

Introduction



I CANNOT SAY WITH CERTAINTY how and when they met, but I do know that Muriel Lester and Nellie Dowell loved one another. That they ever met seems improbable, more the stuff of moralizing fiction than history. Muriel was the cherished daughter of a wealthy Baptist shipbuilder, reared in the virtuous abundance of the Lester family's gracious Essex homes.¹ A half-orphaned Cockney toiling in the match industry by age twelve, Nellie spent her earliest years in East London's mean streets and cramped tenements, and her girlhood as a pauper ward of the state confined to Poor Law hospitals and "barrack schools."² During the first decades of the twentieth century, they were "loving mates" who shared their fears, cares, and hopes. Their love allowed them to glimpse the possibility of remaking the world according to their own idealistic vision of Christ's teachings. They claimed social rights, not philanthropic doles, for their slum neighbors. They struggled for peace in war-intoxicated communities grieving for brothers, fathers, and husbands lost to the western front. Nellie dreamed of ladies' clean white hands. Muriel yearned to free herself from the burden of wealth. Together, they sought to create a society based on radically egalitarian principles, which knew no divisions based on class, gender, race, or nation.³ (See fig. I.1.)



I.1. Nellie, her mother Harriet Dowell, and nephew Willie Delar lived on the first floor of No. 58. Muriel, Doris, and sometimes Kingsley Lester lived at No. 60. By November 1914, they tore down the second floor wall dividing their two homes to create Kingsley Rooms. 58–60 Bruce Road (Photograph taken by author, July 2006.)

This book is about Muriel and Nellie, the worlds of wealth and want into which they were born, the historical forces that brought them together, and the “New Jerusalem” they tried to build in their London slum neighborhood of Bow.⁴ Their friendship was one terrain on which they used Christian love to repair their fractured world. The surviving fragments of their relationship disclose an all-but-forgotten project of radical Christian idealism tempered by an acute pragmatism born of the exigencies of slum life. They explored what it meant to be rights-bearing citizens, not subjects, in a democratic polity. Convinced that even the smallest gestures—downcast eyes or a deferential nod of the head—perpetuated the burdened histories of class, race, and gender oppression, Nellie and Muriel believed that they could begin to unmake and remake these formations—and hence the world—through how they lived their own lives.⁵ The local and the global, the everyday and the utopian, the private and the public existed in fruitful tension as distinct but connected realms of thought, action, and feeling.

Shadowing Muriel and Nellie are two much-maligned figures of nineteenth-century culture and historical scholarship: Lady Bountiful, who talks sisterhood with the outcast poor in smug tones of condescending sympathy; and the worker-on-the-make, who internalizes capitalist labor discipline, apes her betters, and suffers from an acute case of what Karl Marx called “false consciousness.”⁶ Just because Muriel vigorously critiqued Lady Bountiful does not exempt her from the charge of (sometimes) resembling her. Nor does it diminish the extent to which some laboring men and women in Bow wanted and expected her to play that part. Likewise, the more deeply that I researched Nellie’s life, the clearer it became that I could not cast her as an “organic intellectual”—the term coined by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci in the 1920s to describe workers whose experiences with capitalist exploitation made them into revolutionary critics of it. For the better part of two decades in the match industry, Nellie served her rapacious global capitalist employers on two continents and three countries only too well rather than joining coworkers in the vibrant women’s trade union movement. In loving one another and sharing their work in Bow, Nellie and Muriel set out to break—and break free from—these deeply engrained class and gender archetypes that had been so much a part of their upbringing. Their relationship makes it possible to assess just how far it

was possible—and impossible—for them to do this. What were the gains from this undertaking? How can we reckon their costs? My answers to these questions foreground the tenacity of Victorian values as well as Nellie and Muriel's recasting of them to serve radical twentieth-century ends.

This book offers an intimate history of very large-scale historical developments and processes—class relations, gender formation, same-sex desire, and ethical subjectivity; war, pacifism, and Christian revolution; shop-floor labor politics and global capitalism; world citizenship and grassroots democracy. It is also a history about intimacy between two women. The “intimate” unlocks the affective economy of their relationship and provides a key to understanding the program they sought to enact.⁷ Their story is part of a much broader impulse among thousands of well-to-do women and men in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Europe and the United States to traverse cultural and class boundaries in seeking “friendship” with the outcast. A few like Muriel self-consciously “unclassed” themselves by entering into voluntary poverty to model a society liberated from the constraints and inequalities of class. Nellie could not afford to “unclass” herself. She lived and died a very poor woman. She, like Muriel, crossed borders into a place of their own making, one committed to the unfinished business of reimagining gender, class, and nation by breaking down the hierarchies upholding them.

