Educating for Femininity? Reform of Working and Middle Class Girls' Education in Victorian England

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EDUCATING FOR FEMININITY? REFORM OF WORKING AND MIDDLE CLASS GIRLS’ EDUCATION IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND

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A thesis submitted to the Department of History of Wellesley College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors.

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25 April, 2014
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At the end of my sophomore year of college, I was adamant that I’d write a thesis. I didn’t know what I wanted to discuss, apart from a vague sense that it would focus on Victorian pedagogy, or how I could embark on such a sustained project. But, as I told my soon-to-be advisor, I knew I was going to do it, and I knew that I therefore had to spend my entire summer immersing myself in educational history.

It’s been almost two years since that discussion. The reading list my advisor provided, in conjunction with my studies of Victorian girlhood at Oxford University, helped narrow my focus to girls’ education, while my work with the Bodleian’s collection of child diaries inspired my concentration on first-hand accounts—more specifically, memoirs.

Of course, none of the studies I completed before returning to Wellesley for senior year really prepared me for the huge intellectual and emotional undertaking that is an honours thesis. Like every thesising senior, however, I did my best to rise to the challenge, facing what often felt like a monumental task with a mix of dedication and mild panic. In the end, I’m proud of what I’ve created—and, more importantly, grateful for what I’ve learned in the process. Perhaps I’ll even decide that writing a thesis was really no big deal one of these days!

In the meantime, I’d like to extend my thanks and warm appreciation to my two long-suffering advisors, Professor Kapteijns and Professor Slobodian. Without your ongoing advice and support, my thesis wouldn’t have been half as good as it is now. You have even convinced me of the value of a sustained historiography! Thank you, too, to my wonderful parents. Mum, your own intellectual prowess has been a constant source of inspiration; I dedicate this thesis to you. Dad, thanks for providing the much-needed emotional safety valve, especially in March and April 2014. You’ve been my rock. Lastly, to all my friends, and particularly Adrienne and Nicole, you kids are the best. Thanks for the countless bad jokes, coffee dates, and commiserations. I promise I’ll stop talking about my thesis now.
INTRODUCTION

North American and British popular culture is saturated with images of Victorian girls’ education. Representations abound in box office film remakes of 19th and early 20th century school stories, like *Jane Eyre* and *A Little Princess*, in contemporary children’s literature, and even in the pervasive idea of the “schoolgirl,” which emerged and was fundamentally defined by Victorian educational practices.\(^1\) There exists a clear fascination with the pinafored child with her governess, and with her girlish escapades at boarding school. A proper historical analysis of Victorian girls’ education requires scholars to set aside these preconceptions, however. As much as the romanticized view of their schooling serves to entertain, it often fails the litmus test of historical accuracy.

In this introduction, I first provide a brief outline of the development of working-class and middle-class girls’ education in the mid- and late-19th century. The bulk of the chapter analyzes the late 20th and early 21st-century historiography of working-class and middle-class girls’ education, and my thesis’ place within existing scholarship. As I will demonstrate, it is my aim to synthesize the two dominant schools of thought regarding educational reform. I argue that, while conservative attitudes regarding both the fundamental purpose and overall utility of girls’ education persisted (and indeed, remained prevalent) well into the late 19th century, major reforms within schools significantly altered the school experience for the majority of Victorian girls. These reforms drastically changed not only the educational but also the occupational landscape for young Victorian and Edwardian women. Educational reform, in short, was not completely transformative, but it did transform the lives of many individual women.

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\(^1\) Jane Hunter, *How Young Ladies Became Girls: The Victorian Origins of American*
Before 1870, a working-class girl might attend a range of educational institutions.² Most common were dame schools, small establishments run by older working-class “dames,” where girls and boys alike received an education principally in the “3Rs.”³ As the century progressed, a girl might also attend a charity school operated by a religious organization that provided pupils with a similarly rudimentary education. More often than not, girls would withdraw from school at an early age to work or to help at home.⁴ Beginning in 1870, however, Parliament passed a series of education acts that established a basic system of education for working-class children. Developments included setting up state-run elementary schools, standardizing the curriculum, making school attendance compulsory and, after 1891, providing free education to all children.⁵ As a result, by 1900, most working-class girls attended school for a number of years, receiving an education profoundly shaped by the British government.⁶

Until the late 1860s, most middle-class girls were educated at home, either by their mother or a governess.⁷ Many also attended private “finishing” establishments for a brief period during their adolescence. These establishments usually accommodated only a

handful of students, and were based in the home of a genteel woman.  

8 Beyond the 3Rs, girls generally concentrated on feminine “accomplishments,” such as singing and poetry recitation.  

9 Around 1870, a new type of girls’ school emerged, modelled after boys’ grammar schools. These endowed schools incorporated liberal curricula and formality into their structure, and emphasized academic rigour and achievement.  

10 They also proved very popular: while most girls continued to receive some of their education at home, by 1900, these new endowed schools provided the majority of middle-class girls with at least some of their education.  

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**Victorian Girls’ Education in Recent Historiography**

The late 1860s and early 1870s clearly mark a break in Victorian educational practice for both the working and middle classes. While scholars generally agree that this period was a decisive moment in the history of girls’ education, a consensus does not exist about the depth of change, or about how it affected girls in the long term.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a number of feminist historians began to examine Victorian girls’ education. In many respects, they were pioneers: although Victorian educational reform in general was already a well explored topic, few scholars had concentrated exclusively on girls’ education, and especially on working-class girls’ education. These scholars recognized the c. 1870-shift to working-class and middle-class girls’ education, but they questioned its true import, arguing that, on an ideological level,

8 Ibid, 139.
11 Steinbach, 176.
little actually changed for girls. Their arguments draw heavily on the ideology of separate spheres. Specifically, they focus on the Victorian discourse that women’s “proper” place was at home, which, as Davidoff and Hall demonstrated in 1987, rose to prominence in the 1840s, largely due to industrial capitalism and the formal separation of work and home.\textsuperscript{12}

For the sake of clarity, a brief discussion of the ideology of separate spheres and the domestic ideal is warranted. Their construction of model femininity was perpetuated principally by the middle classes, but was adopted by and applied to women from all social strata.\textsuperscript{13} Notions of gendered separation have existed for millennia; the ideology of separate spheres, however, relied on a unique mixture of religious conviction and biological determinism to maintain that women were ordained to be wives, mothers, and household managers, and indeed, were naturally unfit for economic and civil participation in society.\textsuperscript{14} Instead, homemaking was glorified as quasi-spiritual, with the popular \textit{Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management} (1861), for example, contending that, for women, “[nothing] takes a higher rank in God’s eyes than household duties.”\textsuperscript{15}

The importance of the separate spheres ideology in Victorian English society cannot be underemphasized. A woman who successfully embodied the Victorian feminine ideal was herself regarded as a quasi-spiritual being, the “angel in the house.” Full of sweetness and light, she not only guided her husband and children towards virtue but, in

\textsuperscript{13} Dyhouse, 80.
\textsuperscript{14} Gorham, 4; Davidoff and Hall, 171.
\textsuperscript{15} Isabella Beeton, \textit{Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management} (London: S.O. Beeton Publishing, 1861), 60.
so doing, helped raise the moral character of society as a whole.\textsuperscript{16} Conversely, a woman who was unwilling or unable to observe this gender typology was often ridiculed or vilified. A myriad of Victorian texts, for example, criticize middle-class women who, by opting for “over-education” or outside employment, were derided for their masculinity and pretensions and, as a group, even charged with “enfeebling… the [British] race” by neglecting of their husbands and children.\textsuperscript{17} Elite condemnation of working-class women who could not afford to remain at home was often even more alarmist. They too were reproached for their masculinity and for “abandoning” their family members; however, commentators also drew explicit connections between their employment and juvenile delinquency and working-class drunkenness and radicalism. Put simply, if these working women attended to the hearth with as much care as they did the factory machine, their young boys and husbands would not be tempted to go out and engage in criminal activity.\textsuperscript{18} Much more than an individual woman’s reputation, in short, rode on adherence to the domestic ideal.

To return to my discussion of historiography, one of the first scholars to delve into the topic of working-class girls’ educational reform was Carol Dyhouse. Central to Dyhouse’s thesis is that, in the late Victorian period, the Education Department and the Church of England aimed to “civilize” the working classes through a new educational policy. She argues that, for girls, this objective meant promoting the existing sexual

\textsuperscript{16} Davidoff and Hall, 182-184.
\textsuperscript{18} Dyhouse, 80-83.
division of labour within the family.\textsuperscript{19} Dyhouse chronicles elementary schools’ overwhelming focus on needlework and domestic skills, to the detriment of basic literacy and numeracy, to demonstrate the conservative gender ideology underlying educational reform.\textsuperscript{20} Attempting to explain the motivation behind the reform, she draws on middle-class fears about industrialization and working-class radicalism. Concerns about delinquent children, drunken and anarchic men, and infant mortality rates, she claims, led the middle classes to perceive working-class women as “ill-equipped wives, mothers, and housekeepers” who required schooling in the domestic arts so they could better influence their male family members.\textsuperscript{21} From her perspective, working-class girls’ educational reform was not concerned with “raising” girls, but with training them to be traditional “handmaids of virtue” to remedy a budding national crisis.\textsuperscript{22}

Ann Marie Turnbull presents a similar argument. She too contends that the Education Department’s domestic lessons were “social sedatives,” although she takes her analysis a step further: Noting the poor quality of needlework and housewifery lessons, she posits that curriculum developers had no intention of actually teaching girls to be competent washers, cooks, or seamstresses, even within a home environment; rather, she argues that they simply wanted working-class girls to internalize a middle-class standard of propriety, regardless of whether they could actually live up to it or not.\textsuperscript{23} Although sometimes conspiratorial in tone, Turnbull’s essay also provides a thorough outline of how working-class girls’ and boys’ education became increasingly differentiated in the

\textsuperscript{19} Dyhouse, 79.  
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, 84.  
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 84-90.  
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 91.  
\textsuperscript{23} Turnbull, 84-89.
late Victorian period and documents the curriculum’s growing emphasis on a separate spheres ideology that “secured women’s imprisonment in domesticity.”

Scholars in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s questioned the ideological significance of middle-class girls’ education as well. In 1978, Sara Delamont published two articles focused on what she describes as “the contradictions in ladies’ education” in Britain and the United States. While noting the mid-century movement that attacked the frivolity of girls’ education, as well as the establishment of “good, academic schools,” she argues that English girls’ education remained firmly rooted in the cultivation of “perfect little ladies, pure in thought…and ruled by etiquette.” Delamont also considers middle-class parents’ changing attitudes to their daughters’ education, maintaining that most late-Victorian parents “bought into” the new style of education as a form of conspicuous consumption, and that, even by 1900, middle-class parents principally wanted their daughters to embody the early Victorian model of dependent, self-sacrificing womanhood. Delamont therefore contends that reform was a “Pyrrhic victory” for girls’ education: although new educational practices narrowed the structural and curricular gaps between middle-class girls’ and boys’ schooling, educational pioneers and parents continued to glorify—and, in fact, further entrenched—the Victorian domestic ideal.

27 Ibid, 142.
28 Ibid, 166; 184.
Deborah Gorham presents a similar thesis in her book *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (1982). Arguing that the “Angel in the House” archetype remained at the heart of girls’ education throughout the 19th century, she highlights endowed schools’ focus on charity work, household management, sewing, and theoretical housewifery as articulations of a conservative gender ideology. She also comments on new schools’ continued emphasis on marriage and motherhood, even when girls studied “masculine” subjects. Gorham cites the words of a number of reforming educationalists and headmistresses to establish the pervasiveness of this educational focus, concluding that “at the end of the century, girls were still advised, even by those most committed to their education, that they should perceive education as a preparation for ‘woman’s mission,’ that is to say, for femininity and domesticity.”

Evidently, Dyhouse, Turnbull, Delamont, and Gorham chiefly emphasize ideology in their studies of Victorian girls’ education. In so doing, they paint an overwhelmingly negative picture of reform: Despite the structural innovations to education, they posit, it continued to “trap” girls in the domestic sphere (and indeed, in the case of working-class girls, served to root them further in the home).

A fresh wave of scholarship concerned with Victorian girls’ education emerged around 1990, functioning partly as a reaction to these ideas. This time, historians concentrated almost exclusively on the practical changes to Victorian working and middle-class girls’ schooling, contending that, far from being a rearticulation of old ideas, 1870 marked a paradigm shift in the history of girls’ education and girlhood.

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29 Gorham, 105.
30 Ibid, 104; 108.
Sally Mitchell is one such historian. In her 1995 work, *The New Girl: Girls' Culture in England, 1880-1915*, she argues that legislation limiting child labour and promoting elementary education transformed working-class girlhood in the late Victorian period: daughters of the working classes were no longer “working girls,” but “had come to be included under the conceptual model of ‘the schoolgirl.’” To support this claim, she uses new laws and the sustained emphasis on education in magazines geared towards working-class girls. Mitchell also contends that the girls themselves internalized this message, noting that, by the end of the century, many saw themselves primarily as schoolgirls whose proper place was in school. In this way, Mitchell emphasizes that these working-class girls were radically different from previous generations. Instead of considering school a fleeting part of their childhood, cues from the Education Department and commentators led them to view sustained education as integral to their development—and, in some cases, a fundamental right.

Using similar reasoning, Susie Steinbach contends that “working-class girls’ schooling changed dramatically in the second half of the nineteenth century.” Steinbach acknowledges that working-class education became increasingly gendered, but she posits that much of the change was nevertheless positive. Steinbach highlights the unprecedented literacy and numeracy rates amongst late-Victorian girls, which she argues created new opportunities for working-class women. Rather than having to rely on drudgework, their basic education allowed increasing numbers of women to assume, for

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33 Ibid, 175.
34 Ibid, 93-94.
35 Steinbach, 173.
instance, shop-keeping and clerical work. Moreover, tracing the extension of the school leaving age, Steinbach demonstrates how, by the 1890s, more working-class girls than ever entered into quasi-professions, such as elementary teaching and nursing. From her perspective, educational reform did not constrain young working-class women’s growing transition into the public sphere, but actually facilitated it.

