

THREE VICTORIAN FICTIONAL IMAGES OF VOLUNTEERING

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Fictional depiction of volunteering in the second half of the nineteenth century in Britain can, I believe, provide a commentary on social trends during this period of rapid changes in social action. The three novels I have chosen to illustrate this assertion (North and South, Tom Brown at Oxford, and Marcella) are considered in the chronological order in which they were published. The novelists, Elizabeth Gaskell, Thomas Hughes, and Mary Augusta Ward, as well as providing fictional models of what is involved in the life of a volunteer, provide insight into three different movements in the social theories underlying social action in the period. The novelists themselves were involved in volunteering and in its organisation, giving an extra dimension to the creation of their fictional worlds.

North and South: Learning to Speak to Each Other

Elizabeth Gaskell (1810–1865) published North and South at first in serial form in Charles Dickens's Household Words, then in an amended and enlarged book form in 1855. The 1850s were years of reconsideration of social problems and of the ways of solving them. The two previous decades had witnessed serious social catastrophes, particularly for the hugely expanding cities such as Gaskell's own locality, Manchester. The cholera epidemic of the 1830s, economic stagnation in some aspects of industry, the Hungry Forties, and labour unrest throughout the period were living issues for all, but particularly for the church community to which this author belonged. The Unitarians considered themselves, with

justification, to be leaders in charitable work among the urban poor. Cross Street Chapel, ministered to by William Gaskell, led the way in involvement in social and educational ventures such as Manchester's Domestic Missions. The author was herself personally engaged in these activities particularly in the Mission's Sunday Schools in Mosley Street. She participated in providing relief for industrial workers, notably during the city's cholera epidemic (Chapple, J. 1997 and Uglow, J. 1993).

The ferment of industrial unrest and consequent rethinking of social action generated a new wave of reform in Unitarianism, led by critics within the faith community who found the inheritance of late eighteenth-century social theories defective in the new urban contexts. A Priestleyan doctrine based on Necessitarianism had implied that, with the right kind of education and regular association with good ideas and family routines, humanity's living conditions must improve. Rapid urbanisation had challenged this optimism. A new generation of Unitarian thinkers, such as American William Henry Channing, and James Martineau, William Gaskell's colleague in Manchester New College's teaching faculty, proposed an overhaul of social theory. Gaskell, always assumed to be less radical than his friend, was nevertheless at the forefront of what we might call "New Unitarianism". In the same year that North and South was published, he preached, and later published, a funeral oration in Cross Street Chapel to celebrate the life of a Manchester philanthropist and politician, Sir Joseph Potter (Gaskell, W. 1858). The themes of this address echo in his wife's novel. They are that Unitarians should be inspired to act charitably by their feelings as much as by their traditional reliance on reason, the heart assisting the conscience. Individuals are obligated to serve their fellows, particularly those of a different social class, but should do so without condescension. In a puzzling phrase, to be revealed in Elizabeth Gaskell's fictional terms, his advice was that philanthropy should be "inoffensive".

The principal character of North and South is Margaret Hale, the daughter of an Anglican priest who, on grounds of theological doubts, had given up his comfortable living in the rural South of England and moved to "Milton-Northern" with his wife and Margaret. There he maintained them by teaching classics and philosophy to those who could afford to pay him. One of his mature students is John Thornton, a self-educated mill owner. After initial cultural shock, Margaret begins to understand the lives of the working class in her new setting. Involved in a dangerous incident during a strike, she is drawn closer to Thornton, a classic Utilitarian. He believed that the social classes (the owners and the workers) should respect each other's rights and privacy, and therefore it is inappropriate to engage in welfare work with them or even to enquire into their domestic circumstances. Margaret's knowledge of the effects of poverty is acquired by compassionate assistance to two poor families. She was convinced that Thornton was wrong. The author uses the narrative device of set debates in Socratic mode between the mill owner, her father, and Margaret. At a later point, the dialogue is extended over new social boundaries, as they are joined by one of Thornton's workers. They could not agree on what Margaret regarded as vital, communication

between the social classes. Bereavement, and a melodramatic misunderstanding which severed her growing romantic relationship with Thornton, left Margaret in a depressed mood, out of which she resolved to proceed with her commitment to act on behalf of the poor.