That place was Kingsley Hall, Britain's first Christian revolutionary “People's House” and the institutional incarnation of Nellie and Muriel's friendship where they tried to translate ideals of fellowship into the stuff of everyday life. Founded in February 1915 in an abandoned hellfire Baptist chapel amid the furies unleashed by the world at war, it was an outpost of pacifism, feminism, and socialism committed to radical social sharing. Muriel and Kingsley Hall's original residents established East London's chapter of the pan-denominational Brethren of the Common Table, whose members satisfied their minimal weekly needs for food, shelter, and clothing and then placed whatever excess remained from their earnings on the Communion table for others to take.⁸ They asked no questions and accepted no thanks. A special London correspondent from the United States witnessed the earnest Brethren in conversation at Kingsley Hall. He gleefully reported that the involuntarily

poor among them upbraided their well-born friends for excessive self-denial. “It drives me wild to see these people going short of things they want,” one widowed mother of four complained. “They ain’t used to it. It’s going too far.”⁹ At times comically self-serious, residents of Kingsley Hall decided it was too risky to leave fun to chance: they held temperance “Joy Nights” where men and women could laugh, dance, and socialize.

The Hall also functioned as a vibrant center of community life in East London with its Montessori-inspired nursery school; men’s school in civics and Scripture; and restaurant for working women under the auspices of the London Society for Women’s Suffrage. Some called it a “settlement house,” but Muriel eventually rejected this name, which smacked of missionary uplift incompatible with the Hall’s commitment to rights-based democracy. Ardent defenders of human freedom, community members imposed on themselves rules about everything from the proper disposition of toothpaste in washbasins to protocols about gossip. Often mistaken for members of a modern monastery, the residents of Kingsley Hall lived as if each minute detail of their intimately regulated lives resonated through the cosmos. They were so vigilant because the stakes were so high: nothing less than inaugurating a nonviolent Christian revolution in the heart of the world’s wealthiest imperial metropolis. They tethered their faith in God’s unbounded love to an egalitarian everyday ethics. Muriel declared Kingsley Hall an “overdue act of justice.”¹⁰ During the war, jingoistic neighbors suspiciously eyed it as a pacifist refuge for the kaiser’s deluded dupes. In the war’s immediate aftermath, Marxists (Muriel called them “Communists”) belittled their naïve faith that the rich would willingly dispossess themselves of wealth and power.

Kingsley Hall’s early history cannot be disentangled from Nellie and Muriel’s, but the Hall was never theirs. The language of possession is not quite right. It is at odds with Kingsley Hall’s theology and ideology. Residents sought freedom from the tyranny of money and things. Possessions and the desire for them were afflictions of capitalism and its malign handmaiden, imperialism. Many others in the community joined Nellie and Muriel in making Kingsley Hall, foremost among them Muriel’s quietly determined younger sister Doris. The two were partners in almost everything they did in East London. Doris was as shy as Muriel



I.2. The two sisters, Muriel Lester (left) and Doris Lester (right), shared their lives and labors as daughters and social workers. The similarity in their modest demeanors, hairstyles, and simple dress belied profound differences between charismatic Muriel and shy but strong-minded Doris. (Left) Muriel Lester, portrait by Paul Swann, 1930. (Courtesy of Bishopsgate Institute.) (Right) Doris Lester, portrait, studio postcard, n.d., Platten Papers, Loughton Library. (Courtesy of Loughton and District Historical Society, Ben Platten Collection.)

was charismatic, but in all sorts of ways she drove their work, especially among children. She moves in and out of Muriel and Nellie's story. (See fig. I.2.)

By the time Muriel Lester died in 1968 in a modest roughcast Loughton cottage, she had become a grande dame of global pacifism and social justice Christianity. Revered and reviled in her lifetime, she hosted her friend Mohandas Gandhi at Kingsley Hall for several months during the 1931 Round Table Conference and marched with him in earthquake-shattered Bihar a few years later. One of the best-known faces of the world-wide peace movement, she circled and recircled the globe as ambassador-at-large for the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the pacifist organization that she and Doris first joined in 1915. She witnessed and exposed the traffic in drugs in Japanese-occupied Manchuria. She re-

