified and traditional account at a time when she was engaged in a very modern campaign for women's rights.

The Osler business had very different antecedents from that of the Taylors. Little is known about them prior to the arrival of Thomas Osler Senior into Birmingham from Bridgwater in 1807 with a view to starting a business. No long tradition has been traced nor plentiful family money. Many enterprising people in the nineteenth century saw

¹⁰ Peterson, *Family, Love and Work*, pp. 104-105.

¹¹ *Memories 1*, p ix.

Birmingham as a place where a business could thrive. The business to be known as F. & C. Osler was important for the family wealth generated. Catherine Taylor, as she then was, had the great good fortune to move to Birmingham with her family to share in the fruits of the company by marrying the man who became the proprietor of the business from 1876 onwards. It gave her the wealth and prominence to further her aims, supplementing the existing wealth of the Taylor businesses.

For some background history about F. & C., Osler, the writer had access to a published history of the company, which has provided much of the material for this section.¹² Care must be taken in placing excessive reliance on a family history which might be unduly fulsome in its praise although to a degree it is based on extant records. Subject to that caveat, it is the only record of the family business and also contains a pictorial record of the wares produced. It enables the reader to appreciate the success of the Osler family in building a business from small beginnings and helping Osler to establish with her husband contacts and an enhanced profile within the city. Osler Senior began on a small scale with the manufacture of glass toys and progressed to building small glass chandeliers. The expansion of the firm owed much to the enterprise and technical ability of Thomas's son Follett Osler, who joined the company in 1831, followed thereafter by his brother Thomas Clarkson Osler (Alfred Osler's father). In the earlier years the business means were 'extremely narrow' and Follett Osler had to borrow money from his father-in-law to

¹² J. P. Smith, *Osler's Crystal for Royalty and Rajahs* (London, 1991). The book described the history of glass-cutting and glass blowing by F. & C. Osler between 1807 and 1922. The book's author had had access to the archives of the company held at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery and the Library of Birmingham which enabled him to produce a book almost solely from those original sources. The book is a limited edition of 750 copies produced for an exhibition by Malletts in 1991 and was advertised as the first account of F. & C. Osler's work containing much previously unpublished material.

survive.¹³ Nonetheless they were able to manufacture innovative chandeliers, established a lucrative Indian connection, and were able to purchase premises in London in 1845. They were visited there by Ibrahim Pasha, the ruler of Egypt, who purchased a pair of sixteen-foot high candelabra and as a result the business became even better established. Their fame spread and resulted in visits from the Prince Consort and the Duke of Wellington. In 1849, an even larger candelabrum was purchased from the firm by the Nepalese Ambassador following an exhibition of their work in Birmingham. In 1851 at the Great Exhibition, the Oslers exhibited a large crystal glass fountain which led to a major increase in business. In 1858, Follett Osler produced a Tudor Glass Service for the opening of Aston Hall. The Queen visited and later purchased a set of the glass as a present for the Princess Royal on her marriage.¹⁴ This evidence suggests that by the time of Follett Osler's retirement in 1876 and the death of Thomas Clarkson Osler in the same year, the business was both well-established and thriving. Alfred Osler, by then in the early years of his marriage to Catherine, inherited the business and, together with his brother, carried it on successfully. Alfred is described as a man of 'great energy, ability and industry' and 'of sterling quality of intellect and heart'.¹⁵ Accordingly, by the time of the Osler marriage, F. & C. Osler had developed into an international company of considerable repute and wealth. There are no figures available for the amount of his wealth in the 1870s, but Alfred's will, admitted to probate in December 1903, showed a net personal estate valued at £85,713 17s 8d. Whilst it is difficult to give an accurate

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

current figure, the Bank of England Inflation calculator estimates the value of his estate as being equivalent to £8,627,218 on 2 April 2024.¹⁶

Courtship and Marriage

There is no evidence that Catherine Taylor and Alfred knew each other before the Taylors moved to Birmingham in 1868. Unsurprisingly, on their arrival, they were welcomed into the Unitarian community, and spent their first Christmas as guests of the Oslers.¹⁷ As a man of 21, Alfred impressed Catherine's mother as a 'lively somewhat self-opinionated young man, who "chaffed" her about her "advanced" views on women's rights'.¹⁸ This was at the time when Osler herself then aged 14 was less interested in women's issues than her mother (see Chapter Two). The relationship clearly developed such that by August 1869 the couple were openly exchanging correspondence. By Christmas of that year, they were acting together in amateur theatricals and Osler recognised that she was 'deeply, even passionately in love'.¹⁹ Alfred had taken her parents into his confidence, and they were supportive of the relationship. The couple were betrothed in January 1871 and married in February 1873, when she was aged 19 and he 26.²⁰ She was a young bride for the time. On average, women of the middle-class tended to marry at age 25.²¹

The marriage took place at a time when questions were being raised about women's rights and the subordination of women within marriage. The Birmingham Women's

¹⁶ <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator/> (accessed:2/4/24).

¹⁷ *Memories 1*, p. 15.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-21.

²¹ P. Branca, *Silent Sisterhood: Middle-Class Women In the Victorian Home* (London, 1975), pp. 4-5.

Suffrage Society (BWSS) had been founded in 1868 (see Chapter Two), and the 'first dedicated women's suffrage bill' was debated in Parliament in 1870.²² As a young woman of progressive views exposed to the radical views of women such as her aunt Clementia, Catherine would have been aware of these developments in society and the position of women within it - a social climate that presaged a change in marital relations for both sexes. These thoughts were likely to have been influential in the then unusual and joint decision of Catherine and Alfred to omit the promise 'to obey' from the marriage ceremony. The conducting minister, Henry Crosskey, was 'interviewed' before the ceremony by Alfred to make the request. According to Catherine, Alfred felt more strongly about the step than her, considering it a 'grave wrong' to vow 'unquestioning obedience to a fallible human being'.²³ Ben Griffin has argued that the 'religious justification' for the woman's obedience to the man on marriage was 'the single most important component' of 'anti-feminist thinking' in the nineteenth century.²⁴ He highlighted the Unitarians and 'liberal Anglicans' as being significant in the establishment of 'dual responsibility' as opposed to 'domination' by men.²⁵ As modern Unitarians, the Oslers would have supported constructive criticism of a biblical foundation for women's inequality. In *Memories 1* Osler confirmed that Alfred followed the omission of obedience in that he 'never assumed an attitude of authority towards me' or 'questioned my

²² N. Gauld, *Words and Deeds: Birmingham Suffragists and Suffragettes 1832-1918* (Alcester, 2018), p.9.

²³ *Memories 1*, p. 25.

²⁴ B. Griffin, *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain: Masculinity, Political Culture and the Struggle for Women's Rights* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 52.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

freedom of speech or action' on the rare occasions when they disagreed. In that event, they consulted together to decide how to proceed.²⁶

Aside from the increasingly questionable religious basis for women's subordination, Osler addressed the whole issue of women's role in marriage in her book, *Home*. (see Chapter1). It is the best evidence of her vision of a more equal relationship within marriage. In a chapter headed 'Helpmates' she presented a historical survey from source material of the relationship of the sexes through the ages and drew a number of conclusions. Firstly, there was no natural distinction between the status of the sexes, and any attempt to suggest such a difference was based upon male prejudice and custom.²⁷ Secondly, any longstanding custom or prejudice in a community, must have or have had, the support of the majority of the population, both male and female. In that event, women must share responsibility for their submission and indeed she found in the history of women's rights that women had on occasions opposed reform 'as obstinately as the men'.²⁸ Thirdly, the 'highest friendship can only exist between equals', with mutual respect, and not if the woman is 'under the arbitrary control of her husband, and subject to his will and pleasure'.²⁹ If 'equal participation' within the marriage is replaced by protective control and subjection, then such an arrangement 'is nothing less than desecration'.³⁰

²⁶ *Memories 1*, pp. 25-26.

²⁷ *Home*, p. 24.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

Given these general insights, it is pertinent to consider whether Osler's theoretical belief in equality in marriage was evident in her own. By reason of their wealth and status, the Oslers were an upper middle-class family in Birmingham, particularly after 1876 when Alfred gained the proprietary share in the family business. They were then able to take foreign holidays, and purchase horses for Alfred to pursue his hunting activities.³¹ Outwardly at least, the marriage was conventional, in that Catherine was not routinely involved in running the business, and Alfred was less concerned with managing the home. Their affluence enabled them to employ a number of servants in the household to assist, as will be discussed later in the chapter. However, it would be an oversimplification to minimise Catherine's role. In addition to her own activism in the cause of women's rights, and her work within the household, she assisted Alfred particularly during periods of stress. Jeanne Peterson's study of upper middle-class women in England was valuable for her analysis of these women's lives, and in particular her investigation of the extent of nervous depression amongst professional men in Victorian times.³² Her research concluded that nursing care might be required as part of household management, something that was not easily delegated to servants in more severe cases. Alfred had been affected by episodes of depression from an early age, often exacerbated by business anxiety. They were at least an annual event and could last for several months. During such periods, he 'leaned with pathetic dependence on my more equable temperament and clung for comfort to the peace and happiness of his home-life.'³³ Catherine recalled a particular visit he was to make to India for both business and

³¹ *Memories 1*, p. 44.

³² Peterson, *Family, Love and Work*, pp. 116-118.

³³ *Memories 1*, p. 40.

health reasons. By the time he reached France his depression had become acute, exacerbated by the severe illness of his brother. The exertion had 'an almost paralysing effect' and Catherine had to travel to France to deal with the issues arising.³⁴ She had to arrange urgent advice and persuade him of the medical necessity of returning home. Whilst some men might have seen this as a sign of weakness and a challenge to their masculinity, Alfred was full of gratitude for her help and support in aiding his recovery.³⁵ He also displayed a reciprocal concern for her welfare. On an occasion when she was paying a short weekend visit to a relative, Alfred sent a note asking her to stay an extra day or so. He chided her for being obsessed with working from 9 am until 6 pm on six days of the week and thus restricting the pleasure she gave to others by her visits. He asked her to be a 'good girl' and stay an extra day in order to give comfort to others 'by the companionship of mutual affection'.³⁶ Examples of such marital affection and regard within the source material are scarce for the period of their married life. It is likely that they were too frequent to be separately recorded but they indicate both mutual regard and the valuable contribution sometimes made by Catherine to the running of the business.

Two further questions arise when considering Osler as part of the upper middle-class. Firstly, to what extent was she typical of the women in this echelon, and secondly, how radical was she as a woman in the context of wider society in the later Victorian period? Peterson's study of a selection of women of Catherine's class as a comparator to Osler's

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 117-118.

marriage and activities is instructive. Regarding the first question, she considered two aspects: firstly, their acceptance or otherwise of their place in society, and secondly, their relationship with their husbands. Peterson found generally that the women held conservative views, were without gainful employment although well-educated, tended to be Anglican in religion, and were uninterested in women's rights movements or other movements for reform. They supported the status quo and lived their lives in accordance with 'the ordinary experiences of their class and time'. They tended to be socially active, and prominent citizens in their community, partaking in charitable and philanthropic work for the relief of poverty and using their learning for the enhancement of literacy.³⁷ In their marital relationships, Peterson's conclusions were that the assumption of male superiority was less evident at their level of society. By reason of their wealth and status, these women were able to partake in 'companionate' marriage. They had their own sense of superiority and were indifferent to the constraints under which the vast majority of Victorian women lived their lives. In wider society, however, men were still looked upon as stronger in the public world. Peterson found little evidence of a wish to disturb the existing hierarchy based upon birth rather than achievement, and status rather than gender. She concluded that Victorian society was not 'modernising as rapidly as we have until now believed'.³⁸

Osler shared some characteristics with the women Peterson was describing. She too was rich and not gainfully employed. However, she was not an Anglican but subscribed to a creed which was condemned by its opponents as hardly Christian at all. An instance

³⁷ Peterson, *Family, Love and Work*, pp. 31-33, 57, 187.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 189-191.

following the death of King Edward VII in 1910 revealed an idiosyncratic and, to some segments of the population, unpopular aspect to her character. She had written to her local newspaper supporting some correspondents who had abstained from wearing 'weeds' on the basis of expense, and instead wore rosettes or bands. No disrespect was intended as she had done the same following the death of Queen Victoria, but Osler was met with a volley of abuse, referring to her as 'disloyal, discourteous, and atheistic'.³⁹

The departure of Osler from the conventional thinking of gentlewomen is most evident in their different political opinions and views on women's rights. Upper middle-class ladies tended to have traditional and conservative views on political issues as opposed to Osler's liberal thinking. In a *Journal 1* entry in 1910 Osler referred to certain reforms of the Liberal Government designed to secure some redistribution of wealth by adjustments to taxation. In Banbury, the home of the Penroses, the parents of her elder daughter's future husband, these proposals were met 'with insults and contempt and loathing' usually reserved for criminals. When the Irish Nationalist, Charles Parnell was exonerated in the Pigott forgery affair, the Penroses, as 'violent Orange' sympathisers, refused to believe that he was innocent.⁴⁰ Parnell had been implicated in the Phoenix Park Murders of 1882 as a result of the discovery of letters linking him to the events. An Investigative Commission found that the letters were forgeries.⁴¹ Osler was a reluctant and critical supporter of the more radical liberal policies, and despite her support for Irish Home

³⁹ *Journal 1*, 16 May 1910.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (London, 1988), p. 423.

Rule, she was not an admirer of Parnell, but to her, the level of unthinking opposition to him was repugnant.

In similar vein, Osler was deeply troubled by the opposition or indifference to women's suffrage shown by some 'superior' women whose doctrine was that they had no duties outside their own home. She accused them of selfishness and a lack of concern for poorer women needing help. They had a 'duty' to consider the issue and express an opinion even to 'the smallest social circle'. She made repeated references to 'superior persons' who took no interest in local affairs and attended solely to their own business.⁴² There can be little doubt that these 'superior persons' were the gentlewomen Peterson was describing in her book. Osler's political and suffrage activities will be considered in much detail in later chapters, but in the context of her private affairs, Osler was criticising her own sex and class in a public arena. To that extent, the answer to the first of the questions posed above was that there were significant areas where Osler departed from the mindset of her class in how they lived their private lives.

In terms of her radicalism, Osler can be placed in a category of middle-class women who saw that the marital relationship was in need of reform provided that it did not imperil marriage as an institution. She was a supporter of 'the Family as the true basis of national life'.⁴³ Aside from her book, *Home*, she expressed her view in an important *Journal 1* entry in 1908 at a time when her own daughters were aged twenty-five and twenty-two and marriage was much in their thoughts. A constant theme to emerge from this thesis is

⁴² Women's Library, London, *Women's Suffrage Journal*, November (1880), pp. 215-216.

⁴³ *Home*, p. 13.

how Osler saw the Edwardian era as a period of transition not just for women but for men. Osler was surprised even then how few men had grasped the idea of 'equal freedom' of the sexes and continued to claim a right to 'direct and decide what their wives shall do and think and say.' She considered that the marital relationship as a whole needed revision and reform as women could not be treated merely as 'possessions' and had a claim to their 'own individuality' and 'career'.⁴⁴ If that was the case in 1908, the decision not to promise to obey in 1873 could be considered as truly radical. Even so, Phillipa Levine has written that the view was shared by some men and women who refused to promise obedience and some even insisted on retaining their own name. For example, Millicent Fawcett's sister, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, mused with her sister on her engagement in 1870, how marriage could be made compatible with a woman's continued independence. She agreed with her prospective husband that she would not discontinue her medical career or feminist activities, nor swear obedience.⁴⁵ Some women took an even more radical stance to the confinements of conventional marriage. In 1874, Elizabeth Wolstenholme entered into a 'free union' with Ben Elmy consistent with their secular view of marriage. Whilst this avoided any religious input into the union, it inevitably raised issues as to the legal validity of the marriage, with some women viewing it as potentially harmful to the women's movement. Later in the same year, the couple consented to a formal Register Office marriage, without the swearing of obedience and with Wolstenholme retaining her own name. However, there was still controversy because she was five months pregnant at the time.⁴⁶ This might be

⁴⁴ *Journal 1*, 7 December 1908.

⁴⁵ Levine, 'So Few Prizes', pp. 157-158.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 156-157.

considered an extreme case, but it is indicative of the range of views and actions of some progressive women and men even by the time of the Osler marriage. Levine warned that these advanced ideas were largely confined to higher class women free from 'domestic preoccupations' and within the context of 'unusual male comprehension and sympathy'.⁴⁷ Thus, it was a small number of women, like Osler, who could contemplate these marriages which were beyond the reach of working-class people.

These signs of change in the later Victorian period led in the 1890s to the emergence of a group of women who objected to the ethos of marriage as economic and sexual subservience. An article by Lucy Bland discussed the idea of the 'New Woman' which for more extreme women would have involved a rejection of marriage and its eventual replacement by 'free unions', as referred to above. For most women this was not seen as a solution, rather they looked for a changed relationship based on 'love, equality and respect'. For many women the idea of sexual freedom was less important than dealing with the 'sexual dangers' posed by predatory men.⁴⁸ Osler would have supported such sentiments but equally would have opposed anything which might be seen as hostile to traditional marriage. She took the opportunity when interviewed for the magazine article of 1894, albeit in the context of a previous generation of suffragists, to reject any suggestion of progressive women like her being 'mannish and objectionable'. Indeed the 'earnest-spirited' women of the 'advanced movements of the day' are 'refined womanly women' who love their homes and families.⁴⁹ By 1912 a Royal Commission was ready to

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 173.

⁴⁸ L. Bland, 'The Married Woman, the 'New Woman and the Feminist: Sexual Politics of the 1890s' in J. Rendall. (ed.), *Equal or Different: Women's Politics 1800-1914* (Oxford, 1987), p. 164.

⁴⁹ S. A. Tooley, 'Ladies of Birmingham', *The Woman at Home* (October 1894), pp. 445-455, p. 448.

report on legal reforms to address at least some of the obvious gender imbalance in favour of men in the existing grounds for divorce. Pending its publication, there was much correspondence in the radical magazine, the *Nation*, regarding the requirement of the woman vowing to obey her husband. It was noteworthy that many women readers responded that the 'instinct of obedience in woman' is deeply rooted, and generally the 'headship' of the male is preferred.⁵⁰ In March 1912, the poet Charlotte Mew had published a poem, *The Farmer's Bride*, which had depicted a marriage from which the wife had tried to escape by running away. The wife was apprehended and thereafter kept locked away by her husband. Mew's biographer, Julia Copus, wrote that the poem voiced a 'growing frustration' with gender inequality and may have contributed towards the suffragette violence which broke out within a month of its publication in 1912.⁵¹

Osler was as aware as any woman of the danger of confining women to a kind of imprisonment within marriage, but she was adamantly opposed to unlawful suffrage activity. For her the granting of voting rights was the best way of giving women a voice in the debate on marital reform and women's rights generally, particularly for those of a lower social class than her. Osler also had the advantage of a supportive husband. The next section examines how progressive Osler's views were on the upbringing of the children and whether Alfred was supportive of her views on parenting and educating the children.

⁵⁰ J. Copus, *This Rare Spirit, A Life of Charlotte Mew* (London, 2021), p. 192.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

The Education and Upbringing of the Children

There were five children of the marriage, Jack (1874), Philip (1876), Julian (1879), Nellie (1883) and Dorothy (1886). All lived to marry and have their own families except Philip who was killed in a works accident in 1897.⁵² Throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, the type of education for these children was influenced by age, class and gender. Unfortunately, Osler left limited information with which to produce a complete picture of the education of her children, and the reader catches only fragmentary glimpses of the family's activities derived almost exclusively from her own writings supplemented by secondary sources for the general position. For wealthy households, according to Carol Dyhouse, there would have been a nursery and schoolrooms staffed by nurses and governesses until it was deemed suitable for children to be sent to school. For boys, this was likely to have been a carefully selected boarding school to enhance 'character' with a view to later 'success in professional and public life'. Dyhouse suggested that it was common until later in the nineteenth century for girls to receive no formal schooling at all save by governesses, but during this later period 'new types of school' appeared for a 'very small minority of middle-class girls'.⁵³ Peterson supported the view that the Victorian period saw substantial changes in schooling for 'daughters of the new middle-class, the arrivistes of the booming Victorian economy', but for upper middle-class girls, the centre of education remained the home.⁵⁴

⁵² *Memories 1*, pp. 120-121.

⁵³ C. Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (Abingdon, 1981), pp. 40, 55.

⁵⁴ Peterson, *Family, Love and Work*, p. 35.

In the Osler household, the girls' education was progressive for the period, in that from quite early in their lives, the girls regularly attended a local school. The census evidence for 1881 showed the employment of Emily Brain as a nurse,⁵⁵ with the same person appearing as a nurse domestic in the 1891 census,⁵⁶ reflecting likely additional duties as the children grew up. Both girls were at school in 1894 when Osler was interviewed for the article in *The Woman at Home* magazine. It referred to the two girls, then aged eleven and eight, 'scampering into the drawing room, fresh from school, looking very bonny in fawn suits, satchels on their backs, and long hair falling over their shoulders'.⁵⁷ The only other direct reference to the girls was in 1901, when Osler mentioned her attendance at the 'High School play' in which the girls were acting, on the same night as the Birmingham Town Hall riot.⁵⁸ The girls, by then aged eighteen and fifteen respectively, were thus attending full time education at a day school, and both would have received at least ten years of schooling. Ruth Watts tells us that Birmingham was fortunate to have two day schools, 'chiefly' for the middle-classes, Edgbaston High School for Girls founded in 1876 and King Edward VI High School for Girls in 1883. It is not possible to be certain which of the two the girls attended, but it is more likely than not that it was Edgbaston High as it was 'established, mostly by leading non-conformist families'.⁵⁹ Additionally, the first High Mistress from 1876 until 1895 was Alice Cooper, herself a Unitarian, who supported the aims of the 'nonconformist industrial squirearchy

⁵⁵ Census records. England. Edgbaston, Warwickshire. 3 April 1881. OSLER, Alfred (head). Piece 2957. Folio 64. Enumeration District 24. P. 8. <https://ancestry.co.uk/> (Accessed: 02 April 2024).

⁵⁶ Census records. England. Edgbaston, Warwickshire. 5 April 1891. OSLER, Alfred (head). Piece 2358. Folio 67. Enumeration District 17. P. 15. <https://ancestry.co.uk/> (Accessed: 02 April 2024).

⁵⁷ Tooley, 'Ladies of Birmingham', p. 447.

⁵⁸ *Memories 1*, p. 185.

⁵⁹ R. Watts, 'Educating Girls and Women', *History West Midlands*, <https://historywm.com/articles/educating-girls-and-women> (Accessed: 30 December 2024).

of Birmingham'.⁶⁰ She introduced a 'broad curriculum', promoted the teaching of science as well as drama and sport, encouraged 'questioning attitudes in pupils' and showed some preference for co-education.⁶¹ There is likely to have been little difference in the quality of education between the two schools but there might have been a somewhat different ethos. The headmistress of King Edward VI from the mid-eighties to 1910 was Edith Creak, who was equally concerned to establish a wide academic curriculum with a strong emphasis on science. However, Ruth Watts suggests that as a congregationalist, she was a more conservative figure than Cooper and became an opponent of women's suffrage in the 1900s.⁶²

There is some difference of opinion as to how radical or progressive these schools were by the turn of the twentieth century. Carol Dyhouse and Helen Sunderland have provided research on some of the private schools similar to those featured above in different parts of the country. They show a debate as to whether these schools were designed or likely to encourage feminist ideas or were essentially conservative institutions.⁶³ Dyhouse dismisses the notion that these schools were 'feminist institutions' but nonetheless considers them important in pointing the way forward for the development of the women's movement. They provided a 'space' for individuality aside from being a 'dutiful

⁶⁰ Watts, Ruth. "Cooper, Alice Jane (1846–1917), headmistress." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. September 22, 2005. Oxford University Press. Date of access 30 Dec. 2024, <https://www-oxforddnb-com.bham-ezproxy.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-51748>.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Watts, Ruth. "Creak, Edith Elizabeth Maria (1855–1919), headmistress." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. May 25, 2006. Oxford University Press. Date of access 30 Dec. 2024, <https://www-oxforddnb-com.bham-ezproxy.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-51760>.

⁶³ Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up*, pp. 56-78. and Sunderland, 'English girls' schools and women's suffrage' pp. 163-190.

daughter' and 'mother's helper'. Further, it enabled girls' access to their peers where these ideas could be debated. Finally, it opened up the possibility of a career or further education.⁶⁴

Helen Sunderland's more recent article concentrated on girls' involvement in the debate on women's suffrage. Her research shows a communal approach to the dominant issue shared not only by current and former pupils but by teachers as well. She indicates how school magazines, debating societies and Old Girl's Associations furnished debate for and against voting rights, and between suffragists and suffragettes. She argues that girls were not 'passive recipients' of an adult issue, but through the written word, verbal argument and conversation, girls 'themselves contributed to the suffrage debate'.⁶⁵

Although Osler may have taken a progressive approach to education for her girls, there is little sign of any radical plan for their futures. For example, there is no evidence that either girl went on to further education or university nor that they took up gainful employment in the several years they were at home between leaving school and their subsequent marriages in 1909 for Nellie, and 1912 for Dorothy. There is only fragmentary evidence of socially inspired activity. Anna Brown's thesis centred on Ellen Pinsent's work, refers to N. and D. Osler being members of an After-care Sub-Committee set up in 1903 by Pinsent to supplement the work of her Special Schools' Committee which had been established to identify and assist girls identified as 'feeble-minded'. The remit of this new Committee was to oversee and monitor girls who were reaching majority and

⁶⁴ Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up*, pp. 172-175.

⁶⁵ Sunderland, 'English girls' schools and women's suffrage', p. 164.

might need continuing protection and intervention. Brown notes the Committee members as consisting largely of middle-class women from 'influential families in the city'. It is very likely these members would have been Nellie and Dorothy whose interest in eugenicist ideas are discussed in Chapter 8.⁶⁶ Whilst Osler's love for her children is beyond doubt, she is not beyond criticising them and herself. An entry in Osler's *Journal* on 7 December 1908 records Dorothy hosting a gathering of 'young men and maidens' to discuss women's suffrage at Fallowfield where a vote was taken showing an equal gender split. It is of interest that Osler noted that her daughter was 'at length justifying' her name as 'a champion of her sex'.⁶⁷ There is little doubt that the 'at length' was meant ironically in the sense of 'at last', given the relatively late period of the suffrage campaign. A *Journal* entry in March 1915 records Osler as being 'disappointed' that her children, 'fail to share one's convictions and aspirations'.⁶⁸ In a *Memories 2* entry in September 1915, she bemoans her failure to influence her children, save one, to show inspiration, an interest in 'contemporary history' or a 'craving' for knowledge or vision.⁶⁹ These words suggest a likelihood that the girls were destined and indeed desired suitable marriages rather than the public career of their mother as will be considered further in subsequent chapters.

The education of the boys was different, at least for the two younger ones. Once more, Osler has left little information, but it is significant in what it shows about the effect of

⁶⁶ Anna Brown, 'Special Schooling and the 'feeble-minded' in Birmingham (1870-1914)' (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2007), Chapter 4, Administering Lives.

⁶⁷ *Journal 1*, 7 December 1908.

⁶⁸ *Journal 1*, 26 March 1915.

⁶⁹ *Memories 2*, 15 September 1915.

the boys' education and the parents' thoughts and decisions on the issue. As Dyhouse stated, for the affluent parents of boys, the choice of schooling was very important in the moulding of 'character', and the expense was seen as a 'vital investment' in their future.⁷⁰ According to John Tosh, in the later nineteenth century this normally meant attendance at the growing number of boarding schools, which increased from seven at the beginning of the century to seventy-two by 1890. Private tutors became a rarity as was attendance at day schools.⁷¹ Nonetheless, the Oslers' oldest boy Jack was sent to a private day school, King Edward's School in Birmingham, in the same way as the girls. Catherine justified this decision on the basis that the parents wanted a 'home life' for the boys at a satisfactory school.⁷² Alfred himself had not attended a boarding school but the Edgbaston Proprietary School and had also been a promoter of the establishment of Edgbaston High School for Girls.⁷³ However, the parents took the decision to send the two younger boys to board at Shrewsbury School in light of the children's own wishes. Philip apparently disliked Birmingham and 'begged so hard for the public-school life' that they eventually 'yielded'. Julian was also sent there for unspecified health reasons.⁷⁴ It seemed an unusual decision to succumb to pressure from the boys, particularly with the positive message from Jack at the day school to guide them. It needs to be considered in the context of the marital relationship.

⁷⁰ Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up*, p. 40.

⁷¹ J. Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Harlow, 2005), pp. 111-112.

⁷² *Memories* 1, p. 92.

⁷³ 'Obituary of Alfred Osler', *Birmingham Evening Dispatch*, 2 October 1903.

⁷⁴ *Memories* 1, p. 92.

Catherine had two strong reasons for opposing the wishes of the two children. Firstly, she wanted to maintain the family unit for as long as possible and secondly, she was deeply suspicious of sexual immorality in boarding schools. A speech she gave on Social Purity and the Training of Children in 1886, set out her thoughts on the subjection of boys to the 'pollution' of sexual immorality often without training or guidance. She felt men were much less concerned about the issue and were content to leave it to the women. Alfred would have thought that she was worrying unduly, but she felt that moral training played a 'huge part' in the upbringing of the children.⁷⁵ Catherine was a strong and determined woman, not least when considering the welfare of her children, but it may be that Alfred was prepared to accede to the children's wishes, leaving Catherine in an isolated position. There is evidence from Julian's son Michael, that Julian himself at least witnessed sexual abuse and endured bullying at Shrewsbury but said nothing to his son until the eve of Michael's own departure for Shrewsbury.⁷⁶ In the event Julian fared well academically at Shrewsbury becoming Head of School, and was the only child in the family to obtain a university degree before joining Jack in the running of the family business.⁷⁷ Whether Julian's schoolboy experiences had any lasting effects on him cannot be stated with any certainty. However, he appeared never to have forgiven his son for becoming an actor rather than joining the family business, nor his daughter for becoming a doctor, a profession he thought 'unsuitable for a woman'.⁷⁸ They are surprising views from a man who was the son of a feminist and a supporter of women's suffrage. Tosh

⁷⁵ *Memories 1*, pp. 71-72.

⁷⁶ Mirabel Osler, *The Rain Tree, A Memoir* (London, 2011), pp. 30-31.

⁷⁷ Diana Clutterbuck, 'A Clock and a Family', *The Midland Ancestor Magazine*, June (2018), p. 733.

⁷⁸ Osler, *The Rain Tree*, pp. 35-36.

suggests that such attitudes of manliness and sense of feminine subordination were typical of the ethos of boarding schools during the nineteenth century.⁷⁹

In terms of the upbringing of the children and the maintenance of a suitable home environment, the issues to be considered are the nature of their parenting, the extent of the contribution of each parent, and the need for outside assistance from servants. The evidence left by both parents suggested some difference in emphasis. Catherine wrote that the 'home education' of the children until their schooldays was 'the most important work of our lives'. They believed in obedience and discipline but in accordance with what she believed was a more modern approach to correction. For example, there was never a resort to corporal punishment.⁸⁰ In an address on 'Punishment', Alfred said that a child's natural tendency was to be truthful and would lie only as a response driven by fear.⁸¹ If discipline was required, it should be a joint responsibility, as if administered solely by the father it would send the wrong message to the child.⁸² Equally, as part of parenting, there should be family discussion and debate as part of the 'continuous intercourse of family life', enabling the children to develop their own views fearlessly.⁸³ In pursuing their 'creed', Catherine wrote, 'we fell below our aspirations', but the ideal of a home without fear had been achieved in the confidence of their children throughout their childhoods.⁸⁴ Catherine gave the impression in those words that both parents were equally responsible for the children's upbringing. Whilst that may well have been their intention, it was never

⁷⁹ Tosh, *Manliness*, pp. 112 and 115.

⁸⁰ *Memories 1*, pp. 56-57.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁸² *Home*, p. 57.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁸⁴ *Memories 1*, p. 59.

likely to have been achieved as Alfred frankly acknowledged in another of his addresses, in which he bemoaned the increasing demands of business and work on a father's home life. Whilst his remarks were not particular to him, there is no doubt he was including himself as one of the fathers he was criticising. He painted a picture of the children being quiet at breakfast so he might read the newspaper and, of him having been absent all day, being too occupied in the evening to interact with them or more generally to 'take much part' in their development. When 'they grow beyond the mother's control', they are 'packed off to a boarding school' and handed to the 'charge of strangers' when most in need of 'parental care'. Whilst he felt there was much to be said for boarding schools, he believed that 'home training' was better for developing 'resourcefulness and self-reliance' and a 'more sympathetic character'. He felt in the future that fathers should be less the 'governor' and more 'elder brothers to their lads'.⁸⁵

A number of conclusions flow from this discussion of the children's education and upbringing. Firstly, Alfred's description of the dilemma faced by businessmen and professional people such as himself was likely to have been an accurate appraisal of the male position. It reveals a mixture of guilt, regret and a wish to do more as a father. Secondly, whilst Catherine no doubt profoundly wished for Alfred to equally share in parenting, it was always likely to be an ideal rather than a reality. Thirdly, referring back to the decision for the boys to attend Shrewsbury School, it gives added credence to the notion that Alfred was persuaded to send the boys away to school in the early 1890s. It seems unlikely that Catherine lost control of the boys, but if the parents were put under

⁸⁵ *Memories 1*, p. 109.

sustained pressure from the boys, Alfred, even though concerned for Catherine, may have given way. The answer will never be known but it is plausible speculation. Fourthly, from the beginning of the marriage long before the issue of boarding school education arose, Alfred's business pressures and bouts of depression, coupled with Catherine's growing involvement in the women's suffrage campaign, Liberal politics and philanthropic ventures from the 1870s onwards, meant that the employment of a number of household servants was indispensable.

Servants

The presence of servants in Osler's households was constant throughout her life. This section will consider her need for servants and the nature of her relationship with them, at a time when the position of women in civic society was developing. As an upper middle-class woman, she was naturally familiar with servants whilst living at home with her parents. The previous chapter, for example, recorded four servants in the 1861 census at her parents' home. There would have been an expectation that, as a wealthy married woman with a growing family, substantial assistance would be provided. Laura Schwartz refers to the established view that the employment of servants was a 'key indicator' of class position'.⁸⁶ Hence the census in 1881 after the Oslers' marriage, showed three servants, a cook, a housemaid and a nurse, to attend to three children and the parents.⁸⁷ By the time of the census in 1891, there were five children and the parents required four servants, a nurse domestic, a cook, a maid and a housemaid.⁸⁸ The census

⁸⁶ Schwartz, *Feminism and the Servant Problem*, p. 24.

⁸⁷ For the 1881 census records, see footnote 55.

⁸⁸ For the 1891 census records, see footnote 56.

for 1901, by which time Osler's father was living with them, shows that there were five servants, a cook domestic, a parlourmaid, a housemaid, a sewing maid and a kitchen maid.⁸⁹ The census for 1911 showed Osler as a widow with only one child still at home, but there were still four servants, all referred to as domestics.⁹⁰

Osler was doubtless conscious of an expectation of servant labour, but unlike the 'gentlewomen' discussed in an earlier section, her servants were not predominantly an adornment but rather an essential part of her daily life. Indeed, without them, she would have been unable to carry on her activist career. There were two principal areas of work for her servants, namely childcare and housework. Schwartz notes that in these households, childcare 'made up a significant element of domestic service' particularly during the later Victorian period when, for example, infant mortality became an increasing concern, and eugenic ideas of motherhood favouring the production and preservation of the higher classes were to the fore.⁹¹ The Osler household at Fallowfield was substantial. Aside from cleaning and cooking, Catherine and Alfred would have needed staff to cater for a busy public life encompassing her prominent role in the campaign for women's voting rights, her political work for the Liberal party, and her philanthropic work. She was the President of two major societies and held various positions in other organisations throughout her career. She would surely have hosted meetings, lunches, dinner parties and 'at homes' at Fallowfield which would have

⁸⁹ Census records. England. Edgbaston, Warwickshire. 31 March 1901. OSLER, Alfred (head). Piece 2814. Folio 166. Schedule Number 202. Enumeration District 07. p. 46. <https://ancestry.co.uk/> (Accessed: 02 April 2024).

⁹⁰ Census records. England. Edgbaston, Worcestershire. 2 April 1911. OSLER, Catherine (head). Piece 17917. Enumeration District 07. p. 444. <https://ancestry.co.uk/> (Accessed: 02 April 2024).

⁹¹ Schwartz, *Feminism and the servant Problem*, pp. 8-9.

required support, as well as the organisation of her diary and engagements. In 1888, when Gladstone visited Birmingham, two prominent Liberal politicians, Sir William Harcourt and Earl Spencer stayed at Fallowfield. In 1894, at the inauguration of the Midland Liberal Federation in Birmingham, the Prime Minister, Lord Rosebery stayed at her home. Osler recorded this as the first but not the last time that the 'house was guarded by police' and described the 'household' being entertained by the crowd escorting the Oslers and Rosebery from the town, and 'pressing up to the kitchen windows' discussing dinner. This would have needed detailed planning and organisation by competent household staff. Osler's account also suggested her personal engagement with the servants, possibly reflecting some positive rapport with the staff.⁹²

There is no evidence that Osler had any misgivings about the employment of servants. Two main reasons might be put forward to explain her position. Firstly, her background of wealth and status would have nullified any identification with the lower classes from which servants tended to come. Secondly, her individual brand of Liberalism would have dissuaded her from any radical undermining of the existing social order. She was likely to have considered that she was providing women with employment and income which they could use to improve their lives and avoid destitution. For example, Osler was a lifetime subscriber to the Birmingham Girls Night Shelter which opened its doors in 1888 as a refuge for 'helpless' women and continued until at least 1960 when its last report was lodged in the Library of Birmingham. Its fourth report in 1892, for instance, recorded welcoming something like four hundred girls of whom one hundred and ninety went into

⁹² *Memories 1*, pp. 80, 113-114.

service, fifty-seven were placed with friends, sixty went to homes and refuges, twenty-eight to the workhouse, and forty-four only were lost sight of.⁹³ An investigation of the records shows it was a common trait for many years that the largest number went into service.

Osler responded positively in her relationship with some of her servants and it would have been sensible for her to have sought to retain the most competent of them. The 1881 census showed her employing Emily Brain as a nurse.⁹⁴ The birth of Osler's first daughter Nellie in 1883 occasioned no sense of 'distressing jealousy' from the other children, owing mainly to the 'gentle influence of our dear nurse, Emily Brain'.⁹⁵ Emily was recorded as still in Osler's employ at the time of the next census in 1891 as a 'nurse domestic'.⁹⁶ For an example of the development of a deeper relationship, reference can be made to the employment of Rachel Skinner who first appeared in the 1901 census as a parlourmaid.⁹⁷ She appeared again in the 1911 census, and subsequent evidence suggested she was at Osler's side until the latter's death in 1924.⁹⁸ Two examples are given as evidence of her position of responsibility within the family. Firstly, she was called upon to nurse Alfred when he was on his deathbed in 1903. Osler preferred Rachel to care for him rather than the professional nurse they had employed, as she was 'the most devoted and efficient attendant'. As the end approached, he was heard to say, 'You won't leave me Rachel'.⁹⁹ Secondly, in 1920, Osler went to Bermuda for a second prolonged

⁹³ BA&C, LF41.14, *Reports of the Girls Night Shelter 1888-1958*.

⁹⁴ For the 1881 census records see footnote 55.

⁹⁵ *Memories 1*, p. 56.

⁹⁶ For the 1891 census records, see footnote 56.

⁹⁷ For the 1901 census records, footnote 89.

⁹⁸ For the 1911 census records, footnote 90.

⁹⁹ *Memories 1*, pp. 214-215.

visit to her daughter Dorothy and her grandchildren, accompanied throughout by Rachel. Osler stayed from October 1920 until June 1921 and took her grandson back with her to commence school.¹⁰⁰ By then Rachel was aged fifty-nine, and it may well be that by then she had become more than a mere servant. Osler had been living alone since the marriage of her younger daughter in 1912. The inference becomes stronger when consideration is given to Osler's will. Her original will made in 1911 granted Rachel a legacy of £250. A codicil of November 1922 increased the legacy to £500, equating to approximately £22,000 today.¹⁰¹ She did not leave a legacy to any other servant and it signified, at the least, an appreciation of long and faithful service by a servant who may have progressed to become a companion and even perhaps a friend.

The Death of Alfred and its Aftermath

The unexpected death of Alfred aged fifty-six in October 1903 was a devastating blow to Osler and their family. After thirty years of marriage, she had lost her friend, mentor and lover. It was made worse by the deaths in the same year of her father and uncle Follett. Both Catherine and Alfred were involved in important public activities where they would have relied on each other for support. He had all but retired from his business, and on 11 June 1903 he had been formally adopted as the parliamentary Liberal candidate for Central Birmingham at the next General Election, where he was hoping to make his mark in national politics.¹⁰² Osler had recently succeeded to the Presidency of the BWSS in 1901 at an important time in the suffrage campaign and remained the President of the

¹⁰⁰ *Memories 2*, 20 October 1920.

¹⁰¹ Details of the original Will and codicils thereto from Wills Online. The estimation of the legacy value uses the same calculator as in footnote 16.

¹⁰² *Memories 1*, p. 201.

Birmingham Women's Liberal Association. This section will consider the immediate effect, and the later consequences for her of his death. In accordance with the theme of this chapter, the main emphasis will be upon the changes to her private life.

Firstly, as a public figure, she had to decide whether as a woman approaching fifty years of age, she would retire to become an affluent 'gentlewoman' or carry on with her political career alone. Her choice after a 'few months' of mourning was to continue to pursue, 'the aims and causes for which we had jointly laboured and made ourselves responsible'.¹⁰³

Secondly, as a widowed woman, Osler had to come to terms with the responsibilities and opportunities of a change of status in society in terms of 'behaviour, dress, and social interactions'.¹⁰⁴ According to her account of the marriage, Alfred had not interfered with her freedom of action, but it is difficult to accept that there were no restrictions on her conduct as a Victorian married lady. However, it is likely that over the course of twenty years of widowhood, she enjoyed increased access 'to power and influence'.¹⁰⁵ After Alfred's death, Osler used all her influence and energy in pursuing women's suffrage. She and other widows, notably Millicent Fawcett and Emmeline Pankhurst, were able to spend their time and money on 'causes they believed in very passionately'.¹⁰⁶

Thirdly, and of direct relevance to her future private life in view of the impending marriage of her youngest child Dorothy in 1912, is to consider what arrangements would

¹⁰³ *Memories 2*, unpaginated and undated.

¹⁰⁴ Andrews and Lomas, *Widows*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

be necessary for Osler once she had no family living with her. Her journal entry in December 1911 illustrated the point. It referred to Dorothy being away for the week and found Osler alone save for Rachel and her 'kind and devoted' servants who would do anything for her, but there is 'the sadness of the empty house'.¹⁰⁷ The issue caused considerable family dissension and was important in highlighting two points, firstly, what seemed a gendered attitude amongst the children concerning her need for care and secondly, the stark reality of loneliness. Dorothy was to marry Leo, a serving soldier, who had agreed to accept a posting potentially of some years in India. In *Journal 1* in 1911, Osler lamented that Dorothy was to go with him leaving her alone but reluctantly accepted her decision. The important issue was the reaction of the eldest child, Jack, who resented Dorothy's decision, and caused it to mar what had hitherto been a 'delightfully affectionate' relationship, in which the satisfaction of his interests had been her 'foremost delight'.¹⁰⁸ Three points arise from these facts. Firstly, Osler's isolation was a foreseeable consequence of her widowhood which needed to be addressed by the family as a whole because it was difficult to criticise Dorothy for wishing to follow her husband to India for him to pursue his army career. Secondly, there is at least a tacit presumption on the part of Jack that Dorothy, as the youngest daughter, should accept responsibility for Osler, despite the fact that Jack was himself affluent, possessed two houses and could, together with his family, probably have offered assistance. Thirdly, this displays a very gendered attitude even amongst a seemingly progressive family at the time and

¹⁰⁷ *Journal 1*, 13 December 1911.

¹⁰⁸ *Journal 1*, 13 July 1911.

tends to confirm a theme of this chapter, that whilst there were signs of progress in women's rights, paternalistic attitudes remained strong.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the marriage between two upper middle-class people of liberal persuasion in late Victorian Birmingham. Catherine and Alfred were the children of two business families, one old and well-established, and the other more recently established in the city. The couple were rich, and the union was not typical of most marriages in the city during the period. It represents a significant addition to the existing historiography of marriage and the upbringing and education of children within Birmingham during the period. The aim of the first section was to consider the nature of the marriage between the children of these business families and what may be learnt about Osler during the years of the marriage. In one regard it was progressive in the joint decision to remove the vow to obey from the marriage service. This should be seen within the context of Osler's own writings which urged women to seek enhanced respect and participation in marriage, rather than be complicit in their subordination due to custom and prejudice. Alfred's support was vital in the promotion of a more modern approach to the marriage. The evidence suggests that only a minority of marriages during the period of study would have followed their pattern. There were also more traditional aspects to the marriage. Osler took no part in business affairs nor did she need to work herself. It therefore contained both progressive and traditional elements.

The education of children was gendered in the period of study amongst the affluent middle-classes. The Oslers were progressive in that both of their girls were educated for

an extensive period at private day schools in Birmingham rather than continuing to be home-schooled by governesses or being sent to boarding schools. They almost certainly attended Edgbaston High School founded in 1876 with a Unitarian High Mistress sympathetic to the education of non-conformist children. The children would have received a broad liberal education. Two historians, Carol Dyhouse and Helen Sunderland have written about these new private schools. Dyhouse dismisses the idea that these schools were feminist in outlook but sees them nonetheless as progressive as providing a degree of individuality with scope for debate and discussion. Writing more recently, Helen Sunderland suggests that these schools did promote discussion on women's voting rights communally and between both suffragists and suffragettes. However, the girls did not go into further education nor did they obtain employment. They both married in their mid-twenties and raised their respective families. The three boys were destined to work in the family business, and there is no surviving evidence of their early education. Both the younger boys went on to boarding education against the wishes of Catherine, whilst the eldest went to a private day school like the girls. Their education was thus a mixture of the progressive and the traditional.

As was common with families of this class, Osler employed a number of servants throughout her life just as her parents had done. They would have assisted with the upbringing of the children and the upkeep of a busy and substantial household. It was a traditional arrangement which enabled Osler to pursue a fulfilling public life and for Alfred to attend to his business. The marriage was again traditional in that although

Alfred professed a desire to participate in family life, his time was taken up chiefly with his business.

Osler was widowed at the age of 49 and died aged 70. She had to decide how to occupy the remainder of her life as a widow. She did not retire but threw herself into her public life at a critical period. She had to come to terms with the responsibilities arising from her change of status to a single woman. As she grew older and her health deteriorated, she had to consider her remaining life after the marriage of her children and their departure from the family home. This latter issue proved particularly difficult and was the cause of unresolved family dissension.

This chapter has sought to throw light on Osler's role as a wife, mother and widow and has illustrated the private world of a pivotal figure in the modern history of Birmingham. The examination of her private life in its various aspects has revealed both progressive and traditional elements as might be expected of a woman who in her own estimation was part of a transitional phase in women's development. The companionable nature of the marriage; the acceptance by Alfred that the parties to the marriage were of equal status, evidenced by the omission of the vow of obedience; and the education of the two girls for some ten years in a day school, are some evidence of a change in the nature of the marital state and add to the historiography of the period in Birmingham and more generally. The following chapters will concentrate on her philanthropic and public work and show how both sides of her life illuminate the character and strength of the woman.

Chapter Four: Osler and Philanthropy in Birmingham 1878-1920

Osler is a particularly significant subject of study for this chapter in that, whilst several middle-class women of the period were involved to some extent in philanthropic endeavour, she combined this work with the assumption of leadership positions in political and feminist groups, as well as maintaining an active family life. The major period of her philanthropic activity was between 1878 and the end of the nineteenth century, during which time she was a member of two Birmingham groups, the Birmingham Ladies Association for Useful Work (BLAUW), and the Birmingham Ladies Association for the Care and Protection of Young Girls (BLACPYG). Both organisations were affiliated to the Birmingham branch of the National Union of Women Workers (NUWW), an influential umbrella group formed in the late 1880s, which Osler served as a committee member and Vice-President. The two principal areas of her work in these Associations were her attempts to reduce the high incidence of maternal and infant ill health and mortality and her moral campaign to eliminate the evil, as she saw it, of prostitution and venereal disease (VD).

Investigating and analysing her philanthropic work for women is valuable for this thesis in highlighting an important aspect of Birmingham life and enables an exploration of her reasons for undertaking voluntary work. The study reveals both a concern to reduce death, pain, suffering and moral laxity amongst women coupled, with a desire to increase the profile and political and social advancement of women. In pursuing the latter objective, women in Osler's position knew that they were challenging male authority,

leading to a common tendency for women to work in organised groups both for support and to enhance their effectiveness. A further theme of this chapter considers the extent to which the nature of philanthropic work changed towards the end of the Victorian era to a more communal and professional approach, mirroring the social, political and scientific developments of the period, and reflecting the increasing role of local and central government in people's lives. It affords an opportunity to consider Osler's cautious approach to this change in emphasis, and to compare her work with that of other contemporary philanthropic activists in different fields of work. A final but very important issue to consider is the extent to which Osler was affected by her faith, class and moral views in her dealings with the predominantly working-class women with whom she came into contact.

Literature Review

There is little secondary material to assist in a discussion of philanthropy in Birmingham but F.K. Prochaska's book is still important on the themes of faith and morality in relation to prostitution and preventative work.¹ Specific to Birmingham are two articles by Paula Bartley on the operation of the Civic Gospel and the BLACPYG which were critical of middle-class liberal women such as Osler in their allegedly class-based and unsympathetic approach to their working-class counterparts.² Ruth Procter's thesis critically examined the performance of the local council in Birmingham in its response to the rate of infant

¹ F. K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1980).

² P. Bartley, 'Preventing Prostitution: the Ladies' Association for the Care and Protection of Young Girls in Birmingham, 1887-1914', *Women's History Review*, Volume 7, No.1 (1998), pp 37-55, and 'Moral Regeneration: Women and the Civic Gospel in Birmingham, 1870-1914', *Midland History*, 25:1 (2000), pp. 143-161.

mortality during the period, whilst commending the efforts of Osler's BLAUW.³ Julia Bush considered the movement of many women from traditional amateur philanthropy to a more professional approach in the early twentieth century, and the extent to which the progressive wing of the NUWW to which Osler belonged, evolved from a philanthropic to a feminist position on women's rights.⁴

A number of texts will be considered which whilst not specific to Birmingham, cast light and add context to philanthropic activity within the city during the period of study and help in a consideration of Osler's relevance to such work in the twentieth century. When considering the arguments and opinions on the two principal areas of activity, namely infant mortality and prostitution, it is important to appreciate that reactions to them could be very different. Whilst nobody would argue that infant death needed to be avoided, the issues surrounding prostitution were more complex. Whilst Osler considered it to be inexcusable and evil in any circumstances, others took a more tolerant and sympathetic approach, for instance for the relief of male sexual frustration which might otherwise manifest itself in worse consequences, and for some women in desperate financial circumstances, it might furnish an essential source of income. Van Drenth and De Haan's book analysing what they termed 'caring power' used the life and times of Josephine Butler to argue for a kinder and more considerate feminist approach to female prostitution rather than Osler's hostility. At the same time, Butler and Osler were in complete agreement on the need for women's suffrage and the abolition of the

³ R. Procter, 'Infant Mortality - A Study of the Impact of Social Intervention in Birmingham 1873-1938' (M. Phil thesis, University of Birmingham, 2011).

⁴ J. Bush, *Women Against the Vote: Female Anti-Suffragism in Britain* (Oxford, 2007).

