In Victorian England, partly in response to a perceived threat of social and political disorder, and partly out of a wish to improve the conditions of working-class life, reformers embraced leisure as a means of educating and edifying the masses. These “rational recreation” initiatives were one element of a more general social meliorism. They became less didactic as the nineteenth century wore on, but the idea that leisure could and should be used to shape the behavior and attitudes of working people, that it was an important arena in which to effect social “progress,” continued to have a powerful appeal. Reformers claimed that rational recreation would uplift the working classes, and commentators accorded wives and mothers a central role in this project. Yet historians have had almost nothing to say about women’s involvement—either as propagandists and sponsors, or as objects of reform—in rational recreation. Hugh Cunningham has implied an explanation for the void in the literature. He points out that rational recreationists were “almost exclusively . . . men dealing with men”; that they assumed that women spent whatever free time they had “confined within the bonds of home, family and class”; and that, thus safely contained and controlled, working-class women and their leisure attracted little attention.¹

But if this was true of the 1830s and 1840s during what Cunningham dubs the heyday of rational recreation, it was certainly no longer so by the last decades of the nineteenth century.² In the late Victorian and Edwardian period, upper- and middle-class women involved themselves enthusiastically in the leisure interests of their less privileged counterparts. They did so because of the class-bound nature of much working-class women’s leisure—more precisely, because in it they saw a great deal that disturbed their gender and class sensibilities. And they did so because young working women appeared to be moving beyond the bonds of home and family and slipping between the cracks of such institu-
tions of social control as the educational system. Apprehending an expanding leisure world opening up, one which was full of worrying dangers as well as appealing possibilities, female rational recreationists set out to forewarn and forearm their lower-class counterparts against the dangers. They also attempted to make possible alternative forms of leisure that would ennoble rather than degrade.³ This recreational reform came within the compass of a broader philanthropy in which, from the early 1800s and increasingly after mid-century, upper- and middle-class women played a central role. Understood to be unfit by nature for anything other than maternity and care-giving, expected to be moral and compassionate, and relieved by virtue of their social and economic positions from the necessity of earning a living; these were some of the social and cultural circumstances that predisposed female philanthropists to find in the difficulties and deprivations of the lower classes a vocation for which they seemed—and deemed themselves—uniquely qualified.⁴

My purpose in this paper is twofold: first, to counter the notion that reformers were unconcerned with working-class women’s leisure; second, to examine some of the cultural work which the reformers undertook in the production and promulgation of rational recreation. My interest in the latter is in the way upper- and middle-class women constructed working women’s leisure as a problem needing a remedy, represented themselves as the ones most suited for finding and administering that remedy, and thus made working women’s leisure their work. In doing so, some found an escape from the constraints of lives too full of leisure—ironically, leisure that was possible precisely because of the heavy burden of labor that working-class women bore.

According to Peter Bailey, by the 1860s leisure had secured a place in the public mind as “a necessary amenity, a basic overhead in the maintenance of an industrial society.” This legitimacy extended even to the working classes, though the notion persisted that leisure was a “dangerously open-ended world” in which to let them have free rein.⁵ During the late Victorian period, upper- and middle-class women in a range of philanthropic and reform enterprises began to broach working women’s leisure in much the same terms, guided by similar principles. Churches, chapels, and other religious agencies; clergymen’s wives, sisters, and daughters; trade unionist associations; temperance groups; upper-class ladies playing out their customary bountiful roles; and growing numbers of college-educated young women: these were among the main propagandists and providers of a consciously reformist model of leisure. They offered working-class girls and women alternatives to the amusements of the public house and music hall, encouraged them to use leisure as a means of improvement, and attempted to imbue them “with a love for rational amusements indulged in a rational way.”⁶