jected war even in the face of Nazi atrocities. She befriended leaders of the United States' civil rights movement, including Bayard Rustin. Along the way, she also inspired an impressive sheaf of scathing confidential reports in the secret files of MI5, MI12, and the India Office chronicling her dangerous anticolonial and antiwar activities.¹¹ With more than a touch of resentment, at least one relative still remembers her and Doris as the “mad aunts” whose poverty cost the Lester family too much of its fortune.¹² The truly devout in Britain can pilgrimage to Kingsley Hall's branch in Dagenham to see one of her well-preserved modishly simple capes, her signature outerwear. In North America, they can visit the sole surviving Muriel Lester House in the United States: a vegetarian residential cooperative at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. All this happened after Nellie's death in January 1923; but it is essential to understanding their history as well as the circumstances that have made it possible to reconstruct their story.

The renown that Muriel courted and accumulated from the 1920s to the 1960s enabled the Kingsley Hall in Bow along with its satellite branch in far eastern Dagenham to survive into the twenty-first century. (It did not hurt that Sir Richard Attenborough made the restoration of Kingsley Hall Bow, so badly treated during R. D. Laing's occupancy of it in the mid-1960s with his community of schizophrenics, part of the filming of *Gandhi*.) It also ensured the preservation of the Lester papers, including Muriel's typescript biographical fragments about Nellie, “From Birth to Death,” and Nellie's letters to Muriel. I went to Dagenham looking for Muriel Lester, the once-famous, now-mostly-forgotten Christian revolutionary saint. I found Nellie Dowell.

My first day at Kingsley Hall Dagenham, I read Nellie's witty warm letters to Muriel. I was instantly struck by her humor and intellect as well as her evident discomfort with letter writing and the conventions of Standard English.¹³ Full of mundane chat, her longing for Muriel, and events so inconsequential that she probably forgot them the next day, Nellie's letters invite listening to her talk as much as reading what she wrote. They retain the rhythms and freshness of speech as thoughts take flight without regard to formal punctuation. Nellie's letters baffled, delighted, and intrigued me.¹⁴ (See fig. I.3.) Who was Nellie? Why did she write these letters, what did they signify, and why did Muriel save them?

20
ML4
313 Brunswick
14.2.12 Poplar

Dear Miss Lester
I was so pleased to hear
you are better, from Miss Doris
I daresay you miss her now
she looked better for her
change, she did not look
very well & she just got
away in time for the bad
days here, it is so changeable
it keeps me in doors, I must
be getting old or something
is wrong with me this

I.3. Nellie wrote this letter to Muriel on Valentine's Day 1912—a token of their loving friendship. Nellie Dowell to Muriel Lester, February 14, 1912, Dowell Letters. (Courtesy of Bishopsgate Institute.)

My training as a social historian brought me to the London Family History Centre of the National Archives with its helpful staff and wonderfully accessible records of births, deaths, marriages, and much else. I had no idea when Nellie died and only a broad range of possible dates for her birth. Her epistolary relationship with Muriel suggested, at least upon initial readings, that Muriel was not only her better but her elder. She must have been born after 1883, I assumed. As I eventually discovered, Nellie had many names and several different dates of birth at various times when she entered institutions and official archives. She was Nellie, Nell, Nella, Ellen, and Eleanor. Nellie can be a nickname for several other first names as well. My initial guesses were all bad ones. By the random accidents that make history and are part of writing history, Kingsley Hall had retained no copies of its own Eighth Annual Report that included Muriel's essay commemorating Nellie's life and death, "The Salt of the Earth." That would have made the task much easier since

Muriel gave the precise date of Nellie's death: January 31, 1923. In any case, I began to believe that I might do something substantial about Muriel and Nellie only when the Bow registrar's office handed me a copy of her death certificate. It told me that Eleanor Dowell was forty-seven and died of mitral valvular disease in 1923 at 58 Bruce Road.

My archival quest and so much of the story that I will tell began with these simple facts. These clues eventually led to census data and to scattered evidence of her movements through London Board schools, Poor Law institutions, public asylums and voluntary hospitals as well as ships' logs to and from New Zealand. Nellie, I came to learn, had a remarkable global life as a proletarian match factory worker and Cockney cosmopolitan *before* she met Muriel. When her father died at sea in 1881, poverty compelled her devoted mother Harriet Dowell—who outlived Nellie by several years—to give her up to Poor Law officials. They classified her as a Poor Law half-orphan and sent her to late-Victorian Britain's most controversial Poor Law school and orphanage, Forest Gate School. Nellie entered the match industry in the year of the world-famous "Match Girls' Strike" of 1888. Labor conflicts dogged her everywhere she went. Her arrival in Wellington in June 1900 was fiercely debated in the New Zealand Parliament and sparked a political crisis for the Liberal ministry. Her labor assignment to Sweden around 1907 was outwardly peaceful, but a time of inward ferment. She began to question truths about God and nation that she had long taken for granted. In the winter of 1909–10, an attack of rheumatic fever abruptly ended her ability to withstand factory labor; it also freed her to devote her time and love to Muriel and their joint ventures in East London. Nellie and her mother Harriett joined Doris and Muriel at the modest row houses 58–60 Bruce Road that served as their headquarters and home.¹⁵