Her social “conversion” was fired by an intellectual source. She read in one of her father’s theological texts, the devotions of St Francis de Sales, the message, “let us return to the road of humility”. Margaret’s will was strengthened:

“The way of humility! ‘Ah!’ thought Margaret, ‘That is what I have missed! But courage little heart. We will turn back, and by God’s help we may find the lost path’.” (North and South, 345)

Margaret’s new determination was instantly put into effect by caring for and educating two poor families who have suffered from bereavement, disease and unemployment. Her resolve to use her energies to help the unfortunate received a further blow from the deaths of her mother then of her father. She then temporarily moved to London to be with her wealthy married sister. An unexpected inheritance from an old family friend enabled her to return to her mission to make a difference in the lives of the workers in Milton. Thornton, chastened by commercial failure, is reunited with her, and she is able to use her new wealth to assist him in establishing a scheme where the workers themselves organise a type of cooperative canteen in his new factory.

The basic social message is that dialogue across social class barriers is vital. The renewed conscience of Margaret did not involve her in working in a contemporary institutional structure, say, with contemporary forerunners of the Charity Organisation Society. Indeed, the novel makes an explicit rejection of “case work” approaches which distinguish between the deserving and undeserving poor. In a late episode Margaret returned to her former rural home for a brief visit. She found her father’s successor operating an educational scheme of organised philanthropy with a strong moral pressure on the villagers. The charity of the Hepworth vicarage is didactic and intrusive. Margaret saw it as the opposite of, to use William Gaskell’s phrase, “inoffensive philanthropy”. Another interesting issue is related to gender roles, with the emergence of the woman as an agent of change through her financial power as well through the promptings of her heart. She is united with the strong male captain of industry, but it is her resources (and, in one episode, clear headed ability to make use of legal documents) that enables Thornton to start up business again and to initiate an Owenite style of management.

Thomas Hughes (1822 – 1896): Tom Brown’s Awakening Conscience

The next novel and novelist is from a very different political and religious context. Tom Brown at Oxford, published in book form in 1861, was a sequel to Tom Brown’s Schooldays, which had fictionalised (in more ways than one) the ideal of Thomas Arnold’s Rugby School. Now largely unread, the further

adventures of the hero are interesting for their attempt to infuse Arnoldian high mindedness and spiritual uplift into the contemporary discussion of the reform of the ancient English universities. The novel, in my view, also has value for the Victorian presentation of the rite of passage of a middle class young man. As in North and South, this novel takes its protagonist from the security of a traditional rural home into more disturbed modern locations, and, in the later stages of the novel, to London.

Tom Brown left Rugby School for St Ambrose College, Oxford. The classic narrative of Victorian campus novels ensued. The hero falls into error, drinking and eating to excess, makes friends, some unsuitable and some morally superior, and studies very little. Sport and, on vacation, rural pursuits of the gentleman, filled up his time. The novel charts a growing maturity and moral seriousness. Attendance at a university sermon (by an ex Rugby man) on the theme, "Truth will set you free", awakened Tom to serious matters. It is no coincidence here to find Hughes, a Christian Socialist, making use of one of the key messages of F. D Maurice, to whom the novel is dedicated. In Tom's second Oxford year another influential voice spoke to him, the seer, Thomas Carlyle. Tom's reading of Past and Present is a great awakening to the dangers of growing industrial society. Another section of his life does not proceed so well. Tom falls in love with Mary, a friend of his cousin, but the pursuit is hampered by rumours of his misbehaviour, partly fed by a wicked aristocratic Oxford rival.

The hero was fortunate to have made two influential, morally aware friends in Oxford. One is Hardy, a slightly older man, who becomes a college tutor. He, like Tom, displays Muscular Christianity (the title of Chapter XI). Hardy is more than a rowing blue role model. He becomes a mentor to Tom's growing awareness of social duty. The second friend is more ambiguously portrayed. Grey is an ordained man, a serious pastor deeply involved in charitable work with the poor, at first in Oxford, then in London. He is no sportsman, and the novel makes him into a slightly comic figure, although dedicated to Christian service. Despite this, Grey provides the opportunity for Tom to become involved in his missionary work with tough working class people. Tom offers to help him and proved to be effective as a firm "bouncer" when trouble breaks out during the mission meetings. Later, Tom taught cricket and boxing in the "Settlement".

