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Seth Koven: Slumming

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Introduction



SLUMMING: EROS AND ALTRUISM IN VICTORIAN LONDON

FOR THE BETTER part of the century preceding World War II, Britons went slumming to see for themselves how the poor lived. They insisted that firsthand experience among the metropolitan poor was essential for all who claimed to speak authoritatively about social problems. To a remarkable degree, the men and women who governed church and state in late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain and dominated social welfare bureaucracies and the emerging profession of social work felt compelled to visit, live, or work in the London slums at some point in their careers of public service. Even the fiery Welsh radical Lloyd George, champion of popular rights against aristocratic privileges, sought out a friend to take him on a tour of the East London slums soon after he arrived in London in 1890 to assume his seat in parliament.¹ Lloyd George may have been intent to witness the scenes of human misery and sexual degradation made famous the world over by the serial murderer Jack the Ripper, but he also embarked on a journey routed for him by thousands of well-to-do men and women. By the 1890s, London guidebooks such as Baedeker's not only directed visitors to shops, theatres, monuments, and churches, but also mapped excursions to world renowned philanthropic institutions located in notorious slum districts such as Whitechapel and Shoreditch.²

We will never know precisely how many men and women went slumming, but the fact that slums became tourist sites suggests it was a very widespread phenomenon. At any given time there were hundreds of private charitable institutions and agencies in the metropolitan slums, each visited regularly by scores of donors, trustees, and volunteer and paid workers. No doubt slumming was merely an evening's entertainment for many well-to-do Londoners,³ but for many others, the slums of London exercised powerful and tenacious claims over their minds and hearts, drastically altering the course of their lives.

One such man was James Granville Adderley. Adderley was far too iconoclastic to be representative of anything, but his life provides one point of entry into the world of the women and men whose philanthropic labors are the subject of this book. Even those who disliked Adderley's radical ideas liked the man himself. He bristled with righteous

indignation about the world's injustices, but he also radiated an inner calm and a joyful enthusiasm that drew people of all sorts and conditions to him. Well-born, charming in conversation, blessed with even-featured good looks, and bright without being ostentatiously intellectual, Adderley seemed destined for a lucrative career in law and politics. However, within a short time of leaving Oxford in the mid-1880s, he found himself the toast of philanthropic London as head of one of the metropolis's newest institutions for translating vague ideals about cross-class brotherly love into concrete form: the Oxford House in Bethnal Green. A residential colony of idealistic university men planted in a slum district, it was devoted to constructing bridges of personal friendship between rich and poor through Christian work and wholesome "rational" recreation. There was something absurd about Adderley's instant celebrity as an expert on social questions, and he knew it better than anyone else. He canily recognized that his contemporaries saw him not as he actually was but rather as an embodiment of a new type of man: the "ecclesiastical young man," called upon to "address all kinds of meetings, and looked upon as a sort of freak—the fellow who might live in luxury in Belgravia but preferred [the poverty of] Bethnal Green."⁴

Impatient with the unending stream of visitors, reporters, and transient do-gooders to Oxford House, Adderley took his clerical vows and moved farther east into ever less glamorous slum districts. He joined the Catholic prelate Cardinal Manning and the trade unionist Ben Tillett in championing the cause of London's grossly exploited dock laborers in their world-famous strike in 1889; he defended the rights of laboring men against puritanical attempts to deny them the pleasures of the stage and music hall; he threw his heart and soul into club work with the "rough lads" in his adopted neighborhood of Poplar and invited large numbers of them for holidays on the grounds of his ancestral home, Hams Hall. He helped form a new religious community within the Church of England that was founded on the rules of St. Francis: The Society of Divine Compassion. Adderley and his brothers in poverty exalted the beautiful while despising the exuberant materialism of late Victorian London. Jolly fellowship among men went hand in hand with severe austerity. "There was no carpet on the floors, a fire only in the common room, and the brothers did their own crude cooking," one visitor recalled. A bare plank served as his only bed. Adderley felt that even this self-denying regimen kept him too far removed from the gritty struggles of the homeless poor. He spent weeks at a time disguised as a tramp, often sleeping rough on the streets. The depth of his compassion was matched by the breadth of his tolerance. He extended his hand not only to social outcasts but also to sexual outlaws like the celebrated playwright Oscar Wilde, convicted in 1895 for committing same-sex acts of

gross indecency. Living in East London placed Adderley far from the starched-collar respectability and top-hatty conventions of bourgeois domesticity and freed him to develop distinctly heterodox ideas about class relations, male sexual celibacy, and social purity. When Adderley died in 1942, it was another man, Arthur Shearly Cripps, his “comrade in tramping, dossing, and in preaching the gospel,” who memorialized their loving friendship in a tender poem of chaste but sensual couplets: “He to whose lips the taste of old wine clings/ Asks no new wine. Ah me! My friend’s loss brings/ No wish for some new friend to fill his place.”⁵

Why did Adderley renounce the privileges of aristocratic birth and the comforts of family to live for six decades in voluntary poverty and sexual celibacy among the London poor as a bachelor slum priest? His only biographer discouraged readers from seeking the psychological roots of Adderley’s singular devotion because he was “a man of simple ways and thoughts and friendships” who never worried about himself and instead did God’s work as a parish priest.⁶ We need not posthumously coerce Adderley onto the psychoanalyst’s couch to suggest that the private and public, sexual and social forces shaping his life choices may not have been as “simple” as his “ways.”