No sources make it possible to reconstruct how Muriel and Nellie's contemporaries perceived their partnership, besides Nellie's allusion to friendly gossip about them in a single letter. However, depictions of philanthropic ladies and the objects of their benevolence abound in Victorian culture. Scholars have written copiously and critically about what Dickens's indomitable Mrs. Jellyby and her many flesh-and-blood counterparts saw when they looked through their philanthropic telescopes to inspect the "dirtiest little unfortunates" in Britain and its empire.¹⁶ Many others have reconstructed how such unfortunates—so-called objects of

private benevolence and public welfare—responded to and resisted the disciplinary imperatives of philanthropists and state bureaucrats to become “heroes of their own lives.”¹⁷ It has proved much more elusive to reconstruct and analyze cross-class benevolence and social welfare *in* and *as* a dynamic negotiated relationship between individuals. Nellie’s letters offer the possibility of doing that by handing Mrs. Jellyby’s telescope to her to find out what Muriel, Kingsley Hall, Bow and public-private welfare looked like through her eyes.

By putting Muriel’s and Nellie’s stories back together, I reconstruct their Christian revolutionary project as part of their evolving relationship within the broader context of Britain in war and peace during the first three decades of the twentieth century.¹⁸ This book joins unglamorous methods of social history research (turning thousands of pages of different hospital admissions registers in the hope that perhaps Nellie had once been admitted there) with cultural and literary-textual analysis.¹⁹ I combine insights from feminist and queer theory with those of scholars of everyday life and historical geographers’ contributions to the interplay between place, space, and self.²⁰ I track Muriel and Nellie’s global itineraries while paying close attention to their day-to-day lives.²¹ By approaching large-scale developments as refracted through their relationship, I sustain my focus on class, gender, sexual, and social subjectivity, which can easily fall by the wayside in the exciting new global approaches to modern British history.

I also have written this book because Muriel and Nellie’s friendship—its tensions and tenderness, their failures and foibles—moved me. Courage is not a category much used by historians, but it was something that Nellie and Muriel abundantly needed and possessed as they faced the daunting task of changing themselves and their world. Plutarch, the Greco-Roman author of *Parallel Lives*, eloquently distinguished “lives” from “histories” as he grappled with a way to harmonize the Greek past with the demands of the first-century Roman Empire. Lives, he insisted, illuminate moral virtues and vices. They function as didactic mirrors into which we, his readers, gaze as we shape who we are and hope to become. Histories, by contrast, explain what happened in the past as well as how and why it did. Lives capture often entirely private choices indicative of character. Histories revolve around great battles and public matters of governance. I’ve written this book with the intention of dis-

solving the boundary between “lives” and “histories.” Like Plutarch, I have paired lives. My story, however, is about intersecting, not parallel, lives. Nellie and Muriel were mirrors for one another: each came to understand herself better as they labored with and loved the other. Muriel, in particular, insisted that private choices about apparently trivial matters of quotidian conduct—the stuff of Plutarch’s *Lives*—were inextricably entwined with large historical structures. In other words, she rejected the distinction between a private ethical domain and a public political one. Lives made history; history made lives.

Methodologically, this book borrows from both micro- and macro-histories while challenging the distinctions between them.²² It sometimes mobilizes the slightest shard of evidence such as Nellie’s documented arrival in Wellington, New Zealand to move from the very small—her work filling matchboxes for R. Bell and Company—to the very big—British global capitalism and imperial trade policies at the turn of the century. It uses the tools and techniques of biography in reconstituting Nellie and Muriel’s lives, apart and together. Its central questions and problems, however, are historical. Shelves groan from the weight of books about women like Muriel Lester—wealthy, well educated, ethically alert, committed to social and political service to humanity.²³ We have none about very poor women like Nellie who spent years in Poor Law institutions and harsh factory settings.²⁴ *The Match Girl and the Heiress* argues that Nellie and Muriel’s historical importance consists both in their achievements as individuals and in what they did—and tried to do—as partners.

