

A HISTORY OF BRITISH
WORKING CLASS
LITERATURE

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CHAPTER 15

At the Margins of Print
Life Narratives of Victorian Working Class Women

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Introduction

In recent decades, a number of scholars and critics have turned their attention to the study of nineteenth-century working class autobiography. David Vincent's *Bread, Knowledge, and Freedom* (1982), for example, interpreted working men's autobiographies as works of witness, reflection, and self-definition, but noted with regret that fewer than five percent of the works he had found were written by women (8). John Burnett, Vincent, and David Mayall observed in the introduction to their comprehensive bibliography, *The Autobiography of the Working Class, 1790-1940*, that "[t]he most obvious distortion in the body of autobiographies is the small number written by women. Of the main group, just seventy, less than one in ten, record the lives of daughters, wives and mothers from their own point of view" (vii). More recently, however, Jane Rendall and Barbara Kanner have identified other memoirs by Victorian working class women, and I have been fortunate to locate further examples. Uncertainties of attribution and identification have made it difficult to estimate how many more memoirs of Victorian working class women may be found, but those we have offer poignant and at times eloquent testimonies to the situation of women in working class culture. To borrow a phrase from Jane Carlyle, "they too [were] there."

The great number of Victorian autobiographies and the vast differences between them have prompted efforts to tame their exuberance into categories. In *Traditions of Victorian Women's Autobiography*, Linda Peterson has characterized nineteenth-century *middle class* women's autobiographies as forming "a hybrid genre [which] drew on many genres of life writing" (x), in particular, the spiritual autobiography, domestic memoir, and narratives of familial authorship (as with the Brontës). In *Subjectivities: Self-Representation in Britain 1832-1920* Regenia Gagnier identifies several patterns in *working class* (mostly male) autobiography: personal

memoirs, sensational confessions, political and polemical vindications, conversion and gallows narratives, and accounts centering on self-analysis and -examination (151). Jane Rendall's account of slightly earlier memoirs by *working class women* (1775-1845) suggests categories of "spiritual autobiography, the repentance narrative, the world of oral story, the petition, the genre of romantic fiction, the language of middle-class womanhood, and the life-cycle of the family economy" (35).

Although such paradigms remain useful, most working class women's memoirs fail to fit readily into a single category. For a working class woman, family, work, and even religion were inevitably interdependent, so that a farm worker's life story may include the account of a religious conversion in addition to familial events and political commentary (*The Autobiography of Elizabeth Oakley*); even memoirs ostensibly intended for one's immediate circle (*Aunt Janet's Legacy*) may consider wider issues, such as educational reform or women's roles; and narratives composed later in the century are more likely to address political issues, such as domestic violence protection or an expanded suffrage (*Mary Smith's Autobiography*).

It also makes obvious sense to view memoirs in the context of the occupations and relative social class of their respective authors. The life narratives of rural workers (Oakley, Elizabeth Campbell, Christian Wart) seem quite different from those of autobiographers from urban settings (Ellen Johnston) and/or with more educational access (Mary Smith); only the latter could aspire to a not always attained upward mobility, and their accounts show relatively greater awareness of national issues and identification with reform movements.

Another means of arranging these autobiographies is by the circumstances of their publication, since few working class women could command the resources to self-publish or the name recognition needed for sales. Not surprisingly, therefore, several of the memoirs which have come down to us were sponsored by a reformist organization (e.g., the Anti-Slavery Society, who published *The History of Mary Prince*), a religious society (The Religious Tract Society, who issued *A Brief Sketch of the Late Sarah Martin*), or a group of patrons sympathetic to an aggrieved victim (advance subscribers to *The Autobiography of Elizabeth Storie*). Several autobiographical sketches were attached as prefaces to poetic works published by reformist editors (e.g., Campbell's *Songs of My Pilgrimage* and Ellen Johnston's *Autobiography*); only Janet Hamilton (a temperance poet), Janet Bathgate (a beloved local teacher), and Smith (an influential schoolmistress and reformer) had attained sufficient regional prominence to attract a ready publisher. Also interesting are oral narratives (*The History of Mary Prince*,

The Autobiography of a Charwoman), which enabled the voices of those without formal education to be preserved, but also required the collaborative efforts of a transcriber/editor.