A historiographical shift also occurred in the scholarship surrounding middle-class girls’ education. A 1991 article by Ellen Jordan focuses on the new academic orientation of girls’ schools and the introduction of public examinations. She portrays these developments as encroachments and even “attacks” on early Victorian accomplishment training (for instance, dance and conversation lessons), arguing that the introduction of grammar school practices was a politically charged move that contradicted conventional definitions of a feminine education. Like Steinbach, Jordan also insists that educational reform affected girls’ futures. She links the proliferation of endowed schools to middle-class women’s growing access to university, as well as to the rising number of “respectable” career paths open to women in the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods. Echoing an earlier work by Felicity Hunt, Jordan argues that the new opportunities created by endowed schools through their “masculine” educational focus did not emerge incidentally, but resulted from the conscious objectives of some reforming schoolmistresses, who wished to “to prepare [girls] for both home and work.” In other words, Jordan sees an explicit connection between middle-class girls’ educational reform

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37 Ibid, 180.
40 Hunt, 8-9; Jordan, 445.
and the expanding roles for women outside the home in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Sally Mitchell examines late Victorian changes to middle-class girls’ education as well. She points to the number of endowed schools that were established in the 1870s and 1880s, and to their influence on existing educational structures, to argue for the comprehensive nature of reform.\(^4\) Mitchell also scrutinizes the new physical and organizational environments endowed schools created to show that they did not only mirror boys’ grammar schools in terms of curriculum, but also in terms of their schedule, physical layout, and teacher-student dynamic.\(^5\) Particularly noteworthy is Mitchell’s assessment of physical education, and endowed schools’ progression from “gentle calisthenics” to demanding gym classes and competitive intercollegiate team sports. She argues that this transition, while highly circumscribed, reflects just how encompassing late-Victorian reform was: endowed schools not only trained pupils to adopt “masculine” study habits, but even came to encourage physical “boyishness” in girls.\(^6\) Put simply, by redefining the schoolgirl, they contributed to the transformation of middle-class girlhood at large.

The Organization of this Thesis

To summarize, two broad historiographical schools exist in the study of Victorian girls’ education: one that emerged in the late 1970s and places emphasis on the theory behind the reform to argue that little changed, and one that developed around 1990 and


\(^5\) Ibid, 81.

\(^6\) Ibid, 104.
focuses on tangible practical change to demonstrate that a transformation did indeed occur. At first blush, their arguments seem diametrically opposed; certainly Sally Mitchell has directly contested previous scholarship, making the case that it overlooks concrete changes through its overwhelming focus on ideology.\textsuperscript{44}

In my thesis, I will evaluate the arguments of both groups of scholarship, examining the significance and impact of the changes in girls’ education from the subjective positions of some working-class and middle-class girls, as expressed in their memoirs. In Chapter 1, I consider the development of working-class girls’ education, demonstrating the profound structural changes that emerged despite enduring traditionalism regarding working-class women’s role in society. In Chapter 2, I turn my attention to the reform of middle-class girls’ education, juxtaposing the new opportunities available to girls with the pervasive belief that both divine and natural order consigned them to marriage and motherhood. As noted, my aim is to bridge the gap between these two bodies of scholarship to show that girls’ educational reform was both old-fashioned and innovative, and that we can unproblematically understand it as such. More specifically, I argue that, at the level of value systems, old-style Victorian conservatism remained influential, but in terms of girls’ everyday experiences, an important shift undoubtedly occurred. While reform was therefore not revolutionary, it nevertheless fundamentally altered the lives of countless girls and young women. As I note in my conclusion, moreover, it also opened the door to even further change in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century—much of which was actually instigated by this new group of educated women.

\textsuperscript{44} Mitchell, \textit{The New Girl}, 71.
Eight primary sources—seven memoirs and one memoir-style biography—by women describing their own educational experiences form the basis of my case study. These memory texts are illustrative of early and late Victorian educational practice and, together, allow us to observe its development. By both describing their childhood and evaluating the significance of events in hindsight, the authors reflect two moments: the time about which they write, and the time during which they are writing. I will first explore the former, returning to the latter, that is to say the moment the writer comes into her own voice, in my conclusion.
CHAPTER 1: WORKING-CLASS GIRLS’ EDUCATION

The growing elite focus on working-class education noted in my introduction fundamentally altered the school experience for working-class Victorian children: School became increasingly standardized as schools regulated by the newly formed Department of Education took prominence over dame schools, informal “institutions” run from the homes of impoverished and (usually) elderly women. At the same time, as we shall see, gender differentiation became a much more pronounced feature of working-class education.

In this chapter, I will examine the memoirs of four women: Mary Smith, Marianne Farningham, Flora Thompson, and Daisy Cowper, whose various school experiences are illustrative of working-class girls’ education at different points in the Victorian era. Through the lens of these memoirs, I aim to demonstrate how limited working-class girls’ education remained throughout the Victorian period, despite significant reforms made to elementary education. I argue that, while some gender-based distinction was common in the educational programs of the early 1800s, over the course of the 19th century, such distinctions grew considerably. I connect this development partly to the mounting influence of the middle-class educationalists and their desire to use the schoolroom to instil conservative ideas of femininity focused on girls, but also to the ongoing disinterest of both officials and parents towards girls’ academic achievement. At the same time, however, I attempt to revise earlier scholarship that fails to note the progress that did occur, particularly in terms of more widespread and sustained school

attendance, rising literacy and numeracy rates, and the consequent increase of career opportunities available to young working-class women.

England had no system of national education until 1870, did not institute compulsory attendance until 1880, and did not fully subsidize education until 1891. Nevertheless, by the early Victorian period, schooling was an established part of working-class childhood: At Tysoe on Warwickshire, there were “only one or two families whose children did not go to school at all” according to one trade unionist, while the 1851 census recorded that 54% of children between five and fifteen attended school at any given time. However, the education children received was generally poor, intermittent, and short. In 1851, more than 700 teachers surveyed by the census were unable even to sign their own names; moreover, educational authorities noted that children were frequently absent for extended periods, usually for financial reasons, and that parents and teachers generally believed that working-class children ought to leave school by their tenth birthday.

Before 1870, working-class children might attend a number of educational institutions. Until the 1850s, dame schools remained the most common, although between the 1850s and 1870, state-aided National and British Schools, overseen respectively by the Church of England and the British and Foreign School Society (the latter, a largely nonconformist group), came to surpass them in popularity. Indeed, by 1870, National and British Schools provided over 90% of voluntary school places for

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working-class children.\textsuperscript{51} While National and British Schools were more formal environments than dame schools, in small towns and villages, they might simply be single schoolrooms where largely unqualified teachers taught children of mixed ages and genders. More common, however, were large, district schools in urban centres, with children divided roughly by age and educational stage, and boys and girls occupying separate departments.\textsuperscript{52}

As I have implied, 1870 marked a critical juncture in the history of English education, when England began to construct for itself a state-organized educational scheme.\textsuperscript{53} The \textit{Elementary Education Act 1870} established a system of government-run schools across England to provide all children aged five to ten with a basic “elementary education”.\textsuperscript{54} These new elementary schools were meant to supplement, not replace, the education provided by National and British Schools; they were run by local school boards, and were either free or (before 1891) cost a nominal amount.\textsuperscript{55}

While the \textit{Education Act 1870} did not create a system of universal education, in many respects, it foreshadowed one. It was the first in a series of acts that provided an increasingly expansive and prescriptive course of education accessible to all English children: The \textit{Education Act 1880}, for example, made school attendance across the

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid, 101.
\textsuperscript{52} Frost, \textit{Victorian Childhoods}, 38.
\textsuperscript{54} Susie Steinbach, \textit{Women in England 1760-1914: A Social History} (London: Phoenix, 2005), 170-171; The motivations behind this statute were manifold, but relate broadly to fears about keeping Britain commercially and politically powerful on the world stage. As they are beyond the scope of my thesis, interested readers may refer to Michael Sanderson’s \textit{Education, Economic Change and Society in England 1780-1870}, from Cambridge University Press.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid, 171.
country compulsory to age ten, while the *Board of Education Act 1899* raised the leaving age to twelve. As a result, by 1900, over 5.3 million children attended elementary schools, 61.1% at National Schools, 24.2% at Board Schools, and 6.2% at British Schools.

I divide this chapter by chronology, considering first the early Victorian period (which I identify loosely as 1830 to 1870), and then outline mid-century reform, before turning to the late Victorian period (roughly 1870 to 1900). Again, I argue that, over the 19th century, as working-class education became increasingly state-controlled, the distinctions between boys’ and girls’ education grew markedly. Notwithstanding these arguably retrograde developments in working-class girls’ education, however, reform did precipitate some positive change that greatly affected girls’ future prospects. My conclusion, then, weighs the overall significance of Victorian reform on working-class girls, establishing that, despite the continued scarcity of educational opportunities, those that were introduced mark a clear departure from early Victorian practice.

**The Early Victorian Period**

The first memoir under consideration is that of Mary Smith. Mary was born in a village in Oxfordshire in 1822. Her father was a shoemaker, and her mother, the vicarage cook; accordingly, the Smiths were members of the skilled working class. Mary attended two dame schools between the ages of four and eight, before being sent to a

\[\text{\underline{\text{56}}} \text{ Ibid, 171; Turnbull, “Learning Her Womanly Work,” 84.} \]
\[\text{\underline{\text{58}}} \text{ Mary Smith, *The Autobiography of Mary Smith, Schoolmistress and Nonconformist, A Fragment of a Life* (London: Bemrose & Sons, 1892), 1.} \]
small proprietary school, where she remained until financial problems forced her to leave at age ten.\textsuperscript{59}

Mary’s dame school experience was characteristic of the early Victorian period. She describes the “old dame” at her first school as “a very antique specimen of humanity” under whose tuition she “learnt nothing or next to nothing”.\textsuperscript{60} As the late-Victorian writer Joseph McCabe noted, dames were generally “elderly and impoverished widows [who] stirred the soup with one hand and held a penny cane in the other”—that is, they could be equally if not more concerned with their ordinary domestic duties than with actual instruction.\textsuperscript{61} Certainly dame schools provided only the most basic of educations: children generally learned reading, Scripture, and spelling from an unqualified and sometimes senile teacher in a helter-skelter manner.\textsuperscript{62} In 1835, James Kay-Shuttleworth, the Secretary of the Supervisory Committee of the Privy Council on Education, commented on their deficiencies. Dame schools, he wrote, were “in the most deplorable condition. The [teachers’] only qualification for employment seems to be their unfitness for every other… regular instruction among their scholars is absolutely impossible”.\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid, 15; 24; 28; 50.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid, 16-17.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid, 178.
June Purvis has noted that it is difficult to describe in absolute terms the curricular differences between boys and girls at dame schools, as lessons varied greatly. However, girls would usually devote a portion of their day to knitting or sewing while their brothers continued with other activities.\textsuperscript{64} In the early 1840s, for example, the Reverend John Allen remarked that most girls in Derby dame schools sewed and knitted in conjunction with the regular course of reading and Scripture.\textsuperscript{65} Mary Smith herself remarks that “the sole object” for which she attended her second dame school was to learn to knit and sew, and that these activities “occupied nearly the whole time of the girls”.\textsuperscript{66} Dames and parents often put particular emphasis on needlework as an indispensable skill for girls: not only did it function as vocational training for a possible future in low-paid textile work, but it also equipped girls for domestic work within their own homes.\textsuperscript{67}

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid, “The Experience of Schooling for Working-Class Boys and Girls,” 94.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid, \textit{Hard Lessons}, 80.
\textsuperscript{66} Smith, \textit{The Autobiography of Mary Smith}, 25.
\textsuperscript{67} Purvis, “The Experience of Schooling for Working-Class Boys and Girls,” 94.
Mary, unlike most early Victorian working-class girls, went to a private “higher school” for the daughters of tradesmen when she was eight. Mary herself recognizes her experience as uncommon, attributing it to her father’s unusual interest in education.\textsuperscript{68} While she notes the relative thoroughness with which she learned English literature, history, and Scripture, sewing remained at the heart of the curriculum. “A girl’s education at that time consisted principally of needlework of various descriptions,” she remarks, “thus I did an endless quantity of embroidery…children’s caps…aprons, and many other things.”\textsuperscript{69} In learning to make small domestic garments, Mary’s sewing lessons clearly mirrored her responsibilities, both present, as her mother’s domestic helper, and likely future, as the wife of a cottager or artisan.

Mary’s father’s interest in her education is striking, and is worth exploring. Generally speaking, early Victorian working-class parents, and especially fathers, took little or fleeting interest in their daughters’ formal schooling, often arguing that the acquisition of domestic skills at home was more useful.\textsuperscript{70} Indeed, as Mary elaborates on her own father’s efforts to expose her to intermediate arithmetic, she also comments that other parents were generally “prouder of their daughters’ pieces of needlework than of their scholarship”.\textsuperscript{71} Even the rest of Mary’s family were sceptical of her scholarly aspirations, connecting them to eccentricity and idleness.\textsuperscript{72}

\textsuperscript{68} Smith, \textit{The Autobiography of Mary Smith}, 28.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid, 30-32.
\textsuperscript{70} Purvis, “The Experience of Schooling for Working-Class Boys and Girls,” 91.
\textsuperscript{71} Smith, \textit{The Autobiography of Mary Smith}, 30.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid, 41.
Despite her father’s interest in her education, Mary had to leave school at age ten
due to financial difficulties, marking the end of her education.\textsuperscript{73} Before the establishment
of state-funded education, children could only go to school when their families were
relatively financially stable. As a result, many early Victorian children attended school
briefly and irregularly.\textsuperscript{74} This trend is especially evident in girls’ education, as working-
class parents usually gave greater priority to their sons’ schooling than that of their
daughters.\textsuperscript{75}

Very often, girls pulled from school would begin to work. A Mrs. Layton, for
example, recounting her childhood in a suburb of London in the 1850s and early 1860s,
noted that she left school at age ten to “earn [her] own living” after her mother died,
while a Mrs. Burrows, also from outside of London, left at eight to perform agricultural
work due to unspecified pecuniary difficulties.\textsuperscript{76} I shall elaborate on the phenomenon of
early Victorian girls withdrawing from school early later in the chapter; at present,
however, it is sufficient to note that Mary’s experience was a common one: a family
crisis frequently precipitated the premature end of a girl’s education, whereupon she
would often begin some sort of service role.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid, 50.
\textsuperscript{74} Heward, “Reconstructing Popular Childhoods,” 246.
\textsuperscript{75} Julia Swindells, \textit{Victorian Writing & Working Women} (Minneapolis: University of
Minnesota Press, 1985), 130.
\textsuperscript{76} Mrs. Layton, “Life as We Have Known It: Memories of Seventy Years,” in \textit{Life as We
Have Known It by Co-operative Working Women: Working Women Describe Their Jobs,
Families, and Political Awakening in Early Twentieth-century England}, ed. Margaret
Llewelyn Davies (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1931), 20; Mrs. Burrows, “A
Childhood in the Fens, About 1850-60,” in ibid, 109.
\textsuperscript{77} Purvis, “The Experience of Schooling for Working-Class Boys and Girls,” 90; Neil J.
Smelser, \textit{Social Paralysis and Social Change: British Working-Class Education in the
From Mary’s memoirs, we may extract four key details as illustrative of early Victorian working-class girls’ education: A large number of girls attended dame schools, which provided them with a notably poor education. Girls, unlike boys, practised needlework at school—and indeed, parents generally showed little interest in their daughters’ education aside from needlework—but would still learn their other lessons alongside boys. Finally, because almost all schools charged fees, girls in particular often left school early to begin earning wages.