Overdetermined serendipity has shaped this book. It explains the utter improbability that Muriel and Nellie would meet *and* the deep structures that made it quite normal for young, well-to-do Nonconformist ladies to befriend factory girls at the turn of the twentieth century. It also captures the predictable frisson of archival discovery that fueled my research: how and why I found traces of Nellie in the records of Marner Street and Forest Gate schools, the Poplar and Stepney Poor Law Infirmary, the Whitechapel Poor Law lunatic ward, London Hospital, and the passenger lists of the *Waiwera* that carried her to Wellington and the *Papanui*, which took her back to London three years later. Working from addresses in the Dowell family census data, I made in-

formed guesses about the educational, medical, and social welfare institutions and agencies to which the Dowell family likely resorted in times of dire need. State policy makers and bureaucrats mapped my path of archival discovery more than a century ago. My job was to think like one of them. This task was made easier by the stability of the British state at all levels—from central government to vestries—and its penchant for keeping close tabs on the poorest of the poor, documenting and preserving each of their encounters. Finding Nellie in the archives felt like the hand of providence, but it was more likely the invisible hand of bureaucratic logic and my own perseverance. Seek and ye shall find.

Nellie's and Muriel's relationship was reciprocal, unequal, and asymmetrical. Muriel had access to wealth, substantial social and cultural capital, and a first-rate education at one of Britain's leading "public schools" for the intellectually agile daughters of the well-to-do. Like every other woman in turn-of-the-century Britain, she suffered the legal disabilities of her sex. She did, however, enjoy a great deal of personal freedom and power. Nellie was poor, perceived as a social problem (first as a Poor Law "orphan" then as a "match girl" and "pauper lunatic") and endured an education that even school officials confessed favored discipline and rote memorization over critical thought and creativity. Like Muriel, she benefitted from a loving and supportive family network to which she was devoted and which proved to be a tremendous asset to both of them in their community-centered work. It was extreme poverty, not a lack of family love that made Nellie Dowell a half-orphan ward of the state in the eyes of Poor Law officials.

As best as I can tell, Muriel and Nellie's love was also reciprocal and asymmetrical. Muriel adored and admired Nellie. She depended heavily upon Nellie's knowledge, wit, tact, and diplomacy in building the networks of human relationships upon which their Christian revolutionary project was founded. Nellie looked to Muriel to guide her political and intellectual development as they studied Tolstoy and other Christian revolutionary texts together. Her letters suggest that she also received material assistance from Muriel, though the precise form and quantity I cannot say. Nellie also longed for a deeper and more exclusive intimacy than Muriel would—and could—give her or anyone else. Love may have animated their vision of radical egalitarianism and Christian revolution,

but it forced each of them, in quite different ways, to confront her own emotional and intellectual limits. Love, like the Christian revolution of which it was a part, proved both exhilarating and challenging.

My sources accentuate these asymmetries. Fleeting traces of Nellie's life history are scattered in the archives of Poor Law institutions and other "public" records. For some periods of her life, my account is necessarily speculative. By contrast, Muriel has left behind copious records. She mastered the art of telling her life story in print and in the endless rounds of speeches that she delivered throughout the world from the 1920s to the early '60s. It was part and parcel of the appeal that she made on behalf of the many causes she championed. She published two full-scale autobiographies and drafted several others; she preserved many of her diaries along with the weekly letters she wrote from India—and elsewhere—that she circulated among her friends and followers.²⁵ We even have a 1931 Pathé film clip that captures her elegant vigorous body movements and precise upper-class diction as she takes viewers on a tour of Kingsley Hall in anticipation of Gandhi's residence there.²⁶

As an extension of her religious commitment to truth telling and transparency, Muriel strove to efface the boundary separating her public from her private self. Reflecting on her own shortcomings was part of her daily routine, which in turn provided fodder for her writings and speeches. Pulling back the mask of her public persona—revealing her flaws—was essential to the way she presented herself to the public and to herself. Muriel used candor to acknowledge and disarm her critics. A disgusted agent sent by the United States government to report on one of her Chicago antiwar speeches in December 1939 commented that Muriel had so completely internalized the performance of her own saintliness that even when she thought that she was unobserved, she maintained the same maddening, serene, beatific smile.²⁷ She could be insensitively self-denying to the point of making others feel uncomfortable about their failure to match her virtue. Nellie's letters and those of other poor Bow friends hint at this by accentuating their sense of unworthiness in comparison to her. Ruth Harris (Comfort), the ill-used wife of the sex guru and a Loughton friend of the Lesters, remembered the day that Muriel came to Folkestone, where she attended boarding school, to take her out to lunch. It was "a great honour and event" marred

slightly by the fact that only after she ordered a three-course lunch did Muriel inform her young guest that it was her fast day: “my pleasure will be to see you enjoy [your meal].”²⁸

