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## Ladies of the *Times*: Elite women's voices at the turn of the Twentieth Century

*This paper draws on a wider study of letters to the editor of the Times published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is specifically concerned with the nature of women's contributions to this, the United Kingdom's 'paper of record', at a crucial historical period. At this time, rapid transformations of social and cultural power and status were linked to equally rapid transformations of the role and function of the press. Women's contributions are of particular interest as women's public facing work was often at the forefront of changes in cultural power. The paper examines the ways in which women used the forum of letters to the editor and what this reveals about the nature of publicity and feminine public identity in the period.*

### Key Words

Newspapers. Editors. Letters. Publicity. Public Sphere. Women.

### Introduction

On 2 February 1900, a letter appeared in the *Times* from "A Soldier's Mother"

Sir,- I write from one of the many hundreds of English homes that are in mourning to-day for their dead sons ... to express my dismay and hopelessness at the picture presented by our statesmen in Parliament last night. Party spirit was the moving spring of each one ... Selfishness was uppermost in each, and the littleness of mind that could try to raise a laugh on such an occasion fills one with the contempt of despair.'

Whilst this letter itself is unremarkable, being one of many on similar themes, it is a fascinating example of the ways in which women engaged with and shaped the new culture of publicity emerging at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. In this era, rapid transformations of social and cultural power and status were linked to equally rapid transformations of the role and function of the press and public-ness. On the one hand we see the rise of new journalism, the ongoing mass production and marketization of news, fierce competition between divergent ethics of journalism and reportage and on the other economic transformations which rocked the old certainties of status and wealth and invoked new forms of social distinction. All these presented unique challenges for women, as it was these forms of social status and distinction of which women, in their public-facing roles, were custodians. As many historians (Davidoff and Hall 1987; Fraser 1990; Barker 2000) have argued, women's public-facing work has often reflected fundamental shifts in cultural power. Historically women have worked 'behind the scenes' to secure and extend ephemeral, social and symbolic forms of power and influence that complement the more formal dominance of political and financial power enjoyed by males.

The end of the nineteenth century and in the early years of the twentieth saw the beginnings of a 'mediatisation' (Hjarvard 2008; Krotz 2009) of formal nodes of power. Women's traditionally symbolic and social roles came to play a greater part in this process, as will be argued here. Moreover this was also a period of transformation in the lives of women in other respects. Increasing opportunities for participation in political, cultural and educational spheres, came along with a, sometimes unwelcome, liberation from the strict confines of traditional roles. Together these make this era one in which uncertainty and transformation were the norm and, against this background, conservative social discourses reasserted the centrality of distinctions, practices and statuses which were being assailed.

This paper draws on a study of letters to the Editor of the *Times*. It focuses on the nature of women's contributions to this, the United Kingdom's 'paper of record', in the first decade of the twentieth century. Using examples drawn from two years of this sample selected at random, 1900 and 1905, I here examine the ways in which women negotiated access to, and used, the potent forum of letters to the editor, and what this tells us about transformations of symbolic power and mediatisation in the early part of the twentieth century. The paper is based on a limited sample in order to ensure comprehensiveness insofar as this can be accomplished (See Cavanagh 2013). I focus here exclusively on the *Times* in order to capture the ways in which the paper intersected with and constructed a community of readers. The paper was unique in its association with the elite political and economic class. Its detailed coverage of parliamentary debates, and ability to report on foreign news through its extensive network of foreign correspondents made the paper an adjunct to political and public life (Lee 1976; Conboy 2010). The *Times* was also at the forefront of establishing the cultural and political position of the press. Williams does not mince words when he declaims that in the early nineteenth century

'The Times had dominated everything; a towering Everest of a newspaper with sales ten times those of any other daily, combining leadership in circulation, in news services- especially of the most confidential and exclusive kind – in advertisement revenue, commercial profit and political influence to an extent no other newspaper in the world has done before or since' (Williams 1959, 90)

Although the paper's circulation figures had declined from its peak in the 1860s (Wadsworth 1955), it is fair to say that the paper retained a wider influence, setting the model for professionalization in journalism, its staid gravitas smoothing the way for movement from muckracker to fourth estate. Its readership was no less serious-minded than its editors (Conboy 2010, 85). The *Times*, moreover, played a central role in the Victorian imaginary, with consequences which we will see later. "Men think, and speak, and act the *Times* newspaper", argues Trollope in *The New Zealander* (1972, cited in Rubery 2009, 89). Whereas the provincial press at this period offered a platform for those who were otherwise without voice (Jones 1990), the *Times* was one amongst many platforms for those who were already influential individuals (although there are notable exceptions to this; see Cavanagh 2013). It thus offers not only an insight into wider 'public' opinion, but into elite opinion expressed in a forum that was, as I will argue below, a cosy extension of their social circle.

