

Ladylike Lives? Upper Class Women's Autobiographies and the Politics of Late Victorian and Edwardian Britain

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When Lady Frances Balfour completed her two-volume autobiography in 1930, she expressed the unusual hope that her readers would find it 'dull'. There had been a recent spate of personal memoirs by female authors, and most were considered to be 'rather dull' in the sense of 'lacking in the scandalous'.¹ To minimise the danger of notoriety, she carried her main source – 'hundreds of letters, ranging over a century' – to a nearby lochside and ceremonially burnt them: 'As the smoke rose in the sunlit stillness, I lifted my eyes to the hills, and asked that, as these records were stainless, so might be all that I wrote in memory of them who are now among the great company of Immortals.'² Family reputation and personal reputation were closely allied. Frances's brother had warned her against the excessive 'self-esteem' of another memoirist, and in her Preface she vowed to avoid egotism as well as indiscretion, though not without the slightly defensive comment that 'it is difficult to keep personality out'.³

This must have been particularly true in her own case. Daughter of the Duke of Argyll, Frances Balfour prided herself throughout her life upon her Scottish ancestry and strong religious and political beliefs. Burne-Jones captured her flaming red hair and determined expression in a portrait painted in the early years of her married life. Her husband proved a disappointment, and eventually an alcoholic, but he brought her the inestimable advantage of entry into the inner circles of the Balfour-Cecil political dynasty. There she became a confidante of Arthur Balfour, brother-in-law, Prime Minister and party leader. Her own political trajectory extended from the Primrose League through the Women's Liberal Unionist Association to the imperialist

Victoria League and ultimately back to free-trade Liberalism. Acceptably feminine social work gradually evolved towards feminist politics, and she presided over the London Women's Suffrage Association at the height of the militant campaign. Margot Asquith, who disliked her suffragism and was not given to flattery, described her as 'one of the few women of outstanding intellect that I have known'.⁴ Frances Balfour's own, semi-humorous, self-depiction was as 'an unadorned, unrestrained, and totally illogical Celt'.⁵

Why did this strong-minded author submit to willing self-censorship when she wrote her life history? This question is of wider interest since, as Frances herself recognised, her autobiography was one of a type. A substantial group of upper-class women, mostly from leading political families, set pen to paper in the inter-war years. The currency in aristocratic social and political memoirs began to rise even before 1914. It peaked in popularity in the 1920s and 1930s, as prominent late Victorian and Edwardian hostesses reached old age and as a mainly female, middle-class readership developed a taste for tales of a vanished age, and even in the 1950s a few survivors continued to cater for the nostalgia of élite contemporaries and the idly curious modern reader.⁶ The literary merit of these books is rather slight. Most are now long out of print, and have failed to enter the canon of distinguished nineteenth and twentieth century autobiographies. The very characteristics of discretion and avoidance of self-revelation, which so recommended themselves to Frances Balfour, have helped the process of exclusion. Yet there are a number of reasons for suggesting that this cluster of texts now deserves a fresh reading. In the first place the autobiographies present a set of interlocking narratives which, collectively, are a valuable source of evidence on High Society and its political dimensions in the period from 1870–1914. This point has been acknowledged by historians over the decades, and the autobiographies are best-known for supplying convenient pen-portraits of Great Men and selectively-quoted sketches of upper class environment. Since the rapid growth of women's history, gender-focused research has thrown new light on many established subjects, among them the status and roles of the British aristocracy.⁷ Individual life histories, however reticent, are a vital part of this research. Women autobiographers inevitably bear witness to aspects of their own experience and their own self-perceptions, even whilst consciously attempting to turn the spotlight onto more famous male contemporaries and the development of society in general.

Meanwhile there has simultaneously been a growth in scholarly interest in self-writing itself, and especially in women's self-writing. The boundaries between historical and literary studies of female autobiography have become less distinct. Border-crossings have their dangers, but many historians would nowadays accept the contention that a wider range of theoretical insights into the structure and content of textual evidence can assist an analysis of its provenance and meanings. Conversely, the discipline of detailed archival research remains essential to the historicised study of any text. The published

autobiographies of upper class women form an interesting literary sub-genre. Their historical importance to the politics of late Victorian and Edwardian Britain can only be investigated in conjunction with other published and unpublished sources. This article will indicate the relevance of other evidence, but its main focus is upon the autobiographies of thirteen women who, for all their individuality, shared common social and political values and indicated as much by deciding to leave a definable type of public record. It is argued that an interpretation of the nature of this record contributes towards understanding some rather elusive aspects of women's political history before the Vote. Silences and oblique, subjective meanings deserve as much historical attention as the more obvious features of declared authorial intent and the many colourful descriptions of people, places and customs.

How much do the autobiographies have in common? Clearly, not an indefinite amount, for their authors were in some respects very varied people. One must consider, for example, the social contrast between the 'new rich' parental families of Margot Asquith, Violet Markham, Lady Frances Horner, Edith Lytton and Lady Elizabeth Haldane and the ancient aristocracy which produced Lady Frances Balfour, Lady Dorothy Nevill, Lady Mary St Helier, Margaret Countess of Jersey and Frances (known as Daisy) Countess of Warwick. Jennie Jerome (Lady Randolph Churchill) was a rich American; Lady Constance Battersea was born a cosmopolitan Rothschild; Violet Maxse (the Viscountess Milner) was the daughter of an Admiral, yet brought up mainly in the separate home of her artistic mother who shared the same acquaintance as Frances Horner's artistic father. In adult life each woman (with the exceptions of Violet Markham and Elizabeth Haldane) redefined herself in relation to her husband's family. Margot Asquith, Frances Horner, Edith Lytton, Mary St Helier and Constance Battersea married lawyers who became titled politicians; Jennie Churchill and Violet Milner entered through their first marriages the inner circles of two of Britain's greatest political families, the Marlboroughs and the Cecils; and Frances Balfour, Dorothy Nevill, Margaret Jersey and Daisy Warwick made appropriately grand marriages into families of equal status but (in the case of the former) of different religious and political beliefs. A substantially shared autobiographical identity remained possible because late nineteenth and early twentieth century Society was increasingly open to wealth and talent as well as to long-established noble descent. All these different women knew each other, in some cases intimately. All took a knowledgeable interest in politics, both on their own and on their male relatives' behalf. All had some involvement in women's organisations, whether philanthropic or political or both (as in the case of the Edwardian female imperialist associations, to which all the women owed some measure of allegiance).⁸ But they differed over party politics, over the level and nature of their political activism, and over the issue of Votes for Women. Whilst Edith Lytton, Elizabeth Haldane and Frances Balfour were strong supporters of moderate suffragism,

and several others were quietly sympathetic to the Cause, Margot Asquith, Violet Markham and Margaret Jersey were in the vanguard of anti-suffragism, the latter acting as Vice-President of the National League for Opposing Women's Suffrage.