Such stories echo Virginia Woolf’s scathing portrait of Miss Kilman in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), who starved herself for blockaded Austria’s starving millions; lived in a slum and wore the same ugly green mackintosh each day; and reminded everyone about “how poor she was; how rich you were.” “She was never in the room five minutes,” Clarissa Dalloway mused, “without making you feel her superiority, your inferiority.” At the same time, Woolf’s belittling, angry dependence on her own Nellie, the housemaid Nellie Boxall, offers a stunning rebuke to Woolf’s claims to sisterhood across the class divide. Woolf viciously confided to her diary that Nellie Boxall exists “in a state of nature; untrained; uneducated, to me almost incredibly without the power of analysis or logic; so that one sees a human mind wriggling undressed.”²⁹ I linger over Woolf’s relationship with Nellie Boxall because it is an almost too-perfect foil to Muriel and Nellie’s partnership. The comparison throws into relief what made Nellie and Muriel’s tender reciprocal relationship so extraordinary then and so important now. We know a very great deal about Bloomsbury’s loquacious rebellion against Victorianism and far too little about the political, religious, cultural, and gender work of the radical Christian Left.³⁰

Because sources by and about Muriel are so superabundant, it is possible to reconstruct where she was and what she thought and did for most of her adult life. The challenge in writing about Muriel is to avoid becoming her authorized biographer, to resist ventriloquizing her self-critical autobiographical prose. By contrast, there are very few sources by and directly about Nellie. Proletarian spinsters don’t have literary executors; their family members rarely enjoy material circumstances that would enable them to save letters and papers. If Nellie’s papers do exist, I have not found them. The most important sources about her survived *because* Muriel preserved them. Nellie and her letters mattered to Muriel. She made no secret of how much she loved, admired, and depended on Nellie, with her “broad commonsense outlook on life,” “staggering generosity” and “genius” for solving problems.³¹ In a collection full of missives from major and minor figures in modern history—heads of state, activists and reformers, Nobel laureates—Muriel herself put Nel-

lie's eleven letters in a manila envelope. In the distinctive unsteady hand of her old age, she wrote "Nell" on it. No other documents in her papers bore such indisputable marks of Muriel's self-archiving, at least when I first touched and read her papers. Above and below Muriel's hand is that of another person, possibly Muriel's first biographer, Jill Wallis. She organized the Lester papers into what we call an "archive" by sorting them into folders and numbered boxes. To her, I remain profoundly indebted although she barely mentions Nellie.

After Nellie's death, Muriel coped with the great grief of losing her by writing several biographical essays about her. They provide a basic outline of Nellie's life, without any dates and with almost no names of places, institutions, or people. I have often needed to remind myself to thank Muriel for the clues that she gave me rather than grumble about her many omissions and factual errors. She must have gotten most of her information and misinformation about Nellie from Nellie and her mother Harriet. They function almost as coauthors of these life narratives, which sometimes purport to quote them directly. Muriel celebrated Nellie's life in a two-and-one-half-page printed obituary, "The Salt of the Earth."³² She drafted but never published a much longer and more detailed biographical narrative about Nellie, "From Birth to Death," which survives in two typescripts of twenty-six and twenty double-spaced typed pages—the first of which Muriel edited extensively. Muriel systematically crossed out the name Dowell each place it appeared in the first draft and wrote the name Short above it—the only name that she used in the second draft.³³ (See fig. I.4.) Presumably, Muriel had considered publishing the story as a socio-fiction (she drafted dozens of such stories drawn from life) while using the name Short to prevent most readers from identifying the Dowells. Contrary to its title, these typescripts are fragments. Both end in midsentence, long before Nellie's death. Neither includes anything about Muriel's life with Nellie or Kingsley Hall. Not a single word. On the basis of Nellie's London Hospital records, I now know that these drafts take Nellie's story up to 1910, the very year of Nellie's earliest surviving letter. Muriel is an emotionally generous narrator of "The Salt of the Earth" and figures in her story about Nellie. By contrast, "From Birth to Death" is mostly narrated through Harriet Dowell's loving maternal eyes. Muriel as author and friend strove to make herself invisible.

again, distantly, collects into a stream. Nellie's history likewise simply disappears for years at a time; she, like the learned protagonist of *Sartor Resartus* (a book that Muriel read at the turn of the century), moved between "the highest and lowest levels," and, in surprising ways, came into "contact with public History itself."³⁴ We can be certain that Carlyle, consummate chronicler of epoch defining men, would not have viewed her or Muriel as fit subjects of history. The loss, I hope to demonstrate, would have been entirely his.