Contagious Diseases legislation.⁵ Although by the end of the nineteenth century there was a growing impetus towards women's activities in the public sphere both political and philanthropic, a strong theme for consideration is a continuing and renewed emphasis on women's duties as mothers. Eileen Yeo has written extensively on what she termed 'social motherhood'. It raised gender and particularly class issues between women which made the development of solidarity between women difficult to achieve.⁶ Greater emphasis and criticism of women's alleged neglect of their motherly duties to care and procreate in the context of eugenics and imperialism, particularly following the Boer War, are displayed in an article by Anna Davin.⁷ The First World War and its aftermath can be seen retrospectively as a watershed in the development of twentieth century philanthropy during the last years of Osler's active life. Two books will illustrate these changes pointing to a mixture of voluntarism, local government action and legislative intervention.⁸

Osler did not write a great deal about her philanthropic work, but she left a vivid description of her work for the BLAUW in *Memories 1*.⁹ She imparted her views on the importance of purity training and the shortcomings in the conduct of men in her book *Home*.¹⁰ Other primary sources are the minutes of the Birmingham City Council, and reports of the sanitary and health committees. They tell us much about the policies and

⁵ Van Drenth and De Haan, *The Rise of Caring Power* (Amsterdam, 1999).

⁶ Eileen Yeo, 'Social Motherhood and the Sexual Communion of Labour in British Social Science, 1850-1950', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (1992), pp. 75-87.

⁷ A. Davin, 'Imperialism and Motherhood', *History Workshop*, No 5 (Spring 1978), pp. 9-65.

⁸ Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, *Mothers of a New World* (London, 1993) and Eve Copus, *Female Philanthropy in the Interwar World* (London, 2018).

⁹ *Memories 1*, pp. 38-39, 45-47.

¹⁰ *Home*, pp. 60-77.

motivations of the local authority during the period. The archives of the main philanthropic organisations with which she was associated are valuable as a record of their work and motives. However, they are of limited help for describing the detailed work of Osler herself or indeed the other women activists, as they tended to be anonymous, probably because the authors of the annual reports regarded themselves as representing the organisations or groups, rather than as individual contributors.

Fortunately, some of Osler's speeches have survived and her speech of 1891 to the NUWW entitled 'Union Among Women' sets out her view of the role of women in general and the charitable field in particular. She described women coming down from the pedestal on which they had been placed by men to take an active role in all fields, social, political, philanthropic and educational. For her it was in accordance with 'the modern interpretation of Christian duty' to ensure progress over evil, and no limit should be placed on the sphere of women's work and influence. Women's task was to gather organisations 'into actual union and co-operation and weaving a net of charity and sympathy' so that all might obtain 'succour and relief'. It involved 'leading men in the true path of progress'.¹¹ This extract encapsulates some important themes for this chapter. Her vision of women playing a full role in public life included philanthropic work without restriction and men and women working together in a collective endeavour for the benefit of all citizens in accordance with the force of religious zeal. Osler's work had commenced long before this speech. In 1878 she gave her first lectures for the BLAUW, and it is to that organisation that attention is first directed.

¹¹ BA&C, L41.2, *National Union of Women Workers, 1891*, pp. 1-5.

BLAUW

The BLAUW was the first organisation for which Osler carried out charitable work and an analysis of its activities through the reports of the body, the minutes of the relevant municipal committees, and Osler's own recollections throw light on philanthropic work in nineteenth century Birmingham. The format of this section will be to foreground Osler's reasons for undertaking the work, the methodology of her lectures, the relationship between the BLAUW and the local authority and, with reference to Ruth Procter's thesis, to consider the effectiveness of her activity and how it influenced Osler's views for the future of voluntary work.

Osler became involved in the BLAUW as a result of suffering disability following the birth of her second child in November 1875. For some three years, she was able to walk only short distances and was in almost constant pain. This is significant in that her personal experience of prolonged discomfort and suffering led her to realise the importance of improving 'the conditions of life' for women generally.¹² It was also chiefly during this period that she became involved in contributing towards the compiling of the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*.

Sarah Ogilvie's recent book contains a chapter on the work of suffragists in the compiling of the dictionary, and as she put it, Osler's name 'stood out'.¹³ It is convenient to summarise this work in the present context. It was an example of early philanthropic work which was both useful to the community, beneficial to learning and satisfied Osler's

¹² *Memories 1*, pp. 37-38.

¹³ S. Ogilvie, *The Dictionary People* (London, 2023), pp. 244-249.

own obvious love of reading which she wished to impart to her fellow citizens. The *OED* was compiled over a long period and involved 'readers' submitting words which were thought worthy of inclusion in the dictionary, in the form of 'scripts' naming the word together with a sentence or two placing it in context. Osler was one of many readers and submitted 550 scripts chiefly in 1878-9 in relation to three specific books. As was common to all contributors, the words submitted had no connection to their activist lives. Two of the books were written by a Unitarian acquaintance, the Reverend John Page Hopps, and were plainly religious in nature: *First Principles of Religion and Morality*, and *Life of Jesus*. The third was a book entitled *Scientific Lectures*, on plants, insects, and archaeology by a Liberal, Sir John Lubbock. One of the scripts submitted by Osler was for 'ant rice' referring to a Texan ant which is a 'harvesting species storing up especially the grains of *Aristida oligantha*, the so-called 'ant rice'.¹⁴ Archival research at the Oxford University Press has disclosed a further selection of her submissions including, for example, a description of the antirrhinum as a plant particularly adapted for fertilisation by bumble bees.¹⁵ Having read many scripts, Ogilvie regarded Osler as an 'excellent Reader' whose quotations were in a 'natural voice' with accurate explanation of context: thus many of the words for which Osler submitted scripts were put into the *OED*. This section throws fresh light on the breadth of Osler's interests at a still young age. For a woman of relatively limited formal education, she showed scientific interest alongside her more familiar religious observations. Along with her concern with women's physical and moral health, she clearly wished to encourage literacy and learning by both sexes.

¹⁴ Ogilvie, *Dictionary*, pp. 246-247.

¹⁵ Archive of the Oxford University Press, Oxford.

She submitted no further slips after 1879, presumably because of the demands of family and activism.

With the support of her cousin Edith Bracey, an early activist within it, she became involved with the BLAUW which had originally been formed in 1871 for educational purposes to give lectures to candidates sitting the Universities Examination for Girls. In 1873 it expanded to give lectures to women on health and sanitation.¹⁶ Osler described preparing herself 'for some of the most useful work of my life - the public teaching of hygiene'.¹⁷ The purpose was to give lectures to audiences of working women and to collaborate with the 'reformers on the Town Council to improve the conditions of life and reduce the high rate of infant mortality'.¹⁸ Having worked 'for two years at physiology and hygiene' she gave her first set of six lectures in 1878 usually delivering one or two sets each year until 1895 to women connected to institutions requesting their assistance - chiefly the clergy or philanthropic workers.¹⁹ The lectures were always free and dealt with 'sanitary dwellings, fresh air and ventilation, food, drink, cookery, digestion, cleanliness, management of infants, infection, sick nursing, and child-bearing'. They were accompanied by 'diagrams, models and simple experiments'. Printed questions were handed out after each lecture and prizes were awarded for the best answers. The audiences varied from a few dozen to several hundred and Osler observed that 'the trust and confidence shown us by our poor and ignorant hearers was often deeply pathetic'.²⁰

¹⁶ BA&C, L41.2 *First Annual Report, BLAUW, 1876*, pp. 4-6.

¹⁷ *Memories 1*, p. 38.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

The BLAUW was dissolved in 1903 at around the time Osler wrote *Memories 1* which forms the chief source for these recollections. She found the work with the BLAUW both 'fruitful' and satisfying, not simply in the imparting of knowledge and awareness of precautionary measures, but in establishing 'sisterly relations' with 'her fellow women' in different parts of the city and in 'different grades of life'.²¹

To what extent her work for the BLAUW was worthwhile will be considered later when analysing Ruth Procter's findings, but three factors suggest why she might have considered her efforts beneficial and valuable. Firstly, she believed she was saving some women and children from death or disease - sufficient justification in itself. Secondly, it was her first real foray into public work and speaking in public, something that was still comparatively rare at the time. She admitted in *Memories 1* that she suffered fatigue from the lecturing, alleviated by being seated on a stool, and 'much from nervousness' such that she was 'physically upset' and had to bury herself in a book to distract her thoughts although experience 'soon cured this'. Indeed, she recounts that it was after commencing lecturing that she 'began to speak occasionally in public on other subjects, chiefly Women's Suffrage and politics'.²² The lecturing experience seemed to be a clear stepping-stone on the way to her future activist career from the 1880s onwards. Thirdly, she emphasised her contact with her 'fellow women', including working-class women. The concept of a sisterhood is a prominent theme which is encountered again in connection with the suffrage campaign, although it remains a matter for debate to what extent she engaged with working women and the scope of the help she was prepared

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 47.

and able to offer them. She said nothing more in *Memories 1* about her lecturing work and there was little about her individual efforts in the BLAUW archive. However, she was an active lecturer and there is no reason to doubt that the collective views expressed in the records apply to her as much as to any of the other lecturers. The records show her as a member of the BLAUW's Sanitary Committee from 1878, and a member of the main executive committee from 1881. She served a year as President in 1887. The extracts referred to are illustrative of the main issues raised in the contributions of herself and others. Two points are particularly important: the respective role and input of the City Council and the volunteers, and the difficulties of communication with those they were seeking to help.

The Respective Roles of the BLAUW and the Local Authority

An examination of the relationship between the BLAUW and the Local Authority exemplified the extent to which the nineteenth century Local Authority in Birmingham declined to accept responsibility for the individual plight of women and children in the City. Instead, it delegated responsibility to volunteers who were keen to exercise and expand their influence.

Although Alfred Hill was appointed as the first Medical Officer of Health (MOH) in Birmingham in 1873, it was not until some four years later that he invited the officers of the BLAUW to a meeting in October 1877 to discuss the issue of infant mortality. The reaction of the BLAUW was recorded in the annual report for that year and described the 'privilege' of recording 'a new era' for the organisation. The BLAUW was obviously delighted to be invited and saw it as a recognition of the developing public role of

women. The meeting agreed that the main problem was ignorance on the part of mothers which could only be remedied by 'the spread of education', and 'no better agency' was available than 'the lectures' of the BLAUW.²³ The Local Authority considered it to be a social and class issue beyond the remit of the Council's Health and Sanitary Committees, although the MOH suggested that the volunteers might arrange for ladies to visit 'low-class homes' to give feeding instructions, and perhaps establish private nurseries where working mothers could leave their children.²⁴ A subsequent public meeting in November 1877 did not pursue those two suggestions despite criticism from Joseph Chamberlain, amongst others, who 'stressed the need to improve the conditions of the life of the poor'.²⁵ The Health Committee report for March 1878 concluded that the BLAUW lecturers were doing valuable public work and it was the only effective means of giving instruction to those having the care of the children.²⁶ The matter therefore remained with the voluntary sector and Osler and her fellow women continued with their lectures. Procter did not feel any definite conclusions could be drawn as to the reasons for non-intervention but suggested that the Health Committee may not have had the power to intervene even it had wished to do so.²⁷ Aside from that, the Council may have been concerned about the cost of intervention believing that the lecture courses were the best way forward. There was also a close relationship between the women giving the lectures and the Council officers. At the time of these meetings, the Lord Mayor of

²³ BA&C, L41.2, *Third Annual Report, BLAUW, 1878*, p. 8.

²⁴ Procter, 'Infant Mortality', p. 75.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

²⁶ BA&C, L41.2, *Minutes and Report of the Birmingham Council Sanitary and Health Committee, 5 March 1878*.

²⁷ Procter, 'Infant Mortality', p. 76.

Birmingham was William Kenrick, the brother of Caroline Kenrick who was President of the BLAUW, and many of the participants were members of the non-conformist groups which were influential during the period. For example, the Kenricks were Unitarians as, of course, was Osler herself.²⁸ The conclusion must be that the Council and the BLAUW were content for practical and ideological reasons to proceed on the chosen course. As for the women, they were doing worthwhile work which also raised their public profile, and the Council could avoid potentially expensive interventions whilst being seen to be entrusting the work to committed and worthy women.

The records of the lectures suggested that Osler was mainly lecturing to middle-class audiences. For example, in 1880 she talked of lecturing to an 'intelligent, well-to-do class' whose answers to the questionnaire were 'of a high standard'. She was aware that some women lectured to the poor but thought that more benefit might be achieved 'amongst those whose intelligence leads them to apply the knowledge they gain to good purpose'.²⁹ More explicitly, in 1883 after a series of lectures to a 'high-class intelligent audience', Osler felt 'we look to women of this class', to show how poorer neighbours might show greater economy. However, she also noted that one poor woman had walked for miles to attend the lectures.³⁰ These extracts raise two points. Firstly, there is the suggestion of the lecturer delegating to those instructed the task of explaining the information to the poor at a time when there may have been little social interaction between the classes, together with the barely concealed assumption that the poor were

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 35, 75.

²⁹ BA&C, L41.2, *report of the BLAUW, 1880*, pp. 7-8.

³⁰ BA&C, L41.2, *report of the BLAUW, 1884*, p. 7.

less intelligent than the middle-classes. Secondly, there was the sheer physical difficulty of the disadvantaged attending the talks. Reaching those most in need of help was acknowledged to be a problem. The 1884 report of the BLAUW contained a Council resolution requesting it to consider extending a system of day nurseries in the city. The response was that the cost of such a scheme 'far exceeds the funds they have at their disposal'. There was no suggestion that the municipal authority would provide any funds.³¹

As late as 1893 another Council report on infant mortality claimed the predominant cause of death was improper feeding by inadequate mothers. It was noted that 1,084 deaths in that year out of 1,222 occurred in the homes of 'artisans and others'. The Council still accepted no responsibility and looked for the solution in 'enlightened philanthropy'.³² Eventually, it became clear that the voluntary system was failing, and in 1899 for the first time the Health Committee recorded the proposed appointment of women sanitary officers to work to 'improve the life chances of children' by arranging home visits where necessary.³³ In 1903, the BLAUW was discontinued, accepting that health visitors could deliver greater practical instruction and 'give it to a class they (the BLAUW) could never reach'.³⁴

³¹ BA&C, L41.2, *Resolution of the Health Committee of Birmingham City Council February 1884, Minutes of Birmingham City Council meeting 23 April 1884 and letter from the BLAUW Committee to the Health Committee of 21 November 1884.*

³² BA&C, L41.2, *Report of the Health Committee of 11 July 1893.*

³³ BA&C, L41.2, *Minutes of the Health Committee January and February 1899.*

³⁴ BA&C, L41.2, *Final Report of the BLAUW, 1903*, p. 4.

Procter's thesis suggested that the bald statistics show no reduction in the rate of infant mortality during the period of the BLAUW's work and thus, purely in terms of data, their intervention could be seen as ineffective. However, she further suggested that without their input the mortality figures might have been considerably higher throughout the period.³⁵ Her thesis was chiefly targeted at the inadequacy of the Local Authority rather than voluntary intervention, and thus she was not unduly critical of the BLAUW.

However, for her, the Council's approach even in hindsight 'cannot be considered in the best possible light'.³⁶

The conclusion must be that the efforts of Osler and her colleagues were never likely to resolve such a difficult problem, and neither would the Local Authority, given the prevailing circumstances in Victorian Birmingham as described by Procter. Osler's own account confirmed her diligent preparation for the work but acknowledged her lack of medical expertise and inexperience in addressing large audiences, particularly in the early days. The larger issues such as insanitary housing conditions were beyond her ability to address. Aside from those practical issues, the philosophical standpoint of Victorians like Osler and the local authority officials was one of self-reliance and personal responsibility. Whilst those of a higher class were prepared to impart knowledge, it was for the recipient to take responsibility for applying what was learned. It was clear that whilst Osler talked of assisting the working-classes, the amount of interaction was limited, as was explicitly acknowledged in the final report of 1903. The Council could allow the volunteers to bear the majority of the burden and these women were content to do so. They were keen to

³⁵ Procter, 'Infant Mortality', p. 89.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 153.

be seen doing good works whilst increasing women's competence and enhancing their profile at a time when the campaign for women's emancipation was gathering momentum. It was only towards the end of the Victorian era that a different ethos began to take hold partly out of necessity in view of the continuing prevalence of illness and mortality, but also because of the advent of a more collectivist approach to public life. In that context it is necessary to consider the other important nineteenth-century charity with which Osler was involved including reference to the career of her contemporary Josephine Butler.

Josephine Butler, 1828-1906, was one of the early feminists and is chiefly known as the head of the National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts 1864-1869 which eventually secured the repeal of the legislation, widely seen as discriminating against women accused of prostitution.³⁷ It is not proposed to discuss that campaign, important though it was in the progress of women's rights, but instead to consider briefly Butler's concept of 'caring power' advanced during the latter years of the nineteenth century. As mentioned earlier, Butler shared Osler's support of women's voting rights and in turn Osler agreed with the campaign for repeal of the Contagious Diseases legislation. Additionally, they were both, in their contrasting ways, driven by deep religious beliefs, and were from the affluent middle-class. The thrust of this study is that Butler's doctrine of 'care' for prostitutes and other disadvantaged women evidenced a different approach to that displayed by Osler and other middle-class women of the time which will be

³⁷ Van Drenth and De Haan, *The Rise of Caring Power*, p. 90.

considered further in the next section as part of the discussion of Osler's role in BLACPYG and the contribution of Paula Bartley to the debate.

BLACPYG, Sin and Moral Philanthropy

Whereas the BLAUW had been concerned with improving the physical health of women and children, the BLACPYG concentrated on their moral welfare and the avoidance of a life of prostitution. Unlike the BLAUW it was overtly religious in orientation. In 1887, Osler was appointed as the head of a new Moral Education Branch (MEB) of the charity to supplement its two existing branches, the Training Branch and the Workhouse Magdalene Branch. The Training Branch was a type of rescue facility akin to the Night Shelter founded in Birmingham in 1888, designed to help young friendless girls in danger of prostitution and destitution by training them predominantly for domestic service or laundry work if they could not return home. The Workhouse Magdalene Branch existed to assist girls who had already 'fallen' and were pregnant for the first time. For those women the aim was to offer support, attempt to trace the putative father for financial support, and hopefully to lessen the stigma and avoid further 'sin'. The task of Osler's new branch was described in the 1887 report as 'the most difficult, as well as the most important and trying part of our work', the training of the 'sacred obligations of morality' and inculcating into the young 'the possibility and imperative duty of modesty and self-restraint'. Osler herself spoke of the need for men and women to join the 'crusade against social evil and impurity'.³⁸ In *Home*, she described immorality as a 'canker' which impeded efforts towards social reform. Just as slavery had been abolished because it had

³⁸ BA&C, L41.2, *Report of BLACPYG, 1887*, p. 4.

come to be seen as evil and immoral, so Osler's aim was for prostitution to be seen in a similar light and by combating ignorance and emphasising the virtues of purity at a young age, the demand for prostitutes would be eradicated leading to healthier moral lives.³⁹ Like the BLAUW, the BLACPYG offered guidance on combatting VD, whilst emphasising the personal responsibility of the children and their parents, with the added ingredient of religious fervour. The wider issues which might lead women to prostitution are considered later in this chapter.

The annual reports of the BLACPYG illustrate the work of Osler and her committee and the extent to which firstly, purity teaching was central to the message, and secondly, the primary responsibility of mothers especially of the working-class in delivering the instruction. For example, in 1889 Osler undertook a canvas partly for subscriptions but also to spread the word amongst parents to prevent their children 'from falling into the quicksands of sin', and 'to spread a healthy moral tone throughout all classes of Society'. In January 1889 Osler gave an address entitled 'Address to Mothers' which was published by the Social Purity Alliance. Her committee purchased 500 copies which apparently sold quickly, although unfortunately none have come to light. Mothers' Meetings were held, leading to the formation of Mothers' Unions in Birmingham.⁴⁰ Great store was set upon these meetings of young women and educated older women. In November 1890, Osler attended a large meeting of 'educated mothers' to explain purity work, and in January 1891 she addressed a large meeting in Leamington Spa attended by 400 women from

³⁹ *Home*, pp. 61-62.

⁴⁰ BA&C, L41.2, *Report of BLACPYG, 1889*, pp. 10-13.

nineteen Mothers' Meetings.⁴¹ Her committee wanted to see these meetings held in every parish to emphasise the responsibility of mothers.

An important development referred to in the report for 1890 was the formation of Snowdrop Bands to reach girls in the Elementary Day Schools prior to them leaving education. Osler attended a meeting of school heads with a view to introducing the girls to 'the subject of the temptations of their future life' before they left school and keeping 'a hold of them' afterwards through bands. Fourteen of these bands were started in the year divided into juniors from ages 11 to 15 (11 being the age when most girls apparently left school), and seniors from age 15 until marriage. For the junior section the emphasis was upon instruction in 'modest quiet conduct, dress, health, companions and books', and for the seniors, 'love, courtship and marriage can be touched upon and good counsel given'.⁴² A Union of Bands was formed in 1891 by which time there were twenty bands with 800 members. The aims were set out in a pamphlet which emphasised standards, purity of thought and conversation of 'our working girls', and 'awaken in them some clear perception of what God meant a woman's life and influence to be'.⁴³ Whilst the reports stress the benefits for all social classes, there is little doubt that class and religious concerns were key components of the message. The 1892 report referred to whole streets in parts of the city without a 'single Christian man and woman', causing a 'festering pool in which sin germinated unchecked'. 'This growing separation of classes ... was a grave social evil which called for some check or remedy'. A Laundry Scheme was

⁴¹ BA&C, L41.2, *Report of BLACPYG, 1891*, p. 14.

⁴² BA&C, L41.2, *Report of BLACPYG, 1890*, pp. 12-14.

⁴³ BA&C, L41.2, *Report of BLACPYG, 1891*, pp. 13-14.

introduced as a shelter for 'feeble-minded and semi-imbecile girls' to protect them from 'temptations to sin'.⁴⁴ Such arrangements anticipate the work of eugenicists such as Ellen Pinsent, to be discussed later in this chapter, as a means of controlling women deemed to be incapable of responding to purity teaching.

By the time of the discontinuance of the BLACPYG in 1897, Osler was unsurprisingly positive about its achievements. She felt that the causes of prostitution as well as the effects had been addressed by the MEB and doctors, teachers, parents and employers had been enlisted to influence public opinion. Many meetings had been addressed and suitable literature distributed. The founding of Mothers' Unions was seen as a significant achievement, and they were to continue within a separate organisation, as were the Snowdrop Bands. Osler conceded that the recruitment of new workers was difficult, but she detected a change in the tone of public opinion on the issues of purity and morality which were 'no longer the work of the few but of the many'.⁴⁵

Trenchant criticism of the BLACPYG and the MEB in particular, is found in two articles by Paula Bartley. Approaching the issue from a more socialist perspective, she accused the organisation specifically including Osler of lacking in radicalism and being bound by class ideology in the subjection of working-class women to their middle-class mores. Bartley saw Osler as typical of the liberal, non-conformist women who, although often supportive of progressive causes such as female enfranchisement, and the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, were located within a 'window of power and authority'.⁴⁶ Their wealth and

⁴⁴ BA&C, L41.2, *Report of BLACPYG, 1892*, pp. 7, 19.

⁴⁵ BA&C, L41.2, *Report of BLACPYG, 1897*, pp. 11-13.

⁴⁶ Bartley, 'Preventing Prostitution', p. 40.

leisure enabled them to exert 'their own definition of what was considered to be correct forms of behaviour' and 'to appropriate the moral selves... of the working class'.⁴⁷

Further, as they operated within orthodox parameters of chastity and conventional marriage rather than female autonomy, and were reluctant to impose responsibility upon men to exercise sexual restraint, their rejection of the double standard of morality still left women in a subordinate position. Bartley was equally critical of the BLACPYG in its distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor, and its failure to consider working-class women as fitted for employment above the level of domestic service, laundering and humble factory work. Bartley's conclusion was that women such as Osler displayed a 'complex mixture of humanitarianism, feminism and class prejudice', although it did not follow that they were insincere. They worked within the 'class ideology of Victorian and Edwardian England' and thus had limited success, in part because the working classes were unsympathetic to the idea of adopting the mores of these middle-class women.⁴⁸ In the meantime she alleged 'prostitution in Birmingham continued unabated'.⁴⁹

It is important to consider firstly, the extent to which Bartley's criticisms of Osler and her fellows were valid when set against the times in which they lived and secondly, how Butler's ideas of 'caring power' differed from Prochaska's views and Osler's individualist approach. There was no unanimity in society during the period as to the reasons why women became prostitutes. Bartley suggested that in the later nineteenth century two

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 40.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 54-55.

⁴⁹ Bartley, 'Moral Regeneration', pp. 143-161, p. 158.

perceived causes were homelessness and mental incapacity, hence the establishment of organisations such as the BLACPYG to provide education, training and accommodation for those women seen to be most at risk, in the hope that purity training, coupled with such menial employment as these women were thought capable of, might enable them to lead a life without resort to predatory men.⁵⁰ Osler's commitment to education through the Mothers' Union and the Snowdrop Bands was discussed earlier. The Training Branch and the Workhouse Magdalene Branch were designed to provide a safety net for those women in need, but with a form of detention for those deemed irremediable, as discussed later with regard to the work of Ellen Pinsent. That this approach failed to eliminate prostitution can be no surprise. Bartley considered this to be a question of class discrimination, but it might equally be seen as a symptom of the society in which Osler lived, where state support was meagre at best, and women even of the middle-class were lacking in power. In terms of employment opportunities, Prochaska suggested that within the existing paternalistic class structure, domestic service was one of the few employments available, and the restrictions under which charitable women operated made them 'powerless to offer them very much else'.⁵¹ The next section will discuss how Osler and her supporters sought to address the restrictions on employment. Some prominent and influential women philanthropists and moral campaigners, such as Ellis Hopkins and Josephine Butler, followed Osler 'often against their conservative instincts' in adopting and advocating female suffrage. This would enable women to become more prominent in public life and to campaign alongside men more forcibly for a more

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 150-153.

⁵¹ Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy*, pp. 154-155.

compassionate and humane society, although 'few of them were critical of the class structure and economic order of Victorian Society'.⁵² Whilst Prochaska, for example, agreed with the analysis that prostitution was an essentially moral rather than a political and social problem, she did regard moral reform organisations such as the BLACPYG, with its consideration of the moral responsibility of men, as an example of the changing nature of philanthropy.⁵³ Susan Mumm agreed with Prochaska that 'radical political positions were rare amongst female philanthropists'.⁵⁴ Charitable organisations maintained 'the established social order without bringing society's fundamental structures into question'.⁵⁵ Even so, she considered the position was more nuanced than stated by Bartley. Mumm considered there was a middle ground where many issues such as good intentions, egotism and opportunism came into play, as well as 'opportunities for broadening social networks and a wide range of cross-class relationships'.⁵⁶

Whilst there is obviously much truth in Bartley's views of Osler and the BLACPYG, they have to be seen within the context of their time. For Osler and other Gladstonian liberals, the principles of small government, minimal intervention with individual lives, strict control of state expenditure, and the concepts of the deserving and undeserving poor were predominant. Quite apart from those philosophical issues, it is difficult to see how much additional practical assistance could have been provided. The BLACPYG was a charity dependent upon its subscribers for funds, and the sort of assistance being

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 218-219.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

⁵⁴ S. Mumm, 'Women and philanthropic cultures' in S. Morgan and J. de Vries (eds.), *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800-1940* (Abingdon, 1910), pp. 54-71, p. 55.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

advocated, together with the accompanying employment opportunities, would only have come with collective state endeavour paralleling the advances noted earlier in the context of infant mortality. The overall impression of Bartley's articles was that she had little empathy with the views of Osler or her colleagues. Prochaska's approach arguably exhibited a greater appreciation of society at the time. However, there is little doubt that Butler's views looked forward to an era where there was a recognition of environmental and financial factors as being important and more likely to bear results than a punitive approach. In their writings, Van Drenth and De Haan noted possible ambiguity in offering on the one hand care to the less prosperous but on the other seeking to convert them to a different way of living. It may have been perceived as 'civilising' the poor by imposing a degree of control. It could thus become a 'strategy' to 'police those people who could constitute a threat to their class interests.'⁵⁷ Butler rejected such a notion and suggested that the caring approach 'shaped new representations of a 'feminine identity' and pointed the way to a perception of womanhood which provided middle-class women with a 'potential role in regulating social relations in a changing society'.⁵⁸

The National Union of Women Workers and Twentieth-Century Philanthropy

Osler was on the ruling council of the Birmingham Branch of the NUWW from its inception in the late 1880s and became a Vice-President in 1897 following its affiliation to the National Union in 1895. Its importance for this study is twofold; to illustrate how women worked as a collective organisation to discuss matters of interest, and to what extent those issues reveal how philanthropic endeavour developed in the late nineteenth

⁵⁷ Van Drenth and De Haan, *Rise of Caring Power*, p. 105.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

and early twentieth centuries to reflect changing times as set out in the previous section. In its early days the NUWW catered for a wide range of opinions and beliefs. It acted as an umbrella group for numerous affiliated charities, including the BLAUW and the BLACPYG. Despite its name, it was not at its inception, a working-class organisation but consisted of affluent women active in public philanthropic work. Julia Bush described how individual charities merged into more organised professional philanthropic bodies to replace inadequate 'old-fashioned amateurism' in meeting the scope of the social work 'the nation required of its women'.⁵⁹ In a similar way it was not originally an organisation which supported women's suffrage. Its first President, Louise Creighton was for many years against female voting rights and it was only in 1906 that she became a supporter believing that 'the vote could increase their influence on parliament and achieve reform'.⁶⁰

An important three-day conference of the local NUWW took place in Birmingham in 1890 and the wide range of topics discussed, the YWCA, the Night Shelters, the BLAUW, Prisons, and Mothers' Unions, gave a flavour of the range of organisations involved. On the last afternoon, Osler addressed a Young Ladies Meeting attended by 'a staggering 600 people' to listen to a number of talks. Her opening remarks set the tone for a significant conversation on the aspirations of young women for greater work opportunities as discussed in the previous section. It was philanthropic in its urging of women to take advantage of the NUWW to find suitable work, and feminist in urging

⁵⁹ Bush, *Women Against the Vote*, p. 47.

⁶⁰ P. Thane, 'Well-bred and conventional ladies: the National Council of Women of Great Britain and Ireland/Northern Ireland', *Women's History Review*, Volume 32 (2023, Issue 2), Abstract.

women to take the opportunity to work outside the home rather than being confined 'within the four walls of her home' as used to be the case whilst young men were launching their careers. In a typical peroration, she referred to '... a grand freedom with which we walk today; no man daring to make us afraid!'.⁶¹ She then called on a selection of young women to talk of their work and recreational experiences in, for example, the Girls' Evening Homes, the Kyrle Society, the Girls' Letter Guild, and District Nursing. The Evening Homes catered for the 'rough class' and consisted of various after-work activities including a cooking class, scrap book making, a clothing club and a singing class. The religious input was emphasised by the singing of hymns and Bible readings, supported by a Temperance Association. The Kyrle Society originally catered for boys with manual pursuits such as wood carving, modelling and general handicrafts encouraging artistic pursuits. For the girls, classes started in dressmaking, rug making, laundry work and lace making. The Letter Guild encouraged factory girls to write at least monthly to an assigned lady on such subjects as health, cooking and friendship. Many girls found it easier to communicate such thoughts in writing rather than verbally. District Nursing consisted of a nurse being appointed to defined districts of the city to give cheer, comfort and nourishment. These activities provide examples of the work of Osler and her colleagues in seeking to improve the prospects and widen the vision of young poor women in the late Victorian period.⁶² They echo Osler's continuing interest in women's education and the pursuit of independence. Several years earlier in 1880, when she became the inaugural President of the Birmingham Ladies Debating Society, she had spoken of the

⁶¹ BA&C, L41.2, *The Report of the 1890 Conference of the NUWW, 13 November 1890*, pp. 191.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 203-210.

use of dress as a method of encouraging women's independent thinking rather than being urged to take their opinions from men. She then used that thought to illustrate the importance of women thinking of their prospective employment as a means of shaping their futures and avoiding dependency. She saw it as 'one step in a long march'.⁶³

Important though it is to discuss increased opportunities for female employment and progressive philanthropy, it needs to be emphasised that there was still great pressure on middle-class women, including Osler, to fulfil their obligations as mothers. Eileen Yeo's concept of 'social motherhood' is useful for the idea of women acting in the public space in an adoptive role as mothers to disadvantaged women by for example working with former prostitutes. This, depending on the circumstances, could be by empowering, protecting or disciplining them. In an article discussing social motherhood in the context of social science and the poor, she emphasised the difficult issues that could arise with regard to authority and subordination. A loving relationship with a woman of a different class could degenerate into almost a mother and infant relationship. If the object was to promote social class harmony, it would have needed to surmount 'huge class barriers' in 'building a common sisterhood'. The intentions may have been worthy but they tended to create a system which was 'just as cruel and heartless in the name of motherhood and love'.⁶⁴ Whilst this study does not suggest that Osler acted exactly in that capacity, there is no doubt that she took her responsibility as a mother extremely seriously, and that she

⁶³ BA&C, L50.7, *First Annual Report Ladies Debating Society, 1880-1881*, pp. 3-16.

⁶⁴ Yeo, 'Social Motherhood and the Sexual Communion of Labour', pp. 75-82.

saw her family as being fundamental to her life. Chapter Five will pursue the description of Osler and Millicent Fawcett as 'maternal feminists'.

The domestic role of women during the early twentieth century was analysed by Anna Davin in an article emphasising their duty both to give birth to children and to ensure they were properly cared for. The growth of Britain's large overseas empire produced a need for people to populate, administer and protect the colonies. The military conflicts resulting from the colonial policy, particularly the Boer War 1899-1902 which will be discussed at length in Chapter Six, had shown the scale of manpower required and the shortcomings in the calibre of the British Army. The perception of the men in control of the country and the armed forces was that 'good motherhood was an essential component in the ideology of racial health and purity'.⁶⁵ It followed that any shortcomings identified were the result of women failing in their duty as mothers. The issue was bolstered by eugenicist ideas prevalent during the period emphasising the need for suitable children to be bred and reared. Thus, the issue of class once again raised its head as working-class women were perceived as giving birth to an inferior calibre of children. These ideas, and the refusal to countenance alternative causes of infant mortality, were likely to have had an effect on restricting women's pursuit of a public role and once again highlighted the male idea of women's domestic priorities. The 'husbanding' of women to safeguard the welfare of the race 'fuses the ideologies of class and sex domination', together with confirmation of the 'superiority of the British imperial race over the rest'.⁶⁶ Osler understood and to an extent was sympathetic to these

⁶⁵ A. Davin, 'Imperialism and Motherhood', *History Workshop*, No. 5 (Spring, 1978), pp. 9-65, p. 12.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

arguments as will be discussed in Chapter Seven. However, she embellished the issue by linking it to the grant of voting rights.

Despite these attempted restrictions, there is no doubt that philanthropic work for women developed in the new century. It was a gradual progression and the following paragraphs illustrate the extent and scope of the developments. Osler used her membership of the Parents' National Education Union (PNEU) to pursue her interest in female education, including sex education for women and men, and in enlarged employment opportunities for women. The organisation grew out of the Mothers in Council, a charity which developed together with the Mothers Unions' previously mentioned. From 1902 to 1913 she was a committee member of the PNEU serving as President in 1906. It was religion based, largely middle-class and operated by a series of annual talks to co-ordinate home and school training. A wide range of topics were covered, including the training of children for social service, the importance of university education for women, public service for girls, and sex education. One individual contribution from Osler has survived when, in 1912, she participated in a discussion on sex education, particularly in the period prior to marriage, and the preciousness of the 'gift of life'. She concentrated on the lack of candour in the sex education of young men. She complained that they were left 'rudderless' and were wrongly encouraged to think that celibacy and 'unacted desire was a curtailment of personality'.⁶⁷ By these comments Osler can be seen as condemning the failure to curtail irresponsible male promiscuity not only as impure but almost an expression of male superiority. It might also encourage a

⁶⁷ BA&C, MS 2143, *Minutes of the Birmingham Branch of the Parents National Education Union, 1912*, handwritten and unpaginated.

resort to prostitution. It is likely this was a minority view even by this time but it expresses Osler's known views on moral purity and the need for proper guidance to young men on the dangers of what she would have classed as irresponsible sexual relationships.

Two talks given by Osler within the NUWW at the beginning of the new century showed her taking advantage of that forum to promote and increase the scope of women's ambitions on the public stage. In October 1900, in a talk entitled 'Women as Citizens', she used one of her heroines, Lady Godiva, to emphasise women's devotion to their fellow citizens. Valuable as philanthropic organisations such as the BLACPYG and the BLAUW were, Osler expressed her concern that they reached a relatively small number of people whereas some public bodies 'may benefit hundreds of thousands as compared to units and tens'. She gave the example of serving as a Sunday School teacher as compared with membership of a School Board.⁶⁸ In another talk in 1902 entitled a 'A Needful Step Forward' she emphasised the need to become involved in local authority work as a matter of increasing importance in what could be called state philanthropy. She gave two interlocking reasons, firstly, to meet the needs of 'a more socialistic system of government' and secondly, the centralisation of services in elected bodies rather than in voluntary agencies. As an example, she cited the recent Education Act 1902 which abolished School Boards and replaced them with Borough Councils to administer school services. She was concerned that women would lose influence at a time when more proposed legislation affecting women was being considered. As women had been found

⁶⁸ BA&C, L41.2, C. Osler, 'Women as Citizens', *Report of the NUWW, 1900*, pp. 2-7.

trustworthy in the previous regime, so 'they may rightly and justly ask to be made rulers over more in the future'.⁶⁹

Another example of the changing nature of philanthropic work came with the decision of the NUWW to appoint a Legislative and Industrial Committee in 1904 to scrutinise the increasing volume of proposed legislation which affected women. Osler was appointed to the committee and in its first year its report encompassed, amongst other matters, the implementation of the Midwives Act 1902. The report for the year showed Osler as a member of a deputation which interviewed the Chairman of the Council Health Committee about the implications of the statute.⁷⁰ The only other report disclosed within the available records is that for March 1907, examining the Education (Provision of Meals) Act 1906 which gave important discretionary powers to local authorities to provide meals for needy children at public elementary schools. This provision will be discussed at length below in the context of an appraisal of Osler's difficult relationship with the local authority.

In principle, Osler was supportive of women being elected to local government when the appropriate legislation was enacted in 1907. At a preliminary meeting in November 1907, Osler was appointed to a committee to oversee the implementation of the new legislation. The Society for the Election of Women on Local Government Bodies was inaugurated in May 1908. A consideration of her speech at the launch is noteworthy for its humility. She accepted, for example, that women would require training but pointed

⁶⁹ BA&C, L41.2, C. Osler, 'A Needful Step Forward', *Local Report of the NUWW, 1902*, p. 15.

⁷⁰ BA&C, L41.2, *Reports of the Legislative and Industrial Committee of the Birmingham NUWW, 1904-1905*, pp. 58-59.

out that the experience of women 'as heads of homes qualified them to a large extent for public work'. She admitted that it might be difficult to locate suitable women and that they would require the encouragement of 'their men friends'.⁷¹ The context is important as this was a potentially important step in the evolution of women's public work but, as will become clear in subsequent chapters, there was still much opposition to female voting rights at this time. Some women and men opposed to the parliamentary franchise were nonetheless prepared to support local voting rights, seeing it as an extension of their philanthropic role.⁷² Osler may have felt it important to assure those present that the new rights were not interpreted as a stepping-stone to the franchise even though that was her eventual aim. In fact, it was not until 1911 that the first female councillors were elected.

Osler's attitude towards the state, as manifested in local and national government, could be antagonistic as discussed earlier. It is best evaluated by examining the history of her opposition to the provision of school meals to children both before and after the enactment of the Education (Provision of Meals) Act 1906. The Act gave local authorities a discretion to provide eligible schoolchildren with meals in school, replacing, where appropriate, voluntary charitable arrangements. The minutes of an Education Sub-Committee Report confirmed that for many years charitable endeavour had enabled meals organised by the local School Board to be provided in the winter to children chosen by school heads. Latterly, some 200,000 to 250,000 meals had been supplied each year.

⁷¹ Report of the Society for the Election of Women on Local Government Bodies, *Birmingham Daily Post*, 12 May 1908.

⁷² Bush, *Women Against the Vote*, pp. 15-17.

Additionally, a local benefactor, George Hookham, had been providing breakfasts throughout the year to fourteen elementary schools for some seven years and the report suggested that some 300,000 to 320,000 meals had been supplied. Eventually, power was given to the Poor Law Guardians, under the Relief (School Children) Order 1905, to provide meals, although there were complaints that the procedure was overly bureaucratic and restrictive. The Guardians were desirous of the Council taking over the feeding programme as soon as possible. On 19 June 1907, a plan was approved. A census for the period up to 31 March 1908 was returned, showing a total of 205,518 meals being provided at a cost of £1,245. An evaluation indicated that there had been a distinct improvement in the children's response to the teaching received.⁷³

Osler was hostile to the idea of the local authority being involved in the provision of meals. The previous year, when the issue was being debated, she took to the columns of the *Spectator* to air her views. Her letter of 24 March 1906 questioned the accuracy and extent of the problem, and whilst conceding that there were needy children, she did not accept it was of such magnitude as to justify 'a measure so subversive of parental responsibility'.⁷⁴ Mr. Hookham's letter in response has not been seen, but in Osler's further letter of 7 April 1906 she expressed surprise that Hookham thought it right to be 'relieving all neglectful and unnatural parents' from their maintenance obligations, not through a charity or the Poor Law, but through a new authority free 'of any discredit or social stigma'. She considered it 'ruinous to the morals of present and future

⁷³ BA&C, LB48.22, *Minutes of the Birmingham Education Special Sub-Committee Reports*, 22 March, 27 April, 19 June, 19 July 1907, and Census Return.

⁷⁴ *The Spectator*, 24 March 1906.

generations', and that it might have been preferable to remove the children from home knowing that the 'callous selfishness and neglect of duty' will be borne by the public.⁷⁵

The extensive treatment of this issue is justified for two reasons. Firstly, it is another example of what Osler saw as the increasing power and influence of the state and its local organs, in encroaching upon and superseding parental authority and voluntary philanthropic endeavour, to produce a solution to perceived parental inadequacy. Secondly, it enables a torch to be shone on the thoughts and ideology of a rational, libertarian Victorian woman. As a Liberal, Osler was instinctively hostile to encroachment by the state or authority of any kind on the freedom of the individual. Thus, whilst she accepted the inevitability and benefit of some local services, it should be in the least interventionist way possible. Giving advice and practical help to avoid infant death was one thing but taking away as basic a parental obligation as the feeding of their children was quite another. For Osler and similar thinkers, the key question for them to answer was what was to happen to the children who were starving and in danger of death or serious illness, not to mention severe social and moral damage. She gave her answer in the first chapter of *Home*. Her case was that the remedy lay within the family and the 'slow patient upbuilding of self-dependence and responsibility' because, as she frankly asserted 'a state of Society in which any large proportion of parents are unable decently to support their children, is a rotten and dangerous state, and demands reform'. She called for a fairer society, by the raising of wages, a more just and equitable distribution of wealth by evolution not revolution, improved conditions of labour, shorter working

⁷⁵ *The Spectator*, 7 April 1906.

hours, better housing provision and town planning, and education of parents in child-rearing and home making. It was less radical than substituting the state for parents, but 'has the merits of training a people to work out their own salvation by personal aspiration and endeavour'.⁷⁶

Although Osler's views on state interventionism may sound unpalatable to modern ears, they have to be seen in the context of their time. They were formed against the backdrop of the development of an active socialist party in the country and what she saw as the ever-increasing power of the state. However, it can also be said that the reforms she outlined had considerable affinity with the Liberal Government reforms from 1906 onwards.⁷⁷ Thus whilst she exhibits an instinctive aversion to the exercise of power by the state over the individual's freedom of action, she reluctantly acknowledged the winds of social and political change brought in by the new century as seen earlier in the case of combatting infant mortality.

Two further examples illustrate the ongoing debate. Osler was a contributor to the Birmingham Settlement, another charitable organisation set up to benefit the Birmingham populace. In 1908 she attempted to set up a scheme to provide cookery lessons for predominantly working-class women in their homes. In *Memories 2* she described the aim of the venture was to protect 'English Home Life' from the 'socialist mania for State interference.' She had high hopes for the scheme, which was supported by 'experienced social workers' but it collapsed within the year. Her thoughts on the

⁷⁶ *Home*, p. 19.

⁷⁷ E. Bernstein, *Liberalism and Liberal Politics in Edwardian England* (Winchester, MA, 1986), p. 198.

failure are illuminating, suggesting it might be that the intended recipients valued only what they paid for, or felt shame at their modest abode or were suspicious of patronage. No doubt she was in earnest and wanted to confer a benefit but was unsuccessful. It arguably provided evidence of her lack of empathy with the working-classes.⁷⁸ The second example concerned a visit Osler made in 1906 to the opening of a club connected to the Early Morning Adult School run by the Unitarian Domestic Mission. The building had been renovated to include a museum, a bagatelle and a small library. She described it as 'a genuine piece of self-help and self-reliance' which she found endearing in an age of 'getting everything done for you instead of doing it'.⁷⁹ It illustrated again the theme of self-reliance, but Osler was prepared to consider assistance and change in respect of social and medical advances, for example, in the treatment of VD.

During the years of the First World War important advances were made in relation to the treatment of VD. In 1916, towards the end of her active political life, Osler became involved in the debate surrounding the issue. The control of VD had been a vexed problem throughout the Victorian period particularly in garrison towns, where sexual liaisons between serving soldiers and prostitutes sometimes led to infection. The Contagious Diseases Acts passed in 1864, 1866 and 1869 provided for the compulsory examination of common prostitutes and for the compulsory detention and treatment of those women found to have contracted the disease. The legislation caused much anger amongst female activists and, as discussed earlier, led to a long campaign for its abolition

⁷⁸ *Memories 2*, Chapter 3.

⁷⁹ *Memories 2*, Chapter 1.

led by Josephine Butler which eventually succeeded in 1882.⁸⁰ Notwithstanding the repeal, it was common ground that the problem exposed by the controversy needed to be addressed, particularly during periods of war when the incidence of VD tended to become more prevalent.

In February 1916, in her capacity as President of the Mrs. Roger's Memorial Home, one of the early Rescue Homes for vulnerable women, Osler herself raised her concerns that men returning from war might 'be eager to throw off the restraint of self-control to which they had become accustomed and might hunger for pleasure and self-indulgence'.⁸¹ The Report of the Royal Commission on Venereal Diseases had recently been published and in May 1916 Osler presided at a meeting to discuss its recommendations.⁸² An analysis of the conference findings shows how medical advances in the diagnosis and treatment of VD offered the real possibility of a cure if the public and the medical profession were apprised of the information and funds were provided for the appropriate treatment. It suggested that twenty-five per cent of the cost should come from the local rates, and seventy-five per cent from Imperial Funds. Such free and confidential treatment was seen as a big step forward. However, the report also stressed the perennial need for education of the public. Osler quickly turned her attention to that more familiar issue. A Sub-Committee for Education in Moral and Racial Hygiene was formed from existing members of the council of the NUWW and other relevant societies, chaired by Osler. She held a meeting in July 1916 to prepare a series of lectures which

⁸⁰ For more details of the statute and the repeal campaign reference can be made to Chapter Two of this thesis, and Judith Walkowitz's book there referred to.

⁸¹ BA&C, L41.2, *NUWW Report, June 1916*, p. 17.

⁸² *Ibid.*, *September 1916*, p. 61.

were delivered in the autumn of 1916 by a professional speaker from London.⁸³ There were four lectures on the biology of sex, parenthood, teaching in women's meetings, and teaching in girls' clubs, with a view to their instruction and accompanying literature was dispersed to schools and other bodies.

Osler appeared to have ceased active involvement with the Sub-Committee in the following year but importantly she was very active in following up the Royal Commission report with practical action in pursuance of its recommendations, on a subject which was always of great concern to her even at a time when her health was increasingly fragile and the campaign for women's suffrage was coming to its climax. Plainly, the approach to the problem of prostitution and sexual disease had changed since the days of the Moral Education Branch and the BLAUW. Medical advances, the involvement of the local authority, the provision of public money for medical treatment and professional instruction had replaced volunteerism. She embraced the changes which she accepted were beneficial for women despite her individualist instincts.

Osler devoted most of her time in the twentieth century to female emancipation which she saw not only as a fundamental civil right, but also as the best way of improving the welfare of women and their status in society, not least by ensuring that women's concerns would have to be taken into account in their role as voters and subsequently as legislators. Whilst supportive of women being involved in municipal affairs, she did not seek election to the Council in Birmingham although she was invited to stand in 1909 as will be revealed in Chapter Six. The careers of Elizabeth Cadbury and Ellen Pinsent

⁸³ *Ibid.*, December 1916, pp. 93-94.

showed different avenues of philanthropic activity and exemplified the range of activities in which women in Birmingham were involved in the early twentieth century, and the gradual merging of the philanthropic and the political strands.

Whilst supporting women's rights including suffrage, Cadbury was more important as a philanthropist than as a political campaigner, even though she served as a city councillor from 1919 to 1923. After her arrival in Birmingham in 1888, she was involved, like Osler, in private charities such as the NUWW and the BLAUW. However, in the new century, she participated in practical philanthropy in conjunction with the local authority in improving children's health. In 1911 she became the first chairman of the Birmingham City Council Hygiene Sub-Committee with responsibility for health inspections and dental health throughout a child's school career. It was seen as 'a new field of opportunity' for her, and she 'was to play a leading part' in the committee's development which involved her in negotiating with the male-dominated Council for the resources to carry out her philanthropic work.⁸⁴ In 1913 she played an important role in the funding and establishment of a Central School Clinic for the city, making use of her contacts with male councillors, including the Chief Medical Officer, Sir George Newman.⁸⁵ It is a compelling example of the increasing importance of women in the affairs of Birmingham and the blurring of the distinction between strictly philanthropic work and public activity.

Ellen Pinsent who, like Cadbury, came to Birmingham in 1888, was another middle-class woman who engaged in philanthropic activity, and worked with the Council, in her case

⁸⁴ R. Scott, *Elizabeth Cadbury 1858-1951* (London, 1956), p. 105.