The role of women in this sphere is of particular interest. As Eger et al (2001) point out, the relationship between private and public spheres is a central trope of feminist theory and historiography. Starting with the centrality of exclusions based on gender to the organisation of the bourgeois public sphere (see Fraser 1990; Clery 1991), analyses of women's access to the public arena has been core to understanding women's agency. The dominant approach in looking at the position of women in nineteenth century society has of course been the 'separate spheres' ideology. However, as Gordon and Nair argue, taking this at face value risks over simplification. Women of the nineteenth century were 'enmeshed in a matrix of circulating discourses, some of which competed with separate spheres, cut across it, supplemented it, or even supplanted it' (Gordon and Nair 2003, 2). This is especially the case for women whose position is already to some degree 'public'. There is a tendency to see the presence of such women as qualifying or opposing more general exclusions but as Chapman, drawing on Scott, argues feminist history is less the 'recounting of great deeds' and more the uncovering of the 'silent and hidden operations of gender' (Scott, cited in Chapman 2013, 8). Moreover we should be equally cautious in too easy an identification of agency with public identity. As Gonda has argued women's visibility in public is not necessarily an index of emancipation. 'To the extent that ...women were actors on a public stage, it was mostly not to a script of their own making, or under their own management' (Gonda 2001, 68). Women's public identities therefore are highly politicised and contested and their public personae likewise suffused by gendered discourses.

Letters to the editor written by an explicitly female correspondent are, however, by far a minority of the letters published. For the two year sample I discuss here there were only some 344 letters which could be identified as written by women, against over 6000 letters in total. Women's appearances in this forum were then very limited and, as I will be arguing below, confined to a very narrow range of commentary and activity.

### **Letters to the editor**

Letters to the editor are a curiously underused resource in both historical research and in studies of the media. With some notable exceptions, for example the work of Wahl-Jorgensen (2002, 2007) and Pedersen (2004, 2002), letters to the editor are usually treated instrumentally, as a resource in other academic endeavours. Most often this takes the form of using them to provide insight into the production of public discourse and public opinion (e.g. Thompson 1980; Hall, et al. 1978; Robson 1995; Richardson and Franklin 2004; Ansari 2011). As Thornton (2007, 63) has argued letters are 'among the few remaining accessible and unchanging records of public opinion' and provide a window on the preoccupations of newspaper readers. Recent large-scale digitalisation projects have rendered these letters more accessible and it is more practical to conduct larger scale comparative research into them.

Of course scholars have also acknowledged there are serious limitations in the use of these even in our own era. A view of public opinion as this is embodied in letters is inevitably one skewed towards a self-selecting sample of individuals who chose to write in, and, as Thornton (2007, 64) notes, these are more likely to be educated, affluent and, because more people write to complain

rather than praise, 'disgruntled'. There is the often unanswerable question of the extent of editorial selection and filtering, and, although much scholarship has been devoted to organisational studies of this selection process (see e.g. Richardson and Franklin 2004; Wahl-Jorgensen 2007; Raeymaeckers 2005), in historical research these details are often lost to us.

This project also throws up unique challenges. Although digitalisation presents opportunities, this is not to say that the research process is a simple question of retrieval. Optical character recognition (OCR) algorithms used to digitalise the archive sometimes struggle with archaic typography leading to errors of word recognition. Identifying female correspondents from their letters is also a complex, and at times exasperating, task in its own right. Where a correspondent gives her full name, it is easy enough to read off gender. Few Victorian and Edwardian given names were gender neutral. However, where the full name is not given, it can be more problematic and some detective work is needed. Thus for example, the letter written on 14 February 1905 by M. L. Parker Smith who writes of experiments in horticulture: "To lovers of flowers and to those who desire to watch the beautiful developments of the spring I should like to tell of an interesting experiment I tried last year". Several features pointed to a female correspondent. The language used, for example "which made one exclaim and say 'The silly things will soon be nipped by the frost'" was suggestive. The first person narration, for example '(w)hen I went to London in January of last year' confirms this as do references to household servants. Moreover the closing 'yours obediently', rather than the more commonly used 'your obedient servant', also pointed to a female writer, as indeed did the subject matter itself. Resolving the case for certain, however, meant an extensive search through footnotes and databases. In a second example, 'C. A. Elliot', wrote to correct a previous correspondent, confusingly one C. H. Eliot, concerning procedures for prosecuting parents for children's absenteeism from school (18 October 1900). The tone of the piece suggested male writer, as did the identification of the writer as from the London School Board Offices, although women did serve in many capacities on school boards. The matter was only resolved with reference to another letter by the same writer from May 10 1905 in which the return address is given as the *Athenaeum Club*, until 2002 a male-only club.