Differences of ability and personality compounded those of birth, wealth and beliefs. An analysis of the autobiographies might plausibly be constructed around their contrasts, rather than their similarities. Yet the shared characteristics of approach, style and content remain striking, and are certainly stronger than the similarities among the authors themselves. The existence of historically specific, and gendered, autobiographical conventions is evidenced in each writer's introductory preface. 'This is a dangerous age in which to write a Memoir', opened Frances Balfour, before going on to promise, 'I have had no intention of laying my friends on their own dining room tables, and there dissecting them ... What I have wished to record are the memories, and, above all, the Hero landmarks which have marked life's highway'.⁹ Mary St Helier lamented that 'nothing is more difficult to write than an interesting book of reminiscences, because one is confronted at every moment with the fact that what would most surely tend to make it amusing and interesting is exactly what cannot be published'. She consoled herself and her readers with the view that 'after fifty years' acquaintance with many of the world's most interesting people, even the humblest observer may remember something worth recalling'.¹⁰ Elizabeth Haldane constructed her *Reminiscences* around a diary which 'in grown-up days became yet more objective, and was mainly concerned with any interesting persons I met.' The resulting book was 'in some parts historic, and of course like all diaries bowdlerized'.¹¹

Protestations of discretion were normally accompanied by claims of modesty and of selfless motivation. 'The world's most interesting people' deserved to be commemorated, especially if some of them were beloved members of the author's own family. High Society itself deserved commemoration, if only because it was passing away. At the same time no female autobiographer chose to set herself up as a true historian since this implied male attributes of knowledge and skill, directed towards an authoritative analysis of the world. 'Many of my reminiscences, I fear, are but trivial and even commonplace, but I have done my best' wrote Dorothy Nevill, after a lifetime as a powerful political hostess.¹² Constance Battersea prided herself on having 'lived under three reigns ... and had the inestimable advantage of seeing and knowing many distinguished men and women', before falling back on the disclaimer that 'These Reminiscences will have neither political nor historical value, but they are faithful annals of a happy and not uneventful life.'¹³ Violet Milner titled her book *My Picture Gallery* and imagined herself leading her readers past 'full-length portraits, half-lengths, charcoal sketches, pastels' of her friends and famous acquaintances: 'I do not write with any idea of teaching anything, but I have a longing to show others the people I have admired and the scenes among which I have lived'.¹⁴ The gallery

was hers, but the works within it represented, and had been rendered, by others more significant than herself.

The autobiographers consistently claimed that their writings were an act of homage to past heroes and past times, and thus the performance of a duty towards posterity. As such they were an acceptable form of feminine service. The individual achievements of the narrator were never intended to take centre stage, so that an upper class female autobiography could not be expected to inherit the respected male traditions of historical and literary self-writing. An awareness of these traditions seemed to weigh heavily upon many women authors, to the extent of almost halting their pens. Perhaps the most self-effacing preface of all is that to Frances Horner's *Time Remembered*, composed not by the author herself but by her supportive parish priest: 'The truth is that for a long time after I met her I did not discover that she had a book to write. She is not an easy person to know. A singular lack of self-esteem makes it unnatural for her to talk about herself.'¹⁵ After a great deal of urging by friends and family, Frances Horner began her work, drawing confidence from her acknowledged skills in composing 'charming' letters, and with the intention of completing 'memoirs' rather than autobiography: 'She is always herself when she writes, without the suggestion of being self-centred. We are delightedly aware of the personality of the writer, but are never offended by obtrusive egotism ... Perhaps we ought to say of Lady Horner, not that she has mastered an art, but that she possesses a virtue.'¹⁶ This commentary illustrates very clearly the gendered constraints upon an early twentieth-century female autobiographer, arising equally from social expectations of virtuous upper class femininity and from the literary expectations of readers well-versed in a hugely popular and very extensive genre of male biography and autobiography. It is not surprising that many women took refuge in memoirs, reminiscences or published letters or journals, rather than entering the male arena of autobiography proper. Such forms of self-writing legitimated a paradoxical absence of 'self', a focus upon the individual and collective achievements of others, and an absence of artistic or philosophical unity in the finished work.

Yet it would be misleading to accept the apparent selflessness of ladylike authors at face value. The act of written composition for publication was in itself an act of self-assertion. Women writers who appeared intimidated by the male autobiographical tradition were nevertheless buoyed up by the example of their friends, by their pride in their own life histories, and in many cases, by a consciousness of the advancing position of their sex as the twentieth century unfolded. It is far from coincidental that the women who published were all self-confident and successful, despite their self-deprecating stance. As we shall see, the evidence for this can be found by reading between the lines of their autobiographies. More direct evidence exists in the form of their unpublished letters and diaries, in their writings about each other, and in the external record of their work as philanthropists, political activists, and (increasingly, after 1914) as both paid and unpaid public servants. The older

generation never moved beyond womanly traditions of voluntary service, but this in itself was a sphere of impressive achievements. By the date of the later autobiographies Elizabeth Haldane had contributed to two Royal Commissions, served on the National Insurance Act committee and become Scotland's first female Justice of the Peace. Violet Milner had taken over the editorship of the *National Review*. Edith Lyttelton had followed up war-work on national committees with an active role in relation to the League of Nations, and (along with Margaret Jersey and Millicent Fawcett, the suffragist leader) had been created a Dame of the British Empire. Violet Markham published a self-declared 'autobiography' in 1953, after a particularly distinguished career which evolved out of Edwardian ladyhood into senior government service at both local and national levels.

