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“A Right Sort of Man”: Gender, Class Identity, and Social Reform in Late-Victorian Britain

The Education Act of 1870 (a.k.a the “Forster Act”) marked a watershed in the history of the Victorian state. With its passage, England finally joined the other major European states in their adoption of public elementary schooling for all children.¹ The act divided the country into 2,500 school districts, each to have a governing school board elected by local ratepayers. At both the national and local levels, however, there was great concern over the government’s expanded role in the home, over the fate of England’s extensive parochial school system, and over whether elementary schooling should be paid for directly by parents or indirectly through taxes. Some measure of compelling attendance was also deemed necessary, particularly for the poorest of England’s working classes, by those across the socioeconomic spectrum who supported universal primary education.² The newly elected school boards were therefore authorized to create their own bylaws regarding school fees and the mechanisms of compulsion in their districts.

Because of a lack of consensus among policymakers on the education issue, school fees were not eliminated until 1891, and compulsory attendance did not become national policy until 1880. In a nation where Liberal

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ideals and the right of individuals to be free from government interference were widely championed, compulsion was an especially problematic subject, and not one that the members of the first School Board for London (LSB) approached lightly.³ Most members of the board agreed that they should maintain as much continuity as possible between the established traditions of voluntary philanthropy in London's working-class districts and the new, state-sponsored educational reform. To that end, in 1871, the LSB committee tasked with laying a blueprint for enforcing the laws on compulsory education strongly recommended that the board should hire "women who have had experience in similar work" as London's first official School Attendance Officers (i.e., truant officers).⁴ The justification for this recommendation was twofold. First, since these officers would be dealing with parents on issues involving childrearing, the work was "most fitly dealt with by women," and second, they argued that middle-class women with previous experience in domestic reform "will be the least likely to incite resistance" from working-class mothers.⁵ At the launch of compulsory schooling, the LSB had clearly defined the enforcement of the new regulations as women's work.

The initial reaction to the committee's suggestion was mixed. Among the first cohort of School Attendance Officers (a.k.a. "School Board Visitors," or simply "Visitors") in London, men and women were almost equally represented. In 1871, for example, the Lambeth Division of the LSB hired four women and four men as Visitors; the former were paid £50 per annum, the latter, £80.⁶ From an initial gender parity in 1871–72, the numbers of women serving as London School Attendance Officers declined rapidly. In May 1872, more than half of the London Visitors (25 of 47) were women, but by 1874, two of the largest school board divisions in London had no female Visitors at all.⁷ The number of female SAOs in the metropolis as a whole dropped dramatically over the course of the decade, and this pattern would be repeated across Britain.⁸

The exclusion of women from the profession of School Attendance Officer complicates the picture of late-Victorian social policy as it has been drawn by recent historians. Seth Koven and Sonya Michel have both emphasized how the development of the welfare state and, in particular, state policy on children's welfare, were arenas where women played an increasingly prominent role.⁹ The masculinization of the SAOs profession thus ran contrary to the general trend of women's employment in the field of education and of their involvement, albeit largely at a local level, in the Victorian state.

Previous historians have pointed to the expansion of the English government—and the expansion of the state educational apparatus in particular—during the Victorian era as a phenomenon that opened the doors of opportunity (however tentative) for women's employment as professionals, though they have also shown how women were often excluded from positions of authority within the state educational system.¹⁰ The primary focus of such scholarship has usually been on the exclusion of women from the higher levels of educational organization, such as from the elected membership of school boards and from Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools. The transformation of school attendance work into an almost exclusively male preserve demonstrates how women were also systematically excluded from even the lowest levels of the state education system. Since such a career could have been open to women of modest social, economic, and educational backgrounds, this exclusion was highly significant. Not every woman could aspire to be a school board member or an HMI, but the formal qualifications required for the position of School Attendance Officer were not extensive.¹¹

The success of male SAOs and their immediate superiors, the district superintendents, in excluding women from their profession was dependent on their assertion of masculine domestic moral authority and their redefinition of social reform from a voluntary, "personal" activity appropriate for women to a professional, bureaucratic endeavor for which only men were suitable. This process entailed the exclusion of middle-class women from this arena of organized state reform and the blaming of working-class mothers for the alleged moral decline of working-class homes that made such reforms necessary.¹² To put it simply, according to local administrators and the agents who executed policy, women were the root cause of social ills that they were inherently incapable of ameliorating.

In addition to revealing how the expansion of the Victorian state, even as it provided new opportunities for women, helped institutionalize their exclusion from other professional roles, the efforts by SAOs and their superiors to masculinize their profession provide valuable insights into the relationship between gender, class, and morality and into the nature of lower-middle-class identity in this period. Historians are still in the process of reconstructing the social and cultural history of the lower middle class, and the gender history of this elusive segment of Victorian society remains among its least-understood aspects.¹³ Recently, scholars of this period have begun to recognize the vital role that masculinity played in the lives of lower-middle-class men.¹⁴ Victorian masculinity was an ideal that lower-middle-class men, who often found employment as clerks and in other jobs on the bottom rung of those deemed by middle-class

observers to be appropriate for the educated and respectable, found particularly difficult to attain in the public eye.