The Match Girl and the Heiress both draws upon and reorients understanding of several key categories and grand narratives in the making of modern Britain. Scholars have long sought to explain the emergence of collectivist politics and state-directed social welfare in the land of laissez-faire liberal individualism. They have fruitfully debated whether the welfare state arose as an ad hoc response to the pressing demands of circumstances or as an enactment of ideological-philosophical principles. They have "brought the state back in" by emphasizing its internal mechanisms and the workings of civil servants; they have charted the emergence of new forms of expertise about the management and welfare of society like publicly funded school meals. Still others look to society and the impact of social movements, feminist arguments, and working-class political mobilization in demanding an expansion of welfare rights within the framework of shifting conceptions of citizenship.³⁵ Some, including me, have emphasized the porous boundaries between middle-class women's private voluntary initiatives and the rise of municipal and state maternal and child welfare policies and programs.³⁶

This book, like Nellie's life, unfolds within, around, and in the shadow of the New Poor Law (1834), the landmark legislation that shaped public provision of welfare to the poor until 1929.³⁷ Muriel joined the pre-World War I crusade to abolish the Poor Law altogether and narrated Nellie's life through the prism of her disgust at its inhumanity. Nellie grew up in the Poor Law school and orphanage at Forest Gate that became the flashpoint for acrimonious national debates about the state's obligations to its most vulnerable subjects. She and Muriel lived in the district of East London, Bow and Poplar, that incited metropolitan, national, and international debates in 1921 when its borough councillors

defied the state and were jailed for bringing concepts of redistributive justice and economics to bear on welfare and citizenship. As a Poplar Council member heading the borough's Maternity and Child Welfare Committee from 1922 to 1926, Muriel herself played a part in these celebrated controversies. The social, cultural, and political ecology of their slum neighborhood was, I show, an important incubator for their work and social politics. This study looks at the mixed economy of public and private welfare provision for the poor through Nellie's eyes and Muriel's.³⁸ It analyzes how Poor Law institutions including schools, orphanages, and medical infirmaries shaped not only Nellie's life but constructions of family, childhood, motherhood, work, illness, and the body. Stories like Muriel and Nellie's remind us about the affective, intellectual, political, and cultural work involved in dismantling the apparatus of Victorian benevolence and creating new understandings of rights-based welfare in the twentieth century.

Nellie's participation in the match industry in England, New Zealand, and Sweden elucidates a critical moment in the history of British global capitalism from the vantage point of one of its most essential, easily replaced, and least powerful participants: an unmarried proletarian female worker. Her transnational laboring life played out against a backdrop of massive challenges to British capitalists' economic hegemony from within—by struggles between Labour and capital—and without—by competition with other nations like the United States as well as anti-colonial nationalist movements from Ireland to India.

Histories of capitalism from below invariably emphasize resistance to it and the mobilization of workers through trade unions, socialist, and labor parties. Nellie's history does not. She put job security before worker solidarity. In this respect, she resembled the vast majority of women workers in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Britain, who were neither trade unionists nor members of labor and socialist political parties. About such women, we know far too little.³⁹ They are often lumped together into a vast inert body of metropolitan toilers whose supposed passivity Frederick Engels lamented; in Gareth Stedman Jones's influential formulation, such apolitical men and women bartered away class-conscious politics for cultural autonomy from bourgeois meddling.⁴⁰ Nor do they have a place in feminist socialist historiography other than as recalcitrant obstacles in the path of gender and economic

justice. By *not* resisting capitalist factory disciplines, workers like Nellie are presumed to be the ones who got it wrong; they short-circuit the implicit ethical imperative to root for those who fight against structures of domination. Nellie's history makes it possible to begin to sketch the economic, emotional, and familial logic of such choices and her own. Her laboring life also invites an approach to business history—in this case, the match industry—attentive to family dynamics, class, gender, and cultural analysis.