By far the largest difficulty in tracking down correspondents, however, comes about as consequence of the social function served by the paper. For the majority of writers there is a clear assumption that the reader of the paper and their own close circle of acquaintance are the same. This is a topic that will be discussed in more detail below, but for the purposes of this discussion it is important to note that this assumption informs writers styles of self-identification. Male patrician writers used their title rather than their name and female correspondents similarly used affiliation. V. Montrose was perfectly clearly Violet Montrose to contemporary readers, both because she was a long-standing correspondent to the *Times* on philanthropic matters (see below) and, should any doubt exist, the use of Buchanan castle as a identification address resolves the question of identity. For contemporaries then, markers of identity and of distinction were easily legible. One letter of 16<sup>th</sup> June 1905 opens '(t)he letter in your issue of to-day signed "a Hospital Surgeon" is so transparently the work of gentleman and a good man acting from the best motives that one hesitates to criticise it'. For a modern reader, such taken-for-granted knowledge

of the social scene is often laboriously acquired. Thus the first hurdle, identification of writers, itself presupposes an anthropological knowledge of how this social scene was constituted.

To begin with then, I will here divide the analysis into two sections. The first section looks at why women wrote to the *Times*. As Pounds points out there are many reasons why modern correspondents write letters to the editor:

'Even though the predominant motive is arguably the wish to participate in a debate by sharing one's opinions, this can take many forms: expressing protest, outrage, criticism, providing or requesting clarification and information, or advocating a course of action. In some cases, particularly for regular writers, the motivation may simply be one of prestige' (Pounds 2006, 32).

This is as true for the women writing to the *Times* in the early twentieth century as it is today, however, it is notable that women's letters tended in this era to be concentrated within a limited number of categories. This section examines the issues and concerns which these letters evidence. Of course, this should not be taken as an index of concerns more generally. The letters are significant as much for their silences, issues which are not discussed, as for those that are. Thus, to take one such example, that of women's suffrage, of letters published in the *Times* between 1900 and 1910 only some 92 mentioned either the word 'suffragette' or 'suffragist', of which some 54 were written by women, 21 by men, the remainder being identified only by pseudonyms or initials. Editorial selection and the reader's sense of what is and is not appropriate for the forum, then, play defining roles. The second section looks at the formal properties of the letters in the sample, considering what the letters can reveal about the ways in which female writers operationalised ideas of publicness in their writing, and their orientation to the paper and its wider readership.

## **Issues and concerns**

### **Philanthropic**

Predictably, the largest category of letters concerns appeals for charitable donations to philanthropic causes. As Peter Grant (2014) has observed, the Victorian and Edwardian eras marked a 'golden age' for philanthropy, and newspapers formed a significant conduit for this effort. Female writers took a leading role in soliciting donations and organising charitable events and subscriptions. Margaret, Countess of Jersey, for example, famed for her philanthropic work with children, appears in the letters sample soliciting donations for her Children's Happy Evening's Association (30 January 1905) and later also for the Victoria League (13 April 1905), of which charitable institutions she was president. The pattern of involvement by female aristocratic patronesses is prevalent, with high-profile charitable events and causes often attracting a number of titled correspondents. One letter from May 1905 for example lists a number of titled patronesses in a veritable roll call of London's great and good soliciting support for the Royal Free Hospital (8 May 1905). The value of having an aristocratic patroness is obvious in these appeals. The Mary Wardell convalescent home (13 October 1905), for example, gains a public credibility and confidence from the names of Constance Derby and Mary

Harrowby that 'Mrs. Gladstone's Free Convalescent Home' (9 January 1900) did not need. Aristocratic women were also cognisant of the value of their names in 'fronting' these public institutions. Consider the case of Violet Montrose, for example, who writes,

' Sir- My name having appeared in your issue of the 18th inst. as a member of the committee of the lay Association for Promoting the State Registration of Nurses, I beg to say that since reading the evidence given before the Select Committee of the House of Commons on this question, I have decided to withdraw my name from the association' (29 May 1905).

Likewise Cordelia Adair took the *Times* to task for using the name of one benefactor who had desired anonymity (1 January 1900).

For aristocratic women, as Horn notes, the 'Lady Bountiful' role was more than an affectation. Ladies philanthropic work acted as 'bridges between rich and poor' (Horn 1991, 5), creating 'warm bonds between donor and recipient which made acceptable the patriarchal social system it was designed to bolster' (113). However, it was also a double-edged sword, used to enforce social discipline by rewarding deference and penalizing independence. However, such a role was also important for women as it provided a sphere of independent action. 'For many women, charitable activities were merely an antidote to the irritations and limitations of their daily lives' (124). It is notable here that appeals for funds in the *Times* altered the nature of this role. Beneficence on the part of aristocratic women was more usually parochial, rural and tied to the immediate needs of a locale.