Domesticity, as John Tosh has pointed out, was central to middle-class ideals of masculinity.¹⁵ The most serious public challenge to lower-middle-class masculinity was found in satire and public caricature that portrayed lower-middle-class men as weak and attributed this weakness to “women’s control of the domestic sphere.”¹⁶ But, this ideal of middle-class male domestic authority that SAOs adopted in their profession fit uneasily with the patterns of working-class life, as Ellen Ross and Anna Davin have emphasized.¹⁷ And the “masculine” approach to social reform, which emphasized coercion and bureaucratic order, was poorly suited to the social complexities of attendance work. Among SAOs, who were challenged to work in what the LSB initially conceived to be a feminized sphere of activity and one in which the methods popularized by women’s voluntary reform ultimately proved more effective, issues of masculinity, femininity, and their relation to class identity took on considerable urgency.

To categorize SAOs firmly as lower-middle-class is itself problematic, both because the cohort was not well defined and because an SAO’s salary, social background, and work environment all existed in the liminal space between the working and middle classes. The men who became SAOs were more likely to be drawn from the ranks of policemen, soldiers, and artisans than they were from the ranks of Victorian clerks. If their social origins were most commonly working class, the identity they built for themselves, which focused on morality, education, professional association, and the drawing of a strong distinction between themselves and the ranks of laborers, was closer to a middle-class ideal. Regardless of their often modest social origins, it is clear that the SAOs *aspired* to be recognized as part of the white-collar workforce. It is for this reason that, according to the journal of their national association, the enforcement of the compulsory attendance laws was “not the work of artisans, but men of education.”¹⁸

SAOs’ efforts to define their work as being “professional” therefore illuminate the fluidity of class and gender identities and their relationship to morality and domesticity in Victorian England. Their public efforts to establish their class status and masculinity in relation to public duty and the alleged moral progress of English society were central to their broader effort to define themselves and their social position in Victorian society. The wider historical implications of their efforts lie in their demonstration of how class and gender were constructed and contested categories, and in their support of Patrick Joyce’s argument that such discursive constructions of self through

the medium of public narrative were essential to both working-class and middle-class identity in this period.¹⁹

The campaign waged by SAOs and their superintendents to establish the former's work as an exclusively male preserve also underscores some of the essential tensions operating within late-Victorian social reform. Among the most important were the construction of a firm distinction between compulsory state reform and voluntary reform or charity, and debates over the efficacy of coercion versus persuasive tactics. Underlying these debates was the more fundamental contrast between the elevation of a "masculine" approach to reform, which stressed bureaucratic tactics, legal methods, professionalism, and an assertive moral authority, on the one hand, and the concurrent deprecation of a "feminine" approach that advocated personal contact with the working class and sought to bridge the distance between classes in Victorian society, on the other. In these debates, men had a considerable advantage because the structure of the Victorian state education system ensured that their voices would dominate most public discussions and policy decisions.²⁰

This did not mean, however, that the masculine approach to social reform would be unanimously championed. Male state agents ultimately found that the methods developed by voluntary female reformers were often more practical and, equally important, more supportive of their attempts to fashion a positive professional image for themselves than was the more coercive, impersonal, masculine approach championed by their superiors. For the SAOs, the dilemma of how to work in a traditionally feminine sphere while establishing a masculine identity set the context for their efforts to define themselves as professionals, to work effectively, and to gain the respect of both those above them in the social hierarchy and of those below them. It is only against the backdrop of these tensions—between volunteerism and professionalism, between persuasive tactics and coercive tactics, and, lastly, between self-consciously "feminine" and "masculine" models of social reform—that the significance of the SAOs and their role in the late-Victorian state becomes clear. My focus in this article will be on London, both because its large and influential municipal education system often set the precedent for policy throughout the nation and because its location in the economic, political, and cultural capital lent its educational affairs a public prominence that those of other major British cities lacked. But, since the policy issues debated in London had a national resonance, and since those who debated them often drew upon experiences from across the nation in their arguments, I have incorporated evidence from other urban areas when appropriate.

The initial cohort of London Visitors faced a daunting task. Their first step was to compile accurate records of how many school-age children there were in their divisions. Once that had been done, the job of monitoring school attendance itself began. SAOs worked in conjunction with school teachers to track the attendance (or nonattendance) of every school-age child in the metropolis. If any child on the compiled rolls failed to attend school consistently over a period that could range from a few weeks to a few months, depending on the size and location of the school division, the local SAO issued a warning to the father. Sustained absence prompted a summons for the father to appear before the officials of the local attendance committee to explain his child's absence. If the child still failed to attend the mandatory number of times each week, the Visitor or their superintendent could then apply to the local magistrate for a court summons against the father. The decision to fine the parent, to postpone the issue until the parent had time to ameliorate their child's attendance, or to dismiss the case outright rested in the hands of the magistrate, who would carefully weigh the evidence given by the Visitor or their district superintendent against any arguments put forth by the parent. The report given in the initial years of educational compulsion by one SAO from Reading, a town to the west of London, gives some idea of how much work the job entailed:

Gentlemen - I must respectfully report that it has been necessary for me, in the past month, to give parents 111 notices to send 239 children to school; 177 being irregular (four regular ones being included in the notices for preventative reasons), and fifty-nine non-attendants. . . . I have conferred with 229 children in the streets; this duty being almost stultified by frequent holidays from various causes: "inspections," "examinations," and "decoration of rooms" preparatory thereto, and want of unanimity with reference to Whitsuntide, &c. Children are averse to attend after and previous to such relaxations. I have visited 243 homes of children; the public schools fifty-three times; receiving therefrom 343 irregular children's names. . . . I have also during the past month referred fifty cases to the Destitute Children's Aid Society.²¹

And this was the work of only a single month!