Yet a further approach might be *teleological*—identification of the writer's apparent purposes in recording her life. Here again, of course, motives may be mixed; one might seek to pay tribute to a past way of life as well as enunciate grievances or argue for reform. In what follows, I would like to present three memoirs, reflecting the different social backgrounds, occupations, literary styles, and purposes of their respective authors. Mary Ann Ashford's *The Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter* provides a rare example of unmediated self-publication; Bathgate's *Aunt Janet's Legacy* is distinctive for its artful presentation of the writer's life in a third-person narrative; and Mary Smith's *Autobiography* testifies to an earnest life of activism, intellectual effort, and self-reflection. These three memoirs reflect different regions (southern England, southern Scotland, and northern England) and different familial circumstances: Ashford was a twice-married mother of six, Bathgate a widow who had remarried, and Smith remained single and independent by choice. Most important, however, are the differences in tone and purpose, as Ashgate relates the grievances of her past work life with asperity and distaste; Bathgate remembers her youthful struggles with good-humored nostalgia; and Smith employs her *Autobiography* as a means of analysis and self-scrutiny, identifying the guiding principles of her life and honestly confronting what she believes had been its failures.

Mary Ann Ashford (1787 to after 1861)

The 91-page *Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter, Written by Herself* (1844) was carelessly printed with several pages out of order by Saunders and Otley, a well-known publishing house which had issued the work of better-known authors such as Edward Bulwer-Lytton. All that is known about Mary Ann Ashford, in addition to what she has told us, is what can be derived from census records, which provide the names of her siblings, husbands, and children, all in accord with her account.¹ There seems little reason to doubt the authenticity of her tale, for it lacks the elements of romance, sudden fortune, or melodramatic adventure which might signal a fictional account.

Ashford's preface pointedly raises questions of class and the extent to which stereotypes dominate the representation of ordinary women workers:

In the month of July, 1842, as I was passing the site of the Royal Exchange, . . . my attention was caught by one of the very numerous bills with which the boards . . . were covered: it ran thus — "Susan Hopley, or the Life of a Maid Servant." This book, I thought to myself, must be a novelty; for although female servants form a large class of Her Majesty's subjects, I have seen but little of them or their affairs in print: sometimes, indeed, a few stray delinquents, from their vast numbers, find their way into the police reports of the newspapers; and in penny tracts, now and then, a "Mary Smith," or "Susan Jones," is introduced, in the last stage of consumption, or some other lingering disease, of which they die, in a heavenly frame of mind, and are duly interred. (iii–iv)

Not everyone of the literate lower classes, it seems, identified with penny tracts. When she learned that *Susan Hopley* was a work of fiction (a popular novel published in 1841), Ashford decided to write down her experiences, an unusual ambition for someone of her position. Clearly defensive about her class status, Ashford firmly tells her reader that she was not a "servant," for "seventeen years of my life have been spent in service; . . . [but] that is not the third part of fifty-seven." Her father had been briefly an innkeeper, though not a successful one, and she preferred to style herself "a Licensed Victualler's Daughter," even though the "licensed victualler" had played only a brief part in her life.

Born in 1787 to Joseph Ashford, a London glove and leather worker, and Jane Gadderer, an orphan who inherited a public house, Mary Ann was given over as an infant into the care of a woman in the country who neglected her ("I used to take an egg and a small bit of bread, which was to last me the day" [12]). Her mother died when she was about 12, and her father, weakened by asthma and bloodletting, followed a few months later. Nonetheless, she paused in her narrative to express a rare moment of gratitude ("I have frequently been very poor; yet I never felt any of the real evils of poverty; and health, the best of all Heaven's blessings, I have enjoyed almost continually" [18–19]).

Her surviving relatives offered to apprentice her to a milliner, but despite her cousin's warning that she would "not be introduced into society by her or any of my respectable friends if I was a servant" (21), she entered service instead. As with other important decisions in her life, Ashford later felt some ambivalence about this choice; on the one hand, "respectable" milliners could make little money (20), and on the other hand, as a young person none too fond of her unhelpful relatives she might have made a rash judgment.