The construct of the modest, altruistic lady author is therefore not a static one. It still exercised a certain power over later writers, but its influence was uneven, and unevenly contested, throughout the group of autobiographies. It is interesting to note two examples of apparent revolt against conventional inhibitions from two very distinguished women. Jennie Churchill's American background was no doubt blamed by contemporaries for her outspoken criticism of other writers' apologetic prefaces. 'If a book needs an apology, ought it to be written?' she demanded 'Having been favoured by Providence with delightful and absorbing experiences, having travelled all over the world, and met many of the most distinguished people of my generation, why should I not record all that I can about them and about the stirring things I have seen, or shared in doing?' She nevertheless admitted that 'what is left unsaid' would have its own intrigue for some readers.¹⁷ Margot Asquith's forthrightness owed everything to her unconventional upbringing, her humour and personal energy, and her delight in causing shock waves since her days as a leading light in the Souls, an advanced coterie of talented men and women whose social exploits aroused envy and admiration in the 1880s. Life as a Prime Minister's wife eventually calmed her behaviour. However she made a point both of dedicating her autobiography to her husband, and of absolving him of any responsibility for its contents: 'Had it been any other kind of book, the judgment of those nearest to me would have been invaluable; but being what it is, it had to be entirely my own, since whoever writes as he (*sic*) speaks must take the whole responsibility ... My only literary asset is natural directness.' Margot's husband stood by her. But the press response to her book (published in 1920) was extensive and largely hostile. *The Times* devoted a leading article and an editorial to criticising her 'vanity and self-love', and to lamenting that 'self-revelation, in one form or another, is now the fashion, and autobiography, once a stately and instructive form of literary composition, when undertaken by elderly persons of eminence with careers behind them, has become under modern treatment, merely a form of self-advertisement'.¹⁹ There could scarcely be a clearer attempt to shore up the canon, in the process excluding women writers. Perhaps it is not

surprising that a great many women were silenced, or driven to more subtle forms of self-writing such as fiction, poetry or biography of close family members. Frances Balfour wrote five memoirs of her relatives, including her sister and Arthur Balfour. Edith Lyttelton wrote plays and biographies of her husband and infant son. Her book on *Alfred Lyttelton* has such prominent passages of disguised autobiography within it that it is here included within the same frame of reference as the other women's life histories.²⁰

It is, of course, necessary to read beyond the prefaces of the autobiographies in order to judge the extent to which women authors put precept into practice. The second half of this article will explore the autobiographies as a source of evidence on female political outlook and activity. This analysis is developed within the general framework of understanding which has so far been established. Its main aspects are underlined here by a brief summary of some relevant theoretical literature about women's self-writing. Discussions of the male-defined autobiographical genre have continued into the late twentieth century,²¹ but there have also been interesting attempts to build upon Estelle Jelinek's ground-breaking *Women's Autobiography* (1980).²² Jelinek's introductory essay opens up debate both on the chronology of female autobiography and on its form and content. She highlights general characteristics of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century autobiographies which can be related to the different (and unequal) gender roles of men and women in Western societies. Whilst her conclusions often lack historical specificity, they are nevertheless suggestive of the ambivalences detected within the present group of upper class women's autobiographies. The separate tradition of female life histories is characterised by a privileging of 'private' and family life over career achievements, even where these manifestly exist; and a treatment of 'public' work through humour and anecdote, with an emphasis upon the achievements of other people. Both men and women may consciously avoid self-disclosure, but women tend to do so differently, projecting their self-image through 'a variety of forms of understatement'.²³ While male authors usually 'shape the events of their life into a coherent whole', constructing a chronological and progressive narrative of individual achievement, 'the multidimensionality of women's socially conditioned roles seems to have established a pattern of diffusion and diversity when they write their autobiographies as well'.²⁴

The concepts of 'fragmented narrative' and of self-portrayal through the portrayal of significant others, both within the family and outside it, have subsequently been developed by other writers. Sidonie Smith (1987) rejects the possibility of a comprehensive theory of women's autobiographical writing, whilst reinforcing the view that androcentric paradigms have restricted both the writing and the reading of such works. The dynamic forces which structure women's life-writing include 'the way in which the autobiographer who is a woman must suspend herself between paternal and maternal narratives, these fictions of male and female selfhood that permeate her historical moment'.²⁵ Shari Bestock (1988) writes of the 'decentered',

or virtually absent, self within many women's autobiographical texts.²⁶ Susan Friedman, in the same collection of essays, considers strategies which women writers have consciously or unconsciously adopted in order to achieve self-representation whilst avoiding typically male emphasis upon individual achievement. She refers to concepts of collective and relational identity which will be further illustrated in the present article. Jane Marcus (1988) and Carolyn Heilbrun (1988) take up the particular issues posed by the autobiographies of 'women of achievement'.²⁷ Marcus argues that many such women have used the life history as a means of reinscribing their femininity. They have represented themselves, usually to an intended audience of other women, as 'recording culture, neither creating nor analysing it,' and as keeping alive 'the legends of their masters', thus escaping the censure of misogynist critics whilst at the same time achieving an indirect self-record.²⁸ Such arguments can only convince if they are adequately historicised. Valerie Sanders (1989), Sara Mills (1991) and Mary Jean Corbett (1992) have produced detailed, historically rounded studies of aspects of middle-class female autobiography in Victorian and Edwardian Britain.²⁹ Liz Stanley (1990) provides a salutary warning against an over-generalised association of women's autobiographies with a distinctive set of characteristics defined by patriarchal societies. She concludes that feminist readers must continue to engage with these works as 'complexly constructed sets of ideological practices'.³⁰ Though the woman writer may resist a spotlight upon her authentic, individual self, her work has contributed towards self-definition, both for herself and for her readers. Authenticity may reside in multiple selves, or in social selves, rather than in the classic formulation of a unitary, individual life story.

There is clearly much common ground amongst these theorists. Their work has informed the writing of this article, but not, it is to be hoped, in any unduly prescriptive sense. The task of interpreting particular texts within their contemporary context remains essential to a historical understanding of autobiographical theory. The thirteen autobiographies considered here can usefully be connected at a theoretical level, but their shared characteristics fundamentally depend upon the many shared experiences of the authors' interconnected lives. Closeness to the highest levels of British government was one outstanding feature of these women's lives. They experienced politics variously yet inescapably. The political dimension of the autobiographies reveals aspects of each woman's self perception, whilst at the same time adding to our broader knowledge of elite political life in a period when women remained formally excluded from the parliamentary process. The autobiographies demonstrate the range of political opportunities open to upper class women with Cabinet connections. They also indicate that some women had more difficulty than others in adjusting their self-concepts to the task of taking up these opportunities. The autobiographical filter tends to eliminate or understate certain female political activities, whilst the importance of others is deliberately magnified. The process of authorial selection

is in itself revealing, though it frustrates any straightforward search for historical truth.