Female reformers’ interventions varied considerably in scale, permanence, and political tenor, but all shared a common vision of leisure’s place and purpose in working-class women’s lives: whatever else, leisure must conduce to respectability and edification. These principles underpinned the Girls’ Friendly Society (GFS), for example, founded in 1874 by a group of Anglican women. The GFS’ overarching aim was to bring together unmarried and “virtuous” young women, both with one another and—in a classic rational recreation experiment in promoting social harmony—upper-and middle-class “associates.” Serving as moral guides and exemplars, associates were surrogate mothers whose mission
was to keep GFS members from sliding into sin and to educate them in “religious principles and domestic duties.” By 1885, the GFS operated 821 branches in England and Wales and in its peak years of 1913 and 1914 had 39,926 associates, 197,493 full members and 81,374 “candidate” or probationary members. Closely allied with the GFS—indeed, organized with the express intention of serving as its extension—was the Mothers’ Union, established in 1885 as a kindred organization for married women. Within four years of its foundation the Mothers’ Union numbered 157,668 members and associates in branches throughout Britain and between 1902 and 1920, its branches and members doubled in number. Recreation was critical to these agencies’ objective of preserving members’ moral character and preparing them for “Christian marriage and... motherhood.” The GFS strongly discouraged any leisure behavior that tended in the opposite direction, “whether it be drinking, extravagance, or the reading of light literature.” Likewise, the Mothers’ Union warned its members about the hazards of “bad books,” wandering the streets at night, and “unsafe companions and...dangerous amusements.” Both associations provided “safe” alternatives and spaces for women’s recreation, which included counter-attractions such as “pure” literature and garden parties hosted by titled ladies, social clubs, country holidays, meeting rooms, and rest homes. And both encouraged working-class girls and women to use leisure for their own and their families’ betterment.
Other women’s organizations, including those with patently more radical objectives than the GFS, also saw working-class women’s leisure primarily in terms of its didactic utility. The Women’s Protective and Provident League (WPPL) and the Women’s Industrial Council (WIC) incorporated recreational and educational elements in their efforts to improve the working conditions, status, and rights of women. WPPL officers knew that the leisure activities and services they offered helped attract and retain union members, and that in working-class families leisure resources were often a privilege men enjoyed at the cost of their wives’ and children’s well-being. The League regularly conducted its business in the context of social gatherings and entertainments, and provided women with facilities such as meeting rooms, pianos, and circulating libraries, as well as recreational evenings and classes in history, reading, arithmetic, botany, grammar, French, German, Shakespearean literature, ambulance, first aid, and drawing. The WPPL and the WIC viewed leisure as conducive to the personal health and happiness of working-class women, and their publications are noticeably free of the conservatism and unquestioning deference that marked the GFS. Nonetheless, like the GFS, the largely upper- and middle-class leaders of both these organizations insisted that they had a responsibility to guide women in their leisure choices and habits, and in this respect the recreational philosophies and practices of all three associations were very much of a piece.\textsuperscript{11} The WIC’s Circulating Library for Working Girls’ Clubs, for example, took as its twin missions encouraging working-class women to read, and the elevation of their reading tastes. Unfortunately, reported the \textit{Women’s Industrial News}, only “light literature” ranging from “blood and thunder to twaddle” appealed, despite the library’s best efforts “to provide wholesomer” books.\textsuperscript{12} (According to one contemporary critic, there was “hardly a magazine read by [working-class girls] which it would not be a moral benefit to have swept off the face of the earth.”\textsuperscript{13}) WPPL clubs and homes for working women were seen similarly as places in which upper- and middle-class women would use their influence to shape working-class behavior and values: “the ladies who visite[d] . . . had a very beneficial effect on the girls, which [was] shown in their improved manner and high moral principles,” the \textit{Women’s Union Journal} enthused of one such enterprise in Soho, London.\textsuperscript{14}

These organizations were not as exclusive as the GFS—and were less inclined to sanctimony about working-class women’s moral characters—but they depended on the patronage and benevolence of the ruling classes quite as much as it did.\textsuperscript{15} WPPL and WIC social gatherings (especially the more formal events) evoked the class power, privilege, and condescension that were hallmarks of rational recreation. Describing a dinner provided by Lady Brassey and a speech by her husband to 250 members of the London Women’s Union in September 1883, the \textit{Women’s Union Journal} enthused over the order and decorum that marked the occasion. “The tables. . . were tastefully laid out and decorated with flowers,” and the gathering of “what were justly termed ‘respectable well-behaved workwomen’” [emphasis added] was “a novel and pleasant sight,” according to Sir Thomas Brassey. Novel, presumably, because in the world-view of the aristocratic patrons of women’s rational recreation, qualities such as respectability and decorum were not easily admitted of laboring women.\textsuperscript{16}