In thirteen positions over the next seventeen years, Ashford slowly climbed the ladder from housemaid to general servant to cook. The tales of her different employers give a rare servant's eye view of conditions in this form of unregulated labor. She offers an unpleasant and unforgiving retrospect of false accusations, deceitful fellow servants, withheld wages, and relegation to winter quarters in a flooded cellar. One of her more miserly mistresses – the daughter of a Scottish earl who fed a large menagerie of pets – begrudged her food:

One day, after looking at me earnestly, she said, "Mary, child, you would be very handsome were it not that your cheeks are too large; if you would eat less, they would soon be thinner." . . . I thought about it, and soon after went to a looking glass and examined my face more than I had ever done before, and thought my cheeks, which were very rosy then, would do very well: at any rate, I would not quite starve myself to make them thinner. (30)

She later ate some of a lodger's cheese; when he remarked that "if the girl had been properly fed, . . . she would have [not] taken his cheese" (32), a storm ensued, and she resigned. In one of her other positions, she "had very bad living; very little meat, and the bread kept till it was mouldy before it was cut" (37).

In her last post as a servant, her best, she worked for a clergyman's family in an institution she called "Fairyland" (in actuality, the Duke of York Military Asylum in Chelsea), an orphanage for the children of dead soldiers. Even here, she suffered disappointment when her mistress replaced her, for she was "now near thirty years old, seventeen years of that time I had spent in service, and never had warning given to me before; and if I had served one mistress better than another, it was my present one" (56).

Now an "old maid" by nineteenth-century standards, Ashford had rejected two earlier proposals of marriage. After she had been released from her post at the orphanage, however, she accepted an offer of marriage from an older widower (James Dallison, whom she married in 1817), who worked as the institution's shoemaker. When a "respectable Quaker gentleman" named Isaac proposed to her shortly thereafter, though "He was very well-looking, and about my own age," she felt obliged to decline his offer for she could "not break my word upon any account, unless my intended husband gave me some just cause" (61). Clearly, this was a decision she would have preferred not to make. Her husband suffered from arthritis, and the heavy demands of his occupation made him ill-tempered: "it was no easy matter to keep nearly thirteen hundred children in shoes, and the boys in caps. . . . [H]e was very rough, [but] he generally had truth and justice on

his side. . . . [Still] it made me think – 'Dear me! I have rejected Isaac and taken Ishmael'" (63).

As she tells it, a fortunate coincidence attended her daughter's birth. The Duke and Duchess of Kent (Queen Victoria's parents) visited the Asylum shortly thereafter and were much taken by the shoemaker's new child and his tidy shop, and the Duchess sent a gift with a message that "I was to name the baby Victoria Louisa Maria, after Her Royal Highness." The couple readily complied, and Ashford took the child to Kensington Palace annually thereafter, in the hope that "the Duchess [might] remember her . . . at some future time, [and] take her into her service, or put her forward" (70). The Duchess did in fact arrange for little Victoria Louisa Maria to receive a modest annual sum and increased it after the shoemaker's death. Sincerely grateful for patronage, years later when Ashford learned of the Duke's funeral, she "could not help crying bitterly, [for] I thought of the only time I ever saw him, when his extreme condescension was enough to inspire respect and gratitude in any mind" (69).

The marriage with "Ishmael" was a good one in one important respect, for "my husband and I were thoroughly agreed in everything that was essential" (71), and during his last illness, "very few men would, while suffering almost continually from a most painful complaint, have exerted themselves as my husband did for the sake of his wife and children" (70). After his death shortly after the birth of their sixth child, Ashford faced bureaucratic intransigence when the Institution rejected her plea for a pension for her husband's sixteen years of work. Without income, Ashford eked out a temporary living selling fruits and cakes to the Institution's children, "crush[ing] all the pride I had, which was very little" (74–5).

At this point her husband's close friend, the Institution's thrice widowed merchant tailor (Edward Green), a man in his sixties, offered marriage on the grounds that "he knew I should do my duty by him, and he could assist me in rearing his old comrade's children" (76). They married in 1830, but she soon rued the consequences of this arrangement when the Asylum refused to let her lodge her children on its grounds. Forced to send her infant to a nurse and her daughter to a boarding school, she remarked bitterly that "I had, for the sake of my children, entered what might almost be termed a sepulchre; for I had seen three women, all of whom I knew well, carried dead out of it; and it was hard indeed [for me] to be parted from my children, or my husband to give up his situation" (77).