The memoirs of Marianne Farningham also detail key elements of early Victorian working-class girls’ education. Marianne, the daughter of a small tradesman, was born in 1834 in a Kentish village. While she briefly attended a dame school and received some lessons from a neighbour’s older daughter, her mother conducted most of her early education, focusing on domestic tasks. At age nine, Marianne went to a nonconformist British School; however, after her mother died two years later, she began to attend only intermittently. She left school for good in her early teens.

I have already noted that working-class parents, generally speaking, were at best indifferent to their daughters’ school-based “book learning”, favouring instead a home education centred on domestic tasks. Marianne’s family exemplifies this phenomenon: Marianne comments that her mother believed that a girl’s education should concern principally “the exercise of household arts”, disapproving of Marianne’s fondness for

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80 Ibid, 26; 43-45.
81 Ibid, 50.
reading, and consequently restricting her daughter’s access to books. Meanwhile, Marianne’s father was mystified by his daughter’s desire to attend school, remarking that “he did not think such knowledge would ever be of much use to [her]”. Marianne’s encounters with her parents—which, again, were common—underscore just how little early Victorian working-class parents could value their daughters’ formal schooling: it was, quite simply, a distraction from their more important domestic duties. In other words, while Mary Smith’s father might have indulgently fostered her love of learning, Marianne’s experience of active discouragement from her studies was far more typical.

Julia Swindells, in her survey of working-class women’s autobiographies, has noted that most women, while disillusioned by their school experiences, still expatiated on their childhood devotion to the acquisition of knowledge. This trend, she argues, corresponds to the Victorian focus on individual self-improvement, manifest not only in the rhetoric of the elite, but also in that of the skilled working classes. In other words, working-class girls’ bookishness (or purported bookishness) can be understood as a desire to improve their character through education and personal development, typical of the 19th century. Swindells’ argument is astute, and helps explain why Marianne was so firmly devoted to her studies despite receiving no encouragement at home. Her nonconformist background might also have inspired her: As a member of the Baptist community, she would have been exposed to ideas of moral betterment through self-study of religious texts. It is plausible that these ideas provoked in Marianne a more

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82 Ibid, 20-23.
83 Ibid, 48-49.
84 Swindells, 128.
85 Ibid, 100.
general urge to learn, either as further means for self-improvement or simply for interest’s sake.

Marianne briefly attended a state-subsidized British School. Despite her initial excitement, however, her lessons were of decidedly poor quality, leaving her “without any learning worth the name”. Just like in dame schools, in National and British Schools, lacklustre teaching was hardly uncommon. Teachers were generally untrained and under-resourced: Mary Smith, who I previously considered as a pupil, taught at a National School as a young adult, despite her total “inability and want of training”, and found herself so underfunded that she could barely keep the school running. Katherine Warburton, who taught at a London school in the 1850s and 1860s, articulated the consequences of these shortcomings: even the brighter pupils, she remarked, commonly left school with significant gaps in their education.

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88 Frost, *Victorian Childhoods*, 41.
To return to Marianne’s education, at age eleven, her mother’s declining health forced her to leave school “to do the housekeeping and the work of the house”.\textsuperscript{89} I have already discussed how financial crises sometimes compelled girls to withdraw from school early; however, girls (and particularly eldest girls) also commonly sacrificed their education to become “little mothers” in the event of their mother’s death or, more generally, inability to manage the home alone. Analysis of records from the Church of England’s National Society demonstrate that, in the 1830s, girls’ “reasons for leaving” were primarily connected with helping at home.\textsuperscript{90} The 1861 Newcastle Commission on popular education noted the same trend, as did 1851 census officer Horace Mann, writing that girls were “taken away from school in very great numbers at a very early age to attend to various household avocations”.\textsuperscript{91} Girls, in short, often left school early so they could attend to domestic tasks like cleaning, cooking, and caring for younger siblings. Moreover, while their departure might arise from situations of necessity, other times parents would suspend their daughters’ schooling simply because they did not consider an extended formal education important for girls.\textsuperscript{92} Indeed, while Marianne returned to school for a period during her early teens, her father considered it a luxury, and consequently expected her to pay her own tuition by undertaking additional jobs.\textsuperscript{93}

In some respects, Marianne’s school experience mirrors that of Mary Smith. Like Mary’s education, hers was uninspiring, focused on domestic tasks, and ended prematurely because of a family crisis. Marianne also highlights parents’ unenthusiastic

\textsuperscript{89} Farningham, \textit{A Working Woman’s Life}, 44.
\textsuperscript{90} Smelser, \textit{Social Paralysis and Social Change}, 267.
\textsuperscript{91} Heward, “Reconstructing Popular Childhoods,” 239-240; Smelser, 268.
\textsuperscript{92} Purvis, “The Experience of Schooling for Working-Class Boys and Girls,” 90.
\textsuperscript{93} Farningham, \textit{A Working Woman’s Life}, 45-50.
responses to their daughters’ book learning, although the picture she paints is one of hostility, not mere disinterest. Unlike Mary’s, her memoirs depict the emergence of early state-subsidized schools, which, again, the majority working-class children attended by 1870. Finally, Marianne helps clarify that girls did not only leave school to work; rather, household responsibilities often prohibited them from attending school, either regularly or at all.

**Mid-Century Reform**

We have seen that, during the early Victorian period, working-class girls generally received an education characterized by its brevity, poor quality, and its focus on domestic tasks. However, the helter-skelter nature of working-class education, particularly at dame schools, meant that the average girl still theoretically received the same basic education as her brothers.\(^94\)

With the rise of National and British Schools, gender-oriented curricular differences became more pronounced, as sexual division was fundamental in the structure of these institutions.\(^95\) An 1841 report from the National Society (which, again, governed National Schools) clearly articulated an ideology of gender separation and separateness in noting that they desired primarily to teach girls “to be sober, to love their husbands [and] children… and to be chaste keepers [of the] home, obedient to their husbands”.\(^96\) Gender divisions and an emphasis on girls as future wives and mothers were not only embedded in the abstract objectives of these schools, however. The 1833 *Code of Regulations* from

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\(^{94}\) Purvis, “The Experience of Schooling for Working-Class Boys and Girls,” 100.

\(^{95}\) Ibid, 101.

the Education Department, which granted aid to British and National Schools, enforced concrete curricular differences between genders.\(^{97}\) The regulations made needlework a compulsory subject for girls but not for boys, and outlined distinct standards of achievement in arithmetic and writing for both genders—the latter proviso reflecting the different amounts of time spent on those subjects.\(^{98}\) At the National Society’s Central School in Baldwin Garden, for example, boys and girls studied together in the morning, but in the afternoon, girls spent a portion of their time on needlework while boys continued to practice ciphering, reading, and writing.\(^{99}\)

By 1860, the focus on practical work in working-class boys’ education had waned.\(^{100}\) The reasons behind this shift are connected to a number of economic policies that are beyond the scope of this thesis; what is worth noting, however, is that practical training did not only remain a prominent feature in working-class girls’ education, but actually began to grow in importance.\(^{101}\) In 1871, the Department of Education’s new *Code of Regulations* introduced optional “academic” subjects.\(^{102}\) While the range of subjects continued expand until 1895, girls could only take a fraction of them; instead, the new curriculum directed them towards a number of practical domestic subjects. For example, boys, unlike girls, had the option of taking animal physiology, mechanics, and chemistry, with girls offered domestic economy, cookery, and laundry as substitutes.\(^{103}\)

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\(^{97}\) Annmarie Turnbull, “Learning Her Womanly Work,” 84.

\(^{98}\) Ibid, 84-85.


\(^{101}\) Ibid, 11; See page 10 of the Board of Education’s 1926 *Report of the Consultative Committee on The Education of the Adolescent* for more information.

\(^{102}\) Ibid, 12; Turnbull, “Learning Her Womanly Work,” 86.

Even when boys and girls studied the same subjects, they did not necessarily learn the same material. In 1900, Her Majesty’s School Inspector (HMI) Thomas Spalding noted that in London, both boys and girls had begun to study “experimental science”, but that girls’ assignments had overt domestic connections, such as learning about the weight of clothes or how to boil water efficiently, while those of boys focused on more general scientific principles. Teachers might even teach subjects like reading and writing differently, a development facilitated by girls and boys increasingly occupying separate departments or rooms within a school. Readers for girls, for example, focused less on subjects like geography or literature, and more on exalting the virtues of “dear little house mothers” who kept the home for their fathers and brothers.

Gender differentiation aside, however, the establishment of National, British, and Board schools greatly increased the number of subsidized and free school places for working-class children. This increase allowed an unprecedented number of girls to attend school, constituting an especially significant difference in remote rural areas, where previously only dame schools might have existed. Moreover, the Elementary Education Act of 1880’s introduction of compulsory schooling, in conjunction with child labour laws, protected many girls from being pulled out of school at a very early age to work. The Newcastle Commission estimated in 1861, for instance, that 66% of working-class children under twelve worked instead of attending school, and that

107 Frost, 43; Farningham, 46.
nationally, 12,000 girls were employed as domestic servants; by 1900, less than 10% of girls engaged in full-time paid employment, the rest presumed to be at school at least part time. As I will demonstrate, the effects of these changes, and of the standardization of the curriculum more generally, had a profound impact on working-class girls’ educational and even career prospects.

The Late Victorian Period

Let us shift our focus to the final two working-class memoirs under consideration, both from the late Victorian period. The first are those of Flora Thompson, the daughter of a stonemason and nursemaid. She was born in 1876 in rural Oxfordshire, where she attended a National School until about age twelve. Flora’s memoirs are structured somewhat differently from the others examined in my thesis. Hers are recorded as a memorial novel, *Lark Rise to Candleford*, in which she cast herself as the main character, Laura. While one must undoubtedly proceed with caution when attributing historical accuracy to memorial novels, there is no reason to think that the basic elements of Flora’s school narrative are fictional; certainly other scholars have treated her description as a reasonably straightforward memory text.

Flora’s school consisted of only a single classroom, in which boys and girls sat separately. By the late Victorian period, day schools of the working classes usually segregated girls from boys: Rural schools often enjoyed more integration because they were so small (although, as evident in Flora’s experience, some separation was still possible), but in larger schools, like that of Helen Corke (b. 1882 in Kent), “the segregation of the sexes [was] complete, so [boys and girls] never met in school”. Indeed, separate departments with separate play areas and entrances for boys and girls became common in mixed-gender schools; in larger cities like London, local boards also established a number of single-sex schools.

At Flora’s school, while all pupils studied reading, writing, and arithmetic, girls devoted every afternoon to needlework as the boys continued with the 3Rs. As I have already discussed, the practice of girls spending some of their afternoons sewing and knitting was introduced as part of the Department of Education’s 1833 *Code of Regulations*, applicable to all schools that received state funding. However, in 1862, the *Revised Code of Education* reclassified needlework as an “obligatory subject” alongside reading, writing, and arithmetic for girls; in other words, it officially equated needlework with the 3Rs in terms of its fundamental curricular importance. To reflect this new emphasis, teachers began to spend more time on sewing and knitting lessons. HMI E.M. Sneyd-Kynersley, discussing the elementary schools of the 1870s in his memoirs,

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112 Ibid, 188.
115 Thompson, *Lark Rise to Candleford*, 191; 197.
described post-Revised Code needlework lessons: like at Flora’s school, at the ones he inspected, “it was not unusual to find five afternoons a week devoted to sewing”. Similarly, in 1873, the London School Board’s Committee on Needlework reported that London schools dedicated 25% of girls’ instruction to needlework, or about seven hours a week. This phenomenon was compounded in 1875, when needlework was again reclassified, this time as a “class subject”—that is, a subject for which schools received special financial incentives for teaching. HMI Reverend Byrne, commenting on Liverpudlian elementary schools, noted that by the 1880s, schools treated “needlework as the main staple of [girls’] instruction”.

Because Flora’s school collected subsidies from the Department of Education, the Payment by Results scheme dictated its lesson program. The Department of Education

118 Ibid, 90.
119 Ibid, 91.
instituted Payment by Results in an effort to hold schools that received government grants (again, National, British, and Board schools) accountable.\textsuperscript{120} In broad terms, from 1862 to 1897, grants depended on pupils’ performance on annual examinations, which were conducted by HMIs and focused on fundamental aspects of the curriculum.\textsuperscript{121} Flora describes in great detail the examination process, noting that all children were tested on the 3Rs and Scripture, but that a female needlework inspector came in specially to examine girls’ sewing skills.\textsuperscript{122} Helen Corke (who, again, grew up in 1880s Kent) elaborates on the needlework inspection, stressing its importance relative to the other examined subjects for girls.\textsuperscript{123} Indeed, that the Department of Education inspected needlework at all, let alone hired additional, specialized inspectors to oversee the examinations, underlines just how important they considered needlework proficiency for girls. They would sooner allocate additional resources to girls’ needlework lessons than to their reading or writing.

As Carol Dyhouse has helpfully remarked, by the end of the century, working-class girls did not necessarily need to learn how to sew as their mothers had because of the ubiquity and declining cost of store-bought clothes and sewing machines.\textsuperscript{124} Clearly, then, needlework’s importance had become symbolic: proficiency in knitting and sewing might no longer have been an essential domestic skill, but it remained important as a

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\textsuperscript{120} Brendan Rapple, \textit{Payment by Results: An Example of Assessment in Elementary Education from Nineteenth Century Britain}, Educational Policy Analysis Archives (Arizona State University and the University of South Florida, 1994), 3.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid, 1.
\textsuperscript{122} Thompson, \textit{Lark Rise to Candleford}, 211.
\textsuperscript{123} Corke, \textit{In Our Infancy}, 53.
\textsuperscript{124} Carol Dyhouse, \textit{Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England}, 89.
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marker of femininity.\textsuperscript{125} Department of Education officials frequently contended that needlework instilled in girls neatness, thrift, patience, and a love of domesticity. In 1900, HMI J. Fitzmaurice argued that needlework lessons benefited girls “not only on account of their practical utility, but because… they had a great refining influence, and love for the needle encourages domesticity”.\textsuperscript{126} In other words, needlework taught them the key virtues of Victorian femininity as understood by the elite.