The letters page gives testament to a different operationalisation of the 'lady bountiful' role. In some respects, obviously they can be seen as extensions of this face-to-face philanthropy, however, a wider and often international focus is also evident. In November and December 1905, for example, the causes for which donations were solicited by women included the provision of books for the Japanese, toys for children, the purchase of land for the National Trust, donations for the associations for befriending servants and boys, donations for an emigration scheme to Canada, support for the YWCA, help for a home for respectable and friendless British and American girls in Paris, and money and offers of work for the poor through the Sisters of Charity in Westminster. This more public and extensive role positions philanthropy as an arena in which women could follow a script that conferred some agency upon them. As Gonda notes of women of the eighteenth century for aristocratic women

"being in the public eye, being on display, is part of their duty as daughters or as wives. Women are written into the ceremonial script ...even if they are present as functions rather than as persons, their individuality subsumed in rank' (Gonda 2001, 66)

Of course, female aristocrats were far from the only women able to generate philanthropic capital from their names. The appeal for funds from St Catherine's Home for Friendless Girls (9<sup>th</sup> June 1905) may have gained respectability from its first author, Sibell Grosvenor, wife of the Duke of Westminster, but its spice came courtesy of its second, the society hostess Maud

Cunard. The central role of aristocracy was never far away in these endeavours though. One letter appealing for donations of books for Japan argues

'(i)f this appeal can but catch the eye of Royalty and nobility, and the many editors who receive more books for review than they require, we think the Japanese will very soon receive the hundreds and thousands of books that they assert are needed to meet the mental hunger of their compatriots' (9 December 1905)

What these make clear is the extent to which the organisation of charitable giving through appeals to the *Times* was tied to personal connection. Constantly reiterated in these letters are acknowledgements of donations and 'name dropping' of powerful or 'celebrity' patrons. Georgiana Curzon showed a shrewd appreciation of the times in offering to name beds in her yeoman's hospital after benefactors (5 and 29 January 1900). Later, Helena Sandwich's appeal of September 1905 ran to over 800 words and included a complete list of the names of the special appeal Committee and set out the terms of recognition bluntly: 'Donors of £10 10s and upwards will be entitled to have their names recorded as founders of the institution; and donors of £250 and upwards will, in addition, be entitled to name a bed' (16 September 1905). This roll call of acknowledgement, printed in full, recognises and publicises at the same time, in addition to serving to warrant the enterprise in question.

For some women, philanthropic work emanated from, and acted as an extension of other commitments, often those of their husbands or other male relatives. Mariana Halliburton, for example, writes to the *Times* to solicit gifts of fruit for returning soldiers hospitalized after combat in the Boer war (16<sup>th</sup> March 1900), without needing to acknowledge her husband's long-term career with the War Office. For others, philanthropy was more of a career in itself. The prevalence of letters from career reformers such as Octavia Hill and Louisa Twining is testament to the extent to which appeals in the *Times* were an essential resource in auxiliary and campaigning work, to which we now turn.

## **Campaigning**

In addition to ad hoc charitable causes, the pages of the *Times* were also used to further long-term campaigns, most often on philanthropic and welfare questions. Women very successfully used the letters pages of national newspapers to advance political and issue campaigns, of which a notable and constitutive example would be Emily Hobhouse's 1901 letters to the *Times* on the conditions endured by women and children in the camps during the Boer War. In this sample there is also plenty of evidence of this use of the letters pages. Thus senior female members of the Child's Protection League wrote in opposition to a proposed amendment to the Child Messenger Act concerning children's access to liquor (31 May 1905). Miss E. Mary Young (24 October 1905) writes in with respect to supervision of convents and monasteries, making something of a cause célèbre out of the testimony of one inmate of a convent in Caen. A second example would be Frances Balfour's letter concerning the inclusion of women in government, where she expresses support for a bill to remove the bar to women serving on London borough councils as aldermen and



councillors (22 May 1900).

Campaigning as a category overlaps with another, that of reportage of potential abuses. Justine Moore wrote, along with two male writers, on the poor regulation of electricity supply and photography studios: "(i)f something stringent is not done, one of these days a block of buildings and a few hundred people will be burned, in the interests of flashlight photography' (19 November 1900). Writing to express such concerns in the public interest is again a less common category for women correspondents to the *Times* and it is interesting that although Justine Moore was listed as a correspondent on two letters on this topic, she was only listed first on one.

## Reputational

A further, and for the purposes of this study, significant theme in the letters is the perils of what subsequent eras would know as reputation management. For some writers the pages of the *Times* provided a vital forum to address specific matters related to professional status or reputation. Thus the playwright Pearl Mary-Theresa Craigie twice used the *Times* to address criticisms of her work in the press more generally (20 September and 30 November 1900). Lucy Clifford (6 and 8 September 1900) entered into correspondence to head off potential accusations of plagiarism with respect to one of her plays. Josephine Butler corrected reports on her comments published in an Austrian journal on German Anglophobia (16 February 1900). The president and Vice-President of the Soldiers and Sailors Families Association wrote on the 27 of February 1900 to defend their association from accusations made in the *Times* previously. Frances Warwick, better known as the socialite Daisy Greville, 'in view of the numerous statements about my Agricultural and Horticultural College at Studley Castle', writes to detail changes made in the administration and staffing. She went on to describe the benefits of an agricultural training for women (11 September 1905). Here, then, repairing a damaged reputation offered scope for publicity.