This book tries to make sense of the ideas and movements, institutions and practices that made the slums of London and “slumming” seem so necessary to Adderley and thousands of members of the “comfortable classes.” It examines the complex historical and cultural circumstances in which such women and men found themselves and to which they importantly contributed. I attempt to save them from the misguided goodwill of those who would make them into saints and the smugness of those who would dismiss them as marginal cranks, or worse yet, as hypocrites. They were none of these. Instead, I try to recapture the altogether messier mingling of good intentions and blinkered prejudices that informed their vision of the poor and of themselves. While exploring deep structures of thought and feeling in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century British culture, I attend to individuals’ particularities. I portray slum reformers and workers not as mere tools of social or discursive forces outside their control—though such forces did influence their agendas—but as human beings who confronted ethical dilemmas and made difficult choices.⁷ I examine the interplay of sexual and social politics both at the micro-level of how women and men came to express and understand who they were and at the macro-level of public debates about poverty and welfare, gender, and sexuality. By so doing, I work within, but also reorient, a tradition of scholarship linking private conscience and public duty in Victorian culture and society.⁸

The intimate, turbulent, and often surprising relationship between benevolence and sex, rich and poor, in Victorian London is my subject. I

came to this topic circuitously through the history of elite men's and women's philanthropic endeavors to bring "sweetness and light" to the dark spaces and dirty inhabitants of the metropolis. As I immersed myself deeply in the sources, I found it impossible to keep sex, sexual desire, and sexuality out of their story. So what began as an inquiry into class-bridging institutions and social welfare programs took on a life of its own, propelled by several insights. First, it became clear that debates about "social" questions such as homelessness, social hygiene, childhood poverty, and women's work were often sparked by and tapped into anxieties about sex, sexuality, and gender roles. To understand how elite men and women thought about the poor required me to reckon with how they thought about sex, gender, and themselves. Second, I discovered that the widely shared imperative among well-to-do men and women to traverse class boundaries and befriend their outcast brothers and sisters in the slums was somehow bound up in their insistent eroticization of poverty and their quest to understand their own sexual subjectivities. But how and why were these movements, both literal and imaginative, connected? And what were the consequences of such linkages for the histories of class, gender, sexuality, and welfare? An inquiry into the set of social practices and relations that Britons called slumming promised a means to untangle and knit together in a new way the history of sexual and social politics.⁹ Once I started looking for slumming, it was hard not to find it everywhere.

The Oxford-educated journalist Henry Wood Nevinson, who lived with his talented wife Margaret and their growing family in an insect-infested slum flat in the 1880s, astutely observed that slumming expressed both "shamed sympathy" with the poor and an irresistible "attraction of repulsion" for them.¹⁰ Nevinson's paradoxical formulation points to the double optic through which elites viewed the slums of London. Men and women like the Nevinsons knew only too well that slums were real places of monotonous material deprivation and quiet human suffering which both rightly elicited their sympathy and called them to action. At the same time, when elites wrote about slums, they tended to romanticize and exoticize them as sites of spectacular brutality and sexual degradation to which they were compulsively drawn.¹¹ Slums were anarchic, distant outposts of empire peopled by violent and primitive races; but they were also conveniently close, only a short stroll from the Bank of England and St. Paul's, inhabited by Christian brothers and sisters. They were prosaically dull and dangerously carnivalesque.

The metropolitan slums provided well-to-do philanthropic men and women with an actual and imagined location where, with the approval of society, they could challenge prevailing norms about class and gender relations and sexuality.¹² These men and women may well have needed

the freedom the slums offered them more than the poor in their adopted neighborhoods benefited from their benevolent labors. Such claims capture the complex social dynamics of philanthropic encounters between rich and poor, as well as my own ambivalence about them. Reformers' creativity and passion, their sincerely felt and lived ethos of service, inspire admiration. At the same time, many were deeply invested in the titillating squalor of the slums, which they used as stages upon which they enacted emancipatory experiments in reimagining themselves. Synonymous with squalid tenements and soiled lives, the slums of London ironically functioned as sites of personal liberation and self-realization—social, spiritual, and sexual—for several generations of educated men and women.¹³

Upper-class men and women had long ventured into the low haunts of London in pursuit of illicit pleasure. In 1670, the Queen and the Duchesses of Richmond and Buckingham caused a public uproar when they disguised themselves as “country lasses” at Bartholomew Fair to mingle undetected with the common people. “They had all so over done it in their disguise,” Sir Henry Ingilby reported in his diary, that they quickly drew the attention of the mob, which angrily pursued them all the way to the Court gate. Ingilby concluded his entry “thus by ill conduct was a merry frolic turned into a penance.”¹⁴ It would be easy to trace an unbroken history of such self-serving escapades from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. But by the mid-nineteenth century, altruists began to rival pleasure seekers in shaping public perceptions of the purpose and meaning of descents into the spaces of the poor. Well-to-do philanthropists justified their slum journeys as a way to do penance for the sins of their class, to investigate and study the poor, and to succor them. Far from concealing their slum explorations, they did their best to publicize them in the name of social science, civic duty, and Christian love. They used the materials they gathered—statistical, anecdotal, visual—to write sociological reports, political-economic treatises, novels, passionate sermons, and revelatory newspaper articles; to secure jobs in private voluntary associations and in expanding social welfare bureaucracies within local and national government; to bolster their credentials as expert witnesses before parliamentary commissions of inquiry and as members of parliament.

If slumming was an indispensable method of gathering knowledge about urban poverty, it also revealed the extent to which charity was, according to the expatriate American novelist Henry James, “a kind of passion.” But what was the nature of this “passion”? How did this “passion” affect the ways in which well-to-do Victorians came to define social problems and their solutions? James's understanding of the London poor was at best superficial. He was, however, an astute observer of the

inner longings of his English peers, those extraordinarily articulate “public moralists” who molded opinion and devised policies on social questions.¹⁵ His writings suggest that the Victorians’ “passion” for charity was fueled by unconsummated and unacknowledged desires for all sorts of taboo intimacies between rich and poor, the clean and the dirty, the virtuous and the verminous, men and women, women and women, and men and men.¹⁶ James could not help thinking that there was “something indecent” about so much goodness.¹⁷

Many kinds of love, sexual and nonsexual alike, animated Britons’ engagement with philanthropy. I investigate how the histories of sexuality and sexual desires usually associated with the private lives of individuals intersected with the public histories of benevolence to shape metropolitan philanthropy and social welfare. While I do not anachronistically impose the vocabulary of twentieth-century psychoanalysis on my nineteenth-century subjects, I do attempt to illuminate their psychological and sexual complexities. I examine the motives, representations, meanings, and consequences of their forays into the slums of Victorian and Edwardian London. At the same time, I reconstruct as best I can the responses of the poor to their uninvited visitors. The circumstances and survival strategies of the poor necessarily shaped their vision of the world and of their social betters.¹⁸ This book reveals the extent to which politics and erotics, social and sexual categories, overflowed their boundaries, affecting one another in profoundly consequential ways for our understanding of poverty and its representations, social policies, and emerging sexual and gender identities in modern Britain.