⁸⁵ H. Smith, 'Elizabeth Taylor Cadbury (1858-1951): religion, maternalism and social reform in Birmingham, 1888-1914' (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2012), pp. 205-209.

to address the needs of women she described as ‘feeble-minded’. Unlike Osler and Cadbury, she was not active in support of women’s suffrage. From 1903, until her departure from the city in 1913, Pinsent chaired the Special Schools Sub-Committee of the Education Committee and became one of the first two women city councillors in 1911. Her work can be seen as pioneering in the scientific identification of girls and women whose inadequacies were so severe that they were likely to require continuing care into adulthood, not excluding their compulsory detention for their own protection and to prevent reproduction. In 1904, she was appointed as the sole woman member of the Royal Commission for the Care and Control of the Feeble-minded. Its eventual report led to the passing of the Mental Deficiency Act 1913. Pinsent was an avowed eugenicist, and her work was controversial, although her views were not uncommon at the time. For the purposes of this thesis, however, the point is that as a woman philanthropist she was engaging in a prominent role as an administrator and implementer of radical policies in the city. Her work highlighted the ‘shifting boundaries both between professional and amateur and between philanthropic concern and “scientific diagnosis”’.⁸⁶

The final section of this chapter moves the history beyond Osler and exemplifies the engagement of women with philanthropic work as national public policy in the field of child welfare. The development of the concept of maternalism in the field of child welfare provides an example of policies of motherhood linking municipal activity with private initiative. Mary Ward, 1851-1920, was a non-conformist, anti-suffragist who involved

⁸⁶ R. Watts, *Women in Science: A Social and Cultural History* (Abingdon, 2007), p. 182. See also P. Hollis, *Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government 1865-1914* (Oxford, 1987), p. 425 for details of Pinsent’s career.

herself in local philanthropic activities in the field of children's welfare expressing it as 'participation of each individual in effort for the good of the community' and which she termed 'civic maternalism'.⁸⁷ She founded settlements together with local government which provided facilities for disadvantaged children, including the Invalid School for Crippled Children. She looked upon her work as including a collectivist element, whilst retaining private input and influence. Seth Koven describes it as at the 'intersection between voluntary associations and local government' also 'one of the most innovative and essential sites of social welfare development' at the end of the nineteenth century, and a 'site for the development of women's civic consciousness'.⁸⁸

Eve Colpus's recent work on inter-war philanthropy ranges beyond Osler's active life but is appropriate in showing how philanthropic activity had developed during and beyond her lifetime. Her book discusses the lives of four women who operated in different areas of activity This study concentrates on the work of Lettice Fisher, 1875-1956, a middle-class married woman active in Liberal politics and a supporter of women's voting rights. She had studied economics at university and her main interest was in using voluntary enterprises to improve the lives of poor families. In 1918 she became the first chairman of a new organisation the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child. It was founded in the same year as the passing of the Maternity and Child Welfare Act and worked as both a supporting agency for unmarried women and also as a lobbying body. It looked to reform the law defining the status of illegitimate children and aimed to keep

⁸⁷ S. Koven, 'Borderlands: Women, Voluntary Action and Child Welfare in Britain, 1840-1914' in S. Koven and S. Michel (eds.), *Mothers of a New World* (London, 1993), pp. 94-135.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

the children and the mother together if possible. Fisher was adept at the use of the media to convey her message, for example, writing a letter to the *Times* in 1921 criticising the limitations on married women's employment in business and industry, and in 1924 giving a lecture to London University students on the same theme. She continued her propaganda work for the unmarried mother and used her political contacts with Edwardian New Liberalism as espoused by Lloyd George, a close friend of the Fishers. Fisher's work shows social and political debates moving beyond a gendered approach and following Mary Ward in marking the shifting shape of social life.⁸⁹

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed Osler's extensive and varied involvement in female philanthropy during the later Victorian and early twentieth century period. Her adult life from the early 1870s coincided with the early years of the campaign for women's suffrage, and the emergence of women to stake their claim for public recognition. This study adds significantly to the existing historiography of women's involvement in philanthropy in Birmingham. The uncovering of archive material supplemented by her own contemporaneous records provides a fresh insight into women's developing role in municipal life and the social changes taking place in the later Victorian and Edwardian period. An investigation of Osler's motivations in undertaking philanthropic work illustrates the intellectual and social challenges to middle-class women like Osler, as she sought to reconcile her individualistic instincts with the need for active local and national

⁸⁹ E. Colpus, *Female Philanthropy in the Interwar World* (London, 2018), pp. 76-86, 108-118, 166-175.

involvement in meeting the demands of a growing and more assertive working-class population.

Osler's stated reasons for her involvement in philanthropy were various. It was not merely a way for an able and willing middle-class woman to spend her days, but rather a desire to use her time and money to enhance the welfare of her fellow women. She was not a 'gentlewoman' philanthropist as discussed in Chapter Three. For her the work was purposeful and rewarding. It was also a method by which the profile of women in Birmingham could be enhanced. It enabled her to meet and work with a variety of women from different classes, albeit in a limited way, and was an important way for women in this period to make their voices heard in a way that individual women could not easily achieve. She learned organisational skills in her executive role with the charities and developed the oratorical skills which became such a marked feature of her public life. Paula Bartley has suggested that for middle-class women like Osler, philanthropic, moral and educational work was a method by which working-class women could be controlled. This accusation is arguably misconceived. In a patriarchal society, one of Osler's basic objectives was to assist all women, by their own endeavours, to raise their sights as high as was commensurate with their abilities thus fitting them to take their place in civic life. It was a wish to enable rather than to control. However, she admitted that as an upper middle-class woman, she found communication with lower-class women challenging, a fact that undoubtedly limited her effectiveness, given that the incidence of infant mortality and prostitution was much higher amongst working-class women.

At the end of the Victorian era, there is no doubt that philanthropic work was evolving in tandem with social and political change. Osler only reluctantly came to terms with even limited collective endeavour and as a mid-Victorian that is perhaps unsurprising, although the contemporaneous views of women such as Josephine Butler with her concept of 'caring power' show that new ideas of aiding the poor and disadvantaged were gaining purchase. Modern historians such as Paula Bartley are expressly critical of Osler. Osler's trenchant views on the provision of school meals showed a political and class prejudice that blinded her to the clear practical and welfare benefits of providing much-needed succour and nourishment. Philanthropic endeavour was perhaps the one obvious area where Osler's views could be considered as outdated during her life although she did come to recognise that as civic society became more complex, there had to be a larger role for local and national government and organised philanthropy had to develop with it. This thesis adds to the historiography of philanthropy in Birmingham by showing the dynamic nature of the developments in welfare provision in the city, and the difficulty of Liberal individualists like Osler to accommodate this changing world. However, Osler was at least supportive of women becoming involved in municipal affairs, and her engagement with the local authority in combatting VD was evidence from later in her life of a receptiveness to medical advances and new methods of dealing with problems she had confronted during her life in Birmingham. The work of Elizabeth Cadbury and Ellen Pinsent reveals a more inclusive approach to providing help and support for women, and the widening scope of philanthropy. They had both been co-opted on to local authority committees prior to women being eligible for direct election to them. The establishment of the Central School Clinic was a major achievement for Cadbury in enhancing children's

medical services. Pinsent's success was arguably more noteworthy in pioneering the provision of health services for the mentally impaired. However questionable her aims and methods may have been, her use of statistics, publicity and the infant science of psychiatry were ground-breaking. An examination of the work of other women such as Josephine Butler, Mary Ward and Lettice Fisher showed how women's philanthropy developed enormously over the span of Osler's active life in ways she found difficult to come to terms with.

Osler never completely abandoned philanthropic work and recognised its importance for women's welfare and rights. Succeeding chapters show that she dedicated the remainder of her life to achieving feminine advancement by obtaining parliamentary voting rights for women. She saw this as the most important reform to enhance the status and worth of women in society.

Chapter Five: Feminism, and the Early Years of the Suffrage Campaign 1873-1900

This chapter is the first of three which will predominantly deal with Osler's role and importance in the long campaign for women's voting rights. A largely chronological approach is adopted to explain and analyse the different phases of the struggle over the forty or so years of Osler's active involvement in Birmingham. It analyses Osler's public life both as a feminist and suffrage campaigner in Birmingham and as an active supporter of the Liberal cause within the city in the nineteenth century and is separated into four parts: firstly, a discussion of the development of Osler's feminism within the context of her early public career; secondly, a consideration of her pursuit of women's rights encompassing the period up until the Third Reform Act of 1884 and the subsequent Liberal Party schism following the defeat in 1885 of the Irish Home Bill; thirdly, an examination of how she continued her campaign during the period until the end of the century; fourthly a consideration of the extent to which the suffrage campaign was uniform or varied depending on such factors as, for example, geographical location or cultural background. Two principal research questions arise for discussion. Firstly, what was the nature of Osler's feminism at the beginning of her public career and what that meant in terms of her actions and beliefs? Secondly, how and with what success did Osler pursue the cause of women's rights in this period of the campaign in Birmingham and what can be gleaned by looking at the issues in a wider geographical and cultural context.

In that regard, the work of Karen Hunt and June Hannam is relevant in pointing out the importance of a local study of the women's campaign for suffrage. Although their work

relates to the period after partial women's suffrage was granted, their argument for 'a new archaeology of women's politics' situated 'within local political cultures' and 'women's neighbourhood activism' is germane to Osler's activities in her city in pursuit of voting rights. The availability of written testimony of Osler's thoughts and beliefs is an advantage in supplementing the other surviving written material about the city. The ascendancy of Joseph Chamberlain's Unionists following the political split in the city over Irish Home Rule was also a significant factor affecting the suffrage cause.¹ The significance of geographical location and cultural considerations on a larger scale is shown by an examination of the campaign in Wales to be considered within the Literature Review below.

Literature Review

The review of the suffrage and political literature in the Introduction makes it clear that there is a paucity of material relevant to this study in Birmingham which this thesis seeks to remedy. Ben Griffin's research concentrates upon the changes to men's attitude towards women and the effect of this on the culture of politics and the voting system in pursuance of the suffrage cause.² This chapter gives detailed consideration to the 1890s, often seen as a barren period for women's rights. This thesis argues to the contrary that there was much activity during that decade and David Rubinstein's extensive work on those years has thrown light on the unheralded but important work of women's

¹ K. Hunt and J. Hannam, 'Towards an Archaeology of Interwar women's Politics: The Local and the Everyday' in J. V. Gottlieb and R Toye (eds.), *The Aftermath of Suffrage: Women, Gender and Politics in Britain, 1918-1945* (Basingstoke, 2013), pp. 124-125.

² B. Griffin, *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 201-305.

organisations.³ However, none of these books considered the situation in Birmingham. This study suggests that the strong presence of Unionism in Birmingham after 1888 and the consequent tendency towards anti-suffragism makes the city an important and distinctive area of study. More general written sources outlined in the introductory chapter are referred to as the chapter unfolds. An analysis of the issues and sources for the position in Wales is pursued within this Review.

Beth Jenkins's study highlights the challenges faced in pursuing suffrage activity in Wales.⁴ Although social and political differences were present across the United Kingdom the position was more problematic in Wales because of 'linguistic and cultural differences' which hampered the establishment of 'a truly inclusive movement across Britain'.⁵ Jenkins suggests that recent scholarship supports the idea of the development of a distinctive Welsh movement quoting the work of Ursula Masson, who foregrounded the issues of Welsh nonconformity, and Welsh Liberal nationalism, with the Welsh Union of Women's Liberal Associations as the 'main early vehicle for suffrage'.⁶ In political terms, Jenkins is clear that the Liberal Party was the dominant political party up until the First World War, but it was coming under increasing challenge from the Labour movement in the south of Wales.⁷

³ D. Rubinstein, *Before the Suffragettes, Women's Emancipation in the 1890s* (Brighton, 1986).

⁴ B. Jenkins, 'Suffrage organisers, grassroots activism and the campaign in Wales' in A Hughes-Johnson and L Jenkins (eds.), *The Politics of Women's Suffrage* (London, 2021), pp. 87-107.

⁵ Jenkins, 'Suffrage organisers', p. 88.

⁶ U. Masson, *For Women, for Wales and for Liberalism: Women in Liberal Politics in Wales, 1880-1914* (Cardiff, 1991), in Jenkins, 'Suffrage organisers', p. 89.

⁷ Jenkins, 'Suffrage organisers', p. 102.

Outside formal political structures, Jenkins clearly identified the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies as taking a leading role in the years leading up to the First World War, although caution is needed because of the distinctive characteristics of the Welsh nation. For example, there were strongly working-class areas in the southern coalfields and the slate-quarrying regions in the north, so women's political participation in these areas was limited. By contrast, in the commercial towns the middle-classes tended to dominate. The agricultural regions in the middle and north contained many Welsh-speakers. These factors presented a large challenge to women in promoting their suffrage message.⁸ In the early twentieth century some half of the population spoke Welsh and in some rural and northern areas the proportion of monoglot speakers was over 50%, thus placing a premium on Welsh-speaking campaigners both for oral and written communication.⁹

The works of Jenkins and Masson shows that the challenges for women to participate in the suffrage campaign in Wales were considerable in light of the cultural, political and class issues outlined. They were plainly different to those in a developed urban area such as Birmingham as a discussion of Osler's activities in Birmingham will illustrate.

The Nature of Osler's Feminism and Early Public Life

Little material has survived of Osler's early work for women's rights during the first years of her married life. *Memories 1* contained much more information about her work for the Liberal cause which she served in a minor capacity to promote the Civic Gospel and

⁸ Ibid., pp. 90-91.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 98-99.

develop a distinct liberal policy through the development of the Caucus, the political machine established to promote Liberal control of Birmingham.¹⁰ Although the evidence for her early work is scarce there are some surviving accounts of her early speeches which are important in elucidating the nature of her message both to supporters of women's rights, and to those whom she wished to attract to the cause. In assessing her remarks, two points should be borne in mind. Firstly, in the period from 1875 to 1881 when these speeches were made, it was still unusual for a young woman such as Osler to have spoken in public on the rights of women. Secondly, it would be an error to believe that feminist thinking was limited solely to women's voting rights at that time. For her and her supporters and allies, feminism was an attitude of mind and an expression of her thoughts on the condition of women and how these might be improved. She saw suffrage as the way forward, but this chapter suggests that others took a different view. Two speeches at meetings in support of voting rights illustrate the basis of her feminist thinking at this early stage of her public life.

In April 1877 in Birmingham at a large meeting of the National Society for Women's Suffrage, Osler seconded a motion proposed by Henry Crosskey to grant the parliamentary vote to single women on the same terms as men. The influence of Crosskey on the young Osler was highlighted in Chapter Two. The points she made are fundamental to her feminist thinking. Firstly, voting rights enabled women to have independent rights other than those that men 'chose to accord to them'. Secondly, if men realised that, as mothers, women had a great bearing on the character and qualities

¹⁰ *Memories 1*, p. 31.

of men during their development, they would have nothing to fear if women could bring those qualities to an adult forum. It was fear coupled with prejudice that led women to be subjugated, just as formerly they had been 'shut up in convents, veiled, secluded and uneducated'. Thirdly, she emphasised that what women wanted was the autonomous right to do 'whatever we are able and willing to do' and to remove 'artificial and conventional boundaries', so that it would not be any more 'unwomanly' for a woman to participate in politics than for a man to 'nurse a baby'. Fourthly, no government could be truly representative which ignored the views of 'more than half the community'. Fifthly, it was a 'hollow pretence' to suggest that men could cater for the needs of women, given the 'glaring inequality' in the application of the law to women. The 'unmanly coarseness' of men's speech towards women showed that men were incapable of 'understanding and representing them'.¹¹

Despite those trenchant comments, her speech at a Great Suffrage Demonstration at Birmingham Town Hall on 22 February 1881 was noteworthy for another fundamental premise of her feminism, namely her desire to work with men for the betterment both of women's lives and of society generally. She sought to refute the idea that women were antagonistic towards men. On the contrary, many women like Osler herself were happily married to good husbands and fathers. They wanted the right to be 'truer helpmates than they could be now', and 'to work hand in hand' to reform society. This amity would not only affect public affairs, but also the 'peace and purity of their homes', and the 'happiness of every little child at his mother's breast'.¹² Another important element of

¹¹ Women's Library, London, *Women's Suffrage Journal*, 1 May 1877.

¹² Women's Library, London, *Women's Suffrage Journal*, 1 March 1881.

her feminist viewpoint was her criticism of the predominantly middle-class women who refused to become involved in the promotion of women's rights, as discussed in Chapter Three.

To refer to women who expressed these ideas as 'feminists' is problematic because this descriptive term did not exist in England when Osler gave these speeches. According to Lucy Bland, the word originated in France only arriving in England in 1895, and for many years was 'rarely used'.¹³ Ben Griffin states that the word did not enter 'common usage until the early twentieth century'.¹⁴ The writer has discovered only one occasion in all of Osler's written material at his disposal when she used the word. It occurs in a *Journal 2* entry of 1918 describing women's support for the defeat of an attempt by the government to revive the Contagious Diseases Legislation. Osler indicated that in the event of 'united feminist support', the government would concede.¹⁵ It suggests that by 1918 the word 'feminist' was in more common use. The question then is whether there was a consensus as to what the word meant and how far the definitions of other historians and contemporary women accord with the five points in Osler's 1877 speech. Unsurprisingly, there was no complete agreement, and there remains controversy as to whether it is anachronistic to retrospectively attach meaning to words which were not used by these women themselves. This writer contends that it is reasonable to investigate whether research elicits some consensus in the views of Osler's contemporaries. Lucy Bland used the term 'feminism' to refer to the 'thoughts, actions

¹³ L. Bland, 'The Married Woman, the 'New Woman' and the Feminist: Sexual Politics of the 1890s' in Jane Rendall (ed.), *Equal and Different, Women's Politics 1800-1914* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 141-164, p. 142.

¹⁴ Griffin, *The Politics of Gender*, p. 6.

¹⁵ *Journal 2*, p. 36.

and persons that challenged the existing power of men over women and its consequent inequalities'.¹⁶ Whilst this offers only a general definition it does address the power imbalance between men and women, and the subordination that follows. Bland also emphasised the point made earlier, that feminism cannot be limited to suffragism. Earlier feminists might, for example, have concentrated on improving married women's property rights or gaining access to 'higher education and medicine'.¹⁷ This illustrates a theme of this research that views Osler as a transitional figure in the eventual concentration on voting rights as the only way in which women would gain full recognition.

Barbara Caine's study of four prominent women activists during the nineteenth century - Emily Davies, Frances Power Cobbe, Josephine Butler, and Millicent Fawcett - further developed Bland's views. All were supporters of women's suffrage, but only Fawcett, the youngest, adopted suffrage as her main mission in life. Davies's main interest was in developing women's public education opportunities, Cobbe concentrated chiefly on women's private lives and the incidence of violence within marriage, and Butler led the long campaign to repeal the discriminatory Contagious Diseases Acts. Caine's research led her to adopt the definition of feminism developed by the American historian, Nancy Cott.¹⁸ She identified three fundamental strands: firstly, an opposition to a 'sex hierarchy'; secondly, the belief that women's subordination was 'socially constructed and not ordained by God or nature'; and thirdly, that women 'constitute both a biological sex

¹⁶ L. Bland, 'The Married Woman', p. 142.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 142.

¹⁸ B. Caine, *Victorian Feminists* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 6-7.

and a social grouping'.¹⁹ She succinctly captured the themes of female suppression and lack of autonomy based on male prejudice and presumption, combining them with a recognition of the separate nature of the two sexes. Fawcett placed particular emphasis on women's distinct domestic role and the nurturing of the children. For her the differences between the sexes on this and other issues increased the need for the franchise so that women could pursue and protect those differences.²⁰ On the last point, reference is made again to Griffin's argument; whilst accepting that feminism was 'fundamentally concerned' with ideas about the place of women in society, it should also be about 'explaining and changing the behaviour of men'. The 'women's question' cannot be 'hermetically sealed' such that the evolution of ideas about legal rights, religious belief and masculinity are ignored.²¹

This examination of other campaigners suggests that Osler's views from an early age meshed well with the developing tide of opinion in the later Victorian age. Her insistence on women's autonomy and her rejection of gender boundaries and distinct spheres of activity, provided common ground for co-operation with other women campaigners. Whilst Osler was always prepared to work with men for the benefit of society, she had little confidence in positive change, and in any event, it was a fundamental right of women to end groundless distinctions. Like her friend Fawcett, her feminism was maternal. The physical and psychological differences between the sexes were clear to her. She did not see them as an impediment to voting rights or as 'unfeminine'. Her

¹⁹ N. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, CT and London, 1987), p. 3.

²⁰ Caine, *Victorian Feminists*, p. 221.

²¹ Griffin, *The Politics of Gender*, p. 8.

preference for married life as natural was clear, and her dismissal of the 'new woman' was discussed in Chapter Three. She was equally dismissive of women who failed to engage at all in feminist debates. These debates about women's rights were important and their practical application in the earlier years of the suffrage campaign will now be examined.

Osler's Role in the Pursuit of Women's Rights in Birmingham from 1880 to 1888

The evidence for the years 1883 and 1884 when the Liberal Government was legislating for a further extension of the voting franchise, reveals that there was never any real possibility of women obtaining voting rights at that time. Amongst the principal reasons were the opposition of powerful male Liberal politicians. The two Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867 had still left most men without the vote. A third Act was proposed to increase the electorate to a little under 60 per cent of the male population. Critically this would grant voting rights to coal miners and rural voters including farm labourers.²² Since one of the reasons for refusing the vote to women was their supposed lack of education and political knowledge, the enfranchisement of humble and possibly illiterate male workers would weaken that objection.

Fortunately, an isolated Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society (BWSS) report of a large suffrage meeting at Birmingham Town Hall on 26 January 1883 has survived, affording evidence of how seriously men treated the women's claim. There was a large attendance of many men and women and its importance can be gauged by the fact that the Lord

²² R. Jenkins, *Gladstone* (London, 1985), p. 488.

Mayor presided. The resolution to be moved was firstly to extend the franchise to 'suitably qualified women'; secondly, no proposed franchise reform was to exclude such an extension. The franchise sought was limited in that it would be on the same terms as for men, namely household suffrage. As married women could not be householders under the doctrine of coverture, only some unmarried women and widows would qualify. Griffin pointed to evidence that there were 487,000 widows and 1,110,000 spinsters in the country who were without the vote.²³ For many women the exclusion of married women was a highly contentious issue but most, including Osler, were prepared to agree to it as a first step, although it meant that they themselves would not have a vote. Osler made a reasoned speech in support, appealing to English Liberal men to assist women even if they believed, as many did, that middle-class women might tend to the Conservative cause. Great emphasis was placed upon the simple justice of the political and ethical claim for the right to vote and a rejection of partisanship. She made three particular points. Firstly, that women had no wish to 'disturb society' but were mainly 'interested in a peaceable, orderly, social life'. Secondly, as a Liberal, she desired the election of governments 'of the people by the people', not those based upon 'rank, or riches, or even by intelligence'. To stand against women's voting rights because women might vote for the opposing party, whilst supporting the enfranchisement of agricultural labourers for the opposite reason, was 'not Liberalism'. It showed a lack of ideals and a lack of faith in the exercise of 'power over the minds of others'. Thirdly, pursuing her ideal liberalism, she had 'no desire to make this a woman's question' in the sense of

²³ Griffin, *The Politics of Gender*, p. 271.

being antagonistic towards men. Women were not 'slaves begging favours from tyrants'. They sought justice for their sex from men.²⁴

There was much support for the resolution, including from men, but there was a significant letter in opposition from Joseph Chamberlain who wrote that whilst he could not find a 'logical' reason to oppose women's enfranchisement, he would need to consider the 'special benefits' and the 'practical advantage' which would flow from franchise extension. However, he went further in indicating that, for example, the vote had always been denied to 'minors and paupers'.²⁵ Thus, in addition to the 'special benefits and advantages' needing to be displayed, Chamberlain saw women as inferior persons to be compared with those disadvantaged by age or poverty. For further evidence, reference can be made to *Memories 1* when Osler referred to a speech given by Chamberlain in her presence at Bingley Hall in 1883. He supported the proposed franchise extension, but without making any mention of women's claims to representation 'in a way which went to my heart'. Chamberlain knew she was present, and afterwards apparently told a companion that Osler was sure to have noted the omission of women from his speech. She expressed the strong need to change his mind 'if it takes half my life'.²⁶ She was unsuccessful, and more will be said about her difficult relationship with Chamberlain in subsequent chapters. He remained a very influential Liberal voice in Birmingham as an MP, even though by then he had become a national figure. His opposition would have been particularly unwelcome, as in 1872 he had

²⁴ BA&C, L76.12, *Annual Report of the BWSS*, 26 January 1883, p. 19.

²⁵ Women's Library, London, *Women's Suffrage Journal*, 3 February 1883.

²⁶ *Memories 1*, p. 54.

supported a resolution to enfranchise female householders.²⁷ It is unclear why he ever adopted a pro-suffrage stance because, aside from his comments in 1883, the evidence from his third marriage in 1888 confirmed that he was no supporter of women's rights. Mary Endicott was an American who confirmed her 'willingness' to submit to him and disclaimed 'any wish to vote'. He insisted that she promised to honour and obey him as a simple and natural action. 'Encouraged' by her denial of women's voting rights, he 'poured out his loathing for the odious crew of strong-minded women, all of them more or less unsexed'. He considered John Stuart Mill's book on women's subjection to be 'stupid'.²⁸ As would become apparent later, Chamberlain was no stranger to changing his mind, but he had travelled some distance between 1872 and 1883.

Chamberlain was not the only prominent man who was adamantly opposed to women's voting rights. Gladstone was another eminent anti-suffrage Liberal politician. During the debates on the Third Reform Bill in 1884, an amendment to include household suffrage for women in the terms discussed above was threatening 'to run strongly'. Gladstone gave instructions that if the amendment was carried the government would resign because he feared that the whole Bill might be lost. The amendment was duly defeated by 236 votes to 33, representing a large fall in support from votes in previous years.²⁹ Clearly Gladstone was opposed to women having the vote in principle. The best evidence was his letter to Samuel Smith MP in 1892, when he expressed the fear that women might inadvertently 'trespass upon the delicacy, the purity, the refinement, the elevation

²⁷ Griffin, *The Politics of Gender*, p. 270.

²⁸ P. T. Marsh, *Joseph Chamberlain: Entrepreneur in Politics* (Kings Lynn, 1994), p. 302.

²⁹ Griffin, *The Politics of Gender*, p. 280.

of her own nature, which are the present sources of its power'.³⁰ This was condescending rather than dismissive compared with Chamberlain, but the message was the same.

Another Liberal grandee who opposed women's voting rights was John Bright. In a letter to Osler of 14 October 1885 he recorded his opposition on the basis that he would not want women to be part of the 'turmoil' of elections to no advantage to the country. He believed that women were best looked after by the male members of their family.³¹

The conclusion which can be drawn from the events of 1883-1884 is that, although there was reasonable support for limited voting rights for women, it was insufficient to overcome the political opposition of the Liberal Party establishment as well as the Conservative opposition. Griffin described the suffrage movement thereafter as becoming despondent and relatively inactive.³² In retrospect it was premature and unduly optimistic to expect such a major leap forward. Taking a long view, the 1884 Act coupled with its two predecessors had moved the country significantly towards democracy, but many men remained without voting rights in an electoral system which was still property based. In a patriarchal society, it was always likely to be women who would be the last people in the country to be enfranchised. Any improvements in their position were bound to be gradual, and one measure of progress would have been women's formal involvement in party politics and women's organisations at a local level, both to increase their profile and their political and social awareness, and to combat discrimination against women at the local and national level.

³⁰ University College London, Special Collections, *Letter from William Gladstone to Samuel Smith MP, 1892*.

³¹ *Memories 1*, pp. 76-77.

³² Griffin, *The Politics of Gender*, p. 281.

In furtherance of that aim, in 1883 Osler was one of six women elected by their Ward Committees to serve on the Central Representative Committee of the Birmingham Liberal Association (BLA). These committees were component parts of the Caucus. The Central Representative Committee was particularly responsible for disseminating party propaganda and had a role in selecting parliamentary candidates. It was in turn responsible to an Executive Committee. Asa Briggs described the system as 'democratic centralism'.³³ Unfortunately, the records of the Central Representative Committee and details of Osler's work on it have not come to light, but her brief description in *Memories 1* is important for this thesis. She gave the impression that these six women may have been the first elected to the Central Representative Committee and further suggested that the male 'Management' were unhappy about it and might seek 'to turn us off'. She felt it her 'duty to the women's cause to stay on'. In a 'cri de coeur' she questioned why women were not given the 'natural, quiet representation of a vote' so that they may 'stop agitating'; whilst she was sometimes disheartened, she nevertheless felt that they had 'won so much'. Indeed, by the time *Memories 1* was written in 1904, she recorded that two unnamed women had been elected to the Cabinet of the Liberal Association.³⁴ In *Memories 2* she recorded she was honoured to be made a Vice-President of the BLA, the first woman to be so appointed.³⁵

Osler's account yields three important points. Firstly, by the early 1880s women were at least being appointed to elected positions in the BLA, and in 1887 it is noteworthy that

³³ A. Briggs, *History of Birmingham, Volume 2, Borough and City, 1865-1938* (London, 1952), pp. 168-170.

³⁴ *Memories 1*, p. 54.

³⁵ *Memories 2*, p. 1.

twenty-three women were elected to the General Council and four to the newly formed Executive, 'an honourable recognition which is of real value to our cause'.³⁶ Secondly, Osler showed her dogged determination to fight for the vote whatever the disappointments and she succeeded to the Secretaryship of the BWSS in 1885. Thirdly, legislation was being enacted that was extremely important for women in pointing the way forward, both for their position in civic life and their personal rights. The Municipal Franchise Act 1869 had given some women municipal voting rights, and subsequently rights to vote for - and to become members of - School Boards and to be appointed Poor Law Guardians. Further local voting rights were granted in the County Council Act 1888 for county councils. The secret ballot introduced by the Ballot Act 1872 was widely seen as improving the environment for women to vote. In 1883, the Corrupt Practices Act tightly restricted the funding of political campaigns and resulted in women becoming heavily involved in canvassing for both municipal and general elections. Outside the political sphere, the 1882 Married Women's Property Act fundamentally improved women's rights to possess and dispose of their own property, and the 1886 Guardianship of Minors Act significantly advanced women's rights in respect of their children in the event of divorce.³⁷

Thus, by the time Osler had become an elected local politician within the BLA in the 1880s, major steps had been taken towards addressing the subjection of women in the public and private sphere. She regarded it as important to build on those gains. Whilst much had been achieved, much remained to be done. After 1884, the main issue which

³⁶ BA&C, L76.12, *Annual Report of the BWSS 1887*, p .4.

³⁷ Griffin, *The Politics of Gender*, pp. 5-14.

occupied Osler's attention in Birmingham was the organisation and leadership of women's Liberal organisations in seeking to influence and educate women in the arts and crafts of political citizenship to prepare them for what she hoped would be the eventual bestowal of the parliamentary franchise. The next section sets out the work that Osler deemed necessary to further that process, and to deal with the effect of the crisis over Irish Home Rule upon the Liberal cause.

The Campaign for Women's Rights after the defeat of the Home Rule Bill 1888-1900

The general election of 1885 resulted in Irish MPs holding the balance of power in Parliament and in April 1886, Gladstone introduced the Irish Home Rule Bill which, as Osler herself put it, 'destroyed the power of Liberalism for twenty years'.³⁸ The Bill was defeated in 1886 and save for a brief interregnum in the early 1890s, the Conservatives, supported by Chamberlain's Liberal Unionists, were in power from 1886 until 1906. The reality for Osler was that as the Conservatives were at the time largely an anti-suffrage party, the chances of any further measure bestowing even a limited women's franchise were remote. Whilst this study is not principally about national politics during the period, within the context of the research questions and the Home Rule debate, two main points are considered. Firstly, to what extent did the Home Rule crisis adversely affect the suffrage cause in the country generally and in Birmingham in particular. Secondly, in what ways and with what success did Osler and her supporters continue their campaign for the vote from 1888 onwards.

³⁸ *Memories 1*, p. 64.

The argument about Home Rule for Ireland was as much an Imperial issue as one of domestic politics and succeeding chapters will consider it in that context. However, it spilled over as a divisive issue into domestic affairs and women's rights. Indeed, from the discord engendered it is sometimes difficult to remember that Gladstone's Home Rule Bill was defeated, and that no measure even for partial Home Rule was successful until 1921. Yet for two such essentially rational women as Osler and her friend Millicent Fawcett to hold such opposite views, illustrates what an emotive issue it was. For Osler, Home Rule was a particularly resonant issue for women and stirred them 'very deeply'. It had done more than any other issue in recent years 'to settle definitely the long-contested question of women's mission and place in politics', as it was seen as 'a veritable crusade' in a 'policy of freedom and self-government'.³⁹ In 1892, Osler was much criticised by English patriots like Fawcett for comparing Home Rule to Italian Unification and the republican victory in the English Civil War, as successful struggles for independence from a foreign power.⁴⁰ For Fawcett, the issue was one of patriotism and Empire, tinged with racism and protection from socialism. She thought it a disgrace to surrender to 'those anarchical people'. The Irish embodied the 'red spectre of revolution' and 'the black spectre of priestly domination'. They were dishonest, idle and lacking in self-reliance. She attacked the 'socialist microbe' manifest in Ireland.⁴¹ Unlike Osler, her political prejudices prevented her from seeing the similarity between two struggles for freedom from oppression. They had similar divergent views on the South African conflict at the turn of

³⁹ Speech to the Birmingham Liberal Auxiliary, *Birmingham Daily Post*, 19 March 1889.

⁴⁰ Speech to the Gladstonian Liberal Association, *Birmingham Daily Post*, 11 June 1892.

⁴¹ D. Rubinstein, *A Different World for Women: The Life of Millicent Garrett Fawcett* (OH, 1991), pp. 118-119.

the century and pacifism and jingoism during the First World War (Chapters Six and Eight). Yet despite these differences, they maintained their friendship simply as fellow supporters of the suffrage cause, albeit in different political parties.

The women's rights campaign was affected negatively by the Home Rule defeat and the failure of women to achieve voting rights in 1884. From her perspective, Osler had every reason to blame Chamberlain for his part in the defeat. His opposition to the suffrage cause was a contributory factor to the failure of the claim in 1884, and subsequently his resignation from Gladstone's Government in 1886 over the Home Rule Bill was a factor in the decline of the BLA. In 1888 Chamberlain formed the Birmingham Liberal Unionist Association (BLUA), thus ensuring that the BLA was in a minority in the city and stifling the progressive Liberal voice. Osler recorded in a letter to her mother that in the municipal elections of November 1888, her wing of the Liberal party won only two of the eight seats with 'four wretched Tories in!' She felt that Chamberlain had 'cold-bloodedly sacrificed his city to the enemy', which had been thrown into the hands 'of any miserable creature' who supported Unionism.⁴² David Rubinstein described Birmingham in 1891 as 'the centre of Liberal Unionism,'⁴³ quoting sources for his statement demonstrating that Birmingham was an important and continuing focus for Conservative power in the city. In a surprising omission however, he failed to acknowledge Chamberlain's pivotal role in the progress of Unionism although his influence was palpable.

⁴² *Memories1*, pp. 78-79.

⁴³ Rubinstein, *Before the Suffragettes*, p. 151.

In relation to Home Rule and women's suffrage Osler can be criticised for two reasons in the later 1880s. Firstly, as a political radical, it is surprising she did not sufficiently appreciate that opposition to Irish self-rule had considerable support in Birmingham and the Midlands region. Chamberlain had never supported Home Rule and thus, unlike his stance on suffrage, he was at least being consistent. She also faced opposition from friends and relatives. Her uncle, Peter Taylor, was a famously radical figure, and yet was a Unionist because he felt Home Rule would destroy 'the peace and progress of the country' although he was in favour, like Chamberlain, of enlarged municipal government.⁴⁴ Henry Crosskey was also a Unionist, for unstated reasons, although he could not contemplate joining the BLUA as he supported the Liberals 'on ninety-nine questions out of a hundred'.⁴⁵ Whatever her opinion of Chamberlain, Osler might have taken more notice of these views. Secondly, on the issue of women's suffrage, despite her irrepressible optimism, she was arguably at fault in not recognising that by no means all Liberals, whether women or men, positively supported suffrage. In her obituary of Osler in 1924, Millicent Fawcett, described Birmingham during the above period as a 'Mecca of the anti-suffragists' and the 'rulers of darkness'.⁴⁶ Indeed it has been argued by some historians that the suffrage campaign was effectively moribund until the arrival of the Women's Social and Political Union in 1903.⁴⁷ The remaining part of this chapter suggests that such a view is untenable.

⁴⁴ Report of a meeting of the East St. Mary's Ward, *Leicester Chronicle*, 7 February 1874.

⁴⁵ R. A. Armstrong, *Henry William Crosskey: His Life and Work* (Birmingham, 1895), p. 262.

⁴⁶ Women's Library, London, 'Obituary of Catherine Courtauld Osler', *The Woman's Leader*, 26 December 1924.

⁴⁷ A. Rosen, *Rise up Women! The Militant Campaign of the Women's Social and Political Union, 1903-1914* (London, 1974).

Osler was ceaselessly active during the last years of the nineteenth century, but her tactics changed to reflect the prevailing political landscape. The BWSS report for 1885 optimistically expressed the contention that to accept women's labour in elections, for example, whilst denying them representation was 'an insult to English manliness' and there were positive signs it 'will not long continue'.⁴⁸ Plainly such rhetoric was unrealistic, and David Rubinstein puts it well when he describes the period from the late 1880s until the new century as a comparison between the 'novelty of the initial campaign and the realism of the long march'.⁴⁹ Osler saw the way forward as working collectively within women's organisations to raise feminine awareness of the struggle and to urge and cajole them by education, propaganda, and example to participate therein. In a different context as shown in Chapter Three, Osler had long been impatient and critical of women, particularly of her own class, for their lack of commitment to the cause. It must have seemed to her that she was fighting not only men's hostility but women's apathy. Her dilemma was exemplified by her speech to a suffrage demonstration at Westminster Palace Hotel in 1881 when she accused Birmingham of 'being culpably and shockingly' indifferent' to the cause in the city. Quite apart from the need to garner support from parliamentarians, of which she was ever conscious, she emphasised it was even more important to 'raise the level of political interest among women of all classes of the community'. She talked of many hesitant women who mistakenly believed that the aim of the suffrage movement was to 'turn women into men' and 'abolish' nature. Whilst the ignorance and misunderstanding embodied in those views was understandable in view of

⁴⁸ BA&C, L41.2, *Annual Report of the BWSS, 1887*, p. 4.

⁴⁹ Rubinstein, *Before the Suffragettes*, p. 138.

most women's endemic subordination, she was less forgiving of the selfishness displayed by many middle-class women who lived leisured, cocooned lives. For Osler, the suffrage movement had always been about joining women of all classes and circumstances in 'one common bond of sisterhood'. Guiding women to 'a higher sense of the duty they owe to humanity' was as important and imperative as emancipation.⁵⁰ The speech illustrated her fundamental beliefs stemming from her background, but rhetoric and eloquence would only go so far, and she knew that practical and collective steps were required.

Aside from the BWSS, which was relatively ineffectual until Osler was elected as President in 1901, she was a leading figure in two allied Liberal organisations which emerged in the latter years of the nineteenth century – the Birmingham Liberal Auxiliary (BLAUX) and the Women's Liberal Federation (WLF). They were important in establishing an independent voice for women within the Liberal Party. Rubinstein asserts that the WLF and its affiliates gave women 'experience in public affairs and organisation' which they could have gained in no other way, referring not to leaders such as Osler, but to women who were new to public affairs⁵¹. The WLF was formed in 1887 and Osler was appointed a Vice-President. The main objects of the WLF when formed were to promote Liberal principles, fair legislation for women, the protection of children, and to advance political education by meetings, lectures and the distribution of literature.⁵² The omission of any explicit reference to women's emancipation was not accidental. Its founder was Sophia Fry, a Quaker philanthropist born in 1837. She was a low-key suffragist who

⁵⁰ Women's Library, London, *Women's Suffrage Journal*, 1 June 1881.

⁵¹ Rubinstein, *Before the Suffragettes*, p. 151.

⁵² University of Bristol, Special Collections, *Report of the Executive Committee of the Women's Liberal Federation 1889*, p. 17.

wished the WLF to be a broad church with the predominant aim of electing a Liberal Government. Its first President was Catherine Gladstone, the wife of Gladstone himself, and an avowed anti-suffragist. Accordingly, the programme of the new body was cautious and unchallenging. It was not until she was replaced that the WLF embraced women's suffrage as an aim in 1892. By then the organisation's membership had expanded from 6,000 in seventeen associations at formation, to 66,000 members in 177 associations in 1892.⁵³ It was becoming an active mass-movement with an overtly feminist agenda. More information about Osler's activities within the WLF is presented in Chapter Six concentrating on the annual meeting in Birmingham in 1900.

The BLAUX was the women's section of the BLA and is of interest as a formal body promoting the profile of women in the city. Unfortunately, its records are missing, and the only evidence of its work is provided by press reports of some of the annual general meetings and special meetings of the local and regional branches. They are nonetheless valuable in assessing the aims of the BLAUX and its development in the city. A report of a preliminary meeting in December 1887 offers a flavour of its proposed functions and confirms it as an organisation to promote the interests of the BLA and, like the WLF, it initially contained no provision for women's suffrage. It was notable also that the persons present were predominantly male, with Alfred Osler presiding in his role as chairman of the BLA. The aim was to establish a committee to promote co-operation between men and women in developing liberal principles and measures. Catherine addressed the

⁵³ University of Bristol Special Collections, *Report of the Executive Committee of the Women's Liberal Federation 1892*, p.7. For a fuller evaluation of the development of the WLF reference can be made to the article by Linda Walker, 'Gender, Suffrage and Party; Liberal Women's Organisations, 1880-1914' in M. Boussahba-Bravard (ed.), *Suffrage outside Suffragism, Britain 1880-1914* (London, 2007), pp. 77-101.

meeting and asked the women of Birmingham to unite, 'not in any subordinate way' but as 'comrades' and 'equals' in the work of the BLA. She felt that valuable work could be done in educating women in Liberal principles by 'holding meetings and distributing literature' to aid the Liberal cause.⁵⁴ The tenor of the meeting was reinforced by a favourable reference to the Primrose League which had been formed three years earlier in 1884 to coordinate the work of women supporting the Conservative cause. Henry Crosskey felt that lessons could be learned from the League's experience and success, and a restrained approach might combat the tendency of some Birmingham women to vote for the Conservative party.⁵⁵ Osler's own comments were typical in emphasising the partnership of equals with men, and she was less happy about the praise for the Primrose League, which she referred to in 1889 as the 'dames and knights' who indulged in 'political fancy work'.⁵⁶ According to Linda Walker, the League was an effective campaigning and electioneering tool, particularly after the banning of paid canvassers by the terms of the Corrupt Practices Act 1883, but it became outdated by the turn of the century as it failed to progress beyond the 'boundaries of woman's informal, indirect persuasion in politics'.⁵⁷ It was perhaps not surprising that Osler did not press women's voting rights at this inaugural meeting. In 1887, the Home Rule debate was current, and the Liberal cause was in turmoil. Osler would very much have wanted women's suffrage

⁵⁴ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 14 December 1887.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 3 April 1889.

⁵⁷ Linda Walker, 'Party Political Women: A Comparative Study of Liberal Women and the Primrose League' in J. Rendall (ed.), *Equal or Different: Women's Politics 1800-1914* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 165-191, p. 191.

to be an aim, but it is reasonable to speculate that she might not have thought it an opportune time to raise the issue as an option.

Osler became the President of the BLAUX in January 1889, and in succeeding years she sought to build support for it across a broad spectrum. For example, surviving newspaper reports feature BLAUX meetings on women's trade unions in 1890; a discussion of discriminatory laws against women in working hours and the divorce laws in 1892; and in 1894, the passing into law of the Local Government Bill, the Employers Liability Bill, the introduction of an eight hour day in War Office factories and workshops, and the employment of women factory inspectors.⁵⁸ By the fourth meeting of the BLAUX in 1892, Osler seemed more confident of her ground. She was able to report that women had taken an active part in all national and municipal elections, and their participation was beneficial to themselves and to political life. As a result of some thirty or forty meetings throughout the year, women were now better informed on questions relating to their sex than when the organisation was formed. She felt able to broach the issue of voting rights in criticising the failure of Parliament to allow the reading of a Suffrage Bill.⁵⁹ It is also noticeable how many of the meetings were devoted to matters of particular interest to working women. If women were eventually admitted to the suffrage, Liberals would be keen to attract their vote from all classes. In 1893, Osler was appointed to the Presidency

⁵⁸ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 20 November 1890, 11 May 1892, 25 January 1894.

⁵⁹ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 28 January 1892.

of the Leicester Women's Liberal Association and in the following years was able to spread her message further afield.⁶⁰

Having guided the BLAUX to an established position, the key question was when Osler would have felt sufficiently secure to follow the WLF in putting forward a proposal for female suffrage to be made an aim of the organisation. In 1894, at the annual meeting of the Midland Union of Women's Liberal Associations, Osler decided to propose that a rule should be added to that end. She appreciated that it could not bind the forty-seven autonomous constituent associations, but it would be an important progressive statement of intent. The proposal was carried but immediately resulted in the resignation of a 30 per cent minority of some 7,000 to 8,000 women who joined a new body, the Midland Council of Liberal Women.⁶¹ The official reason given for the split was that the minority saw this as the relegation of the Midland Union to a branch of the BWSS. The reality was probably that many of these women were opposed to women's suffrage as too radical to take priority over other women's issues. Osler regarded that as a negative policy, arguing that women were unworthy Liberals if they did not 'move with the times and add fresh aims and objects for the BLAUX' as it went on.⁶² The outcome of the meeting was important for Osler for two reasons. It showed her to be a skilled and effective politician, and a strong leader. It also demonstrated her continued adherence to the Liberal cause despite the previous failure of the BLA to support women's voting rights. However, she also had to accept that her victory was at the expense of a further

⁶⁰ Annual Meeting of the Midland Union of Women's Liberal Associations, *Leicester Chronicle*, 18 March 1893.

⁶¹ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 2 May 1894.

⁶² *Ibid.*

split in the Party to add to that over Home Rule. There were plainly still many women opposed to what she saw as progressive change.

The overall importance of the BLAUX and the WLF is difficult to assess. The BLA was in a weakened state due to splits over Home Rule and suffrage. It survived in a city which was a Unionist stronghold, making political progress difficult. However, as Osler made clear, she was trying to raise the political profile of women in the city and it is likely that through her activities over the years, progress was made in that direction despite the strong anti-suffrage opposition. Both men and women gained from the Liberal connection. Men received willing workers to assist in elections and to spread the Liberal message. Women obtained their own distinctive foothold within the echelons of the BLA which may have exceeded the influence of the still subdued BWSS. Such an outcome was not inevitable in 1887 when the preliminary meeting was held in the midst of the Home Rule crisis in the city. Perhaps the 1894 Report was accurate when it talked of women's distinctive approach to politics. They were not trying to do the same as men but were seeking to enhance purity in public life and raise the tone of politics.⁶³

The position of women with regard to their emancipation, and when it might be granted, was addressed by Osler in her interview with the popular magazine, *The Woman at Home*, in October 1894, already referred to in earlier chapters. Optimistically, she felt that the granting of voting rights was only a matter of time provided there was unity amongst women, although predictably she lamented the lack of support of 'the comfortable, well-to do women' who lack sympathy for 'the less fortunate upon whom

⁶³ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 25 January 1894.

unequal laws press heavily'.⁶⁴ A major legislative change came with the Local Government Act 1894. The statute introduced major reforms to local government and in theory, if not greatly in practice, allowed married women to vote for the first time in elections provided that husband and wife were not qualified in respect of the same property, and the women voted as 'occupiers', not as property owners. Griffin hailed the Act as signalling a change in attitude towards marriage, and a clear indication of 'the transformation of attitudes towards domestic masculinity'.⁶⁵ It represented a shift in the Liberals' position on the franchise in the 1890s towards an electoral system based upon a residence requirement of only three months rather than property ownership. Such a reform would come close to manhood suffrage in tune with the advancement of married women's voting rights.⁶⁶ Osler would also have been pleased and at the same time frustrated by the fate of the second of the two women's suffrage Bills presented in the 1890s by Conservative backbenchers. The 1897 Bill passed its second reading by 230 votes to 159, the first suffrage Bill to garner more than 200 votes.⁶⁷ Analysing those figures further, Griffin concluded that only 43 per cent of Conservatives voted against the Bill in 1897 compared with 91 per cent in 1867, and the disparity was not likely to have been distorted by low turnout.⁶⁸ Osler could thus point to solid gains in the fight for the recognition of women's rights, and be satisfied that the profile of women in 1900 was substantially higher than in 1883, taken together with the important statutory enactments referred to earlier. However, it was by no means certain at the time that the

⁶⁴ S. A. Tooley, 'Ladies of Birmingham', *The Woman At Home* (October 1894), pp. 445-455, pp. 447-449.

⁶⁵ Griffin, *The Politics of Gender*, p. 314.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

⁶⁷ Rubinstein, *Before the Suffragettes*, p. 146.

⁶⁸ Griffin, *The Politics of Gender*, pp. 302-303.

ultimate prize of voting rights would be obtained, and the next chapter will consider the debate as to whether a more militant approach was needed. The support of the Liberals was inconsistent, particularly in places such as Birmingham where Conservative Unionism was particularly strong, but nonetheless, important women's organisations had been founded and solid progress made.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the early years of the women's suffrage campaign and the presence of any particular factors which helped or hindered its progress ; the nature of Osler's feminism, and how it guided her activism; and how she endeavoured to put her ideas into practice in Birmingham during the period from 1880 to 1900 covering the period when she first entered public life as an active campaigner for women's rights. In 1880, the concept of women voting in national elections was still new and many women had concentrated their attention on issues other than suffrage, such as female education and opposing male physical aggression. Osler was of that transitional generation which eventually gave their full attention to voting rights as being the only way that full citizenship for women would be forthcoming.

By comparing the way the suffrage campaign was conducted in Wales, it became clear that the campaign in that country, including as it did the experiences of all classes of women, was very different to the English experience, partly because of class and political issues, but also other cultural matters, for example, linguistic and geographical complexities. It was more challenging for female organisers to deliver the message and persuade women to become engaged with the struggle in different parts of Wales.

The word 'feminism' came to be used to describe the intellectual characteristics of women campaigners, although it was not widely used until some way into the Edwardian period. Nor was there any one definition of the term. However, the essence of her thoughts on the rights of women leaves no doubt that Osler was a feminist. For her the key points were the ability of women to have autonomous lives with a freedom to achieve whatever they were capable of, without artificial restrictions imposed by men. Ultimately, this meant an interchangeability of functions, without a preordained hierarchy based upon female subordination. Osler accepted that men and women were naturally different as gender groups and always recognised that women would have a distinct domestic role. She was not antagonistic towards men but wanted to see the sexes as partners in society, mirroring her own marriage. She could see no likelihood of her vision being achieved without voting rights in view of the existing ingrained prejudice. In any event she saw women's emancipation as a basic right of women.

In the early days of youthful optimism, Osler expressed the hope that voting rights for women would be granted sooner rather than later. However, the events of the 1880s, and the failure to include any provision for even single women to be given voting rights in the Third Reform Act 1884, made it clear to her that a long battle lay ahead with no guarantee of success. The problem was particularly difficult in Birmingham where Joseph Chamberlain converted to an anti-suffrage position. His opposition to Irish Home Rule, in concert with other prominent figures in the city, angered and frustrated Osler, a long-time supporter of that cause. The advent of a Unionist majority in the city after 1888 made the political climate particularly hostile to women's suffrage.

Osler realised that the road to voting rights was blocked for the foreseeable future, and although that fight continued, she and her colleagues concentrated more upon local initiatives to increase support amongst women and encourage female education, awareness and participation in municipal life. In the later 1880s, in addition to the BWSS, she became active as a Vice-President of the WLF, and President of the BLAUX both of which were active in raising the profile of the feminist campaign. By the beginning of the twentieth century, there was clear evidence that opposition to women's voting rights was abating through the efforts of women like Osler, but also as a symptom of broader social change. Ben Griffin rightly asserted that the impetus of the suffrage movement slackened after 1884. However, the work of David Rubinstein has highlighted the extent to which the activities of women motivated and trained women in preparation for the renewal of the suffrage offensive in the twentieth century. Whilst Rubinstein's input has been extremely important in stressing the contribution of women's rights activists in the later years of the nineteenth century, he had little to say about Birmingham. This thesis builds on his work in describing the importance and distinctive nature of the city not only as a centre of Unionism but also as a place where active work on behalf of women continued throughout the period.

Chapter Six: Women's Suffrage, Liberal Politics, Imperialism and the Boer War 1899-1909

The first decade of the new century was of great significance to Osler and Birmingham. It raises three principal issues for consideration and assessment; firstly, the effectiveness of Osler's extensive involvement in the campaign for women's suffrage; secondly, the extent to which she could continue to support the Birmingham Liberal Association (BLA) generally and in relation to the suffrage campaign in particular; and thirdly, the degree to which the War in South Africa throws light on Osler's attitude towards Imperialism and military conflict, both in principle and as a means of settling international disputes. A subsidiary issue of great importance to Osler was the trauma of the unexpected death of Alfred, her husband of thirty years, in 1903. All the evidence suggests that they enjoyed not only a very close relationship as discussed in Chapter Three, but that they worked closely together regarding the issues raised above. This chapter aims to enrich the existing historiography of the decade by reference to Osler's personal recollections and public interventions into these three issues and by emphasising not only the increasing involvement of women in the public debate on emancipation and liberal politics, but also in an important foreign policy issue where the views of women would formerly have been largely disregarded.