Institutional efforts such as these were an important part of women’s rational recreation, but they were neither the only contributions to it nor, according to more than one
proponent, necessarily the most effective. “Vast numbers . . . [of] women and girls are not touched by such influences,” Kathleen M. Townend informed the National Council of Women of Great Britain (NCWGB) at its 1894 conference. “These must be reached in humbler fashion, they must be brought into contact more with the individual.” Among the various, personal attempts that privileged women made to touch and—in Townend’s words, “make brighter, purer, and freer from temptation”—laboring women’s lives were some imaginative schemes. “One lady. . . got up entertainments for poor people at her own house, and she called on those poor people from time to time. Then they [sic] gave out plants in the autumn, and in early March had a flower show.” Other offerings of “healthful counter-attractive recreation” included wealthy women opening their gardens and grounds occasionally for the “use and pleasure” of the less privileged, or entertaining female workhouse inmates “allowed out for a day.” Or organizing concerts and “lantern exhibitions” to mitigate the “dulness [that]. . . often sent people to the public-house” on long winter evenings. Recreational ministrations were among the duties some clergymen expected of female relatives. Wives and unmarried sisters entertained female parishioners at tea, gave girls and young women dancing lessons in their parlors, and accompanied them on excursions to the country or seaside. All the while, they imparted lessons in religion and refinement, for, the proponents of women’s rational recreation believed, it was “an education to the girls even to be with a refined woman, to watch her, talk to her.” So different was her “whole standard of life” from theirs, that “unconsciously they [were] learning by being with her.”

Perhaps the favorite form of upper- and middle-class provision for working women’s recreation was the “girls’ club” which offered a variety of social and educational activities. Associations large and small, national and local, and individual women, organized weekly or fortnightly gatherings of this kind. From Bournemouth and London to Birmingham, Cardiff, and Edinburgh, for example, young women trained at the renowned Madame Bergman Osterberg’s Physical Training College gave free gymnastics’ classes in the evenings for working girls and women—some in association with established clubs, others independently. Women’s settlement houses in London held girls’ clubs four or five times a week, many of which were allied with the Federation of Working Girls’ Clubs or the London Girls’ Club Union. There was a large and dynamic club movement in Birmingham. Edward Cadbury, Cecile Matheson, and George Shann indicated in a 1906 study of the city’s female wage-earners that there were 45 girls’ clubs with a total of 4,000 members run by Anglicans, Congregationalists, Wesleyans, the Society of Friends, and Unitarians. A number of Hebrew societies also organized recreation classes. In addition, the GFS had 35 branches with around 5,500 members and candidates, while a Sunday School Union ran 14 Girls’ Evening Homes with a combined membership of 800. These figures represented some 8 percent of the total number of the city’s wage-earning girls and women.

In the northern city of York—to illustrate an individual project of this kind—in 1902, seventeen year-old Winifred Rowntree, daughter of the president of the York Cocoa Works, formed a club for working-class girls and young women. This met one evening a week in the rooms of an adult evening school in the city’s Leeman Road district. By the time of its founder’s death in 1915, the “Honesty Girls’ Club” numbered 200 members ranging in ages from 5 to over 25, organized into five age groups. The club offered drill
classes, needlework (a compulsory subject), blouse-making, millinery, part singing, a dramatic class, Old English folk dancing and modern dancing, swimming, allotment gardening, nature study, and a Sunday afternoon class. "The fun and merriment" of the social and educational activities was "followed by... quiet reading and... hymn singing," with which the evening invariably closed. Many clubs, even those that were not directly connected with churches or chapels similarly encouraged religious devotion and piety by opening or closing meetings with a prayer. All emphasized "worthwhile," "improving" activities such as needlework and ("for the more energetic spirits") drill or dancing. All anticipated that members would adopt the quiet and decorous habits and manner of the ladies who taught, led, and managed them. All aimed at "refining...members by offering opportunities for wholesome recreation and development" and providing "a counter-attraction to the streets, where many a girl [otherwise found] her sole relaxation."22

There is little question, then, that by the latter decades of the nineteenth century, rational recreation programs, promoted and organized by upper- and middle-class women, for working-class girls and women, were a feature of urban and even, to a certain extent, rural England. The scope and impact of these exercises in reformist leisure, and especially the degree to which and how (if at all) they figured in the lives of the intended beneficiaries, remain open and important questions. Some certainly were able to articulate the moral agenda of the clubs they attended. Sara of the Hyson Green Girls’ Evening Home in Nottingham, for example, delighted one of the club’s leaders at the beginning of its 1890 season with the pronouncement: “I am glad I’ve been level-headed and know where to go to be respectable of an evening [sic]."23 But working-class “voices” such as these are few and far between in the documentary history of women’s rational recreation, and even then they have passed through several middle- and upper-class filters. The circumstances and motivations—social and personal, altruistic and self-interested—that impelled privileged women to undertake these reforms, however, have left a more accessible record.