SLUMMING DEFINED

How did Victorian men and women define the activity “slumming” and its closely associated verb forms “to slum” or “to go slumming?” What meanings did they associate with these terms? How do I define and use them in this study? Let me answer each of these questions in turn.

In August 1893, Adderley tried to answer the question “Is Slumming Played Out?” for the middle-brow *English Illustrated Magazine*. “The fashionable slumming of eight years ago,” he assured readers, “is given up as a wholesale practice.” He quickly defined “fashionable slumming” by offering several egregious examples of its excesses. He conjured “the languid lady” driven down to the docks to see a flesh-and-blood “stevedore” for the sole purpose of impressing her dinner guests that evening (841). He blasted the “provoking rich people” who arrived in East London so filled with literary preconceptions that actual slums were not nearly “slummy enough” for them.¹⁹ Fashionable slumming encouraged

some observers to trivialize poverty, transform it into self-serving entertainment, and perpetuate absurd misconceptions about the savagery of the poor.²⁰ It disguised prurient curiosity in the garb of social altruism. There was no reason to lament its passing as a fad.

The clarity of Adderley's moral judgments matched the slipperiness of his rhetoric and arguments. Despite his condemnation of fashionable slumming, he claimed that the attitudes promoting it spurred new approaches to charity, foremost among them the growing belief that "cheque-book philanthropy" (merely giving cash donations) was no substitute for giving one's own best self to the poor in friendship. Adderley contrasted one set of practices he abhorred—fashionable slumming—with another he admired but to which he attached no name. However, the weight of the evidence he put forward undermined his own attempt to construct straightforward distinctions. The very institutions he singled out for doing genuine Christian work among the poor, such as Dr. Barnardo's schemes to rescue street children and the university settlement in Whitechapel, Toynbee Hall, were also the epicenters of fashionable slumming in the 1880s and '90s.²¹ Unable to wrest the word "slumming" from its association with prurient curiosity, Adderley nonetheless wanted to harness its social and cultural resources for benevolent ends. He concluded his article with a rousing call for thoughtful university men to join him in serving the London poor.

Let no young man think his education complete until he has come to know the poor, their lives and their needs. Let the sons of the upper classes strike out courageously beyond the conventional philanthropy of their parents and get over their suspicions of "Socialism." Let them investigate that creature whom they call a "cad" and discover his lurking heart and soul.

Why did Adderley provide examples of fashionable slumming but yet never explain what "slumming" itself meant or how it related to the charitable schemes detailed in his article? His inclusions and exclusions provide several important clues. His article conspicuously ignored the vast army of philanthropic women—from the elite Ladies Bountiful to the working class Ranyard Bible nurses and Salvation Army "slum lassies" (estimated at 500,000 in 1893)—who were rapidly making benevolence into a feminized enclave of social life.²² While Adderley's article ostensibly denounced the idle rich regardless of their sex, he subtly associated the vices of fashionable slumming with women by his choice of examples (recall the "languid lady") and by the close identification of femininity and fashion. Excluding female benevolence in all its many forms made his appeal to the "sons of the upper class"—and not their daughters—seem inevitable and logical.²³ My point here is not to show that Adderley was mean-spirited toward women. He was not. Rather, I

am arguing that Adderley's attempt to preserve Christian work among the poor from contamination by fashionable slumming depended on an unstated set of assumptions about gender and his own unacknowledged investment in making philanthropy appealing to men at a time when women were coming to dominate it.

Slumming, the word and the activities associated with it, was distinguished historically by a persistent pattern of disavowal. It was a pejorative term used to sneer at the supposedly misguided efforts of other people. As a form of urban social exploration, it bore the obloquy of sensationalism, sexual transgression, and self-seeking gratification, not sober inquiry and self-denying service to others. Clergymen, journalists, novelists, philanthropists, social investigators, and reformers, therefore, went to great lengths to contrast their supposedly high-minded engagement with social problems with the activities of casual "slummers."²⁴ Attaching the rhetorical label "slumming" to a social practice was a very effective way to discredit it and to distance oneself from it. An editorial published in the radical journal the *Link* in October 1888 blasted the "gorgeously plumed birds of passage" who "slummed because . . . the horrors they brushed by threw into more brilliant relief the daintinesses of their own fair surroundings . . . because a morbid curiosity, sated with novelistic prurientes, craved the stronger sensations of real abominations."²⁵ The *Link's* outspoken editors, Annie Besant and William T. Stead, had themselves undertaken hundreds of slum journeys, seeking to bring justice to the disinherited through their inflammatory articles. Just as slumming itself brought together the high and the low, it confounded clear-cut distinctions between true and false charity.²⁶

Casual slumming often merged imperceptibly into sustained attempts not just to grapple with the costs of poverty in individual lives, but also to formulate systemic critiques of social and economic injustices. In the letters, memoirs, and autobiographies of leading reformers and politicians, we encounter a recurring pattern: an early episode of slumming, motivated largely by curiosity, sets the stage for deeper awareness of and commitment to redressing the evils of urban poverty. When William Beveridge first visited Toynbee Hall, he felt like "an American tourist doing Whitechapel in two days," but by the time he left, he had begun to analyze the structures of wages and work that caused unemployment and to propose solutions to them.²⁷ Jane Addams, the American feminist-internationalist, condemned the way in which slumming produced an "unfair," "fragmentary," and "lurid view of poverty." But she also acknowledged that her midnight tour of East London in the autumn of 1883, perched safely atop an omnibus hired by a West London Missioner, left an indelible and salutary imprint on her imagination. The socialist H. M. Hyndman heaped scorn upon slumming as a general social phenomenon:

it was one of the odious privileges of the bourgeoisie, a symptom of the ills of capitalist Britain rather than a means to solve them. But he, like Addams, confessed in his memoir that a “tremor of fitful sympathy among the well-to-do” in 1866 had pricked his social conscience and led him to join “guardsmen and girls of the period, rich philanthropists and prophets of Piccadilly, students of human nature and cynics on the make” to betake themselves “with hearts and pockets bursting with charity to the choicest rookeries to be found along the riverside.”²⁸ Just as spiritual autobiographers following Augustine emphasized their youthful carnality to demonstrate God’s grace in leading them to sanctity, so, too, social reformers and political activists confessed their own guilty pleasures of “slumming” in order to criticize them.