Probably the most outstanding characteristic of the political history conveyed through these autobiographies is a powerful emphasis upon Great Men. In the early twentieth century male heroes dominated historical textbooks, media representations and much popular fiction and other entertainment. They exemplified the strengths and virtues of the British master race, and never more so than when advancing the national interest through good government or imperial conquest. The myth of success determined by force of personality stood at its height. The female autobiographers helped to perpetuate it, but not without establishing their own claim to reflected glory. It is important to read their descriptions of famous statesmen as descriptions of two-way encounters, and thus as significant achievements for the women themselves. Elderly Prime Ministers Lord Salisbury and Mr Gladstone came in for frequent commendation as ‘the pleasantest companions at dinner. Both had the happy knack of seeming vastly interested in one’s conversation, whatever the subject.’³¹ Violet Milner was married to one of Salisbury’s sons and Frances Balfour to one of his nephews, so that both had unrivalled access to this particular Great Man and his family circle. They set down detailed and affectionate portrayals which provide the most accessible source of information on the domestic side of Salisbury’s life, illustrating not only his wisdom and goodness, and some of his endearing personal foibles, but also his intellectual dependence upon his relatives, including his wife, daughters and daughters-in-law. ‘Used as I was to first-rate minds, accustomed as I was to greatness, I felt his at once.’ commented Violet Milner, ‘... The talk at dinner was always interesting and – after the servants had left the room – very often about the private side of public affairs.’³² Her intense interest, and very possibly her sense of incipient power and influence elsewhere, led to a temptation ‘to keep notes of the talk, but I was told that Lord Salisbury would dislike the idea I only very occasionally indulged myself in this way.’³³ When the 1896 Jameson Raid threatened to precipitate war in South Africa, Violet ‘pined to be back at Hatfield so as really to hear what was going on.’ A few days later she was able to observe in person Lord Salisbury’s despatch of British ships to warn off the German Emperor at Delagoa Bay. An official red box was brought to the dinner table, a note was scribbled – ‘Lord Salisbury did not hesitate for a second in his action. I was sitting opposite to him at a table for ten ... and I saw and heard everything that passed.’³⁴ Three years later Violet Milner was at the heart of Cape Town politics, becoming increasingly intimate with the High Commissioner, Sir Alfred Milner, whilst her husband languished at the siege of Mafeking. Her private correspondence in this period, and her pivotal role in the formation of the imperialist Victoria League in 1901, demonstrate that privileged spectatorship and active participation in political affairs were very closely related.³⁵

Admiring pen-portraiture nevertheless remains far more typical of published female memoirs than accounts for private lobbying or public committee work. Readers had been promised 'Hero landmarks' and this is largely what they got. Many of the autobiographies structure whole chapters around individual heroes; other sub-title their chapter headings with a string of famous names, evidently expecting these to catch the reader's attention. To varying extents, the authors present themselves alongside or within each portrait. Violet Milner's *Picture Gallery* was indeed her own, and in a far less passive sense than her prefatory remarks suggested. Even Mary St Helier, a more obsequious and less personally gifted hostess, was careful to explain in her autobiography how she transformed chance acquaintances with Great Men into more intimate friendships and thereby gained insights into the affairs of State and the qualities which contributed to political power and influence. When she met Joseph Chamberlain at her mother-in-law's house, it was because she personally had nominated him as a dinner guest: 'That was the beginning of a friendship which has lasted till now.' After sketching in 'all that he has done for England', Mary St Helier referred to his punctuality as a correspondent, and to the gratifying fact that 'from time to time, whenever I wrote to him, he would always give me an indication, and something more, of what he was doing and what he thought of political events.'³⁶ Four transcribed letters from Chamberlain to his hostess follow next; a lapse into epistolary mode which was the deliberate resort of many women authors, and unanswerably bore out their claims of friendship (and political connection) with the great and the good.

Not all encounters with Chamberlain were entirely smooth going. Frances Balfour had good reason to distrust and eventually dislike him, since his conversion to Tariff Reform in 1903 helped to destroy Arthur Balfour's government. She recorded that his conversation was 'mostly about himself and his doings'; but she soon found a way of drawing him away from this self-obsession by engaging in exciting verbal duels. With considerable satisfaction, the tale is recorded of one intellectual victory. Chamberlain claimed a modern derivation for the expression 'a friend to every country but his own'; Frances Balfour telegraphed a friendly professor, and the next day was able to accost Chamberlain before dinner with a volume of Pope in her hand, and no doubt a large group of surrounding guests to enjoy his discomfiture.³⁷ Chamberlain's heroic stature was sometimes cut down to size even by his admirers. Margaret Jersey recalled his reputation in the 1880s as a 'dangerous Radical'; the 'stern disapproval of our old-fashioned Tory butler Freeman'; and, a few years later, the inappropriate dress of his daughter at an Osterley garden party.³⁸ Nevertheless, she approved his promotion into Salisbury's government of 1895: 'There was a prevalent idea that Mr Chamberlain would become Secretary of State for War, but I felt sure that he would obtain the Colonies, knowing what a deep interest he took in the Overseas Empire. We had once had a long conversation about it at a dinner

at Greenwich.³⁹ As Colonial Secretary, Chamberlain more than fulfilled the hopes of his female friends. Daisy Warwick had also observed at close quarters his transition from Birmingham municipal affairs into the company of political aristocrats. She described Chamberlain's 1886 visit to Chatsworth, in the aftermath of the Home Rule split, as 'the most important turning-point in that statesman's career.' He proved himself an acceptable guest, 'more at ease than anybody else in the great drawing-room', and many years later she prided herself upon making her own contribution to 'Mr Chamberlain's Empire movement' by introducing him to the New South Wales Premier, at that time her personal guest at Warwick Castle.⁴⁰