To return to Flora Thompson’s description of a late Victorian National School, while Flora completed the highest standard (level) of education offered, she notes that girls in particular often left school by age ten—before the statutory leaving age—or would miss a significant amount of school.\textsuperscript{127} Indeed, the early Victorian trend of girls attending school for a limited time, or only intermittently, so they could assume household duties continued into the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century. In 1880, the Department of Education established School Attendance Committees to enforce attendance laws, but frequent and prolonged absence remained a serious problem for girls.\textsuperscript{128} GCT Bartley, writing in the \textit{Journal of the Women’s Education Union} in 1875, noted that “girls suffer from this [poor attendance] more than boys… [because] they are handy in the household”.\textsuperscript{129}

Carol Dyhouse, Annmarie Turnbull, and June Purvis have emphasized the discrepancies in boys’ and girls’ attendance rates, and the different reactions absenteeism garnered. In 1880s London, girls’ attendance figures were consistently 5-6% below that

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\textsuperscript{125} Ibid, 89.\\
\textsuperscript{126} Turnbull, “Learning Her Womanly Work,” 89.\\
\textsuperscript{127} Thompson, \textit{Lark Rise to Candleford}, 163; 425.\\
\textsuperscript{128} Heward, “Reconstructing Popular Childhoods,” 248-249.\\
\textsuperscript{129} Dyhouse, \textit{Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England}, 102.
\end{flushright}
of boys at every standard, yet educational officials generally did not scrutinize this discrepancy. While teachers and members of the Department of Education condemned “truancy” amongst boys, they often considered girls’ “absences” understandable. Dismissive notes about girls staying home on cleaning or washing days pepper late Victorian school logbooks. As one teacher later noted, “a girl seldom came to school more than eight times a week [that is, more than 80% of the time] because she had to stay at home and help”. Schools and school officials, in short, might hound the parents of truant boys, but would accept girls’ frequent absences as a natural and unpreventable part of educating girls.

Despite these uninspiring figures, however, the institution of compulsory education and free education, as well as the gradual increase of the school leaving age, did permit late Victorian working-class girls a more sustained education than their predecessors. While the average “school life” of a working-class girl in 1861 was 6.8 years, by the end of the century, nearly 90% attended school for seven to eight years. Unlike in previous decades, parents were compelled to keep their daughters in school even if they dismissed formal education’s utility. Flora, for instance, notes that many of her female peers remained in school simply because their parents feared a visit from a

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130 Frost, *Victorian Child*hoods, 44.
133 Turnbull, “Learning Her Womanly Work,” 84.
government attendance officer. The decline in and eventual elimination of tuition at primary schools also allowed many children who otherwise could not afford an education to attend school. The family of Daisy Cowper, my final memoirist, sometimes could not afford food. Nevertheless, because the local schools were free, all nine children received an education of roughly ten years each.

To return to Flora’s memoirs, as well as discussing absenteeism, she remarks upon her school’s severe disciplinary policies. The cane was the principal instrument her instructors used to enforce discipline; while sometimes the idea of the cane was enough to invoke proper behaviour amongst students, Flora describes one incident after which every child “was caned soundly, including those who had taken no part in the fray”. Discipline in elementary schools could indeed be severe: common punishments included whipping, caning, and raps on the knuckles.

Just as every child received a caning at Flora’s school, teachers usually imposed the same punishments on all pupils, regardless of gender. In fact, as Ginger Frost has noted, discipline was one of the few areas in which gender differentiation was hardly apparent in late Victorian elementary schools, with parents and teachers simply expecting girls, like boys, to bear the punishments they received. Kate Taylor, who grew up in 1890s rural Suffolk, suffered particularly brutal beatings at her school. Her father’s response to these beatings, however, was that she had to “accept the consequences” of her

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136 Thompson, 207.
137 Mitchell, 175.
138 Daisy Cowper, “De Nobis,” Burnett Archive of Working Class Autobiographies (Brunel Special Collections, 1950), 18; 33.
139 Thompson, Lark Rise to Candleford, 199.
140 Frost, Victorian Childhoods, 40.
141 Ibid, 43.
actions. While Kate’s headmaster was certainly atypically violent, her father’s indifference toward the violent discipline of his daughter was not. Physical punishments were an integral part of the working-class educational experience, used even in reaction to minor offenses. Faith Osgerby (b. 1890 in Yorkshire) received a caning once for holding her friend’s hand in the classroom.

Flora Thompson’s memorial novel describes an 1880s National School in great detail, and thus allows us to highlight a number of key elements in the evolution of working-class girls’ education over the Victorian period. The education of boys and girls became increasingly separate in the 19th century, both physically and in terms of the curriculum. Needlework, which had always been a fundamental element in working-class girls’ schooling, nevertheless grew in importance. Because of the declining practical benefits to needlework, moreover, its importance during the late Victorian period can be seen as largely symbolic, connected more to teaching girls feminine virtues than skills acquisition. Finally, Flora illustrates that, although rampant absenteeism continued to plague girls’ education in much the same way as it had in the early Victorian period, legislative reform markedly increased both the percentage of educated working-class girls and average length of their schooling.

Our final working-class memoir is that of Daisy Cowper. Daisy was born in 1890 in a suburb of Liverpool, the youngest child of a sailor. Daisy attended a National School from ages five to seven or eight, at which point she transferred to her older

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142 John Burnett, *Destinies Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and Family from the 1820s to the 1920s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 291.
143 Frost, *Victorian Childhoods*, 40.
144 Cowper, 3-4; 15.
sister’s Board School. She remained at school until she was thirteen, completing the final standard offered by Department of Education schools.

I have already discussed many of the key details of Daisy’s school experience, but a brief summary of these points is nevertheless useful. While both her National and Board schools were mixed-gender, each had a girls’ department, so boys and girls studied separately. As was common, this separation translated into curricular differences. While her Board School added a science laboratory to the boys’ department, the girls did not study science; moreover, Daisy hints that boys spent more time on arithmetic, history, and geography than girls did. Unsurprisingly, sewing was central to girls’ curriculum: it was the cornerstone of Daisy’s education from age five, when she began rudimentary sewing lessons, to age thirteen, when she left school. While the curriculum was gendered, discipline was decidedly not. Daisy recounts how her headmistress at the National School would cane girls, even for mistakes on lessons. Finally, returning to earlier themes, Daisy notes how parents (and particularly fathers) cared far more about their boys’ education than that of their girls. While Daisy’s father emphasized the importance of schooling to his sons, he considered her older sister “simply…a nursemaid to help Mother look after his progeny”.

As well as reviewing previously discussed elements of late Victorian working-class girls’ education, Daisy’s memoirs provide a framework to analyze the rise of

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145 Ibid, 89; 94.
147 Ibid, 91; 94.
148 Ibid, 113-114.
149 Ibid, 89-ff.
150 Ibid, 94.
151 Ibid, 7.
domestic subjects in elementary schools. Daisy studied domestic economy at her Board School’s cookery-and-laundry room. Gender division became even more pronounced in elementary schools after 1870, when girls began to devote increasing amounts of time to various domestic subjects that were either compulsory or, due to the Payment by Results scheme, became effectually compulsory. While the Department of Education’s curriculum regulations did not initially include the direct teaching of domestic subjects aside from needlework, during the 1870s, mounting pressure from middle-class organizations such as the National Association for the Promotion of Housewifery caused them to change their guidelines. These groups argued that working-class girls needed formal training in the domestic arts for both practical and moral purposes. As one advocate explained, “the object of teaching [domestic subjects] is not only to teach girls how to wash and dry the clothes…but to train them to habits of neatness, quickness, and cleanliness”.

In this way, these middle-class groups echoed promoters of needlework in schools who, like them, considered the various elements of “housewifery” catalysts for impressing a conservative feminine ideal upon working-class girls.

Domestic subjects expanded considerably during the late Victorian period. In 1870, the Department of Education added theoretical domestic economy (an umbrella for cooking, clothesmaking, cleaning, and more) to the curriculum as an optional subject; by

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152 Ibid, 114.
154 Dyhouse, Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England, 89.
1878, it reclassified it as compulsory. Consequently, between 1874 and 1882, the number of girls studying domestic economy in elementary schools rose from 844 to 59,812. As with needlework, domestic economy’s primary purpose was to teach girls how to function as “proper” wives and mothers within working-class homes. In other words, the Department of Education invoked both utilitarian and moral justifications for teaching domestic economy, all connected with raising working-class girls to become women who conformed to middle-class feminine mores.

The Code of 1882 introduced cookery as a subject unto itself, focused on basic cooking and baking skills, such as making broth, porridge, and bread. While only 7,500 girls qualified for the special cookery grant in 1882, by 1896, this number had risen to 134,930. Urban school boards even began to found separate “cookery centres”, which they outfitted with the various kitchen appliances common in working-class houses. Similarly, the Code of 1889 established laundry work as a grant-earning subject, with 11,720 girls eligible for the grant by 1896. As with cookery, school boards set up “centres” where laundry work could be taught, again, furnished with equipment common in working-class homes. Evidently, the Department of Education did not design cookery or laundry as vocational training, but as courses in working-class “proper housewifery”, as understood by the middle classes.

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156 Ibid, 92.
157 Dyhouse, Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England, 89.
158 Ibid, 89.
159 See pages x-y of Chapter 1 for more information.
161 Dyhouse, Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England, 90.
163 Dyhouse, Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England, 90.
I have already articulated that domestic subjects were tools to teach proficiency in elite notions of working-class housewifery and motherhood. Also worth noting is that, despite the substantial obstacles to teaching domestic subjects, such as high costs and safety issues, the Department of Education and individual school boards heavily promoted them, underscoring the importance placed on the domestic arts.\(^{165}\) Finally, the expansion of domestic subjects specially tailored to girls meant that even less time was allocated for non-domestic subjects, from reading to history and arithmetic, and that consequently the gulf between boys’ and girls’ education widened further.

The predominance of domestic subjects did not necessarily preclude girls from receiving a satisfactory education. Daisy records in great detail her education’s emphasis on “academic” subjects, such as geography, history, and grammar, which she contends

\(^{165}\) Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, 89.
were taught thoroughly by highly capable teachers. Aside from her anecdotal evidence, rising literacy rates demonstrate the profoundness of legislative and curricular reforms for working-class children, and particularly working-class girls. In 1841, only 40% of working-class girls were literate, compared to 67% of boys, whereas in 1897, that figure had risen to 90%, matching the coincident literacy rate of boys. In other words, working-class girls’ literacy rates jumped by fifty percentage points—a significant increase in itself—but also, in so doing, eliminated the literacy gap between genders.

In her memoirs, Daisy briefly mentions the possibility of scholarships for working-class girls. After 1870, a number of charities established trusts that allowed some elementary school pupils to transfer to fee-paying secondary schools. Girls, however, generally found their scholarly ambitions subordinated to their brothers’. While a number of scholarships existed for boys, Daisy herself notes that “there were very few scholarships in those days” for girls. Girls vying for scholarships also faced parents who were, at best, diffident about their educational aspirations, or teachers who encouraged boys over girls. Ellen Wilkinson (b. 1891 in Manchester) recalled that, during her preparation for a scholarship exam, “the masters would often give extra time, lend books and so on to a bright lad…I never remember such encouragement. I was only

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166 Cowper, 106-108; 113.
a girl anyway.” 171 In short, unlike boys, only in exceptional circumstances would girls receive the resources or even the encouragement to pursue further educational opportunities.

Of course, some working-class girls did earn scholarships, enabling them to attend higher schools and matriculate with either a Cambridge or Oxford higher local certificate. 172 These certificates allowed them to enter teacher training colleges, and eventually become certified Board teachers—a “respectable” profession often held by lower middle-class women. 173 Scholarships were not the only path to social mobility. Working-class girls who matriculated from primary school could enter quasi-white-collar occupations, such as clerking, postal work, and switchboard operation. 174 From 1851 to 1911, for instance, the proportion of women in the clerical workforce jumped from two to twenty percent, a phenomenon not exclusively caused, but certainly facilitated, by increased literacy and numeracy rates among working-class girls. 175 Flora Thompson, for instance, used her education to become an assistant postmistress and professional writer, despite her parents’ earlier plan to engage her in domestic service. 176 State-financed training programs also allowed working-class girls to train as pupil-teachers during their final years of school, after which they could either become assistant teachers or enter

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171 Ibid, 110.
172 Steinbach, 173; 180.
173 Gerry Holloway, Women and Work in Britain Since 1840 (New York: Routledge, 2005), 122-123.
174 Ibid, 114; 121; Steinbach, 174.
175 Holloway, 121.
176 Thompson, 571; 614.
training college and become fully certified teachers. Indeed, although Daisy did not win her scholarship, she did eventually become a teacher in this manner.

Just as Flora Thompson’s memorial novel highlights some key elements in the evolution of working-class girls’ education, so do Daisy’s memoirs. She too illustrates the increased segregation and the heightened focus on needlework characteristic of the late Victorian period—and, more generally, the growing curricular differences between genders. Daisy’s memoirs uniquely explore the emergence of domestic subjects, reflective of the increased middle-class focus on working-class girls’ education primarily as an arena to instil elite norms on girls, as well as an ongoing disregard to girls’ academics. Crucially, however, she also demonstrates the development of an educational system that fostered unprecedented literacy and numeracy rates, and even allowed some girls a thorough education. This new system, as we have seen, also promoted social mobility amongst working-class girls: whereas in the early Victorian period, when education prepared girls to be cottagers’ wives and low-paid textile and domestic workers, girls were newly able to enter “respectable” office positions, and even quasi-professions.

Conclusion

During the Victorian period, developments in curriculum and growing state control over education transformed school into a standardized, mandatory part of childhood for the working classes. In Chapter 1, I have aimed to demonstrate that an intensification of gender distinctions was included in the reforms to elementary

177 Holloway, 44.
178 Cowper, 106.
education. The majority of working-class girls, who had previous studied alongside boys and, apart from needlework, usually learned the same skills, began to occupy separate spaces and focus on different subjects. The subjects they studied, moreover, either had overt domestic associations (such as cookery), or were designed to inspire girls with a love of the domestic, like reading lessons about the joys of motherhood.

The focus on working-class girls as future wives and mothers was connected to elite concerns about perceived working-class volatility and depravity and the idea that working-class girls and women could exert feminine influence over their male family members. Working-class girls’ educational reform implemented by the Church of England, the Foreign School Society, the Department of Education, and other groups was thus an exercise in instilling dominant models of virtuous womanhood in working-class girls: Victorian middle-class policy makers and educationalists used educational reform to mandate ideals of elite respectability that would, in turn, function as mechanisms of social control.¹⁷⁹

Certainly working-class girls’ educational reform was closely associated with domesticity; it is reasonable, moreover, to contend that highly restrictive class and gender ideologies impeded their scholarly achievement, as parents, educators, and educational officials alike either de-emphasized or totally dismissed the need for working-class girls to receive an academic education. Recent scholarship that represents working-class girls’ education as undergoing a paradigm shift thus fails to account for much of the ideological continuity characteristic of reform.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ Turnbull, “An Isolated Missionary,” 82.
¹⁸⁰ Mitchell, 23-44; 173; Steinbach, 163-174.
Educational reform did not, however, “secure women’s imprisonment in domesticity” or provide no significant benefits to girls, as Turnbull and other mid-century feminist historians have argued.\footnote{Turnbull, “Learning Her Womanly Work,” 99; Dyhouse, \textit{Girls Growing up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England}, 79.} Reform drastically improved access to schooling, provided a standardized course of education for girls and, in conjunction with changing labour laws, helped them remain in school for years longer than their early Victorian predecessors. These developments, noteworthy in themselves, allowed working-class girls to achieve near-universal literacy by the end of the century and close the longstanding literacy gap between genders. As restrictive as working-class girls’ curriculum remained throughout the Victorian period, an expanded course of study also enabled pupils like Flora Thompson and Daisy Cowper to study subjects traditionally absent from working-class educations, such as grammar, algebra, and literature. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Victorian educational reform awarded working-class girls a degree of social mobility. While very few actually quit the working class, many used their education to avoid drudgery and obtain low-grade but respectable office and shop work. Some were even able to enter quasi-professional roles.