Like their counterparts in the earlier decades of the nineteenth century, late Victorian and Edwardian female rational recreationists were uneasy about the deleterious consequences of its wide-sweeping economic and social transformations. And, like other reformers and commentators of their time, they particularly feared the nation’s physical and moral degeneration and the imminent eclipse of the British Empire. The working-class woman—and especially the young working-class woman, the embodiment and hope of the next and all future generations—figured in their apprehension of this “degeneracy crisis” as a central actor and, therefore, the primary focus for intervention.24 The family and (as a consequence of the post-1870 piecemeal introduction of compulsory elementary education) the school were two institutions charged with shaping working-class girls and women into the stuff from which wives and mothers of the empire were made. Domestic service, which in 1891 employed almost a third of the female wage labor force, was considered an ideal training for marriage and motherhood.25 But to a nation that, according to Thomas E. Jordan, sensed it was in a social and cultural crisis, these mechanisms appeared all too fallible.26 Public education, for example, though applauded for inculcating such worthy habits as order, discipline, and cleanliness, was criticized for failing to teach anything really worthwhile, and besides, ended too soon, leaving girls “without any help or guid-
ance at the most critical moment of their lives.” In addition, by 1911, although domestic service was still one of the single largest forms of female employment, it was a declining occupation to which fewer and fewer young women were favorably disposed. Those with a zest for life and a reluctance to submit to the very immediate and sometimes oppressive authority of a master and mistress saw alternative employment in manufacturing, and retail and service industries as holding the promise of greater independence and a more interesting and lively worklife. Finally, many reformers believed that lower-class families were incapable of raising young girls and women with the will or skills to be the good wives and mothers, the makers of those healthy and happy homes that the nation and empire needed. This was a problem compounded by the changing patterns of employment, for factory and shop work were notorious for leaving young women ignorant and careless of domestic duties.

Cognizant of these changes and concerned about the ramifications, upper- and middle-class women insisted that leisure could be used to transform recalcitrant working girls and women into dutiful wives and mothers. Female rational recreationists asserted that they could reach over the social and cultural divide and, through personal influence and example, raise and reform their laboring counterparts during the latter’s “precious hours of leisure.” Drawing on—while at the same time constructing and fuelling—the anxiety over degeneracy, they made working-class women’s leisure work; critical and difficult work which they claimed as their own, work for which they were singularly fitted.

The language of articles and letters in periodicals, speeches, and conference papers insisted on this. “A vast work lies before us,” Lady Albinia Hobart-Hampden declared in a typical call to arms, “who will rise up and do it?” Working women’s recreation was “work of supreme importance both for the present and for the future welfare of [the] nation,” Hobart-Hampden explained. It was work that was “sorely needed,” work with issues stretching “far into the future, when these girls shall be wives and mothers, wielding a mighty influence over the next generation—an influence which... will be nobler and better because of the lessons learned long ago in some girls’ club.” “Vice, disease, crime would sweep over this great Babylon as the waters of the Atlantic,” warned Maude Stanley, “but we must raise barriers, we must stem the tide of evil,” “[we must] establish in every locality clubs for working girls.” Experience showed that girls’ clubs would do “a great work... a work which raises, which ennobles, which brings out the best traits in a girl, which by its wholesome pleasures, by its varied interests, by its human sympathies between the ladies and the girls will make their lives happy and good ones.” In urban centers and rural districts, among “mothers, field and farm workers, [and] factory girls,” leisure reformers assured themselves that their “garden-parties, out-door lantern exhibitions, girls’ clubs, friendly teas, and wholesome work for mind and body” were doing a “noble,” “splendid,” and “very real work.”