During his final year as an Oxford student, sobered by various adventures and with a growing awareness of his own maturity, Tom takes up a political stance, writing polemical articles for a radical journal with a Chartist colour, The Wessex Freeman. Hardy, in Socratic dialogue with Tom in his room in college, is able to illuminate that these first steps of social awareness are into shallow waters. He leads Tom to a deeper understanding of his mission. Like, Margaret Hale in North and South, Tom has to go through an uncomfortable period of maturing: "What he was in search of must underlie and embrace his human love, and support it. Beyond and above all private and personal desires and hopes and longings, he was conscious of a restless craving after something which he could not grasp, and yet which was not avoiding him, which seemed to be mysteriously laying hold of him and surrounding him" (Tom Brown at Oxford, 467)

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A volunteering moment reveals to Tom the dilemmas of being socially responsible. Dejected at not being permitted to meet Mary in London, he agrees to assist Grey in taking a party of poor children into the countryside for the day. He is particularly surprised at the common sense of a little girl, who, in her ragged confidence, seems “to have been studying (Carlyle’s) Sartor Resartus”. Tom thoroughly enjoys the trip, except for the return to London. To his horror, he has to accompany the ragged crowd through London’s smarter streets. The tired, sickly little girl asks to be carried, so Tom obliges. He is shocked to meet Mary riding through Rotten Row with his rival and, although he knows he was right to carry the little child, he feels his chances of marriage are sunk. Of course that is not the case. With a few more twists of the plot, which reveal to Mary’s father that Tom has been slandered, he is able to press his suit and succeed. Mary was particularly proud of his volunteering activity!

The way of volunteering is hard and confusing, but the will of the hero assisted. There is a summary moment in the last pages of the novel. Mary and Tom have returned from their honeymoon. Temporarily residing in their rural retreat, Tom is troubled that Mary is giving up a leisured, comfortable life to be with him in what the reader presumes is now a life of commitment to social care and reform. Mary expresses her own reassurance: if a woman cannot do much herself, she can know and love a man who can. She also adds that she will be by his side as he “faces the buffets of the seen and unseen”. The dated conception of gender role here is obvious, but there is another contemporary emphasis both lurking and explicit in references to Tom’s career. The emphasis on “buffets of the seen and unseen” is another instance where Hughes demonstrates that the world’s ills can only be faced by manliness. Manliness entered Thomas Hughes’s own list of published titles with The Manliness of Christ (1876), essays to improve the minds and faith of the working class.

By the time of writing Tom Brown at Oxford, Hughes was an established figure of Christian Socialism. He engaged in the politics of industrial and welfare reform, particularly in the recognition of Trades Unions and the Cooperative Movement. As with Elizabeth Gaskell, and indeed in the case of the third writer in this review, we should not expect a direct correlation between the author’s own charitable or organisational activities and the fictional world. In Hughes’s novel, however, his own commitment to workers’ education imbued with the qualities of “manliness” and religious commitment emerge clearly. Hughes was an influential barrister, and, eventually a Judge, serving on a number of reforming committees. At the London Peoples’ College, founded by his Christian Socialist mentor, F.D. Maurice, Hughes engaged in a Tom Brown manner, teaching boxing, rowing, and cricket. He was Commanding Officer off the Number Two Company of the Volunteer Unit at the Working Men’s College from 1865 to 1868. He was Member of Parliament for a Lambeth seat and then for Frome in Somerset, engaging in a Royal Commission on Trades Unions. Like the next writer to be considered, he was invited as a distinguished reformer to the United States. Although Tom Brown at Oxford concludes with no clear idea of the career that Tom will pursue, the author’s own active philanthropic life would seem to be the kind of path that Tom

would take.

Mary Ward (1851 – 1920) and the trials of Marcella.