This book joins efforts by historians to reclaim pre–World War II Britain for Christianity, a salutary historiographical Reconquista. Building on an earlier generation that demonstrated the blurred lines between secular and religious associational activities of local churches in the decades before World War I, scholars have demonstrated that statistical measures such as declining attendance at church and chapel did not herald the “death of Christian Britain.” In early-twentieth-century Britain, religion was no mere vestige awaiting respectable burial in history's dustbin.⁴¹ Muriel and Nellie's history underscores the enduring power of religious faith as a resource for those seeking an inclusive vision of social and economic justice in Britain and the world. It has led me to uncover a powerful stream of “practical” or “lived” theology within modern British Protestantism that I call “God is Love” theology. Muriel eclectically drew upon emerging conceptions of “spirituality” and “world religions” as she sought to live as an ethical subject. The Sermon on the Mount provided the scriptural foundations for Muriel and Nellie's vision and practice of Christian revolution. The history of their grassroots labors in East London pushes against the amnesia that clouds just how much Christianity once animated and inspired Left politics in Britain.

I first began to research this book at the peak of President George W. Bush's lavish funding of “faith-based” initiatives at the heart of his “compassionate conservatism” in the opening years of the twenty-first century. For readers in the United States, I hope that this history of Muriel and Nellie's “faith-based” initiatives a century ago suggests the potential for deep religious faith to animate a radical critique and redistribution of power and authority between rich and poor, men and women, white and black, colonizer and colonized.

Influential interpretations of post–World War I Britain emphasize its “conservative modernity,” a prevailing mood of escapist despair and de-

cline, and escalating violence against a host of “others,” real and imagined.⁴² *The Match Girl and the Heiress*, by contrast, highlights an optimistic ethical and religious strand of British political culture in the first half of the twentieth century marked by hospitality to all forms of difference, democratic but authoritarian anti-consumerism, and a commitment to living locally as “world citizens.” An immense cottage industry has dissected Bloomsbury’s every noisy rebellious gesture in the first decades of the twentieth century. This book tells a much quieter but more politically exigent story about the relationship between High Victorian Christian moral paternalism and twentieth-century rights-based social justice ethics and politics. Like the lifespans of the book’s two central figures, Nellie and Muriel, this study bridges the putative divide between Victorians and moderns in showing both surprising continuities and shifts in sensibilities and attitudes from the 1870s to 1920s. “Truth,” “reconciliation,” and “restitution” were essential to the language and practice of Christian revolution. Nellie’s and Muriel’s work as peacemakers in wartime Bow prefigured many of the technologies of conflict resolution championed by contemporary human rights activists and global humanitarians. As such, my analysis contributes to an understanding of the early-twentieth-century roots of these developments.

Finally, this study explores the power of love to transform individuals and the world in early-twentieth-century Britain. Love figures centrally in every chapter of this book. Nellie and Muriel’s lives, apart and together, demonstrate the capaciousness, variety, and historical specificity of love. Muriel and Nellie’s love for one another changed and enriched each of them. Love was the motor of their relationship and their unfinished Christian revolution. I show that it also paradoxically limited and constrained them and their community-based work. Christian revolution was predicated upon effacing the many ways in which differences between people—class, gender, religious, racial—produced oppressive hierarchies. But in all sorts of ways, Muriel and Nellie’s love confounded the erasure of difference by insistently demanding and reproducing difference between them. In some chapters love is an indispensable ideological and religious category informing their theology and thinking. Learning to “love thy enemy,” Muriel and Nellie believed, was the way to enact Christian revolution in everyday life. In other chapters, I tease out the implications of love for historical understandings of female friend-

ship, same-sex desire, and cross-class eroticism in the early twentieth century. This book, I hope, demonstrates the analytical gains of keeping together the history of affect and politics, feeling and thinking, loving and doing.

Muriel and Nellie's partnership and the institution they nurtured, Kingsley Hall, must be counted among the innumerable early-twentieth-century "small utopias" spawned by European-wide dissatisfaction with the excesses and failures of fin-de-siècle liberalism and the cataclysm of global war.⁴³ Theirs was a utopian enterprise deeply rooted in the gritty materiality of slum life, not some Arcadian flight into an ideal world of their own making. Utopias, the Austrian-born German sociologist Karl Mannheim famously argued in 1929, are always in dialectical tension with the existing order; for all that they are "incongruous" with and "burst the bounds" of the status quo, they necessarily remain deeply embedded within a "historically specific social life." At least part of why Muriel and Nellie's story matters, I suggest, resides not just in their accomplishments but in their expansion of how people could and did imagine alternative "not yet" futures for themselves, Britain, and the world.⁴⁴