Leisure was, in fact, much too serious to be left to lower-class women. Without guidance, they were liable to find “for themselves all sorts of amusement,” some of which was “unworthy and unstimulating,” and all of which was “unsatisfying.” In the view of many in the upper and middle classes, the working masses were “a pleasure-loving race,” often infuriatingly and irresponsibly so. The masses wallowed in a leisure culture that was rooted in a past more at ease with hedonism and sensual gratification and one that,
despite a certain taming, still celebrated those values. It was a culture whose appeal re-
formers well understood, but also one whose temptations they believed working-class
women were woefully ill equipped to resist. And it was a culture they felt sure was inimical
to the best interests of those women, their families and, ultimately therefore, nation and
empire.36

The main leisure fare of working-class women included gossiping, drinking, attend-
ing cheap theatres and music halls, meeting and promenading with acquaintances and
friends, shopping, celebrating holidays, birthdays, weddings, and a modest consumer-
ism.37 Sympathetic reformers could appreciate that, given the circumstances of their lives,
working women sought out forms of leisure that tended to either narcotize or excite. “Is it
any wonder,” wrote one,

that the tired seamstress, the washerwoman after standing long hours at the tub, the wild
factory girl after a day pent up within four walls—that each, as she drags her way back to
comfortless rooms, by courtesy called home, should linger at the swing door of the public
house, with its glaring lights, its warmth and glow on winter nights, and yield to the
seductions of strong drink which, for a time, brings a forgetfulness of sorrow, and drowns
the gnawing sense of looking for something different? [Or that, to] the weary mother in
some scattered country village, with her large family of children and scanty means., the
visit of the grocer’s cart, with its tempting bottles of cheap wines and spirits [is] an oppor-
tunity to which she flies to drown the ceaseless aching of her limbs, and to revive the
flagging energies which must be kept going if the home is to be kept going as well?38

Or that girls and women “cramped and confined” for hours on end in dreary, miserably-
paid occupations should hope to find in “the garish lights and dresses, the impure atmo-
sphere” of theatres and music halls, in “the impossible passions” and “artificial emotions”
of cheap literature, an exuberant reaction from the monotony, the deadening “greyness”
of their lives?39

But reformers also worried that these circumstantial pressures met little resistance
from working-class women about whose natures and innate characteristics they were sure;
and of whom most reformers seemed to hold the lowest expectations. “Giddy and weak,”
“overflowing with animal spirits,” brimming over “with the frank enjoyment of low life,”
to the censorious, lower-class women (especially young, wage-earning women) had little
control over their sensual appetites or any discrimination when it came to satisfying them.40
They were “wild and careless,” lacking in “purpose or perseverance,” craved “change and
variety.”41 They took their “silly and sensational”42 pleasures recklessly and drifted through
life with no higher object in view than “gaining [their] daily bread or getting as much
amusement as possible.”43 Writing in the “dark continent” convention of late nineteenth-
century imperialism, commentators such as Walter Besant rendered the women of the
laboring classes as an exotic and engaging fauna or a more earthy, primitive race of hu-
man. Besant’s description of “Liz,” the stereotypical factory girl in his East London, is
infused with an animalism and exuberance which is not easily contained and which threatens
the order and stability of civilized society. “Liz” has “quick and restless eyes” and “mobile”
lips; she is full of fun and “quick to laugh,” “ready-witted and prompt with repartee and
retort.” She can not walk sedately, but must dance along the street. Like her work-mates
who, “adorned with crimson and blue feathers... run about laughing and shrieking,” she
is an “impudent, saucy bird, always hungry, always on the lookout for something more.”44
It was an imagery which upper- and middle class commentators and critics commonly employed in their accounts of working-class women at public play. “Ready with a saucy word, a sharp retort, a rude laugh, and often, alas! even foul words or swearing,” female factory hands released from work and out for an evening of fun overflowed “with animal spirits,” moved “in shoals” and “swarms” through the crowded thoroughfares, “always on the look-out for a lark.” East London seamstresses in their “typical” “rowdy slovenliness [and] tarnished finery” (“such hats! and such feathers in them!”): “with warm hearts, with overflowing good nature,” they carelessly played in a “Garden of Eden of uncivilised life.”

Beatrice Potter (later Webb) sensed no “consciousness of sin” among the work-girls and women of the East End tailoring trade, whose uninhibited enjoyment of “the multitudinous excitements of the streets” she observed in the 1880s. Consequently, she concluded, “you cannot accuse them of immorality. . . . There is only one Fall possible to them—drink, leading slowly but inevitably to the drunkard’s death.” But for most rational recreationists neither drink nor any of the working-class woman’s “cheap amusements” was far removed from sin. Sin, in fact, was often the sorry price that had to be paid for those amusements, and in pressing the case for their reform of lower-class leisure, upper- and middle-class women re-told and re-worked an ancient tale of careless delight, temptation, and Fall.