The last decade of the nineteenth century provides the third novel for consideration. Mary Augusta Ward (she always published under her married name, Mrs Humphry Ward) was one of the most popular writers of the end of Victoria's reign and the Edwardian years, in Britain and in the United States. She was a member of an "intellectual aristocracy" (Annan, N.1999, 310/311), granddaughter of Thomas Arnold of Oxford and Rugby School, niece of Matthew Arnold and wife of an Oxford don who became a leader writer on The Times. As a young woman, she lived in Oxford where she met her husband. She was an academic in her own right, publishing French and Spanish texts, and acting as the first female examiner in Spanish in the university. As a member of a group planning lectures for women, she helped to found Somerville College. Mary Ward was closely associated with the circle surrounding the Oxford philosopher, T. H. Green, the leading figure in English Idealism, dedicating her most successful novel to him. The principles of Idealism provided the intellectual foundation for her depiction of contemporary philanthropy and political drama. Its doctrine of the centrality of will supported her personally in deploying her vast resources of energy which made her a key figure in London philanthropic organisations and on national committees for social action.

Her involvement in building new social institutions remains evident today in the Mary Ward Centre, formerly the Mary Ward Settlement, off Gordon Square, London. The committee she led in 1890 first established an educational community for the working classes on the basis of the rapidly spreading Settlement Movement, which usually, but not always, has been associated with the universities and public schools. Mary Ward arranged to take over some rooms in premises in Gordon Square, owned by Dr William's Library, a nonconformist centre of learning that had occupied the building after Unitarian's New College had moved to Oxford. Her venture was an experiment in adult education with a strong religious bias. It was not initially successful. Some of the resident working class students wanted to plan their own courses and moved nearby to a small educational centre, Marchmont Hall, to the east of Tavistock Square. Undeterred, Mary Ward raised funds in order to build what became a community teaching and community service centre, with similarities to the well established London Settlements linked with Oxford and Cambridge. Her biographer suggests that neither Toynbee Hall nor Oxford House satisfied Mary Ward's convictions. The former was too socialist and the latter too High Church (Sutherland, J. 1991). Through her successful canvassing for funds from a rich newspaper magnate, Passmore Edwardes, this Settlement was securely financed. It had a distinct social service ethos. An instance of its success and appropriateness for the times was its organisation of the first day nursery in London.

Mary Ward recorded the moment when she decided to deploy fiction in the cause of social action. In 1881, after attending the Bampton Lecture in Oxford, where

she heard an attack by an Anglican traditionalist on all she felt dear, she committed herself to a literary campaign:

“My heart was hot within me. How could one show England what was going on in her midst? Surely the only way was through imagination; through a picture of actual life and conduct; through something ‘as simple, sensuous, and passionate’ as one could make it” (Ward, M. 1918, 168).

The association between this warm mission and the themes of the first decade of her writing fiction is clearly visible. In the Westmoreland Edition of her collected works, produced in deluxe bindings and with illustrations, the author's prefaces explicitly associate characters and locations with her philanthropic experience and activities. This edition of Marcella, the novel about to be examined, includes photographs of the Passmore Edwards Settlement and its garden.

Mary Ward's first major successful novel was Robert Elsmere published in 1888. Socially and politically oriented novels followed, with massive sales provoked excited discussion and some contention, although they are far from radical in our terms. Each has a strong melodramatic and romantic plot; villains are punished, errors are corrected, and marriage usually takes place between couples who have been through misunderstandings and mutual change of heart and belief. Robert Elsmere continues to be studied for its insight into Victorian faith and doubt in the career of an Anglican priest, although some of the Churchmanship issues were becoming dated by the 1880s. The novel is, however, of considerable interest for students of voluntary action and for the establishment of institutions on the pattern of Settlements and Working Men's Colleges.

Marcella, Mary Ward's fourth novel, published in 1894, has more to interest a twenty-first century student of history and literature. It deals, through the choice of a young woman as the main character, with the role of gender in social action, with the effects on volunteers of practical engagement with the brutalities of rural and urban poverty, and with the limitations of political reform. For this reason, it was a valuable decision by Virago to reprint the novel (with a good introduction by Tammie Walters) in 1984. Sadly, this edition is now out of print.

The novel relates the emotional and political steps towards maturity of what was, in contemporary terms, a “New Woman”. Marcella was educated away from home. While at Art College in London, she attended lectures on Socialism, read from Marx and Lassalle, and mixed with a group of committed Socialists. Like many of the middle class volunteers deployed by Octavia Hill's committees she collected rents and visited the poor in their homes, giving advice and recording the way they lived. Recalled to take care of her wealthy parents in rural England, she applied her charitable impulse to a scheme to employ the village women in craft work, which was aimed to cut out the traditional exploiters of their financial innocence. She and Raeburn, the squire of the village, fall in love, but the romance is cut short by a sequence of melodramatic events and misunderstandings, one of which is the attention paid to Marcella by a political activist, Harry Wharton.