Several years later, her second husband, no longer able to use his right arm after many years cutting cloth, was given six days notice and fired without the expected "superannuation allowance" of half his annual salary.

This left him and his family with only his military pension – thirteen pence a day after 28 years of service – and no place to live. Ashford was

quite thunderstruck at this wind up of affairs; for the consequences bid fair to be most serious to me: my husband, who was now seventy-six years old, was quite unable to do anything beyond dressing and undressing himself; and my hands were in a manner tied; for I could not leave him long together; and I saw no other prospect than that of my own remnant of property being melted away, together with his own, in sustaining me, if it should please God to spare his life long [he died in 1842 aged 82]: and I might be left at an advanced age to encounter the poverty I had always endeavoured to avert. (83–4)

Hurt and depressed but apprehensive that an appeal might lose him his military pension, her husband refused to petition the authorities for restitution of his “allowance” and forbade her to do so. Undeterred, the decisive Mary Ann drafted a letter in a neighbor’s house to “her Most Gracious Majesty Queen Adelaide, . . . humbly begging that she would cause an inquiry to be made” into the cause of her husband’s denial (84). Quite remarkably, her appeal was successful, and her husband’s pension was restored with a few months of back pay.

This was perhaps Ashford’s greatest triumph, and she concluded her brief memoir’s last paragraph with an unattributed quotation from Longfellow, prefaced by her claim that “the many struggles I have met with in my journey through life, may be likened to some lines I saw in a newspaper, of which the following is a copy:

A beacon that, perhaps, another,
Sailing on life’s stormy main –
A forlorn and shipwreck’d brother –
Seeing, may take heart again.
 (“The Psalm of Life”)

Ashford’s autobiography thus recorded a life of lost gentility, economic precariousness, wounded pride, and considerable assertiveness, lightened by anomalous flashes of Dickensian good fortune. Aided by a quick mind and primary education, she composed her memories in standard English and enlivened them with anecdotes, dialogue, and a bit of caustic humor. Almost certainly, aristocratic “condescension” and restoration of her second husband’s hard-won pension made it possible for her to bring it into print.

Pragmatic, unsentimental, and sometimes more upright than she wished to be, Ashford was restless, *déclassée*, in early life a rolling stone, and independent to a fault. No radical egalitarian, she was quick to praise those of a higher class who had singled her out for notice and grateful for the interventions which helped her keep her family together. She had also known fear and injustice and had worked doggedly to care for her four surviving children and two elderly husbands in their final travails. For her at least, her memoir’s modest celebration in print of her eventual relative successes was indeed “its own reward,” and the only form of “transcendence” she had ever sought.

Janet Greenfield Bathgate (1804? to 1898)

Janet Greenfield Bathgate’s *Aunt Janet’s Legacy to Her Nieces: Recollections of Humble Life in Yarrow in the Beginning of the Century* employs fictional and dramatic techniques to present the emotions of an outwardly unremarkable and contented life. Relatively unpolemical and attentive to childhood psychology, *Aunt Janet’s Legacy* was published in Selkirk, Scotland in 1892. Although written for her relatives and friends, “to whom she thought they might be interesting and helpful” (iii), the *Legacy* was sufficiently successful so that George Lewis (b. 1848), a lifelong friend and admirer as well as her publisher, later published a 177-page book of reminiscences, *The Life Story of Aunt Janet*, with a frontispiece photograph of the dignified, tastefully dressed Bathgate at 88.

An unusual feature of *Aunt Janet’s Legacy* is that its events are recorded in semifictional form, with “Janet” presented in the third person. The book’s informality may reflect its intended audience, Bathgate’s nieces, as well as its author’s lifelong occupation as a teacher of young children. Bathgate’s account shows considerable dramatic and narrative gifts, as she arranged her memories as a series of crises or surprises as seen by the mind of a bright and earnest girl and young woman. The third-person technique adds a tone of dispassion, for though the author empathizes with the distresses and perturbations of her 75-years-past self, she also brings humor and detachment to the account of a childhood ruled by a righteous and industrious but at times stern father, a fervently Calvinist if affectionate mother, and the need for all family members to work at farm labor from an early age.