When interviewed by LSB members in 1874, the district superintendents of Visitors gave a variety of arguments for why, contrary to the board's initial recommendations, women were not suitable for the duties described above. Most of their objections focused on the two aspects of the Visitors' work that differentiated it most strongly from that of private, volunteer

reformers—taking an informal census of all children in a neighborhood (“scheduling”) and the prosecution of school attendance cases in the local courts.²² One superintendent said simply that “cases sometimes occur which they [female Visitors] cannot deal with, and hence they need the assistance of male Visitors.”²³ The most revealing response came from the superintendent for the Marylebone Division, who wrote that he “had six [female visitors] to look after. (a) they are not physically capable of the really hard work. (b) they do not carry the same *weight* or *authority* as a right sort of man. (c) they are given to too much talk—too fond of argument. (d) I have reason to think they have, now and then, ‘pet aversions.’ (e) They do not look well as ‘*Officers of the Board*’ in Police Courts, and frequently prove too much.”²⁴ In effect, the Marylebone superintendent had taken the very characteristics that, according to the LSB’s initial findings, had made women seem so suitable as attendance officers and portrayed them instead as liabilities. In particular, their proclivity for conversation and debate and their unobtrusive bearing were held up as disadvantages in the execution of the attendance laws.

It is tempting to attribute the contradictory views on women’s suitability as SAOs to the gender politics of the London state education apparatus. Both the LSB and the attendance committees drawn from it had included prominent supporters of women’s rights—Emilie Davies and Elizabeth Garrett, for example, were both elected to the first LSB in 1870, while Rosamond Davenport Hill, Alice Westlake, and Edith Simcox were active members of the attendance Bye-Laws Committee in the 1880s.²⁵ The majority of school board members, however, were men, as were most of the officials of the bureaucratic hierarchy that extended from the boards up to the Education Department, which ultimately oversaw the entire state education system. At the level immediately above the SAOs, moreover, there was not a single female District Superintendent of Visitors in all of London. Since the superintendents were responsible for monitoring the performance of the SAOs and for recommending their continued employment or their release from service, their opinions carried great weight in staffing decisions. This pattern of increasing male predominance in management and a concurrent lessening of female authority and independence in attendance work fits in with a general trend, beginning in midcentury, in the transfer of social reform from a voluntary enterprise to a state-run affair.²⁶

The tensions between the superintendents and the board and committee members who were staunch advocates of women’s active participation in public affairs were certainly apparent in the debates over whether men or

women were more suitable for employment as Visitors. Those who opposed women Visitors also insisted that there were fundamental differences between voluntary and state-sponsored reform. The social position of SAOs and that of women volunteer philanthropists relative to the working class was a crucial consideration as well, one that affected both the arguments over the gendering of attendance work and the Visitors' own interpretations of their roles in working-class communities. Ironically, the justification for women's initial involvement in the nineteenth-century reform movement provided powerful ammunition to those who ideologically opposed their participation in state-sponsored educational reform. Women's contribution to voluntary reform had originally been presented as an extension of their roles in the domestic sphere. Voluntary social reform projects directed at "domestic" issues such as child welfare and health had allowed middle-class women to stake a claim in a public sphere where Victorian discourse otherwise gave men preeminence.²⁷ By the time such enterprises began to come under state purview in the mid-nineteenth century, middle-class women had already established considerable authority there, and could therefore contribute to the effort without transgressing gender expectations.²⁸

Even when working in the public sphere of reform, however, most middle-class Victorian women remained committed to the idea that the feminine character was inherently nurturing and empathetic. As the state became increasingly involved in these projects, women continued to advocate an approach that stressed sympathy, compassion, and personal contact, what Koven and Michel have described as a "maternalist" or "mothering" state.²⁹ But in their efforts, they often found themselves at odds with the more bureaucratic, impersonal, and coercive approach advocated by male state agents.³⁰ The attitude taken by Sydney Turner, the first of Her Majesty's Inspectors of reformatory schools, typified this contrast. Turner sharply derided the "sentimentality," "petting," and "indulgence" of the feminine approach to reform while praising the more effective "manly, straightforward, and strengthening tone" of the masculine mode.³¹

When superintendents complained that women SAOs were "too fond of argument" and did not carry the same "weight and authority" as a man, they were mirroring the contrasts between masculine and feminine methods of reform articulated by their superiors and arguing that the latter was ineffective in school attendance work. Superintendents also insisted that the key aspects of Visitors' work, "scheduling" and the prosecution of the attendance laws in the local courts, were the two duties women were least capable of performing.³² A good SAO, according to this view, would carry out his duties

using a masculine, impersonal, bureaucratic approach that depended on his official authority, the objective evidence of his attendance records, and legal coercion through the courts, rather than a feminine approach that focused on personal contact and extended discussions with parents.