Wharton becomes a Member of Parliament, campaigning for Land Reform, and therefore on the benches opposite the traditionalist Raeburn. Following this crisis, Marcella left her village to live in a London tenement amongst the poor. She has given herself to a new professional volunteering vocation, nursing. It is fulfilling, teaches her new perspectives, but it is a tough life

In London, she meets and debates with her former London friends, who have grown more radical. Marcella was not convinced by their political agenda. The radical politician, Wharton, turns out to have feet of clay, as he is proved to have deceived his electorate. Marcella was also in touch with the opposite end of the political spectrum, the wealthy and politically conservative. She could not accept their detached, uncaring social attitude. A very different and influential companion is a friend of Raeburn, Edward Hallin, who, like Robert Elsmere, is a volunteer educator amongst the poor. His dying messages to her confirm that she is not a revolutionary (she claims to be a "Venturist", a gentle form of Fabianism). The story ends, not unlike the ending of North and South, with reconciliation with her lover after he too has had a change of heart and social philosophy. Both now engage in social action on equal terms, because Marcella conveniently inherited family wealth and Raeburn, who has succeeded his father in the House of Lords, has changed his perceptions of the problems of the poor. A sequel to the novel, Sir George Tressady has Marcella in a minor role involved in a Trades Union adventure. Gradually, Mary Ward's novels became more melodrama than social action, as she wrote to earn enough to cover her son's gambling debts!

The economic and philosophical context of Marcella assists us in understanding the forces at play for a young woman who is impelled to act in a forceful philanthropic way. British Idealism, at least in the form influenced by T.H. Green, was distinct from Socialism. Green's emphasis on the essential centrality of mind immediately set it apart from a materialist philosophy. Political thinking which accepted poverty and human suffering as inevitable was rejected for the same reason. The educator, Edward Hallin expressed this powerfully:

"Hold what you please about systems and movements and fight for what you hold as an individual, - never say, never think - that it is in the order of things, in the purpose of God, that one of these little ones, this man honestly out of work, this woman "sweated" out of her life, should perish." (Marcella, 556).

As Marcella herself is made to realise, on the eve of reconciliation with Raeburn, the things which are the "real barriers that divide us man from man are not economic, wealth and poverty, but things of quite another order - things of social sympathy and relation - alterable at every turn, even under existing conditions, by the human will" (Marcella, 554).

The notion of "will" is a key to understanding the ideology of Marcella and of Robert Elsmere. Green's Idealism was a markedly individualist philosophy. Social reform is likely only through the action generated by individual minds. A key concept in Green's social doctrine was Citizenship, the expression of the

interaction of individual minds. The outcome of this interaction would be an Ideal Society. The theme is millennial, but there may not be a rapid successful conclusion. Mary Ward concludes Robert Elsmere, with lines from Arthur Hugh Clough's poem, Come, Poet, come:

“Others, I doubt not, if not we,
The issue of our toils will see” (Robert Elsmere, 576)

In that novel, confidence in the possibility of an earthly Eden, however remote in time, is witnessed in schemes for the creation of new communities initiated by volunteers. The Elgood Street Centre, where Elsmere taught, and the “New Brotherhood” which he established are such hopeful institutions. The core concept of Idealism at this point, a belief that human destiny is shaped by the will, gave strength to those who had to surmount difficulties in founding these communities. There were two senses of this concept, the will of God and the will of the individual. The two should be linked in order to change the world for the better. Awakening to knowledge of the Supreme Will is not simple. Life's experiences may lead to that possibility, but, as Mary Ward's heroine discovers, the way is painful and there are wrong turnings. Matthew Arnold wrote in Culture and Anarchy,

“the passion for doing good is apt to be over hasty in determining what reason and the will of God say, because its turn is for acting rather than thinking ...the social motive is to make the will of God prevail, the curiosity element will lead us to know the will of God and so act wisely.” (Arnold, M. 1965, 92).