Typical early events include the family’s forced departure to a new, much less comfortable and more remote farmstead; the attendance at severe

"Cameronian" church services; and Janet's first, very unpleasant job at the age of seven, as a maid of all work for an ill-tempered old woman on a yet more remote farm. Bathgate's desire for her account to illustrate the development of a child's sense of religion is relieved by her memories of the pangs and anxieties of childhood, and her relatively nonjudgmental account of family and neighborly interaction is rendered with the appropriate degrees of regional dialect. Short quotations are inadequate to convey the building of tone, as when the mistress who had so often berated and overworked the seven-year-old child becomes frightened in a windstorm, as told in the present tense:

As the storm increases in fury, Katie trembles from head to foot; she leaves her spinning, and draws close to Janet, and says – "Lassie, are ye no afear'd?"

"No," says Janet, "I'm no fear'd; for my mother says that God walks on the wings of the wind and rises on the storm. . . . But did yer mother never tell ye hoo God gae the de'il leave to raise the wund, and let it blaw doon the hoose on Job's bairns?"

"Yes, my mother told me that the de'il said to God that Job was a selfish man . . . but God knew that Job loved Him, so he said to the de'il, I will allow you to take all these things from Job, but I will not allow you to kill him. So you see that the deil canna hurt us, and if he should knock down the house, God can spare our lives, and give us another. . . ."

"O lassie, ye are ower wice; but div 'e no hear hoo the hoose is creekin'? Oh, I never heard sic a wund as that."

A great blast comes and carries away part of the roof. Katie clung to Janet and exclaimed, "Oh, preserve us, the hoose is doon!"

"No," says Janet, "it's just the theekin' blawn off, and you see we are no deid."

The old woman trembled, and Janet commenced to cry. "Aye," says Katie, "I thocht you wad get fear'd if the hoose fell."

"I am no fear'd," says Janet; "but I'm vexed to see you so frichtened, and I canna help greeting for you." (77–8)

After this her mistress became very attached to Janet, grieved to see her depart, and welcomed her eagerly on her occasional visits.

Bathgate portrayed her heroine as an imaginative and dreamy child, given to reveries and fantasies, and with an introspective devoutness unusual even in her religious family. The final chapters of the book narrate at length her courtship and idyllically happy four-year marriage to James Kemp, a saddler of frugal habits, an interest in astronomy, and similar religious views. Bathgate reenacts in moving detail the couple's shared dismay and grief as James becomes increasingly ill with tuberculosis, his final

attempts to cheer her and prepare for his end, and his quiet and resigned death after bidding his wife a loving farewell. Characteristically Bathgate notes the psychology of grief, as the bereaved Janet, alone with her husband's corpse, becomes terrified that his soul may not yet have reached heaven, then becomes anxious over how she will pay for her husband's coffin.

The autobiography's final scenes, though, celebrate the young widow's survival and commencement of an independent occupation. One day a friend suggests that Janet keep a school, and though at first she demurs from a sense of unworthiness – "I never was six weeks at a regular school at one time, and I feel that it would be the very height of presumption for me to pretend or attempt to teach any one" (186) – she is excited at the idea and tells an old neighbor. The neighbor's publicity in Janet's former village of Lugton (East Ayrshire) brings her eighteen pupils the next week, and the narrator describes her first eager attempts to organize and teach her flock. The school prospers, and the narrator reflects with manifest relief and pride on her new situation:

Janet is filled with wonder at the wisdom and goodness of God, by which all her earthly wants are supplied. Now she has six shillings a week for her brother's board, the fees from her eighteen scholars, and a sum [for tutoring]; and though she has her hands full, she is gathering strength of body . . . her heart is eased, and her eyes enlightened. (189)

After a lapse of 60 years, the narrative here glows with happiness at its author's achievement of a congenial occupation, well-suited to the sociable, child-loving, and didactically minded Janet. Nothing is said about her later remarriage to Robert Bathgate, and her attainment of the role of child's religious schoolteacher remains the climax of her life story.