Cecil Rhodes probably attracted more widespread upper class female hero-worship than any other politician at the turn of the century. Like Chamberlain, he represented the glamour of imperial achievement, with the added recommendation of being a charismatic self-made man who had succeeded in making himself thoroughly acceptable to High Society. 'Cecil Rhodes was that strange, unmistakable thing, a man of genius,' wrote Daisy Warwick, 'His big ideas lifted him right out of the common, well-worn paths Cecil Rhodes had a genuine liking for me, and I reciprocated his friendship with all my heart.'⁴¹ In a chapter titled 'Ladies Ought Not to be Jingoese' (an echo of criticisms she received for supporting the Jameson Raid), she gave a lyrical account of riding the Scottish moors as Rhodes' guest, 'he telling me of all his wonderful ideas he was sure that God would not let him die before he had done his work, and this work he conceived to be, to bring about the Union of South Africa.'⁴² Jennie Churchill published his 'characteristic' letters to her: 'A man of big ideas, he knew what he wanted and made for his goal.'⁴³ Mary St Helier sent him carnations to plant in the gardens of his Cape Town home, although 'He always impressed one as a man to whom the small things of life were of but trifling interest.'⁴⁴ Violet Markham thrilled to the 'remarkable experience' of sharing a dinner table with both Rhodes and Milner, the two 'men of destiny' whose South African cause she was later to defend through public meetings, journalism and two books. Lunch with Rhodes at his home was 'a memory for which I am always grateful'.⁴⁵ Rhodes' more extended hospitality to Violet Milner earned him a full chapter in her autobiography as well as reinforcing her enthusiasm for the politics of Empire.

Only Margot Asquith seems to have been reluctant to fall under Rhodes' spell, mainly because of her husband's critical view of the Jameson affair (when Rhodes and his accomplices had deviously attempted to force the British government's hand). She scathingly recalled 'the circle of fashionable ladies crouching at Cecil Rhodes' feet' during a Downing Street reception in 1899: 'He sat like a great bronze gong among them: and I had not the spirit to disturb their worship.'⁴⁶ However, there were other occasions when Margot's famous forthrightness manifested itself in exceptionally abrasive encounters with Great Men (or so she would have her readers believe).

Adoring spectatorship had never been her forte. When Lord Randolph Churchill cold-shouldered her at a dinner party, she knew how to make their first encounter a memorable one: 'I do not know whether it was the lady on his right or what it was that prompted him, but he ultimately turned round and asked me if I knew any politicians. I told him that, with the exception of himself, I knew them all intimately.' This startled Lord Randolph, but less so than her riposte to his criticism of Lord Salisbury, when she voiced her frank opinion that Churchill had resigned his ministerial post 'more out of temper than conviction': 'At this he turned completely round and, gazing at me, said 'Confound your cheek! What do you know about me and my convictions?'⁴⁷ Few women autobiographers would have ventured such tactics, and fewer still presented the tale for publication. However Margot's determination not to be ignored was far from untypical. Encounters with famous politicians (and others) were part of a Society lifestyle which prescribed a certain level of political knowledge and involvement for the women of upper class political families; and which enabled determined and ambitious women, and those with a high level of ability or political commitment, to capitalise upon their influential friendships.

The Great Man was an essential ingredient of female autobiography. His presence there reflects an important facet of these women's political experiences. It also bears out modern writers' suggestion that women autobiographers have frequently resolved the problems of 'egotistical' self-representation by including very extensive accounts of other people in their published life histories. The first admired other who features in the autobiographies is usually the author's father. This prompts at least a passing reference to feminist psychoanalytic literature on relational identity. Nancy Chodorow and others have written of women's gendered process of individuation which, even in adulthood, will leave many women with a sense of selfhood which is defined primarily through relationships rather than through separateness and isolation. Chodorow's focus is upon the centrality of mother-child relationships.⁴⁸ However, in a different cultural context it is plausible to extend the concept of relational female identity in different directions. Writers taking a variety of theoretical positions have noted the prevalence of 'a fully rendered other' within women's self-writing. Amongst the autobiographers considered here, most chose to depict a range of significant relationships, at varying levels of depth and detail. Frances Balfour presented 'fully rendered' portrayals of her father and of Arthur Balfour. Frances Horner reciprocated the deep affection of the artist Edward Burne-Jones, alongside her tributes to her father and her husband. Edith Lyttelton erected a full-scale memorial to her husband, Unionist Politician and Colonial Secretary Alfred Lyttelton. Widows' posthumous biographies were far from unusual in the early twentieth century. Some, more than others, depicted a marriage partnership as central to the life and public work of the 'heroic' husband. By so doing, Edith valorised her own achievements

whilst at the same time commemorating his exemplary abilities and their mutual love.

Upper class women autobiographers prided themselves upon their famous friends and relations. When they came to compose their life histories, they were equally proud of their representative status as surviving members of a powerful social caste. As early as 1906, Dorothy Nevill observed that 'Society as it used to be ... is no more.'⁴⁹ David Cannadine (1992) has comprehensively chronicled its decline during the period covered by this group of autobiographies.⁵⁰ His work lacks a detailed gender focus, but is supplemented by Leonore Davidoff's earlier study of the sociological dimensions of *The Best Circles* (1973). She supports aspects of Beatrice Webb's much earlier (and hostile) autobiographical analysis of the overlapping, competitive subsets within Society. Webb concluded a disapproving description of 'this most gigantic of social clubs' by stating that 'The dominant impulse was neither the greed of riches nor the enjoyment of luxurious living ... but the desire for power.'⁵¹ Women were quite as susceptible as their male relatives to that desire, and indeed (according to both Webb and Davidoff) occupied a leading role as social gatekeepers and as marriage-brokers. Not all played the political game with equal fervour. Yet every one of these women engaged in the competitive life of Society's political elite as a participant rather than merely an observer. The autobiographies dwell extensively upon the period before the first World War, though some were written many decades later, and together they powerfully illustrate the coterminous, self-defensive cultures of Society and of Cabinet government in an era when the foundations of both were fundamentally shifting. Their view of British politics is a highly selective one. It helps to reveal certain aspects both of Victorian political tradition and of incipient democratic change, from a gendered as well as a class-bound perspective.