Marcella's early schemes for improving rural industry were too hasty. Reflecting, after her experience of the London tenement dwellers, she realised that she had previously acted with the “blind spasmodic efforts of a mind that all through saw nothing – mistook its own violences and self-wills for eternal right, and was but traitor to what should have been its own first loyalties, in seeking to save and reform.” (Marcella, 554). Marcella identified one vital statement of what that essential ingredient of the good life was during an enforced convalescence in a smart London home. It was not a revolutionary doctrine. The core of her social commitment is aesthetic:

“And I don't want so much to take from them and give to others. I only want to be sure that the beauty, and leisure, and the freshness are somewhere – not lost out of the world” (Marcella, 435).

In a lecture to London Unitarians, delivered at the time of the publication of Marcella, Mary Ward praised them for their scientific appraisal of social problems, but criticised the Church for its “defective sense of what is delicate and lovely, and, in the best sense, distinguished” (Ward, M. 48/49). She begged them to renew their mission with a new tone: “Let the new faith then seize upon ritual, upon music and art, upon the methods in fact of the common folk” (Ward, M. 48/49.). The tone is that of Ruskin and William Morris, of Culture not of Anarchy.

The Romantic Volunteer heart and agony

This paragraph's heading uses the term "romantic" in both literary and philosophic senses. Two strands in the fictions which I have been considering have strong flavours of the impact of Romanticism on social action and philanthropy. One is the emphasis on the power of feeling to generate the energy to act rightly in voluntary action. The heart acting with the head. The other is the less obvious, but never far removed sense that a Romantic agony may be the lot of the volunteer.

At the heart of Victorian dilemmas about the role of the middle class in intervening in the lives of the poor was a basic disagreement about natural law. Is the economic condition of mankind the outcome of an inflexible and necessary economic law? For many, intervention in "the natural processes", either by legislation or by something more active than traditional local patronage, was irrational and likely to create a disturbance of the order of things. Isaiah Berlin in his essay, The Roots of Romanticism, makes this observation about the diametrically opposed viewpoint:

"Romantic Economics are the precise opposite of this. All institutions must be bent towards some kind of ideal of living together in a spiritually progressive manner" (Berlin, 1999,126)

The appeal to the heart in North and South is a good example of Romantic social science by this definition, as is Marcella's memory of Edward Hallin's fervent cry quoted above, that no institution should allow suffering. The novels are generally opposed to laissez-faire attitudes which leave the problem to solve itself, but they are equally wary of an involvement in apparently rational schemes for the radical reorganisation of basic social institutions. Romantic commitment does not necessarily lead to the destruction of long lasting social structures. Tom Brown's friend, Hardy, puts his energy into reforming Oxford not by destroying the structures of the university but by encouraging its members to live up to its long standing traditions. Tom Brown rejects his temporary espousal of the intellectual and theoretical bases of Chartism. It was his heart and his education in Christian principles that helped him to come through. Marcella was awakened to the flaws in Wharton's apparently rational political stance as she watched a debate in the House of Commons and noted the anguish of Raeburn, listening on the opposite benches.

Volunteering, at least as portrayed here, comes at a high cost. The novelists are severe with their protagonists as they travel towards commitment. Elizabeth Gaskell's heroine suffered for the most part in silence, except when she faced a crowd of striking workers at John Thornton's mill. Her inner turmoil after the deaths of her mother and father and the suffering and death of a young woman she had befriended take her close to breakdown and despair. At the point of abandoning her new found commitment to Milton-Northern she was awakened by

the text of a meditative life with its doctrine of “humility”, a call to continue in her new vocation. The return to Milton is achieved after she undertakes what is close to a religious retreat. She leaves the distractions of London for a period of meditation on the Norfolk coast. At the simpler end of the scale, Tom Brown passed through a period of depression and confusion. The episode with the little London child appeared to be his lowest point, a social humiliation.