Bathgate's account is an impressive achievement for an elderly woman who had only a year or so of formal schooling. Some of the book's mellowness of tone may derive from its author's advanced age and long view back, juxtaposing an acute memory of her youthful troubles and gratifications with a pleasure in the simple, representative quality of her remembered past. The third-person narration also enables Bathgate to take pride in the quickness and resilience of her youthful self without seeming immodest. Modeled on family storytelling, and with its unusual formal resemblance to autobiographical fiction, Bathgate's informal and lively *Legacy* shows how its author employed the ideologies and opportunities available to the rural poor of her time and place to create a life which brought her many satisfactions and a sense of self-worth.

Mary Smith (1822 to 1889)

Possibly the most successful, intellectually minded, and broadly reformist of Victorian working class women autobiographers was Mary Smith, whose *Autobiography of Mary Smith, Schoolmistress and Nonconformist. A Fragment of a Life*, was published in 1892 with an editorial afterword three years after her death in 1889. In its attention to religious and political ideas, and its extended introspection and careful chronicling of its author's intellectual development, Smith's account resembles the better-known middle class intellectual autobiographies of its day, such as that of Harriet Martineau. Though Smith led an active life of many accomplishments, she records with some bitterness the many years of unpaid labor which delayed her attainment of financial and personal independence, and her sorrow that she could not devote more of her life to her beloved pastime of writing poetry.

Like most other Victorian women memoirists born to relative poverty, Smith felt pride rather than regret at her origins: "I was born in an English nonconformist household, of simple country habits, of the order of the common people, without any pretension whatever to wealth or rank" (1). Her father, William Smith, was a boot and shoemaker of Cropredy, Oxfordshire, and her mother, Ann Pride, an energetic woman who kept a grocery shop in their home. When Ann died in Mary's infancy, William married his housekeeper, a woman Mary generally esteemed but found unsympathetic to her desire for education. William was a devout Independent (in this context I think Baptist) of kindly and mild personal traits and a love of education, and he encouraged his brightest child's passion for books, at one point bringing home a cartload of volumes he had bought cheaply, including Shakespeare's plays and Kirke White's [Poetic] *Remains* (39-40).

Even at an early age, this future teacher was a stern critic of the education she received, and feminist indignity rises in her critique of the denial to girls of academic learning, as she criticizes her third school: "Thus I did an endless quantity of embroidery and flowering, children's caps, muslin aprons, and many other things; . . . What long months I worked at it – and how I hated it – but it was all in vain! For long years Englishwomen's souls were almost as sorely crippled and cramped by the devices of the school room, as the Chinese women's feet by their shoes" (32). But she read voraciously in the school's small library and devoured every book in her locality she was able to borrow, including legends, romances, handbooks of logic, and theological treatises.

Formal education ended when her father became town registrar, and for a time she and her brother minded the boot shop. When her brother's marriage left her stranded with no source of income, however, she was quick to note the marginality of a woman's labor: "But for myself, as is often the case with women, even the most capable and energetic, the one small event of my brother's marriage had stranded me without occupation" (65). Mary had already rejected one suitor urged by her father, declaring firmly, "I did not want him, and could work for myself" (57), and now, resolved not to burden her beloved parent, she made the determining decision of her life. She accepted the offer of a nonconformist minister, Mr. John Jones Osborn, to move north with his family to Cumberland as their servant. Thus, in mid-winter 1842, she left without other family members for what to her was an alien land of harsh climate, rough but intriguing dialect, and unaccustomed religious habits.

The remainder of her *Autobiography* is largely the story of her many adjustments, her steady efforts at intellectual self-improvement, and her unhappiness at her exploitation by the Osborns – who broke promises, borrowed shamelessly from their indigent servant, and repeatedly demanded her services after she had escaped to be well employed elsewhere. In addition, for some years, the Osborns virtually supported themselves on her labor as a teacher in a school run by the ineffectual and erratic Mr. Osborn. Though disappointing, the experience with Osborn's school had brought Smith a local reputation for painstaking and successful tutelage, and when she at last opened a school of her own designed to appeal to the children of regional farmers, it became an immediate and lasting success. Self-denying, frugal, and debt-averse, Smith gradually gained a modest competency, eroded only by taking a friend's advice to invest in local bank stocks which lost their value, and by her inability to work during her final illnesses. In her last years, she was sufficiently prosperous to assist younger relatives and other needy persons, and at her death she left more than £1,400 for charitable causes, a remarkable amount for someone of her initial disabilities.