At times such reputation management could be rather subtle. Margaretta Eager wrote to the *Times* under the dramatic heading "'Spy in the Tsar's Household"

'Sir, Paragraphs bearing the above, or similar heading, have appeared in the leading morning and evening papers, stating that an English nurse had been caught stealing papers from the Emperor of Russia's study, and had been conveyed across the frontier. I now write, as I am the only English nurse who has lately left Russia, to emphatically deny the truth of the story'.

She went on to offer her bona fides:

'At Christmas I was the recipient of letters, cards, and gifts from the Empress and the Imperial children...Inquiries at the Consulate or the Russian Embassy will confirm my statement. I am at present staying with my brother-in-law, whose card I enclose, but not for publication (2 January 1905)

At other times women write in defence of the reputation of another. Thus Jean Wauchope writes to deny 'most emphatically' accusations against her husband:

Statements have, I understand, been made that the last letter which I received from my husband, General Wauchope, contained criticisms on Lord Metheun's conduct and that my husband expressed a feeling that he was being sent to his death...My husband would never have criticized his chief, even in private letters to his wife' (23<sup>rd</sup> January 1900)

Women artists and writers also wrote to the *Times* to offer factual corrections in areas of their specific expertise. Gabrielle Festing, for example, wrote to respond to criticism of her writings (20 September 1900) and to defend her description of Humphrey Davy's marriage as a *mésalliance*. Likewise Gwendolen Cecil corrected a *Times* reviewer on one of Lord Salisbury's essays. Cecil's biography of her father 'Life of Robert, Marquis of Salisbury' was acknowledged as scholarly both at the time and subsequently, and as such she writes here as an acknowledged expert. In a similar vein Charlotte, Lady Blennerhassett (5 May 1900) writes to the *Times* to add weight to the paper's critical review of a recent sensationalist account of the life of Baroness Cecilia de Courtot whose accuracy and authenticity had been challenged by the *Times* and defended by the work's publisher, William Heinemann, in correspondence (28 April 1900).

## **Grievance**

A second major theme of correspondence is public expression of grievances. As I have noted elsewhere (Cavanagh 2013), the *Times*' status as a forum for the public redress of private injustice was a role awkwardly assumed. Yet for many letter writers the paper provided the ideal, or in some cases the only, platform for speaking out over perceived injustice. Often these letters record apparently trivial transgressions. L. Gardiner's letter of April 10 1905 records her distaste at decorating Easter eggs with stuffed birds. Violet Markham, usually a correspondent on matters pertaining to the empire, writes to complain of the manners of 'that fashionable section of society whose primary business at the opera is millinery not music'. 'It is scarcely credible that London acquiesces in what neither Paris, Berlin, nor Vienna would tolerate for five minutes' she exclaims (13 June 1905). The state of the railways is also a recurrent theme. Janet Hogarth wrote on the 4 of October 1900 to express solidarity with a gentleman complainant on the paucity of seats. Likewise both the physician and activist Sophia Jex-Blake and campaigner Maud Stanley write in support of Edmund Gosse's tirade on the state of railways in Italy (9<sup>th</sup> October 1905). For both of these women, providing corroboration of the problem is warranted by their status as seasoned travellers. Thus Jex-Blake speaks for '(t)hose who, like myself, are especially fond of the Italian Riviera' and both women refer to recent experiences in Italy. For some the *Times* provides a platform to highlight abuses by the media itself. In this category, an excellent example is that of S.H. Leeder, the editor of the popular young women's magazine, *Girl's Realm*, who wrote to the *Times* to complain of the treatment of Marie Corelli by the popular press:

Will you allow me to call attention to what I think is a great grievance? If a person, however humble, is libelled by the public Press, there is an easy remedy in the law. But if the camera is turned upon a defenceless woman, the photographers are apparently at liberty to publish the result, however gross and cruel the libel may be. I wish to mention a case in point...As Miss Corelli was entering the Portman rooms, where our bazaar was held, a "snapshot" was surreptitiously taken of her, which has been circulated widely through the illustrated press, in some cases being very much enlarged, so that all of the libellous hideousness is exaggerated ...I can only ask you to make some measure of justice possible by publishing my protest' (21 December 1905)

Violet Markham's protest at the treatment of liberal unionist candidates by the local conservative press (8 October 1900) is another example. It is interesting that both women make distinctions between the kinds of activities engaged in by some section of the press, whether illustrated papers or local press, and the *Times*.