Most patently, in Mary Ward’s novels, there is a strong flavour of romantic martyrdom. Robert Elsmere’s health was mortally damaged by his commitment to the “New Brotherhood” project. A similar suffering educator is Edward Hallin in Marcella, judged by critics to be based on the thinker, Arnold Toynbee. The theme of self sacrifice is prevalent in the literature of the period relating to the type of institutions in which Mary Ward herself was involved. In an address by Canon Barnett to undergraduates in Oxford in 1883, the inspirer of the Settlement Movement uses an interesting epithet about Toynbee who had died the previous year. Barnett expressed faith in a new spirit moving in the university: “with Professor Green for its founder, Arnold Toynbee for its martyr and various societies for its propaganda” (Brock, M.G. and Curthoys, M.C. 2000, 671). Martyrdom is not far distant from the atmosphere of Hallin’s dying days, lengthily explored in true Victorian fashion. He returned to his friend’s country home after collapsing during a punishing lecture schedule.

The changing power of women to take the lead

It would be neglectful to omit a reference to the gender issues in relation to volunteering raised by the three main characters considered here. Tom Brown at Oxford, of course gives the most obvious illustration of the power of the masculine idea of Muscular Christianity. Tom’s (and his author’s) involvement in sport within the working class communal centres is not just a fictional notion. Volunteer undergraduate and graduate enthusiasts for gymnastics, cricket, boxing and football continued to engage in the activities of University Settlements, beyond the middle of the twentieth century. The patient acquiescence of Tom Brown’s wife, supporter to his manly struggles, in the final chapter of the novel noted above needs little elaboration. However, we should note how Mary Ward handles a similar situation. In Robert Elsmere she draws a more complex picture of the dilemma for a volunteer’s wife who can not understand her husband’s theological and social liberalism. Catherine Elsmere faithfully followed Robert to London, but with obvious distress. She reappears in a more demanding role in a later novel, as if Mary Ward wanted to explore further the role of a wife among the new urban pressures.

The changing role of women within charitable work in the late nineteenth century has been well documented (See, for instance, Burman, S.1971; Comitini, P. 2005; Morris, R.J. and Rodgers, R. 1993; Prochaska, F. K.1980; Watts, R. 1998) The active participation in voluntary action of both Elizabeth Gaskell and of Mary Ward, and of their fictional characters illustrates the shifts that were occurring in the location of women’s work from rural stability to suburban domesticity to city

centre, from Dorcas Clubs to active committee work and, eventually in Mary Ward's case, from organising the servants to charring committees and giving lectures on social reform. The stance of these authors is not as simple as we might think. Neither Gaskell nor Ward were in favour of votes for women. Mary Ward was particularly active in the anti-suffrage campaign, and Thomas Hughes was outspoken against the idea of universal suffrage.

Theoretical Coda

The arguments about using fictional literature as an insight into social institutions continue, but this article is based on a fairly straightforward acceptance of Raymond Barthes's thesis that literary sources create or assist in creating "mythologies", which, in their turn, enter into the fields of social action. Fictions become powerful influences on social institutions and how they are conceived. Within the study of semiotics, there is interest in the depiction of poverty and charity in popular ballads and informally circulating narratives. Here I have obviously selected from the Victorian canon. More attention could be paid to women writers from the 1850s who, in fiction and in articles in journals such as The English Women's Journal, played their part in encouraging women to take a more active part in their local communities. Anna Jameson, Harriet Martineau, Barbara Bodichon and Bessie Parker would be good candidates for the list.

There is no shortage of Victorian novels which raise awareness of dire poverty and social suffering. The three authors chosen here certainly aim to do this, but they have principally been selected because they examine the nature and identity formation of those who step into the world of volunteering. Missing from their narratives is a minor but intriguing characterisation of volunteers in some of their contemporaries' novels. This is a strange depiction of comic or eccentric participators in volunteering. Charles Dickens's Mrs Jellyby in Bleak House neglected the detailed care of her own offspring because she is frenetically engaged in caring for the charitable effort of a charity project "on the left bank of the Niger". A longer imprint on the nation's conscience is "Lady Bountiful". During Margaret Hales's period of reconsideration of her purpose in life, she is approached by her eventual benefactor to retire from Milton with her father and become a "Lady Bountiful" in a rural retreat. The term itself, by the time of the three novels discussed here, conveys something between the ridiculous and the condescending. In the next century, within social work training circles, it was close to a term of abuse. Lady Bountiful was a comic character in George Farquhar's drama, The Beaux' Stratagem (1707), – a very good example of a literary figure permanently adding to the language of voluntary action.

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