The form Smith's faith took was nonsectarian for her time, as she affirms: "Indeed, as I have grown older, I have come to see and feel that creeds are less than life. The latter may be true, when the former is far from it" (122); or more simply, "What we believe is not of so much importance as what we are" (237). She records many favorable impressions of Quakers, Baptists, and Roman Catholics of her acquaintance, and when an employer asked her whether they should attempt to persuade her fellow servant Ann to change her religion, Smith quickly replied, "Do you think we can make

Ann a better girl by doing so?" whereat the mistress desisted. Avowing that she had been "a decided mystic . . . all my life" (199), Smith spent many years enraptured with the transcendental philosophy of Emerson, recalling that her first reading of "Nature" "woke in my soul a thousand new and wonderful thoughts. I could not forget it . . . whenever I could get a chance I read it over and over again, till I knew it by heart as I knew the Psalms of David . . ." (95). In later life, Smith worshipped in a Unitarian Church (though careful to note that she was not a Unitarian), and in outlook she came to embody the sort of catholic and civic-minded reformist associated with Quaker and other nonconformist philanthropists and former Unitarians such as Martineau.

Smith's secret love was the writing of poetry, managed while doing housework or on Sundays. As a girl, she had written verses, and during her days as a servant she kept a verse book by her to "pursue my own thoughts, with great zeal and delight" (140), though it could lead her to such deep reveries that she failed to hear her employer calling: "Poetry, in fact, grew into a passion with me. I soon found I must be on my guard against it" (142). Her stylistic ideal was unpretentious simplicity, traits more often associated with prose: "My great aim was to use simple, natural language, avoiding metaphors as Wordsworth did, and never to write without a feeling of help and inspiration" (144). Though literary endeavors were always "a solace and joy" (144), her gratitude for the consolations of poetry are tinged with regret that she could not devote her life to literature:

Poetry indeed was through all the hard periods of my life, my joy and strength, the uplifter of my soul in trouble. Now it was that every prospect of a literary career – always the cherished ideal of my soul – seemed forever blocked out of my prospects and hopes. (242)

Interestingly, she attributes her want of greater success, not to the absence of connections or a relatively limited education, but to her sex:

I had higher visions than matrimony; literature, poetry, and religion gleamed fair before me. Had I been a young man, how gladly should I have gone into the Non-conformist ministry, and should probably have been accepted. But as a woman I had to struggle with all sorts of difficulties, hardships, and insults. . . . (196)

My object has been to show the inner cravings of my soul after literary pursuits, which, being a woman, I failed to attain, despite of all my self-denial and persistent endeavours. (192)

Her most ambitious ventures were two volumes of poetry published at her own expense, the 1860 *Poems* and the 1863 *Progress, and Other Poems; The*

Letter Including Poems on the Social Affections and Poems on Life and Labour, dedicated by permission to Thomas Carlyle and issued both in London and Carlisle. Used to facing unpleasant truths, however, Smith acknowledged the limitations of her cherished efforts: "Like all second rate poets, I lacked imagination, and believed too much in the lower powers of will and continuous study, [though s]ome few of the minor poems attained a more poetic height" (289). In fact, her poetic "tales of the affections" were somewhat better than her didactic poems, but ultimately her distaste for metaphor blinded her to some of the imaginative ranges of poetry. Her poems reached her primary audience, however, "I was pleased to know they were read by working men, in reading rooms, news rooms, etc." (289).

Smith probably chose singleness and independence for reasons of temperament. Though by her own account, she was plain and unfashionable, four men sought to marry her, and of these three were shy men of considerable means who probably hoped the earnest and unfriended Smith might desire security. Nonetheless, she rejected all with similar alacrity: "Riches were the reverse of attraction to me. I had too independent a mind to allow anyone to say that they had made me rich." She noted: "Had I been a duke's daughter, I could not have been more careful of keeping clear of any matrimonial liaison than I was. I did not want matrimony; it was congenial labour I wanted. For this I prayed, and waited, and suffered" (122). Her comments on marriage also show a feminist contempt for women's economic subordination: "women, in reality, [are] bought and sold in the marriage market as in any other" (101).