There were several versions of the story, some of which focused on adolescent, wage-earning workers, others on married women and mothers. Some charted in detail the stages of a life course marked by tragic beginnings and disastrous decline. Others telescoped the narrative around a first, fatal misstep—a drink taken at a workplace party that engendered “the taste for a dangerous indulgence,” for example. All warned of the dire consequences of what might first appear innocently in the guise of “harmless recreation.” Maude Stanley’s “Clubs for Working Girls” is an exemplar of these cautionary tales. Stanley’s woman-child becomes a wage earner at fourteen and thus earns a dangerous freedom and independence from her parents. Fearful of losing a contributor to the family exchequer, they “will not venture to draw the reins too tightly,” but instead let her “have her fling.” Seeking recreation in the street, the “main playground” of the people, she begins her moral descent by loitering with “some chosen companion” or indulging “in rough play with boys and lads.” Eventually the mere “walk around, the looking into the shop-windows, the passing by the glaring gaslit stalls in the evening markets” cease to be enough to entertain or divert. And so, if the means can be found, comes the first “visit to the music hall, the cheap theatres, the gin-palaces, the dancing saloons, and the wine shop.” Then follows—finally and inevitably—the “easy sliding into greater sin. . . [and] degradation. . . the downfall of all womanly virtue.”

In all these narratives, the reformer cast herself as a moral and cultural superior whose duty it was to save working girls and women, nation and empire, from the consequences of profligacy and dissolution. Prepared for the task by birth and breeding, education and upbringing, she was a stalwart guide and teacher, a friend who would lead the working-class woman “forwards and upwards,” who would “raise. . . purify, and strengthen her.” GFS leaders saw their organization as the nation’s “largest preventive society,” acting as a “fence between [working girls] and vice.” The association essayed an almost continuous...
surveillance and instruction of its members from the time they joined as candidates at the age of eight until they married and came under “a husband’s protection.” The educated, cultured ladies who made up the women’s corps of the late Victorian and Edwardian rational recreation movement thus attempted to provide the controlling influences and instruction about which they believed working-class parents—and, more specifically, mothers—were indifferent. “Thousands of lower-class mothers are... utterly and culpably careless about their daughters,” opined one aristocratic associate and leader of the GFS. “It is here the Girls’ Friendly Society steps in,” she continued. “Modesty in behaviour at home and on the streets is enforced... instruction [is] given... in the first principles of purity and honour... the protection and refining influence surrounding the daughters of the upper classes [is] extended to the daughters even of the lowest!”

Mired in the debasing culture of working-class homes and neighborhoods, caught up in the frantic and tawdry pleasures of the lowest forms of leisure, it was almost impossible for the working girl or woman to raise her thoughts to what was “lovely, pure, or of good report.” But with help, she might do so, and who better to give that help than upper- and middle-class women? “We have had leisure and opportunities of culture and of entering into the elevating thoughts of our time,” Lady Albinia Hobart-Hampden reminded her peers, “have we not something we can give to our less favoured sisters? Cannot we seek to show them the deeper meanings of life, and raise their thoughts above their surroundings?”

Making leisure work as an educational tool, as a preventive and remedial force against a host of social and cultural ailments, was the essence of rational recreation. And during the late Victorian and Edwardian period, numbers of upper- and middle-class women worked to administer the nostrum to girls and women of the lower classes. Yet, in the writings and pronouncements of leisure reformers, dominant though the motifs of solemn duty, of sacro-secular mission are, there is another strain to be heard. This spoke of the benefits that rational recreation also provided privileged women. For them this work could be an antidote to too much leisure.
Philanthropic, charitable, and social reform movements were arenas in which upper-and middle-class women stretched the class and gender conventions that historical wisdom tells us frequently rendered their lives ones of “refined [and “enforced”] idleness.” By the turn of the century, charity work had been firmly established as a “respectable alternative” to genteel idleness and many privileged women found in it a sense of purpose that was denied them elsewhere. Thousands established a presence in working-class neighborhoods and workplaces where, ministering to the poor and deprived, they sought and found self-fulfillment and excitement. (One contemporary estimated for the final decades of the nineteenth century that there were over 500,000 such women engaged in charity work.)