On the first issue, the historical debate on the women's suffrage campaign has tended to concentrate on the activities of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). As discussed in the introductory chapter, that imbalance has been challenged in the more recent historiography. The fresh perspective centred upon Osler's personal interventions

discussed in the previous chapter gathered pace in the new century. She was elected President of the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society (BWSS) in 1901 and continued in post until 1920. The surviving records of the BWSS show that in 1901 there were 99 members, a committee of fourteen and an annual income of £52. By 1909, the records show a membership of 662, a committee of fifty and an annual income of £613.¹ The reasons for that growth and the extent to which Osler contributed thereto will be discussed. The first decade of the century witnessed the emergence of the WSPU, which was active in Birmingham from 1907 onwards. It will be necessary to explore Osler's opinion of and relationship with the WSPU, whose members came to be known as the 'suffragettes', and to consider their relative influence in the suffrage campaign in Birmingham during the period. Osler also faced opposition from the many women who were opposed to female voting rights resulting in Osler being faced with opposition to her constitutional suffrage views from two very different directions. Regrettably, little evidence has come to light of any organised anti-suffrage activity in Birmingham other than the political opposition of the Liberal Unionists led by Joseph Chamberlain discussed in Chapter Two. In a larger context, reference will be made in the literature review to the important work of Julia Bush together with an examination of the career of Violet Markham.

On the second issue, Chapters Two and Five explored Osler's association with the BLA, the Birmingham Liberal Auxiliary (BLAUX) and her role within the Women's Liberal Federation (WLF). In 1906, a Liberal Government was elected, ending a long period of

¹ BA&C, L76.12, *Annual Report of the BWSS, 1909-10*, p. 8.

largely Conservative and Unionist rule. This chapter analyses the relations between Osler and the Liberal Party and examines the events which led to Osler resigning from the BLAUX in 1909 and the consequences of that step.

The third issue, the War in South Africa, commonly known as the Boer War, was into its second year at the beginning of the century. For Osler, the War, like Irish home rule, raised fundamental issues of her Liberal ideals of self-determination and free trade against ideas of Imperialism and British trading supremacy, as espoused by her foe, Joseph Chamberlain. The conflict and its unsatisfactory outcome highlighted Osler's reservations about armed force as an acceptable method for the settlement of international conflicts. This chapter examines the extent to which Osler, as a Gladstonian Liberal, had a clear position on this conflict and its ramifications for the future, and whether it is possible to discern a specifically feminist view of the conflict. The evidence will question if there was such a view, but there is no doubt that many women, including Osler, took an increasingly critical stance to the Boer War and military conflict in general. Osler was opposed on this issue by Markham and Millicent Fawcett giving an illustration of the absence of consensus amongst activist women on these important issues.

Literature Review

The nature and extent of the issues raised in this chapter lead to a focus on wider sources encompassing Birmingham and beyond.

David Rubinstein's biography of Millicent Fawcett is helpful in two ways. Firstly, her pursuit of the vote during the first decade of the twentieth century and critical approach

to the suffragettes: secondly, her support for the Boer War and attitude towards the conduct of the British Army and the existence of concentration camps.²

Ben Griffin's book, *The Politics of Gender*³, discussed in the Literature Review of the previous chapter, will again be featured to contrast with the views of Julia Bush in her two books highlighted below. Taken together with Eliza Riedi's article on the career of Markham these sources frame the argument that the anti-suffrage cause was all but lost by 1910.⁴

Edmund Fawcett's book on Liberalism examines the actions and motivations of Joseph Chamberlain in the adoption and pursuit of colonialism in support of his protectionist policy to promote British prosperity.⁵

Claire Hirschfield is the author of two articles which offer distinctive contributions on two pressing issues for Liberal women during the period of study. Firstly, the stance of women towards the Boer War and the growing opposition to the War of the Liberal Federation compared to Millicent Fawcett's National Women's Liberal Suffrage Society and secondly, the scale of defection from the Liberal Party due to the failure of progress towards women's voting rights.⁶

² D. Rubinstein, *A Different World for Women, The Life of Millicent Garrett Fawcett* (Columbus, OH, 1991).

³ B. Griffin, *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 2012).

⁴ E. Riedi, 'Options for an Imperialist Woman: the case of Violet Markham, 1899-1914', *Albion*, 32 (2000), pp. 59-84.

⁵ E. Fawcett, *Liberalism, The Life of an Idea* (Woodstock, 2014).

⁶ C. Hirschfield, 'Liberal Women's Organisations and the War Against the Boers, 1899-1902', *Albion, Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 1/4/82, Vol.14 (1), pp. 27-49 and 'Fractured Faith: Liberal Party Women and the Suffrage Issue in Britain, 1892-1914', *Gender and History* Vol.2 No.2 (Summer 1990), pp. 173-197.

A more recent article by Vron Ware than those above, written at the time of the centenary of the ending of the First World War and the granting of partial voting rights for women in 1918, gives a very critical portrayal of Fawcett's stance on the Boer conflict compared to that of Emily Hobhouse, a peace activist who brought to light the conditions in the concentration camps referred to later.⁷

Julia Bush has written widely on feminine opposition to women's suffrage and the attitude of women towards Imperialism, although her writings do not deal with the position in Birmingham. However, they help to frame the arguments surrounding Osler's and Markham's different positions on these issues.⁸

Osler, the BWSS and the WSPU 1901-1909

The aim of this section is to compare and contrast the work of the BWSS and the Birmingham Branch of the WSPU up to 1909, with an emphasis firstly upon the degree to which their relationship became more antagonistic owing to the increased militancy of the suffragettes, and secondly upon their comparative significance. The focus of this thesis is upon Osler and thus her leadership of the BWSS is given prominence, but some information about the WSPU is essential for assessing Osler's effectiveness during this first decade of the new century. The discussion is largely based on primary sources: those for the BWSS are the surviving reports of the BWSS Archive and *Memories 1*, and those for the WSPU are its monthly magazine *Votes for Women* founded in 1906 which

⁷ V. Ware, 'All the rage: decolonising the history of the British women's suffrage movement' published online at <http://doi.org/10.1080/09502.386.2019.1638953> (Accessed: 27 November 2019).

⁸ J. Bush, *Edwardian Ladies and Imperial Power* (London, 2000) and J. Bush, *Women Against the Vote* (Oxford, 2007).

provides material on WSPU activities in Birmingham and the Midlands. Les Garner's book offers a succinct secondary source for information on the origins and aims of the two organisations but is silent on its activities in Birmingham.⁹

By 1901 the BWSS had existed for over thirty years. Its leading members were, like Osler, largely middle-class women. Both she and her family had strong links with the BLA although they became increasingly strained as the decade progressed in circumstances that will be considered later in this chapter. By contrast, the WSPU was not founded until 1903 and had its roots firmly within the northern Labour movement. However, its founders Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, ended their association with Labour in 1907 by which time the WSPU was centred in London.¹⁰ By May 1907 it had established a presence in Birmingham and the wider Midlands.¹¹ The aim of both organisations was the same, namely to obtain voting rights for women on the same terms as men. Both accepted that the only feasible way to achieve that outcome was for the male legislature to be persuaded and, if necessary, pressured into passing the appropriate legislation. The distinction between them were the methods to be adopted to secure that end. Osler's 'suffragists' employed strictly constitutional methods, excluding any unlawful or violent activity. For the suffragettes, militant tactics were seen as the only way to inject energy into a movement which, for all its efforts, appeared to be making no progress towards their common goal.

⁹ L. Garner, *Stepping Stones to Women's Liberty* (London, 1984).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹¹ Women's Library, London, *Votes for Women*, 26 March 1908.

The BWSS records showed Osler setting about the expansion of her Society with the primary aim of expanding its influence and increasing membership and subscribers, despite the early years of her Presidency being marred by two factors. Firstly, the South African conflict did not finally end until May 1902 and Osler complained in the Society's reports that the war 'monopolises public attention' such that other affairs remain in abeyance.¹² Whilst that was undoubtedly true, it is right to remark that Osler herself became increasingly involved in the debate surrounding the Boer War as will be discussed in a later section of this chapter. Secondly, her activities were curtailed for several months following the death of her husband. Notwithstanding those issues, she demonstrated a determination to proceed with her campaign. For example, she pointed to 'increasing vitality' in 1902 in enlarging the scope of their work from a twenty-mile radius of Birmingham to a county-wide radius encompassing the 'whole of Warwickshire and Worcestershire'. A canvas was carried out in the most significant towns and a local branch was founded in Stourbridge with a Secretary and Treasurer appointed. During the same year, meetings to attract new members were organised in Coventry, Brierley Hill, Rugby, Quarry Bank, Leamington and Redditch.¹³

The period from 1905 to 1907 was particularly significant and included the General Election of 1906 when a Liberal Government was elected after a long period of predominately Conservative rule. Osler was keen to maximise exposure and to attract funds, always important considerations for the BWSS. In November 1905, she chaired a special meeting of subscribers with a view to laying down suggestions for new areas of

¹² BA&C, L76.12, *Annual Report of the BWSS, 1900-1901*, p. 5.

¹³ BA&C, L76.12, *Annual Report of the BWSS, 1901-2*, pp. 6, 7.

work, coupled with a request for special donations to enable the distribution of 'large quantities of literature' during the General Election campaign.¹⁴ In the following year, thirty new subscribers were recruited, and there was a large increase in the members of the committee from twelve to thirty-seven. Thirty-eight meetings were held, with Osler chairing two subscriber meetings.¹⁵ The BWSS was undoubtedly expanding and yet the national picture suggested that the 'suffragettes' were correct in pointing to an absence of movement on the introduction of voting rights.

In what may have been seen as a positive sign, the new Liberal Prime Minister, Campbell-Bannerman, met a deputation of women in May 1906. Whilst he accepted that the suffragists had an 'irrefutable' case, he gave no commitment to legislate, and simply advised women to 'go on converting the country'.¹⁶ These words suggested that suffrage was not a high priority for the new Government. Such a position may have been forgivable, given the legislative agenda of the incoming administration and the immense difficulties in passing such controversial legislation faced with an unreformed House of Lords. However, the absence of any hope of change from her own Party would have been galling for Osler. In the following month she had an article published in *The Spectator* in which she complained that women were being asked to satisfy spurious requirements above those of men to qualify for the franchise. Further, when out of understandable frustration, some women exhibited impatience at 'the refusal of their just demands', their 'loss of self-control' was seen as making them unfit for 'citizenship'.¹⁷ This seemed

¹⁴ BA&C, L76.12, *Annual Report of the BWSS, 1905-06*, p. 3.

¹⁵ BA&C, L76.12, *Annual Report of the BWSS, 1906-1907*. pp. 13-14.

¹⁶ Rubinstein, *A Different World for Women*, p. 150.

¹⁷ C. C. Osler, 'Woman's Suffrage', *The Spectator*, 2 June 1906.

to be an obvious reference to the suffragettes who by then were beginning to employ more militant tactics. By the autumn of 1907, the WSPU had established a significant presence in Birmingham. The October 1907 edition of its journal, *Votes for Women*, stated that the city was becoming 'one of the strongholds' of the organisation.¹⁸ It could even be considered whether Osler might have been prepared to tolerate and even work with the WSPU to promote their common aim from 1907 onwards.

The evidence suggests that Osler took a relatively tolerant and restrained view of the 'suffragettes' until 1909. The BWSS report for 1906-07 praised the 'zeal and sacrifice' of the suffragettes in inspiring and enthusing an 'immense number' of 'hitherto indifferent onlookers'. However, Osler was careful to qualify her praise by questioning to what extent militancy might do more harm than good.¹⁹ In *Memories 2* she referred to the 'dramatic and sensational appeal' of the suffragettes which 'probably gained more adherents than it alienated'. Their 'indomitable resolution' to achieve their aims could probably have been demonstrated in 'no equally impressive way'. However, from an 'ethical' viewpoint, she never doubted the 'immeasurable superiority' of reason as opposed to force.²⁰ It was never likely that there could have been any formal coalition between the two parties. Firstly, the methods to be adopted in the Constitution of the WSPU, as outlined by one of its principal members, Emmeline Pethwick Lawrence, were antithetical to the suffragist approach. They included a bar on working with all political parties, actively opposing whichever government was in power at local and national

¹⁸ Women's Library, London, *Votes for Women*, October 1907.

¹⁹ BA&C, L76.12, *Annual Report of the BWSS, 1906-07*, p. 9.

²⁰ *Memories 2*, Chapter 2.

elections, and 'vigorous agitation justified by the position of outlawry' in which women found themselves.²¹ The word 'agitation' immediately conjured up visions of militancy and possible disruption if not violence, which Osler could not have condoned. Secondly, Osler had hitherto worked from within the BLA and, although this stance was eventually modified as will be discussed in the next section, it would not have been acceptable for her to oppose a pro-suffrage candidate solely on the basis that he was a member of the governing party.

The increasing prominence of the suffragettes in Birmingham and the wider Midlands was evident by 1908. The local organiser, Gladice Keevil, wrote regular reports for the area in the monthly magazine of the movement, *Votes for Women*, founded some three years prior to *The Common Cause*, the equivalent magazine of the suffragist movement. In December 1908 it was reported that central premises in Birmingham had been established, and regular At Homes were established at the Priory rooms. Speakers Classes were instituted weekly to instruct members as to how to address meetings throughout the region, including Saltley, Moseley, Coventry and Walsall.²² In May 1908 in a by-election in Wolverhampton the WSPU had campaigned extensively against the Liberal candidate, who although personally pro-suffrage, was standing for a party which at that time appeared to be doing little to advance the cause of women's suffrage. They fielded a team of seven women who held meetings every afternoon from the 29 April to 4 May, and dinner-hour meetings at factories. They also held three mass meetings at the Empire Theatre, one of which was attended by Mrs. Pethwick-Lawrence. The Liberal was elected

²¹ Women's Library, London, *Votes for Women*, 2 July 1908, p. 280.

²² *Votes for Women*, 24 December 1908.

by a substantially reduced majority of only eight votes.²³ It was claimed as a victory by the suffragettes. However, as George Barnsby pointed out, the campaigning was arguably wasteful and counter-productive given the pro-suffrage stance of the Liberal.²⁴

In June 1908 two large rival demonstrations were held in London organised by the suffragists and the suffragettes within a week of each other. They provide an opportunity to observe the contrasts between the meetings, and their consequences. The BWSS prepared for the demonstration by taking a shop in Birmingham to hold evening meetings and distribute leaflets. A special train from Birmingham took 150 suffragists to London for the gathering.²⁵ Osler related enthusiastically that some 13,000 women joined a procession to the Royal Albert Hall, and she traced 'a new spirit' and a vibrant answer to any doubt as to the seriousness of the demand for the vote. The procession included women who had not marched before and were converted from 'lukewarm' supporters to 'ardent' seekers for the vote.²⁶ By contrast, the WSPU rally in the following week was said to have consisted of between 250,000 and 500,000 participants and spectators. A journalist in attendance described the two gatherings as the difference between a 'cultured procession' and a 'vast democratic assembly'.²⁷

The reaction to and the consequences of these demonstrations for each organisation were important for the future of the suffrage movement as a whole and for the two

²³ G. Barnsby, 'Votes for Women: The Struggle for the Vote in the Black Country 1900-1918', *Socialist Occasional Pamphlet Series No. 3* (1994), pp. 1-15, pp. 3-4.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁵ BA&C, L76.12, *Annual Report of the BWSS, 1908-09*, pp. 12-13.

²⁶ *Memories 2*, Chapter 2.

²⁷ Rubinstein, *A Different World for Women*, p. 161.

separate bodies. The lack of any response from the Government to their demonstration led the suffragettes to resort later in the same month to more overt militancy, including stone throwing.²⁸ Their language became militaristic. Mrs. Pethwick-Lawrence opined that militant action was all that was left, and now was 'the eve of the battle'.²⁹ Despite those words, the WSPU maintained a strong and increasing presence in Birmingham in 1908 and 1909, holding many meetings and recording an increase in membership.³⁰ However, an intensification of violence later in 1909 eventually led to the passing of a resolution by the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) in October, strongly condemning 'violence in political propaganda'.³¹ This was shortly after the occasion at Bingley Hall in Birmingham on 17 September 1909 when the Prime Minister attended an evening meeting to discuss the forthcoming budget. The meeting was disrupted by some suffragettes who resorted to serious violence and were themselves the subject of violent restraint by the police and the subsequent regime of forced feeding.³² The meeting is discussed in more detail in the next section as it also had important personal consequences for Osler.

The reaction of the suffragists was far less dramatic. For them the 1908 demonstration was a new departure, and it was likely that Osler and her fellow women saw the advantage of such spectacles which were newsworthy, morale-boosting and positive for recruitment in respect of women for whom the suffragists were a more acceptable

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

²⁹ Women's Library, London, *Votes for Women*, 2 July 1908, p. 280.

³⁰ N. Gauld, *Words and Deeds: Birmingham Suffragists and Suffragettes 1832-1918* (Warwickshire, 2018), pp. 37-41.

³¹ Rubinstein, *A Different World for Women*, p. 164.

³² Gauld, *Words and Deeds*, pp. 41-42.

organisation than one which espoused militancy. Certainly, the report of the BWSS for 1908-09 referred to 'phenomenal progress'. The general committee had increased to fifty-eight members and overall membership grew from 220 to 541 with annual receipts of £569. Meetings by then were too numerous to individually mention, but it was noted that there were 113 in the following year. The same report referred to the importance during the year of the formation of the Franchise Club which catered for those members who were willing to give personal service to the BWSS. They canvassed for subscribers and collected subscriptions, as well as performing routine tasks such as addressing envelopes. A suffrage candidate for a by-election in Stratford was given some financial support and canvassing was carried out, together with attendance at polling stations on election day.³³

By the end of the decade, under Osler's presidency, the BWSS had become an important campaigning organisation. She accepted that her Society learnt and benefited from the suffragette's methods and its flair for publicity. The BWSS probably recruited new members who became supporters of women's suffrage but found the WSPU methods to be unacceptable. Osler regretted the ill-treatment of the suffragettes, but she considered it inevitable that the societies would have to go their separate ways once militancy came to include unlawful conduct. It would be difficult to judge which organisation was more effective by this time, but clearly by 1909, there were two contrasting women's organisations in Birmingham energetically campaigning for the franchise.³⁴

³³ BA&C, L76.12, *Annual Report of the BWSS, 1908-09*, pp. 13-14.

³⁴ Gauld, *Words and Deeds*, p. 50.

It is appropriate at this juncture to consider the response of anti-suffrage women to the campaign for the vote as the end of the first decade of the twentieth century approached. It was probably not coincidental that in 1908 the *Anti-Suffrage Review* began publication to counter the campaign of the two pro-suffrage societies. It ran until 1918 when it presumably ceased publication on the grant of partial suffrage. In addition, the Women's National Anti-Suffrage League was founded in 1908 and joined forces with the mixed-sex National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage in 1910 which also ran until 1918. Julia Bush writes that the League had an enrolled membership of 42,000 compared with 5,000 members of the WSPU and 50,000 of the NUWSS in 1914. There is no great disparity in these figures and, taking into account the greater passivity of the anti-suffragists in terms of campaigning and general profile, Bush suggests that their claim that most women did not want the vote has 'considerable plausibility'.³⁵ Though that may be correct the issue is how cogent and realistic was continued opposition to the claim for suffrage. Ben Griffin's convincing case was that, politically, anti-suffragism was untenable by the end of the century as the majority support for women's suffrage, even in the Conservative party, meant that 'the back of the anti-suffrage movement was broken in the 1890s'.³⁶ Those opposing women's voting rights had to fall back upon the 'separate spheres' argument of the innate difference between the sexes as the 'only legitimate source of anti-suffragism'.³⁷ This did not prevent many years elapsing before women achieved voting rights, but in the twentieth century the obstacles to the grant of suffrage became political. As Griffin puts it, 'the intellectual arguments were won at

³⁵ Bush, *Women Against the Vote*), p. 3.

³⁶ Griffin, *The Politics of Gender*, p. 303.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 308.

precisely the moment when the political arguments became insuperable'.³⁸ Those arguments will be discussed later in this chapter and those which follow.

Convincing though Griffin's arguments are, there remained significant objections from both men and women to female emancipation right up to the grant of partial suffrage in 1918. Markham supported the anti-suffrage campaign until 1916. She was a middle-class woman like Osler and shared some of her Liberal instincts. For example, she supported the Liberal Government's reforms after 1906, including Lloyd George's 1909 Budget, and reform of the House of Lords. However, she adopted radical imperialist views and strongly supported the Boer War as well as being a staunch opponent of women's suffrage and active supporter of the Anti-Suffrage League.³⁹ She had two fundamental objections; firstly, her perception that women were fundamentally 'different in kind' from men, and secondly, that suffrage would damage Britain's imperial position. In 1913, she expressed the view that the feminist movement was 'a symptom of a more prevailing anarchy in my sex' and a 'loose spirit which seemed to have come over the relations of men and women'.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, in 1916 Markham declared her conversion to the suffrage cause largely it seems on pragmatic grounds. In a letter to Lord Cromer, she expressed her dilemma. Whilst her views about women's suffrage had not changed 'fundamentally' and she still felt that 'the man as worker, the woman as home maker remains my ideal of society', 'one has to take facts as they are'.⁴¹ Osler, in a generous

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

³⁹ Riedi, 'Options for an Imperialist Woman', pp. 59-84, pp. 79-80.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁴¹ Bush, *Edwardian Ladies*, pp. 197-198.

entry in her Journal paid tribute to Markham's changed position. She had 'too fine a nature to maintain her anti-feminist position and came over to us during the war'.⁴²

Osler and Liberal Politics 1901-1909

Osler was a law-abiding woman who accepted throughout that as a constitutional rather than militant suffrage campaigner there was no alternative to the party-political system to promote the advancement of women's rights. For her the lifelong pursuit of women's suffrage was simply a claim for political and social justice although embedded in a sound philosophical framework imparted by the youthful influences discussed in Chapter Two. However, the suffrage campaign cannot be divorced from other contemporary political issues of pressing importance to women, for example, the future of Liberalism and Imperialism in the context of Irish Home Rule and the Boer War in South Africa.⁴³ These were all current issues for Liberals in Birmingham at the commencement of the new century at a time when the city was under the sway of Joseph Chamberlain and his Liberal Unionists. The issue for Osler and other progressive women was whether the Liberals were the political party most likely to achieve their aims.

Osler's Liberal allegiance was longstanding, but she had been disappointed by the failure of the Party to support women's suffrage at the time of the 1884 Third Reform Act, and many supporters had left the Party during the Home Rule crisis in 1888. In those circumstances, if the Liberals were to regain power and influence, they would have to look for support to the more radical end of the political spectrum and to the working-

⁴² *Journal 2*, 19 February 1922.

⁴³ Introduction in Alexander Hughes-Johnson and Lyndsey Jenkins (eds.), *The Politics of Women's Suffrage, Local, National and international Dimensions* (London, 2021), pp. 1-22, p. 5.

class vote. As a middle-class Victorian, Osler was uncomfortable with that prospect. Nonetheless, she attended a political meeting in October 1904, when she addressed an audience of the Independent Labour Party. She found them 'rather fierce and irreconcilable' to her ideas and questioned whether the Liberals were serious in espousing the 'rights of labour'.⁴⁴ In an entry in *Journal 1* on the 2 September 1905, she declared herself unsympathetic to 'Socialistic influences' which the Liberal Party felt it had to support, as dictated by 'the popular will'. It was, she felt, 'practical politics' and to preach 'self-reliance' was impossible without appearing to be hypocritical. In respect of political activity, she would have found herself 'in opposition to my own party continuously'.⁴⁵ For George Bernstein, the Liberals were a middle-class party which feared socialism as contrary to free markets and 'individual liberty itself'. He argued that the Liberals could never be a party prioritising the poor, and that if the era of class politics developed, the eventual decline of the Liberal Party would be inevitable.⁴⁶

In the longer term, Bernstein was assuredly proved correct, but this thesis demonstrates the heart-searching undergone by Osler throughout her remaining years of active political involvement. She was strongly opposed to the Tories and the Liberal Unionists and was not ready to support a Labour candidate. Indeed, it was not until 1912 that the Labour Party declared itself unequivocally in favour of female enfranchisement.⁴⁷ In the General Election of 1906, when the Liberals had a real chance of victory, she actively supported the Party. The Liberals had formed an electoral understanding with the

⁴⁴ *Memories 2, Chapter 1*, October 1904.

⁴⁵ *Journal 1*, 2 September 1905.

⁴⁶ G. Bernstein, *Liberalism and Liberal Politics in Edwardian England* (Winchester, MA, 1986), pp. 197-201.

⁴⁷ Garner, *Stepping Stones*, p. 17.

emerging Labour movement to promote the Liberal Party's claim to support working people and provide the electorate with an alternative to voting for the Conservative/Unionist Party. It was seen as an important step in the recognition of the power of Labour as a force.⁴⁸ For Osler, once she had made a decision to participate, the choice was between a socialist-leaning Liberal Party or the Conservatives and the Unionists led by Joseph Chamberlain, for whom the main campaigning issue was the abandonment of free trade, and its replacement by a system of tariff protection by imposing import duties on foreign goods from outside the Empire. For Liberals of Osler's generation, the doctrine of free trade was of seminal importance. As Chamberlain had already played a large part in the defeat of Gladstone's Irish Home Rule Bills in the Victorian period, it was natural for her to oppose his attempt to defeat another of her core beliefs. Accordingly, in *Memories 2*, she recounted making speeches for local Liberal candidates in Chamberlain's 'special sphere of influence' and actively campaigning for a Liberal Government. She celebrated 'a time of magnificent victory'.⁴⁹

However, by 1909 she felt obliged to resign from the BLAUX and her own record of events for that year and 1910 are vital to a consideration of Osler's political direction of travel at that critical juncture. The reason she gave for her resignation was the distinct possibility of divided allegiance between her position as President of both the BLAUX and the BWSS. It was a recognition of the hardening attitude of the NUWSS and its local branches in the light of the failure of the Liberal Government after three years in power,

⁴⁸ R. Wright, 'Liberal Party Organisations and Politics in Birmingham, Coventry and Wolverhampton 1886-1914 with Particular Reference to the Development of Independent Labour Representation' (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 1977), pp. 348-349.

⁴⁹ *Memories 2*, Chapter 1.

to have taken any steps towards enacting female suffrage. Although Osler would have been unhappy with the scale of the welfare legislation passed by the Liberal Government in its early years, including, for example, reform of juvenile punishment, state pensions for the over 70s, unemployment insurance, labour exchanges, and the provision of school meals, they had not been resigning issues.⁵⁰ She would have had reservations too about Lloyd George's radical 1909 Budget which was to be the subject of a fateful meeting at Bingley Hall on 17 September of that year attended by the Prime Minister himself. It was likely that women's suffrage would be raised at the meeting as Herbert Asquith was a noted opponent of women's voting rights. The outcome of that meeting will be addressed later in this chapter.

The potential conflict of interest for Osler arose from the so-called Cambridge Resolution of the WLF in 1902, under the terms of which the officers of the WLF, which included Osler in her role as President of the BLAUX, were prevented from giving electoral assistance to Liberal candidates who were not in favour of women's suffrage, thus delivering a 'serious blow' to any Liberal candidates falling within that category.⁵¹ Further, Osler was bound as a member and President of the BWSS to put the interests of women's suffrage before party politics. Since by 1909 there were still Liberal anti-suffrage candidates standing for office, and the suffrage debate was becoming more and more fractious, these 'increasingly painful' conditions led her to withdraw from 'official connections' with the Liberal Party, although she came to regret her delay in taking her

⁵⁰ Fawcett, *Liberalism*, pp. 161-162.

⁵¹ Hirschfield, 'Fractured Faith', pp. 173-197, p. 179.

decision.⁵² Matters had come to a head on 17 September 1909, when before Osler's resignation, Asquith attended the meeting at Bingley Hall referred to in the previous paragraph. Unfortunately, but predictably, there were violent clashes between suffragette protestors and the police, resulting in slates being thrown by some suffragettes from an adjacent roof, and further damage being caused to Asquith's train as it departed for London at the end of the evening.⁵³ Subsequently, some of those arrested were imprisoned and subjected to some of the first instances of forced feeding in this country.⁵⁴ Originally, women were excluded from the meeting, but Osler insisted that she and her BLAUX committee be permitted to attend purely in their official capacity and without condoning Asquith's anti-suffrage beliefs. Eventually, admittance was allowed but she was subsequently strongly criticised in the suffragist newspaper, *The Common Cause*, for 'being brought on a leash to be exhibited as part of the Premier's triumph'. Whilst she considered the criticism to be unfair, she was confirmed in her view that she needed to sever her links with 'my political Party' and eleven days after the Asquith meeting, on 28 September 1909 she and her fellow officers submitted their resignations from the BLAUX.⁵⁵

Whilst Osler was in a difficult position it may be thought she did not handle events particularly well. The impression was falsely but understandably gained by some suffragists outside Birmingham - notably a long-standing colleague, Margaret Ashton - that Osler's appearance at the meeting on 17 September implied an endorsement of

⁵² *Memories 2*, Chapter 2.

⁵³ Women's Library, London, *Votes for Women*, 24 September 1909.

⁵⁴ Gauld, *Words and Deeds*, pp. 42, 44-50.

⁵⁵ *Memories 2*, Chapter 2.

Asquith's anti-suffragist policies. Had she and her committee resigned prior to the meeting, then they would not have attended, and nothing further would have been heard of it. Her procrastination was born out of genuine regret for severing her links with 'my political Party', the Party of her late husband and her birth family. The subsequent resignation letter from the BLAUX signed by her, the Honorary Secretary and the Treasurer, made the position clear. It stated that the continued failure of the Party to advance the claim for women's emancipation had forced them to adopt the stance that they could 'take no further part in actively working for those who deny women the rights of citizenship'. When the full facts were known, Osler subsequently received an apology from Ashton and the latter accepted that she had not placed 'sufficient trust and faith' in Osler to do the right thing and regretted any bitterness caused.⁵⁶ Osler's dilemma was clarified by a letter she wrote to her son on the day of the Bingley Hall meeting referring to a visit from members of the local Liberal Committee shortly before the meeting, requesting that she stand as a candidate for election as the 'pioneer' woman City Councillor in Birmingham. She refused, and the disappointed deputation departed 'after a long struggle' to persuade her to stand. She described crying after they left as she felt she could have won the election. The letter to her son is in a separate section of *Memories 2* and suggests that she did not feel sufficiently healthy to cope with the work. She explained that she could probably have done 'as well as many of the new Councillors do' but felt that as a woman pioneer, she would have to set a 'high standard of usefulness' and it was by reference to that standard that 'the value of her sex's co-

⁵⁶ *Memories 2*, Chapter 2.

operation would be judged'. She hoped she might be stronger in the following year.⁵⁷ The last comment suggested that she was citing her poor health as her reason for not standing as she made no mention to her son of any intention to resign from the Party.

Her letter of 17 September was significant for two reasons. Firstly, it suggested that even by the day of the Asquith meeting she had made no definite decision to resign as if she had, she would surely have told her son to whom she was very close. It is also likely that she would have told the Liberal deputation that she could not have accepted their nomination as the Liberal Party candidate. The letter of resignation was dated some ten days after the Bingley Hall meeting which is further evidence that a final decision to resign had not been reached at that point. Taken together, these factors highlight the difficulty of the decision she had to make in view of her sense of allegiance to the Liberals, despite the way women had been treated by the Party. Secondly, even if her state of health may not have been the sole reason for her refusal to stand for election, there is no doubt that by this time her health was declining. Even though it is likely that if elected, she would have been a perfectly adequate councillor, she plainly felt that, as a woman, she would have been held to a higher standard than her male counterparts, rather confirming the continued existence of notions of gendered 'double standards'.

In the longer term, Osler was one of many prominent Liberals who eventually left the Party over the Government's refusal to grant voting rights. Clare Hirschfield mentioned Osler as one of many who had worked for the Party for several years, and for whom

⁵⁷ *Memories* 2, Chapter 3.

female enfranchisement was 'the single overwhelming test of feminist convictions'.⁵⁸ Hirschfield further submitted that the resignations of such women as Osler, Bertha Mason and Catherine Marshall, had the consequence of these women transferring their primary allegiance from Liberalism to the suffrage cause, and bringing with them all the benefits of their 'political sagacity and financial resources,' and also 'the fire of their convictions'.⁵⁹ However, neither the BWSS nor any other suffrage society were political parties, and if these women were to continue campaigning for voting rights, some form of allegiance to a political party was needed to navigate the parliamentary process. As already discussed, Osler participated in the two General Elections of 1910, and talked of 250 open-air Liberal Party meetings taking place to keep 'our suffrage claim well to the front' in the city.⁶⁰ Plainly, 1909 was an important year for Osler. She had seriously questioned her continued allegiance to the Liberal Party but did not, at that stage, consider any other party was more attractive. She had seen that the suffragettes were becoming a liability to the suffrage movement owing to their increasingly lawless approach. The next chapter will discuss the contentious decision of the suffragists to form an agreement with the emergent Labour Movement in the final stages of the long campaign. The final section of this chapter examines international conflict, a further divisive issue for Osler and Liberalism.

⁵⁸ Hirschfield, 'Fractured Faith', p. 184.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁶⁰ *Memories 2*, Chapter 2.

War, Peace and Empire: the Boer War 1899-1902

In the latter years of the Victorian period Osler and her family, together with a section of the Liberal Party had been strong supporters of self-government for the Irish people. Chapter Five made it clear that they were in opposition to the Conservative Party, the Liberal Unionists led by Joseph Chamberlain, and also to women such as Millicent Fawcett. By 1895, the Irish issue had faded somewhat with the defeat of Gladstone's second Home Rule Bill in 1893, but it was replaced by a different Imperial issue, the dispute between the British Empire and the Boer Republics for suzerainty over the Transvaal and the Orange Free State in southern Africa. Support for the Imperial cause was led by Chamberlain, now a Cabinet Minister as Colonial Secretary. However, support for the Boers from Osler and other Liberals was more nuanced, particularly after the outbreak of war in 1899. The issues of the extent of Osler's support for the war and its subsequent conduct, and the degree to which a feminist view of the conflict evolved both in Birmingham and nationwide are now considered.

The context of the Boer conflict revolved around the huge expansion of the British Empire in the second half of the nineteenth century under a doctrine which Edmund Fawcett terms new Imperialism. At a time when Canada and Australia were becoming increasingly self-governing, Britain was conquering and occupying a number of countries at great cost in lives and money. Edmund Fawcett writes that in colonising these countries, governments, including Britain, 'killed at the same time in tens of thousands.' In the years between 1871 and 1900 he states that 'Britain engaged in twenty-two

colonial wars of significant scale'.⁶¹ Joseph Chamberlain came to embrace Liberal Imperialism as a means of increasing British wealth and influence by exploitation of the colonies by policies of protection rather than free trade. In the case of the Boer Republics, this resulted in a military conflict commencing in 1899.⁶²

There is no direct evidence of Osler's initial position on the resort to war. As a Gladstonian Liberal her instincts would have been both to support the right of a country to self-determination and freedom from foreign domination, and to oppose the inevitable costs of war. Her hero, Gladstone himself had died only the year before the outbreak of the long-predicted war and was, according to Edmund Fawcett, 'ambivalent and conscience-stricken about the British Empire.'⁶³ Equally, Chapter Two referred to Osler's longstanding admiration for the Italian patriot Mazzini and her support for his battle for Italian independence from the Habsburg Empire. In February 1899, a few months before the final outbreak of hostilities, Osler gave her Presidential Address to the Leicester Women's Liberal Association, focusing on foreign affairs. Although she did not mention South Africa specifically, it must have influenced her address. She quoted evidence that English 'annual expenditure on national defence amounted to forty million sterling'; further in the previous twenty years, England had 'annexed 2.5 million square miles' of territory into the Empire. The enmity this caused, and the consequences of aggressive trading made peace on earth more difficult to achieve.⁶⁴ These points would

⁶¹ Fawcett, *Liberalism*, pp. 204-205.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 208-211.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 210-211.

⁶⁴ *Leicester Chronicle*, 18 February 1899.

suggest an anti-war stance, but other factors may have persuaded her otherwise, particularly the support for the war by her husband Alfred.

Osler was an independently minded woman and Chapter Three suggested that she may have had a more progressive view of women's rights than Alfred. However, the chapter on the Boer War in *Memories 1* suggested his view was persuasive. His reluctant and critical support for the pursuance of the War was based on two principal grounds. Firstly, that the Boers had declared war on Britain and hence became a threat to the Empire; secondly, in the feverish political atmosphere whipped up by Chamberlain and the Unionist press, support for the Boers was certain to further weaken an already divided BLA. There was no doubt that the aim of Chamberlain and the Imperialists was to gain control of the gold and diamond mines by taking control of the Transvaal.⁶⁵ The plan was to place Britain at the centre of an expanded trading Empire in Africa, whilst excluding all other nations' goods by imposing high tariffs.⁶⁶ It was the antithesis of the doctrine of free trade which was fundamental to the Liberalism of the Oslers. In December 1895, the 'Jameson Raid', a proxy incursion into the Transvaal provoked by Britain, had failed, and during the years up to 1899, the denigration and provocation of the Boers and the clamour for military action had grown. For example, the *Birmingham Gazette* condemned the Boers in June 1899 as '40,000 uncultured retrogressive half-breeds, held in contempt

⁶⁵ R. Ward, *City State and Nation: Birmingham Political History c. 1830-1940* (Chichester, 2005), pp. 135-142 gives an excellent account of the war and its effect in Birmingham.

⁶⁶ Fawcett, *Liberalism*, pp. 210-211.

for their backwardness'.⁶⁷ In October 1899 'anticipating' British action, the Boers declared war.⁶⁸

Alfred and Catherine were in no doubt that the immediate blame for hostilities lay with Britain. They condemned the Jameson Raid, and the subsequent 'provocative utterances' and 'bluff', but nonetheless Alfred supported the response because, in admitting that his views had changed, he considered that it would have been impossible to work with the Boers. The problem for the Oslers and other Liberals was that the issue was presented in such binary terms. If they were not completely supportive of the British position, they were tarnished as 'pro Boer' and rational argument became impossible.⁶⁹ In 1900 when the War seemed to be going well for Britain, the Government called the 'Khaki Election' and campaigned on the slogan that every vote for the Liberals was a vote for the Boers. The same jingoism caused Osler and her party to lose control of the Birmingham School Board in 1900 for the first time in seventeen years to the Church Party.⁷⁰ Her appeal to fellow Unitarians was met by 'flabby apathy'.⁷¹ The most flagrant and potentially dangerous example of Chamberlain's tactics was the Liberal meeting at the Birmingham Town Hall in December 1901, at which David Lloyd George, a Liberal politician who had been critical of the conduct of the war, was invited to speak. Both Catherine and Alfred were on the platform for what was a private meeting of the BLA. Osler's account

⁶⁷ Ward, *City State and Nation*, p. 135.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁶⁹ *Memories 1*, p. 176.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

described a riot of some 50,000 people where much damage was caused, and Lloyd George had to be carried to safety in disguise to save him from serious injury or worse.⁷²

Whatever the extent of Osler's initial reluctant support for the War, she became increasingly critical of its conduct and the consequences, and along with other women she voiced serious concerns on humanitarian and political grounds. The conflict did not end in 1900: the Boers fought a protracted and effective guerrilla campaign, causing the war to continue until spring 1902, by which time it had become a major and very unpopular military conflict. According to John Reader, Britain committed 448,000 men to the War over its course, losing 22,000 dead, 13,250 of these to disease. The Boers mobilised 88,000 men, losing 3,000. Reader writes that the war 'cost the British taxpayer £222 million'. A major criticism of Britain during the War was the introduction of concentration camps. By October 1901, the population of these camps was 111,619 and the appalling conditions in them resulted in the deaths of 27,927 Boers by the end of the conflict in May 1902. Of particular concern to women was that of this total, 22,000 were children under 16 years old, and more than 4,000 were adult women.⁷³

For Osler and other women, the main organ for expressing their views about the Boer War and war generally was the WLF and its local branches. Two speeches by Osler have survived. The first in June 1900 was given at a time when it was thought that the war would soon be concluded with victory for the British. However, there was no triumphalism. She referred to it as the 'horrible war' which she hoped was 'repudiated

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 186.

⁷³ J. Reader, *Africa: A Biography of the Continent* (London, 1997), p. 595.

and loathed'. There should be no celebration that an army of 200,000 had defeated an army of 40,000. She advocated a search for agreement and a return to 'sobriety and judgment'.⁷⁴ By the time of the second speech at the annual conference of the WLF in Birmingham in May 1901, the situation had changed. The guerrilla war was underway, and the end was not in sight. The annual motion for peaceful settlement of international disputes was no longer a formality and Osler's speech in support showed her to be one of the women pressing for an end to the conflict by a reference to arbitration. Two particular themes of her speech were significant. Firstly, she emphasised that there was no contradiction between anti-militarism and 'true patriotism'. Many citizens throughout the 'deplorable' war had stifled their consciences when met with the repetition of the mantra of 'inevitable war'. With greater wisdom and patience, arbitration provided the pathway to peace. She strongly hinted that those who felt that a war was inevitable should themselves face 'retribution'. Secondly, her motion was qualified by recognising the necessity of maintaining an efficient army 'so long as armies exist'. This qualification showed Osler adopting her customary balanced approach, in accepting immediate disarmament as unrealistic and even stating that, particularly in the absence of an effective arbitration machinery, resort to arms might be justified. As postulated earlier, the decision to take up arms against the Boers may have been - in her view - one such case. The theme of patriotism and a just war is revisited in Chapter Eight in the context of the First World War, but it is noteworthy that her 'qualification provision' was defeated at the conference as it was thought to be encouraging militarism rather than peace, and

⁷⁴ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 13 June 1900.

because so much depended 'upon the influence of women' the principle of peace should be 'upheld'.⁷⁵

Clare Hirschfield's research described an increasingly united opposition to the War by progressive Liberal women such as Osler by 1901 channelled through the WLF.⁷⁶ The revelations by Emily Hobhouse of the conditions experienced by women and children in concentration camps shocked not just women. The new Liberal leader, Campbell-Bannerman, condemned the 'methods of barbarism' in the concentration camps in a speech in June 1901.⁷⁷ For Hirschfield, their wartime experiences permanently affected some activist women and 'ultimately, the opportunity for direct participation in the public arena', and the 'enhancement of self-image' led 'to a greater willingness to confront the question of enfranchisement'.⁷⁸ The need for women to have a voice in matters as profound as war and peace meant that there could be 'no further equivocation' on voting rights. It led to the 1902 Cambridge Resolution referred to in the previous section, and the linkage of political reform with the franchise.⁷⁹ It was also, as discussed earlier, the issue which caused Osler to sever her links with the BLAUX in 1909.

Whilst there was clearly support among progressive women over the conduct of the War, research has shown that some influential women took a contrary view such that there was clearly not a unified view of the merits of the conflict. As already mentioned,

⁷⁵ The University of Bristol Special Collections, *Minutes and Reports of the Women's Liberal Federation, 1889-1901*.

⁷⁶ Hirschfield, 'Liberal Women's Organisations', pp. 27-49.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

Millicent Fawcett and Josephine Butler supported the War, perhaps explaining why the NUWSS led by Fawcett was largely aloof from the debate.⁸⁰ It illustrated the complexity of women's views as they emerged on to the stage in international affairs. To a large extent the differences over the South African conflict, mirrored the split over Irish Home Rule where again Osler and Fawcett were on opposite sides. Vron Ware's article, whilst critical of Fawcett's stance, accepted that she saw it as her patriotic duty as a citizen, whether woman or man, to support the War along with a commitment to the Empire and, if necessary, armed conflict in pursuance of that perceived duty. Ware also accepted that Fawcett's views were widely held at the time, although it meant that the potential was lost for women to be prominent in 'peace-making' and arbitration without regard to 'race, colour or sex'.⁸¹ Laura Mayhall has argued that disagreements between supporters and opponents of the Boer War raised an issue as to the nature of women's role within the Empire. Supporters of suffrage such as Fawcett promoted an idea of women's service to their Imperial rulers as a justification for limited voting rights. For more radical women, there developed the idea of citizenship involving a right to participate in the country's affairs including a right to protest. Mayhall saw in this formulation of citizenship the seeds of the militant tactics of, amongst others, the suffragettes. It may certainly be argued that some supporter of women's voting rights were radicalised by the Boer War. The argument of this thesis is that many women, including Osler, held such views of women's civic rights long before the Boer War. For them the effect of the Boer conflict

⁸⁰ B. Caine, *Victorian Feminists* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 173-175.

⁸¹ Ware, 'All the rage', p. 25.

was rather to confirm their views and also their stance that war, whether Imperialist or otherwise was not the way to settle disputes.⁸²

Another strong supporter of the War was Markham whose views on Imperialism followed the same course as displayed on women's suffrage; strong opposition in youth and moderation later in life. During the period of the conflict, she described the Boers as 'barely one branch up from the 'natives' on the tree of evolution'.⁸³ Their mental state was 'that of a 15th century peasant' and in Darwinian terms, 'The Boer is not fit and he must go to the wall'.⁸⁴ For Markham, conquest of the Boer Republics was the only hope and that remained her stance throughout. Like Fawcett, she was very critical of Hobhouse's work and report.⁸⁵ Markham's opinions on South Africa eventually became more liberal in her acceptance of the 'increased native participation in political life' whilst still believing that 'the white man will rule'.⁸⁶

Emily Hobhouse's findings about the suffering in the concentration camps led to the appointment of a commission of enquiry consisting wholly of women. Fawcett, who had already written an article criticising Hobhouse's findings, was chosen to head the commission. The report published in February 1902 contained trenchant criticism of the administration of the concentration camps, but at no time questioned the need for them and tended to blame the inadequacies of the Boer women in caring for their children for

⁸² Laura E. Nym Mayhall, 'The South African War and the origins of suffrage militancy in Britain, 1899-1902' in I. C. Fletcher, L. E. Nym Mayhall and P Levine (eds.), *Women's Suffrage in the British Empire: Citizenship, nation and race* (London, 2000), pp. 1-13.

⁸³ Riedi, 'Options for an Imperialist Woman', pp. 59-84, p. 63.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 64.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 69.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 61.

the high rate of mortality.⁸⁷ Emily Hobhouse was both rejected as a committee member and prevented from returning to the camps. The report mounted a strong defence of the conduct of the British army. Her biographer described Fawcett's view of patriotism as 'narrow to the point of vindictiveness'.⁸⁸ It mirrored her view considered in the previous chapter in the context of Irish Home Rule.⁸⁹

Osler's views on the Boer conflict and Imperialism generally were complex and her friendship with Fawcett was longstanding, but plainly she would have taken serious issue with Fawcett's position. She had always believed that ultimately the Empire could only be maintained with the consent of the governed rather than by coercion. In the context of India, Alfred Osler had said in 1893 that successful rule could only be maintained by 'sympathy' and 'understanding'.⁹⁰ In her speech to the BLAUX of March 1889, Osler had contrasted the consequences of British conduct towards the Irish, with what would have happened if there had been similar behaviour in India. Her conclusion was that Britain would have been 'driven out' long ago.⁹¹ It was one thing to impose power on a small population but quite different in a country with a population as large as that of India. Osler was favourably disposed towards Indian rule in the Empire. Following her holiday to India in early 1900, she was full of praise for the 'wonderful achievements' and 'vast benefits' of English rule.⁹² Chapter Eight will suggest that her view of the maintenance of

⁸⁷ Caine, *Victorian Feminists*, pp. 213-214.

⁸⁸ Rubinstein, *A Different World for Women*, pp. 122-128.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁹⁰ *Memories 1*, p. 98.

⁹¹ Osler's speech to the BLAUX, *Birmingham Daily Post*, 19 March 1889.

⁹² *Memories 1*, pp. 160-161.

Empire and the benefits of British Rule had been modified by the end of her life after the First World War and the Amritsar massacre.

The outcome of the Boer War for Britain was unsatisfactory and by 1910 both Boer Republics regained their independence. Whatever Fawcett's conclusions, the legacy of the concentration camps was bitter, and damaged Britain's reputation. It provided evidence of 'physical decrepitude as well as moral turpitude'.⁹³ Osler did not emerge from the war as a pacifist, but she was plainly leaning against the use of force save as a last resort and in limited circumstances. Nor did she become an opponent of the Empire, although her faith was shaken by the treatment of the Boer women. One of the consequences of the War was the realisation that many British soldiers were unfit for military service. This led to a debate as to middle-class women's domestic role in producing suitable offspring for the next generation of servicemen. Osler's expressed view was that women were more likely to be receptive to their civic duties, including producing children, if their role was recognised by voting rights.⁹⁴ Like other suffrage campaigners, Osler saw it as appropriate and politically expedient to support the armed forces of the Empire during these times. All of these issues are pursued further in Chapter Eight in the context of the First World War.

Conclusion

This chapter has covered three main areas. Firstly, it outlined the aims, growth, methods and activities of the BWSS and the WSPU in seeking female emancipation during the

⁹³ P. Brendon, *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire, 1781-1997* (London, 2007), p. 225.

⁹⁴ *Vote*, pp. 37-39.

years of Osler's Presidency in the first decade of the twentieth century. Secondly, during the same period, it appraised the relationship between Osler's BWSS and the Liberal Party, and the evident strains caused by the suffrage issue towards the end of the period. Thirdly, it analysed the experience of Imperialism centred on the conflict in South Africa, together with the evolution of Osler's views during and subsequent to the conflict. Osler's own recollections and prominent participation in the three areas covered in this chapter have enabled a wider and richer view of women's activities during the period, particularly in Birmingham.

After a period of relative inactivity in the 1890s, the first years of Osler's Presidency showed steady growth of the BWSS in numbers and activity. The BWSS was wedded to constitutional methods throughout to achieve voting rights. It expanded its membership and income during the period. It was reorganised and considerably increased the geographical area of its operations. Birmingham was the central point of Osler's work in holding meetings, fundraising and publicity. The BWSS retained a close relationship with the Liberal Party. Osler was an active President but was aware of the limited impact of her campaign. The WSPU had little presence in Birmingham until 1907 but became established speedily. The aim of the two bodies was identical - the achievement of national voting rights on the same terms as men. Osler was impressed by the vigour and commitment of the WSPU and its ability to attract publicity to the movement. However, she was concerned by their militant methods which she feared would be counter-productive. Osler also felt that it was unrealistic to refuse to work with political parties and wrong to resort, if necessary, to unlawful conduct to achieve their ends. By 1909,

following unsuccessful mass demonstrations, it became clear that the two bodies could not work together on an organised basis, and eventually pursued their separate paths.

Osler's relationship with the Liberal Party was longstanding and complex. The split over Home Rule for Ireland in 1888 had been disastrous and left the Party in opposition for nearly twenty years. Despite her reservations about the growing socialist influence, she supported the Party in 1906 and had hopes of progress on voting rights after the return of the Party to government. Those hopes were dashed and by 1909 there had been no steps taken by the Liberals to legislate for women's rights and instead, they were actively legislating on issues which she opposed. The presence of anti-suffragists within the party, and the primacy of her obligations to the BWSS led her to resign as President of the BLAUX in unsatisfactory circumstances in 1909.

The conflict in South Africa raised difficult moral and political issues for Osler. There is no doubt that the Boer War was, fundamentally, an Imperialist conflict to regain suzerainty over the gold mines in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. As a Gladstonian Liberal, Osler believed in freedom and self-determination of countries, small and inexpensive government, and peace rather than physical aggression and hostile trading practices. The provocative and threatening conduct of Britain fostered by Chamberlain, together with the increasing move towards protective trade policies replacing free trade, were contrary to Osler's Liberal beliefs. She saw a clear parallel with the continuing unrest in Ireland, where she strongly believed in self-government. Nonetheless, in 1899, the Boer Republics had declared war on the British Empire, and however provoked they may have been, Osler agreed with her husband that a resort to arms was justified to regain control of the

rebel republics. Osler was not at that time an opponent of Empire and, for example, was supportive of British Rule in India. However, as the Boer War continued with increasing military and civilian casualties, including thousands of women and children condemned to the concentration camps, Osler's view became more nuanced and, along with that of many Liberal women, increasingly critical of the conduct of the War. They voiced their collective opposition principally through the WLF where Osler publicly advanced a case for an arbitration mechanism for the settlement of disputes. The increasing opposition of some women, including Osler, to the War showed women to be capable of contributing to debates on foreign affairs, previously regarded as a male preserve. Opposition to the War amongst women was by no means universal. Millicent Fawcett and Josephine Butler were powerful voices in support of Chamberlain's patriotic, Imperialist viewpoint. The focus on Osler's prominent stance on the issues in the chapter has demonstrated how influential women such as Osler became involved in the debates and offered a different perspective from the predominate male Imperialist world view.