Victorian working-class educational reform was primarily motivated by an elite preoccupation with social control, which involved relegating working-class women into domestic spaces. However, by instilling middle-class values on working-class girls, educational reform actually loosened, if only somewhat, the grip of class and gender constrictions on working-class girls across England. As Flora and Daisy have demonstrated, reform empowered little girls without enough food to eat, and with a future seemingly reserved for drudgework, to become fairly educated, white-collar working
women. In other words, while reform did not erase social inequality or revolutionize the educational experience for all girls, it did redefine the scope of what was possible for them.
CHAPTER 2: MIDDLE-CLASS GIRLS’ EDUCATION

Just as working-class girls’ education underwent major structural changes during the 19th century, so too did that of middle-class girls. In this chapter, I consider the educational experiences of four girls in particular: Elizabeth Garrett Anderson and Annie Besant from the early Victorian period, and Angela Brazil and Molly Hughes from the late Victorian period. I explore the persistence of the early Victorian gender regime throughout the course of education reform, and the consequent traditionalism of new educational structures. In particular, I demonstrate how the fundamental ideologies underlying many of the changes accommodated a conservative notion of domesticated femininity rooted in marriage and motherhood. At the same time, however, I argue that middle-class girls’ education did change significantly during the 19th century, providing an unprecedented number of girls with an academically oriented, formalized education that mirrored that of their brothers and even allowed some to pursue higher education and hitherto unreachable careers.

In 1864, the Committee of the Privy Council on Education established the Schools Inquiry Commission to enquire into the state of middle-class education.182 While their 1868 report focuses principally on boys’ grammar schools, it also provides a detailed account of how early Victorian girls were educated. James Bryce, Assistant Commissioner to the Schools Inquiry Commission, describes a pattern in Lancashire that he considered typical of mid-19th century girls’ education throughout England: daughters were taught at home by their mother or by a governess as young children, and then as

adolescents, might be sent to a day or boarding school for a few years, where they would be “finished.”

Wherever girls studied, their education during this period was generally of poor quality. Mothers and governesses were often uneducated themselves, while good schools were as expensive as they were uncommon. Like their working-class counterparts, early Victorian middle-class girls rarely studied academic subjects; instead, for the first fifty years of the 19th century, they usually received what was commonly referred to an “ornamental education.” While such studies accommodated lessons in reading, writing, and some arithmetic, they focused overwhelmingly on showy accomplishments, like conversational French and German, music, and drawing. Ultimately, middle-class girls were expected to become philanthropists, wives, mothers, and household managers of comfortable domestic spaces, and were trained accordingly.

By the 1860s, the vast majority of middle-class girls received their education at home, although most also attended private school for a period of time. These schools were

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183 Ibid, 173.
185 Ibid, 135.
usually small, informal “establishments” that concentrated on accomplishment training and were run by middle-class women from their homes.\textsuperscript{189}

From the 1870s onwards, a new type of school emerged, soon to provide the gold standard of girls’ education. These endowed schools were much larger than their antecedents, and had a greater commitment to academic achievement.\textsuperscript{190} At these schools, girls studied subjects that had been largely reserved for boys’ education, like mathematics, natural sciences, and classics.\textsuperscript{191} Most influential were those founded by the Girls’ Public Day School Company, established in 1872 and responsible for thirty-six schools by 1896.\textsuperscript{192} Other trusts also began to emerge and open their own schools during this period: the Church Schools Company, established in 1883, ran twenty-four girls’ secondary institutions by 1896, while a number of smaller trusts founded schools like the prestigious Manchester High School and Edgbaston High School.\textsuperscript{193} Very few schoolgirls, in short, were untouched by late Victorian educational reform. Alice Zimmerman, in her study of Victorian royal commissions on education, has estimated that by the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, 70\% of girls received some kind of higher schooling at an endowed school.\textsuperscript{194}

\textsuperscript{192} Ginger Suzanne Frost, Victorian Childhoods (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2009), 49.
\textsuperscript{193} Dyhouse, Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England, 56.
\textsuperscript{194} Ibid, 50; Frost, 49; Steinbach, 176.
Like the previous section, this chapter is organized chronologically, considering first the early Victorian period, mid-century reform, and then the late Victorian period. Again, I have used 1870 as the rough delineation between the early and late Victorian period, although now to reflect the time before and after the publication of the Report of the Schools Inquiry Commission and the emergence of new endowed schools.

**The Early Victorian Period**

The first educational experience I consider is that of Elizabeth Garrett Anderson. Elizabeth, born in 1836 to an entrepreneurial family, grew up in rural Suffolk. She was educated first at home by her mother, and then by a governess. At age thirteen, her parents sent her and her older sister to a local establishment school, where she remained for two years. Elizabeth’s withdrawal from the school marked the end of her education. Elizabeth did not write a memoir, but her daughter, Louisa Garrett Anderson, compiled a biography using Elizabeth’s private letters and speeches, along with various family anecdotes. This document, while not a first-hand account, provides an intimate description of Elizabeth’s childhood and youth that later biographers have treated as a memory text. To flesh out Elizabeth’s educational experience, I draw heavily from Louisa’s work, as well as the memoir of Elizabeth’s younger sister, Millicent Fawcett.

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Elizabeth’s mother conducted her daughters’ first lessons at home, teaching them the 3Rs and some Scripture.\textsuperscript{198} Middle-class mothers were usually the first instructors of both their sons and daughters.\textsuperscript{199} Although the quality of instruction varied, women often taught their children in between attending to other responsibilities, so lessons could be fragmentary and disorganized.\textsuperscript{200} Elizabeth’s mother, for example, conducted lessons only when she found spare time in her busy schedule of caring for the younger children and managing the household.\textsuperscript{201} Emily Pepys, a child diarist born in 1830s Hertfordshire, describes an average day of lessons as taking no more than three hours, frequently disrupted or cancelled so her mother could attend to more pressing matters, or so they could engage in leisure activities.\textsuperscript{202} While both Elizabeth and Emily’s education might seem lacking by modern standards, their experiences were actually well within the norm.\textsuperscript{203}

Jeanne Peterson has argued that mothers were not qualified teachers or generally very educated themselves.\textsuperscript{204} As such, they usually focused on the fundamentals when teaching their children. In Western Gloucestershire in the 1830s and 1840s, Sarah Omerod only provided her ten children with an education in reading and catechism.\textsuperscript{205} Similarly, Frances Power Cobbe (born in 1822 in Dublin to an English family)

\textsuperscript{198} Garrett Anderson, 28.
\textsuperscript{200} Ibid, 37.
\textsuperscript{201} Garrett Anderson, 30.
\textsuperscript{202} Emily Pepys, \textit{The Journal of Emily Pepys} (London: Prospect, 1984), 44.
\textsuperscript{203} Peterson, 37; Schools Inquiry Commission, 171; de Bellaigue, 139.
\textsuperscript{204} Peterson, 37.
remembers that, as a young child, she “was supplied only with simple… lessons [from her] gentle mother,” which seem to have centred on spelling.206

Sometimes children could receive a thorough education at home. In 1850s and 1860s London, Lydia North, a cleric’s wife, taught her boys and girls arithmetic, history, geography, and even some Latin grammar.207 Meanwhile, Emily Pepys’ mother engaged French, drawing, and music tutors to fill the gaps in her daughter’s education. Although Emily herself hints that her tutors were not always qualified in their purported area of expertise, the very engagement of these teachers demonstrates at least an attempt to provide Emily with a comprehensive education at home.208 Some rigour might even be achieved incidentally: Mary Marshall (born 1850 in Lincolnshire) was homeschooled until age nine. She became well versed in German because her parents spoke it at the supper table, and learned about various scientific principles from books in the family library.209

Within the homeschool environment, distinctions between girls’ and boys’ lessons were not so profound. If a family could afford to hire subject tutors, young daughters might attend to more “ladylike” subjects like conversational French and drawing while their brothers studied mathematics, classics, and the sciences.210 However, as Deborah Gorham has demonstrated, girls and boys were usually educated together, the nature of their education dictated more by their mother’s abilities and their family’s financial

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208 Pepys, 44.
210 Gorham, 18.
circumstances than by gender. Nevertheless, distinctions arose as children grew older: while boys usually went to school once deemed ready, girls often continued to receive their education from their mother at home, only going to school as adolescents, if at all.

To return to Elizabeth Garrett Anderson’s childhood, her brothers were sent to Rugby and the City of London School at a very early age, while Elizabeth and her sisters remained at home until their teens. As Louisa Garrett Anderson notes, “their brothers might go to public schools…but home was considered the right place for their sisters.”

When Elizabeth was ten, her mother engaged a governess. As Louisa explains, in the early Victorian period, “a governess at home, for a short period, was the usual fate of girls.” Governesses had two principal functions. First, as Susie Steinbach has convincingly argued, they were hired as markers of affluence. Governesses were also tasked with teaching girls to be proper young women. The Garrets engaged a Miss Edgeworth, who was particularly concerned with correct posture and ladylike speech, although “deportment” in general was a commonly emphasized subject. Mary Marshall recalls that her governess too “[thought] very much of deportment,” while Jane Harrison, daughter of a merchant in Hull, had a few governesses in the early 1860s, all of whom drilled her in "deportment, how to come into a room, how to get into a carriage.”

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211 Frost, 53; Gorham, 19.
212 Ibid, 20.
213 Garrett Anderson, 32.
217 Steinbach, 164.
219 Marshall, 6; Steinbach, 165.
Governesses were usually relatively uneducated middle-class ladies looking to supplement their income.\textsuperscript{220} As such, their lessons were characteristically rudimentary. The Troubridge sisters in 1860s Plymouth had a governess who taught them little more that reading and writing.\textsuperscript{221} Meanwhile, both Mary Marshall and Frances Power Cobbe recall their governesses’ lessons concentrating on the basics of spelling, geography, and history that relied heavily on out-dated readers.\textsuperscript{222} Certainly Elizabeth and her sisters spent most of their time with the “untrained and uneducated” Miss Edgeworth memorizing excerpts from “ancient” books.\textsuperscript{223}

![Figure 5: Abraham Solomon, “A Portrait of Two Girls with Their Governess,” painting, 1865, Tate Gallery. Note how the governess is portrayed as a general caretaker, not exclusively as an educator.](image)

When Elizabeth and her older sister were young teenagers (respectively, thirteen and fifteen), they began to attend the Academy for the Daughters of Gentlemen at


\textsuperscript{221} Frost, 50.

\textsuperscript{222} Cobbe, 187-188; Marshall, 6.

\textsuperscript{223} Garrett Anderson, 30.
Thousands of these establishment schools existed in the early Victorian period. Frances Power Cobbe notes that, in 1830s Brighton alone, there were “not less than a hundred such establishments in the town,” usually housing between eight and ten pupils, from ages nine to nineteen.  

Parents might send their daughters to an establishment school for a number of reasons. Middle-class parents often invested in their daughters’ schooling as a form of conspicuous consumption. Like governesses, private schools allowed families to demonstrate their ability to indulge in a “superfluous” paid education for their daughters, and thereby theoretically prove themselves affluent or upwardly mobile. Assistant Commissioner to the Schools Inquiry Commission James Bryce noted in 1868 that girls’ schooling was “not so much an educational agent as a tribute which the parent pays to his own social position.” Elizabeth’s family exemplifies this phenomenon. Her father, who was very much a parvenu and social climber, tried to assert his social status not only by enrolling his daughters in Blackheath, but by paying for expensive, gimmicky “extras.”

Parents also would send their daughters to school to be “finished” — that is, they used school as a rite of passage. Early Victorian girls’ schools generally promoted themselves as socializing agents, guiding girls towards refined womanhood. The Schools Inquiry Commission commented on schools’ singular focus on furnishing pupils with a “finished

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224 Garrett Anderson, 32.
225 Dyhouse, Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England, 46; Cobbe, 192.
226 De Bellaigue, 139.
227 Schools Inquiry Commission, 826.
228 Garrett Anderson, 32; Manton, 25.
229 Gorham, 23; de Bellaigue, 141.
ease and propriety of manner characteristic of an English Lady.”230 More often than not, this focus emphasized girls’ marital eligibility. Hannah Pipe, who ran a small school in 1860s Manchester, heavily advertised her ability to shape a girl into a dignified “Queen… [to] her husband, King.”231 Parents were indeed keen to send their daughters to schools that stressed marriageability: As the 1868 Report of the Schools Inquiry Commission noted, “parents who have daughters have always looked to their being provided for in marriage.”232

Like working-class dame schools, middle-class establishment schools were unregulated. That, combined with the sheer number in existence, makes it impossible to speak of a curriculum. We may, however, speak of trends. Girls' schooling, especially before 1850, generally emphasized polite social accomplishments.233 An 1839 girls’ education manual outlines what was often the core curriculum: along with reading and writing, “playing [instruments], singing, dancing, and painting” were commonly taught.234 Music and dancing seem to have held particular importance. Frances Power Cobbe, ranking the emphasis placed on various subjects at her school, remembers that they were “at the top.”235 The instruction of good “feminine habits,” such as sobriety and pious thinking, were also an important part of the curriculum.236 Elizabeth’s school

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230 Schools Inquiry Commission, 478.
232 Schools Inquiry Commission, 3.
233 Steinbach, 164.
234 “R.T.,” The Mother, the Best Governess: A Practical System for the Education of Young Ladies (London: John W. Parker, 1839), 15.
235 Cobbe, 193.
placed great emphasis on manners and deportment, while Frances Power Cobbe recalls her lengthy lessons in “Morals and Religion.”

Early Victorian middle-class girls did study more academic subjects at private schools as well, generally focusing on modern languages (usually French, German, or Italian) and English literature. At Blackheath, for example, “French had to be spoken always” a popular custom at establishment schools meant to imitate expensive continental finishing schools. These lessons were generally fairly basic. Frances Power Cobbe recalls learning “atrocious” French, German, and Italian, while Elizabeth’s French instruction was similarly flawed. Regarding literature, Elizabeth and her sister studied a number of fashionable English writers at Blackheath. Literature lessons principally prepared girls for their future as middle-class ladies: schools familiarized them with authors about whom they might be expected to converse at social gatherings. The educator Dorothea Beale, recalling her career in the 1850s, remarked that parents objected to authors deemed unworthy of the drawing room, “complaining bitterly…that it was all very well for the girl to read Shakespeare, 'but don't you think it is more important for her to be able to sit down at the piano and entertain her friends?'