As Pounds noted of contemporary British and Italian newspapers, letters to the editor tend to encode participation at the level of expression of grievance. Hence she found that one of the main reasons for writing were 'to express (negative) criticism and to appeal for action, which arguably embody the nature of the writers' contribution to the democratic process' (Pounds 2006, 59). Expressing a grievance is a particular mode of engagement, one which often serves an affective function, as is the case with Maud Stanley and Sophia Jex-Blake's letters, where the aim is to confirm and express solidarity with a statement by another. In other cases, expressing grievances on specific issues can be a form of campaigning in another guise. Thus L Gardiner's outrage at Easter egg birds is warranted by her status as secretary for the Royal Society for the Preservation of Birds. At other times, publicly expressed disgruntlement can form part of a process of professional distinction, as is the case with S. H. Leeder who seeks to distance herself, and her paper, from the sordid practices of the early 'paparazzi' (see above). Finally grievance expression offers a magnificent platform for condescension. It is interesting that the letters of Markham, Stanley and Jex-Blake all include copious references to their status as cosmopolites. The grievance expressed offers a mode of distinction, in these cases in the context of nationalism and national pride, something Jex-Blake and Stanley applaud, and Markham bemoans the lack of.

### **Formal features**

In addition to examining the themes and preoccupations of the letter writers, we need to consider the formal properties of these letters and in particular the way in which they emerge out of and constitute a relational space. As Richardson (2001) has argued, readers letters give testimony to the mutual perceptions of papers and their audience and "also of those individuals and/or groups excluded from the position 'We'. Letters to the editor represent the intersection of 'everyday talk' and 'mediated discourse': the individual, personal and often anecdotal insights of a newspaper's readership" (2001, 148). That they are selected and included signals their relevance for the readership

and thereby to some extent validates them (148). This section then looks at the ways in which women writers warranted the inclusion of their letters, and the sense in which women writers invoked the idea of a community of readership.

The first point to note here is the extent to which correspondents assumed a common identity and set of experience amongst *Times* readers. Three letters suffice to illustrate this point. The first is that of Florence Dixie, famous explorer, writer, feminist and war correspondent for *The Daily Post* during the Boer war. Dixie wrote to the *Times* to ask travellers near the Zermatt glacier to be on the lookout for the lost body of her brother, Lord Francis Douglas, who died 40 years previously in an attempt on the Matterhorn. Dixie wrote that she has received intelligence by telegram that the melting of the glacier offered the possibility the body may be revealed and that any information should be relayed to her solicitors (18 April 1905). A few days later she wrote again to thank all those who had responded, and quotes verbatim one letter she has received concerning the likely whereabouts of the body (24 April 1905). For Dixie, then, the reach of the *Times* made it an effective resource in this kind of intelligence gathering.

A second example of this kind of advertising for information is the letter of E.L. Pike, whose husband had hoped to devise a scheme to benefit wounded war horses. His recent death had put paid to these hopes and his widow was seeking to refund all subscriptions already received. However a problem had arisen: 'Small sums were received from "A Poor Man," "Anon.," and "F. B. Bridgeman". If these three will kindly write telling me their address and the sum sent I will return it to them' (13 November 1900). Again this is a case where the likelihood of the *Times* reaching these individuals was unquestioned.

Finally there is the case of Edith Leycester who offered her services as a witness to an offence. 'Should the cyclist who was run down by the motorcar A7472 at the corner of Sloane-street and Pont-street at about ten minutes to 7 yesterday evening wish for the evidence of witnesses, I was passing with a friend at the time and saw exactly what happened, and we should be quite ready to testify that the cyclist was in no way to blame.' (1 July 1905).

What links these letters are certain implicit 'small world' assumptions about the status, and other reader's consumption, of the *Times*. Newspaper historians have charted the development of a style of presentations which privileged non-linear reading (Rubery 2009, 9; Conboy 2010). However letters such as those discussed assume a greater engagement and a sense of involvement on the part of the reader, that a letter would find its mark amongst an anonymous readership.

Of course, the reach of the *Times*, though considerable was not tied to location. The letters pages evidence as strong an orientation towards events in the empire and abroad as to events at home. The division between the provincial and the London press is marked in the nineteenth century (Hobbs 2009; Brown 1985), so much so that the London dailies could hardly be said to be national newspapers in the sense that term implies today. In the provinces, newspapers such as the *Times* were not regarded as more significant than the local paper (Hobbs 2009). London papers returned the compliment by largely ignoring regional news (Brown 1985). Moreover, whilst the London press may not have had any claim to represent the nation to itself, neither could the *Times* be said to represent London to itself. The bulk of the paper at this time was devoted to

political, business and foreign reportage, with London life being largely represented through cultural news and crime reporting. The speeches, politics, opinions and sporting activities of the elite form the bulk of home news reporting, with financial intelligence, advertising and announcements forming the remainder (Lee 1976; Conboy 2010). That is not, of course, to say that the metropolitan experience was not a relevant frame for the readership. The cosy assumption of shared experience and intimacy of London clubland, the London season and the metropolitan based social sphere runs through the letters pages. However, it is an intimacy based on mutual belonging to a social sphere and mutual experience rather than co-location.