A strong sense of collective social identity thus emerges from the autobiographies. Frances Balfour described 'good society' as 'composed of people who knew how to behave, were well bred, and felt their obligations to live according to the position in which they were placed ... There was, as I have endeavoured to show, much ease among the inner circle, the ease of equality of station which everybody recognised.'⁵² For Dorothy Nevill, 'Society as it used to be' was defined as 'a somewhat exclusive body of people, all of them distinguished either for their rank, their intellect, or their wit.'⁵³ If the autobiographers are to be believed, these virtues were closely allied within the great families whose clannish loyalties maintained exclusivity, and restricted access, even during the decades when Society as a whole was rapidly expanding. 'Entertainment among the elite was undoubtedly an art', recalled Daisy Warwick, her nostalgia undimmed by her later conversion to socialist politics, 'The enchantment lay in setting us at ease in a luxury that was exquisite, without thought of cost.'⁵⁴ She went on to develop the theme of 'Petticoat influence', a term with negative connotations in government circles, but

which also reflected a genuine political and personal opportunities for the leading ladies of British Society. Open discussion of government affairs, and the exertion of female influence in support of policies or individuals, depended to a considerable extent upon the defence of social barriers (lifted occasionally to admit a Chamberlain or a Rhodes). Female loyalty to family is portrayed in most of the autobiographies as encompassing loyalty to a social and political circle of 'insider' friends and guests. Not every 'inner circle' was identical, even in the upper reaches of the aristocracy. The autobiographies provide an opportunity to sample the subtle differences between the hospitality of Hatfield (the Cecils), Whittingehame (the Balfours), Mells (the Horners) and Osterley (the Jerseys), whilst in every case laying delicate emphasis upon the crucial importance of individual hostesses. Loyalties were owed to particular segments of Society – to circles within circles – and the style and decisions of powerful women helped to define their parameters. The guiding influence of hostesses could become still more important if a calculated decision was taken to move with the times and to expand certain guest lists. This was most likely to occur during the London Season (from February to July), and in the houses of the socially and politically ambitious. Mary St Helier has left an unrivalled account of her efforts to launch a successful *salon* in the 1880s, remarkable both as a contribution to social history and as an example of cleverly concealed self-advertisement. With a heavier emphasis than more confident and established hostesses, she described the pleasures and perils of entertainment from a feminine organiser's perspective. Fellow-hostesses were her rivals, but they were also fellow-workers, and their collective achievements are duly celebrated in her autobiography.⁵⁵

The different, but complementary, nature of male and female roles within the social elite was clear enough to the autobiographers and was commented upon by them all. This is scarcely surprising since they lived and wrote through a century of important changes for women of all classes. Only Elizabeth Haldane threaded consistent references to the emancipation of women throughout her autobiography. Other women expressed their sense of a collective gender identity in more indirect and less feminist ways which implied their acceptance of difference, if not necessarily of other aspects of gender inequality. The inadequate formal education of girls was consistently regretted, though the writers succeeded in overcoming many of its handicaps. The fundamental legal and political disqualifications of women received little comment in the autobiographies. Instead, these female members of the British ruling class persisted in more veiled forms of self-assertion by writing themselves into the history of famous men and famous events. The inseparability of upper class social and political activities emerges clearly from the pages. It is apparent from the autobiographies that their authors positioned themselves primarily within this powerful arena, rather than as excluded and disempowered feminist critics. Simple choices between 'class' and 'gender' were not required of them, and were not made. Multiple identities were

available to the autobiographers as members of Society, as members of political sub-sets of Society, and as women in Society. A straightforward collective self-identification with British women in general was seldom likely, even amongst those authors who supported the suffrage movement. Gender equality was rather an abstract issue for highly privileged and influential ladies with a range of other political paths to pursue.

Though older traditions of 'Petticoat influence' lingered into the twentieth century, the women's life histories also portray the new roles which the changing political context forced upon them. When the electorate doubled in 1867, then nearly doubled again in 1884, election victories needed to be organised as never before. Professional party managers, and a huge array of volunteer helpers, stepped forward to fill the breach. The female relatives of parliamentary candidates were expected to play their part, and learned to do so with greater or lesser degrees of enthusiasm. Electioneering came more naturally to some wives (and some husbands) than it did to others. 'My heart sank within me', recalled Constance Battersea, of her first arrival at her husband's prospective Brecon constituency in December 1878. The local Liberal caucus was an all-male affair, so she listened to her husband's introductory address from a position 'stowed away behind a screen, where I could hear but was not visible'.⁵⁶ A more prominent part was required of her on election day itself, and in her autobiography she reproduced a lively letter to her mother describing 'how I got through the day'. Her activities included driving through the town 'arrayed from head to foot in light blue'; enduring a mixture of 'cheering and *awful hooting*'; drinking 'endless cups of tea' while peering down from the local hotel at 'all the exciting scenes in the streets'; then finally receiving news of victory, at which point 'I went to the window and seized a flag and waved it enthusiastically.' Her husband gave a speech from the portico roof, and Constance surprised herself by uttering her own one-sentence message, including the Welsh word for Victory ('I shouted as loud as I could').⁵⁷ Such unusual thrills could become addictive. Jennie Churchill's electioneering in the 1880s, which included active canvassing for votes and eventually the formation of a ladies section in the Primrose League, was conducted with huge enjoyment. In her autobiography she boasted that the League had 'materially helped to keep the Conservative Party in power twenty years'.⁵⁸ Her account reveals very clearly that personal fulfilment, rather than party advantage, was the main reward of her political efforts. Her reaction was correspondingly bitter when, after several years of spectacular parliamentary success, Lord Randolph Churchill rashly decided to walk out of the post of Chancellor of the Exchequer. Lord Salisbury never forgave him and his political career never recovered. The heaviest blow for Jennie Churchill was undoubtedly her husband's refusal to trust her. She learnt of his resignation from the morning papers, after an evening spent planning a grand ministerial reception: 'When I came down to breakfast, the fatal paper in my hand, I found him calm and smiling ... He went into no explanation,

and I felt too utterly crushed and miserable to ask for any, or even to remonstrate.⁵⁹