Similar reasoning prevented the majority of girls from studying classical languages,

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237 Garrett Anderson, 34; Cobbe, 193.
238 Ibid, 35; Manton, 45.
239 Cobbe, 195; Garrett Anderson, 33.
240 Garrett Anderson, 32.
241 De Bellaigue, 167.
mathematics, or anything beyond basic history and geography, with educators and parents alike regarding them as unnecessary for girls.243

The poor quality of girls’ establishment schools has received much attention from contemporaries and modern scholars alike. Louisa Garrett Anderson, Elizabeth’s daughter, argued that in the early Victorian period, “good schools for girls did not exist.”244 At Blackheath, “the teaching [was] poor, indeed ‘the stupidity of the teachers’ was remembered by Elizabeth ’with shudders.’”245 Frances Power Cobbe apparently felt similarly: she considered her time at school a “loss of priceless time… and the result… a complete failure.”246 From a macro standpoint, the Schools Inquiry Commission criticized middle-class girls’ schools, commenting that “on the whole, the evidence is clear that... girls' schools are inferior” to those of boys.247 This inferiority can be partly attributed to the teachers themselves, who were, as Elizabeth’s daughter describes, largely “untrained and ill-educated.”248 Like governesses, establishment school “proprietresses” were usually not professional educators, but genteel women who had fallen into of financial hardship, and were looking to supplement their income while remaining respectable.249 Elizabeth and her sister’s teachers, for example, were a pair of sisters struggling to keep their home.250

Contemporary complaints about girls’ schools generally did not focus on the qualifications of teachers per se, but were directed against the superficiality and chaos of

243 Gorham, 23.
244 Ibid, 20.
245 Ibid, 32.
246 Cobbe, 193.
247 Schools Inquiry Commission, 549.
249 Delamont, 137; Thomas Edward Jordan, 157.
250 Garrett Anderson, 32.
lessons. Frances Power Cobbe railed against “the heterogeneous study of [ornaments],” such as dancing and recitation, at her school, particularly because they were pursued in a “helter-skelter fashion… of the shallowest and most imperfect kind.”251 Here, she echoed the Report of the Schools Inquiry Commission, which criticized the “want of thoroughness… showy superficiality… [and] the undue time given to accomplishments” of girls’ establishment schools.252

It is important to note that neither Frances Power Cobbe nor the commissioners condemned the actual teaching of accomplishments; rather, they took issue with how they were taught. More specifically, they argued that, first, girls spent too much time on accomplishments, and that, second, superficial and haphazard teaching left girls with little skill in the chosen accomplishment anyway. As Bryce articulated in his report, because girls were not taught “intelligently or in any scientific manner,” standards suffered greatly across the board, affecting everything from reading to dance training.253

Annie Besant’s memoir also helps expose trends in early Victorian girls’ education. Annie was born in 1847 in Clapham, London.254 Her father, a doctor, died when she was five, leaving her mother in financially difficult circumstances.255 Annie received a haphazard education from mother until age eight, when a lady philanthropist who ran a pseudo-charity school for genteel children took her in.256 Annie remained at school until she was “finished” at age sixteen.257

251 Cobbe, 195.
252 Schools Inquiry Commission, 305.
253 Ibid, 306.
256 Ibid, 15-16.
Annie’s financial difficulties illuminate the importance early Victorian middle-class parents placed on their daughters’ education relative to that of their sons. Annie recalls that her parents were intent that her older brother “should receive the best possible education…at public school, and then [at] University.” Indeed, despite her financial losses, Annie’s mother was “resolute to fulfill this [plan],” moving to an unfashionable neighbourhood and taking on boarders to pay the boy’s tuition. Annie, meanwhile, remained at home: her mother was too busy with the boarders to attend properly to her daughter’s education, and no other plans seem to have been made for Annie’s schooling or tutelage.

In her memoir, Annie wholeheartedly accepts the discrepancy between her and her brother’s education as natural. Certainly her mother’s overwhelming focus on her son’s schooling was not unusual. We have already seen this phenomenon amongst working-class parents, but such an attitude was also common amongst middle-class families, becoming most apparent when they did not have enough money to pay for the “best” for all of their children. Millicent Fawcett (b. 1847), Elizabeth Garrett Anderson’s younger sister, actually experienced a situation similar to Annie’s. In her memoir, she recalls that her “school-days…were brought abruptly to an end [because] there was suddenly a financial crisis at home.” Interestingly, however, her brother continued to attend public school, the annual tuition of which would have almost certainly been more

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258 Ibid, 17.
260 Ibid, 15.
261 Delamont, 136.
expensive than a stint at an average establishment school. In other words, like in Annie’s case, Millicent’s parents were not unable to pay school fees outright; however, because they wanted a premier education for their son, they compromised that of their daughter. As Louisa Garrett Anderson comments, “parents thought the serious education of their daughters superfluous,” so it was a reasonable to sacrifice in times of financial hardship.

Annie’s financial situation ultimately did not thwart her educational aspirations. At age eight, a chance meeting led to her admission to a free establishment school overseen by a philanthropist named Miss Marryat. Annie did, therefore, manage to be educated formally, although unlike her brother’s education, hers came about incidentally. Annie’s mother actually played no part in organizing Annie’s admission, citing the common concern that leaving a home environment might damage her daughter.

Despite her mother’s anxieties, Annie, like many girls, entered a domestic setting when she went to school. Establishment schools were typically run from the drawing room of a private middle-class home. In the words of the Schools Inquiry Commission, establishment schools were “conducted like private families…more a home than school.” To achieve this ambience, schoolmistresses would cultivate pseudo-mother-daughter relationships with girls. A “lady proprietress” generally behaved

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265 Besant, 25.
266 Ibid, 26.
267 Gorham, 22.
268 Schools Inquiry Commission, 547.
269 De Bellaigue, 148.
maternally towards her pupils, teaching lessons in an intimate and informal manner, and relying on ties of affection and dependence, not rulebooks, to secure discipline. In his 1868 report, James Bryce quoted one schoolmistress who, when faced with insubordination, would simply "say that I don't love them, that is always enough." Through Annie’s description of Miss Marryat, it is clear that she considered herself a “second mother.” Miss Marryat referred to her pupils as “her children,” for example, and insisted that they call her “‘Auntie’… for she thought 'Miss Marryat' seemed too cold and stiff.”

The conscious domesticity of establishment schools may be understood as doubly

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271 Schools Inquiry Commission, 817.
272 Besant, 21.
motivated. Joyce Goodman has argued that, on the one hand, familial settings were considered the safest environment for “delicate girls.”273 As Bryce concluded in his report, parents also favoured a homelike atmosphere for its supposed “production and confirmation of gentle and feminine characteristics.”274 Sending girls to establishment schools, in other words, was often part of a calculated effort to cultivate domesticated femininity.

Miss Marryat might have fostered a homelike atmosphere at her school, but unlike most schoolmistresses, she still provided her pupils with a serious education.275 Annie stresses the unusual breadth and rigour of her education. Miss Marryat, who herself seems to have been uncommonly learned, focused her lessons on higher French and German, history, geography, and classics, and hired language and music masters so older girls could study at an advanced level.276 Annie’s education was also atypically long. De Bellaigue’s study shows that the average pupil at an early Victorian private school attended for 4.7 years, with 14% of them staying for twelve months or fewer; Annie, however, remained with Miss Marryat for 8.5 years.277 While the quality and duration of Annie’s private school education was unusual, her experience serves as a reminder that establishment schools were not of universally poor academic merit.

From Annie’s memoirs, we may extract three key details as illustrative of early Victorian middle-class education. In some respects, her experience mirrors that of Elizabeth Garrett Anderson: she too received her early education at home before finally

273 Goodman, 11.
274 Schools Inquiry Commission, 818.
275 Besant, 22.
276 Ibid, 30.
277 De Bellaigue, 145; Besant, 33.
attending a small establishment school run by a genteel lady. Annie also highlights parents’ overwhelming focus on their sons’ education vis-à-vis that of their daughters, particularly during times of financial hardship. Unlike Louisa Garrett Anderson, she suggests that some academic rigour was possible (if uncommon) at establishment schools, although the ultimate aim of her education remained “finishing.”278 Finally, Annie’s memoir provides a vivid description of how homelike establishment schools were, both in terms of physical space and the relationships between “lady proprietresses” and pupils.

**Mid-Century Reform**

I have already noted that, starting in the 1870s, trusts like the Girls Public Day School Company (GPDSC) established a number of endowed schools. These institutions, created as counterparts to the leading boys’ grammar and public schools, soon provided the dominant model of education for middle-class girls. The roots of this transition may be traced back to the 1850s, when reforming educationalists like Dorothea Beale, Frances Buss, and Emily Davies called for the standardization and regulation of girls’ schools and, more generally, for a new focus on academic rigour and competition.279 Due in part to their efforts, new patterns in girls’ education began to emerge in the 1860s, such as the introduction of Oxford, Cambridge, and Durham’s local examinations (in essence, general education certificates).280 Ultimately, however, it was the Schools Inquiry Commission’s harsh criticism of girls’ secondary education that

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278 Ibid, 32.
279 Gorham, 25.
captured the middle-class public’s attention and spurred reform.\textsuperscript{281} The Commission’s official condemnation of the condition of girls’ education not only provoked widespread concern in its own right, but also lent authority to the earlier claims of Beale, Buss, and others, not least because these reformers had testified at the Commission.\textsuperscript{282}

Altogether, almost two hundred endowed schools were founded between 1871 and 1900.\textsuperscript{283} The Royal Commission of 1895, which reviewed progress made since the Schools’ Inquiry Commission of the 1860s, observed that between 10,000 and 15,000 girls attended a higher school in any given year.\textsuperscript{284} Again, these figures suggest that about 70\% of late Victorian middle-class girls attended an endowed school at some point in their childhood.\textsuperscript{285} Foremost among them was North London Collegiate, established in 1850 as a small private school, but made public in 1871, and becoming one of the largest and most influential girls’ schools in the country by the end of the century.\textsuperscript{286}

Endowed schools adopted many elements of early Victorian girls’ education. Educators, government officials, and parents alike articulated that the primary objective of endowed schools, and of improving girls’ education more generally, was to raise well-educated wives and mothers.\textsuperscript{287} Reform, at least in part, confirmed the importance of traditional femininity. However, as we shall see in the memoirs of Angela Brazil and

\textsuperscript{281} Gorham, 25.
\textsuperscript{282} Steinbach, 175; Gorham, 17.
\textsuperscript{283} Goodman, 13.
\textsuperscript{284} Dyhouse, \textit{Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England}, 50.
\textsuperscript{285} Ibid, 50.
\textsuperscript{287} Dyhouse, \textit{Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England}, 41.
Molly Hughes, the traditional undercurrents of reform did not preclude meaningful change to middle-class girls’ schooling. The mid-Victorian shift fundamentally altered girls’ educational course, producing a sizeable group of highly educated young women, and helping to bridge the gap between the male and female spheres.

**The Late Victorian Period**

The first late Victorian educational experience I examine is that of Angela Brazil, the daughter of a successful mill manager. Angela was born in 1869 in Lancashire, although her family moved to Manchester soon afterwards.\(^{288}\) She received most of her education at Ellerslie, a new endowed school.\(^{289}\)

Headmistresses at late Victorian endowed schools adopted a liberal curriculum modelled after that of boys' grammar and public schools. Like their early Victorian counterparts, later schoolgirls continued to study the “aesthetic subjects” (such as music and drawing), literature, history, and modern languages, although usually with more rigour than before.\(^{290}\) Angela notes that, at Ellerslie, "the subject upon which the curriculum concentrated was the teaching of English literature," but that instead of exclusively reading fashionable authors like Elizabeth Garrett Anderson had, they engaged in a comprehensive study of the literary canon.\(^{291}\) These schools began to teach conventionally “masculine” subjects as well, such as classics and political economy, with

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\(^{288}\) Angela Brazil, *My Own Schooldays* (London: Blackie and Son, 1925), 62; 135.

\(^{289}\) Ibid, 63-ff.

\(^{290}\) Gorham, 106.

\(^{291}\) Brazil, 142.
a similar emphasis on thoroughness. Angela, for instance, studied higher Latin and physiology at Ellerslie.

Endowed schools also focused heavily on public examinations. I have noted that starting in the early 1860s, Oxford, Cambridge, and Durham administered local examinations that functioned as general education certificates. These were aimed at girls who had engaged in loose home study, meant as a final mark of “finishing.” Still, by 1868, only about 25% of middle-class schoolgirls ever participated. The watershed occurred in the early 1870s, when Oxford and Cambridge introduced higher certificate examinations in response to mounting pressure from a number of Girls’ Public Day School Company schools. These exams, which were significantly more difficult than the “locals,” soon became wedded to matriculation (that is, graduation) at endowed schools.

Angela elaborates on her experience with the Higher Cambridge Local Examination in English literature, describing Ellerslie’s preparation program “a tremendous grind.” Ellerslie, like many other endowed schools, clearly did not only expect girls to participate, but to succeed. On top of their regular lessons, examination candidates attended demanding after-hours classes on a daily basis conducted by professors from the local university. “Old girls” from a number of GPDSC schools

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292 Hunt, 6.
293 Brazil, 152; 160.
294 Jordan, 440.
295 De Bellaigue, 182.
297 Brazil, 229.
298 Ibid, 229-230.
certainly emphasize how difficult exam preparation was, sometimes robbing them of leisure time for months.\footnote{Ibid, 227; Sara Burstall, \textit{The Story of Manchester High School for Girls, 1871-1911}. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1911),168; Pedersen, 80.}

Ellen Jordan has argued that examinations, and the academic rigour of endowed schools more generally, helped cement new academic and career opportunities young middle-class women.\footnote{Ellen Jordan, ""Making Good Wives and Mothers"? The Transformation of Middle-Class Girls' Education in Nineteenth-Century Britain," in \textit{History of Education Quarterly} 31, no. 4 (1991): 450} The Oxford and Cambridge higher certificates soon became \textit{de facto} entrance examinations for the new women’s colleges at the University of London, Oxford, and Cambridge.\footnote{Marlene Rayner-Canham and Geoff Rayner-Canham, 21.} The establishment of women’s colleges is outside the scope of my exploration and was, in many respects, a movement apart from girls’ educational reform; for our purposes, however, it is important to recognize that endowed schools

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Ipswich_High_School_Archive.jpg}
\caption{Anonymous, “Examination Room in Northgate Street,” photograph, 1880, \textit{Ipswich High School Archive}.}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Anonymous.jpg}
\caption{Anonymous, “Examination Room in Northgate Street,” photograph, 1880, \textit{Ipswich High School Archive}.}
\end{figure}
facilitated girls’ entrance into these institutions. The liberal curriculum and academic emphasis of endowed schools provided the necessary educational preparation for post-secondary, while their reliance on Oxbridge-administered matriculation exams normalized university as logical next step for young women.