She was also a lifelong activist and campaigner. Her "leisure" time was spent, among other things, in reporting speeches and sermons for Carlisle newspapers, supporting local reform candidates, organizing and performing at public readings, and teaching and recruiting for the adult education movement, for which she organized the first classes for women given in Carlisle. She wrote and campaigned against slavery, standing armies, public executions, denial of burial to non-Anglicans, slanderous election campaigns, and other forms of what she believed to be abuse, injustice, or intolerance. She notably departed from general sentiment in opposing the Crimean War on populist grounds, seeing it as "a great quarrel among kings, fought out for their good, at the expense of the common people" (203).

As her remarks on the disabilities of nineteenth-century women might suggest, Smith's most protracted allegiances were with the woman's movement, and she participated vigorously in its education, suffrage, and sexual-reform sectors. She recorded that during the 1860s, "I began to take an

interest in the circumstances and conditions of woman's life" (256), because her efforts to educate poor women had taught her "[t]he helplessness of women in the great battle of life . . . especially in large towns . . ." (257). Soon after its inception, she became a member of the Carlisle Woman's Suffrage Society founded by Lydia Becker, and more remarkably, she threw herself into the campaigns against married women's disabilities and the Contagious Diseases Acts.

I worked and wrote whenever I could in favour of the Married Woman's Property Bill, and against that disgrace to humanity, the "C. D. Acts," which, thanks to the exertions of women, and Mr. Stansfield, are not what they were. I lectured on this subject to women to full audiences, and helped Mrs. Hudson Scott, who worked heartily in the cause, to get up petitions to Parliament against them. (258)

The retrospective view brought no regrets over her choices:

I feel great satisfaction, in looking back, that in the midst of a busy life, wherein my own head and hands had to supply every need, I tried to take a humble part in this cause, and still try to help with the helpers of women. (258)

Indeed, Smith was even more radical for her time, perhaps, on women's issues than on issues of religious equality and other reformist causes.

The *Autobiography* was issued with an editorial afterword by George Coward, a local bookseller and publisher, who had brought out her *Progress, and Other Poems* 29 years earlier. Coward recalls Smith's "unceasing craving for intellectual intercourse," "her intense love for the higher class of literature," "her warm sympathy" (301-2), and above all, that "She was one of the most truthful spoken of Adam's race it has been my fortune to know, with any kind of intimacy" (302). He also notes somewhat wryly that "Your clever or intellectual woman is invariably a woman with a will of her own, and Miss Smith was no exception to this rule" (302). Smith was indeed a woman who lived by her principles to the end.

Conclusion

The three memoirs we have examined all center on their writers' lives as workers and record their unceasing efforts to achieve higher status, financial security, or vocation. Here they part company, however, with the earliest, Ashford, finding her greatest triumph in her family's mere survival, whereas both Bathgate and Smith were able to find intrinsic satisfactions in the

relatively respected occupation of teacher, and the more educated and intellectual Smith found greatest fulfillment as a poet and feminist campaigner. As we have seen, Ashford's blunt, unvarnished account of her experiences was prompted by the desire to assert her existence against an expectation of silence, whereas Bathgate's genial vignettes and Smith's earnest confessions evince a greater sense of potential audiences. The more self-consciously crafted autobiographies of Bathgate and Smith also share a recognizably Victorian moralistic and self-disciplined tone, offering a more socially conscious version of Samuel Smiles's self-help ethic. All three of our autobiographers place a high value on personal independence, and in the cases of Bathgate and Smith, their interests in the inner life is expressed through religion or its variants – mysticism, skepticism, or a belief in spiritual presence. And although Ashford, Bathgate, and Smith all chafed against some aspects of their fate, all expressed at least qualified satisfaction in what they had managed to achieve or witness and in their ability to record their arduous lives for posterity.

NOTE

1. For census details I am indebted to the researches of Sharon Knapp of Burnaby, British Columbia, who has traced Ashford's family line and marital history.