The superintendents' arguments on the role of Visitors as legal representatives, the necessity of coercive tactics, and the inadvisability of extended interaction between state agents and working-class men and women, were not wholly replicated in the attitudes of the Visitors themselves. The efficacy of the methods developed earlier within the context of volunteer female philanthropy became clear to the London SAOs over time. When they were interviewed by the LSB in 1891, Visitors, by then an almost exclusively male cohort, championed precisely those qualities and approaches that the superintendents had criticized fifteen years earlier. Persuasion, communication, and an intimate knowledge of the character and circumstances of working-class parents, they argued, were the keys to success.³³ Indeed, some statements by Visitors even echoed the rejection of bureaucratic, impersonal methods articulated earlier by middle-class women volunteers. In an article printed in the inaugural edition of the Visitors' professional journal, *The School Attendance Officer's Gazette* (later renamed *The School Attendance Gazette*), one author wrote that the profession of SAO "has attracted into its ranks the men who, not content with performing their duties like machines, desire to work out [of] an ideal."³⁴ Part of the motivation for such statements was Visitors' assumptions that by emphasizing the moral dimensions of their work over its bureaucratic aspects, they would win greater respect, status, and remuneration from both their immediate superiors and the general public.³⁵

The use of judicial summonses against parents was another point of contention. In contrast to superintendents' emphasis on the importance of Visitors' roles as representatives of the state in local courts, many SAOs stressed that legal coercion should be avoided whenever possible and used only when the established approach of "moral persuasion" had failed.³⁶ SAOs and superintendents also differed in their general attitudes toward women in the courts. The former insisted that, in order to be effective, the laws on school attendance should hold mothers as well as fathers accountable for a child's school attendance. Superintendents, on the other hand, were consistent in their opposition to the presence of women in the courts, applying this view to both female SAOs and to working-class mothers. Rather than insisting that the law be changed to hold mothers legally accountable, the superintendents argued that the 1873 Act dealing with summary prosecution should be altered so that the accused (i.e., the father) could not send his wife to answer the

charges, but *had* to appear in person. He would therefore, upon conviction, promptly face any sentence handed down.

Despite superintendents' assertions to the contrary, there were considerable parallels between the "feminine" approach of middle-class volunteers and how male SAOs engaged their work, and there seemed to have been no practical reason why women could not perform well as school attendance officers. In several important ways, both the approach and motivations of SAOs mirrored those of their middle-class female predecessors in volunteer and amateur philanthropy. The "moralized" approach to reforming the working class, for example, was a prominent shared theme.³⁷ In particular, SAOs and the host of female District Nurses, Charity Organization Society agents, and settlement house workers all shared a deep commitment to sorting the "deserving" from the "undeserving" in their work.³⁸ The opposition to alcohol was another common principle.³⁹ Likewise, both male SAOs and female social reformers were acutely aware of ethnicity and the obstacles that the cultural distance between themselves and their charges could pose to their reform efforts.⁴⁰ Above all, SAOs and female social reformers shared an unwavering confidence in the rightness of their cause and in the necessity of their presence as a positive moral influence in working-class neighborhoods.

The Visitors' emphasis on morality was prominently demonstrated in their detailed descriptions of their districts, which were collected by Charles Booth's assistants in 1886–87 as part of the research for *Life and Labour of the People of London*. For "deserving" parents, the Visitors might lend a sympathetic ear, describe them favorably in their reports, or even draw the attention of charities to their plight. The "undeserving" were vilified in the Visitors' reports and, when appropriate, were recommended for prosecution according to the school attendance bylaws. It is ironic that Booth used the information provided by the Visitors, men who frequently attributed poverty to moral causes and drunkenness, as evidence that poverty was largely the result of a labor market over which working-class Londoners had no control.⁴¹

Reflecting shifts in late-Victorian discourse on class and morality, the Visitors did not, as a rule, always argue that poverty was in and of itself a sign of moral degradation. In their eyes, a street, household, or individual could be poor but respectable.⁴² They were more concerned with the circumstances that led to such poverty, and made their judgments accordingly. To differentiate between the "respectable" and the "rough," the Visitors employed a series of commonly understood signs and terms. Among the most frequently used indicators of immorality were filth, the poor physical condition of homes, children in the streets, violence, and drunkenness.⁴³ The term "respectable,"

along with "decent" and "hard-working," was ubiquitous in Visitors' descriptions of parents who conformed to their moral standards. In contrast, SAOs classified those who violated their moral parameters as "dirty," a "bad lot," a "filthy lot," or, perhaps the most common and damning, "poor ... own acct. [i.e., by their own fault]." ⁴⁴ Using physical metaphors to indicate moral failings was common among those who worked in the state educational system. ⁴⁵ The outwardly-visible filth and disorder mirrored an inner moral corruption, and cleanliness was likewise an indicator of respectability, hence the emphasis in girls' education on housekeeping and laundry work. ⁴⁶

Besides drawing on a common terminology of respectability to describe the moral status of working-class streets and households, SAOs and middle-class female volunteers also shared similar motivations for engaging in their work. The desire to legitimate their participation in the broader sphere of Victorian public life was a common cause for both groups. Likewise, the "heightened sense of individual worth" identified by Seth Koven as an instrumental factor in middle-class women's volunteer work was also part of the Visitors' motivations. ⁴⁷ But the disparity in gender and social position between the men who became SAOs and the middle-class women who worked in private philanthropy prompted significant differences in how the two groups engaged London's working class. The confidence with which middle-class women approached the reform of working-class households depended on their alleged moral superiority and assumed expertise in domestic affairs. ⁴⁸ Beyond those assumptions, most middle-class reformers felt that social contact alone between the middle class and the working class would have a positive effect on the latter. ⁴⁹ This assumption was a natural outgrowth of Victorian discourses on the origins of poverty and immorality, which held that the social and geographic alienation of the working class from the middle and upper classes was a chief cause of these ills. ⁵⁰