Chapter Seven: The Later Stages of the Suffrage Campaign and Political Turmoil 1910 to 1914

This chapter analyses Osler's opinions and the extent of her influence in the years of the campaign for women's voting rights leading up to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. As the President of her local suffrage society, the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society (BWSS) and from March 1912 an elected member of the Executive Committee of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), Osler played an important part in dealing with the complexities of the campaign at local and national level up to the commencement of hostilities. As with Chapters Five and Six, this chapter emphasises the novel contribution of this study in its concentration on the local campaign in Birmingham, but also broadens the picture by comparing and contrasting Osler's activities with those of other prominent suffrage campaigners such as Millicent Fawcett and Emmeline Pankhurst who, like her, produced publications giving their own perception of the long campaign. The discussion falls into three main parts.

Firstly, it considers why, after so many years of campaigning, Osler decided to produce a comprehensive justification for women to have voting rights, centred on the significance of the fourteen articles she wrote for the NUWSS magazine, *The Common Cause*, from March to August 1910. These articles were later published and circulated in book form as *Vote*.¹ It identified the disadvantages of women being denied voting rights, contrasting these with the benefits to women and society generally of women's emancipation. By way of placing Osler in the context of her time, this section will also feature other books,

¹ C. C. Osler, *Why Women Need the Vote* (Place of publication unknown, 1910).

of which Osler's may have been the first, published by contemporary women suffrage campaigners - Millicent Fawcett, Helena Swanwick and Emmeline Pankhurst - in the immediate pre-war years. The likelihood is that these were produced at a time when there was increased morale and confidence amongst campaigners that the argument for women's suffrage had finally been won, the issue being how and when, rather than whether, it would be achieved. It is also appropriate to include Eleanor Rathbone at this stage in the discussion. Although she does not appear as an author she figures prominently in the remaining chapters of this thesis. All were on their own journeys and exhibit differing views and motivations as suffrage campaigners as will be alluded to at appropriate places in the text. As Osler is the central figure of this thesis, her book will have the greatest prominence.

Secondly, it discusses the failure of the bipartisan Conciliation Bills of 1910-1912 and its effect on the suffrage campaign. It assesses the effectiveness of Osler's response to the defeat and her continuing local work for the BWSS by reference to its meetings, publications and surviving archive from 1910 to the outbreak of War when suffrage work was put on hold. It additionally includes an appraisal of the effectiveness of Osler's work in countering the militant and violent response of some members of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) between 1912 and 1914 resulting from the failure of the conciliation process and analyses the effects of the response of the WSPU with reference to recent historiography.

Thirdly, it assesses Osler's national work for the NUWSS up to the outbreak of the War, centring upon her attitude towards the important proposed collaboration with the

Labour Party following the failure of the Liberal Government to ensure the passage of the final Conciliation Bill in 1912. It will include an appraisal of the increasing relevance of that Party which was founded to advance the interests of working-class men and women.

One background issue assumed ever greater importance during these years. By 1910 Osler's health was deteriorating markedly. She was by then aged fifty-six and three entries in *Journal 1* illustrate the problems. In May 1910, she complained of being invalided for six months with heart weakness and being confined to 'a little writing'.² In September 1910, she recounted failing hearing, along with sight and breathing difficulties rendering all activity 'exhausting'.³ Perhaps most seriously, by the end of 1912, she complained of increasing deafness, making long NUWSS Executive Meetings difficult to follow, with hearing instruments bringing no relief.⁴ Despite these problems, Osler continued to work and this chapter records her attendance at meetings long after 1912. However, deafness in those times would have been a significant impediment to both private and public activity and was likely to have been an important factor in any diminishing of her influence on events. A Journal entry for January 1910 in which she highlighted the vote in the House of Lords granting the partial enfranchisement of women, recorded also her decision not to stand again for election to the Executive Committee of the NUWSS in February of that year, 'owing to my deafness'.⁵

² *Journal 1*, 16 May 1910.

³ *Journal 1*, 21 September 1910.

⁴ *Journal 1*, 20 December 1912.

⁵ *Journal 1*, January, 1918.

Literature Review

This Review will refer to a range of primary and secondary sources in connection with the suffrage movement in Birmingham. It will include books written by contemporaries and by later historians.

Millicent's Fawcett's book published in late 1911 is valuable as a succinct history of the suffrage movement from a leading suffrage figure of a Unionist persuasion and is particularly informative about the period encompassed by the Conciliation Bills.⁶ Helena Swanwick, writing in 1913, shared many of Osler's concerns and hopes for the future if and when voting rights were granted. It was written by a younger woman who became a socialist pacifist during the war.⁷ Emmeline Pankhurst's contribution was published in 1914 and as a leading suffragette supporter of militancy she was particularly informative on the motivations behind the campaign of violence from 1912 to 1914 and its consequences.⁸ These contemporary sources add to the existing historiography in pointing up the nature of the debate amongst women as the pressure for women's enfranchisement increased. Their themes range from the classic gradualism and moderation of Osler's Liberalism to the more opportunistic pragmatism of Fawcett; from the more radical socialistic leanings of Swanwick to the violent, confrontational and non-political approach of Pankhurst.

More recent publications will consider how the debates surrounding women's suffrage were affected by the growing emergence of the Labour Party and the increasing

⁶ M. Fawcett, *Women's Suffrage: A Short History of a Great Movement* (London, 1911).

⁷ H. Swanwick, *The Future of the Women's Movement* (London, 1913).

⁸ E. Pankhurst, *My Own Story* (London, 1914).

relevance of issues of class. David Rubinstein's biography of Millicent Fawcett showed how the political imperative to achieve suffrage outweighed Fawcett's conservative Unionism.⁹ Sandra Stanley Holton's research highlighted the deep reservations of many Liberal suffrage supporters, including Osler, regarding the electoral problems and loss of political identity which might follow such fundamental realignment as well as investigating the results of the failure of the Conciliation Bills and the formation of the Election Fighting Fund (EFF).¹⁰ Dawn Langam Teele's recent book emphasises the particular importance of the EFF in contributing to the achievement of women's voting rights.¹¹ Lyndsey Jenkins's article assists in our understanding of class issues within the WSPU.¹² The variety and wide-ranging nature of these sources will illustrate the growing momentum of the suffrage movement and assist an analysis of the relevance of activist women such as Osler at this vital period of the quest for women's emancipation.

Why Women Need the Vote

Osler began her book *Vote* with the following quotation from her childhood hero and lifelong influence Joseph Mazzini: 'You cannot fulfil your task without liberty, which is a source of responsibility. You cannot fulfil it without equality, which is liberty for each and all.'¹³ These sentiments may be considered as the leitmotifs for her book. Osler stressed in the first eight chapters the disadvantages to women under the existing parliamentary

⁹ D. Rubinstein, *A Different World for Women: The Life of Millicent Garrett Fawcett* (Columbus, OH, 1991) pp. 189-196.

¹⁰ S. S. Holton, *Feminism and Democracy: Women's Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain 1900-1918* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 79-115.

¹¹ D. L. Teele, *Forging the Franchise: The Political Origins of the Women's Vote* (Princeton, 2018).

¹² L. Jenkins, 'Anna Kenney and The Politics of Class In The WSPU', *20th Century British History*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (2019), pp. 477-503.

¹³ *Vote*, an unpaginated opening page.

franchise of having no right to vote on issues concerning them, or public issues generally. Without those rights and consequent obligations, women could not be considered full, free and equal citizens before the law. Even accepting that the existing franchise was not universal, the only other sections of the community who had no voting rights at all were criminals, lunatics and minors.¹⁴

In successive chapters Osler outlined some of the major disadvantages to women of the absence of voting rights; for example, the discriminatory laws restricting the hours women might work and the jobs they were thought to be fitted for; the adverse rates of pay compared with men for the work they were allowed to do; and the absence of any right of maintenance for women who were unable to work. Women were not asking for special treatment but the removal of obstacles to fair and equal treatment. Aside from financial and employment inequality, Osler adverted to the serious issue of social and moral inequality. The evidence of female child trafficking, for example, eventually caused the male legislators to enact the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885 to punish by imprisonment the procuring of girls for prostitution. Even in that case, there were two significant restrictions; proceedings had to be instituted within three months of the alleged offence, and there was a defence of reasonable excuse if the man had grounds for believing the victim was of age. In emphasising her point Osler quoted Gladstone: 'Men have often been the most unfaithful guardians of women's rights to social and moral equality.'¹⁵ She was making two points here. As the law stood in 1910, women were the victims of unequal and discriminatory treatment in all aspects of private and

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

public life with no means of exercising responsibility and challenging their subordination and, save in exceptional circumstances, men could not be trusted to act in women's interests equally or in priority to their own.

Osler proceeded to consider the advantages for women and the wider community if the franchise were to be granted. She rejected the suggestion of some men that there could be a difference between public and private issues. She claimed that most issues coming before Parliament concerned both sexes anyway, but more importantly, there was no question - public or private - when it would not be important to have the participation of men and women in the decisions to be made. As she put it, public spirit is not 'an exclusively masculine virtue, it is 'not sex but responsibility' which brings about such a spirit.¹⁶ She produced evidence from women's involvement in philanthropic, educational and limited political work at local level to demonstrate that they had fulfilled their tasks with proficiency and without criticism. Also, by 1910, she was able to point to countries such as New Zealand, Australia, Norway and Finland, where measures to enfranchise women had been enacted with favourable results. Taking New Zealand as an example, Osler considered the experience of women's voting rights to assess whether the vote was valued and used. The statistics from 1908 showed that eighty-one per cent of the men qualified to vote actually voted in an election, compared with seventy-eight per cent of women. A local observer recorded that women showed knowledge and judgment in preparing themselves to vote, and at public meetings exhibited a keen interest in the subjects discussed. Turning next to the benefits that have accrued to women from voting

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

rights, Osler cited a delegate to a conference in 1903 who noted an evolution in women's rights which now included, for example, equal conditions for divorce, the right of women to enter the legal profession, and a Family Maintenance Act stipulating that a man had to make proper provision for his family before he could dispose of his property by will. Finally, with regard to the effect of the women's vote on the country itself, Osler was available to refer to The Premier of New Zealand who declared that women's suffrage had resulted in the passage of laws beneficial to the country, whilst not resulting in women becoming 'in the slightest degree unsexed'.¹⁷

In the last two chapters of her book, Osler set out her vision for the status of women and the ideal relationship between the sexes in the future. She was looking to achieve 'a position of equality with men' rather than a previous 'unquestioning subordination' based upon the spurious notion of 'chivalry'.¹⁸ She believed that equal status would enable women to be more able to discover their appropriate 'spheres in life' and that the bringing together of men and women as partners in public activity and social effort would lead to a more genuine respect and understanding.¹⁹ She then asked how realistic was the aspiration towards what she termed the 'Vision Beautiful' and what it meant for men and women. She identified a growing ideal of society as a living organism which can only thrive if its constituent parts work together harmoniously and healthily.²⁰ It would not be a socialist concept. There would always be divisions of labour, but it would be based upon 'personal and natural fitness and inclination' rather than the dominance of one sex

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-44.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

over the other.²¹ There would be equality of opportunity rather than social and racial equality. Osler was conscious of the duty of higher-class women to procreate and questioned the decision of some 'prosperous women' to restrict their families, leaving 'the thriftless irresponsible and often physically undesirable' to populate the Empire in defiance of their patriotic duty.²² A harmonious society would include an ideal of patriotism which would rescue the country 'from fear of racial degeneracy'.²³

These are the ideals of an affluent middle-class woman, and such eugenic and class-based views were widespread during the period, as mentioned in Chapter Three.²⁴ They are important in providing a realistic portrait of liberal thinking at the time. Class distinctions were increasingly being challenged by working-class women as will be discussed also in Chapter Nine. An extract from the diary of Catherine Osler's daughter, Dorothy, illustrated racial prejudice in the context of a discussion between the two women in 1915 concerning racial tensions in South Africa. Dorothy described her 'intense racial feeling' and that 'at all costs intermarriage must be prevented'. However, at the same time she recognised that once 'natives' were admitted to education with 'our sons and brothers', the parameters of gender contact between the races would have to be addressed. As a progressive woman, Dorothy accepted that to deny education to such 'natives' would be 'totally unjust' and impossible, and she was very critical of 'brutality' towards the 'Kaffir' in South Africa. However, Dorothy's life with her husband in Bermuda led her 'for the first time' to a 'deep-rooted dislike for a coloured race' who could be 'useful and efficient'

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

²⁴ A. Davin, 'Imperialism and Motherhood', *History Workshop*, No. 5 (1978), pp. 9-65.

with discipline, but if uncontrolled, were 'degenerate, loose-living, lazy and insolent'.²⁵ Whilst these are Dorothy's views, it is more than likely they were shared by her mother. The racial prejudice is clear but nonetheless, there is recognition of inappropriate methods of showing superiority. A more expansive discussion of the intertwined issues of racism and gender in the context of eugenics would be beyond the bounds of this study, but for further discussion in addition to Anna Davin's article at footnote 24, readers are referred to subsequent contributions to the debate by Greta Jones and the recent 2019 article by Vron Ware offering a comparison between Millicent Fawcett and Emily Hobhouse referred to in the previous chapter.²⁶

Two questions arise from this discussion; namely, why were the articles contained in *Vote* written, and what was their effect upon the women's rights campaign? There is no surviving evidence as to Osler's reason for writing and publishing the articles. The feminist perspective differed little from the views she had been putting forward from the early days of the suffrage campaign, as analysed in Chapter Five. It is not known whether she approached the magazine for permission to publish or was commissioned to write them. However, it is reasonable to consider why publication may have been not only in her own interests, but also those of the magazine. It might have been relevant that the first editor of *The Common Cause* was Helena Swanwick, a woman with similar feminist views to Osler who, as noted above, published her own substantial literary contribution

²⁵ Dorothy Hayes, Diary entry, 22 January 1915.

²⁶ G. Jones, 'Women and Eugenics in Britain: the Case of Mary Scharlieb, Elizabeth Sloan Chessier, and Stella Browne', *Annals of Science*, 51, Abingdon, (1995), pp. 481-502 and V. Ware, 'All the rage: decolonising the history of the British women's suffrage movement' published online at <http://doi.org/10.1080/09502.386.2019.1638953>. pp. 1-37 (Accessed: 27 November 2019).

to the campaign some three years later. Osler was ten years older than Swanwick and by then one of the most senior of the suffrage campaigners. It may have been seen as appropriate for Osler's concise series of articles to be published at the time when the first Conciliation Bill was presented in the summer of 1910. The articles were essentially a practical guide to the advantages of emancipation and the disadvantages of its absence, rather than a comprehensive feminist manifesto. Swanwick's book, published in 1913, consisted of sixteen chapters and gave a graphic and wide-ranging survey of the history of the women's movement and its future. She saw the struggle as the 'most complex problem' to be faced by the 'human race' and failure to overcome it could only be viewed as an 'anachronism'.²⁷

A further possible consideration was, as already noted, that by 1910 Osler's health was deteriorating, and she took an increasingly pessimistic view of her longevity as she neared the age at which her husband had died. In her *Journal 1* entry for 16 May 1910, she referred to the 'end of life' being constantly present, and though she would not 'shrink from it', she wished to be spared 'suffering', 'helplessness', 'uselessness' and the 'agony of further bereavements'.²⁸ Accordingly, she may have thought it appropriate to present to the public a summation of her lifetime involvement in the cause of women's rights, particularly her strong emphasis on liberty and equality for women and the concept of responsibility, as demonstrated by the evidence from New Zealand. Further evidence for that theory may be provided by the publication during the same period of her book on women's private life, *Home*, already considered in detail in Chapter Three.

²⁷ Swanwick, *The Future*, p. 194.

²⁸ *Journal 1*, 16 May 1910.

Another possible consideration both for her and Swanwick would have been the major developments in the suffrage campaign by 1910. The presentation of the Conciliation Bills from 1910 to 1912, was regarded as a reasonable and probably final opportunity for the Liberal Government to adopt the cross-party proposals contained in the Bills. Osler had separated from the Liberal Association by this time and was able to present a politically independent and well-informed view by a veteran campaigner.

The national impact of *Vote* is difficult to gauge in view of the paucity of evidence, although it is reasonable to assume that the circulation of *The Common Cause* magazine supported by Swanwick would have ensured that the original articles, written by an influential campaigner, would be widely considered. Some information as to its local distribution is considered in the next section on the activities of the BWSS.

Conciliation Bills 1910-1912

Aside from her publications, 1910 was an important year for Osler and the BWSS. Due to continued expansion, the sixteen local societies in the Midlands were reorganised into the Midland Federation with its own management committee ultimately controlled by the central NUWSS. Osler supported the reorganisation which gave some additional devolved powers at local level.²⁹ Further, whilst Osler was no longer an office holder in the Birmingham Liberal Association, she was involved as President of the BWSS in vetting and supporting pro-suffrage Liberal candidates in the two General Elections of 1910. For the first General Election, in addition to the usual canvassing, 250 meetings were held

²⁹ BA&C, L76.12, *Report of the BWSS, 1909-10*, pp. 28-30.

and a petition supporting voting rights was signed by 7,250 people.³⁰ The second General Election was on a smaller scale, called on the single issue of reform of the House of Lords, but even then, 30,000 leaflets were distributed.³¹ For women seeking enfranchisement, reform of the House Lords was vital to facilitate the passage of the appropriate legislation. Significantly, the Liberals were returned to power but lost their overall majority – a factor which proved to be important for the progress of the Conciliation legislation to which attention is now directed.

The fate of the Conciliation Bills put before Parliament between July 1910 and March 1912 was crucial for the future course of the women's suffrage campaign as their defeat would result in difficult decisions having to be made by Osler and other longstanding suffrage campaigners regarding the future direction of the quest for female emancipation. Drawn up by a Conciliation Committee of all-party pro-suffrage MPs the Bills were designed to be acceptable to various shades of pro-suffrage opinion. Importantly, the WSPU had been involved in the discussions and scaled back its militant activities during the period. Emmeline Pankhurst of the WSPU wrote that her party was 'prepared to share in this united and peaceful action', asserting that 'the time for passing a suffrage bill was ripe'.³² The first Bill was presented in June 1910. It is important to appreciate that all were private Bills and would inevitably fail without Government support. Sandra Stanley Holton's research identified a new generation of younger pro-Labour supporters within local suffrage societies and increasingly on the NUWSS

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-19.

³¹ BA&C, L.76.12, *Annual Report of the BWSS. 1910-1911*, pp. 18-20.

³² E. Pankhurst, *My Own Story* (London, 1914), pp. 168-169, 171.

Executive itself. She saw this development as resulting from disillusionment with the Liberal Government, and a greater readiness by the 'old guard' of the suffrage leadership such as Millicent Fawcett to engage with the Labour movement.³³ Osler would have fallen into this 'senior' category. She actively supported the Bills but, in the event of the failure of the Conciliation process, the question arose as to whether she would be persuaded to work with the Labour movement as the way forward for women suffragists.

The vital question was whether the Government would support the conciliation process. The first Conciliation Bill in 1910 achieved a majority of 110 votes on second reading but failed for lack of Government backing and also because it was thought by many suffrage supporters to be insufficiently ambitious.³⁴ A more progressive second Bill was debated in May 1911. It was noteworthy that at Easter 1911, before the vote on the second Bill, a representative of the NUWSS attended the annual Labour Conference in Birmingham and spent three weeks in the city lobbying the members of the Independent Labour Party branches and urging them to support the women's suffrage cause. The effort was successful in that the Labour Party members unanimously voted in favour of the Bill which achieved a majority of 167 at its second reading in May 1911.³⁵ The Government could hardly ignore such support and appeared willing to proceed with the second Bill, but in November 1911 the Prime Minister, still a confirmed anti-suffragist, reneged and announced instead an intention to proceed with a Bill for universal male suffrage whilst leaving open the possibility of some form of women's enfranchisement by an

³³ Holton, *Feminism and Democracy*, pp. 68-69.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

³⁵ BA&C, L76.12, *Annual Report of the BWSS, 1910-1911*, pp. 21-22.

amendment to the Bill. Millicent Fawcett's book was published just after this announcement, and she wrote that there was 'every prospect of a hard-won Parliamentary victory for women's suffrage in 1912'. Even if, as turned out to be the case, 'victory should be delayed it cannot be delayed long'.³⁶ Emmeline Pankhurst, with considerable support in the press and from her supporters, saw only treachery in the Prime Minister's tactics and wrote, 'The truce, naturally, came to an abrupt end'.³⁷ In March 1912 when Asquith presented a third Bill, it was defeated by fourteen votes. Thus, the fragile consensus centred on the Bills was broken and the suffragettes, who had already resumed 'mild militancy', gave warning in their manifesto published in July 1912 of what Pankhurst described as a 'fiercer spirit of revolt' which 'it would be impossible to control'.³⁸ Sandra Stanley Holton is one of the few historians who has written in any detail on the failure of the Conciliation Bills. She wrote that their failure 'demonstrated conclusively' that the constitutionalist Liberal pro-suffrage strategy was inadequate, and a 'more aggressive policy' was needed. Equally, she records that their campaign must be 'completely dissociated' from the WSPU 'outrages'. An alliance with the Labour Party was 'attractive' in gaining popular support, whilst continuing the 'attack' on the Government. Although there were risks to the Liberals from the increasing 'rivalry' between the two parties in industrial constituencies, the support of Labour was seen as 'critical' to the suffrage debate and to combat the WSPU's 'anti-labour policy'.³⁹

³⁶ Fawcett, *Women's Suffrage*, p. 82.

³⁷ Pankhurst, *My Own Story*, p. 208.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

³⁹ Holton, *Feminism and Democracy*, pp. 69-75.

Osler confided her own views in *Memories 2* in which she described Asquith's November announcement of solely male suffrage as 'staggering'. However, although the treatment of women was 'unjust and ungenerous', she and the BWSS carried on with their campaign, and were in no doubt that the militant suffragettes 'by their deplorable window-breaking tactics played into the hands of our enemies' by alienating moderate support.⁴⁰ Although Osler's reaction was entirely understandable from her viewpoint, Holton's account suggests a more nuanced view of the suffragettes' reaction. From their perspective, they had endured a prolonged pause in their militant tactics without obvious benefit. They had not been consulted about the consequences of Asquith's change of position in the previous November, and their response was dissension leading to renewed agitation and consequent repression.⁴¹ An additional important factor in the defeat was the decision of the Irish Nationalists, on whom the Liberal Government depended for support, to vote against the Bill lest it jeopardise their own cause.

In one of her strongest and most compelling surviving articles written for the NUWSS after the defeat, Osler argued that for women like her who spoke from outside official Liberal Organisations, only a single-minded pursuit of the 'one supreme idea' would suffice. For them, like the Irish Nationalists, every other consideration was subordinate to them achieving their aim of women's voting rights. It was the same consideration that had caused so many Liberal women to abandon the 'fealties of a life-time' in order to achieve the one aim which transcended 'all others in immediate importance'. In robust language, Osler wrote that if the Liberals were 'faithless' to the cause of women's

⁴⁰ *Memories 2*, Chapter 2.

⁴¹ Holton, *Feminism and Democracy*, pp. 71-72.

independence and 'political recognition', 'a higher service' might be rendered by 'rebellion' than by 'subservience'.⁴² This language is not far removed from the militant words of the WSPU, although it was always considered imperative by the constitutionalists that they should distance themselves from the tactics of the suffragettes, whose reaction to the 1912 defeat was to embark on a campaign of violence (see below). Osler's article suggested that her 'rebellion' was more likely to take the form of refraining from Party work at the next General Election in the event of a Reform Bill being enacted that excluded votes for women.⁴³ Osler had, of course, already resigned from the Presidency of the Birmingham Liberal Auxiliary in 1909.

Thus, by March 1912, a point had been reached when Osler's constitutional suffragists had to decide how they were to continue with their struggle for the vote by means of a Parliamentary strategy. There was no future in supporting the Liberals for as long as anti-suffragists were in control, nor was there any prospect of the Conservative/Unionist Party adopting a pro-suffrage stance. Whilst the WSPU had been party to the conciliation process, they considered themselves betrayed by the Government and resumed and intensified their extra-parliamentary activities. The only viable alternative political strategy of those who opposed violence and unlawful activity appeared to be the seeking of an understanding with the Labour Party, the only political organisation which by that time, unequivocally supported female emancipation. Osler's election to the Executive Committee of the NUWSS led by Fawcett in or about May 1912 involved her in the

⁴² Women's Library, London, Catalogue number B71, *NUWSS Leaflets 1907-1914*, C.C. Osler, 'The Vital Claim, An Appeal from Liberal Women to Women Liberals', pp. 38-40.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

progress of that policy. Before pursuing that issue further, this chapter considers Osler's activities in Birmingham to further the suffrage campaign, and how she and the BWSS dealt with the militant violence in Birmingham.

The Local Suffrage Campaign 1912-1914

Despite her appointment to the NUWSS in 1912, Osler always placed great store on local suffrage work in the city and this continued until the outbreak of the War. A good example of a new initiative was the introduction of the Friends of Suffrage in 1913. The aim was to engage workers and ordinary citizens in the suffrage campaign as observers and potential members at a time when by contrast, the WSPU was engaging in unlawful and often violent behaviour. Those who showed an interest were visited and invited to public meetings and were given a membership card. They were told more about the BWSS and asked to spread the word. The Annual Report for 1912-13 talks of the Society being in contact with 'a much wider circle', including organisations of 'working men and women' who can spread the word to both 'old or young, rich or poor alike'. By the end of the first year, 1,111 cards had been signed. Sales of *The Common Cause* also increased. Osler's book *Vote* was 'brought out by the Birmingham Society' and had 'run through' its first edition by the time of the 1913 report. It was then republished at 4d. rather than the original 6d.⁴⁴ By 1914, the total number of Friends had increased to 4,572 divided into districts, and thirty-four workers kept in touch with them and gave notice of meetings

⁴⁴ BA&C, L76.12, *Annual Report of the BWSS, 1912-13*, pp. 20-21.

through a quarterly leaflet edited by Osler herself. Where possible, campaign literature was made available by street sellers together with copies of *The Common Cause*.⁴⁵

Osler's work was not confined to female supporters. The final pre-war report of the BWSS highlighted the work amongst men's organisations. As she explained, male support 'means votes', and through votes alone can 'women's suffrage be won'.⁴⁶ She was particularly interested in the reaction of trade unionists who seemed to know little about women's suffrage aside from descriptions of militant outrages. Ever keen to distinguish the BWSS from the militants, she stressed her commitment to constitutional methods, appreciating how their cause could be adversely affected by violent disorder and rioting.⁴⁷ In *Memories 2* she admitted that the work amongst working men was 'of a novel and not over-pleasant kind'. The meetings were usually at night at an 'unsavoury little tavern, upstairs to a room full of beer and tobacco fumes'. She undertook most of this work with the Society's Secretary, Mrs. Ring, and described it as onerous but rewarding, an 'educational campaign for both ourselves and our hearers'. Whilst her comments could be considered condescending, it might equally be thought creditable that she seemed to have treated it as an opportunity to learn from others in unfamiliar surroundings.⁴⁸ A further example is furnished by her description of a Saturday night trade union meeting in May 1914 during which she was 'pelted' with questions by 'fierce but intelligent men' of varying views. She felt that they were convinced by her views despite initial hostility and believed that they parted as 'very good friends' with a

⁴⁵ BA&C, L76.12, *Annual Report of the BWSS, 1913-14*, pp. 16-17.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴⁸ *Memories 2*, Chapter 2.

resolution supporting suffrage secured. It left her 'exhausted' but with the thought that she had influenced them and 'they were worth struggling for'.⁴⁹ Osler's relationship with working men was plainly never easy for her or the men but a grudging mutual respect seemed to develop for their respective views. It might be added that given the venue, Osler's growing deafness would not have helped her in such an environment.

The effectiveness of this style of campaigning is difficult to gauge although there is evidence of continued growth in support. By January 1914, the Midland Federation formed in 1910 had grown too large to be workable and was reorganised into the Central Counties Federation, comprising eighteen societies covering the Warwickshire, Staffordshire and North Worcestershire areas.⁵⁰ Osler was strongly supportive of the Great Pilgrimage in Summer 1913 in which women marched in waves from Edinburgh to London. She described it as 'yet another original plan of propaganda'.⁵¹ It demonstrated that she had learned from the suffragettes how to promote spectacles to attract support whilst, unlike them, refraining from any unlawful or provocative behaviour. The Great Pilgrimage lasted from June until the end of July and ended with a mass meeting in Hyde Park. Osler had hoped, perhaps optimistically, that the peaceful nature of the march would end any confusion between the BWSS and the militants.⁵² She also hoped that it might influence the Government in granting voting rights. Hope was raised by Prime Minister Asquith consenting to receive a NUWSS deputation after the march. Osler felt his attitude exhibited a marked change. Whilst he might be able to ignore meetings and

⁴⁹ *Memories 2*, Chapter 2.

⁵⁰ BA&C, L76.12, *Annual Report of the BWSS, 1913-14*, pp. 8-9.

⁵¹ *Memories 2*, Chapter 2.

⁵² BA&C, L76.12, *Annual Report of the BWSS, 1913-14*, p. 11.

petitions, a concerted and prolonged demonstration reported by the local press was less easy for him to ignore.

Osler and the WSPU Campaign of Violence 1912-1914

Osler had no sympathy or connection with the suffragette campaign of violence which ran for two years following the failure of the Conciliation Bills. However, she felt it could not be ignored because it consistently grabbed media headlines and if not continually challenged, she was aware of the constant risk of the BWSS being seen as indistinguishable from the militants and thus condemned as collaborators. The scale of the violent activity was extensive and whilst there were signs that by early 1914 there was a reduction in activity nationwide, it seemed that in Birmingham it reached its height in that year.⁵³ The following incidents described by George Barnsby are but examples of what took place. In February 1914, the Carnegie Library in Northfield was burned down, and in the following month the refreshments pavilion in Canon Hill Park was destroyed. In May, the cricket pavilion at the Harborne Oratory School was burned down and the grandstand at the Castle Bromwich Racecourse was attacked. These were indiscriminate attacks on recreational facilities used by the public at large. These tactics were more disturbing when they involved attacks on prominent public buildings. For example, in March 1914, Birmingham Cathedral was vandalised, and slogans were daubed throughout the building including on the renowned Burne-Jones windows. In June, the

⁵³ G. J. Barnsby, *Birmingham Working People: A History of the Labour Movement in Birmingham 1650-1914* (Wolverhampton, 1989), p. 480.

Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery was targeted, and George Romney's portrait of 'Master Thornhill' was slashed.⁵⁴

Even before the most serious violence, Osler wrote to her son in November 1911 complaining of the 'reckless madness' of the militants in pursuing tactics which risked the support of their political allies through 'a policy of mere terrorising'. The perpetrators seemed to her to be beyond reason and blind to the effect of their actions beyond their own circle. Osler was frustrated by their complete refusal to compromise and be governed by reason because whilst it might be frustrating to accept partial suffrage, once the principle was conceded, 'our battle is won'.⁵⁵ She was of the view that, on the whole, the working-classes are intensely opposed to militant tactics.⁵⁶

The intransigence of the militants and the appetite of the press in reporting the suffragette activities as opposed to the work of the BWSS, caused Osler to write a letter to the *Birmingham Daily Post* in March 1914 when, as noted above, violent activity was at its height in Birmingham. She again wanted to make it clear that the long-established BWSS found the 'guerrilla warfare' of the WSPU, 'wanton', 'futile' and 'certain to alienate sympathy from a noble cause'. The 'invariable practice' of the press in giving much greater prominence to their activities than those of the BWSS meant that the latter's work was left 'unrecorded'. Aside from her frustration with the daily press, she was also angered that even *The Common Cause* criticised the BWSS for not stopping the militants

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 480.

⁵⁵ *Memories 2*, Chapter 2, Letter 30 November 1911 from Osler to her son Jack.

⁵⁶ BA&C, L76.12, *Annual Report of BWSS, 1911-12*, p. 16.

when it clearly lacked the means to do so. The clear but false implication was that the BWSS sympathised with the WSPU activity.⁵⁷

At no time did the WSPU leadership express any misgivings in respect of their activities. At the end of her book, referring to a parliamentary debate shortly before the outbreak of the War, Emmeline Pankhurst denied absolutely that the militant activities set back the suffrage cause. On the contrary, she argued that it had brought it forward by 'at least half a century'. She considered that the foreseeable end of Asquith's ministry would produce fresh leaders which would make militancy unnecessary, and lead to women's liberty.⁵⁸ The latter part of the sentence certainly proved to be prescient.

There is no evidence that Osler was involved in the extensive political negotiations which preceded the granting of partial women's suffrage during the War years. It is, however, noteworthy that the more recent historiography of those final stages of the suffrage campaign has suggested a reappraisal of the relative significance of the BWSS and the NUWSS compared with the WSPU. Written In 1983, Michelle Shoebridge's thesis on the campaign in Birmingham concluded that the suffragettes had 'far more impact' than the BWSS.⁵⁹ However, in a recent composite article divided into three separate 'Viewpoints' discussing the theme, three historians show the position now to be much more nuanced. In her Viewpoint, June Purvis follows Shoebridge in arguing that WSPU militancy was more important than the 'moribund' NUWSS in achieving eventual success. 'It shook the

⁵⁷ N. Gauld, *Words and Deeds: Birmingham Suffragists and Suffragettes 1832-1918* (Alcester, 2018), pp. 81-82.

⁵⁸ Pankhurst, *My Own Story*, pp. 362-364.

⁵⁹ M. Shoebridge, 'The Women's Suffrage Movement in Birmingham and District 1903-1919' (MA thesis, Wolverhampton Polytechnic, 1983), Conclusion, p. 64.

complacency of the British Government' and 'without it, it is unlikely that a limited women's enfranchisement would have been granted in 1918'.⁶⁰ However, Elizabeth Crawford argues in her contribution that militancy was an obstacle to suffrage because its supporters failed to acknowledge that the suffrage campaign was a political project which could only succeed if militant activity ceased. The vote would only be won by 'manipulating the political machine' rather than destroying it.⁶¹ Finally, Sandra Stanley Holton argues that the political subtlety of the constitutionalists, aided by the understanding with the Labour Party, and 'faith in constitutionalism' brought success even if the strategy was less eye-catching than violence.⁶² Osler never doubted the contribution of the WSPU towards ultimate success by virtue of their gift for spectacle, their innovative campaigning style and personal courage. However, the recent evidence lends support to Osler's view that the WSPU's activities from 1912 to 1914 displayed a lack of judgment, discipline and wider awareness, which, on balance, may have delayed rather than accelerated the granting of voting rights.

Osler, Suffrage and the Labour Party 1912-1914

It was clear to Osler, as discussed earlier, that following the defeat of the final Conciliation Bill in March 1912, a different approach was needed by suffragists to achieve women's suffrage, not involving 'terrorism' and 'guerrilla warfare', terms used to describe the WSPU activities featured in the previous section. There had to be a

⁶⁰ J. Purvis, 'Did militancy help or hinder the granting of women's suffrage in Britain?', *Women's History Review*, Volume 28, No 7 (2019), pp. 1212-1217, p. 1212.

⁶¹ E. Crawford, 'Did militancy help or hinder the granting of Women's suffrage in Britain?', *Women's History Review*, Volume 28, No. 7 (2019), pp. 1217-1227, pp. 1222-1223.

⁶² S. S. Holton, 'The language of suffrage history', *Women's History Review*, Volume 28, No 7 (2019), pp. 1227-1234, p. 1231.

constitutional solution through a parliamentary procedure. In light of the 'betrayal by a Liberal Government of our hopes and expectations', a policy of support for the Labour Party was adopted and 'consistently pursued' by the NUWSS until the advent of the First World War.⁶³ The evidence in this section shows that to be something of an oversimplification of a complex process. Because the records of the NUWSS are neither complete nor in the best order, it is not known when Osler was appointed to the National Executive but the first official record of her attendance at a meeting was in May 1912, by which time negotiations with Labour were underway. The negotiations were driven by the President Millicent Fawcett who, for purely pragmatic reasons, saw this route as the best way forward to achieve women's voting rights. However, it was deeply controversial not only amongst Labour supporters who sensed a threat to their Party's development, but also amongst some women, particularly those with present or previously strong links with the Liberal Party including Osler. They feared for the future of Liberalism and the non-party status of the NUWSS whereas, as a non-aligned but conservative-leaning Unionist, Fawcett had no such ideological issues. Her sole aim was to secure women's voting rights by any legal means available.⁶⁴ Three separate instances where there is evidence of Osler's part in the deliberations will be examined to illustrate the problems that arose in implementing the policy.

In May 1912, an Executive Meeting of the NUWSS attended by Osler had approved the establishment of an 'Election Fighting Fund' to give financial support to Labour candidates, with a Special Committee formed to vet, raise and administer the fund. The

⁶³ *Memories 2*, Chapter 2.

⁶⁴ Rubinstein, *A Different World for Women*, pp. 189-192.

money would be made available to individual Labour candidates opposed by anti-suffrage Liberal candidates.⁶⁵ At an Executive Meeting in June 1912 to discuss implementation of the policy, it was determined that a Labour candidate would be supported unless his views on women's suffrage were unsatisfactory, or he was opposed by an 'old and tried friend of either Party'. If both candidates were pro-suffragists, then other circumstances would be considered, for example, whose candidacy was first in time. The vote on the resolutions showed fourteen in favour, three abstentions, and five against including Osler and Eleanor Rathbone.⁶⁶ The reasons for dissension were not recorded, but Fawcett's biographer has plausibly suggested two main possibilities; firstly, a suspicion that the fundamental non-party policy of the NUWSS was being abandoned in favour of clear support for a particular political party, and secondly that the chosen party was Labour, which 'probably had the least support amongst suffragists'.⁶⁷ There were certainly cogent reasons for Osler and Rathbone to question the policy as Sandra Holton has posed in general terms.⁶⁸ Previous chapters have made plain Osler's intense opposition to socialism, the political creed of the Labour Party, and Rathbone's politically independent but pro-suffrage views. They would not have been consistent with a policy which threatened a potential loss of Liberal support for minimal if any gain other than to the Conservative Party, and the possible absorption of the Liberal Party into the Labour Party. Osler's support certainly appeared less positive than suggested in her entry in *Memories* 2 previously referred to.⁶⁹ Recent research by Dawn Langan Teele paints a positive

⁶⁵ Women's Library, London, *Minutes and Reports of Executive Committee of the NUWSS*, 2 May 1912.

⁶⁶ Women's Library, London, *Minutes and Reports of Executive Committee of the NUWSS*, 20 June 1912.

⁶⁷ Rubinstein, *A Different World for Women*, p. 190.

⁶⁸ Holton, *Feminism and Democracy*, pp. 79-80.

⁶⁹ *Memories* 2, Chapter 2.

picture of the EFF policy which she regarded as 'novel and contentious' but very important to the eventual grant of voting rights. She saw four ways in which the Labour Party, as the weaker of the two parties, gained from the policy. Labour gained access to the abundant financial resources of the Liberals which enabled it to run more candidates; the Liberal workforce could deal with the costly work of maintaining and adding to the electoral register; it could use the 'grassroots network of the suffragists' to mobilise the working-class vote and perhaps convert some of them; and Labour might establish itself in more seats to increase its representation at the next election.⁷⁰ Teele argues that the EFF policy provided sufficient incentive to persuade Labour to commit to the suffrage policy.⁷¹ She further asserts with the implicit support of Holton, that the EFF and the pivotal involvement of the Labour politician, Arthur Henderson, was the most important reason for women's inclusion in the eventual suffrage legislation.⁷² Two points are important; the extent to which Osler became supportive of the policy with the passage of time, and the strength of her continued support for Fawcett who denied any fundamental change to the non-party status of the NUWSS.

In November 1913, a row erupted over the support of candidates at a by-election in Keighley, Yorkshire, where a decision was made not to offer any EFF support to the Labour candidate who had declared his candidacy late in the day, and whose organisation was felt to be weak. He was opposed by an established Liberal pro-suffragist. The Executive felt it unlikely the Labour candidate would outpoll the Liberal and were funding

⁷⁰ D. L. Teele, *Forging the Franchise: The Political Origins of the Women's Vote* (Princeton, 2018), p. 65.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 74.

to be offered in those circumstances, it might have had disastrous consequences for the EFF policy as a whole. Two meetings were needed on 3 and 20 November to resolve the dispute which was decided at a thinly attended meeting by eight votes to two in favour of the Liberal candidate. Osler unsurprisingly sided with the majority view.⁷³ This dispute is significant in showing the difficulties in operating a policy which was attempting to meld together two very different political traditions whilst seeking to maintain their separate identities. It left a residue of bitterness over how the issue was handled. The NUWSS Secretary commented that the Labour candidate was 'more Labour than Suffrage'. The dispute was 'serious' and in the future could be 'calamitous'. The response from a Labour supporter was that 'the good Liberal women' went beyond suffrage propaganda to active support for the Liberal candidate. She added that her Labour associates were 'bitter' and that 'serious harm had been done to the cause'.⁷⁴

The third dispute about the EFF in 1914 was even more bitter in view of what would have been at stake in the approach to a General Election in the following year. Eleanor Rathbone and Osler put forward a resolution in February 1914 seeking to restrict the operation of the EFF at the forthcoming General Election to the constituencies where funds had already been allocated. The resolution was defeated by only five votes.⁷⁵ The reason for the resolution was the political concern that if the policy was extended and support was given to Labour candidates in more constituencies, then Liberal votes would be lost leading to the possible election of a Conservative/Unionist Government. The

⁷³ Women's Library, London, *Minutes of Executive Committee Meetings of NUWSS, 3 and 20 November 1913*.

⁷⁴ Holton, *Feminism and Democracy*, pp. 110-111.

⁷⁵ Women's Library, London, *Minutes of Executive Committee of NUWSS, 15 January 1914*.

records are sadly incomplete, but it is clear that Rathbone in particular, although politically independent, was far from satisfied with the position as she was concerned that a Conservative Government would harm the suffrage cause. She and her allies thus formed a minority committee to canvas local branches to try to prevent the present EFF policy being extended to the General Election. There is no evidence that Osler was a member of the minority committee but there is every likelihood that she would have been in sympathy with its aims. The problem for her and other members was the strong support of Fawcett for the continuance of the EFF policy. Fawcett viewed the establishment of the minority committee as a threat to her authority. This led in May 1914 to the resignation of Rathbone and three others, but not Osler, from the Executive Committee.⁷⁶ It was clear that there were serious difficulties with the EFF policy and if there had been a General Election, the unity of the NUWSS would have been severely tested. The outbreak of the War in August 1914 put an end to such discussions.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this discussion of the EFF policy. Firstly, despite what Osler may have related in *Memories 2* about the policy, she plainly had reservations about it, both personal and political. Like many senior suffrage supporters, she came from a Liberal background. Despite the manifest failure of the Liberal Party to deliver women's suffrage, she retained some residual political and social ties to liberalism in a broad sense, and for her to identify with the Labour Party would have been to adopt an alien cultural identity. The idea that with the approach of an election, the two political

⁷⁶ Women's Library, London, *Minutes of Executive Committee of NUWSS, 7 May 1914*.

parties would subsume their differences and fight only for suffrage was optimistic except to Fawcett who was politically neutral.

Secondly, Fawcett was the prime mover in the establishment of the policy and no doubt genuinely felt that it was the right way forward. However, she faced strong opposition not only from those like Osler and Rathbone but also from Labour supporters. Fawcett had a low tolerance of opposition to her policies, a characteristic which was to surface again in the approaching War years.

Thirdly, despite her opposition to Fawcett's policy, there is no evidence that Osler overtly challenged the EFF policy other than in the initial stages and in seconding Rathbone's resolution. Unlike Rathbone, she did not resign from the Executive Committee. The next chapter will discuss a further disagreement between Osler and Fawcett and consider what may be concluded about their relationship.

Fourthly, Rathbone remained an important non-Labour figure in the NUWSS despite her resignation. In fact, she was reappointed to the Executive Committee in 1915, as discussed in Chapter Eight, and eventually succeeded Fawcett as the leader of the successor body to the NUWSS after Fawcett's retirement in 1919.

Fifthly, the outbreak of the First World War reduced the importance of the EFF policy for the duration of the conflict and there is no evidence that Osler played any significant role in the events leading to the grant of partial suffrage in 1918. However, Osler's work and thoughts during the First World War and its aftermath are of great importance and will form the core of the next chapter. Before turning to those events, it is necessary to

consider a developing theme in the pre-war years, namely the increasing political and social importance of the role of working-class women in Britain predominately through their representatives in the Labour Party.

The Importance of Class in the Movement for Women's Rights

Although this thesis prioritises the life and career of Osler in Birmingham, it would be remiss not to give some consideration to developments in the position of working-class women in relation to the rights movement. The work of Liddington and Norris highlights the contribution of what they term the 'radical suffragists' in Lancashire. They were predominately socialist women who in the years after 1890 became involved in the suffrage movement. For these practical women the importance of voting rights was not just of theoretical importance but to improve the conditions of women in society. They wanted 'womanhood suffrage' by means of a mass movement rejecting 'gradualism' and middle-class predominance. They tended to work through the WSPU and the Labour Party and by 1903 were an organised group.⁷⁷ However, the increasing violence of the WSPU together with its increasing reliance on London as its base of operation alienated the radical suffragists. They saw their 'unique strength' as being an intrinsic part of their local communities and recognised that violence would 'alienate them from their roots'. It was this stance together with their strategy of 'involving women of all classes in the struggle' which brought them towards the Labour Party and the NUWSS.⁷⁸ This chapter has alluded to their influence and the necessity for middle-class women such as Osler to

⁷⁷ J. Liddington and J. Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us, The Rise of the Women's Suffrage Movement* (London, 1979), pp. 10-19.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

seek their support. It may have made her uncomfortable but she saw its necessity. The welcome of the woman-class suffragists by the constitutional suffrage societies may have been guarded but it can be contrasted with the conduct of the militants.

A recent article by Lyndsey Jenkins examined class issues by exploring the significance of Annie Kenney, a militant suffragette supporter of the WSPU from an authentic working-class background. She can be seen as an example of the fluidity of the class issue, in that as the WSPU moved away from its working-class roots after relocating its centre of operations to London after 1906, it sought middle-class support. Jenkins suggests women like Kenney could be used as a recruiting sergeant for the Labour Party. She could dress in clogs and a shawl on occasions to give authenticity as an 'idealised suffragette'.⁷⁹ In fact, she continued to embrace militancy from 1912 onwards, was force-fed on occasions and went into hiding. She was prepared to die for the cause and retained her working-woman's identity, although also retaining her relationships with more affluent women as she saw friendship as central to social and political change.⁸⁰

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the later period of the suffrage campaign up to the outbreak of the First World War when formal activities were suspended. These were important years for the movement both in terms of local campaigning in Birmingham and nationally following Osler's election to the National Executive of the NUWSS. The failure of a concerted Parliamentary procedure to achieve voting rights in 1912 by means of the

⁷⁹ Jenkins, 'Annie Kenney', pp. 477-503.

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 495-500.

Conciliation Bills, led the two most important suffrage groups to adopt radically different paths. The NUWSS pursued the path of co-operation with the Labour Party, whilst the WSPU began a campaign of violent disruption; both strategies were terminated by the military conflict. Amidst all this activity, Osler led the BWSS in its ceaseless quest for support and progress.

The widespread activity of Osler in recording and commenting on events has enabled a fresh appreciation of the later stages of the suffrage campaign in Birmingham. In 1910 Osler wrote her twelve articles for *The Common Cause* magazine, setting out the disadvantages to women of the absence of voting rights, and the benefits to women and civic society of the granting of such rights. The national impact of the publication of the articles in book form is unknown, although many copies were sold in Birmingham. It can be seen both as a contribution to her legacy and the impetus to the suffrage campaign arising from the debates on the Conciliation Bills.

This thesis further explores the existing historiography by including material by other suffrage campaigners representing varying opinions and perspectives. They point to increased confidence in the ultimate success of the suffrage movement, despite continual frustrations in overcoming the objections of Liberal politicians, the Irish Nationalists and the tactics of militant women campaigners. The fresh sources discussed reinforce the point that the achievement of women's emancipation was the fruit of a protracted political process that continued to unfold long after the merits of female voting rights had been conceded in principle.

Within this general framework, the chapter uncovered several points of significance. The national activity in which Osler was closely involved from 1912 after her election to the National Executive of the NUWSS did not prevent her from effective leadership of the BWSS. The continuing work of the Franchise Club was supplemented by the creation of a local branch of the Friends of Suffrage, a group of supporters who were not members of the BWSS but who provided help and support. By 1914, there were 4,572 members of this group in Birmingham. Osler continued to take her message to the community including male societies. She attended meetings of trade unions and other groups of men to garner support and understanding from citizens who already had voting rights. She was supportive of the Great Pilgrimage in 1913. This was a different type of activity modelled on the eye-catching campaigning techniques of the WSPU but shorn of violence and disorder. The BWSS had continued to expand and by 1910 it formed part of the Midland Federation, an amalgamation of numerous local societies, with its own management committee and devolved powers. The BWSS had become and would continue as a major campaigning organisation.

The decision by the NUWSS to seek an accommodation with the Labour Party was enthusiastically promoted by its President, Millicent Fawcett. She had no political affinity with Labour but saw this strategy as a pragmatic method of promoting women's voting rights by associating with the only political party which unequivocally supported women's suffrage. It was an ambitious experiment but Osler, and other longstanding proponents of Liberalism and opponents of Socialism, were less supportive. Unsurprisingly, there were difficulties surrounding the implementation of the policy, including the selection of

election candidates and the inevitable effect of the accommodation on the political fortunes of both parties. These arguments led to resignations and rancour. The advent of the First World War, before a general election could be held, meant the experiment was never tested nationally. The disagreements between Osler and Fawcett were significant and are further examined in Chapter Eight.

The WSPU campaign of violence from 1912 to 1914 was unequivocally opposed by Osler and the NUWSS generally. Birmingham suffered significant damage to buildings and other infrastructure. As President of the BWSS as well as an important figure at national level, Osler was faced with the task of distinguishing the BWSS from the militant WSPU. Again, it was the outbreak of war which curtailed their activities. There is no consensus amongst historians as to the effectiveness of the WSPU campaign, but there is a view amongst some historians that the WSPU activities may have delayed rather than accelerated the grant of voting rights for women.

The significance of class issues amongst suffragists and suffragettes and their political allegiances were explored by reference to the scholarship of Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, and the very recent additional work of Lyndsey Jenkins exploring the life of Annie Kenney.

Chapter Eight: The First World War and its Aftermath

Osler had already experienced war in the guise of the South African conflict at the beginning of the new century and her growing questioning of that war was discussed in Chapter Six. This new war was to be longer and much more intensive. It entailed local bombing raids and loss of life near her home, and the direct involvement of her son-in-law who was wounded and gassed whilst serving as a medical officer at the front. The historiography relating to the War is considerable, and a selection of secondary sources are considered in the literature review to highlight three particular areas of involvement by women, the Home Front, the charitable sector and the instigation of women's patrols to guard against perceived moral and physical risk to women during the conflict. The review will consider the nature, extent and significance of these sources and when and if appropriate they will be revisited in the body of the chapter. The chapter then proceeds to investigate the significance of Osler as a female non-combatant in Birmingham who has left much primary written material relating to the conflict. This study concentrates not on the conflict itself but on the effect of the War on women and families; the consequences for the women's rights movement; and the ethical and moral dilemmas posed by the War. Osler's surviving papers from 1914 onwards are dominated by the War, its outcome and future significance. They enable a fresh appraisal of the conflict and its aftermath from a liberal feminist perspective. In particular, the thesis will forefront for the first time her role in resolving the serious disagreement between pacifists and militarists within the NUWSS in 1915. This examination and assessment will be conducted under three broad headings.

Firstly, the extent and significance of Osler's activities and effectiveness during the conflict will be covered with reference to her continuing Presidency of the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society (BWSS) and presence on the Executive Committee of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). Inevitably, formal suffrage activity was abandoned during the early stages of the War as Osler's work concentrated on charitable relief through the BWSS and the newly established Birmingham Citizen's Committee. Nonetheless, she was always alert to the potential benefit of the work for the advancement of women's profile and their claim for citizenship. She also became an early member of the newly established Union of Democratic Control (UDC) which campaigned for peaceful settlement of conflicts and democratic involvement in decisions about war and its conduct, as well as supporting female emancipation.