If the *Times* could not be said to represent the nation, or the capital to themselves it did, however, have a wider claim to represent England (or at least London) to the rest of the world (or at least the empire) and vice versa. News from abroad was accorded a greater importance. As Conboy (2010) has noted the network of foreign and war correspondents established by the *Times* in the latter half of the nineteenth century allowed it to emerge as a powerful political actor in its own right. It is this dominance of international news that underpins the *Times'* readers extension of the familiarity of London drawing rooms to the rest of the empire. Thus Florence Dixie's appeal, the 'small world' assumptions which underpin Margaretta Eager's attempts to clear her name of spying on the Tsar, or of Maude Stanley and Sophia Jex-Blake's recounting of their travels all are based on the same sense of social proximity over geographical distance. And of course this assumption was warranted. Constance Barnicoat, writing on education, is a case in point.

"Perhaps as a New Zealander I may say a word about the points raised by the Rev. C Coleridge Harper and Mr J Allanson Picton. I have often heard of Mr Harper, since one of his churchwardens is a brother of mine; I know a good deal of his parish, which is the focussing point of a large, very rising agricultural district, fairly typical of New Zealand, I should think'. (19 January 1905)

Likewise the appeals on behalf of missionaries overseas (e.g. Mary Denbigh's letter on Ning Po; 30 November 1900), reveal not only the sense of connectedness of the British abroad but also its mechanisms. Appeals for help from 'home' through the network of connected and influential individuals bind the British abroad back. The *Times'* readership lived their lives on an international stage.

In terms of the formal features of the letters themselves, the modes of address of Victorian and Edwardian letter writing is one that was secured by formal schooling and therefore had a highly rigid set of codes. Perhaps for this reason there are few discernible differences between male and female patterns of salutation and closing. Interestingly women also both intervened in existing debates and brought their own interests and causes to the attention of the editor, and so there is little basis for distinction on these grounds. However, when it comes to the question of the ways in which women warranted their interventions, there are significant differences. Women often offered more information as a warrant for public speech than male writers. Thus, as we have seen above, many women secured their right to speak on the basis of recent

travel. Violet Markham, for example, opens one letter: 'Having recently returned from Canada, may I add my testimony to the facts set forth in Mr. Colmer's able letter in your columns on the subject of British and Canadian postal rates' (1 December 1905). Likewise both Sophia Jex-Blake and Maude Stanley appeal to recent experiences travelling abroad.

Recent experience also served as a warrant for Alice Stopford Green's argument for an end to the Boer conflict (13 November 1900), though this letter stands out for other reasons. Stopford Green was well known to contemporaries as an intellectual and was passionate in her opposition to the war. The tone of her piece here is masterly, in contrast to many more self-effacing pieces. Her statements, for example, '(u)nder these circumstances we have the greater obligation to take all possible precautions that the Boers would certainly and clearly understand what are the intentions of the English people' can be compared with Constance Barnicoat's equivocation in an account of secular education in New Zealand peppered with qualifiers, such as 'I think' and 'I believe'.

Membership of committees is another common warrant, for example, Margaret Baines writes as 'one of the founders of the Self-Help Emigration Society, of 39, Memorial-hall-buildings, London, E.C., and still an active member of its committee' (4 January 1905). A further common way in which interventions are warranted is through taking the position of a 'conduit'. Thus Georgiana Curzon apologises for yet another appeal to the charitable

'Nothing but absolute knowledge of their sufferings prompts me to thus inaugurate another fund, and one which must come in addition to the numerous subscriptions already started in connection with the South African War...I...can only plead as an excuse the heartrending accounts of the sufferings of Mafeking that I have received from my sister, Lady Sarah Wilson' (14 May 1900).

Likewise Mary Denbigh (30 November 1900) opens '[y]our readers may be interested in the following extracts from the letters of an English sister of charity at Ning-po'. Violet Solly also offers correspondence in her letter of 12 February 1900: 'I have just received a letter from a native gentleman in Western India, whose description of the state of things there is so graphic and appalling that I venture to ask you to give space to it in your valuable paper'.

At other times, as with the opening example of 'A Soldiers Mother' (see above) the warrant for speech is founded on the use of a *nom de plume*. As Pedersen has pointed out the assumption of a pseudonym by a writer can serve to construct a 'civic identity' which is "used to justify the writers intrusion into the public sphere of newspaper correspondence" (Pedersen 2004, 175). One example here, that of 'A Woman Worker' who requests to

'draw attention to a section of the unemployed whose necessities are in danger of being overlooked? There are many women living nominally above the poverty line, actually in the ranks of the educated, cultivated, and self respecting citizens, who are practically in danger of becoming hopeless industrial failures unless they are helped to find self-supporting

employment'

turns out to be writing a puff for the charitable Central Bureau for the Employment of Women (28 January 1905). Similarly 'A Yeoman's Mother' writes on the unfairness of delaying demobilisation of volunteer yeoman troops from Capetown (16<sup>th</sup> November 1900). In these cases the use of noms de plume is not to disguise identity but to act as a means of flagging up the credentials of the writer to speak in a debate. This is certainly the case for "A Housekeeper of Forty Years" whose appeal to the "women of Great Britain" to buy British goods to ease unemployment was published as part of a debate on unemployment on 30 November 1905.