The differences between the SAOs' approach to reform and that of their female middle-class predecessors lay not in a rejection of personal contact with the working class, but rather in the relative moral and social position from which, ideally, that contact would be made. The goal of many middle-class female reformers was to bridge the gap between themselves and their working-class subjects and, through that proximity, to morally uplift them. SAOs, in contrast, went to great lengths to establish and maintain, both in action and public dialogue, a social *distance* from working-class parents. ⁵¹ Unlike their female middle-class counterparts, furthermore, the SAOs never claimed to be advocates for the poor, nor did they seek to find common ground with them in their work. For almost every positive capacity

that Visitors ascribed to themselves—diligence, morality, sobriety, enthusiasm for education, compassion toward children—they argued that the converse was prevalent among working-class parents. Such contrasts were essential to SAOs' discursive construction of their class identity, since their claim to status as professionals was constantly being challenged from both above and below.

The effect that relative class identification had on the dynamics of social reform was clearly evident in one of the SAO's most significant contributions to the late-Victorian discourse on class and poverty, which was their role in Charles Booth's survey of the London poor. The information gained from the Visitors' notebooks and interviews with the agents themselves formed the centerpiece of Booth's study.⁵² Just as the Visitors used their experiences among the poor as a touchstone for the establishment of their own class identity and moral status, so too did Booth use their information as support for his own conclusions about the nature of poverty, its causes, and possible ameliorations for it. Booth's observations, like those of the Visitors, were drawn in the context of his own efforts to identify his role in the reform project and his social position vis-à-vis working-class Londoners. Booth claimed that he was an empiricist and that he was seeking to avoid the dramatization of poor people's lives that was common in journalistic accounts.⁵³ It proved impossible, however, for Booth to rely on a source that was itself so heavily laden with moralized language without replicating it himself. Consequently, there were significant parallels in how Booth and the Visitors described working-class households. One prominent example was Booth's employment of the same indicators that the Visitors used to distinguish the "rough" from the "respectable," house by house and street by street.

But, like female middle-class volunteers, Booth ultimately claimed a personal connection to the poor, and sought an intimacy with them that the SAOs tended to eschew. Whereas the Visitors used the working class as a moral foil against which they could define themselves, Booth, operating from a more secure position in the social hierarchy, often expressed admiration for the qualities he found in his subjects. Some of the starkest contrasts were apparent in their respective descriptions of parenting. The SAOs were almost unanimously critical of working-class childrearing and this particular failing served as the central justification for their enforcement work. Good parents, their reasoning held, would send their children to school regularly, and the ubiquity of poor school attendance was therefore an indicator of the failings of working-class parenting. Booth wrote, conversely, that "the simple natural lives of working-class people tend to their own children's happiness more

than the artificial complicated existence of the rich."⁵⁴ He even claimed that the moral status of the parents did not necessarily translate into poor child-rearing, an argument that directly contradicted the claims of the SAOs.⁵⁵ Booth sought connection where the SAOs maintained a distance, and his sympathetic tone and embracement of the moral complexities of working-class life contrasted with the moral absolutes espoused by the Visitors.⁵⁶

Ultimately, Booth drew different conclusions from the Visitors about the cause and character of poverty in London. The latter remained wedded to the mid-Victorian attitude that poverty was often the result of moral failings such as laziness or drunkenness, hence their constant, damning description of innumerable households as being impoverished through no fault but their own. Booth, in contrast, argued that poverty was caused primarily by lack of economic opportunity.⁵⁷ On the other hand, Booth and the Visitors were in agreement over the ameliorative potential of compulsory education. The positive results of the policy, according to Booth, lay not in the transformation of working-class boys and girls from workers into scholars.⁵⁸ He claimed that the successes of compulsory education lay rather in the moral education of working-class children and their instruction in the practices that made one respectable, arguing that through these lessons the working class had been given the means to morally uplift themselves. "Obedience to discipline and rules of proper behavior have been inculcated," Booth wrote in praise of compulsory education, "habits of order and cleanliness have been acquired; and from these habits self-respect arises."⁵⁹ These goals had been central to the arguments for compulsory education at its inception and remained prominent in the vision of both Visitors and their superintendents.

Charles Booth, even as he expressed his appreciation for Visitors' dedication, was not the only authority in late-Victorian social reform who found himself at odds with their claims to moral expertise. In their attempts to forge a masculine, professional identity for themselves in the context of social reform and the Victorian state, SAOs also encountered considerable resistance from within the bureaucracy that managed their efforts. When asked by the London School Board to explain the deficiencies in school attendance in his division, the superintendent of West Lambeth, for example, claimed that "the class of Visitors might be improved as some of the present staff were not men to carry the weight and respect they should. The scale of salary should be increased, as the present remuneration would hardly secure a better class of men."⁶⁰

Male Visitors were drawn primarily from the ranks of former soldiers, policemen, and artisans.⁶¹ Men like Elias Eisenstadt, a poor Polish Jewish

immigrant who had once made a living by selling scrounged goods from a handcart, or David Parry, a former coal miner, could hardly be recognized by their superiors as being morally qualified on account of their class background.⁶² Nor could Daniel Gerrard, the vice president of the Visitors' national organization, claim to possess the same domestic knowledge as a middle-class female volunteer. His domestic experience consisted of his upbringing in an orphanage and his work as a chimney sweep.⁶³