Secondly, the chapter explores her involvement in the political and personal disputes which arose between different groups of women as a result of the outbreak of hostilities and the impact of those disagreements on Osler's ideas, actions and political viewpoints. It will examine the motivation and perspective of those supporting or opposing the war, and those like Osler who took a more equivocal position. The chapter assesses the danger of serious harm to the suffrage cause and Osler's role in resolving those disagreements.

Thirdly, it analyses the degree to which Osler's views were modified by the experience of the War and its outcome. It explores her developing opposition to a war she had initially supported; the fraught issues of pacifism, patriotism and freedom of expression, both during the conflict and after the cessation of hostilities; and the importance of an armistice acceptable to all parties to minimise the likelihood of further war. Osler's views

on the Versailles Treaty are critically examined together with her concerns about the future of the British Empire in relation to Ireland and India. Some of these themes are inevitably interlinked and, where appropriate, sub-headings are employed to better elucidate the thematic issues.

Literature Review

Several publications have thrown light on the activities and experiences of women of different classes, age and location both at home and at work during the First World War. They give an insight into the ways in which women contributed to the war effort. Osler's personal contribution was limited for various reasons to be alluded to later in this review. A wide-ranging book edited by Maggie Andrews and Janis Lomas is helpful in considering the role of women of different classes, age and location both within the home environment and in the workplace.¹ In Chapter One Maggie Andrews focuses on the home environment of married women, managing the household, caring for the children and sending letters and parcels of food and clothing to men who had joined the armed forces. The provision of care at a distance was seen as part of the role of women by keeping the idea of home alive for servicemen however elusive it actually might be. In reality, Andrews argues that there was little change to the 'traditional gender roles', and after the end of the war 'there was an increasing emphasis on the cult of domesticity'.²

¹ M. Andrews and J. Lomas (eds.), *The Home Front in Britain, Images, Myths, and Forgotten Experiences since 1914* (London, 2014).

² M Andrews, 'Ideas and Ideals of Domesticity and Home in the First World War' in Andrews and Lomas (eds.), *The Home Front in Britain*, Chapter One, p. 17.

Anne Spurgeon's Chapter Four concentrates upon the physical and moral welfare of women workers. There has been an understandable foregrounding within the historiography of the importance of munition workers, for example, the dangers of TNT poisoning. However, it is important to remember that men and women were engaged in the manufacture of an extensive range of goods and products in factories and workshops. Spurgeon points to some 3,000 such establishments by 1916 employing some 1.25 million people of which a fifth were women. In terms of welfare and safety, the Factory Act 1916 enabled Welfare Orders to be issued containing provisions for the supply of food, drinking water, protective clothing and first-aid framed to cater to the needs of women workers. Women factory inspectors were already in existence to ensure protection and even before the war there were provisions for women's toilets, washrooms and canteens. Aside from provisions to ensure a safe working environment, concerns for women's moral welfare were also apparent.³

Karen Hunt in Chapter 5, chooses to view women on the Home Front during the War, not as mothers or wives, but with their own identity as housewives. In what can be defined as the first total war, housewives become a defined category alongside the military and the government. It is a difficult status to place, depending as it did on factors such as class, marital status, location, age and the size of the household. However, for there to be a functioning Home Front, it had to work amongst local communities and access and affordability of food, in particular, was of vital importance to the maintenance of community cohesion. Karen Hunt tells us that the government worried more about the

³ A. Spurgeon, 'Mortality or Morality? Keeping Workers Safe in the First World War' in Andrews and Lomas (eds.) *The Home Front in Britain*, Chapter Four, pp. 58-63.

provision of food and the cost of living than the fear of industrial unrest. The 'unknown housewife', although difficult to define in a war context, could be considered 'as representative of the heroines at home'.⁴

Peter Grant's book on charitable work is very relevant for this section in examining women's involvement in military activity sometimes at the cost of their lives. He points to the Boer War as the first conflict when a significant number of volunteers worked with the professional army. He assesses 90,000 men offered their services for humanitarian and patriotic reasons at an estimated cost of £200,000. By contrast, he suggests twenty times that amount was raised in the First World War. Although Grant largely concentrates on male contributions, he devotes four pages (pp. 50-54) to a description of women's activity under a heading 'My Good Lady Go Home and Sit Still - Militant Women'. The NUWSS was unsurprisingly at the forefront as an organised and well-financed resource. It organised a network of hospitals, principally in France, Serbia and Salonika staffed by trained support workers. It was also active in Russia by establishing, for example, a maternity unit in Petrograd. Grant singles out Dr. Elsie Inglis of the Scottish NUWSS for particular praise. The NUWSS Scottish Women's Hospitals were welcomed by their French colleagues and set up hospitals in Royaumont and Troyes. Grant also praises Evelina Haverfield, the founder of the Women's Volunteer Reserve and Flora Sandes who was 'the only British woman to serve as a front-line fighting soldier' in the War. They were clearly exceptional for their time but recognition of their achievements at the time

⁴ K. Hunt, 'A Heroine at Home: The Housewife on the First World War Home Front' in Andrews and Lomas (eds.), *The Home Front in Britain*, Chapter Five, p. 88.

suggest it enhanced the general position of women in society in a way which would have been unthinkable before the conflict.⁵

It is not surprising that Osler was relatively inactive during the War. At the commencement of the conflict she was aged sixty and in deteriorating health. Her deafness was becoming an increasingly inhibiting factor as described in the previous chapter. In terms of her home circumstances, she had no dependants to care for, her husband was long deceased, and her surviving children had their own family lives although she would probably have helped Dorothy, her youngest daughter, with the care of her husband who was wounded and gassed during the conflict. Whilst she would have had a continuing concern for women's welfare, she would have pursued that agenda through the organisations she continued to be involved with, the BWSS and the Citizens Committee, as will be seen in the next section. However, there is likely to have been an additional factor, namely her abhorrence of the War. Her growing antipathy to military conflict as a method of resolving international disputes was manifested in her growing opposition to the Boer War at the beginning of the century as discussed in detail in Chapter 6. Her initial support for the First World War was based upon her opposition to the initial German aggression, but subsequent sections will show a growing opposition to the conflict and her desire to see a peaceful end to the War and a just peace between the warring parties. Her early membership of the Union of Democratic Control manifested an anti-war position and The Versailles treaty which ended the War was not at all what she had wished for. She would have known that her quasi-pacifist views and emphasis on

⁵ P. Grant, *Philanthropy and Voluntary Action in the First World War* (Abingdon, 2014).

peace, forgiveness and reconciliation were against the mood of the times. It would not have been surprising in those circumstances if, whilst mindful of women's welfare, she would have been increasingly reluctant to support activity which looked to glorify and prolong the conflict rather than to seek an end to the slaughter and misery of the War.

Angela Woollacott has written about the safety and moral danger to women in the early stages of the War and the concern particularly amongst middle-class women, that the presence of young men in uniform might lead to sexual misconduct amongst working-class girls. Woollacott's article addressed the 'phenomenon' which was labelled 'khaki fever', bringing back to mind the scarlet fever outbreaks of the nineteenth century. She saw it as a further attempt to control the behaviour of young women seen to be at risk of prostitution and venereal disease. Many feminists including Osler supported suitable measures to combat the perceived problem. Millicent Fawcett, for example, accepted that girls would wish to see the men in their uniforms, but 'in the absence of proper control it certainly leads in very many cases to deplorable consequences'. Woollacott argues that gender and morality were central to the debate and regulation. There was a fear amongst middle-class women that the established gender order based on the centrality of chastity was being challenged. An attempt to forestall the risk to young women involved the employment of women in a preventative capacity discussed in the next section.⁶

⁶ A. Woollacott, 'Khaki Fever - Gender, Class and Sexual Morality', *Journal of Contemporary History* 1994-04, Vol. 29.2, pp. 325-347.

Another major theme of the chapter is the influence of pacifist organisations during the years of conflict. Marvin Swartz's book on the history of the UDC is instructive in assessing its significance during the War and the opposition to its activities.⁷ The potential conflict between feminism, suffrage and militarism in the context of the crisis within the NUWSS in 1915 is critically examined by Jo Vellacott in her wide-ranging book. The tactics and activities of Millicent Fawcett and her pro-war supporters in dealing with the pacifist group and the resultant weakening of the NUWSS are extensively considered. This thesis adds to Vellacott's work in emphasising Osler's role in the resolution of the crisis.⁸

The BWSS the Birmingham Citizens' Committee and the Local Impact of the War

The unexpected declaration of war in August 1914 caused a great change in the work of the BWSS. Osler quickly offered its services to the authorities to assist in relief work.⁹ She arranged an emergency meeting of the BWSS within days of the declaration and offered the assistance of the BWSS to the newly formed Citizens' Committee. In early 1915, Osler was appointed to its Executive Committee along with three other women, to co-ordinate national relief activities.¹⁰ The Committee had two principal aims, the raising of money for the Prince of Wales Fund, and the administration and control of expenditure. The report for 19 February 1915 showed total receipts of £116,821 1s 6d from benefactors, subscriptions from local working people and street collections of which £42,150 had by

⁷ M. Swartz, *The Union of Democratic Control in British Politics during the First World War* (Oxford, 1971).

⁸ J. Vellacott, *Pacifists, Patriots and the Vote, The Erosion of Democratic Suffragism in Britain during the First World War* (Basingstoke, 2007).

⁹ BA&C, L76.12, *Report of the BWSS 1914-1915*, p. 11.

¹⁰ BA&C, L41.2, *Report of the Birmingham Citizens' Committee, 19 February 1915*.

then been distributed for the relief of distress in Birmingham.¹¹ Much of the work involved the complex task of dispensing money to soldiers and sailors and their dependants. In addition to Osler's work on the main committee, she was also appointed as a Vice-President of one of the District Committees, served on the Work for Women sub-committee and superintended local special activities. One of the major concerns of these bodies was the threat of women's unemployment in certain luxury trades, for example, jewellery manufacture and dressmaking. In November 1914, Osler chaired a meeting with a view to setting up a workroom. Voluntary donations were forthcoming and within a few days a workroom was opened where unemployed women could work for twenty-seven hours per week to produce garments at three and one-half pence per hour, to be sent on to a clothing department for dispatch to charities. Interestingly as a social dimension, some of this clothing was gifted to German children in Birmingham whose fathers were interned.¹² Recognising that it was the women who were usually the first to forgo food in poor households, the BWSS raised voluntary funds to provide expectant and nursing mothers recommended by the Citizen's Committee with dinners at a dining centre in the city. Some 1,800 dinners were provided between October 1914 and March 1915.¹³

The reports of the Birmingham Citizens' Committee show that philanthropic work continued throughout the War but they suggest that the most serious distress had been

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹² BA&C, *Report of the BWSS, 1914-1915*, p. 14.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

alleviated by 1915.¹⁴ In the report of the BWSS for the year 1914-15, Osler was keen to stress that although the emphasis had been on other than political work, the year could be considered 'one of the most active and important epochs' in the history of the NUWSS.¹⁵ The evidence of the worth and value of women to the country and the war effort 'cannot we believe, be without helpful results to our hopes' in that women's contribution to the community in alleviating distress as well their employment in, for example, the manufacture of munitions, should be recognised by voting rights.¹⁶ A meeting of the Birmingham Citizens Committee in December 1914 began the process of employing women volunteers in preventative work concerning the behaviour of young women in the vicinity of army camps discussed in the previous section. The report of December 1914 disclosed that the National Union of Women Workers had obtained permission from the Home Secretary and the Chief Commissioner of the Police to the Metropolis to organise Women's Patrols in the neighbourhood of the camps and in towns where troops were quartered. The plan was for women to patrol in pairs for no more than two hours at a time during the periods when the soldiers were off duty. There would be paid women organisers to train and supervise the women who would carry an authorising card and distinctive armlets. An Editorial Note to the report refers to a recent meeting of the local NUWSS branch at Osler's home to discuss the establishment of patrols in Birmingham. An organiser was to be sent to the city to offer training to suitable volunteers. To meet possible difficulties with the girls, it was seen as important to

¹⁴ BA&C, L41.2, *Report of the Intelligence Officer to the Birmingham Citizen's Committee, 21 April 1915*, pp. 1-11.

¹⁵ BA&C, L76.12, *Report of the BWSS, 1914-15*, p. 23.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

arrange adequate 'counter-attractions' to channel their attention and energies. The Report of March 1915 confirms the appointment of a paid permanent organiser to work with the police who were much in sympathy with the initiative. The report refers to many of the volunteers being skilled social workers and trained teachers. A Beat had started by then in Thorp Street, Moseley every evening from 6 to 8 and 8 to 10, two patrols working together for each shift. After a few weeks a great improvement was noted and clubs established to occupy the girls.¹⁷

In *Memories 2*, Osler was able to record later in the conflict that contrary to her concern that the outbreak of war and the 'resort to brute force' would be 'disastrous' to the suffrage movement, the opposite proved to be the case. Save for 'actual hand to hand fighting', women's contribution was 'indispensable' and made 'a profound impression upon their countrymen'. She singled out, for example, the work of the Scottish Women's Hospitals which were staffed wholly by women who saw active service in 'Troyes, Corsica, Salonika and Serbia', and experienced 'a glorious albeit tragic record of heroic self-sacrifice'. Osler wrote that many in Parliament and even Mr. Asquith had 'converted'. Whilst the experiences of war doubtless had an effect on 'men's minds', she asserted that 'it was the patient educational labour of fifty years' which enabled women to 'seize the psychological moment for victory'.¹⁸ In assessing these claims, readers need to consider that there may have been an element of 'propaganda' in emphasising these achievements for the benefit of her supporters. However, even if that criticism has

¹⁷ BA&C *Reports of the Birmingham Citizens Committee*, December 1914, pp. 85 and 87, and March 1915, pp. 97-98.

¹⁸ *Memories 2*, Chapter 10.

substance, the evidence suggested solid achievements to support her contentions in principle. Unfortunately, during the early years of the War, the relative unity of approach amongst women to the granting of voting rights was offset by disharmony on the merits of going to war, the war aims, and the terms upon which the conflict could be brought to an end. Both Osler's early involvement with the UDC and its termination are germane to an appraisal of her developing stance on the war.

The Union of Democratic Control

Osler's papers contain only one mention of the UDC and that is in 1918 in *Journal 2*. It dwelt only on her withdrawal from the UDC in 1915 because she felt at that point that the time was not opportune to demand that the Government set out its peace terms.¹⁹

For this thesis it is important to consider what may have led her to join a new controversial organisation such as the UDC at a time when she was heavily occupied with the activities of the BWSS, the NUWSS and the Birmingham Citizens' Committee. In one sense, her decision to join was surprising given that she supported the Government's declaration of war. Her *Journal 1* entry on 5 August recorded her 'comfort to feel in sympathy with one's country and people' and 'not forced to make oneself a moral outcast, as in the last of our wars'.²⁰ This was undoubtedly a reference to the South African conflict discussed in Chapter Six in the context of Osler's increasing opposition to that war and to war generally as a method of settling disputes.

¹⁹ *Journal 2*, 24 January 1918, p. 1.

²⁰ *Journal 1*, 5 August 1914.

Osler does not disclose when or why she joined the UDC, but It was likely to have been at some point in mid-September 1914 when the organising committee published its manifesto or four 'cardinal points' summarised below together with an accompanying letter of intent. Firstly, that no province should be transferred from one country to another without the consent of the population by plebiscite or other means. Secondly, Britain could not enter into a treaty or similar arrangement without parliamentary approval as part of a 'machinery' to ensure 'democratic control' of foreign policy. Thirdly, British foreign policy should not be centred on entering into alliances to maintain the 'Balance of Power' but should rather be concentrated on international co-operation between powers to promote amicable relations. Fourthly, as part of any peace settlement, Britain would propose a plan for 'drastic reduction' of arms, the 'nationalisation' of the production of armaments, and control of their export from one country to another. The accompanying letter emphasised that the points were aimed to define rather than undermine the war effort and were not to be seen as advocating an immediate end of the war or defining when the conditions for peace negotiations had been reached. They were merely setting out the 'fundamental principles' which should govern the peace terms.²¹ The attraction of these aims for Osler was clear. The latter two points mirrored views she had expressed to the Women's Liberal Federation in Birmingham in 1901 in the context of the Boer War. As to the others, the annexation of one state by another without consent or parliamentary involvement would be a violation of the right of the self-determination of states, a central principle of Gladstonian Liberalism. Proper parliamentary control of the conduct of foreign policy was essential to

²¹ Swartz, *The Union of Democratic Control*, pp. 41-44.

curtail the secret diplomacy which Osler regarded as a contributory factor towards the conflict.

Aside from the aims of the UDC, Osler would also have been attracted to the organisation owing to the involvement of women and the support of its members for women's rights. Although the original founders of the UDC tended to be eminent male politicians or intellectuals, such as Ramsay MacDonald and Bertrand Russell, they were themselves supporters of female emancipation. Helena Swanwick who figured in the previous chapter as a prominent suffragist and member of the NUWSS Executive, became a member of the UDC Executive Committee. Women were welcomed as branch secretaries and organisers as the UDC was 'convinced that democracy must be based on the equal citizenship of men and women'.²² Swanwick was also one of the radical members of the NUWSS who were 'appalled' by the prevalence of the 'German-baiting and Hun-hating climate'. For these women opposition to the war was analogous to dissension from militarism and feminine subordination and was seen by them as central to the suffrage cause.²³

It is important to understand that the UDC was not a political party formed to exercise power. It was an 'organ of opposition to governmental policy' during the First World War, hoping to influence a just and 'lasting post-war settlement'.²⁴ Nonetheless, it was seen by elements of the press and the public as a 'pro-German organisation' and its meetings

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

²³ J. Vellacott, 'Feminist Consciousness and the First World War', *History Workshop Journal*, Volume 23, Issue 1 (1 March 1987), pp. 81-101, p. 92.

²⁴ Swartz, *The Union of Democratic Control*, p. 1.

were subjected to 'physical attacks'.²⁵ Swanwick, who wrote the only contemporary history of the UDC, was verbally abused for having been born in Germany, and wrote of her attendance at a UDC Meeting in London on 29 November 1914, when a group of soldiers prevented the meeting from taking place by preventing her and her fellows from mounting the platform.²⁶ It was in that political climate that Osler probably made the decision to withdraw from the UDC in 1915. She may also have been influenced by Millicent Fawcett and her supporters from continuing her association with what would have been regarded as a pacifist group. Swanwick herself became a member of the Independent Labour Party in 1916 and, according to Swartz, it had been in late 1915 that the UDC began to press the Government to set out peace terms albeit without success.²⁷ In later reflections in 1918, Osler expressed regret for her decision to swerve 'from the straight course for a time' rather than supporting those who came to be termed the 'despised and rejected "Pacifists"', all along.²⁸ She may have used a measure of hindsight with those comments, but the context of 1915 was very different, in that aside from public opinion and the press, Osler and her peace-oriented colleagues within the NUWSS faced the opposition of the pro-war faction led by Millicent Fawcett.

The Dispute within the NUWSS and Osler's Role in its Resolution 1914-1915

The opprobrium faced by members of the UDC was repeated on a larger scale within the Executive of the NUWSS in the first half of 1915. As a member of the Executive, Osler

²⁵ J. Vellacott, *Pacifists, Patriots and the Vote, The Erosion of Democratic Suffragism in Britain during the First World War* (Basingstoke, 2007), p 55.

²⁶ H. Swanwick, *Builders of Peace being Ten Years' History of the Union of Democratic Control* (London, 1924), p. 93.

²⁷ Swartz, *The Union of Democratic Control*, pp. 70-71.

²⁸ *Journal 2*, 24 January 1918, pp. 3-4.

took part in the debates and played a role in resolving the main issue of whether the NUWSS, as an important public institution, should adopt a view on the War or whether it should restrict itself to 'winning the vote'. The National Council Meeting of the NUWSS on 4-6 February 1915 exposed the divisions between the members with regard to the eventual ending of the present War and its stance on future conflicts. A Resolution supported by Osler was carried calling upon the NUWSS to 'promote understanding and goodwill among nations' and to 'resist any spirit of hatred and revenge'; additionally, future disputes were to be submitted to arbitration or conciliation before any recourse to military force. Osler was plainly carrying forward these positions from the UDC and her own established opinions, rejecting the balance of power argument and military alliances. These arguments were rejected by Fawcett who insisted on Resolutions expressing admiration for the troops defending the Empire and seeking to limit the previous Resolution to merely expressing an opinion on Government thinking but giving no leave for individual suffrage societies to promote it.²⁹ The argument intensified, and it is significant to consider the extent to which Osler and her allies were prepared to challenge Fawcett on an issue of signal importance.

The February Meeting had revealed the existence of three separate groups of women; what might be described as a pro-war party led by Fawcett; those, like Osler, who were not at that stage calling for a truce but wished eventually to see a negotiated settlement together with a mechanism for preventing future wars; and a third group of pacifists and peace-seekers who wished to be free to criticise the continuance of the war. In early

²⁹ Manchester Central Library, Archives Section, M50, *Minutes of the Executive Committee of the NUWSS, 4-6 February 1915*

March 1915 an open split developed when two members, Kathleen Courtney and Catherine Marshall, resigned from the NUWSS so that they would be free to criticise the war. The dispute intensified when an invitation was received from the International Congress of Women inviting selected delegates of the NUWSS to attend a conference in The Hague in April 1915 where a wide agenda would include debates on the terms of peace and a possible truce and the promotion of arbitration, conciliation, and amity between nations.

The issue was debated at an Executive Meeting on 18 March 1915. Osler was present and potentially had an opportunity of opposing Fawcett on an important issue for the future of the NUWSS. Fawcett argued that it was 'undesirable' for there to be official NUWSS participation at the conference, and any agitation for peace 'was almost treachery'.³⁰ The surviving records are of poor quality but suggest that Osler argued that there were already Council resolutions authorising attendance at a conference of this kind; however she accepted that it might be premature to support a call for peace negotiations, echoing her reasons for parting from the UDC. She therefore supported Fawcett thus indicating her reluctance to challenge the latter's authority.³¹ Further, Fawcett sought to bar Executive members from either joining the UDC or attending a National Conference of Women called by it.³² This provoked an angry response from Swanwick who told Fawcett she could not continue to call her colleagues, 'traitors and lunatics'.³³ By the time of an Executive Meeting on 15 April, ten Executive members, - some half of the total, including

³⁰ Vellacott, *Pacifists*, p. 76.

³¹ Women's Library, London, *Report of the Executive Committee of the NUWSS, 18 March 1915*.

³² Vellacott, *Pacifists*, p. 77.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

Swanwick, - had tendered their resignations.³⁴ Osler remained in post and a handwritten note from her attached to the minutes of the meeting, protested that she did not accept that the remaining Committee members were against peace, and 'she intended to work for peace'.³⁵ In *Memories 2*, Osler accepted that her sympathies at the time were more with those with 'pronounced pacifist views' than with the 'Militarist section' but 'my intense desire to avert injury to our Cause held me to my post in the hope of being able to exercise a restraining influence'. Thus again, Osler refused to challenge Fawcett placing the cause of women's suffrage and unity ahead of a factional dispute.³⁶ At a meeting on 6 May 1915, a Special Council Meeting was arranged in Birmingham for three days in June to clarify, amongst other things, the role that the NUWSS should have, if any, in promoting peace proposals.³⁷ Osler was to play a role of some significance at that meeting in her home city.

In the event, although Fawcett's position at the Meeting was potentially in peril given the scale of the resignations from the Executive, she and her supporters ensured that the vacant positions on the Executive were filled by those loyal to her and largely based in London. Only Osler and two others were from north of Cambridge.³⁸ Osler's previously unpublished account contained within her *Memories 2*, confirmed that she and Mrs. Rackham had charge of the 'crucial' resolution which was carried by a 'very decisive majority' without 'further ruptures'. It decreed that the NUWSS would not undertake

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

³⁵ Women's Library, London, *Report of the Executive Committee of the NUWSS, 15 April 1915*.

³⁶ *Memories 2*, Chapter 9.

³⁷ Women's Library, London, *Report of the Executive Committee of the NUWSS, 6 May 1915*.

³⁸ Vellacott, *Pacifists*, pp. 93-95.

‘propaganda’ for promoting international goodwill and peace in the absence of a consensus. Individual members were free to undertake individual work ‘through other organisations as they saw fit’.³⁹ Osler felt that she had succeeded in pouring oil ‘on the troubled waters’, although she noted much ‘fanaticism’ on both sides rather than ‘level-headedness’. As she put it, ‘Our people (the Executive) can see nothing but mischief in the Hague Congress; while the others all up on their hind legs at the very word ‘patriotism’.⁴⁰ It was characteristic of Osler that she searched for consensus between those two extreme positions neither of which she herself held, and Fawcett was rightly grateful to her for providing ‘the atmosphere of peace and goodwill’ for the meeting at her home ‘in these anxious times’.⁴¹ In Fawcett’s obituary of Osler, she wrote that she ‘never forgot her loyal and invaluable support during the crisis in our Society in the spring of 1915’.⁴² Osler was equally effusive in her praise of Fawcett after the meeting, writing that the surmounting of this and other crises was thanks ‘largely to the wise and statesmanlike leadership of our beloved President’.⁴³ There is almost a suggestion of hero-worship towards Fawcett in those words. Osler clearly saw Fawcett as too important to the success of the suffrage campaign for her to be sacrificed at such a critical stage. She was neither willing nor able to challenge Fawcett’s dominance and there is no evidence that she sought the leadership of the NUWSS herself either then or at any time thereafter.

³⁹ BA&C, L76.12, *Report of the Special Council Meeting of the BWSS, June 1915*, p. 26.

⁴⁰ *Memories 2*, Chapter 9, undated letter.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Women’s Library, London, ‘Obituary of Catherine Courtauld Osler’, *The Woman’s Leader*, 26 December 1924.

⁴³ BA&C, L76.12, *Report of the Special Council Meeting of the BWSS, June 1915*, p. 26.

The outcome of the Special Meeting was plainly a complete victory for Fawcett and her supporters. There would be no official questioning by the NUWSS of the conduct of the war and any personal opinions expressed would be ignored and vilified. One of the new committee members, Ray Strachey, gloated that because they 'had the bulk of the stodgy members' backing them, they had thrown 'all the pacifists out'.⁴⁴ It was not just the pacifists they sought to silence but even more moderate opponents, including Osler herself, notwithstanding any gratitude Fawcett may have expressed personally. The point is clearly shown by Fawcett and her supporter's reaction to five articles published in the journal *Jus Suffragii* in October 1915 by Mary Sheepshanks, the international secretary and editor of the journal until June 1915 when she had resigned, claiming that Fawcett was making her job impossible. The articles were condemned by Fawcett's supporters as 'pacifist propaganda'. Osler subsequently provided a reasoned analysis of the articles, asserting that none of them advocated 'any suggestion of immediate peace', and that it was 'a suicidal policy ... to exclude speculative and general philosophical articles on the questions of war and peace'. Fawcett 'showed no interest in Osler's description of the articles which she brushed off as not good articles ... fluffy stuff ... appeals for peace'.⁴⁵ Osler felt the articles were suitable for any 'serious journal' and on her initiative a 'significant resolution' was passed, opposing the making of important policy decisions 'by a small group at the end of long meetings'.⁴⁶ However, as a result of pressure from Fawcett a subsequent resolution of an umbrella group, the International Women's

⁴⁴ B. Caine, *Bombay to Bloomsbury: A Biography of the Strachey Family* (Oxford, 2005), p. 313.

⁴⁵ Vellacott, *Pacifists*, p. 130.

⁴⁶ D. Rubinstein, *A Different World for Women: The Life of Millicent Garrett Fawcett* (Columbus, OH, 1991), p. 230.

Suffrage Alliance precluded the publication of further articles on 'controversial political subjects', pacifism being the only one specified. David Rubinstein again compared Fawcett to Lloyd George and Lenin in her dictatorial methods, echoing her hostility to Irish Home Rule.⁴⁷ The censorship tactics succeeded with Sheepshanks as well, in that she ceased to include articles in the *Jus Suffragii* by well-known opponents of war.⁴⁸ Osler and her like-minded colleagues were defeated, and no further challenge was forthcoming during the war years.

The relationship between Fawcett and Osler is instructive in comparing the characteristics of two prominent women campaigners. Fawcett was seven years older than Osler and began attending meetings about female suffrage – including some in Birmingham – from 1871 onwards. Osler would have attended speeches in the 1870s by Fawcett who was to become a life-long friend.⁴⁹ They were both examples of middle-class feminists who came to prominence after the presentation of John Stuart Mill's first women's suffrage Bill to Parliament in the late 1860s. Their aim as suffragists was similar, to obtain voting rights for women on the best terms achievable by all lawful means. They both saw the importance of working with men wherever possible to achieve their aim. However, there were important differences of ideology and character. Their political differences have been shown principally to be in colonial and Imperial affairs. As seen in Chapters Five and Six, Fawcett was an Imperialist, colonialist and racist in her resolute opposition to Irish Home Rule and strong antipathy towards the Irish people, her stance

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

⁴⁸ Vellacott, *Pacifists*, p. 130.

⁴⁹ N. Gauld, *Words and Deeds: Birmingham Suffragists and Suffragettes 1832-1918* (Alcester, 2018), p. 13.

on the South African conflict and her adverse view of the Boers. She saw the Irish and the Boers as inferior people who needed to remain subjects within the Empire. She was a fundamentally Conservative Unionist whose association with Liberalism ended long before Osler's, save in her continuing support for Free Trade. Vellacott described Fawcett as a determined moderate who had no thoughts of any radical change in women's social role either during the war or afterwards. She saw women as having a traditional role and by supporting the war effort, the chances of having an enhanced role in society by the vote were advanced even though on men's terms.⁵⁰ For Fawcett the War had to be won whatever the cost, and Germany had to be completely defeated and severely punished. Within that narrow vision it was clear from her attitude and actions that she could also be vindictive and ruthless if opposed or thwarted in a way Osler could never have been. At the same time, Fawcett inspired great affection in her supporters. All the evidence suggests that the support for her political views and actions was considerable during the war years and afterwards, and those of Osler's persuasion were in a minority. Osler was just as determined as Fawcett to win voting rights for women. However, aside from the suffrage campaign, and within the confines of her time, the evidence suggests that Osler displayed a more radical approach to political change particularly in international affairs, and a more humane and constructive vision with regard to the issues raised by war and its consequences. She also always looked to promote conciliation and compromise evincing a contrast of temperament rather than ideology. The differences between the

⁵⁰ Vellacott, 'Feminist Consciousness,' pp. 87-88.

two women should not be exaggerated. Osler was, like Fawcett, in essence a maternal feminist who also displayed racist instincts as discussed in Chapter Three.

The preceding analysis of the schism within the NUWSS showed why Osler would have ended her involvement with the UDC. By the summer of 1915, Fawcett was in an unassailable position at the head of the NUWSS which was dominated by a pro-war Executive. To the extent that Osler had promoted a questioning of the lack of war aims and peace proposals, any influence she could exert in that direction could now be completely ignored. After October 1915, the surviving records of the Executive show no further significant interventions by Osler of that nature and are largely confined to her activism within the suffrage campaign where she was still an important figure. For example, at the Executive Meeting of 4 January 1917 she opposed a Resolution proposing that support should be withdrawn from a Mr. Ayles as a potential Parliamentary candidate under the Election Fighting Fund procedure because he had been imprisoned as a conscientious objector. Osler argued successfully that the objection to Ayles was disingenuous. He was not a lawbreaker but was imprisoned because he held opinions and attitudes towards the war which were opposed by Fawcett's supporters. She suggested that he would not be condemned if he was resisting, for instance, the Vaccination Acts.⁵¹

Patriotism, Pacifism and Free Speech During the War

Osler was accused of a lack of patriotism in her support of Irish Home Rule, her criticism of aspects of the South African conflict, and her pacifist leanings, for example, in her support of the UDC. She also faced criticism for her support of conscientious objectors

⁵¹ Women's Library, London, *Minutes of the Executive Committee of the NUWSS, 4 January 1917*.

and freedom of expression during the War. This section explores her thoughts and writings on these topics during the War and considers to what extent her views evolved during the conflict, and whether - even if they were of marginal influence – her opinions can be ignored by history. The approach is both chronological and analytical in demonstrating how her thinking on these topics developed over the course of the long conflict.

Although Osler never succumbed to a jingoistic patriotism, she harboured no illusions about the conduct of the German army during the war. In September 1914 she accused some of its troops of acting like barbarians in their destruction of towns and hospitals. They were behaving like ‘blind savages’ with ‘naked unashamed brutality’ although she could not guarantee that ‘our hitherto honest brave but not superhuman soldiers’ would not be tempted to retaliate.⁵² An early indication of her own views was given in a letter of November 1914 to her son Jack who had walked out of a lecture given by a ‘ghastly cleric’ who had expressed hatred of the Germans. Osler approved of Jack’s action and stressed the responsibility of peaceable people to both ‘influence current ideas’ about the War, and to ‘deprecate every expression of hatred, vengeance and retaliation’ because hatred can only be defeated by love.⁵³

In August 1915 in an extended entry in *Journal 1*, Osler examined the concept of patriotism which she described as ‘a strong and elusive emotion or passion’. It could be unreasoning, uncritical and instinctive, often expressed as ‘my country right or wrong’.

⁵² *Journal 1*, 28 September 1914.

⁵³ *Memories 2*, Chapter 9, Letter to Jack Osler, 30 November 1914.

Alternatively, it could express an ideal of what a country could be. She described her hero, Mazzini as one who loved the soul of his country, Italy, more than its existence and the striving towards such perfection was central to his patriotism.⁵⁴ Osler understood and subscribed to such an ideal. She saw it as conceivable, in the event of peace, for a country such as Britain to cede some territory gained during or before the war. Unfortunately, she sensed that such a concession to the Germans would be seen as unpatriotic. Whilst she accepted that Germany was at the time in the grip of a 'militarist class', she was confident that it would eventually return as a civilised country and should be shown mercy. To act otherwise would be to embrace the same militarist ideals for which Germany was being condemned. Osler did not see it as an answer to assert that Britain would not behave as the Germans had done, when its past conduct included the 'love of conquest and dominion'.⁵⁵ She saw Britain's position as exhibiting a perversion of patriotism in asserting military might. She was not adopting a pacifist position but laying down a marker for future peace negotiations between two flawed but civilised countries. This referred back to the earlier discussion surrounding the UDC and emphasised the importance of a moral and humane vision, even if it was unpopular in the fog of war.

By the time of Osler's next extensive entry in June 1916, her mood had darkened. A battle was raging for Verdun where, by some estimates, the Germans were losing 1,000 men every day. The Battle of Jutland on 31 May had caused the death of many sailors on both sides. On 6 June, a ship carrying Lord Kitchener to Archangel was sunk with the death of all on board. Osler was horrified that the patriots were unabashed and wanted

⁵⁴ *Journal 1*, 8 August 1915.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

to carry on. Those who wished to find a way to stop the War were denounced as peace mongers who could be fined or imprisoned as 'criminal rebels' after conscription was introduced in that year. There seemed to be no possibility of a decisive victory and yet no step was taken to halt the conflict. Ideals of free speech, freedom of thought and free will were in abeyance. No human could emerge with credit save the few conscientious objectors.⁵⁶ There was no longer any suggestion of greater German culpability. British troops were killing and being killed equally as 'madness consumes the world'.⁵⁷ Osler was coming close to a pacifist position and that is how she would likely have been perceived by most of her fellow citizens.

There are three entries in *Journal 2* for 1918 which exemplify Osler's views in what turned out to be the last year of the War. They encapsulate her major preoccupations with religious faith, freedom of expression, patriotism, militarism and pacifism. The first concerned the treatment of Quaker conscientious objectors. In May 1918 one such group, including Harrison Barrow, the acting chairman of the Friends' Service Committee, was criticised for disobeying the censorship regulations in their support of those opposed to military service. They had arranged for an article - entitled a 'Challenge to Militarism' - to be published, and as a result they were sentenced to six months' imprisonment for failing, as a matter of principle, to submit the article for clearance by the censor under regulations pursuant to the Defence of the Realm Act.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ *Journal 1*, 16 June 1916.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 8 September 1916.

⁵⁸ *Journal 2*, 31 May 1918, pp. 39-40.

In essence, the Quakers argued that they were exercising a right of free speech in accordance with the will of God, and that it was not considered appropriate to submit the outcome of their deliberations to a Government official for approval prior to publication. The reasons for the prison sentence as reported in the press are of interest in illustrating the justification for interference with the longstanding principle of free speech. It was suggested that if all citizens had taken a pacifist view, Britain would by then have been occupied by German troops. Whilst the Quakers were entitled to their religious views, the country had to have some control over opinions disseminated. The leaflets glorified those who refused to fight, and 'tended' to induce others not to do so, and the pacifists refused to undertake not to repeat the offence.⁵⁹

Osler and six other citizens arranged for publication of a letter entitled 'The Struggle for Freedom' in the *Birmingham Gazette* on 5 July 1918, objecting to the judgment and the sentence. The signatories to the letter made two points. The Quakers were obeying their conviction of God's direct guidance which should be respected by the state; furthermore, the original article was a contribution to open debate on an important public issue and the authors should not be silenced at the behest of the state.⁶⁰ Osler's further comments on the letter in *Journal 2* highlighted the right to free expression of opinion on a vital issue of public debate. In addition, she discerned that the attitude of the court displayed at least a suggestion of bias against the free expression of pacifist and anti-militant opinions; and the letter made clear that the authors, including Osler, were not to be taken as agreeing with the Quaker position and indeed they held 'widely divergent

⁵⁹ *Manchester Guardian*, 25 May 1918.

⁶⁰ *Birmingham Gazette*, 5 July 1918, in *Memories 2*, Chapter 9.

views'. It was the principle that was at issue and Osler herself had not seen the offending article at any stage.⁶¹

On a separate but related issue, Osler was asked whether genuine repentance by the Germans for their 'crimes' should enable them to be forgiven. She answered affirmatively but was then asked by a woman whether her view would have been different if her own son had been 'crucified' by the enemy. Her answer was that the mother's 'passion' would understandably be dominant, but nothing could show 'a greater disobedience to Christ than to sanction or justify such passion'.⁶² These words can be seen not only as an expression of Osler's profound Christian faith, but arguably they justify pacifist forgiveness for such a crime and affirm the right to put forward unpopular views to ensure that the position of the Government could be subject to debate and challenge.

Osler's antagonism to restrictions on free expression stayed with her after the end of the First World War. In the last year of her life, she wrote an article which claimed that such 'regimentation seriously atrophied the public mind'. In the context of an edict banning the work of named pacifists from being considered for the Nobel Peace Prize, Osler wrote that such strictures must 'tend to lower the level of national attainment', and the 'respect for individuality and freedom of soul'.⁶³

Subsequent to the previously mentioned first entry concerning the treatment of Quaker conscientious objectors, the second entry related to a book Osler had been reading in

⁶¹ *Journal 2*, 31 May 1918, pp 38-41.

⁶² *Journal 2*, 31 May 1918, pp. 41-43.

⁶³ C. C. Osler, 'The Terror of Ideas', *Hibbert Journal*, Volume 22 no. 3 (1923-1924), pp. 574-585.

1918 by May Sinclair which, in her view, misused religion to justify the glorification of war.⁶⁴ Osler was 'sickened with war novels' in general and this one in particular elevated 'the fighting instinct into a religion'. It argued that to take part in war was to be part of the Great War of Redemption, and any man who did not take part in combat was to be held in contempt by everyone, including himself. The pre-war era was seen as decadent, and to die in the War achieved an apotheosis. The novel's 'hero' had originally been a pacifist and opponent of the Empire but now sought redemption for his sins by being part of 'the most glorious army in history'. The defeat of Germany by the Empire would be the end of wars. Inevitably, the 'hero' of the novel was killed in battle. Osler viewed this as 'dangerous nonsense' but was concerned that, aided by the pro-war press, these views would gain some traction. She was dismayed by the perversion of religion for military ends, the abuse of freedom of expression to propagate such views, the espousal of the worst excesses of patriotism and militarism.⁶⁵ It is of interest that according to the cover notes to the book, the author (whose real name was Mary Amelia St. Clair) wrote under a pseudonym and was an active suffragist and member of the Woman Writers' Suffrage League. There was no suggestion in Osler's *Journal 2* entry that she regarded Sinclair as writing ironically, and the example of Fawcett and indeed the Pankhursts has illustrated that prominent women activists could be as supportive of the conflict as men. Osler herself admitted to hating 'Prussianism with the best of them', but her hatred was against the creed not the German people whom she saw as sheep following their ministers. She was forced to concede that in 1918, European nations still believed in

⁶⁴ M. Sinclair, *The Tree of Heaven* (New York, 1917), pp. 256-272.

⁶⁵ *Journal 2*, 13 June 1918, pp. 43-49.

military force to resolve disputes. The abandonment of militarist thinking had to be multilateral and accompanied by a change to the ethos that 'Power, Empire, Wealth, and Territory are the essential things that make a nation great, honoured and successful.'⁶⁶ These pacifist arguments were coming to be entrenched in Osler's thinking. The third relevant entry can be considered in that light.

In September 1918, Osler preached at a Unitarian Church in West Bromwich, deprecating the 'sowing and cultivation of hatred' notwithstanding the War. Her contention was that it was a sign of a 'high level of civilisation' to hate evil but not the perpetrator, even if he was 'a foreigner'. The reaction to her remarks from the congregation suggested that it was 'too Christian' a view for the present 'national temper'. She sensed that her resentment of hatred clashed with the prevalent conviction that hatred was 'a necessary attribute of patriotism', and that its absence was 'suspect'.⁶⁷ As a Unitarian herself, Osler must have been disappointed by the reaction to her comments. It may be that the long war had so hardened the hearts of her audience that any suggestion of sympathy with their foes might suggest pacifist tendencies.

It can never be known whether Osler was a private pacifist. As the previous paragraph indicates, to admit publicly to such leanings would have invited opprobrium, even from her fellow Unitarians, and the criticism aimed at the avowed Quaker pacifists was discussed earlier in this section. On grounds of sex and age, she would never have been called upon to take up arms and thus any open admission of her position was

⁶⁶ *Journal 2*, 16 June 1918, p. 50.

⁶⁷ *Journal 2*, 5 October 1918, pp. 62-64.

unnecessary. There is evidence from the memoirs of her grandson, Vice-Admiral Sir John Hayes, that Osler was 'a confirmed pacifist'.⁶⁸ On the other hand, there is an undated private letter from Osler to an unnamed 'Pacifist friend', disputing the assertion that submitting to alien domination would have been preferable to fighting. Osler's view was that 'Liberty' was worth any price and peace was not the 'very first consideration'. She had reluctantly accepted that the World War itself was probably inevitable given the conflicting ideals of the English and the Prussians. For the future, the only way of making atonement for war was by resisting the advancement of 'hatred, malice and uncharitableness', and pursuing unceasingly, 'moderation, restraint and reason'.⁶⁹

The issue of pacifism arose in connection with the first General Election after the war in 1918. Further information and analysis of that election follow in the next chapter but in this context, one of the candidates in the election, Mr. Kneeshaw of the Independent Labour Party, was described by Osler as an 'extreme pacifist'. She knew he had the support of three pacifist members of her committee including the BWSS's secretary Mrs. Ring, a long-standing colleague of Osler. Osler hoped that the 'minority of pacifists' would none the less support the Liberal candidate just as Osler herself had consistently championed the rights of pacifist conscientious objectors although she herself was 'not one of them in her opinions'.⁷⁰

In summary, the War had showed Osler to be steadfast in her espousal of freedom of expression and her opposition to a resort to arms for the settlement of disputes. She was

⁶⁸ J. Hayes, *Face the Music: A Sailor's Story* (Pentland, 1991), pp. 25-26.

⁶⁹ *Memories 2*, Chapter 9.

⁷⁰ *Journal 2*, 22 November 1918, pp. 77-79.

not without love of her country and expressed strong views about the conduct of the German forces but as the War proceeded, she increasingly realised that war reduced all the combatants to the same level. Her patriotic feelings were never chauvinist - rather they reached for an ideal state which was probably unattainable. Her increasingly pacifist views chimed with her patriotism. If all war was evil, it became a perversion of patriotism, and thus the avoidance of martial conflict was the only true path. However, she was not prepared to say that the taking up of arms could never be justified and if freedom was under dire threat then drastic steps might be necessary as a last resort. Osler might be described as a moderate pacifist and in her view, the only way that such unpalatable choices could be minimised was by an international mechanism for the settlement of disputes. To what extent that was achieved will be addressed in the next section. Her influence on the debates about the course of the war in Birmingham and further afield was likely to have been minimal. It was clear that her views on the war - as on other issues - were in the minority. Her experience at the Unitarian meeting showed clearly that her promotion of peace was strongly opposed. Although her views were obviously unwelcome to the majority, it did not follow that they could be ignored. Osler clearly felt her opinions needed to be heard as a basic right of free expression.

Aftermath and the Peace of Versailles

Following the cessation of hostilities in November 1918, prolonged peace negotiations concluded with the Peace of Versailles in June 1919. Osler's views on the conflict, fully disclosed in the previous sections, would have led her to hope that after an exhausting and destructive conflict, the warring parties would have sought a just peace coupled with

reconciliation and a determination to avoid further warfare. This section analyses Osler's reaction to the eventual peace treaty and the significance of her views as contemporaneously recorded.

Osler's *Journal 2* entry for 10 November 1918 described the terms of the proposed Armistice as 'severe and humiliating' for Germany and her allies. She was heartened that the overthrow of the Kaiser and his regime had come from within rather than by imposition, and she spared a thought 'for the agony of a proud and once great nation in its abasement'. She hoped that the triumphant allies would take the opportunity to be just and merciful.⁷¹ However, by 12 January 1919, her hopes had been dashed. The General Election in Britain in December 1918 was fought on the slogan of 'Hang the Kaiser', and Lloyd George's Government was re-elected. At the beginning of the Peace Conference Osler discerned only a desire to resurrect the 'Balance of Power' doctrine and to recast the map of Europe. Clemenceau, the French Prime Minister, was particularly militant in his demands for security, a stance that was inevitable given that his country had been so badly affected by the conflict. It became clear that Osler underestimated the desire of the French and the other Allied Powers for security and retribution, and the relative lack of concern for the establishment of the League of Nations.⁷² Her ideal of a 'rebirth, and fresh start for humanity' as a result of the Allied success became instead, for her domestic opponents, solely an exercise in securing 'the fruits of victory', a concept she described as a 'hateful phrase'. Yet despite feeling it hopeless to protest, she expressed a 'passionate desire' to 'preach a crusade' and 'to influence public opinion

⁷¹ *Journal 2*, 10 November 1918, pp. 75-76.

⁷² *Journal 2*, 12 January 1919, pp. 84-86.

against this insanity'.⁷³ Once more she was demanding that her minority view be heard and acted upon, however much it may have been questioned by the majority.

In February 1919, Osler preached again at a Unitarian meeting, on this occasion at her own Church of the Messiah. Mindful of the opposition to her address in the previous September, it was notable that she tried to balance her approach to be more in tune with her congregation whilst advocating a Christian response towards friends and enemies. She emphasised two instances which were likely to generate German opposition; the blockade of the country with the consequent starvation of the population; and the demand for and the cruelty of the 'indiscriminate expulsion and repatriation' of British-born Germans. She balanced those criticisms by emphasising German brutality during the War, suggesting that by comparison 'we might claim to be the best of a bad lot'. She hoped that the younger, more idealistic members of the congregation would have been more sympathetic to her address. However, she found it difficult to persuade them at that time, that cruelty and hatred were as sinful as the original war crimes. Typically, she was searching for constructive progress whilst the majority of her listeners wanted punishment.⁷⁴

In Osler's view, the peace terms enshrined in the Peace of Versailles on 24 June 1919 were a disaster, fuelled by 'passionate enmity and ruthlessness' against a 'helpless and crippled opponent'. She felt that it was bound to lead to a 'fresh war as soon as it can be made possible'. The new League of Nations became a 'League of Allies', with Germany

⁷³ *Journal 2*, 16 January 1919, pp. 88-89.

⁷⁴ *Journal 2*, 17 February 1919, pp. 91-96.

and others excluded. For Osler, although she accepted that Germany was 'mainly responsible' for the War, the imposed peace terms would result in negative consequences for Britain and its allies. They completely failed to acknowledge their own past misdeeds or the significance of the fact that the Germans had overthrown their own Government as pointing to a desire for a better future.⁷⁵

The views of Osler and others who opposed the peace treaties were supported by the economist John Maynard Keynes in his book, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, published in 1919.⁷⁶ Keynes had been a member of the Treasury team at the peace talks but resigned in 1919 because of the likely economic consequences of the proposed Treaty. Just as Osler considered that the continuing blockade of Germany and the peace terms generally were irreligious and vindictive, Keynes argued that they were economically disastrous. As Osler recorded in *Journal 2*, in an interdependent world the renewed power of the Germans rising from 'the dust in which we have trampled them' was essential to the financial recovery of Europe and to enable Germany to pay the reparations and indemnities demanded, deserved as they might be.⁷⁷

Osler's view of the Treaty of Versailles buttressed as it was by Keynes's economic expertise and analysis, and the failure of the Allies to take a more balanced view of the causes and consequences of the War, would seem to have been borne out by subsequent developments. In the 1930s Hitler's exploitation of German resentment against the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, led ultimately to renewed warfare just as she had predicted.

⁷⁵ *Journal 2*, 11-26 June 1919, pp. 101-106.

⁷⁶ J. M. Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (London, 1919).

⁷⁷ *Journal 2*, 20 February 1920, pp. 116-120.

However, the evidence suggests that in Britain, outside the UDC and other progressive bodies, there was little support for her views which, when seen through the prism of history, were idealistic and ahead of their time. Her efforts to influence the debate in Birmingham were probably of little value although it does not follow that they were futile or unnecessary. The final section of this chapter turns to consider Osler's views on a separate but related issue which concerned her in her final years, namely, the future of Imperialism in relation to Ireland and India.

The Future of Empire in Ireland and India

As a Gladstonian Liberal, Osler had no great regard for the concept of Empire. Just as on an individual level she supported individual liberty and self-reliance, so at the national and international level she questioned any interference with the rights of individual nations by colonial control unless it offered substantial benefits and had the consent of the people of the subservient state. Her increasing opposition to the South African conflict and loss of life caused by force of arms was discussed in Chapter 6. The First World War had accelerated the demise of decaying Empires and the emergence of new individual states. The Ottoman and Habsburg Empires came to an end and Germany's emergent Empire was dismembered. Even though the British Empire remained and indeed expanded as a result of the War, its nature, extent and continuance were increasingly being questioned. In these last years of her life, Osler's surviving papers display her concerns about the future of two colonial possessions - Ireland and India. The focus of this last section is to consider and evaluate her thoughts on the future of these two countries.

A pointer towards her opinions is disclosed in two *Journal 2* entries for November 1921 which show that she was reading the diaries of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, a noted if maverick anti-imperialist and supporter of Irish and Indian independence.⁷⁸ In the first entry, Osler noted that as far back as 1896, Blunt was of the view that the 'the rights of weaker nations are lost in Europe even among the best'. The 'aggression and brutality' of the colonisers suggested that humanity was best seen on the 'rebel side'. Osler agreed 'however reluctant to avow it', as the practicality and goals of his opinions were questionable.⁷⁹ It was an example of Osler looking back to unpalatable Victorian Imperialism but also looking forward, however hesitantly, to a potentially different post-war world. The War and its aftermath provided the possibility of a solution to the seemingly irreconcilable conflict between Britain and Ireland.

Irish Home Rule

The failure to achieve Home Rule for Ireland and the schism in the Liberal Party in Britain in 1888 as a result of the defeat of Gladstone's Home Rule Bill, were considered in Chapter Five. It was a serious blow to Osler who was a perennial supporter of Home Rule. Whilst Gladstone's proposals did not envisage complete Irish independence but rather a devolution of powers to an Irish Parliament within the Empire, Unionists feared that even devolved powers would eventually lead also to the loss of India and the end of the Empire. Piers Brendon recorded that the hope of the Unionists was for the continuance of the status quo by consent but failing that it would have to be 'by force'.⁸⁰ The issue of

⁷⁸ For those readers interested in Blunt's work and opinions, see Elizabeth Longford, *A Pilgrimage of Passion: The Life of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt* (London, 1979).