This brings us on to a further aspect of the formal features of letters, proposed audience, and, a related category, orientation to the newspaper as text. In his analysis of a collection of letters sent to James Keeley, editor of the *Chicago Herald* and *Chicago Tribune* between 1912 and 1917, Nord identifies three reader purposes with respect to letters. Writers, he argues, tend either to address themselves to the editor, the public at large or the self (Nord 1995, 71). In this sample of letters there are more attempts to speak to the 'public at large'. Letters frequently invoke the idea of the *Times* as a conduit. Thus phrases such as 'your readers may possibly care to know', 'may I venture to bring to your notice, and that of your readers', 'We... ask our friends and readers to help us in a most urgent matter' are common. The attempt is made, through the medium of the *Times* to access a wider public, rather than to enter directly into correspondence with the editor.

Additionally, Nord draws on the ideas of "cuing" and "linking" as standard reader responses to the news. Readers, argues Nord (1995, 68), bring to bear "a repertoire of conventions and norms for reading a newspaper" which inform their letters. "Cuing" occurs when an item in the paper "trigger(s) a conventional religious, political, or ideological reaction". Linking, however, is the process by which people make sense of news by stringing one item together with disparate others to make a wider meaning (Nord 1995, 72-73). What is interesting about these letters is that the women seldom respond to news items. Where such responses do appear they tend to be oblique. Thus for example Theresa Londonderry writes '(a)s the drilling of boys and the establishment of boys' brigades are now arousing a considerable amount of interest, some of your readers may possibly care to know what has already been done in a group of voluntary schools connected with the Londonderry Collieries in the county of Durham'(24 February 1900). Effectively this letter advertises her own philanthropy by attaching her comments to a diffuse agenda. Where a specific cue for letter writing is identifiable, which is to say where an item in a previous edition solicits a response, it is nearly always a response which falls into the category of either correcting an error of fact, defending against an attack on reputation (e.g. Evelyn Stanhope and Margaret Knutsford on 27 February 1900) or responding to another letter, and it is to this latter point that we now turn in conclusion.

## **Conclusion**

One of the key themes to have emerged from this study is the extent to

which female writers to the *Times* imagined and constituted it as a social phenomenon. The fact that women, in this limited sample at least, tended to respond more to other letters than to news items suggests a certain mode of consumption and orientation to the paper, one in which it is read through the lens of personal relevance, whether this is the identification of letters from known correspondents, or issues with which the writer is already involved. These might be intellectual or more frequently philanthropic, but are imagined as being in the personal domain of the writer. This is further substantiated by the fact that women tend to write to 'our friends and readers', far more than to an imagined abstract public, or to the editor himself. These women, imagining the community of the *Times*, imagined those with whom they were already familiar. 'Letters of interaction' (Rojas-Lizana 2011) are less common than specific appeals, whether for information, as in Florence Dixie's case, money and support for charitable organisations, or support for specific campaigns. The methodological challenge of identifying subjects from their letters also points to the social function of the *Times*, as I have argued above. The paper, then, added another link in an already densely interlinked community of the elite. Letters in the *Times* were far from an index of abstract public opinion but constitute active and targeted public communications.

The second key point emerges from the first, namely the significance of reputation management. The letters pages provided a forum for those who believed themselves slandered or slighted to try to put the record straight. This points to the increasingly mediated nature of women's work at this period. The correspondents to the *Times* were not, for the most part, members of the 'general' public. They tended to be those who were known to the readership in multiple capacities, whether as reformers such as Octavia Hill, socialites, aristocrats, artists or scholars. Yet their work required them to maintain a public face and a public engagement in terms that they struggled to control. We can see this most clearly in the case of philanthropy, where the face-to-face 'Lady Bountiful' role had been replaced by that of patroness. The auxiliary and fundraising roles, increasingly assumed by urban middle class women since the early nineteenth century, transmogrified into a more symbolic role for the elite at the end of the century. What this means is that personal reputation becomes as central to women's endeavours in the wider sphere as it had always been in the personal sphere of the home. Moreover the importance of social status, and the tightening of the social circle, occurred at just the point where it was most under threat. As Hobsbawm (1994) has pointed out this is an era characterised by financial and symbolic insecurity on the part of the elite. New methods of negotiating social recognition, through consumption, education and location, were all attempts to reassert a lost certainty of 'who's who'. Against this background, reputation management was a high status game in which newspapers were coming to play a central role.

Finally this paper has flagged up the potential for letters to the editor to shed light on an important and neglected area of research. As Jane Chapman has observed, "historians do not know enough about the connections between women's emerging citizenship and the communication of that process by the public press and other communications" (2013, 3). The letters pages provide a glimpse of the ways and bases upon which women formed public identities and claims to cultural citizenship (Chapman 2013). In furthering this analysis, it



would be instructive to compare the uses made of this sphere by women directly with those of men, though sadly this lies beyond the remit of this paper.

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