The urban historian H. J. Dyos has argued, and I think cogently so, that the word “slum” has “no fixity” and “was being used in effect for a whole range of social and political purposes.”²⁹ The fundamental instability of meanings attached to the “slum” and its associated word forms is reflected in the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s definitions. According to the *OED*, “slumming” is “the visitation of slums, esp. for charitable purposes.” But it referred readers to the verb “to slum,” which it defined in several ways: “to go into, or frequent, slums for discreditable purposes; to saunter about, with a suspicion, perhaps, of immoral pursuits” and “to visit slums for charitable or philanthropic purposes, or out of curiosity, esp. as a fashionable pursuit.” “Slummers” usually referred to those who “slummed” or engaged in “slumming”; but, maddeningly, “slummers” also described the poor residents of slums. Charity and philanthropy mingle with immoral pursuits and voyeuristic curiosity in these definitions, which refuse to be definitive.³⁰

Following Dyos’s lead, I have made mobility, not fixity, central to my definition of slumming. I use slumming to refer to activities undertaken by people of wealth, social standing, or education in urban spaces inhabited by the poor. Because the desire to go slumming was bound up in the need to disavow it, my history of slumming includes the activities of men and women who used any word except slumming—charity, sociological research, Christian rescue, social work, investigative journalism—to explain why *they* had entered the slums. My definition of slumming depends upon a movement, figured as some sort of “descent,” across urban spatial and class, gender and sexual boundaries. The sermon preached by Rev. Prebendary W. Rogers in Balliol College Chapel on Sunday, February 4, 1883, captures well the spatial dynamics of slumming with its sanctioned immersion in an otherwise forbidden world. Rev. Rogers invited his audience “to descend with him” into the streets of East London to confront the rampant “coarseness and vulgarity,” “poverty and meanness written upon the countenances of the wayfarers . . . vice flaunting it-

self in gaudy apparel.” Not satisfied with the grotesque spectacle of the street, Rogers beckoned churchgoers to penetrate even more intimate interior spaces of the poor: “Follow these people home to their wretched houses in which they are huddled together like the beasts that perish, and you will find them grossly ignorant, semi-paupers.”³¹ If, as cultural anthropologists tell us, dirt is matter out of order, then slumming required elite men and women to go where they did not belong, out of their expected places. While most justified their slum expeditions as part of an effort to expose and clean up the filth of city life, their roles as urban housekeepers existed in uneasy tension with their own disordering of class, gender, and sexual norms.

Contemporaries imposed a wide range of meanings and distinctions on their forays into the precincts of the poor as they vied with one another for preeminence in the crowded world of metropolitan philanthropy. While underscoring these differences, each of the following chapters identifies shared cultural assumptions about the social and sexual relations between rich and poor, men and women, that bound together the varied forms of slumming examined in this book.

WHO WENT SLUMMING? SOURCES AND SOCIAL CATEGORIES

The socioeconomic backgrounds of those who went slumming and those they went to see ranged very broadly. Throughout this study, I will often use terms such as “rich,” “elite,” and “well-to-do” to characterize slummers. These terms lack precision for they include men and women whose social worlds had little in common beyond their sense that they commanded resources entitling them to gawk at or help the poor. The capaciousness of these terms reflects the heterogeneity of slummers, who included members of the royal family, such as Princess Alice of Hesse; scions of Britain’s most eminent aristocratic dynasties, such as the prime minister Lord Salisbury, whose sons William and Hugh lived in Oxford House in Bethnal Green; upper-middle-class political elites, for example, William Gladstone, whose daughter Helen lived in the south London slums as head of the Women’s University Settlement; the offspring of clergymen and professionals aspiring to gentility; and merchants and their children for whom slumming marked their own recent social ascent. Some, such as the journalist James Greenwood, came from very modest backgrounds and used their slumming to earn their living rather than as a way to share their wealth.³²

The so-called poor, the objects of all this unsolicited benevolence, likewise spanned a considerable spectrum from the homeless to sweated workers packed into one-room tenements to seasonally employed un-

skilled laborers to regularly employed skilled artisans, whose wages surpassed those of junior clerks. Once again, this grouping defies the commonsense categories of social history.³³ Why lump together such diverse people under the umbrella of “the poor” or “laboring men and women” or “the working class”? After all, the late-Victorian pioneers of empirical sociology such as Charles Booth and Ernest Aves, Jesse Argyle, Beatrice Potter, and Clara Collet, themselves deeply involved in the mania for slumming in the 1880s, went to great pains to offer fine-grained distinctions between different groups based on earnings and social and cultural habits. A highly skilled “labour aristocrat” had no more in common with an out-of-work member of the so-called “residuum” or “submerged tenth” than a titled noblewoman did with the daughter of a tradesman who, by dint of intelligence and determination won a scholarship to Girton or Newnham College before embarking on a paid career as a social worker in the slums. “Elite,” “poor,” “well-to-do,” and “laboring people” remain useful though descriptively imprecise terms because they signal the social distance—and contemporaries’ own perception of that distance—which lay at the heart of slumming and slum benevolence. Terms such as “the poor” also convey the social reality that even skilled and relatively well-paid laboring men and women, over the course of their lives, did often experience periods of want and poverty occasioned by sickness and unemployment.³⁴ Many who went slumming came to appreciate the crudeness of their own initial ideas about poverty and understood the vast differences in outlook separating denizens of penny-a-night lodging houses from those pillars of working-class respectability who took pride in their immaculate broom-swept front stoops and lace curtains. Other less careful observers did not bother to make such distinctions, generalized about the poor based on their observations of a few sensational cases of misery, or felt cheated when the men and women they encountered seemed altogether too respectable.