⁷⁹ *Journal 2*, 11 November 1921, pp. 135-136.

⁸⁰ P. Brendon, *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire 1781-1997* (London, 2008), p. 295.

Ireland became prominent again during the First World War after the nationalist Easter Rising of 1916, which was brutally suppressed by Britain. It was seen as 'a blow at the heart of Empire' which might inspire nationalism in India.⁸¹ The first post-war election in January 1919 saw Sinn Fein, the Irish nationalist party, triumphant.⁸² There followed two years of guerrilla warfare followed by a negotiated peace. Osler was able to post a triumphant journal entry proclaiming 'a great epoch in history' ending 700 years of enmity and praising equally the work of the Government and Sinn Fein. The Treaty creating the Irish Free State omitted Ulster, but Osler had no doubt that it would join later although probably not for a generation.⁸³ Unfortunately, she failed to recognise two insuperable problems for the nationalists. Firstly, they did not gain complete independence but remained within the Empire as a Free State with dominion status, and secondly, the Irish Free State would have to submit to an 'Oath of Fidelity' to the Crown. In a separate journal entry in July 1922, Osler reported that 'once more' Ireland was at war, and she made it clear that she blamed the Republicans for the renewed conflict and widespread damage to buildings.⁸⁴ However, the reliability of her sources of information is questionable. She wrote that there had been an unmistakable majority for the Treaty in the Irish Parliament, whereas Roy Foster's book stated that there was only a 'tiny majority of seven seats'.⁸⁵ Neither Foster nor Brendon mention major property damage. No doubt there was likely to have been much confusion at the time. The fact is that the

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

⁸² *Journal 2*, 12 January 1919, p. 83.

⁸³ *Journal 2*, 7 December 1921, pp. 142-143.

⁸⁴ *Journal 2*, 8 July 1922, p. 163.

⁸⁵ R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (London, 1989), p. 508.

Treaty did not solve Ireland's problems and claim and counterclaim for the cause of the subsequent civil war continued.

Osler undoubtedly wanted to see a form of Irish Home Rule, but there was probably deliberate ambiguity as to what that meant. Osler's surviving papers are silent on her view as to the continuance of Ireland's place in the Empire or the oath of fidelity, but a number of points can be made. It is likely that she was untroubled by the settlement provided that there were substantial devolved powers to enable the country to develop as a dominion. She wrongly thought that Ulster would join its compatriots in the Irish Free State in the foreseeable future, thus promoting reconciliation. She took a jaundiced view of Sinn Féin and other Republicans whom she regarded as militants and troublemakers similar to the suffragettes in the suffrage campaign. It may be suggested speculatively that the Irish people might not have been viewed by Osler as subjects of Empire given the proximity of Ireland to the British mainland, but rather more as argumentative neighbours who should have been able to live together amicably, as the 1921 Treaty envisaged. That was unlikely to have been her view of India as will now be considered.

India and the Amritsar Massacre

The central issue in this sub-section is Osler's reaction to the massacre of many Indians by British troops in the Punjab in 1919. Although the circumstances were very different to the events in Ireland, issues surrounding the nature and future legitimacy of the British Empire were present in both cases.

Osler had visited India twice in the early years of the century with Alfred whose family business had close connections with India. Although the Oslers were positive about the virtues of British rule, they were clear that the continuance of that rule could only be with the consent of the Indian people – something that could only come with sympathy and understanding.⁸⁶ Even at the time of her first visit in 1900, she noted an absence or decline of those qualities, which boded ill for the future. As a woman well-used to employing servants, she noted the discourtesy and ‘overbearing arrogance’ of Anglo-Indians towards their servants – an attitude that bred resentment, though at that time it ensured obedience.⁸⁷ She noted generally a ‘decline in the sympathy and good understanding between the English and native races’, and an increase in ‘racial antipathy’.⁸⁸ She was saddened by these developments because during her visits Osler was positive about the ‘vast’ benefits of English rule to ‘our Indian Empire’.⁸⁹ The question for her was whether these developments pointed to political undercurrents which threatened the stability of the Empire.

As in Ireland, the First World War provided the context to highlight the dissatisfaction of the subject people with Imperial rule on the sub-continent. Many Indians fought and died for the Empire in many theatres of war, including Gallipoli, Salonika, the Middle East, and the Western Front. As an example, approaching 2,000 Indian troops were killed at the siege of Kut near Baghdad.⁹⁰ Mahatma Gandhi, the increasingly influential Indian leader,

⁸⁶ *Memories 1*, p. 98.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 159-160.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁹⁰ Brendon, *The Decline and Fall*, pp. 256, 259.

hoped that 'freedom would burst from the battlefields of France'.⁹¹ Whilst there was some attempt at mild reforms by the colonial power, they were seen as insufficient by the Indians and too radical by the British; as in Ireland, protest led to repressive measures.⁹² Gandhi led an effective campaign of passive resistance and civil disobedience which, on 13 April 1919, led to British troops commanded by General Dyer attacking an unarmed crowd of some 15,000 Sikhs at Amritsar in the Punjab as they worshipped at the Golden Temple. According to official statistics, 379 people were killed, including children, and 1,500 wounded.⁹³ Dyer was censured by the House of Commons. He was unrepentant and observed that the massacre would 'teach the bloody browns a lesson'. Nonetheless, Brendon considered that in the longer term his actions may have significantly loosened Britain's grip on the subcontinent.⁹⁴ Osler had considered differing points of view on the continuance of the Indian Empire from two unspecified articles she had read - one by an Anglo-Indian expressing fear of reprisals from the native population, another raising the question of the circumstances in which one nation can dominate another by the exercise of power and force, if necessary. In a letter written to a journal in 1920, Osler considered that the effectiveness of the use of such force was being undermined by the advance of democracy, which led to her questioning the benefit of Imperial rule. Osler always considered she had conducted herself in a sympathetic way in India, having, as a woman, witnessed the disrespectful exercise of arrogant power herself. For her, the censuring of Dyer was a judgment less on him than on the British

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 260.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 261-263.

military government. The actions of the colonial power put native Indians at risk whenever riots took place. She welcomed the censure of Dyer who had besmirched the name of his country.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, after Osler's letter was written, Dyer was exonerated by the House of Lords, over £26,000 was raised by public subscription for his benefit, and he was presented with a jewelled sword inscribed, 'Saviour of the Punjab'.⁹⁶

Osler's letter was important in showing that her stance on the nature of the Empire had changed since her visit to India in 1900. Whilst still proud of her country's contribution to the development of India, the evidence of this last section suggests that she saw the advance of democracy as undermining a political system based upon dominance of one nation by another. Her own recent enfranchisement would only have enhanced that thought. It was also consistent with her belief in self-determination of nations. However, there was still a long road ahead before India achieved independence and again Osler can be seen as a radical compared with the prevailing opinion in Britain at the time, where the strong support for Dyer was evidence of the continued sense of the legitimacy of Imperial rule in India.

Conclusion

This chapter has concentrated upon the First World War and its aftermath. It examines Osler's thoughts and actions during the conflict, both domestically and nationally. Firstly, it assesses her welfare work on behalf of those affected by war through the BWSS and the Birmingham Citizens' Committee, together with her early thoughts on the War and

⁹⁵ Women's Library, London, C. C. Osler, 'English Women and Amritsar', Letter to *The Woman's Leader*, 3 September 1920.

⁹⁶ Brendon, *The Decline and Fall*, p. 263.

the avoidance of military means for the settlement of disputes. Secondly, it considers Osler's involvement in the arguments within the women's movement on the attitudes to the War and the means of resolving the conflict – debates that resulted in division and antipathy within different factions of the NUWSS. Thirdly, it reveals Osler's changing attitudes to major themes in the years of war particularly in relation to pacifism, patriotism and freedom of expression, and her reaction to the eventual peace treaty. Fourthly, it offers important insights into Osler's changing perception of the future of the British Empire in relation to Ireland and India. Whilst much has been written about the First World War and Imperialism, the presentation of extensive new contemporaneous material from Osler's family, expressing her minority views on military action and a questioning of the ethos of conflict, has provided an opportunity for fresh feminist insights into an important period in Birmingham's history. It is argued that Osler can be considered as ahead of her time in her stance on military conflict and her encouragement of peaceful settlement of disputes.

On the outbreak of war, Osler transformed the BWSS from a campaigning organisation for women's suffrage, to a society at the service of Birmingham for the relief of the hardship and disruption caused to women by the conflict, for example by a lack of employment. Much of that work was channelled through the Birmingham Citizens' Committee established at the beginning of the conflict. Osler was appointed to the Executive Committee and was also a Vice-President of one of the District Committees set up to co-ordinate local activity. As well as the relief of individual distress, much of her work involved the raising of funds and the control and distribution of expenditure. She

considered the work was successful and saw it as an important example of the contribution of women to the war effort and the enhancement of their profile. This personal and local activity can be contrasted with her very limited involvement in the pursuit of the conflict. This Chapter has suggested that her developing opposition to the continuation of the conflict and the heavy loss of life likely affected her motivation to assist in any way to support steps to prolong the War.

In addition to Osler's personal contribution, this Chapter examined the work of women generally during the conflict by reference to the large historiography on the War and the increasing profile of women therein. An extensive review of the literature assessed the variety of roles undertaken by women, as wives and housewives on the Home Front.

Aside from this practical work, Osler was an early member of the UDC, an association of predominantly Liberal men and women united by a desire for the peaceful settlement of international disputes by an open foreign policy, a machinery for the settlement of disputes, and extensive reduction of armaments. Whilst it did not campaign for an immediate cessation of hostilities but rather a move at the appropriate time towards a negotiated and just peace, it was seen by its opponents as a pacifist, unpatriotic body. Osler resigned from the UDC during the latter part of 1915, probably as a result of pressure from those supporting total war and a hostile stance towards the Germans. It was a decision for which she later expressed regret.

As covered extensively in this chapter, the issue of whether the NUWSS should consider a resolution expressing a clear stance on the continuance of war and the terms of a possible cessation of hostilities or confine itself essentially to women's suffrage,

provoked a serious crisis in 1915. Osler was torn between her loyalty to Millicent Fawcett and her own equivocal questioning of the conflict. The problem came to a head in April 1915 with several resignations from the NUWW Committee. Fawcett ensured that her replacement executive was supportive and was completely triumphant. Osler was plainly a diminished figure as a result.

Osler was not unpatriotic but had no time for unthinking jingoism. Her views were also influenced by a religiously informed sense of forgiveness. She was saddened by the Germans being in the grip of a 'militarist class' but saw it as an aberration from which they would emerge. As the War dragged on, she became ever more disillusioned with both sides of the conflict as it descended into barbarism, reinforcing her incipient pacifism. The three entries in *Journal 2* in 1918 exemplified her darkening view of the War and the consequent threat to free speech, accompanied as it was by increasing chauvinism and militarism. Firstly, the unjustified censorship and imprisoning of the six Quakers prompting the letter in response criticising the infringement of free speech. Secondly, her criticism of a work of fiction glorifying war as the ultimate redemption of sin and route to apotheosis, whereas Osler considered it a perversion of religious belief and an espousal of the worst excesses of patriotism and denigration of pacifism. Thirdly, her address to the Unitarian meeting where her contention that it was appropriate to hate evil but not its perpetrator, was challenged by those who considered hatred of the enemy was a necessary attribute of patriotism, and a contrary view suggested a pacifist tendency. The evidence suggests that Osler was struggling with her pacifist inclinations

and could envision a scenario where liberty itself was at issue and an aggressive response might be justifiable.

Osler was bitterly disappointed with the Treaty of Versailles which brought the War to an end. Once again, she saw the thirst for retribution against the opponent and the enjoyment of the fruits of victory, overrode any sense of forgiveness and the search for an equitable outcome. She felt that such vindictiveness was bound to lead to further conflict and flew in the face of the economic need for the recovery of Germany both to fuel international economic growth after the long war, but also to enable Germany to resume its place as a nation state and to pay the reparations demanded by the victorious allies.

Osler was also concerned about the future of the British Empire in the long term. She was pleased that finally some measure of Home Rule was granted in Ireland although she felt that partition was ultimately untenable. Her other major concern was the continuance of British rule in India. She had been supportive of the benefits of Imperial Rule in the colony but again the results of the War strained the colonial tie. The sacrifices of Indians during the War and the refusal of Britain to implement realistic proposals for reform, fuelled resentment. The massacre at Amritsar in 1919 was a significant event. Independence was still a distant prospect but the pressure for democracy was growing.

Chapter Nine: Osler's Later Years and Legacy 1917-1924

In March 1918, by the terms of the Representation of the People Act 1918, voting rights were finally granted to some women. In broad terms, women over the age of thirty who were local government electors, or the wives of men who were themselves so entitled, were enfranchised. It was estimated that some six million women became entitled to vote.¹ By a subsequent statutory provision passed on 21 November 1918 women became entitled to stand for election to Parliament on the same basis as men. This was clearly a major step forward for women fifty years after Osler became a member of the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society (BWSS) in its inaugural year. The chief aim of this chapter is to evaluate Osler's contribution and importance in the short two-year period from 1918 to 1920 whilst she remained President of the BWSS and its successor organisation, the Birmingham Society for Equal Citizenship (BSEC). Research has not disclosed any significant activity on Osler's part after 1920 when she formally retired from active public work, and consideration of her legacy is discussed from that point, including the extent to which Osler's achievements were recognised during her lifetime.

This chapter argues that Osler became an increasingly less effective campaigner in these later years for two main reasons. By March 1918 she was aged sixty-four and Chapter Seven has already described her poor state of health, in particular her deafness which increasingly confined her activities to written observations rather than personal appearances and speechmaking. Further, the newly available family sources increase an understanding of her state of mind in these later years. They show that the nature of the

¹ BA&C, L76.12, *Report of the BWSS, 1917-18*, pp. 9, 14.

First World War and its aftermath led her to seriously question her place and function in the post-war world. The extent of her disillusionment with and opposition to the militarism and bellicose patriotism displayed by Britain during the War, and her strident opposition to the Treaty of Versailles which ended the conflict, had a lasting effect upon her. The lack of compassion and refusal to compromise which she observed permeating civic society at all levels after the War led to a replacement of her generally optimistic view of life to a pessimism about the future of the country as it emerged from the Victorian and Edwardian era. Although there was a brief period after partial suffrage was granted when Osler believed that voting rights enhanced women's status and their ability to influence local and national events, her optimism soon faded.

The emphasis of this chapter then shifts to a consideration of the extent to which those contemporaries highlighted in the recent chapters reacted to and made use of their increased civil rights for the benefit of women. The discussion is divided into three broadly chronological sections; Osler's early optimism following the granting of voting rights; the disappointment and conservatism of her later years; and an assessment of the legacy and achievements of her and her generation.

Literature Review

Although many of these studies relate to the period after Osler's retirement and death the issues confronted by them can be compared and contrasted with her ideas and thoughts during this later period. Caitriona Beaumont discusses succinctly the different approaches of activist women's political activity leading up to the granting of universal

suffrage in 1928.² Julie Gottlieb and Richard Toye's book provides insights into the consequences for women of the granting of voting rights even though they may largely relate to the period following this thesis. However, there is a helpful chapter on the later years in the life of Emmeline Pankhurst which confirms her fundamentally conservative imperialist political outlook following on from the war years.³ It contrasts with Osler's approach to these issues. Richenda Scott's biography of Elizabeth Cadbury provides an analysis of Cadbury's doomed candidacy in the 1923 General Election as further evidence of the decline of Osler's brand of Liberalism.⁴ David Hallam's book provides comment on the first women candidates in Birmingham and the surrounding area in the 1918 General Election, including the unsuccessful campaign in Ladywood where Osler commented on and actively supported Margery Corbett Ashby, the Liberal candidate, and in Smethwick where Emmeline Pankhurst's daughter Christabel stood as the Coalition candidate.⁵ Laura Lammasniemi's article on the use by the state of Regulation 40D of the Defence of the Realm Act 1914 (DORA) is important for an understanding of Osler's involvement in the opposition to the Act, to enable an understanding of the continuing discrimination against women's sexual lives during the First World War and the penal sanctions applied in many cases.⁶ Patricia Thane provides a succinct appraisal of the way voting rights were

² C. Beaumont, 'The Women's Movement, Politics and Citizenship, 1918-1950s' in Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (ed.), *Women in Twentieth Century Britain* (Harlow, 2001), pp. 262-291, pp. 262-265.

³ Julie Gottlieb and Richard Toye, *The Aftermath of Suffrage: Women, Gender, and Politics in Britain 1918-1945* (Basingstoke, 2013).

⁴ R. Scott, *Elizabeth Cadbury 1858-1951* (London, 1955), pp. 138-140.

⁵ D. Hallam, *Taking on the Men: The First Women Parliamentary Candidates 1918* (Studley, 2018).

⁶ Laura Lammasniemi, 'Regulation 40D: Punishing Promiscuity on the Home Front during the First World War', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 26, issue 4 (2017), pp. 584-596.

used by women, including Osler, in the period after emancipation both in promoting legislation and in political campaigning.⁷

Early Optimism, the Vote and French Brothels

When it became clear in June 1917 that some form of women's suffrage would be granted, Osler was happy but realistic. In a newspaper report, she described the proposals as 'illogical, partial, unequal in incidence, and open to many objections', but they were a beginning, and enabled women 'to make their needs and claims understood'. There was no question of the disbandment of the BWSS which had to continue 'as a watchful guardian of women's interests in the widest sense'.⁸ There is a further report of a BWSS meeting in March 1918 at which she was congratulated as 'the central figure' in the Birmingham suffrage campaign and during which she emphasised three important issues. Firstly, the War was still ongoing, causing 'misery, chaos and suffering', and as well as rejoicing, women continued to 'battle against evil'. Secondly, amongst the 'many political questions' for women, there had to be an 'awakening' of the consequences and responsibilities arising from enfranchisement. Thirdly, the political parties in turn had to realise the importance of 'gaining our allegiance'.⁹

An early opportunity for Osler and her fellow women to consider all three points and, in particular, to challenge the Government, came in the dispute about the use by British soldiers of war-time brothels in France. Osler's longstanding concern with the causes and

⁷ Patricia Thane, 'What difference did the vote make? Women in public and private life in Britain since 1918', *Historical Research*, Vol. 76, Issue 192 (2003) pp. 268-285.

⁸ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 30 June 1917.

⁹ *Birmingham Gazette*, 18 March 1918.

effects of venereal disease (VD), resulting from what she considered sexual licence, was considered at length in Chapter Four. In February 1918, she recorded the failure of the Government to tackle the issue by claiming the impracticality of placing the brothels out of bounds. She further recorded her attempt, without success, to pass a suitable resolution at a Suffrage Society Venereal Disease Conference but pointedly noted that if no action was taken by 'our legislators and governors' to 'tackle these abominations', they could not expect women's votes.¹⁰

In a *Journal 2* entry in March 1918, she reported that a Government minister had sought to defend the use of the brothels on the basis that it was better to provide 'clean women, human nature being what it was'. She recorded that the minister was 'bombarded with indignant resolutions', resulting in his removal to another office and a military 'climbdown' placing the brothels 'out of bounds'. Osler claimed the events as the 'first fruits of emancipation'.¹¹ However, the victory was short-lived: within two days Osler reported in *Journal 2* that a new Regulation 40D had been pronounced under the DORA by the terms of which any woman was liable to arrest and detention on suspicion of solicitation if seen so much as speaking to a soldier and could only secure her release by submission to a medical examination. Osler saw it as an obvious 'counter stroke' by the Government to the defeat in Parliament and revived the worst features of the Contagious Diseases legislation which women had fought so hard to have repealed in the previous century. Osler sought comfort from the fact that women now had the vote as an

¹⁰ *Journal 2*, 26 February 1918, pp. 16-18.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 25 March 1918, pp. 22-23.

additional weapon to challenge Government action. It brought home to her that obtaining voting rights was 'the means to an end - not an end in itself'.¹²

In her subsequent *Journal 2* entry for 30 April, Osler referred to the suffrage supporter Maude Royden visiting the Midlands to campaign against the new Regulation complaining not only about the offensive nature of it, but also the secretive manner of its introduction. There had been no parliamentary debate, nor any announcement that the Regulation was to be promulgated until after it was introduced. Whilst she recognised that this debate took place during a time of war, Osler found that 'public-spirited women' voiced 'unanimous condemnation' of the measure as an attempt to reintroduce laws offensive to women which had previously been repealed. Osler was convinced that public opinion had changed since the nineteenth century repeal campaign, arguing that if the women leaders could suggest a plan for combatting the 'evils which will meet with united feminist support', the Government would act. As she put it, 'Verily we do count today! However, women bear a heavy responsibility ... for our actions and inactions'. Despite these strong comments, it is important to record that Osler was aware of 'plenty' of women who subordinated their 'sense of right' to their desire to 'safeguard their sons' by any effective means.¹³

Laura Lammasniemi's article is supportive of Osler's position, although she does not draw a direct link to the placing of the brothels out of bounds with the introduction of the Regulation as Osler does, but she quotes its implementation as on the 22 March 1918

¹² *Ibid.*, 5 April 1918, pp. 24-25.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 30 April 1918, pp. 34-36.

which is certainly apposite to Osler's dates. She described the Regulation as a deliberate linking of chastity with patriotism and to control women's sexuality under the guise of national security. In terms it made it a crime against the State for any woman suffering from communicable VD to have sexual intercourse with a member of the armed forces, or 'to solicit or invite' such a person to have sexual intercourse. If arrested the woman could secure release only by submission to a medical examination and if charged and convicted could be detained for up to nine months.¹⁴ As with the Contagious Diseases legislation, there was no corresponding provision for men. There were in excess of 200 prosecutions under the DORA with some 101 convictions mostly as a result of guilty pleas.¹⁵

According to Lammasniemi there was much agitation against the Regulation, not only from women, and it was perceived by the Government as a political liability. A Royal Commission was appointed to review the Regulation which was repealed on 26 November 1918. The subsequent report of the Commission concluded that from the military point of view the Regulation was a failure.¹⁶ It is right to say that the repeal came after the end of the War when arguably it was no longer needed, but the scale of opposition and its ineffectiveness might suggest some change in society's attitude towards women and sexuality generally.

Discussion of the matter of French brothels showed Osler, as observer and recorder, remaining positively engaged in an issue of public concern to women and one which had

¹⁴ Lammasniemi, 'Regulation 40D', pp. 584-596, pp. 585-586.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 589.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 593.

always been of cardinal importance to her. It also presented evidence of the positive effect of women having voting rights in that the Government did declare the French brothels out of bounds to British troops, and it is arguable that it would not have done so without the pressure of voting rights. However, the Government resorted to a retaliatory Regulation, penalising women who were left powerless in the face of Government retribution. Osler also had to concede that support for her stance was by no means universal amongst women, a point which has been made repeatedly throughout this thesis. The skirmishes with the Government prepared the way for the challenges of a General Election in December 1918.

The 1918 General Election

Osler's participation in and observations on the Election of December 1918 provide an opportunity to appraise a number of factors and themes. Firstly, the extent of her desire and ability to pursue an active part in the Election within a weakened Liberal Party from which she had been estranged for many years. Secondly, the likely limited effect of women's contribution to this first Election, when those women entitled to vote and stand for election had been enfranchised for such a short time, thus giving them little time for proper organisation. Thirdly, the fact that the Election was called within weeks of the ending of the First World War meant that the Government was likely to benefit from victory in the conflict. Fourthly, the constituency with which Osler was involved was Ladywood, a Unionist stronghold to be contested by Joseph Chamberlain's son, Neville.

Chapter Seven recounted that Osler had largely ended her Liberal Party allegiance in 1912 after the defeat of the Conciliation Bills. It was therefore with some surprise that

she described in February 1918 being appointed without her consent or foreknowledge as a Vice-President of the Edgbaston Divisional Liberal Council at a time when the Liberal Party was 'almost dead' and those remaining were seeking leaders with 'strong opinions'.¹⁷ The important point is that Osler accepted the challenge of renewed involvement with the Liberals for reasons she noted in *Journal 2*. She was concerned that political discourse had been completely subordinated to the conflict and such a state of affairs was detrimental as it encouraged cynicism and removed 'all incentive to individual intelligence or range of thought'. She wished to discourage those to whom the War gave leave to play upon the 'pseudo patriotism of an overwrought nervous public' who had 'no faith in any of its rulers'.¹⁸ These reasons are important as continuing evidence of ideas which she came to hold during the First World War and exhibit early signs of Osler's increasing pessimism about political and civil affairs which emerged as an important theme in this later period. The apparent lack of younger women to re-energise the Liberal Party also made it difficult for women to advance a distinctive female voice. Evidence of the political malaise was shown by the report of the Midland Area Representative of the Liberal Association who worked between February and October 1918 to persuade Liberal women to exercise their voting rights. She found most women to be 'exceedingly apathetic' regarding 'a sense of the importance of their vote'.¹⁹ Nonetheless a decision had to be made firstly as to whether a woman should stand for election in her

¹⁷ *Journal 2*, 12 February 1918, pp. 10-13.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-13.

¹⁹ Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham, *Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive Committee of the Birmingham Women's Liberal Federation*, 18 October 1918, pp. 131-132.

constituency on the first occasion when women could cast a vote and secondly, who that candidate should be.

Osler herself had been asked to stand as the Party's candidate at a meeting of the Ladywood Division in July 1918. She would have been the obvious choice. Her stature within the city and her political experience were self-evident. However, she declined, claiming that it was 'too late!', although 'to have lived to have the chance was an honour and privilege!'.²⁰ It was always likely that her health and advanced age would prevent her from accepting nomination, but such was her standing in Birmingham that there was difficulty in finding an alternative woman to stand in her stead. Eventually Margery Corbett Ashby was chosen and, although she was a strong suffrage supporter, she had no connection with Birmingham and her candidacy came very late in the day. Osler's own view was that it was a mistake to have put a woman forward as a candidate against such a strong adversary as Neville Chamberlain who was standing for the Conservative Unionists in his own area. There were also some women Liberals who decided to give their support to the pacifist Labour candidate Mr. Kneeshaw as discussed in Chapter Eight. Osler campaigned for Corbett Ashby and, despite her misgivings, enjoyed the campaign and reuniting with old friends.²¹ Her reaction to the defeat was to view it as symptomatic of a 'sweeping tidal wave of reactionary Unionism', leaving the beleaguered Liberal Prime Minister as a 'nominal dictator' within the prevailing sentiment of 'hang the Kaiser'.²²

²⁰ *Memories 2*, Chapter 10.

²¹ *Journal 2*, 22 November 1918, pp. 77-79.

²² *Journal 2*, 12 January 1919, pp. 83-84.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this first post-enfranchisement Election. Osler actively participated in the Election but was surely right to accept the inevitability of a Unionist victory in the context of an Election called within weeks of victory in the War. There was at least an echo of the calling of the victorious Khaki Election of 1901 during the Boer War. It is doubtful if the gender of the candidate made a great difference to the outcome given the scale of the defeat. David Hallam recounts that 69 per cent of the vote went to Chamberlain against 11 per cent for Corbett Ashby, with the Liberal vote largely going to Labour.²³ The result reinforced the decline of the remains of Osler's Gladstonian Liberals and the need for progressive Liberals to find a political home elsewhere in future elections. It also showed the continuing strength of the hold of the Chamberlain family on Birmingham.

All that having been said, it would be a mistake to consider Corbett Ashby as simply a token candidate of no stature. She was from a land-owning Sussex family of Liberal feminists and her father was a sometime Liberal MP. Over her long life (1882-1981) she was at various times, a secretary of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS,) President of the Women's Liberal Federation, and a member of the Board and between 1923 and 1946 President of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance. She was a strong supporter of the League of Nations; stood unsuccessfully for Parliament eight times; and disliked 'the permissive society and militancy'.²⁴ Dame Margery, as she

²³ D. Hallam, *Taking on the Men 1918* (Studley, 2018), pp. 58-60.

²⁴ Hart, Jenifer. "Ashby, Dame Margery Irene Corbett (1882–1981), feminist and internationalist." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. September 23, 2004. Oxford University Press. Date of access 22 Mar. 2025, <<https://www-oxforddnb-com.bham-ezproxy.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-30970>>

later became, was only adopted as a candidate on 20 November 1918 for an election on 14 December. She stayed with Osler for some period of the campaign and Osler canvassed and spoke on her behalf. A newspaper report in the *Birmingham Evening Dispatch* of a 'dinner hour meeting' on 13 December, where queries were raised by the 'new women electorate,' gives an indication of her campaign priorities. She wanted an early end of military conscription so the men 'could return home'. Secure housing should be a priority with, as a first step, the continuance of the Restriction of Rent Act, to avoid rents being increased 'at the earliest possible moment'. She called for a high minimum wage for the family breadwinners, male and female, and pensions for civilian as well as soldiers' widows. The provision of living wages would prevent living 'from hand to mouth' so mothers could be at home, 'looking after our children'.²⁵ In 1975, Corbett Ashby was one of the surviving early women campaigners interviewed by Brian Harrison for the Women's Library Archive and confided that her family were highly amused by the idea of her standing against Chamberlain in Birmingham, and she didn't have 'the faintest idea of getting in' but wanted people to become 'used to the idea of a woman standing'.²⁶ Importantly it should be remembered that women were not always distant losers. David Hallam recounts that in working-class Smethwick, the higher profile candidate Christabel Pankhurst lost by only 775 votes to her Labour opponent.²⁷

There is no evidence that Osler took any further part in politics in Birmingham. In the 1923 General Election when Elizabeth Cadbury, a woman with similar views to Osler,

²⁵ *Birmingham Evening Dispatch*, 13 December 1918.

²⁶ *Women's Library Archive* 1975.

²⁷ Hallam, *Taking on*, p. 27.

stood as the Liberal candidate in Kings Norton she was defeated by the Unionist candidate and lamented that the Liberals were weak, and she could only rely upon 'personal votes'²⁸. Her election programme can be considered as a pointer to the political future. It was a mixture of traditional 'Liberal philosophy' of seeking to achieve 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number' by means of 'freedom of thought, of choice, of trade, and of discussion' with a view to achieving 'harmony' by rational argument. Her policy proposals included improvements in 'housing' and legislation in the fields of 'public health, education, and child welfare' together with pension reform and building schemes for more roads and railways to reduce unemployment. She considered her election programme both 'constructive and educational'. However, she was disconcerted to find that not only was she opposed by the Conservatives pursuing their policies of tariff reform to appeal to their manufacturing base, but also the 'left-wing ideology' of the Labour Party advocating 'control of the means of production' and 'new forms of economic and social organisation', accompanied by an 'intense' nationalism resulting in 'unwonted restrictions and organised violence'. She felt most voters favoured 'tub-thumping' over thought. Following her defeat, she took no further part in politics and expressed the hope that the Liberal Party could be reinstated as otherwise the future for Birmingham would be 'class warfare' which would destroy 'the whole spirit of citizenship'.²⁹ Osler's views on what Cadbury saw as a changing political world are considered in the next section.

²⁸ R. Scott, *Elizabeth Cadbury 1858-1951* (London, 1955), p. 140.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 138-140.

Decline and Disillusion Osler and Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928)

Principally by reference to three surviving written extracts, Osler's reaction to the changing world in the final active years of her life are explored and compared with the post-suffrage experiences of Pankhurst. They illustrate the different paths followed by two veteran campaigners of similar age after partial voting rights were granted. Osler's response suggests an introspective and pessimistic view from a Victorian middle-class woman struggling to come to terms with a world that was changing in ways she had difficulty understanding and accepting. Much of this depression and anxiety about international affairs were foreshadowed by events described in the previous chapter. The trauma of the long war which only ended in November 1918, the Amritsar Massacre in April 1919 and what she saw as the disaster of the Treaty of Versailles in June of that year, were severe blows to a peace advocate, particularly as it put her at odds with majority opinion and offended her Christian principles of forgiveness. The naked aggression, rather than peaceful arbitration and dialogue, that she witnessed on the international scene, seemed to her to be spreading into domestic affairs.

The first extract is from her *Journal 2* entry in August 1919 centred on industrial strife in Britain which she perceived was taking the country 'towards disintegration and anarchy'. It focused on a three-week coal strike beginning in Yorkshire and spreading to 10,000 miners in Northumberland and more in Wales. A bakers' strike involved 'lads and girls' demanding a minimum wage of £4 per week for 'one of the lightest of jobs.' Far worse, on the grounds of law and order, was a police strike for the right to join a trade union, which led to serious riots and looting in Liverpool and the deployment of the Army. For

Osler, the 'power of trade combination' to this degree placed the country and the Government 'in the hands of any large section who at any given moment decides that it desires any change in the laws or customs of the country'. It was 'mob rule' rather than government by the majority. She could understand workers striking over their conditions of work, but not for political purposes, as she suspected was the case with the miners. She was unaware of any threat of mass starvation or poverty, and thus concluded that excitement and an 'aversion' to exertion had 'overpowered' the moderation and 'good sense' of the nation which she had hoped would prevent the 'general upheaval in Europe'.³⁰ This reaction suggested the narrow vision of a rich middle-class woman with little empathy or sympathy with the working classes seeking to assert their rights and industrial power.

The second reference is to a *Journal 2* entry recording a letter to her son Jack in September 1919 which exemplifies her confusion and puzzlement at events. It concerned 'an unparalleled railway strike' which 'threatened to paralyse our own country'. She was aware of much hatred against the strikers akin to that directed against the Germans during the War. She felt that it was misguided when what was wanted was 'understanding and sympathy'. However, she was entirely 'unable to see justification for this dangerous, revolutionary action' and hoped that in the future the population would be able to adopt a 'wider clearer standpoint' free of a 'paralysing half vision'.³¹ Thus, on the one hand she seemed to be seeking an understanding of the strikers' demands, but on the other hand, ruled out any accommodation with potential revolutionaries. It is

³⁰ *Journal 2*, 4 August 1919, pp. 110-113.

³¹ *Memories 2*, Chapter 12.

noteworthy that these sentiments were expressed in the early years after the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia at a time when talk of revolution even in Britain may not have been fanciful.

The third extract is taken from her draft speech of retirement from the BSEC, formerly the BWSS, in the summer of 1920 where she reflected and summarised her life's work. The surviving draft gives the impression both of a lamentation for the passing of the Victorian world she had grown up in, and a call to women as full citizens to rectify the damage caused to the nation by men. She cited three main reasons for her retirement: the aim of voting rights had been achieved, at least in part; her age and infirmity were 'asserting themselves irresistibly'; and the 'new world arising out of the ashes' of her own should be taken forward by those who will inhabit it rather than die in it. She spoke proudly as a mid-Victorian, and even though times had moved on, she still admired the 'aspirations, the purposeful energy and devotion to duty' of the Victorian period and doubted the assumed superiority of the present generation. She was sure that the addition of women to the franchise would be advantageous. They were 'the conservers of the race, the givers of life - the mother sex'. The War had been a 'crime against motherhood' and she hoped that women's increasing influence would 'prevent such a catastrophe ever happening again'. Whereas the male franchise had advanced on a class basis, for women it was purely gender-based, and as women belonged to all classes, they

could justifiably claim to represent a wider point of view at a time of 'deplorable class distrust and antagonism'.³²

These three extracts are the best evidence discovered of Osler's reaction to the post-war world in the last years of her life. Contrary to her determined optimism in fighting for women's rights, the first two extracts suggest a despairing, ageing, middle-class woman struggling to come to terms with a world of continuing animosity, albeit of a different nature from armed conflict, but still potentially damaging to the social fabric. Although she saw a possible silver lining in the different approach of women to conflict, the activities of the suffragettes during the campaign for the franchise did not suggest that women always chose the path of conciliation. This thesis has demonstrated clear class divisions between women, and unlike those of the affluent middle-class, working-class women may have felt that militant conduct was the only way of improving their lot in life. The final section analyses how Osler and her successors continued the pursuit of women's rights as part of her legacy.

Emmeline Pankhurst also became a women's suffrage campaigner following on from her parents. She was a socialist rather than a Liberal and in 1903 formed the Women's Social and Political Union. It was through that body she pursued her militant campaign of increasingly violent and unlawful behaviour resulting in imprisonment and force-feeding. However, during the First World War she became a law-abiding citizen, a firm imperialist

³² This draft was contained within a bundle of undated miscellaneous documents in the possession of the Osler family.

supporter of the conflict and, as will be seen, eventually stood for Parliament as a Conservative.³³

Plainly, these were two women who took contrasting paths towards the goal of women's emancipation, the strictly constitutional law-abiding Osler against the militant, law-breaker, Pankhurst. During the War their roles were again different. Osler became increasingly opposed to the conflict whilst Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel 'became patriotic feminists, supporting their country in its hour of need' and therefore 'could not be pacifists at any price'.³⁴

After the obtaining of partial suffrage and the end of the War, Pankhurst could have followed Osler and retired from activism, but instead, she left England in May 1920 to live in Canada for four years and then, more briefly, in the South of France before returning to England in December 1925. She saw the work of women after suffrage as being to suppress Bolshevism by an assertion of 'the greatness of the British Empire', and the virtues of 'patriotism, religion, family life and the relationship between father and child, and husband and wife'.³⁵ She was also successful in obtaining employment as a lecturer for the Canadian National Council for Combating Venereal Diseases.³⁶ After her return to England she eventually joined the Conservative Party and unsuccessfully stood for Parliament in 1927 for that Party. Her political evolution after her return to England is

³³ Purvis, June. "Pankhurst [née Goulden], Emmeline (1858–1928), suffragette leader." Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. January 06, 2011. Oxford University Press. Date of access 22 Mar. 2025, <<https://www-oxforddnb-com.bham-ezproxy.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-35376>>

³⁴ Gottlieb and Toye, *The Aftermath of Suffrage*, p. 19.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

complex and it is likely, as June Purvis suggests, that she 'found a splintered women's movement and a changed world to which she had difficulty relating'. Although her later years have been regarded by many as a move to the political right, Purvis considers Pankhurst may simply have had difficulty 'fitting feminism into any of the main class-based, male-dominated political parties of her day'.³⁷ It is noteworthy that Osler expressed similar views in a letter to her son Jack in September 1919 when she considered the possible disadvantages of belonging to 'no Party'. There is a deprivation of 'a certain support' and leaves 'one to one's own initiative' with 'personal responsibility only for one's opinions'. She hoped that in the future there might be 'a clearer line to follow' and to be ready when 'true inspiration comes'.³⁸ It can be seen that these women who had been on very different journeys during their political lives, found themselves uncomprehending of the changed world of post-war England.

Recognition and Legacy

This section considers the extent to which Osler's contribution to the welfare of women was recognised during her active life in Birmingham and suggests how the principles she embodied were carried forward in the decade following her retirement. There is little doubt that Osler's association with and eventual leadership of the campaign for women's suffrage in Birmingham was her most important achievement, although her more general work for women's welfare, for example, her philanthropic and political activity, was also significant. She was one of the early feminist campaigners who were convinced that

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

³⁸ *Memories* 2, 30 September 1919.

securing voting rights was the key issue which would eventually lead to women achieving full recognition and citizenship.

In August 1917, shortly after the indicative vote in favour of partial suffrage, Osler received a request from 'a committee of fellow workers' to sit for a portrait 'intended for presentation to the City'. She felt it was 'not entirely unconnected' to the indicative vote and accepted the request with gratitude as the first woman who had received the accolade.³⁹ On 16 July 1918 the completed portrait was accepted by the City Council and hung in the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. Together with a 'large gathering of friends' with Alderman Clayton presiding, she was presented with a replica portrait and an album containing the names of 210 subscribers. An accompanying inscription referred to the 'deep appreciation' of her fellow citizens for 'her high ideals' and 'her lifelong services to this City, and for the welfare of women'. She accepted it as a 'recognition of women's service to the city, more than the work of any one woman'.⁴⁰ A surplus of funds for the portrait was used to fund a scholarship for women students wishing to read for a postgraduate degree at the University of Birmingham, of which Osler was a life governor. In her ODNB entry for Osler, Elizabeth Crawford saw the portrait as an encouragement to academic achievement by women, and a visible recognition of the advancement of women's rights in the city.⁴¹

³⁹ *Memories 2*, Chapter 10.

⁴⁰ *Memories 2*, Chapter 10.

⁴¹ Crawford, Elizabeth. "Osler [née Taylor], Catherine Courtauld (1854–1924), social reformer and suffragist" *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. October 03, 2013. Oxford University Press. Date of access 5 Dec. 2023, <<https://www-oxforddnb-com.bham-ezproxy.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-101357>>

In July 1919 Osler was awarded an honorary MA degree by the University of Birmingham. She was one of the first ten recipients of the degree of whom three were women, Osler, Elizabeth Cadbury and Ellen Pinsent. They were chosen as 'distinguished local citizens' who by their public service had contributed to 'the spread of knowledge and the welfare of humanity'.⁴² Osler recorded two reasons why the award gave her particular pleasure. It was recognition of her local work in the city where she had spent most of her life, 'under the eyes of its workers', and without 'personal influences and wire-pulling'. Further, it was not a war honour given 'for a few years spasmodic effort,' but 'crowns however undeservedly the labours inadequate tho' they are - of nearly 50 years'.⁴³ The citation of the Principal, Sir Oliver Lodge, praised Osler for devoting her life 'to furthering the moral, intellectual and social welfare of her sex'.⁴⁴

The citations to both honours bear testament to the effectiveness and significance of her work, but also to her modesty and self-effacement. She was also one of the longest serving suffrage activists, having been campaigning for the vote long before it became, as Chapter Six confirms, the predominant issue for women in the twentieth century. Her funeral on 19 December 1924 at the Church of the Messiah, which she had attended for more than fifty years, took place in the presence of a large congregation consisting not only of family, but representatives of the Birmingham Liberal Association, the National Council of Women and Alderman and Councillors of the Birmingham City Council. It prompted obituaries in three local city newspapers. The tributes described her as a

⁴² *Journal 2*, pp. 107-108.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

⁴⁴ BA&C, L76.12, *Archive of the BWSS, 1918-1919*, p. 15.

woman of great industry and courage, and 'before her time' in pursuing views regarded by many as 'fanciful' at the time. To meet that challenge required 'courage and the great quality of idealism'.⁴⁵ Her friend and fellow suffragist, Millicent Fawcett, emphasised in her own obituary notice, Osler's devotion to the suffrage cause in Birmingham, which she described as 'a sort of Mecca of the anti-suffragists'. Despite the hostility of the 'rulers of darkness', Osler never wavered in her support. Fawcett never forgot Osler's support during the crisis in the NUWSS in 1915 (Chapter Eight) and for her support until the end for international peace and the League of Nations.⁴⁶ In 2018, on the centenary of the passing of the Representation of the People Act 1918, a statue of Millicent Garrett Fawcett was unveiled in Parliament Square. On the plinth, there are the images and names of fifty-nine women, including Osler, and four men who supported women's suffrage.

Osler remained as President of the BWSS and its successor until her retirement in June 1920. In March 1919 the granting of partial suffrage had led to the name of the suffrage body being changed to the BSEC, a development Osler strongly supported. In that elected capacity she would have been involved in the initial organisation of BSEC and the broadening of its aspirations to extend beyond voting rights by publishing an annual agenda of aims. For the first year they were to promote the candidacy of women in Parliament; to work towards repeal of the solicitation laws and the establishment of an equal moral standard for both sexes; to safeguard the interests of women in industry

⁴⁵ Obituaries, the *Birmingham Gazette*, 18 December, the *Birmingham Mail* 19 December, and the *Birmingham Daily Post*, 20 December 1924.

⁴⁶ Women's Library, London, 'Obituary of Catherine Courtauld Osler', *The Woman's Leader*, 6 December 1924.

during post-war reconstruction; to achieve equal rights for parents in the guardianship of children; to open the legal profession to women; and to pursue pensions for widows and dependent children.⁴⁷ These were extended in the following year to include further franchise reform. By then, Osler had retired, and the leadership had passed to Eleanor Rathbone, born in 1872 and thus a member of the next generation to Osler. The report of BSEC for 1919-1920 contained a final tribute to Osler after 20 years of service. Those who had worked with her were particularly aware of her 'patience, wisdom, courage and unselfish devotion' to the enfranchisement of women and the 'general raising of the standard and welfare of all women'. It had been a 'great life's work triumphantly crowned with success'. She remained as a Vice-President and Committee member, roles in which she could continue to offer her advice with less 'strain and anxiety on herself'.⁴⁸

There is no evidence that Osler had any direct influence on Rathbone's policies or activism after 1920. Rathbone had no connection to Birmingham and pursued most of her feminist activities in Liverpool. Nonetheless, they would have known each other as both had been committee members of the NUWSS for some years. The only concrete example of a joint approach came with the conflict in 1913-14 over the understanding with the Labour Party, where, as discussed in Chapter Seven, Millicent Fawcett's enthusiasm for ties with the Labour Party had met with increased opposition within the NUWSS as a General Election came into sight. In contrast, Rathbone strongly supported Fawcett's stance in 1915 on her opposition to the pacifists during the War as opposed to Osler's qualified support for the pacifist position. By 1920, it may be said that the two

⁴⁷ BA&C, L76.12, *Archive of the Birmingham Society for Equal Citizenship*, 1918-1919, pp. 12-13.

⁴⁸ BA&C, L76.12, *Archive of the Birmingham Society for Equal Citizenship*, 1919-1920, p. 20.

women occupied positions which were representative of women's future and women's past. Whereas Osler's career had been dominated by the fight for the vote, for Rathbone and the future, the question was rather how voting rights were to be developed and employed for the benefit of women whilst recognising and taking inspiration from the suffrage campaign. There is no suggestion that the achievements of Osler and fellow suffragists of her generation were forgotten, although with the passage of time the memory of their activities would undoubtedly have faded. It is appropriate that her significance in these latter years should be recognised.

For an assessment of the carrying forward of the legacy of Osler and her fellow campaigners, reference is made to the contribution of Caitriona Beaumont which largely concentrates upon the work of Eleanor Rathbone in the early post-suffrage years.

Beaumont describes Rathbone as seeking a concentration, at local and national level, on the meeting of women's needs as wives and mothers described as 'new feminism', as opposed to 'equal rights or egalitarian' feminism pursued by organisations such as the Six Point Group founded in 1921, which looked for complete sexual equality considered by Rathbone to be impracticable. The annual statement of aims of the BSEC largely embodied those aspirations as seen earlier in this section. In 1925, for example, a proposal for family allowances was added to the annual statement of aims, followed in 1927, by a suggestion for protective legislation for women in the workplace. Those aims remained controversial and would have been strongly opposed by Gladstonian Liberals such as Osler as embodying state interference. Nonetheless, in the early years after 1918, much useful legislation in women's interests was enacted in the field of child welfare,

women's rights over their children, and divorce reform. Beaumont saw these as pragmatic and effective reforms pursued by Rathbone as opposed to the 'dead level equality' suggested by the Six Point Group. Despite their different viewpoints she identified much common ground, for example in the demand for better housing provision and the care and protection of children.⁴⁹

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the significance of Osler's activities and thoughts during the two years from 1918 until her retirement in 1920 and concluded by considering her legacy. In contrast to the preceding chapters, Osler's actions after the granting of partial voting rights, were reactive rather than participatory, consisting increasingly of commentary on affairs through her own writings. She did not have a significant impact on political and social developments, but her surviving papers provide insightful observations on key events by providing her individual perspective on ongoing and developing concerns for women.

The argument concerning the use of brothels in France by British troops was of particular importance to Osler who had had a longstanding interest in what she saw as the evils of prostitution. She seized the chance to participate in the debate. There was some success in that the brothels were declared 'out of bounds' although at the expense of the introduction of an emergency Regulation echoing the nineteenth century Contagious Diseases legislation. The research suggests that despite the increased profile of women

⁴⁹ Beaumont, 'The Women's Movement', pp. 262-265.

with voting rights, they had great difficulty in resisting the power of the state particularly during wartime, and progress in one sphere could be met by retaliation in another.

Osler was actively involved in the first General Election after the ending of the First World War. She was unable to influence the outcome for women nor, because of age and fragile health, was she willing to stand for election herself. The result of the General Election showed the unreadiness of women to contest it so soon after emancipation with limited time to prepare and find a suitable candidate after the ending of the conflict. It showed the continuing power of the Chamberlain family in Birmingham and the inability of the Birmingham Liberal Party to find a local woman candidate to stand. The Liberal Party appeared to be in terminal decline and a strong Labour candidate was handicapped by his strong pacifist beliefs.

With increasing age, Osler became more pessimistic about the future of the country despite women achieving limited voting rights. Increasing labour unrest led her to question the stability of society which seemed to be descending into chaos and disorder. Whilst having some sympathy with working men and women seeking to assert their rights by withdrawing their labour, she questioned strikes being called to enhance political claims which might endanger the stability and security of the state. Her comments were chiefly directed towards male activity and she hoped that the good sense of women as full citizens, would alleviate the problems. The evidence suggests that these views were a mixture of an ageing middle-class woman's reaction to the working-class, increasingly represented by the Labour Party, emerging to challenge the existing class system, coupled with a real feeling of unease about change to a different order of society in

which she would play no part. For one who usually maintained an optimistic tone despite the many disappointments she faced in her career, her sense of despair was palpably significant.

Osler's achievements and legacy were recognised during her lifetime by the portrait in the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery and the award of the Honorary MA degree by the University of Birmingham. The pleasure she took in these plaudits were clearly genuine and heartfelt. The research findings suggest that she welcomed the replacement of the BWSS by the BSEC which, in the new era headed by Eleanor Rathbone, enabled the pursuit of a much broader range of aims and activities to build on her earlier success in achieving voting rights. By then Osler had retired, but her legacy was assured in the shorter term. It is beyond doubt that her work and that of her fellow campaigners was appreciated by her successors and continued in appropriate ways by women in their localities. With all that followed, it is inevitable that memory of their activities and achievements has faded, hence the contribution of this thesis in evaluating Osler's importance.

Chapter Ten: Conclusion

This thesis has examined the life and career of Catherine Osler and has assessed her significance as a leading activist in the promotion of women's rights in Birmingham and further afield in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth. It also sets her life and career in context, and assesses her significance within the evolving historiography of Birmingham and women's history. The period witnessed the emergence of women from a position of political and social impotence to one where they had established a substantial presence in the city and achieved at least partial national voting rights. Osler's key role as a participant in, and chronicler and analyst of, the important developments during the period make her career a particularly germane subject for the study of a neglected aspect of Birmingham's history. The combination of previously unseen family documents, coupled with material in local archives, and the input of a variety of secondary sources, has provided an original contribution to the study of the pursuit of women's emancipation in Birmingham. By an emphasis on Osler's involvement in political and social change both in Birmingham and nationally, the thesis explores the private and personal life of a radical, wealthy middle-class woman activist.

Chapter One: Introduction

The introductory chapter identified two predominant issues to be addressed by the thesis: to restore the neglected Catherine Osler to her rightful prominent place in the history of Birmingham, and to consider how she sought to overcome the significant obstacles in her quest to achieve women's civic and political equality. It also introduced a

number of subordinate themes, including the importance of her radical upbringing within her birth family, the role of Unitarianism in her life, the nature and significance of her extensive philanthropic and political work and her opposition to colonialism and military conflict.

This concluding chapter summarises the main findings of the core chapters. It focuses upon her radical upbringing and influences, the importance of the city of Birmingham for her future, and the significance of her private family life and her role within marriage as wife and mother. It considers the moral and altruistic framework of her philanthropic work and its changing nature, and the essence and practical application of her feminist philosophy in pursuance of women's suffrage. It explores her increasing political estrangement from the Liberal Party, and her opposition to colonialism and armed conflict during the South African and First World Wars. The chapter then proceeds to consider the wider implications of this thesis for the nature and extent of women's participation in the political and civic life of the city, and for the future of Birmingham Liberal politics in opposition to Joseph Chamberlain's Liberal Unionists. The chapter concludes by suggesting possible further areas of research, for example extending the enquiry from middle-class women such as Osler to lower middle-class and working-class women and appraises the nature and availability of relevant sources to enable that research.