In response to the doubts expressed about their fitness for duty, Visitors laid claim to a moral authority founded on masculinity rather than on class position. The foil in this effort was working-class mothers, whom the Visitors portrayed as ignorant, neglectful, and selfish. According to Visitors, the moral decline of the working-class home was attributable specifically to the failures of working-class *female* domesticity. This focus on mothers' habits and behavior was yet another aspect of the Visitors' work inherited from the tradition of volunteer female philanthropy.⁶⁴ With working-class fathers' authority in the home circumscribed by long working hours and an alleged ignorance of domestic affairs, only the intervention of male domestic authority in the form of the Visitors could resuscitate the degraded moral atmosphere of the household, the Visitors claimed. The pages of the *Gazette* were filled with stories, cartoons, and mock editorials that ridiculed working-class mothers, portraying them as greedy, deceptive women who had no desire to see their children educated and who treated the Visitors' efforts with scorn, hostility, and even threats of violence (see Fig. 1).

One constant criticism leveled by the Visitors was that parents, and in particular mothers, were far more concerned with the wages their children could bring in than they were with securing for them the long-term benefits of education. Witness the fictional conversation reported by one Visitor in the very first issue of the *Gazette*:

Officer, scheduling: "How old is John?"

Mother: "Well, I don't exactly know."

Officer: "But surely you have some idea."

Mother: "Well, the nearest I can tell you is, that he was twelve [i.e., of working age] last fruitin' time."⁶⁵

As an effective counter to the degenerate state of working-class women's domesticity, the Visitors depicted themselves as paragons of masculine moral virtue, worthy—or even superior—successors to the middle-class volunteers who, in previous decades, had reformed their charges through the moral authority granted by their class position and the domestic knowledge associated



THE CHALLENGE.

MRS. SLOGGINS (to nervous officer) "I admits they're not at schole;
but you jist try it on to take 'em!"

Fig. 1. "The Challenge," *The School Attendance Gazette*, August 1902.

with their gender. Surrounded by the moral degradation of urban poverty, the Visitors claimed to maintain their authority through their adherence to a strict and unforgiving code of masculine moral conduct. As one author instructed his colleagues:

Be free from the taint of intoxicating liquors, tobacco, and snuff.

Educate yourself in the work; master its details and be watchful of opportunities.

Be neat in appearance, punctual in attendance, zealous in your duty.

Be energetic and ambitious in your efforts; work with your head as well as hands.

Be honest in your intentions; kind, cheerful, courteous, and prudent in your dealings with teachers, parents, and children.

Be frank when expedient, and reticent when essential.⁶⁶

"Charged with the special duty of invading the vilest haunts of debauchery, immorality, and crime," another author wrote, it was the Visitors' dedication to duty and his moral rectitude in the face of thorough degradation that

allowed him to “fairly claim to be the greatest social reformer that has appeared in the present age.”⁶⁷

Not surprisingly, the idealized image of the Visitor laid out in the pages of the *Gazette* possessed the selfsame qualities that the immoral parents they described had lacked. Whereas the parents the Visitors wrote about for the Booth project were often “dirty,” the Visitors were “neat”; where they were “drunk,” Visitors were “free from the taint of intoxicating liquors”; and where the parents were “lazy” or “poor on own account,” Visitors were “energetic,” “ambitious,” and “punctual.” Unlike the middle-class observers who deployed these terms, however, Visitors argued that these characteristics of respectability were essentially male. Or, to be exact, that even if their female counterparts in “visiting” (professional or voluntary) possessed them, theirs was a passive morality that was ineffectual outside the confines of the home, hence the statement by the Marylebone superintendent that women lacked both the physical capacity and, more importantly, the “weight” and “authority” necessary for the hazardous task of reforming the working class.⁶⁸

The most conspicuous representation of SAOs’ masculine morality could be found in the biographical sketches published in the *School Attendance Gazette*. These biographies celebrated prominent members of the School Attendance Officers’ National Association (SAONA) who had, through diligence and virtue, uplifted themselves from modest or even impoverished origins. The authors of the articles presented the lives of the SAOs as struggles against adversity, struggles that had proven their dedication to education and their worthiness to vanguard the moral reform of the working class. The image of the self-made man who had struggled from modest beginnings to achieve a position of respect and even admiration in society was an essential element of lower-middle-class identity—an identity that the SAOs were self-consciously seeking to adopt—in Victorian England.⁶⁹ The biographers and eulogists of the *Gazette* ascribed an almost mythic power to personal ambition and perseverance. Even the most impoverished background and tragic family circumstances, the stories in the *Gazette* suggested, could be overcome through dedication, fortitude, and character.

Among the most prominent of the SAOs profiled in the *Gazette* was Daniel H. Gerrard, the vice president of the SAONA. Although Gerrard eventually settled in Glasgow, he had been born in Norfolk in 1849. After losing his father, a policeman, during a riot, Gerrard became a ward of the state.⁷⁰ He spent the next five years in an orphan’s home in Norfolk, where he received only the most basic academic instruction. By the time Gerrard left the orphanage at the age of eight, he had “barely [mastered] the alphabet and words

of one and two syllables." Gerrard was given over by the orphanage to a firm of chimney sweepers, whose owners had chosen him from among the other boys "as being most suitable on account of his slender build." He remained with this firm until the age of eighteen, when "his desire to make headway in life" prompted him to pursue a distinctly masculine career path, that of a soldier. After mustering out of the army, where he completed his education of his own volition at the regimental school, Gerrard accepted a position as an SAO in 1876. Summarizing the personal journey, thus far, of Daniel Gerrard, the author of the biography wrote, "His life is a record of triumphs over difficulties. To start under such unfortunate circumstances, and yet achieve a position of honor and influence, to have earned the respect and esteem of those above and below him in station, is a record his colleagues are proud of."