Some were inconsistent and half-hearted “workers” about whom the more diligent complained. These approached charity and philanthropy as they did shopping: in the words of Judith Walkowitz, as a “roughly equivalent recreational [activity] appropriate to their station.” But even the most idealistically-minded experienced the foray into working-class culture as an adventure, a release, emancipation from dull respectability. As Martha Vicinus notes, the colonial and imperialist overtones of women’s settlement work were much more than symbolic for middle-class women: “Emigration to Canada or Australia meant adventure, freedom, and space for their brothers. Tied more closely to their families, women could find freedom by ‘emigrating’ to the East End [of London].”

Thus, the very features of working-class women’s leisure which rational recreationists bemoaned and determined to reform, paradoxically, had a powerful appeal for them. While reformers exhorted working girls and women to avoid the dangerous, disorderly passions of popular culture and remain aloof from its cheap excitements, they themselves enjoyed rubbing up against that culture. Lily Montagu, one of the keenest proponents of raising working women’s recreational standards, nonetheless envied the “abandonment” with which they joined “the leisured classes” once the working day was over. Emily Kinnaird, in a 1900 presentation to the NCWGB conference on “The Bight Use of Leisure,” similarly admitted the contradictions inherent in the project in which she was engaged. “Leisure, to be leisure, must be spontaneous,” she mused. “I have felt how easily leisure vanishes from our sight and eludes our grasp if we talk of it or try to organise it. . . . leisure is abandonment to miscellaneous impulses.” Busily organizing and policing working women’s leisure, women of privilege were able thus, in a qualified and guarded fashion, to partake of the abandonment and excitement of popular culture, to enjoy being ‘in’ but not ‘of’ its raucous world. Ellen Chase, a settlement worker in Deptford, London, loved the fact that “there was always something going on,” that “there was always a spice about ‘going into the street.’” Margaret Nevinson, who spent the early years of her married life in settlement work in Whitechapel recalled that “life was always full of interest, change, and excitement. . . . I never remember one dull moment during the two years we lived there.” At the beginning of her “apprenticeship” as a social investigator and reformer, Beatrice Webb, who experienced the “want of employment” in her comfortably upper-middle-class life as “almost torture, a silent misery,” described her relationship with the East End and its lower-class inhabitants as a “weird romance.” Though the squalor and coarseness of much of popular culture depressed her, Webb more often “[felt] envy than pity” for the East Enders. She relished the unprecedented freedoms that social missionary work brought.
her and her colleagues. "Ah! what would conventional West End acquaintance say to two young women smoking and talking in the bed, sitting, working, smoking and bath room of an East End School Board visitor?" she recorded in her diary of an afternoon she and a friend spent in the company of a former seaman employed by the local school board. "We have entertained freely and thoroughly enjoyed our life in working-class society."64

Few leisure reformers acknowledged the paradox and tensions in such encounters with working-class culture, and in the nexus of class and gender relations that lay at the heart of women’s rational recreation. Immured and immersed in a class system that was based on the assumption that “the lower classes laboured to sustain the rich. . . in comfort,”65 it was possible for most to avoid facing their own complicity in sustaining its inequities. Equally, they might never see or recognize the inequalities in the relationship between themselves and laboring women, between their own bounteous leisure and the latter’s unremitting labor. While insisting that working women curtail their involvement in working-class culture, they simultaneously continued in their enjoyment of its pleasures. Few shared or articulated Lily Montagu’s discomfort with such inconsistencies. Noting the irony of social reformers attempting to “improve” working women’s lives through philanthropy when they were so often a cause of the hardships those women endured, she recalled asking a young female clerk of her acquaintance whether she was likely to get a desperately needed rise. “‘Oh no, I am afraid I cannot get one yet awhile,’” was the reply, “‘for we are owed at least £200.’ She then gave me the names of one or two well-known social workers with whom her firm had contracted bad debts which were to be paid in the nebulous future.” “The era must come,” Montagu insisted, “when. . . life’s opportunities [will be] better equalised, because on the other side of the scale [from the woman of leisure] there is the sweated, over-strained piece worker, whose charm is completely crushed by the excessive load of toil to which the over-leisured...contributes.”66