Chapter Two: Early Influences

A concentration on Osler's written recollections in Chapter Two brought to light the extent to which Osler's early experiences of people, places and ideas determined the

course of her future life and career.¹ Both her parents were affluent and radical Liberals and supporters of women's suffrage. The chapter also emphasised the importance of her visit to her equally radical aunt and uncle Clementia and Peter Taylor in London where at a young and impressionable age, she met important figures such as the Liberal John Stuart Mill, and Joseph Mazzini. In 1868 she and her parents moved from Bridgwater to Birmingham, where she experienced the advantages of life in a dynamic city at a time when the Liberal Party was dominant. She also met her future husband, Alfred Osler, a successful businessman and aspirant Liberal politician. To cater for her spiritual needs, she attended the Unitarian Church of the Messiah where she met many of Birmingham's prominent citizens such as the Kenricks, Martineaus and Chamberlains. The Minister at the Church from 1869 until his death in 1893 was Henry Crosskey, himself a prominent Liberal figure and supporter of women's suffrage who became a colleague of the young Osler in local feminist ventures. Helen Plant's article provides a detailed analysis of Crosskey's importance in encouraging Liberal families such as the Oslers to promote Unitarian values and for women, particularly Osler, to play a full part in his work.² The chapter elucidated that her exposure to cultivated and politically active people and family from an early age, together with her own reading and precociousness, ensured that by the time of her marriage in 1873 she was ready to enter and thrive in the public world.

¹ *Memories 1*.

² Helen Plant, "'Ye are all one in Christ Jesus': aspects of Unitarianism and feminism in Birmingham, c. 1869-90", *Women's History Review*, 9:4 (2000), pp. 721-742, p. 727.

Chapter Three: Private World

Chapter Three considered the extent to which the Osler marriage in 1873 evidenced signs of significant change, both in the marital relationship within the middle-classes and the upbringing of children, and how her private life was managed and sustained in conjunction with an active public life. The discovery and consideration of her own publication, *Home*, disclosed that even as a progressive woman, Osler took a largely traditional view of family life, emphasising the centrality of marriage and the family home.³ Her magazine interview in 1894 confirmed her dismissal of the 'new woman' concept of the 1890s.⁴ The research findings pointed towards a gradual change in the nature of the marital relationship. By mutual consent and contrary to the still common practice, the promise to obey was omitted from the Oslers' marriage ceremony and, throughout their married life, Alfred sought no authority over her, the marriage proceeding as a companionable and loving partnership.⁵ Further, and again unusually for the period, both of their daughters attended a private day school from a young age rather than remaining at home under the care of governesses.⁶ The extent to which Edgbaston High School for Girls and similar schools provided a progressive education is a matter of some debate, but the research of Carol Dyhouse and Helen Sunderland point at least to the likelihood that communal schooling enabled argument and exchange of ideas outside the home environment.⁷ Evidence of the limitations to change was

³ Osler, *Home*.

⁴ S. A. Tooley, 'Ladies of Birmingham', *The Woman at Home* (October 1894), pp. 445-455, pp. 447-449.

⁵ *Memories 1*, pp. 25-26.

⁶ Tooley, 'Ladies of Birmingham', p. 447.

⁷ C. Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (Abingdon, 1981), pp. 56-78. and H. Sunderland, 'English girls' schools and women's suffrage' in A. Hughes-Johnson and L. Jenkins (eds.), *The Politics of Women's Suffrage* (London, 2021), pp. 163-190.

demonstrated by the decision, probably driven by Alfred, to send the two younger boys to a boarding school. Osler had no role in the family business, save that she assisted Alfred, on occasions, when his bouts of depression were severe. She had no need to work gainfully and was able to lead her busy public life by the constant employment of servants to assist with the care of the children and the upkeep of the home. The findings of Chapter Three suggest that their marriage was reflective of a transitional stage in the evolution of contemporary family life. The combination of a strong-minded wife with a tolerant and supportive husband typified a gradual change in the marital relationship and the upbringing of children particularly in respect of middle-class and upper middle-class marriages.

Chapter Four: The Changing Nature of Philanthropy

Chapter Four investigated Osler's involvement in philanthropic endeavour in the earlier period of her public career. The research disclosed three principal issues: the motivations for her to carry out the work; the extent of her success in these endeavours; and how the nature of philanthropy began to change in the twentieth century. She undertook her work to promote the welfare of women and also saw it as an opportunity to enhance the public profile of women as citizens. It became a stepping-stone in her broader career ambition to promote women's civic and voting rights. Her work for the Birmingham Ladies Association for Useful Work⁸ to reduce infant mortality was achieved by giving health care lectures. Despite their best endeavours over a number of years, research found that the problem was too complex for a voluntary approach and eventually and

⁸ BA&C, L41.2, *Annual Reports of the BLAUW*.

belatedly, the Local Authority employed trained staff in the new century. Osler's work for the Birmingham Ladies Association for the Care and Protection of Young Girls (BLACPYG)⁹ was designed to combat the incidence of female prostitution by religiously inspired exhortation and encouraging activity within bodies such as the Snowdrop Bands. However, the research suggests that the help offered was limited by the ideological objection of Osler and her fellow liberals to the provision of anything more than minimal assistance, for fear of discouraging the individual responsibility of the women concerned. Not only was this implicit in her approach to the philanthropic work described above, but was explicit in her objection to the provision of school meals for needy children.¹⁰ This doctrinaire approach was strongly criticised by Paula Bartley who accused these women of promoting middle-class morality and class distinction, rather than offering practical assistance to poorer women.¹¹ Bartley's views have in turn been criticised as being unrealistic in her expectations of Osler and her colleagues given their backgrounds and motivations. Further, it has been argued that they lacked the personal resources to offer financial assistance, and the lack of employment opportunities for women in those times and the absence of machinery for state intervention made practical support unrealistic. The research findings indicated a change towards a more interventionist and caring approach to philanthropic activity in the later Victorian period and into the twentieth century. For example, the activities of women such as Josephine Butler advanced the idea

⁹ BA&C, L41.2, *Annual Reports of the BLACPYG*.

¹⁰ Articles in the *Spectator*, 24 March and 7 April 1906.

¹¹ P. Bartley, 'Preventing Prostitution: the Ladies' Association for the Care and Protection of Young Girls in Birmingham 1887-1914', *Women's History Review*, Volume 7, No.1 (1998), pp. 37-55 and 'Moral Regeneration, Women and the Civic Gospel in Birmingham 1870-1914', *Midland History*, 25:1 (2000), pp. 143-161.

of offering help to the poor alongside the hope of influencing their way of living to the benefit of women generally.¹² At the same time, women were expected to fulfil their role as mothers both to their own family but also as ‘social mothers’ of the lower classes, whether to promote or discipline them, or to facilitate the breeding of suitable women to meet the needs of the Imperial nation.¹³ The evidence of a more responsive Local Authority also rendered the efforts of women such as Osler less essential. The activities of Elizabeth Cadbury and Ellen Pinsent were illustrative of the effective use which could be made of local municipal resources by determined women in the fields of physical and mental health for women and girls.¹⁴

Chapter Five: Feminism and the Early Years of the Suffrage Campaign 1870-1901

An early question in considering the suffrage campaign in Birmingham was to discuss the importance of special factors which might influence the nature of the campaign in different geographical and cultural locations. The work of Beth Jenkins in particular was considered and the contrast with the position in Wales was highlighted.¹⁵

Archival research into the early years of the suffrage campaign in Chapter 5 raised two questions; the extent to which Osler might be considered a feminist during the period; and the effectiveness of her early work for women’s rights in Birmingham. By 1877, Osler

¹² A. van Drenth and F de Haan, *The Rise of Caring Power* (Amsterdam, 1999), pp. 105-108.

¹³ E Yeo, ‘Social Motherhood and the Sexual Communion of Labour in British Social Science, 1850-1950’, *Women’s History Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (1992), pp. 75-87 and A. Davin, ‘Imperialism and Motherhood’, *History Workshop*, No.5 (Spring, 1978), pp. 9-65.

¹⁴ Helen Smith, ‘Elizabeth Taylor Cadbury (1858-1951): religion, maternalism, and social reform in Birmingham, 1888-1914’ (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2012), pp. 205-209 and Ruth Watts, *Women in Science: A Social and Cultural History* (Abingdon, 2007), p. 182.

¹⁵ B. Jenkins, ‘Suffrage organisers, grassroots activism and the campaign in Wales’ in A. Hughes-Johnson and L. Jenkins (eds.), *The Politics of Women’s Suffrage* (London, 2021), pp. 87-107.

could be described as a feminist although at that time the term would not have been used. The best evidence of her position comes from her speech to the meeting of the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society (BWSS) in 1877 where she proposed that women should have their own independent right to vote, be free to achieve whatever they were capable of without artificial boundaries to their ambitions, and be able to represent their own interests in public forums.¹⁶ In February 1881, she added a further ingredient to her feminist thinking, namely a willingness to work with men as helpmates in the reform of society.¹⁷ That these views were being expressed by such a young woman provide strong evidence that Osler can be viewed as one of the early pioneers of feminism and the suffrage cause in Birmingham and further afield.

The findings of the second research question showed her to have been active in party political and women's organisations at a local level with a view to increasing the profile and political awareness of women. This was particularly demonstrated following the failure to secure national voting rights in the Third Reform Act of 1884, and the weakening of the Liberal Party in 1888 after the defeat of Gladstone's Irish Home Rule Bill. In 1883, she was one of six women elected by her local ward to serve on the Central Representative Committee of the Birmingham Liberal Association, a position which gave her an opening into the political process in addition to membership of the BWSS. In 1887, she became a Vice-President of the newly formed national Women's Liberal Federation.¹⁸ In 1889, she assumed the Presidency of the recently formed Birmingham Liberal Auxiliary

¹⁶ Women's Library, London, *Women's Suffrage Journal*, 1 May 1877.

¹⁷ Women's Library, London, *Women's Suffrage Journal*, 1 March 1881.

¹⁸ Linda Walker, 'Gender, Suffrage and Party; Liberal Women's Organisations, 1880-1914' in M. Boussahba-Bravard (ed.), *Suffrage outside Suffragism in Britain, 1880-1914* (London, 2007), pp. 77-101.

(BLAUX) which promoted local campaigning initiatives for women and adopted women's suffrage as an aim in 1892.¹⁹ In 1893, Osler became the President of the Leicester Women's Liberal Association to add another avenue of influence. These findings suggest a woman doing all she reasonably could to support and develop the women's cause in educating and encouraging women to promote their interests in Birmingham and the wider area during a period when voting rights appeared to be a distant prospect.

Chapter Six: The Suffrage Campaign 1901-1909, the Suffragettes, the Liberal Party and the Significance of the South African War 1899-1902

The first decade of the twentieth century was a vital period in Osler's life. The death of her husband in 1903 was a severe blow, and from the periods analysed in Chapters Six and Seven, three important research themes emerged for this thesis, only the last of which was fully resolved during the period covered by Chapter Six. The first related to the accession of Osler to the Presidency of the BWSS in 1901, and how she met the challenge of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) from 1906 onwards. The second concerned the consequences of the growing rift between the BWSS and the Liberal Party owing to the latter's failure to advance the cause of women's suffrage after its return to power in 1906. The third which prevailed at the beginning of the decade, was the continuing colonial dispute between the Gladstonian Liberals and Joseph Chamberlain's Liberal Unionists which centred on the South African War through to its conclusion in 1902.

¹⁹ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 2 May 1894.

The evidence suggests that she was an active leader who expanded the membership greatly over the first decade of her Presidency and explored every available avenue to press the claim for women's emancipation. However, by 1906 voting rights for women were still a distant prospect and the arrival in Birmingham of the WSPU represented a challenge to the long-established BWSS. They were a firm presence in Birmingham by 1907.²⁰ Osler was initially supportive of the WSPU and admired their determination, courage and ability to enthuse large numbers of people by their forceful tactics.²¹ However, by 1909 their increasing militancy led to a breach between the two organisations. There was no evidence that the WSPU tactics had brought women's suffrage any closer and, although they may have raised the profile of the campaign, their militant tactics were unsavoury to many. Nonetheless, the WSPU remained a notable force in Birmingham and Chapter Seven followed the increasingly antagonistic debate between the two organisations up to 1914 and the outbreak of war.

There was not only dissension between the two wings of the suffrage campaign, but also between those women who desired voting rights, and those who opposed the grant of suffrage. The Women's National Anti-Suffrage League was founded in 1908 and amalgamated with the mixed-sex National League for Opposing Womans' Suffrage in 1910. On paper the anti-suffragists were a strong group but Ben Griffin has convincingly argued that their cause was a lost one by the end of the nineteenth century and was kept alive by political rather than intellectual arguments²². Violet Markham was one of the

²⁰ Women's Library, London, *Votes for Women*, October 1907.

²¹ *Memories 2*, Chapter 2.

²² B. Griffin, *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 2012), p.316.

more notable suffrage opponents, criticising it as contrary to women's innate difference to men, and as damaging to the Empire.²³ She did convert to supporting suffrage on pragmatic grounds in 1916.²⁴

Since the Irish Home Rule crisis in the 1880s, the Liberal Party in Birmingham had been in the political wilderness. Osler was in a difficult political position. She had no wish to join Chamberlain's Liberal Unionists, but equally she was unhappy at the prospect of an association with the emerging Labour Party. By 1905, she had felt divorced from any political party.²⁵ However, in 1906 she campaigned for the Liberals who celebrated a 'magnificent victory',²⁶ and she was prepared to wait to see whether the Liberals in government advanced the suffrage cause. However, by 1909 the evidence shows she had become disillusioned with the Liberals and had resigned as President of the BLAUX due to a potential conflict of interest between her Liberal allegiance and her leadership of the BWSS.²⁷ Osler was a progressive Liberal faced with an anti-suffragist Prime Minister on the one hand and Chamberlain's dominant Unionists on the other.

The dissension within the Liberal Party had also manifested itself in foreign and colonial affairs in the first decade of the twentieth century and Osler faced a dilemma in determining her stance in relation to the Boer War which raged from 1899 to 1902.

Whilst not favouring the colonialism and protectionism espoused by Joseph

²³ E. Reidi, 'Options for an Imperialist Woman: the case of Violet Markham, 1899-1914', *Albion*, 32 (2000), pp. 59-84.

²⁴ J. Bush, *Edwardian Ladies and Imperial Power* (London, 2000), pp. 197-198.

²⁵ *Journal* 1, 2 September 1905.

²⁶ *Memories* 2, Chapter 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Chamberlain's Unionist Liberals, Osler's position was difficult because of the internal conflict between her recognition of the Boers' desire for independence and her opposition to their resort to armed force against the British Empire. Although not explicitly stated, the likelihood is that following her husband, she reluctantly supported the war at its inception. However, the evidence clearly demonstrates that she opposed the eventual destructive and prolonged guerrilla war, and the imposition of concentration camps by the British which led to much loss of life. By the conclusion of the Boer War, Osler along with many other women was an opponent of the conflict and a supporter of the peaceful settlement of disputes.²⁸ It was a principled but difficult position which raised itself again with greater magnitude during the First World War as discussed in Chapter Eight. It was illustrative of women's participation in public debates from which they would have formerly been excluded. The findings suggest that the South African War had become widely unpopular by 1902 when it was ended by an unsatisfactory Treaty and along with the Tariff Reform Policy, contributed to the eventual defeat of the Unionist Government in the 1906 General Election.

Chapter Seven: The Later Stages of the Suffrage Campaign and Political Turmoil 1910 to 1914

Chapter Seven examined four main issues: the importance of Osler's twelve articles in the *Common Cause*, later published as *Why Women Need the Vote*; the failure of the Conciliation Bills 1910-1912 leading to an apparently final breach between Osler and the Liberals; the extent to which as a result she could countenance a closer relationship with

²⁸ University of Bristol Special Collections, *Minutes and Reports of the Women's Liberal Federation, 1901*.

the Labour Party as advocated by Millicent Fawcett; and the effect of the WSPU's resort to prolonged violence from 1912 to 1914 to achieve women's voting rights in the face of the Government's continued failure to secure them.

Chapter Seven highlighted four contrasting books written between 1911 and 1914 by women suffrage campaigners, Osler herself, Millicent Fawcett, Helena Swanwick and Emmeline Pankhurst. It suggested a need by the authors to relate their experiences and hopes for the future, probably coupled with increasing confidence that female emancipation could not be long denied. Osler's own book published in 1911 set out her assessment of the disadvantages to women of not having voting rights, compared to the benefits of suffrage and her vision for the future of relations between the sexes.²⁹

Millicent Fawcett's book published in late 1911 provided a short history of the suffrage movement culminating in what she had wrongly hoped would be the success of the third Conciliation Bill.³⁰ Helena Swanwick, writing in 1913, gave a very detailed history of the development of women's rights and the consequences if the suffrage campaign was unsuccessful.³¹ Emmeline Pankhurst's autobiography gave the suffragette's perspective in 1914, stressing the motivations behind the campaign and its influence.³² All these contributions suggest a growing momentum towards voting rights.

The Conciliation Bills were presented over an extended period of two years as a genuine cross-party attempt, including the WSPU and the Labour Party, to achieve a modest

²⁹ Osler, *Vote*.

³⁰ M. Fawcett, *Women's Suffrage, A Short History of a Great Movement* (London, 1913).

³¹ H. Swanwick, *The Future of the Women's Movement* (London, 1913).

³² E. Pankhurst, *My Own Story* (London, 1914).

measure of voting rights for women. As private Bills they needed Government backing to succeed and after much Government prevarication and double-dealing the final Bill was defeated by fourteen votes in March 1912. The failure of the Bill was immensely significant as it signalled the end of any hope of the Government pursuing women's suffrage and led to both the suffragists and the suffragettes seeking alternative methods of achieving their common goal.

Osler effectively abandoned her life-long Liberal allegiance. Her article in response to the defeat of the Bill called for a concentrated pursuit of suffrage.³³ With some reluctance, she supported Millicent Fawcett's decision to pursue an understanding with the Labour Party which by then unconditionally supported women's suffrage. As a result of her appointment to the Executive Committee of the National Union of Women Suffrage Societies, Osler was involved in the discussions with the Labour Party and the establishment of the Election Fighting Fund. Chapter Seven identified tensions on the part of Osler and colleagues such as Eleanor Rathbone, both with the Labour Party and Millicent Fawcett. Despite those undoubted difficulties, the recent research of Dawn Langan Teale cogently argues that the Labour Party gained much from the Election Fighting Fund which was a significant factor in the ultimate success of the suffrage campaign.³⁴

³³ Women's Library, London, Catalogue number B71, *NUWSS Leaflets 1907-1914*, C. C. Osler, 'The Vital Claim: An Appeal from Liberal Women to Women Liberals', pp. 38-40.

³⁴ D. L. Teele, *Forging the Franchise: The Political Origins of the Women's Vote* (Princeton, 2018), pp. 65, 73, 74. Further evidence of the involvement of the Labour Party can be found in J. Liddington and J. Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind us, the rise of the Women's Suffrage Movement* (London, 1979) and L. Jenkins, 'Anna Kenney and the Politics of Class in the WSPU', *20th Century British History*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (2019), pp. 477-503.

The resort to prolonged violence by the WSPU from 1912 to 1914 provoked total condemnation from the suffragists. Aside from her anguish at the violence and damage, Osler faced local difficulty in Birmingham, partly in distinguishing the BWSS from the WSPU but also in attracting the same amount of publicity.³⁵ Whilst there has been some historical dispute about the respective contributions of the two sides towards the eventual grant of voting rights, the predominant view of historians currently is that the activities of the WSPU delayed rather than accelerated the process.³⁶ By the outbreak of war in 1914, voting rights for women remained elusive.

Chapter Eight: War, Peace and Empire

Osler's experience and writings about the First World War and its aftermath raised a number of research issues. The chapter outlined the importance of relief work during the conflict as a positive factor in the claim for voting rights.³⁷ Osler's work on the Executive Committee of the Citizens Committee included, for example, her involvement in the establishment of Women's Patrols to ensure the safety of women in the vicinity of army camps. It explored Osler's reasons for joining the Union of Democratic Control which supported the settlement of the conflict at an appropriate time and her decision to cease her involvement with it. It considered the significance of her role in the resolution of the dispute in 1915 between the pacifists and the pro-war faction.³⁸ It assessed the extent to

³⁵ Nicola Gauld, *Words and Deeds: Birmingham Suffragists and Suffragettes 1832-1918* (Alcester, 2018), pp. 81-82.

³⁶ For the differing views on this issue, see the contributions of Jean Purvis, 'Did militancy help or hinder the granting of Women's suffrage in Britain?', pp. 1212-1217, of Elizabeth Crawford, 'Did militancy help or hinder the granting of women's suffrage in Britain?', pp. 1217-1227 and Sandra Stanley Holton, 'The language of suffrage history', pp. 1227-1234 to *Women's History Review*, volume 28, No 7 (2019), pp. 1200-1234.

³⁷ BA&C, L76.12, *Report of the BWSS 1914-1915*, pp. 23-25.

³⁸ *Journal 2*, June 1919, pp. 101-106.

which Osler's opposition to the War led her to a pacifist position by 1918. It criticised the punitive terms of the Treaty of Versailles and the financial crippling of Germany which made it impossible for that country either to pay proper reparations for the costs of the conflict, or to contribute her economic potential to the post-war recovery. The severity of the punitive measures imposed on Germany was also likely, in Osler's view, to lead to further conflict. Finally, alongside Osler's increasing questioning of the ethos and efficacy of war, the evidence suggests that she came to doubt the purpose and benefits of colonialism and Empire.

Osler's misgivings about the Boer conflict were largely borne out by the effective restoration of Boer Independence in 1910. Events in two other colonies, Ireland and India, loomed large in the final years of her life. The cause of Irish Home Rule had been a core issue for Osler throughout her life, and finally in 1921 a measure of Home Rule was granted albeit on the basis of partition and whilst still remaining within the Empire as a Free State.³⁹ By contrast Osler had always supported Imperial Rule in India, provided it was with the consent of the native population.⁴⁰ As with Ireland, the First World War was important in crystallising her attitudes. The sacrifices made by Indians during the War, and the lack of adequate recognition of their role by the British, led to protests and the massacre at Amritsar in 1919. Osler's letter in 1920 can be read as a questioning of the

³⁹ *Journal* 2, 7 December 1921, pp. 142-143.

⁴⁰ *Memories* 1, p. 98.

long-term viability of Empire in light of the advance of democracy and her Liberal belief in self-determination.⁴¹

Chapter Nine: Later Years and Legacy

Osler's last active years coincided with the bestowal of partial voting rights for women.

Chapter Nine assessed the early efforts made to capitalise on the granting of the vote.

Research findings suggest very limited early success for Osler and her fellow campaigners.

The declaration that the brothels in France were out of bounds to British troops was an important gain but was immediately undermined by the promulgation of Regulation 40D

under the Defence of the Realm Act 1914 which looked to replicate the Contagious

Diseases legislation of the previous century. Laura Lammasniemi's article discusses

women's reaction to the Regulation and its unpopularity.⁴² Osler's campaigning in the

1918 General Election for Marjorie Corbett Ashby the Liberal candidate in Ladywood

Birmingham was unsuccessful for the reasons set out in Chapter Nine.

The records for 1919 and 1920 suggested a world-weary pessimism and foreboding about

the future of the country for women and Liberalism. She considered that her work was

finished and that it was for the next generation to move matters forward. She assisted in

the establishment of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship prior to her

retirement. Further, she was supportive of her successor, Eleanor Rathbone, who

favoured an evolutionary approach to the improvement of the rights of women in

⁴¹ Women's Library, London, C. C Osler, 'English Women and Amritsar', Letter to *The Woman's Leader*, 3 September 1920.

⁴² L. Lammasniemi, 'Regulation 40D: Punishing Promiscuity on the Home Front during The First World War', *Women's History Review* Vol. 26, issue 4 (2017), pp. 584-596.

continuance of Osler's work. Her legacy was recognised by her commissioned portrait in the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery and the conferral of an Honorary M.A. by the University of Birmingham.

The Wider Significance of the Thesis

This thesis has provided the opportunity for an in-depth consideration of the work of an active middle-class woman in Birmingham who, over a period of 50 years, dedicated her life to the enhancement of the position of women in the city and beyond. One of the wider aims of this study, in addition to restoring Osler to her deservedly significant position as a campaigner for women's suffrage, was to assess her contribution to the promotion of the wider political and civic status of women in her adopted home by the use of her influential and radical personal relationships, and her political connections to the Liberal Party. Osler had been a supporter of the liberal cause since her youth and it was therefore the obvious political vehicle for the realisation of her vision. A second wider aim of this thesis therefore was to consider the extent to which the Liberal Party helped or hindered Osler in the realisation of her ambition with a particular focus on the consequences of the crisis in the Party after the defeat of Gladstone's Irish Home Bill in 1885.

The review of the existing historiography in Chapter One made it plain that the social and political contribution of women generally, and Osler in particular, to the life of the city during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century has been all but ignored in the standard histories of the city. Nicola Gauld's recent book gives an excellent general account of the suffrage campaign in Birmingham, enhanced by some welcome material

on Catherine Osler's role as a suffragist campaigner. However, it was not designed to engage with the wider aspects of the women's rights movement, nor the liberal and feminist underpinning of Osler's ideas and activism.⁴³ Richard Vinen's recent book on Birmingham supplies further information but the section on women in the city comprises only five pages.⁴⁴ By contrast, this thesis has benefited from access to previously unseen material together with an array of primary and secondary sources. Taken in conjunction with other archive material, this study has added a new dimension to the history of women's rights in the city and substantially augmented the existing limited historiography of the period.

The thesis has demonstrated the central significance of radical family connections and location for Osler's development as a female campaigner, together with the advantages of wealth and the availability of input from servants. Chapter Two provided details of her early exposure to influential figures and the radicalism of her parents, such that she developed self-confidence and a clear vision of what was required to further women's rights. Chapter Five confirmed that by the mid-1870s, she had developed her own feminist agenda, based on female independence, autonomy and individual fulfilment. It was a fundamental aspect of her equal rights feminism that women had full voting rights, both locally and nationally. However, she never doubted the need for the support of a political party to enable appropriate legislation to be passed, and her hope rested with

⁴³ N. Gauld, *Words and Deeds: Birmingham Suffragists and Suffragettes 1832-1918* (Alcester, 2018).

⁴⁴ R. Vinen, *Second City: Birmingham and the Forging of Modern Britain* (London, 2022).

the Liberals. Chapter Five discussed her early disappointments in that regard in the context of the Third Reform Act 1884.

Chapters Two and Five emphasised the dominance of the Liberals in Birmingham from Osler's arrival in the city in 1868 until the defeat of Gladstone's Irish Home Rule Bill in 1885 and the subsequent formation of the Liberal Unionist Party by Joseph Chamberlain in 1888. This thesis supports the view that the influence and effectiveness of the liberal cause and the cause of women was severely damaged by the Home Rule crisis which meant that Birmingham became and remained an anti-suffrage city even after the end of Chamberlain's career in 1907. For Osler, Irish Home Rule, free trade, and women's emancipation were fundamental tenets of her Liberalism and all three were opposed by Chamberlain's Unionists. As a woman, it would have been understandable if she had remained silent, particularly as neither Irish Home Rule nor female emancipation were supported by all Liberal politicians. However, this thesis has shown that as prominent Liberals within the city, she and her husband, until his death in 1903, opposed Chamberlain's changed policies, and became a source of political opposition to him in Birmingham despite the opprobrium that their stance attracted. Chapter Five furnished an example of Chamberlain's contemptuous attitude towards Osler relating to women's voting rights.⁴⁵ Chapter Six highlighted the active participation in the 1906 General Election of Osler and other women workers who did the 'lion's share of the labour' in view of the 'enfeebled' state of the men's organisations after 'the long years of hopeless struggle against overwhelming odds'.⁴⁶ Their activities may not always have been

⁴⁵ *Memories 1*, p. 54.

⁴⁶ *Memories 2*, Chapter 1.

effective but in 1906 the Liberals were returned to government although Chamberlain retained his hold over Birmingham and its hinterland. This thesis breaks new ground in that the most recent and detailed biography of Chamberlain published in 1994 mentions virtually nothing about the suffrage campaign or the role of women in the city.⁴⁷ Chapter Seven showed that Osler's relationship with Liberalism became increasingly difficult largely as a result of a continuing lack of progress on women's voting rights after 1912. The chapter considered the major innovation of the relationship with the Labour Party, and the difficulties that caused for longstanding Liberal supporters such as Osler. Whilst the emerging concord was cut short by the outbreak of war, the significance of the development cannot be underestimated for Osler personally or politically. It was an early pointer towards the succession of the Labour Party to the Liberals as the main opposition to the Conservatives in the future.

This thesis has emphasised the significance of underused sources for the study of an individual in the context of her life and times. The present work would not have been possible without access to private family records, supplemented where appropriate by public archives and secondary sources. Specifically, this previously unexamined family archival resource has proved to be an inestimably valuable chronicle of Osler's early life, her marriage, vital records of the South African conflict, and her extensive memoir of the First World War and its aftermath.

⁴⁷ P. Marsh, *Joseph Chamberlain: Entrepreneur in Politics* (London, 1994).

Areas for Further Research and Final Evaluation

The present thesis has mainly been restricted to the life and activities of one affluent middle-class woman. Studies of other women of the same class together with the experiences of women from different classes engaged in similar avenues of activity would undoubtedly be valuable, both for their individual stories and as an index for comparison. Whilst archival records relating to such women might be difficult to uncover, such research, if fruitful, could offer a more rounded picture of women's contributions particularly in the twentieth century when the evidence suggests that their needs and contributions became of increasing significance.

This thesis has emphasised the potential importance of wills as a rich source of information as demonstrated in this case by the wills of Osler's children and grandchildren. The will of her youngest son led this researcher to his granddaughter and to the subsequent uncovering of private sources without which this study would not have been possible. This was followed in turn by contact with the grandson of Osler's youngest daughter and hence to yet more valuable documentation. A search of newspaper archives and archival records of organisations such as those of BLACPYG might well prove fruitful. The approach would inevitably require painstaking research and a measure of good fortune. The importance of family relationships in influencing behaviour has been emphasised in this study. The closeness of Osler's relationship with her husband Alfred and her children was important to the furtherance of her work in difficult times. In Osler's case the relationship with servants was also relevant to her ability to pursue her public

life. A focus on family and other support networks referred to in this thesis might be a fruitful avenue of further study.

The biographical nature of the thesis, supported by valuable sources and personal recollections, has demonstrated Osler's importance as one of the leading campaigners of her generation for women's rights as a suffragist, political activist and philanthropist in her adopted city. The frustrations and setbacks of her public campaigning have been extensively explored. She and her fellow campaigners showed great resilience in their challenge to the sense of male entitlement with which they were faced although she continually tried to work with men to break down the gender barriers. Although determined and often frustrated, she was ever a moderate figure seeking accommodation and evolutionary progress despite her class and affluence limiting her involvement with people she would have considered to be of the lower classes. Her principled adhesion to liberal individualism prevented her from adopting an overly sympathetic approach to those in poverty and need. Her advanced views on international issues of peace and reconciliation marked her out as an open-hearted, deeply religious and forgiving woman. Her preference for freedom of nations and individuals was exemplified by her constant support for the cause of Irish Home Rule, a journey on which an important milestone was reached near the end of her life. As with women's suffrage, Osler witnessed only its partial achievement in her lifetime, but she would have regarded even gradual progress as an important step towards the ultimate goal.

Bibliography

PRIMARY SOURCES

Unpublished Archival Sources and Collections

Birmingham Archives and Collections at the Library of Birmingham

L76.12 The Archive of the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society and its successor, the Birmingham Branch of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship 1868-1920.

The Minutes of the Birmingham Women's Local Government Association (formerly the Society for Promoting the Election of Women on Local Governing Bodies) 1907-1921.

MS2143 The Minutes and Reports of the Birmingham Branch of the Parents' National Education Union 1902-1912.

The Minutes and Reports of Birmingham City Council:

The Sanitary and Health Committee 1875-1899 and 1916-1917.

The Public Works Committee 1896-1897.

The Public Health and Housing Committee 1916-1917.

LB48.22 The Education Committee 1906-1907.

L41.2 Quarterly Reports of the Birmingham Branch of the National Union of Women Workers 1891-1923.

L41.2 Reports of the Birmingham Ladies' Association for the Care and Protection of Young Girls.

L41.2 Reports of the Birmingham Ladies' Association for Useful Work.

L50.7 First annual report of the Ladies' Debating Society 1880-1881.

L41.2 Reports of the Birmingham Citizens' Committee for 19 August 1914, 19 February 1915, 21 July 1915.

L75.7 Reports of the Intelligence Officer to the Birmingham Citizens' Committee 29 October 1914, 27 November 1914.

LF41.14 Reports of the Girls' Night Shelter 1888-1958.

MS2143 Minutes of the Birmingham Branch of the Parents' National Education Union.

L41.2 Report of the Conference of the Ladies' Union of Workers Among Women and Girls November 1890.

University of Birmingham Cadbury Research Library

WMLF 1-3 Minutes and Reports of the Midland Liberal Federation.

University College London Special Collections

Letter from William Gladstone to Samuel Smith MP, 1892

University of Bristol Special Collections

DM1193 Minutes and Reports of the Women' Liberal Federation 1889-1912.

Women's Library, London

Reports and Minutes of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies.

Manchester Central Library

M.50 Extracts from the Millicent Fawcett Collection.

Other Unpublished Sources

Private Material of C. C. Osler, supplied by Tamsin Osler, the great-granddaughter of Catherine Osler

A letter to her son, Julian Osler, dated 7 July 1909.

A draft of her resignation speech as President of the Birmingham Society for Equal Citizenship, 1921 but undated.

Journal from 11 July 1905 to date unspecified in 1918.

Journal from 21 January 1918 to 22 September 1924.

Memories of our Life Part 2.

Material from Colin Hayes, the great-grandson of Catherine Osler

Manuscript diary of Dorothy Osler, the younger daughter of Catherine Osler.

Wills

Alfred Clarkson Osler Will and Codicil, dates illegible, admitted to Probate 10 December 1903 <https://probatesearch.service.gov.uk>.

Catherine Courtauld Osler Will dated 20 February 1911 with First Codicil dated 19 January 1920 and Second Codicil dated 7 November 1922, admitted to Probate 7 February 1925 <https://probatesearch.service.gov.uk>.www.gov.uk.

Published Sources

Newspapers and Journals

Birmingham Daily Post, 1887, 1889, 1890, 1892, 1894, 1900, 1908, 1917, 1924.

Birmingham Evening Dispatch, 1903

Birmingham Gazette, 1918.

The Common Cause, 1910.
The Hibbert Journal, 1923-1924.
Leicester Chronicle, 1874, 1893, 1899.
The Manchester Guardian, 1918.
The Midland Ancestor Magazine, 2018.
Midland History, 2000.
The Spectator, 1906.
Votes for Women, 1907-1909.
The Woman at Home, 1894.
The Woman's Leader, 1920, 1924.
Women's History Review, 1998, 2000, 2019.
Women's Suffrage Journal, 1875.

Other Published Primary Sources

Crosskey, H., 'The Position of Women', *The English Woman's Journal*, Volume 6, No. 35 (January 1861), pp. 289-297.
Osler, C. C., *A Book of the Home* (London, 1911).
Osler, C. C., 'English Women and Amritsar', Letter to *The Woman's Leader*, 3 September 1920.
Osler, C. C. 'The Terror of Ideas', *The Hibbert Journal*, volume 22, no. 3 (1923-1924) pp. 574-585.
Osler, C. C., *The Vital Claim: An Appeal from Liberal Women to Women Liberals*, NUWSS Leaflets 1907-1914, Women's Library, London, Catalogue no. B71.
Osler, C. C., 'Woman's Suffrage', Letter to *The Spectator*, 2 June 1906.

Contemporary Books

Armstrong, R. A., *Henry William Crosskey, His Life and Work* (Birmingham, 1895).
Osler, C. C., *Memories of our Life* (Birmingham, 1904).
Osler, C. C., *Why Women Need the Vote* (place of publication unknown, 1911).
Fawcett, M. G., *Women's Suffrage: A Short History of a Great Movement* (London, undated).
Mill, J. S., *The Subjection of Women* (London, 1869).
Pankhurst, E., *My Own Story* (London, 1914).

Sinclair, M., *The Tree of Heaven* (New York, 1917).

Strachey, L., *Eminent Victorians* (London, 1918).

Swanwick, H., *The Future of the Women's Movement* (London, 1913).

Swanwick, H., *Builders of Peace being Ten Years History of the Union of Democratic Control* (London, 1924).

Taylor, P., *Some Account of the Taylor Family* (London, 1875).

Timmins, S., *The Resources, Products and Industrial History of Birmingham and the Midland Hardware District* (London, 1866).

Venturi E., *Joseph Mazzini, A Memoir* (London, 1875).

Electronic Primary Sources

Census records. England. Bridgwater, Somerset. 7 April 1861. **TAYLOR**, William (head). Piece Number 1624. Folio 105. Schedule Number 23. Enumeration District Number 6. p. 6. <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/> (Accessed: 02 April 2024).

Census records. England. Edgbaston, Warwickshire. 2 April 1871. **TAYLOR**, William (head). Piece Number 3082. Folio 61. Schedule Number 188. Enumeration District 13. p. 45. <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/> (Accessed: 02 April 2024).

Census records. England. Edgbaston, Warwickshire. 3 April 1881. OSLER, Alfred (head). Piece Number 2957. Folio 64. Enumeration District 24. p. 8. <https://ancestry.co.uk/> (Accessed: 02 April 2024).

Census records. England. Edgbaston, Warwickshire. 5 April 1891. OSLER, Alfred (head). Piece Number 2358. Folio 67. Enumeration District 17. p. 15. <https://ancestry.co.uk/> (Accessed: 02 April 2024).

Census records. England. Edgbaston, Warwickshire. 31 March 1901. OSLER, Alfred (head). Piece Number, 2814. Folio 166. Schedule Number 202. Enumeration District 07. p. 46. <https://ancestry.co.uk/> (Accessed: 02 April 2024).

Census records. England. Edgbaston, Worcestershire. 2 April 1911. OSLER, Catherine (head). Piece 17917. Enumeration District 07. p. 444. <https://ancestry.co.uk/> (Accessed: 02 April 2024).

SECONDARY SOURCES

Books

Andrews, M. and Lomas, J. (eds.), *The Home Front in Britain, Images, Myths and Forgotten Experiences since 1914* (London, 2014).

Andrews, M. and Lomas, J., *Widows: Poverty, Power and Politics* (Cheltenham, 2020).

Barnsby, G.J., *Birmingham Working People: A History of the Labour Movement in Birmingham 1650-1914* (Wolverhampton, 1989).

- Beaumont, C., 'The Women's Movement, Politics and Citizenship, 1918-1950s' in Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (ed.), *Women in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Harlow, 2001), pp. 262-291.
- Bernstein, E., *Liberalism and Liberal Politics in Edwardian England* (Winchester, MA, 1986).
- Bland, L., 'The Married Woman, the 'New Woman' and the Feminist: Sexual Politics of the 1890s' in J. Rendall, (ed.), *Equal or Different: Women's Politics 1800-1914* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 141-164.
- Branca, P., *Silent Sisterhood: Middle-Class Women in the Victorian Home* (London, 1975).
- Briggs, A., *History of Birmingham, Volume 2: Borough and the City, 1865-1938* (London, 1952).
- Brendon, P., *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire 1781-1997* (London, 2008).
- Bush, J., *Women Against the Vote: Female Anti-Suffragism in Britain* (Oxford, 2007).
- Bush, J., *Edwardian Ladies and Imperial Power* (London, 2000).
- Caine, B., *Victorian Feminists* (Oxford, 1992).
- Caine, B., *Bombay to Bloomsbury: A Biography of the Strachey Family* (Oxford, 2005).
- Caine, B., *Biography and History* (London, 2019).
- Colpus, E., *Female Philanthropy in the Interwar World* (London, 2018).
- Copus, J., *This Rare Spirit: A Life of Charlotte Mew* (London, 2021).
- Cott, N., *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, CT and London, 1987).
- Davidoff L. and Hall C., *Family Fortunes, Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (Bury St. Edmunds, 2002).
- Drenth, A. van and Haan, F. de, *The Rise of Caring Power* (Amsterdam, 1999).
- Dyhouse, C., *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (Abingdon, 1981).
- Fawcett, E., *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea* (Woodstock, 2014).
- Fletcher, I. C., Nym Mayhall, L. E. and Levine, P. (eds.), *Women's Suffrage in the British Empire: Citizenship, nation and race* (London, 2000).
- Foster, R. F., *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (London, 1989).
- Garner, L., *Stepping Stones to Women's Liberty* (London, 1984).
- Gauld, N., *Words and Deed: Birmingham Suffragists and Suffragettes 1832-1918* (Alcester, 2018).
- Gottlieb, J. and Toye, R. (eds.), *The Aftermath of Suffrage: Women, Gender, and Politics in Britain, 1918-1945* (Basingstoke, 2013).
- Grant, P., *Philanthropy and Voluntary Action in the First World War* (Abingdon, 2014).

- Griffin, B., *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain: Masculinity, Political Culture and the Struggle for Women's Rights* (Cambridge, 2012).
- Hallam, D., *Taking on the Men: The First Women Parliamentary Candidates 1918* (Studley, 2018).
- Hayes, J., *Face the Music; A Sailor's Story* (Pentland, 1991).
- Hollis, P., *Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government 1865-1914* (Oxford, 1987).
- Holton, S. S., *Feminism and Democracy: Women's Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain, 1900-1918* (Cambridge, 1986).
- Hopkins, E., *Birmingham: The Making of the Second City 1850-1939* (Stroud, 2001).
- Jenkins B., 'Suffrage organisers, grassroots activism and the campaign in Wales' in A. Hughes-Johnson and L. Jenkins (eds.), *The Politics of Women's Suffrage* (London, 2021), pp. 87-107.
- Jenkins, R., *Gladstone* (London, 1985).
- Koven, S., 'Borderlands: Women, Voluntary Action and Child Welfare in Britain, 1840-1914' in S. Koven and S. Michel (eds.), *Mothers of a New World* (London, 1993).
- Lawrence, J. F., *A History of Bridgwater* (Chichester, 2005).
- Liddington, J. and Norris, J., *One hand tied behind us, the Rise of the Women's Suffrage Movement* (London, 2000).
- Longford, E., *A Pilgrimage of Passion* (London, 1979)
- Marsh, P. T., *Joseph Chamberlain: Entrepreneur in Politics* (Kings Lynn, 1994).
- Masson, U., *For Women, for Wales and for Liberalism: Women in Liberal Politics in Wales, 1880-1914* (Cardiff, 2010).
- McMillan, M., *Childhood, Culture and Class in Britain, 1860-1931* (Rutgers University Press, 1990).
- Munn, S. and Morgan, S., 'Women and Philanthropic Cultures' in S. Morgan and J. de Vries (eds.), *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800-1940* (Abingdon, 2010), pp. 61-65.
- Ogilvie, S., *The Dictionary People* (London, 2023).
- Osler, M., *The Rain Tree: A Memoir* (London, 2011).
- Peterson, M. J., *Family, Love and Work in the Lives of Victorian Gentlewomen* (Bloomington, IN, 1989).
- Prochaska, F. K., *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth Century England* (Oxford, 1980).
- Purvis, J., 'From "women worthies" to poststructuralism? Debate and controversy in women's history in Britain' in J. Purvis (ed), *Women's History: Britain, 1850-1945* (London, 1995), pp. 6-12.
- Reader, J., *Africa: A Biography of the Continent* (London, 1997).

- Rosen, A., *Rise up Women! The Militant Campaign of the Women's Social and Political Union, 1903-1914* (London, 1974).
- Rubinstein, D., *Before the Suffragettes: Women's Emancipation in the 1890s* (Brighton, 1986).
- Rubinstein, D., *A Different World for Women: The Life of Millicent Garrett Fawcett* (Columbus, OH, 1991).
- Schwartz, L., *Feminism and the Servant Problem: Class and Domestic Labour in the Women's Suffrage Movement* (Cambridge, 2019).
- Scott, R., *Elizabeth Cadbury 1858-1951* (London, 1955).
- Slater, T., *Edgbaston: A History* (Cheltenham, 2002).
- Smith, J. P., *Osler's Crystal for Royalty and Rajahs* (London, 1991).
- Smitley, M., *The Feminine Public Sphere Middle-Class Women in Civic Life in Scotland, c.1870-1914* (Manchester, 2009).
- Sunderland, H., 'English girls' schools and women's suffrage' in A. Hughes-Johnson and Lyndsey Jenkins (eds.), *The Politics of Women's Suffrage* (London, 2021).
- Swartz, M., *The Union of Democratic Control in British Politics during the First World War* (Oxford, 1971).
- Teele, D. L., *Forging the Franchise: The Political Origins of the Women's Vote* (Princeton, 2018).
- Tosh, J., *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Harlow, 2005).
- Vellacott, J., *Pacifists, Patriots and the Vote* (Basingstoke, 2007).
- Vinen, R., *Second City: Birmingham and the Forging of Modern Britain* (London, 2022).
- Walker, L., 'Party Political Women: A Comparative Study of Liberal Women and the Primrose League, 1890-1914' in J. Rendall (ed.), *Equal or Different, Women's Politics 1800-1914* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 165-191.
- Walker, L., 'Gender, Suffrage and Party; Liberal Women's Organisations 1880-1914' in M. Boussahia (ed.), *Suffrage outside Suffragism: Women's Vote in Britain 1880-1914* (London, 2007), pp. 77-101.
- Walkowitz, J. R., *Prostitution and Victorian Society* (Cambridge, 1980).
- Ward, R., *City State and Nation: Birmingham's Political History c. 1830-1940* (Chichester, 2005).
- Ward, R., 'Birmingham: A Political Profile, 1700-1940' in Carl Chinn and Malcolm Dick (eds.), *Birmingham: The Workshop of The World* (Liverpool, 2016), pp. 159-191.
- Watts, R., *Gender, Power and the Unitarians in England, 1760-1860* (Harlow, 1998).
- Watts, R., 'Joseph Priestley and His Influence on Education in Birmingham' in Malcolm Dick (ed.), *Joseph Priestley and Birmingham* (Studley, 2005), pp. 48-64.

Watts, R., *Women in Science: A Social and Cultural History* (Abingdon, 2007).

Articles

Barnsby, G., 'Votes for Women, The Struggle for the Vote in the Black Country 1900-1918', *Socialist Occasional Pamphlet Series No. 3* (1994), pp. 1-15.

Bartley, P., 'Preventing Prostitution: The Ladies' Association for the Care and Protection of Young Girls in Birmingham, 1887-1914', *Women's History Review* Vol. 7, No. 1 (1998), pp. 37-55.

Bartley, P., '(2000) Moral Regeneration: Women and the Civic Gospel in Birmingham, 1870-1914', *Midland History*, 25:1, pp. 143-161.

Caine, B., 'Feminist Biography and Feminist History', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 3, No. 2. (1994), pp. 247-261.

Clutterbuck, D., 'A Clock and a Family', *The Midland Ancestor* (June 2018), pp. 730-733.

Crawford, E., 'Did militancy help or hinder the granting of women's suffrage in Britain?' *Women's History Review*, Vol. 28, No 7 (2019), pp. 1217-1227.

Davin, A., 'Imperialism and Motherhood', *History Workshop*, No. 5 (Spring, 1978), pp. 9-65.

Hirschfield, C., 'Fractured Faith: Liberal Party Women and the Suffrage Issue in Britain, 1892-1914', *Gender and History*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1990), pp. 173-197.

Hirschfield, C., 'Liberal Women's Organisations and the War Against the Boers, 1899-1902', *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, Vol. 14(1) (April 1982), pp. 27-49.

Holton, S. S., 'The language of suffrage history', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 28, No. 7, (2019), pp. 1227-1233.

Jenkins, L., 'Annie Kenney and the Politics of Class in the WSPU', *20th Century British History*, Vol. 30. No. 4, (2019), pp.477-503.

Jones, L. J., 'Public Pursuit of Private Profit? Liberal Businessmen and Municipal Politics in Birmingham, 1865-1900', *Business History*, Vol. 25, Issue 3 (1983), pp. 240-259.

Levine, P., "'So Few Prizes and So Many Blanks": Marriage and Feminism in Later Nineteenth-Century England', *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (April 1989), pp. 150-174.

Plant, H., "'Ye are all one in Christ Jesus": Aspects of Unitarianism and feminism in Birmingham, c. 1869-90', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2000), pp. 721-742.

Purvis, J., 'Did militancy help or hinder the granting of women's suffrage in Britain?', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 28, No. 7 (2019), pp. 1200-1217.

Reidi, E., 'Options for an Imperialist Woman: the case of Violet Markham, 1899-1914', *Albion*, 32 (2000), pp. 59-84.

Thane, P., 'Well-bred and conventional ladies in the National Council of Women of Great Britain and Ireland/Northern Ireland', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 32 (2023, Issue 2), Abstract.

Vellacott, J., 'Feminist Consciousness and the First World War', *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 23, Issue 1 (1 March 1987), pp. 81-101.

Ware, V., 'All the rage: decolonising the history of the British women's suffrage movement', published online, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502.386.2019.1638953> (Accessed: 27 November 2019).

Watts, R., 'Educating Girls and Women', *History West Midlands*, undated.

Woollacott, A., 'Gender, Class and Sexual Morality', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1994-04, vol. 29.2 pp.325-347.

Yeo, E., 'Social Motherhood and the Sexual Communion of Labour in British Social Science', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1992), pp. 63-87.

Theses

Bowring, B., 'From Penury to Published Poet: The Cultural Journey of Ann Yearsley' (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2018).

Brown, A., 'Special Schooling and the Feeble-Minded in Birmingham 1870-1914' (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2008).

Bushrod, E., 'The History of Unitarianism in Birmingham from the Middle of the Eighteenth Century to 1893' (MA thesis, University of Birmingham, 1954).

Iles, K., 'Constructing the eighteenth-century woman: the adventurous history of Sylvia Sidney' (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2012).

Procter, R. J., 'Infant Mortality - A Study of The Impact of Social Intervention in Birmingham 1873-1938' (M Phil. thesis, University of Birmingham, 2011).

Shoebridge, M., 'The Women's Suffrage Movement in Birmingham and District 1903-1919' (MA thesis, Wolverhampton Polytechnic, 1983).

Smith, H., 'Elizabeth Taylor Cadbury (1858-1951): Religion, Maternalism and Social Reform in Birmingham, 1888-1914' (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2012).

Thomas, S., 'George Edmonds and the Development of Birmingham Radicalism' (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2021).

Wright, R., 'Liberal Organisation and Politics in Birmingham, Coventry, and Wolverhampton 1886-1914 with Particular Reference to the Development of Independent Labour Representation' (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 1977).

Electronic Sources

<https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator/>
(Accessed: 02 April 2024).

Crawford, Elizabeth. "Osler [née Taylor], Catherine Courtauld (1854–1924), social reformer and suffragist." Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. October 03, 2013. Oxford University Press. (Accessed: 5 December 2023).

<https://www.oxforddnb.com/ezproxy.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-101357>.

Crawford, Elizabeth. "Taylor [née Doughty], Clementia (1810–1908), women's activist." Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. September 23, 2004. Oxford University Press. (Accessed 26 December 2023).

<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-45468>

Ruston, Alan. "Taylor, Peter Alfred [PAT] (1819–1891), politician and radical." Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. January 05, 2012. Oxford University Press. (Accessed: 26 December 2023,

<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-27070>

Watts, Ruth. "Cooper, Alice Jane (1846–1917), headmistress." Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. September 22, 2005. Oxford University Press. Date of access 30 Dec. 2024, [https://www-oxforddnb-com.bham-](https://www-oxforddnb-com.bham-ezproxy.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-51748)

[ezproxy.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-51748](https://www-oxforddnb-com.bham-ezproxy.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-51748)

Watts, Ruth. "Creak, Edith Elizabeth Maria (1855–1919), headmistress." Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. May 25, 2006. Oxford University Press. Date of access 30 Dec. 2024, [https://www-oxforddnb-com.bham-](https://www-oxforddnb-com.bham-ezproxy.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-51760)

[ezproxy.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-51760](https://www-oxforddnb-com.bham-ezproxy.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-51760)