The link between endowed schooling and young women’s growing access to post-secondary education is in itself significant. Felicity Hunt has argued that, by promoting and popularizing higher education, endowed schools also helped open new careers for young women. The late 19th century saw the rise of female university lecturers, scientists, and doctors, many of whom had attended endowed schools. Molly Hughes, the author of my final memoirs, matriculated from her endowed school to Cambridge, eventually becoming a lecturer and administrator at Bedford College, London. Equally, those who did not attend university often used their education to enter into other post-secondary programs, or assume occupations that required considerable education. Angela and her sister both attended the Heatherley School of Fine Art after leaving Ellerslie, while others went on to pursue journalism, photography, pharmaceutical chemistry, public administration, and politics. Endowed schools were not singularly

302 Pederson, 72.
304 Hunt, 8-9.
responsible for new educational and career opportunities, but they did qualify many young women to pursue them.

Despite the new academic focus of girls’ schooling, middle-class parents in the late Victorian period continued to plan their daughters’ education with their own social aspirations in mind. Angela remarks that her parents ultimately decided to send her to Ellerslie because “it was considered the most select school in Manchester.”308 Parents did not only seek to bolster the family’s prospects in general, however; their intentions were also connected with strengthening that of their daughter in particular. Simply put, like parents of previous generations, they principally wanted schools to socialize their daughters to become respectable and highly eligible young ladies.309 Bryce, writing in the 1870s, notes that mothers continued to be “acutely sensitive to their daughters' social successes" and demand that schools foremost guarantee girls’ gentility and femininity.310

Late Victorian educators were thus charged with instilling learnedness in pupils without neglecting the cultivation of ladylike behaviour, a delicate balance that occasionally sparked tensions between families and endowed schools. Dorothea Beale, the principal of Cheltenham Ladies’ College, observed in the 1870s that some parents complained of her school’s academic orientation, sometimes even accusing her of “turning [pupils] into boys.”311 In other words, some perceived endowed school curriculum not simply as like boys’ curriculum, but actually potentially defeminizing. Overall, however, endowed it met little controversy from the public. While the ideal

309 Jordan, “"Making Good Wives and Mothers"?” 450; Delamont, 144.
310 Jordan, “"Making Good Wives and Mothers"?” 450.
future remained marriage and motherhood for girls, members of the middle classes increasing recognized that increasing numbers of women could not expect to marry, and therefore had to be educated to support themselves.\textsuperscript{312} Even those who insisted upon traditional domesticity saw the benefits of a rigorous curriculum. Sir Joshua Fitch, Assistant Commissioner to the Schools Inquiry Commission, expressed a sentiment typical of late Victorian conservatives when he argued that endowed schools enabled girls to become thoughtful and engaging wives and wise, distinguished mothers.\textsuperscript{313} In other words, by the late 19th century, a thorough education did not only become an integral part of middle-class girlhood, but was incorporated into notions of traditional femininity.

The last memoir I will examine in detail is that of Molly Hughes, born in 1866 to a London stockbroker. She was educated at home until age twelve, when she entered an old-fashioned establishment school for three years.\textsuperscript{314} At age sixteen, Molly left to attend North London Collegiate, matriculating two years later.\textsuperscript{315}

Even after 1865, middle-class girls often received a large part of their education at home.\textsuperscript{316} Molly’s memoirs provide a window into late Victorian homeschooling—and, most notably, how little it changed during the 19th century. As in the early Victorian period, mothers generally furnished girls with a rudimentary education focused on the

\textsuperscript{314} Hughes, \textit{A London Child of the 1870s}, 8; 41.
\textsuperscript{315} Ibid, \textit{A London Girl of the 1880s}, 18; 61.
\textsuperscript{316} Dyhouse, \textit{Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England}, 41.
3Rs, Scripture, and sometimes a smattering of literature and French.\textsuperscript{317} Nesta Webster, born 1876 in London, remembers her mother’s lessons that concentrated “notably on Bible lessons…and [memorizing] poetry.”\textsuperscript{318} Molly’s homeschooling was similarly narrow in focus.\textsuperscript{319} The explanation for homeschooling’s lack of breadth and rigour is almost identical to that of the mid-19\textsuperscript{th} century. Mothers were generally busy with other responsibilities, or (as Molly’s mother was) were disinterested teachers.\textsuperscript{320} Moreover, as we have seen in the early Victorian period, they themselves were relatively uneducated.\textsuperscript{321} Molly remembers how little her mother knew of Biblical history and mathematics, to the extent that lessons often left mother and daughter equally confused about basic information.\textsuperscript{322}

Molly attended an establishment school in the 1870s, at the beginning of the late Victorian educational reform. These schools, even in their most traditional form, continued to exist into the late 1890s. Leah Manning, born 1886 in Worcestershire, recalls in her memoir that “the only things [she] remembers being taught… was to play the piano, to paint a few flowers, and work a sampler.”\textsuperscript{323} Leah’s experience aside, by the 1890s, establishment schools were rare, considered substandard by most parents.

\textsuperscript{317} Gorham, 20.  
\textsuperscript{319} Hughes, \textit{A London Child of the 1870s}, 40-41.  
\textsuperscript{320} Ibid, 45.  
\textsuperscript{322} Hughes, \textit{A London Child of the 1870s}, 41-43.  
Leah herself seems only to have attended due to a misunderstanding, and soon left the establishment for a “real school.”

Many late Victorian establishment schools actually remodelled themselves after endowed schools. Molly received a much more academically oriented education at hers than the majority of early Victorian middle-class girls had. She remarks, for example, that girls studied intermediate Latin, and knew their mathematics “with such easy assurance…[it] smacked… of black magic.” Similarly, Angela Brazil’s establishment school awarded pupils book prizes, a novelty first introduced to girls’ schooling by endowed schools. While private establishment schools did not disappear completely in the late Victorian period, then, they largely provided a different experience for girls than their predecessors had. Endowed schools had redefined girls’ education as necessarily including practices previously more typical of boys’ schools, such as prizes and a serious focus on academics. Even establishment schools, bastions of tradition, did not escape their influence.

In 1882, Molly began school at North London, an endowed school. Angela Brazil’s memoir shed light on the academic orientation of these institutions, and on the resulting educational and career opportunities. Despite significant curricular innovation, however, Molly explains that most schools remained very concerned about ladylike behaviour, instituting strict rules about comportment that set them apart from boys’

324 Delamont, 139; Manning, 27.
326 Brazil, 68; Gorham, 106.
Physical education was a particular sticking point. While organized games had become almost an obsession in late Victorian public and grammar schools, headmistresses at endowed schools were loath to adopt this novelty, deeming girls’ athleticism undignified and potentially detrimental to girls’ developing femininity, and consequently only permitting “decorous callisthenics.”

Team sports bred “hoysdenism” in girls, leading Beale, for instance, to comment that she was “most anxious that girls should not… become absorbed in athletic rivalries.” By the 1890s, most endowed schools had adopted a highly circumscribed system of physical education and organized games, usually involving tennis and cricket, although these activities were often limited to prepubescent girls.

Figure 4: Anonymous, “Musical Callisthenics at North London Collegiate,” drawing, 1882, *The Girl’s Own Paper*.

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330 Gorham, 96.
Endowed schools also promoted traditional femininity by emphasizing the importance of feminine service and duty, often through charity work. North London had monthly “Dorcas” meetings during which girls would sew garments for the poor, while other schools had similar good works programs.331 Domestic tasks were also taught as ends in themselves. Even the most academic of girls’ schools included sewing and cooking lessons, usually meant to teach girls how to manage households effectively.332 At North London, girls studied theoretical Domestic Economy and Health so that they could competently direct servants and ensure the wellbeing of their future husbands and children.333 Schools, while providing new educational and career opportunities for girls, thus still equipped girls to become wives, mothers, and managers of middle-class homes.

While endowed schools prepared girls to navigate home environments, they themselves were usually large, formal institutions. In fact, schools were so large that they had to adopt a system of forms, following some grammar schools in dividing students by age and academic ability.334 Unlike earlier schools, moreover, girls had lessons in classroom settings included blackboards, rows of desks, subject teachers, and codified rules.335 Molly describes how strict these rules could be, commenting on “the iron discipline” of North London, with its ominous rule and punishment books, and where “every movement [was] ordered.”336 Indeed, to foster a sense of formality and decorum, headmistresses would cast themselves as imposing, stately figures worthy of

331 Ibid, 44; Hunt, 7.
332 Gorham, 111.
334 De Bellaigue, 173.
335 Brazil, 124; 139; Jordan, 444; Hunt, 7.
girls’ reverence and fear. Molly was afraid of her headmistress, Frances Buss, citing her uncompromising severity and awe-inspiring grandness. Both late Victorian schoolrooms and headmistresses, in short, were a far cry from their establishment-school equivalents, replacing drawing rooms and “second mothers” with formal classrooms and lofty public figures.

Molly also notes that “marks were the life-blood of [North London].” Endowed schools were highly competitive environments, with tests, examinations, and competitions virtually defining the academic calendar. Molly remembers Prize Day as a red-letter day at North London, partly because of the celebrations involved, but mostly because girls wanted to demonstrate their academic prowess. Angela Brazil had a similar experience at Ellerslie, noting how seriously both teachers and pupils took prizes.

Some educationalists and educators, including members of the Schools Inquiry Commission, expressed concern about stimulating individual competition amongst girls, arguing that it was incompatible with feminine modesty and self-sacrifice. Principals responded to these criticisms by trying to bridge the gap between so-called modern schooling and existing gender norms. Deborah Gorham, who surveyed prize tables from a number of late Victorian endowed schools, points to the fact that subject awards for Latin and mathematics, or prizes for high placements on external examinations, were

337 Cockburn, 309; Mitchell, 182.
338 Hughes, A London Girl of the 1880s, 24.
340 Gorham, 106.
341 Hughes, A London Girl of the 1880s, 48-49.
342 Brazil, 148.
343 Dyhouse, "Miss Buss and Miss Beale: Gender and Authority in the History of Education," 31.
usually books that extolled highly conservative notions of femininity, especially those involving self-sacrifice.\textsuperscript{344} A girl’s “masculine” behaviour (that is, her competitiveness, especially in a traditionally masculine domain) was thus moderated and reintegrated into normative femininity: she might perform well on her mathematics exam like her brother had, but her achievement could still be constructed as a lesson in proper feminine behaviour. While it is difficult to ascertain how much of this “feminizing” was pretence, pupils themselves seem to have been oblivious to or dismissive of it. Molly recalls caring exclusively about the prestige associated with winning, not the prizes themselves, while Angela, expressing surprise at the “queer” choice book prizes, notes she was nevertheless happy to have them for display purposes.\textsuperscript{345}

Angela Brazil and Molly Hughes highlight some key elements in the evolution of middle-class girls’ education. Their memoirs expose the traditionalism of late Victorian girls’ schooling, particularly regarding the persistence of homeschooling and establishment schools and endowed schools’ focus on ladylike behaviour and domesticity. However, they also illustrate the newfound importance of competition, formality and academic achievement introduced to middle-class girls’ education in endowed schools, but soon filtering down to affect the entire system. As we have seen in the case of Angela and Molly, the emergence of new grammar-school education profoundly impacted girls not only during their time in school, but also later in life.

\textsuperscript{344} Gorham, 120.
\textsuperscript{345} Hughes, \textit{A London Girl of the 1880s}, 49; Brazil, 148.
Conclusion

Middle-class girls’ educational reform did not free girls from the restrictive Victorian gender regime. In Chapter 2, I have aimed to demonstrate that new and reformed schools continued to promote the “women’s mission” of the early Victorian period, with parents, government officials, and educators alike still seeking to shape girls into cultivated ladies and dignified wives and mothers. As Frances Buss, the headmistress of North London, told her pupils, “to be deeply pleasing to a husband…[is] as good an ideal as a woman can have.” Moreover, contrary to the assertions of Sally Mitchell and others, educational reform did not transform girlhood. Even within school environments, girlhood remained wedded to a conservative feminine ideal that emphasized ladylike grace, service and duty, and overwhelmingly rejected “boyish” characteristics, such as athleticism and, to an extent, public competition.

Despite the continuity, however, middle-class girls’ education did change considerably over the Victorian period. Whereas most early Victorian girls studied at home or in homelike, non-academic establishment schools, by the end of the 19th century, the majority attended endowed schools, with their formal structure, progressive and rigorous curricula, and focus on academic achievement. As I have demonstrated, while these reforms were significant in themselves, they also enabled many young women to embrace a wide range of new opportunities, such as attend university and enter into careers that were previously out of reach to women.

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346 Hughes, A London Girl of the 1880s, 35.
Reform, in other words, was not revolutionary, but nor was it Sara Delamont’s “Pyrrhic victory,” the entrenchment of gender division disguised as innovation. While it certainly did not precipitate a rejection of traditional femininity, the new focus on learnedness and measurable accomplishment participated in its revision, even within conservative circles. New and reformed schools expanded not only what middle-class girls and women could achieve, but as increasing numbers of girls attended these institutions, what was normal for and even expected of them. In short, reform helped pair traditional femininity with real capacity, whether that capacity was connected with an occupation or with competence at home. By the late 19th century, no girl was to become the unskilled “Ornament of Society” that Frances Power Cobbe describes in her memoir. As an 1882 article in The Girl’s Own Paper declared, whether they became doctors or mothers, there existed a new understanding that “girls hold in their hands the coming destiny of the nation.” Reform, in other words, did not just elevate the quality of girls’ education, but the status of girls themselves.

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348 Cobbe, 193.
CONCLUSION

Working-class and middle-class girls’ education underwent major change during the Victorian period. In the mid-19th century, a working-class girl usually attended an informal and unregulated dame school for a short period, where, if she were lucky, she would become basically literate and numerate. Her attendance, moreover, was cursory, as most young girls withdrew from school early to help at home or work. After 1870, the state became increasingly involved in working-class education, instituting compulsory attendance, defining the curriculum, and even subsidizing school fees. Thus a working-class girl in 1890’s England could expect to attend, for free, a highly regulated, formal institution, where she would study a range of subjects, until she was at least age twelve.

In regard to middle-class education, in the early Victorian period, a girl typically studied at home with her mother or a governess, often attending a homey establishment school for a short period to be “finished.” Throughout her education, she would concentrate on ladylike “accomplishments,” such as singing, dancing, and painting. Starting in the late 1860s and early 1870s, however, new endowed schools emerged that modelled themselves after the leading boys’ schools. These were formal institutions that adopted liberal curricula and emphasized the need for girls to be educated like their brothers. Consequently, as these schools grew in popularity, the majority of middle-class girls began to receive extended education with a strong academic and competitive focus.

As I have argued in my thesis, analyses of Victorian girls’ educational reform fall into two broad historiographical schools. The former, arising in the late 1970s and early 1980s and espoused chiefly by feminist historians, acknowledges reform to girls’ education, but argues that it was largely insignificant, as highly conservative ideas about
womanhood remained rooted in English society. A late-Victorian girl, in short, might study higher arithmetic, but on a fundamental level, she was still groomed to become a traditional wife and mother. Conversely, in the last decade of the 20th century, a number of scholars began to reconsider reform’s importance. In so doing, they deemphasize questions of ideology, pointing instead to the major practical changes to girls’ education, as well as the new opportunities these changes engendered, to argue that a transformation of vast consequence occurred.