I pay scrupulous attention to the widely varying reasons for and contexts surrounding the many forms of slumming analyzed in this book. For example, we need to understand the particular bureaucratic and moral imperatives which led David Edwards, a licensing inspector for the London County Council, to go undercover and inspect a music and dance hall, the Rose and Crown, on December 29, 1890. The Rose and Crown so happened to be located in one of the most impoverished quarters of East London near the Docks. Neither a craving to see how the poor lived nor charity motivated Edwards. No love of disguise led him to go undercover; inspectors were expected to blend into their surroundings to better observe them. He had a job to do that night, and he did it. But the way he wrote about and interpreted his experiences tapped into much broader ways of thinking and writing about slum life. Edwards

could have chosen simply to note that some female prostitutes and their customers frequented the Rose and Crown. Instead, he transformed a routine report of inspection into a tale of disgust and titillation. He reproduced his conversations with a prostitute who importuned him to go home with her. And then, as if anxious to avoid incriminating himself, he opined that “my reason for making such a long report is because I can find no other name for such a place than a hell.”³⁵

Edwards’s sweeping moral condemnation of the dance hall and all its female habituées as prostitutes did not go unchallenged. The official case file of the administrative hearing noted that during the ensuing interrogation, “A Voice from the Hall” cried out, “many a respectable woman goes there.” We will never know to whom that disembodied voice belonged, though we can surmise it may have been a woman (or her husband) who went to the Rose and Crown and believed that Edwards’s words had besmirched her reputation.³⁶ Readers will encounter many other such voices throughout this book, ranging from the indignant accusations of several children Dr. Barnardo “rescued” to the self-assertive political rhetoric of laboring men in a Bethnal Green club who refused to play the deferential part their Oxford sponsors had assigned to them. These voices are potent reminders that those positioned as objects of slumming readily challenged their social betters’ characterization of them and had their own ideas about the affluent men and women in their midst. The poor asserted themselves in their daily encounters with philanthropists, but they did so within circumstances of grotesquely unequal power.

Men and women who went slumming left behind an extraordinary abundance of sources—letters, diaries, memoirs, books, articles, speeches, newspaper stories, annual reports, visual images—which the historian can use to recreate their social and mental landscapes. Sometimes we are fortunate enough to have autobiographies (published and unpublished) and letters written by laboring men and women, which give a fuller sense of their perspective and their use of language to express themselves. However, most residents of working-class and poor neighborhoods in London, while increasingly active participants as readers in Victorian and Edwardian print culture, did not usually have the time, desire, or need to write down their thoughts and feelings.³⁷ We more often than not hear their voices through texts produced by the well-to-do. For example, the spinster housing reformer Ella Pycroft wrote to her colleague Beatrice Potter, daughter of a wealthy merchant and railway executive, recounting the reactions of several East Londoners to an article on unemployment and slum housing that Potter published in the *Pall Mall Gazette*.³⁸ Pycroft had circulated Potter’s article among residents in the Katherine

Buildings, at least one of whom was not edified by what he read. Pycroft explained to Potter that three of the poor residents “having read the article dispassionately, understand it and agree with it all.” But one, a man named Joseph Aarons, “was specially angry at your saying the Buildings were ‘designed and adapted’ for the lowest class of workmen partly because he will take ‘low’ to mean ‘disreputable’; partly because he shares our feelings about the construction of the Bgs. [buildings]. But I told him you did not mean to express approval of their construction, but on the contrary had written strongly against it.”³⁹

Pycroft’s letter offers a fragmentary glimpse, albeit filtered through her own grid of personal and political preoccupations, of an independent-minded working man’s response to the elite slummers in his midst. Far from deferring to Potter as either a “lady” or an amateur sociologist, Aarons objected to her choice of words, which he recognized would adversely mold public perceptions of the social and moral status of the building’s residents. Pycroft, as the author of the letter, gets the final word here as she often, though not always, did in her dealings with her clients. At the same time, her letter captures an otherwise irretrievable moment of intellectual and personal negotiation between an elite woman reformer and a poor man—a sort of tug of war Pycroft and Potter daily enacted with the residents of Katherine Buildings in their philanthropic rounds as lady rent collectors.⁴⁰ While extant sources make it possible to trace the evolution of Potter’s and Pycroft’s ideas about class relations, poverty, and gender, we can recover little more about Aarons’ thoughts.

The great social statistician Herbert Spencer was, like Joseph Aarons, quite critical of the way his gifted protégée Beatrice Potter depicted social problems. Spencer distrusted the reliability of information gathered through slumming and urged Potter to put a halt to her risky “doings in London” investigating sweated labor disguised as a poor Jewish seamstress. “Bear in mind,” Spencer admonished, “that the experiences which you thus gain are misleading experiences; for what you think and feel under such conditions are unlike what is felt and thought by those whose experiences you would describe.”⁴¹ For Spencer, Potter’s incognito slumming could not possibly serve either her best interests as a young single woman or those of the emerging scientific and objective discipline of sociology.⁴² Such methods of collecting data were inherently flawed because they blurred the line between participant and observer, social facts and individual fancies. Spencer’s objections to Potter’s escapades (which she herself later dismissed as a “lark”) can be restated in more general terms: slumming was antithetical to seeing society as it truly was. We need not share Spencer’s confidence in the superiority of his own sociological methods to concur with him that slumming *did* shape how elite men and

women represented their experiences among the poor, defined social problems, and developed solutions to them. This is precisely what makes its history so important.