This inequality was an elemental feature of working women’s lives about which the proponents of rational recreation were largely, eloquently silent. As, in the main, historians have been silent on women’s rational recreation, despite the importance that late Victorian and Edwardian social reformers attributed to it. Both silences speak to the privilege and power that derive from class and gender; the balances struck, and inequalities sustained as women and men, working classes and ruling classes live their lives and make their worlds. Upper- and middle-class women in late Victorian and Edwardian England could and, for the most part did, choose to make working women’s leisure a moral problem for which they had a solution. And this solution, happily for them, also facilitated their negotiation of the cultural constraints that were part and parcel of being over-leisure ladies. Similarly, in overlooking women, a predominantly masculinist scholarship has effaced them from the history of rational recreation, rendering it almost exclusively a men’s realm when it actually occupied large numbers of privileged women, and figured prominently in ruling-class schemes for the reform of working-class women’s lives. Important empirical, conceptual, and political questions remain, both on the specifics of rational recreation and working-class women’s leisure, and the more general issues of class, gender, and leisure within which the present examination of women’s rational recreation
has been framed. But this essay is intended as an initial contribution to a consideration of these neglected topics.

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4. Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution*, 132; Bailey *Leisure and Culture*, 100. There were significant and complex gradations within and between the social classes of Victorian and Edwardian England that I have not attempted to delineate or discuss here but intend to address in subsequent work.


8. Harrison, “For Church, Queen and Family,” 116.
15. Harrison reports that in 1879–80, a schism arose in the GFS over the issue of chastity, a state which some claimed could not be guaranteed of urban work-girls. The Society refused to change the rule requiring chastity of its members and a breakaway organization with less exalted principles was formed. Harrison, “For Church, Queen and Family,” 118, 120. On the overly exclusive nature of the GFS, see also WUJ (Oct. 1884): 84.

The role of female physical educators and the place of physical training in the working women’s club movement are important issues that warrant further study. A preliminary examination of the archives of several women’s physical education colleges suggests that the principals, staff, and students were closely involved in club work. See, for example, Madame Bergman Osterberg’s Physical Training College, Report for 1895, 26, 29, 30–31, 32, 33, the Bergman Osterberg Archive, University of Greenwich, Dartford; Anstey Physical Training College Magazine (Autumn 1905): 17–28 and (Summer 1906): 6–8, both courtesy of Mrs. Frankie Calland, secretary of the Anstey Association; Cohn Crunden, A History of Anstey College of Physical Education (Sutton Coldfield, UK: Anstey College of Physical Education, 1974), 10, 11, 14, 16, 18–21; Ida M. Webb, “The History of Chelsea College of Physical Education with Special Reference to Curriculum Development, 1898–1973,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Leicester, 1977), 51, 52, 58, 139, 153; Dorette Wilkie, “Physical Training in Girls’ Clubs,” Girls’ Club News (Nov. 1916): 3–5; Dorette Wilkie, “Physical Training for Girls,” Japan British Exhibition, Women’s Congress (Jul. 9, 1910), available in the Chelsea College of Physical Education archive, University of Brighton. Dorette Wilkie, the
founder of Chelsea, was a native of Prussia. She became a British citizen in 1908 and changed her name by deed-poll from Wilke to Wilkie; the typewritten copy of the 1910 paper which is in the college archive is, however, inscribed "Wilke." See Webb, “History of Chelsea College," 41, 48–50. I am very grateful to Dr. Webb for giving me access to the Chelsea archives, directing my attention to the article and paper by Wilkie, and sharing a draft of her forthcoming history of the college with me.


29. Hobart-Hampden, “The Working Girl of To-Day,” 726. Instructing and edifying the working classes through personal example was a primary impetus behind the settlement house movement that began in the 1880s. The first London settlement was Toynbee Hall, established in Whitechapel in 1884 and staffed by Oxbridge students. The first women’s settlement was the Women’s University Settlement, founded in 1887. Girls’ clubs, mothers’ meetings, and other social and educational classes were among the services that settlements provided to working-class communities. On the women’s settlement movement, see Vicinus, Independent Women, 211–46.


36. On efforts to “tame” or “civilize” popular recreation see, for example, Alun Howkins, “The Taming of Whitsun: the Changing Face of a Nineteenth-Century Rural Holiday,” Yeo and Yeo, eds., Popular Culture and Class Conflict, 187–208; Golby and Purdue, The Civilisation of the Crowd. The latter challenges the interpretation of a traditional leisure culture in retreat which is advanced.


47. Potter, “Pages from a Work-Girl’s Diary,” 311.


50. Ibid.


54. Ibid.