My thesis has aimed to synthesize these analyses. Later historians are correct in judging educational reform to be highly significant, and emphasizing its momentous effect on the lives of thousands of girls and women. Nevertheless, I believe that we must still acknowledge the underlying conservatism of late Victorian girls’ education illuminated by early historians such as Dyhouse and Turnbull.

It is undeniable that the educational and occupational landscape was transformed over the course of the 19th century. The standard of working-class and middle-class girls’ education increased dramatically, with girls from both socioeconomic groups receiving a more thorough, academically focused education and remaining in school for much longer than their predecessors. Working-class literacy rates and endowed schools’ public examination results demonstrate the profound and unambiguous impact of reform on girls’ educational attainment. Reformed schooling, in turn, provided young women with new access to higher education and an expanded range of career opportunities. For middle-class women, this expansion facilitated university attendance and entrance into the professional world; for working-class women, it provided an avenue to respectable white-collar positions. Indeed, with the help of their reformed schooling, increasing
numbers of middle-class women became civil servants, doctors, and academics, while thousands of working-class women were saved from “drudgework.” Some even became certified quasi-professionals themselves.

As profound as the effects of educational reform were, however, it did accommodate some traditionalism. Elite educationalists promoted early Victorian domesticity as the ideal future for both working-class and middle-class girls, a position accepted by conservatives and liberals alike. As I have demonstrated, even some reforming headmistresses foremost promoted marriage and motherhood to their pupils. Girls also received mixed messages about their schooling. Parents and officials continued to place secondary importance on girls’ education in working-class circles, while some middle-class parents viewed endowed schools as “finishing” institutions meant to enhance their daughters’ marriageability. Within schools themselves, gendered curriculum and rule codes enforced the idea that girls’ future ideally lay in the home and, at least in theory, that girls must conform to old-fashioned notions of ladylike behaviour.

In short, then, significant educational reform emerged in an environment of ideological continuity. The glorification of traditional femininity undoubtedly continued to characterize the dominant gender discourse and permeate girls’ education. However, this persistence does not preclude the potential for meaningful change. A late Victorian schoolgirl might have been subject to the same basic gender regime as her mother had been, but she could also access a range of new resources and opportunities that were hitherto outside the realm of possibility. Reform need not be revolutionary to be significant; equally, however, even significant reform can limit the opportunities and ambitions of girls and young women.
Memoirs as Evidence of Change

In my thesis, I have used memory texts to assess the profoundness of educational reform on a systemic level. In reflecting on how the eight memoirists under study regarded educational reform as individuals, I will consider each woman’s account in turn, concentrating first on the four working-class narratives before turning to those of the middle-class memoirists. As I will demonstrate, as adults, they all appreciate the mixed nature of reform, lauding aspects they considered progressive while criticizing those they deemed backward or old-fashioned.

Marianne Farningham was born in 1834, so her childhood preceded the major reforms to working-class education. Writing as a 73-year-old woman in 1907, Marianne focuses principally on her personal experiences, reflecting little on the significance of late 19th-century reform. She does, however, briefly comment that she is “so glad that compulsory education has been secured for the children of these happier days.” At the same time, Marianne takes issue with the Education Department’s reluctance to raise the leaving age (indeed, it remained below age twelve until 1918), complaining that their inaction permitted many working-class children to leave school with little more than a rudimentary education. In her discussions of early school withdrawals in the 1870s and 1880s, she mentions particularly the plight of girls, whose attendance rates lagged significantly behind boys.

Like Marianne, Mary Smith only briefly addresses late 19th-century educational reform in her 1892 memoir. Reflecting on the situation in the 1880s, Mary comments

350 Ibid, 46.
351 Ibid, 89-ff; Ginger Suzanne Frost, Victorian Childhoods (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2009), 44.
352 Farningham, 155.
that while “girls’ education was neglected” during her own childhood, a growing number of institutions (particularly Board schools) had since emerged to rectify this issue, creating unprecedented educational opportunities for working-class girls. However, Mary maintains that many girls “in the lower classes [nevertheless] remained with no education to help them,” especially in rural areas, where the closest mixed or girls’ school could be miles away. Mary describes this phenomenon as indicative of the broader “inequality of the sexes” in 1880’s England, remarking that these “young women without an education were sadly wronged and injured.”

Although Marianne and Mary touch on separate issues, they both convey the same basic message. They note instances of positive reform to working-class girls’ education—respectively, the introduction of compulsory schooling and its growing accessibility to girls—but then demonstrate how it was not instituted to full effect. As a result, they both argue, many girls continued to receive an inadequate education, or even no education at all, well into the late 1880s.

Flora Thompson, born in 1876, experienced the effects of educational reform during her childhood. Writing her memorial novel as a 63-year-old in 1939, Flora explains that her school was expected to teach children a standardized, broad-based curriculum and meet the external standards of the Education Department. However, while she acknowledges the theoretical advantages of this system, she contends that it

355 Ibid, 257.
hardly benefited children.\textsuperscript{357} Despite the British Government’s growing official focus on working-class education, she argues that those who actually worked with children continued to reject its importance.\textsuperscript{358} For example, Flora remembers that inspectors and teachers were primarily concerned with “training children to accept their lowly lot,” not with providing any semblance of an education.\textsuperscript{359} Ultimately, she concludes that their indifference and even hostility left her “without much of an education,” despite having completed the highest standard her school offered.\textsuperscript{360}

Daisy Cowper also reflects on the reformed system. In her 1964 memoir, she stresses how thorough her education was, noting that she is “still amazed at the amount of work [they] got through” and her consequent “deep appreciation for [her] school.”\textsuperscript{361} The topics she highlights, moreover, are highly “academic,” such as Shakespeare, advanced grammar, history, and geography, all of which she claims are the school’s “specialties.”\textsuperscript{362}

Although Daisy generally praises her former school’s curriculum in her memoir, she does complain about its gender division. She describes her domestic economy lessons as “queer and daft-seeming,” and expresses dismay that girls were never able to use the Boys’ Department’s science laboratory, admitting that she still wishes she could have “unravelled the complexities of physics with [the boys].”\textsuperscript{363} Daisy also recalls that boys received most of the scholarship opportunities, leaving few girls with the ability

\textsuperscript{357} Ibid, 203-205.
\textsuperscript{358} Ibid, 197; 203.
\textsuperscript{359} Ibid, 201.
\textsuperscript{360} Ibid, 425.
\textsuperscript{361} Daisy Cowper, “De Nobis,” Burnett Archive of Working Class Autobiographies (Brunel Special Collections, 1950), 85; 102.
\textsuperscript{362} Ibid, 83.
\textsuperscript{363} Ibid, 86.
attend high school. In her memoir, Daisy describes this discrepancy—and her failure to win a scholarship—as miserable, emphasizing how hard she studied and how comparatively lucky her male classmates were.

In short, then, while recognizing the reforms to working-class education, Flora and Daisy both maintain that they were only partly effective. They demonstrate that existing class and gender inequalities weakened the impact of many of the notionally positive structural changes to working-class schools, especially for girls. As Flora articulates in her memoir, “new ideas were percolating but slowly” among those empowered to effect reform in a meaningful way for children, which created gaps between educational rhetoric of “a good education for all” and children’s lived experience.

The middle-class memoirists also convey mixed attitudes towards educational reform. Born in 1847, Annie Besant did not experience first hand the reform to middle-class girls’ education that began in the late-1860s. In her 1885 memoir, however, she does reflect on changes to girls’ and women’s education since her childhood. Annie recognizes the significance of reform: in general terms, she applauds the developments that helped open universities to women (including the emergence of endowed schools) noting that during her youth, “no one dreamed of the changes soon to be made in the direction of the ‘higher education of women.’” Nevertheless, as a 38-year-old, Annie is still largely critical of the overall structure of endowed schools. With her own

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364 Ibid, 64.
365 Ibid, 65.
366 Ibid, 195.
daughter’s education in mind, she complains of their tendency to mollycoddle girls with simplistic lessons and indulgent behaviour, so that pupils “waste time that might be priceless for their educational growth.” Indeed, elsewhere in her memoir, she suggests that her daughter, then fifteen, was receiving inadequate schooling at such an institution.

Elizabeth Garrett Anderson’s childhood also preceded late 19th-century reform to middle-class girls’ education. In her biography, her daughter, Louisa, does not comment on her mother’s attitude towards educational reform explicitly. She does, however, suggest that Elizabeth acknowledged progress since her 1840’s childhood, but felt throughout her adult life that “better education [still] must be provided for women.”

Elizabeth, for instance, apparently worried that Louisa would fall into the same educational black hole she had despite the reforms to middle-class girls’ education. Louisa recounts that she was accordingly sent to one of the most progressive endowed schools in England, whose mission statement was that “a girl should receive an education that is as good as her brother’s, if not better.”

In short, both Annie and Elizabeth convey ambivalence towards middle-class educational reform, and particularly endowed schools. Both women recognize that these institutions were meant to provide a more rigorous education for middle-class girls than their antecedents, and consider this shift in focus broadly positive. However, they clearly

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368 Besant, 60.
remain sceptical of endowed schools’ academic merit, and suspicious of their propensity towards traditionalism, evident in their anxieties about their daughters’ education.

Molly Hughes, who attended an endowed school in the 1880s, expresses a strikingly similar attitude in her discussion of her schooling and, more generally, of educational reform. Writing in the mid-1930s, Molly reflects that, despite North London’s attempts to imitate England’s leading public schools, “three essentials of the their system was entirely lacking: games, effective punishment, and respectable learning.” She recalls, for instance, the “uselessness, dullness… and stupidity” of many of her lessons, especially of domestic sciences, as well as the absurdity of substituting ladylike callisthenics for actual physical education.

Molly’s adult perspective on her time at North London is perhaps best encapsulated in her discussion of her former headmistress, Miss Buss. In broad terms, Molly acknowledges and respects Miss Buss’ efforts to break new ground at North London, remarking that “I saw later that Miss Buss was faced by the herculean task… [of] almost single-handed, getting some kind of systematic education for girls.” However, 70-year-old Molly argues that Buss’ incongruous insistence on training girls “along Victorian lines of good behaviour” created a system riddled with “faults and absurdities [in which] the education of girls was only a feeble imitation of what boys were doing.” In other words, Molly implies that many of the seemingly major reforms engendered only superficial change.

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373 Ibid, 28-29; 36.
374 Ibid, 35.
375 Ibid, 35-36.
Angela Brazil, writing her memoir in 1925 at age fifty-seven, describes her endowed school, Ellerslie, and “modern” education in general, in more positive terms. She remembers lessons as having been “splendid, inspiring, the very backbone to a real education,” arguing that academic excellence was the distinguishing factor between “modern” and “old-fashioned” (that is, early Victorian) girls’ schools. 376 Angela does, however, voice her disapproval of endowed schools’ efforts to establish themselves as equal to the leading boys’ schools.377 Angela recounts how they pressured students unduly during public examinations in particular, as exam results directly impacted schools’ academic reputation.378 She notes that this overemphasis on prestige was overwhelming, alienating her from her studies and ultimately dissuading her from attending College.379 Like Molly, she also complains of endowed schools’ frustratingly conservative attitude towards physical education and games, which she suggests contradicts “all the talk of the golden age of education.”380

Molly and Angela readily acknowledge the structural transformations that occurred to middle-class girls’ schools. Although they articulate different opinions about endowed schools’ actual academic merits, they both mirror Annie and Elizabeth’s recognition of and support for increasingly widespread educational objective of providing “a real education” for all girls.381 However, looking back to their childhoods, they express discomfort about endowed schools’ lingering conservatism and awkward attempts to imitate boys’ schools. Molly and Angela both demonstrate how these

376 Angela Brazil, My Own Schooldays (London: Blackie and Son, 1925), 141; 154.
377 Ibid, 146.
378 Ibid, 142.
379 Ibid, 141; 231.
380 Ibid, 149.
381 Hughes, A London Girl of the 1880s, 36.
tendencies often caused North London and Ellerslie to fall short of their “modern” rhetoric, causing a number of unintentional consequences along the way.

**Conclusion**

As much as my eight memory texts are reflections on their subject’s lives, they also function as an assessment of educational reform. They, like the composite of secondary literature, clearly establish that the late Victorian period saw significant change to girls’ education, but that, contrary to the assertions of Mitchell and Steinbach, pervasive conservatism forestalled any educational revolution. Their common reflections on both the successes and disappointments of reform serve to connect these women across temporal and socioeconomic divides. They are also more profoundly connected through a shared future, as agents of change.

Nineteenth-century education reform, while momentous, did not involve a complete transformation of existing educational structures or a total reconfiguration of gender roles within these structures. It did, however, open the door to further change in the 20th century, many of which were initiated by women who themselves had benefited from Victorian educational reform.\(^\text{382}\) As adults, Molly Hughes and Daisy Cowper used their positions within the educational system to improve girls’ education. Molly, for example, advocated for the elimination of domestic subjects as obstacles to “real learning,” while Daisy worked to ensure a fairer division of scholarship opportunities between genders.

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within her classroom.\textsuperscript{383} Flora Thompson and Angela Brazil, meanwhile, who both became well-known authors, spread awareness about the difficulties girls faced in school through their writings. Angela in particular emphasized the importance of physical education for girls in her novels, while Flora cautioned parents against dismissing their daughters’ education.\textsuperscript{384} Educational reform shaped the lives of Molly, Daisy, Angela, and Flora when they were girls; it is fitting, then, that they would go on to shape it as women.

Ultimately, any analysis of the profoundness of Victorian girls’ educational reform must be situated in the context of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. As historians, our frame of reference is not the women’s liberation movement of the future—or indeed, a reaction against the type of historical inquiry it produced. Contrasting educational experiences of early and late Victorian girls, it becomes clear that 19\textsuperscript{th} century reform contained both strikingly conservative and progressive features. Put simply, it transformed the educational and occupational arena for thousands of girls without actually changing English society’s core beliefs about the ideal position of women.

The values-based question originally posed by scholars in the 1970s—whether or not 19\textsuperscript{th} century reform was worthy of a feminist stamp of approval—remains, from this author’s perspective, unanswerable. Late Victorian schoolgirls certainly continued to confront educational barriers borne out of the restrictive gender regime; however, they also used the new educational reality to secure their future well being, even if that only meant becoming literate. Many other girls used their education to grow into educated,

\textsuperscript{383} Hughes, \textit{A London Family Between the Wars} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 54; Cowper, 202.
\textsuperscript{384} Brazil, 268; Thompson, 571.
economically independent young women. Indeed, one does not have to look past the lives of Flora, Daisy, Angela, and Molly to see that.
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Images