EROS AND ALTRUISM: JAMES HINTON AND THE HINTONIANS

Punch, Victorian Britain's ever vigilant monitor of shifting cultural norms, seemed quite certain that slum benevolence was neither wholly pure nor wholly disinterested. In 1884, it published "In Slummibus," an ironic visual satire depicting a preening clergyman surrounded by two demurely attractive young ladies carrying presumably wholesome literature for the heathen poor (figure below). The title of the image undoubtedly makes fun of the fad for hiring omnibuses to take visitors through East London's poorest neighborhoods without soiling their shoes and clothes.⁴³ As the three philanthropists gaze upon the squalid slumscape through which they stroll, they are far from masters of all they survey. They are subjected to the stares and impudent commentary of the poor, including one "small Eastendian" who remarks (in *Punch's* best version of proper Cockney): "'Ello! 'Ere's a Masher! Look at 'is Collar an' 'At!" In *Punch's* commentary, the man of God is mistaken for a "masher," a slang phrase for a male sexual predator. Apparently, the poor can see through the clergyman's upright appearance to discern his base motives. He is no different from thousands of West End gentlemen "mashers" who regularly ventured to East London to sample its illicit pleasures: sex, drugs, penny gaffes, and music halls.

As *Punch's* imagery suggests, slumming raised troubling ethical questions about the very nature of the philanthropy itself. Was philanthropy a laudable form of self-denial, an expression of a deep human impulse to witness and enter sympathetically into the suffering of others in order to diminish it? Or was benevolence merely a cover for egoistic self-gratification, a means imaginatively and literally to enter otherwise forbidden spaces, places, and conversations, to satisfy otherwise forbidden desires? What was the right relation between serving others and pleasure? Was eros compatible with altruism?⁴⁴

These questions loomed large in the life and writings of the mid-nineteenth-century aural surgeon and social philosopher James Hinton and lay at the very heart of this book. Hinton's private history and the public history of his ideas and their reception closely parallel that of slumming itself: it is a story of unruly desires and their disavowal, of high ideals and vexed realities. Victorian reformers drew inspiration from many sources, but it was Hinton who most deeply and explicitly articulated how the problems of slum life and the attractions of slumming were enmeshed in a



The stifferly erect, gaitered clergyman appears utterly disdainful of and disconnected from the squalid scene that offers a virtual ethnography of slum types in the imagination of elite observers: barefoot ragged children, a powerful and defiantly-posed working woman with her laundry behind her, and a group of seemingly drunk men clustered in front of the pub, one of whom is so degenerate that he has a simian rather than a human face. (*Punch*, May 3, 1884, 210.)

complex matrix of sexual and social politics. My own discovery of Hinton and my surprise that his ideas touched so many men and women involved in slum benevolence helped to shape the questions I pose in this book. Using Hinton as the philosophical point of departure for my history of slumming—instead of other more familiar thinkers such as Thomas Carlyle or John Ruskin or T. H. Green—signals my intention to construct a genealogy of benevolence and social welfare in which gender experimentation and heterodox sexuality figure prominently.

As slumming gathered momentum in the early 1880s, some claimed that society was beginning to reap the harvest of enlightened altruism Hinton had sown in the years before his death in 1875.⁴⁵ Hinton devoted his life to unraveling the mysterious sources of the desire to serve others as part of his larger project to liberate women and men from the body-denying and soul-withering values which he believed inhibited human self-development.⁴⁶ He could find unity in his philosophy only by mixing “intimately with and becom[ing] the friend of the lowest and poorest class.” He traced the origins of this impulse to his experiences as an apprentice to a woolen draper in Whitechapel, where he daily witnessed the

sexual degradation of laboring women. He ached to live among the poor “as a man longs for his wedding-day”⁴⁷ and insisted that the rich could only realize their fullest selves by sympathizing with and serving those in need. He decried the spiritual deadness of conventional morality, which cut men and women off from nature and the life-affirming wellsprings of genuine altruism.⁴⁸ Rejecting the belief that women’s moral authority was based on their “passionlessness,” Hinton insisted that it was not only moral but essential for women, as much as men, to enjoy sexual pleasure. He anticipated the day when all women would be emancipated from ruinous “social disabilities,” which kept them from realizing their god-appointed tasks to rule by serving others.⁴⁹ Men would only reach their human potential once they had been “womaned”—subjected to women’s beneficent influence.⁵⁰

Hinton was a philanthropic hedonist. Refusing to play the part of self-sacrificing do-gooder, Hinton urged contemporaries to seek pleasure through altruism which would in turn result in social and sexual freedom. At the very heart of his project was the imperative to train human desires to serve others and by so doing unlock those natural “pleasures, instincts, impulses” that society was so determined to repress.⁵¹ The conduct of his life, his outward appearance, and his manners were as striking and unconventional as his ethics and explain in part his impact on contemporaries. He wore ill-fitting and conspicuously plain clothes and had no tolerance for social formalities. In the eyes of Edith Lees Ellis, an ardent proponent of women’s rights and lesbian wife of the founder of British sexology, Havelock Ellis, Hinton was “the ascetic and the sensualist alike,” “a muscularly strong man with the tenderness of a woman.”⁵² Hinton’s body became the mirror of his social and sexual ethics: he was both masculine and feminine, self-denying and pleasure-seeking.

Now forgotten by all but a small handful of scholars, Hinton exercised a magnetic personal and intellectual hold over his disciples, whose substantial contributions to Victorian debates about sexual and social problems bore no relation to their small numbers.⁵³ In the 1870s and ’80s, Hinton’s followers included not only Edith Lees but also her future husband, Havelock Ellis.⁵⁴ Ellis, along with Hinton’s wife, Margaret, and her sister Caroline, were original members of the Fellowship of the New Life, the precursor of the much better known socialist Fabian Society. The Fellowship consisted of approximately thirty men and women committed to discussing decidedly unorthodox ideas about society—including Hinton’s—and enacting them in their daily lives.⁵⁵ Hinton’s teachings left an enduring mark on one of Britain’s best-known female social purity campaigners, Ellice Hopkins, who worked among prostitutes and demanded that men be held to the same standards of chastity as women.⁵⁶ Hinton was a spiritual guide and mentor to the Oxford historian of the indus-

trial revolution, Arnold Toynbee, and influenced Toynbee's friends Henrietta and Samuel Barnett, who founded Toynbee Hall in 1884, the university settlement in Whitechapel named in Toynbee's memory.