At first, Gerrard, an orphaned chimney sweeper turned soldier, who was nearly illiterate as a child, seems to have had little in common with Thomas Salter, an SAO from Bristol, whose biography appeared in the December 1902 issue of the *Gazette*. Salter had "commenced to read the Bible at a very early age," and was described by the biographer as a "scholar."⁷¹ He had attended a voluntary elementary school and later a boarding school near Kingswood. Upon closer examination, however, we learn that Salter's father, like Gerrard's, was from a modest social background—Salter's father was a builder. Before he became an SAO, Salter had worked in his father's trade as a carpenter. The author also tells us that Salter was connected with "various clubs, societies, and associations." Indeed, it was his "advocation of the 'rights and just demands of his colleagues'" as a member of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners, an organization that Salter had joined immediately after its inauguration, that first brought him to the attention of the chairman of the Bristol School Board.⁷² In July 1872, the Bristol board "induced [Salter] to become a School Attendance Officer."

The men who became SAOs came from a broad range of socioeconomic backgrounds, from the poorest of laborers to white-collar clerical workers. David Parry, of the Dudley School Board, started work in the coal mines of his hometown at the age of eight.⁷³ William Spencley, by contrast, was employed as a clerk before he began work for the Birmingham School Board.⁷⁴ T. W. Taylor served as an assistant master at schools in Leeds, Exeter, and Bristol, while Elias Eisenstadt, the poor Polish immigrant, made his first pence in his new country by "acquiring various saleable articles which he carried around for sale in the city of Hull and its neighbourhood."⁷⁵ Although military service, as historian David Rubinstein has suggested, was common among SAOs, in the men profiled by the *Gazette* an artisanal background was also frequent.⁷⁶ If there was a universal character to the employment of the men who became SAOs, it

was that they all came to the position not as their first occupation, but as the last stage in what was often a long and varied employment history. Visitors, according to these biographies, often demonstrated a high level of economic independence and extensive occupational experience. Both would have been almost impossible to realize for a woman operating within the boundaries of Victorian gender roles. Stephen York, for example, had worked as a plasterer, a boot maker, and an auctioneer's clerk before becoming a SAO.⁷⁷

Although their clerical duties required SAOs, especially those working in urban environments, to be literate and to possess a solid grasp of basic mathematics, the profiles in the *Gazette* often described men whose initial experience of formal schooling had been quite limited. The early education of John Frost, like Daniel Gerrard's, had been brief and difficult. "His father dying while he was quite young," his eulogy tells us, "he received little education; having to leave school at a very early age and assist in supporting his widowed mother and young family."⁷⁸ Frost was determined, however, not to remain illiterate. "He has stated," the biographer recorded, "that he never learnt to read or write until he was seventeen years of age, when he attended the Sunday School of the New Church Society (Swedenborgian), Bath, for the express purpose of improving his education." The obituary also emphasized that Frost's interest in developing his education continued throughout his later life. The author of the piece related how, within a few days of beginning his work as an SAO, Frost observed a colleague using shorthand and immediately set about to learn the skill himself and, after diligent application, eventually became a qualified instructor of others.⁷⁹

The struggle against adversity, which biographers described as being commonplace in the lives of the men who eventually became SAOs, could take many forms, but none was more exemplary than that of Elias Eisenstadt. His biographical sketch took the form of a pilgrimage from poverty and apostasy to faith and professional renown. As a young Jew, Eisenstadt arrived in Hull in 1865, "friendless, with slender means, ignorant of a word of English, and only 21 years of age."⁸⁰ Eisenstadt's troubles, the *Gazette* writes, were compounded by a somewhat precipitous religious conversion. After reading a Christian pamphlet printed in Hebrew, "he declared himself a Christian, and from that time became ostracised by his own nationality, thus becoming in a double sense a stranger in a strange land."⁸¹ While eking out a living as a door-to-door hawker, selling whatever he could scrounge, Eisenstadt was counseled by a kindly missionary to go to London, "where he would find a refuge and employment for Converted Jews." The sense that one is being presented with a parable as much as a biography is

compounded when one reads that "his [Eisenstadt's] stock of money was so slender that his only means of making the journey from Hull to London was on foot." Eisenstadt arrived safely in London, thanks to the hospitality of those he met on the road, and secured work as a bookbinder. After writing a book called "The Bible in the Workshop," which was published in 1863 (a scant seven years after his arrival in Hull as a penniless Polish immigrant), Eisenstadt left his trade to become a City Missionary and was appointed as an SAO later that year. He went on to become the president of the London branch of the SAONA in 1891. The ultimate recognition of Eisenstadt's achievements came in 1892, when the U.S. Department of the Interior, "in consideration of his distinguished services in the field of education," invited him to attend the World's Congress on Education in Chicago as the honorary vice president of the Department Congress of Elementary Education.