The political role of a Minister's or Member's wife obviously depended to a considerable extent upon the nature of the couple's marital relationship, as well as upon the outlook and talents of each individual woman. Relational identity moves once more to the fore as the autobiographers chronicle their experiences of parliamentary life. Frances Balfour and Margot Asquith derived enormous satisfaction from their position as political confidantes (in Frances's case, to her father, then her brother-in-law). In their autobiographies they provide very detailed accounts of moments of political crisis, when a confidante was most needed. One of the fullest accounts of the confidante's role came from Edith Lyttelton, whose surrogate autobiography recorded Alfred Lyttelton's decision to enter Parliament, his election campaigns, his promotion to Cabinet Office, and the disappointments of subsequent years in the political wilderness. She lavished praise on her adored husband's achievements, but at the same time made it very clear to her readers that her own agency was integral to his success. At every critical juncture she was at his side. Neither was she a purely passive supporter, for she forced herself to participate in the (to her) distasteful process of electioneering, and described occasions when her husband sought and followed her private political advice. Like many political wives, she spent a good deal of time in the gallery of the House of Commons. Set-piece descriptions of this feminine political venue appear in many of the autobiographies. Most dwell on its changing clientele over the decades. According to Jennie Churchill, the Ladies Gallery of the 1880s was inhabited by 'only a few ultra-political ladies', but by 1908 'this has quite changed. The present generation are full of the desire of being, or appearing to be, serious.'⁶⁰ Whilst fashions had something to do with attendance, the change in fashion undoubtedly reflected the increasing need for politicians' wives to be politically well-informed.

One of the subjects upon which Edith influenced Alfred Lyttelton was the controversial issue of female suffrage. Despite the fact that 'his chivalry and reverence for women made him dislike their entry into the rough and tumble of political life', he eventually concluded that 'his reason could find no justification for excluding women from their share in the government of the country.'⁶¹ She commented elsewhere in her (auto) biography that 'It was our habit as well as our theory of life together, that each should be free to make his (*sic*) own decisions without interference from the other.'⁶² However, the habit of political discussion inevitably tended to produce a convergence of views which, in turn, made possible the development of joint political work. The Victoria League's work of organising colonial hospitality in Britain provided an ideal opportunity for the Colonial Secretary and his wife to organise amiable imperialist propaganda side by side. The emergence of women's sections within each of the main political parties meanwhile offered wider opportunities for other autobiographers to work alongside their male relatives in public

life. Elizabeth Haldane, Frances Balfour and Violet Markham all devoted a certain amount of time to Liberal or Liberal Unionist politics, while the Primrose League attracted leading Conservative ladies. The foundations were being laid for an influx of women into party political work, but in the late nineteenth century most women's groups within the male political arena remained segregated and subordinate, thus perpetuating existing traditions of separate female self-organisation for separate purposes.

Collectively, the writers of female autobiographies played a variety of roles in the British women's movement. Suffrage work was merely one aspect of a movement which spread seamlessly to include a huge range of philanthropic, educational and other social causes. Aristocratic women, and the relatives of distinguished politicians, were much in demand as leaders and leadership icons within this broad-based network of female activism. Few of the autobiographers avoided involvement in some form of women's work; yet equally few chose to devote significant space to these activities in their life histories. Constance Battersea barely mentioned her two-year presidency of the National Union of Women Workers (1901–03) and her subsequent participation at the International Conference of Women in Berlin. Edith Lyttelton had equally little to say about public work, though she too was a National Union president, a determined opponent of sweated labour, and a founding member of the Personal Service Association, apart from her imperialist activities. Violet Markham wrote less about her promotion of women's work in local government than about her anti-suffragism. Margaret Jersey remained silent on her years of Primrose League work and in her brief record of the Victoria League dwelt upon her astonishment at being appointed as its first president ('My breath was quite taken a way, but there was neither time nor opportunity for remonstrance.')

⁶³ Even Elizabeth Haldane, who as a nine-year-old child wrote a combative essay titled 'Fair Play' and was a life-long supporter of women's rights, described in general rather than in personal terms the progress of the various causes she supported, minimising the value of her own contribution. Frances Balfour was unusual in devoting as much as two chapters of her autobiography to the suffrage cause. She could not remember 'any date, in which I was not a passive believer in the rights of women'.⁶⁴ Generous tributes were paid to her fellow suffragists, but her own role was once again understated, with jocular emphasis upon her weaknesses as an organiser and her aristocratic reluctance to mount platforms or join processions.

The 'dullness' of conventional upper class women's autobiographies was thus preserved. Even the most iconoclastic of these authors, Margot Asquith, was reluctant to jeopardise the reputations of family members. Most of the other authors made it clear from their opening pages that their primary aim was to offer homage to an honoured past in which they posed as privileged participants, rather than leading players. A pronounced levelling out of eccentricities, controversies and independent female achievements tends to

characterise the whole group of life histories. From a narrowly informational viewpoint this makes them an unreliable, or even disappointing, historical source. However, a close comparative reading of the autobiographies suggests otherwise. The reticence of these powerful and intelligent women is open to interpretation, with the assistance of literary theory and of supplementary archival evidence. It is possible to work from within the published texts, and to travel beyond them in drawing conclusions about individual women's outlook and about upper class feminine political behaviour. Constraints upon these women's self-writing are related in revealing ways to their privileged yet (in gender terms) unequal social status. Their decisions to publish, and their prioritisation of social and political caste above individual personal achievement or gender solidarity, reflect the contradictory pressures to which they were subject in their active years. The anticipated reaction of contemporary readers was a secondary influence, acknowledged in many texts by comparisons and contrasts between past and present. Each book records its author's pride in the talents and exclusivity of an elite ruling class, and in the political careers of famous men. The autobiographers demonstrate a profound self-association with these success stories. Rejection of more obvious forms of self-promotion does not amount to lack of self-confidence or lack of a sense of their own historical worth. Social and political success, like the writing of autobiography itself, was viewed as unavoidably gendered. It was triumphantly attained by every one of the women authors. The existence of their books helps both to commemorate and to explain the complex nature of that achievement.

Notes

1 F. Balfour, *Ne Obliviscaris. Dinna Forget* (London, 1930), I, xi.

2 *Ibid.*, I, xii.

3 *Ibid.*, I, xi.