Hinton's writings may have focused exclusively on sex between men and women, but his ideas about sexual freedom struck a particularly resonant chord among well-educated philanthropic men and women like Edith Lees Ellis who were attracted to members of their own sex. The married aristocratic poet Roden Berkeley Wriothesley Noel (third son of the Earl of Gainsborough), possessed with "a soul Bisexual," found in Hinton's theories a way to combine his zeal to better the plight of poor children with his equally absorbing passion for describing and enjoying beautiful male bodies.⁵⁷ Other university-educated men shared Noel's interest in Hinton's ideas as well as his search for an ethical creed compatible with their love of male comrades. When the Arts and Crafts socialist Charles Ashbee returned to Kings College, Cambridge, after a sojourn in the Whitechapel slums at Toynbee Hall, he talked over Hinton's theories with his circle of friends and with Edward Carpenter, the age's most outspoken defender of homosexual rights and one of Roden Noel's confidants.⁵⁸

If Hinton mattered so much to thoughtful men and women destined to leave their mark on modern British history, why has he languished in such obscurity? Hinton's virtual erasure from history must in part be attributed to the opacity of his prose and his lack of a coherent philosophical system.⁵⁹ But his disappearance from history was also the result of a deliberate campaign of rumor and innuendo in the 1880s intended to discredit him and his ideas at precisely the time his disciples tried to secure his reputation as a first-rate thinker and social visionary. Hinton was pilloried for violating a litany of sexual norms: espousing free love and the virtues of nakedness; engaging in an affair with his sister-in-law; and offering attractive women an opportunity to experience the joys of sexual liberation with him.⁶⁰ When his son Howard actually did abandon his wife and position as science master at Uppingham and entered into a free union with Mrs. Maud Weldon in 1884, many felt that the son's transgressions vindicated their worst suspicions about his long-dead father.⁶¹ Hinton became *persona non grata* with many late-Victorian proponents of frank discussion of sex and social reform who felt too vulnerable to criticisms about the conduct of their private lives to risk association with the disgraced Hinton.⁶² The quicksand of sexual scandal, based wholly on unsubstantiated rumor, swallowed up Hinton's good deeds and philosophy, leaving behind few visible traces of his once formidable influence on contemporaries' understanding of the dynamics of eros and altruism.

Even this cursory overview of the dense networks of discipleship and affiliation surrounding Hinton demonstrates that his ideas contributed

substantially to innovative philanthropic movements and social purity crusades and formed part of the intellectual lineage of ethical socialism, radical sex reform, and the “science” of sexuality. In the chapters that follow, I reintroduce many of his followers as they wrestled with the legacy of his life and ideas in their day to day work in the slums. Just as men and women whose sexual subjectivities spanned a wide spectrum of same- and opposite-sex desires found spiritual and intellectual sustenance in Hinton, so, too, this book brings together their histories as they sought to integrate their approaches to urban poverty with their ideas about gender and sexuality.

Each of the next five chapters delves into the tension between eros and altruism at a particular moment in the history of slumming in London. I offer neither a continuous nor comprehensive narrative, but rather a series of case studies presented in loosely chronological order. The weight of my evidence and arguments are drawn from the period from the 1860s to World War I, but I will also reach backward to the 1840s and forward to the interwar period and beyond. I will move freely across traditional disciplines including history, literature, art history, and sociology in bringing together men’s and women’s, cultural and political, feminist and queer histories.

I am unashamedly opportunistic in my deployment of a wide range of methodologies and theoretical approaches but my championship of no one of them. My approach has been guided by pragmatic considerations: if a methodology makes it possible to tease out meaning from my evidence, I have used it to the best of my abilities. At the same time, I also have tried to interpret the words of my informants according to their own time-bound social and cultural logic. Understanding men and women from the past on their own terms is quite different from uncritical acceptance of them. I have sought to balance respect for the depth and extent of reformers’ commitment to serving the poor with awareness that they imposed their own assumptions about sexuality, gender, and class on the poor. A great deal of useful scholarly energies have been devoted to sorting out whether the flowering of Victorian philanthropy grew out of genuine Christian empathy for the downtrodden or fear of the disruptive powers of the underclass; out of a desire to love the poor or to dominate them. The evidence gathered in this book suggests that we stand to gain deeper insights by exploring how these seemingly contradictory approaches and impulses co-existed and fed off one another without reducing one to the other. Consequently, I often provide more than one way to think about specific evidence and broader arguments rather than artificially disciplining my findings to support a narrower and more apparently coherent interpretation. While some readers may

find this approach frustrating or equivocal, it constitutes less a refusal to make up my mind than an interpretation sustained throughout the book.

The book has a two-part structure. Part one, “Incognitos, Fictions, and Cross-Class Masquerades” consists of three chapters, each of which explores elites use of deceptive practices (incognitos, undercover investigative journalism, falsified photographs) to reveal “truths” about the poor that they claimed would otherwise have remained hidden. I explore contemporaries’ responses to the ethical conundrums raised by these techniques for producing knowledge about and images of the poor. All three of these chapters interpret texts and images of the poor, the context of their production and circulation, and their impact on the subsequent histories of social policy, sexology, literature, journalism, and photography. These chapters address broad themes in Victorian society, but I approach them through the narrower lens of the work of an individual or a key episode in that person’s life. While my aims are not those of the biographer, I hope that readers will feel as though they have had a chance to get to know my subjects in their complexly flawed humanity.

These chapters build on the insight that clothing was both a metaphor and a marker of class and sexual identities.⁶³ Given the vast scale of life in London and its limitless possibilities for encounters with strangers, most had no choice but to assume that the clothes a person wore defined who a person was. At the same time, Londoners knew all too well that clothes were unreliable signifiers of identity because they could be removed as easily as they were put on. The slum explorers, reformers, and journalists discussed in part one cast off their clothing—and with it the constraints though not privileges of their social status—to gain insights into the poor and themselves.⁶⁴

Disguise and the homoerotic possibilities of nakedness were key issues in the workhouse scandal and press sensation examined in chapter one, “Workhouse Nights: Homelessness, Homosexuality and Cross-Class Masquerades.” This chapter recreates the chain of social, cultural, and political responses to a series of newspaper articles published in January 1866 by the journalist James Greenwood, who audaciously disguised himself as a tramp and spent the night in the state-regulated ward for homeless men in the Lambeth Workhouse. Greenwood’s claim that the casual ward had been transformed into a male brothel for the “hideous” enjoyment of homeless men and youths unleashed a moral panic and led Londoners to wonder whether Greenwood was a selfless crusader exposing the cruel treatment of the homeless poor or an unscrupulous adventurer gratifying his own morbid curiosity. I trace the enduring impact of this workhouse scandal on the British state’s construction and regulation of male homosexuality and homelessness.

A decade later, Londoners once again found themselves discussing the

truthfulness and sexual morality of a man who claimed to be a champion of the outcast poor. Chapter two, “Dr. Barnardo’s Artistic Fictions: Photography, Sexuality, and the Ragged Child” recovers the meanings of photographs of street children, whose tattered garments not only revealed their vulnerable bodies but also beseeched viewers to act on their behalf. Such images have a long history—beginning in the 1870s, when the renowned evangelical philanthropist Dr. Thomas John Barnardo first photographed “street arabs” in his care, ostensibly to document the conditions under which he originally found them and to advertise his own benevolence. This chapter examines the 1877 arbitration hearing in which Barnardo defended himself against charges that he kept company with a prostitute, abused the children in his Home and circulated falsified and sexually provocative images of them (his so-called artistic fictions). The Barnardo controversy, like the workhouse scandal examined in chapter one, led contemporaries to contemplate the relation between eros and altruism. Was Barnardo an upstanding Christian or a sexual miscreant? Did his staged photographs of children, taken in his studio, capture the essential truths about their harrowing lives on the streets or did these images memorialize Barnardo’s self-serving exploitation of his helpless charges?

Chapter three, “The American Girl in London: Gender, Journalism, and Social Investigation in the Late Victorian Metropolis” recreates the transatlantic world of female investigative journalists in the slums of New York and London from the 1880s to 1920s. I highlight the transatlantic migrations and elaborate self-inventions of one woman, Elizabeth Banks, who claimed for women the right to imitate James Greenwood by disguising herself as a laboring girl to garner copy for her articles. Unlike either Greenwood or Barnardo, Banks never pretended to be motivated by a desire to help others. This chapter explains why Londoners were so disconcerted and intrigued by Banks’s refusal to play the part of either the crusading journalist or Lady Bountiful. It sets Banks’s exploits against the backdrop of shifting constructions of femininity and the social and cultural history of women’s incognito slumming and their journalistic accounts of female labor and urban poverty.

Part two, “Cross-Class Sisterhood and Brotherhood in the Slums” consists of two chapters analyzing the tensions between the rhetoric and practice and erotics and politics of brotherly and sisterly love for the poor. I move away from the biographical approach deployed in part one and offer a more panoramic view of philanthropic and religious institutions and movements in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century London. While scandals about sex (or, more accurately, about putative sex acts) figure centrally in part one, part two delves deeply into the subtle but also elusive articulation of sexual desire, sexual subjectivity, and

gender ideologies. These closely linked chapters underscore how conceptions of fraternity and sorority shaped reformers' programs and policies for the poor and their efforts to understand themselves as individuals. At the same time, I analyze how poor men, women, and children negotiated with their would-be benefactors and manipulated elite preconceptions about them to extract what resources they could.

Part two extends my engagement with the impact of imperialism on slumming, a theme that enters briefly into part one. These two chapters demonstrate the ways in which the metropolitan slums and distant outposts of empire were linked in the British imperial imagination as places of freedom and danger, missionary altruism and sexual opportunity. Many male and female reformers discussed in part two not only constructed rhetorical analogies between the two but literally moved between them during the course of their own careers. The American philosopher William James was appalled by precisely the tendency to conflate slums with colonial possessions, which he detected in Rudyard Kipling's writings. "Kipling knows perfectly well," James complained, "that our camps in the tropics are not college settlements or our armies bands of philanthropists, slumming it; and I think it a shame that he should represent us to ourselves in that light."⁶⁵

Dirt as a material phenomenon and as a sexually charged metaphor in the daily lives and writings of educated independent women forms the subject of chapter four, "The Politics and Erotics of Dirt: Cross-Class Sisterhood in the Slums." The first part asks why elite women were so fascinated by dirt and shows how this influenced their analysis of the economics and sexual politics of female poverty in London. The second part turns more fully to the "erotics" of dirt by focusing on the relationship between dirt, dirty bodies, and dirty desires in women's writings about slum life. Chapter five, "The New Man in the Slums: Religion, Masculinity, and the Men's Settlement House Movement" opens with an overview of the history of fraternity and fraternal ideologies in Victorian Britain and then analyzes the interplay of religion and sexuality in benevolent institutions devoted to cross-class brotherhood. I focus on the first two settlement houses, pan-denominational Toynbee Hall and High Anglican Oxford House, as sites where elite men destined to play leading roles in church and state in the twentieth century experimented with unconventional ideas about politics and class relations, brotherhood and democracy, gender and sexuality.

Asserting the historian's peculiar prerogative to dwell in the past, I have largely left it to readers to discern for themselves the implications of this study for the world in which we live. In several chapters, I provide epilogues which briefly trace some of the more striking post-World War I legacies of the particular stories I have told. This book emphasizes the

challenges several generations of energetic and compassionate men and women confronted in their efforts to better the lives of the London poor. In simplest terms, it shows just how difficult it was—and is—to translate the desire to be good into actually doing good for others. I hope that this study may perhaps inspire and chasten those intent to better the world to reflect deeply on the implications of the choices made by like-minded men and women a century ago.