4 M. Asquith, ed. M. Bonham Carter, *The Autobiography of Margot Asquith* (London, 1995 ed.), p. 153. The original version was published in two volumes in 1920 and 1922. The modern editor (her grandson by marriage) has cut back on extended political passages and on detailed sections about Margot's own children in their infancy; thus adding a further selective gloss to the text which brings it more closely into line with the other autobiographies discussed here.

5 F. Balfour, *Dinna Forget*, I, p. 173.

6 The texts which are jointly analysed in this article are: M. Asquith, *Autobiography* (1995 ed.); F. Balfour, *Ne Obliviscaris. Dinna Forget* (1930), 2 vols., C. Battersea, *Reminiscences* (London, 1922); J. Churchill, *The Reminiscences of Lady Randolph Churchill* (London, 1908); E. Haldane, *From One Century to Another* (London, 1937); M. St Helier, *Memories of Fifty Years* (London, 1909); F. Horner, *Time Remembered* (London, 1933); M. Villiers, Countess of Jersey, *Fifty-one Years of Victorian Life* (London, 1922); E. Lyttelton, *Alfred Lyttelton* (London, 1917); V. Markham, *Return Passage* (London, 1953); V. Milner, *My Picture Gallery* (London, 1951); D. Nevill, *My Own Times* (London, 1906); F. Greville, Countess of Warwick, *Life's Ebb and Flow* (Plymouth, 1929) and *Afterthoughts* (Plymouth, 1931). Others

which share similar characteristics are E. Stewart, Marchioness of Londonderry, *Retrospect* (London, 1938) and S. Tweedsmuir, *The Lilac and the Rose* (London, 1952).

7 See particularly L. Davidoff, *The Best Circles* (London, 1973); S. Fletcher, *Victorian Girls. Lord Lyttelton's Daughters* (London, 1997); P. Jalland, *Women, Marriage and Politics 1860–1914* (Oxford, 1988); K. Reynolds, *Aristocratic Women and Political Society in Victorian Britain* (Oxford, 1998); E. Shkolnik, *Leading Ladies* (New York, 1987).

8 On upper class women's political and philanthropic networks, especially in relationship to imperialism, see J. Bush, *Edwardian Ladies and Imperial Power* (London, 2000).

9 F. Balfour, *Dinna Forget*, I, xi.

10 M. Villiers, *Fifty-one Years*, p. v.

11 E. Haldane, *From One Century*, pp. v–vi.

12 D. Nevill, *My Own Times*, p. vii.

13 C. Battersea, *reminiscences*, p. x.

14 V. Milner, *My Picture Gallery*, p. ix.

15 F. Horner, *Time Remembered*, p. xiii.

16 *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

17 J. Churchill, *Lady Randolph Churchill*, p. vii.

18 M. Asquith, *The Autobiography of Margot Asquith*, (London, 1936 ed. of original text), I, preface.

19 *The Times*, 1920, quoted in M. Bonham Carter's Introduction to *Margot Asquith* (1995 ed), p. xxviii.

20 E. Lyttelton, *Alfred Lyttelton*. A precedent for seeking autobiography within wifely biography is provided by S. Koven, 'Henrietta Barnett 1851–1936: The (Auto)Biography of a Late Victorian Marriage', in S. Pederson and P. Mandler, *After the Victorians* (London, 1994).

21 See, for example, A Cockshut, *The Art of Autobiography in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century England* (New Haven: CT, 1984); J. Goodwin, *Autobiography: The Self Made Text* (New York, 1993); G. Landow, ed., *Approaches to Victorian Autobiography* (Athens: OH., 1979).

22 E. Jelinek (ed.), *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism* (Bloomington IN., 1980).

23 *Ibid.*, 15.

24 *Ibid.*, 17.

25 S. Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography* (Bloomington IN., 1987), p. 19.

26 S. Benstock (ed.), *The Private Self* (London, 1988).

27 J. Marcus, 'Invincible Mediocrity: The Private Selves Of Public Women' in S. Benstock (ed.), *The Private Self*; C. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York, 1988).

28 J. Marcus in S. Benstock (ed.), *The Private Self*, (1988), p. 120.

29 V. Sanders, *The Private Lives of Victorian Women* (Hemel Hempstead, 1989); S. Mills, *Discourses of Difference* (London, 1991); M. Corbett, *Representing Femininity* (Oxford, 1992).

30 L. Stanley, 'Moments of Writing: Is There A Feminist Auto/Biography?', *Gender and History*, 2:1 (Spring 1990), 64.

31 J. Churchill, *Lady Randolph Churchill*, p. 97.

32 V. Milner, *Picture Gallery*, p. 79.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

35 See V. Milner papers, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

- 36 M. St Helier, *Memories*, p. 285.
37 F. Balfour, *Dinna Forget*, II, p. 356.
38 M. Villiers, *Fifty-one Years*, p. 141.
39 *Ibid.*, p. 371.
40 F. Greville, *Ebb and Flow*, p. 143.
41 *Ibid.*, p. 134.
42 *Ibid.*, p. 135.
43 J. Churchill, *Lady Randolph Churchill*, p. 294.
44 M. St Helier, *Memories*, p. 228.
45 V. Markham, *Return Passage*, p. 57.
46 M. Asquith, *Margot Asquith* (1995 ed.), p. 227.
47 *Ibid.*, 48.
48 See N. Chodorow, *Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley CA., 1978).
49 D. Nevill, *My Own Times*, p. 99.
50 D. Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (London, 1992).
51 B. Webb, *My Apprenticeship* (London, 1938), I, p. 73.
52 F. Balfour, *Dinna Forget*, I, p. 391.
53 D. Nevill, *My Own Times*, p. 99.
54 F. Greville, *Ebb and Flow*, p. 46.
55 M. St Helier, *Memories*, Chapter XIII.
56 C. Battersea, *Reminiscences*, pp. 180–81.
57 *Ibid.*, pp. 184–85.
58 J. Churchill, *Lady Randolph Churchill*, p. 99.
59 *Ibid.*, p. 141.
60 *Ibid.*, p. 88.
61 E. Lyttelton, *Alfred Lyttelton*, p. 374.
62 *Ibid.*, p. 322.
63 M. Villiers, *Fifty-one Years*, p. 381.
64 F. Balfour, *Dinna Forget*, II, p. 114.

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