It is hardly surprising that a journal devoted to the work of School Attendance Officers should emphasize the commitment of its subscribers to education. Some aspects of the *Gazette's* focus on education, however, are particularly worth noting. The biographical sketches of the SAOs emphasized that these men had educated themselves voluntarily and often in the face of considerable adversity. The *Gazette* did not typically present the profiles of men who had enjoyed the economic luxury of pursuing full-time education beyond the elementary level, but rather wrote often of individuals who had worked industriously at their jobs *and*, at the same time, had continued their education whenever the opportunity arose. The biography of Stephen York typified this image of the hard-working man who remained devoted to his own education. As the *Gazette* wrote, "Not content with merely taking steps to earn his daily bread, Mr. York during these years took advantage of the facilities offered by science and art classes and University Extension Lectures to add to his knowledge of useful arts and sciences."⁸²

The overall impression conveyed by the biographies found in the *Gazette* was that the SAOs were all men for whom, against considerable odds, education had been an effective means for self-improvement. In particular, their stories emphasized the power of education to overcome the economic and social disadvantages faced by many of these men in their youth. This emphasis resonated with the common tendency among policymakers, school officials, and working-class parents to link the issues of compulsory school attendance with children's labor. By repeatedly demonstrating the redemptive power of education in even the most desperate economic circumstances, the editors of the *Gazette* were implicitly arguing that education was not a hindrance to economic self-improvement but, on the contrary, a powerful encouragement to it. The

biographical sketches found in the *Gazette* served to counter the argument, common among those opposed to compulsion, that labor was more necessary and beneficial for working-class children than education was. They demonstrated the long-term practical benefits of education, regardless of the sacrifice required, for even the poorest of Britain's children.

The emphasis on the long-term benefits of education, as exemplified by the SAOs profiled in the *Gazette*, also served as a moral defense against those who criticized the attendance officers for their interference in private life and for their willing participation in a system of state coercion. The biographical sketches in the *Gazette* justified the SAOs' work based on a weighing of long-term economic benefit over short-term need. As with the female volunteers that preceded them in the work of "visiting" working-class homes, the SAOs defended their intrusion into the home and their violation of the cherished principles of "English liberty" with the argument that such measures were necessary for the ultimate good of the family, the community, and the nation.⁸³

The *Gazette* biographies revealed life narratives that were also unassailably masculine. They emphasized the manly qualities of perseverance (i.e., "grit"), physical fortitude, and independence as the central characteristics of the men who became SAOs. Their paths to the profession were facilitated by their participation in trade organizations, private educational clubs, military service, benevolent societies, and a host of other opportunities for self-improvement and social networking that, almost without exception, excluded women.⁸⁴ Visiting was a masculine profession, these biographies implied, because only a man possessed the necessary qualities and could, through diligent application of them, take advantage of all available opportunities to raise his moral, social, and economic status via participation in all-male associations and activities.

Despite their concerted campaign of self-validation, the moral and social status of SAOs remained tenuous in the eyes of many, and they were harshly criticized by school teachers, middle-class social reformers, and working-class parents alike. As the lowest rung in the hierarchy of the state education system, they were often made the scapegoats by those who portrayed state social reform as a "tyranny" deeply antithetical to English ideals.⁸⁵ Lambasting the work of the Visitors, one such critic suggested that "the attendance prowlers should be stuffed down a sewer."⁸⁶ Visitors responded with their own criticisms of teachers and Poor Law Guardians—as with their working-class subjects, the most common tactic was to assume the moral high ground, arguing that the Visitors themselves were the only group truly concerned with the welfare of their charges. One article in the *Gazette* publicly accused

teachers of being immoral, "mercenary," and unconcerned with the well-being of the children in their care.⁸⁷ "There are many teachers," the Visitor claimed, "who fail to take the least interest, other than a pecuniary one, in their calling." When attendance flagged in such circumstances, the author wrote, these Head Teachers, would "straightaway proceed to blacken the reputation of the attendance officer, for they seem to imagine that the fault lies with the unlucky official, and that if they can get him removed to another place, they may be more fortunate in turning his successor into a very useful lacquey [*sic*]." Another Visitor used the Booth interviews as an opportunity to broadcast his criticism of the Poor Law Guardians and their workhouse system. Mr. Bruce, a Shoreditch Visitor, described the Guardians as bullies who threatened poor widows into giving up their homes and entering the workhouse with their families.⁸⁸ According to him, the relieving officers were taking the easy way out. Rather than using "moral suasion" to reform working-class homes, as many Visitors advocated, they simply dismantled it, thus burdening the ratepayers with permanent charity cases and dooming the families themselves to irrevocable penury.

Meeting resistance to their methods, criticism of their work, and doubts about their authority from many directions, SAOs also sought other ways to successfully masculinize their profession. One very direct tactic was to deny women SAOs access to the resources and networking provided by their professional organization, the School Attendance Officers' National Association (f. 1884). It is not clear whether women were denied entrance altogether or were accepted but not allowed to participate in association events, such as the numerous regional conferences hosted throughout the 1880s and 1890s. What is apparent is that the voice of female attendance officers was entirely absent from the *Gazette*, the official paper of the association. Not a single article authored by a woman ever appeared prominently in the journal. Women's primary roles in its pages were as the objects of satire, most commonly in the numerous cartoons lampooning the ignorance, obstinacy, or naïveté of working-class mothers (see Fig. 2). The only other female voice in the *Gazette* was the fictional author (in fact a man) of the regular column "Sum Edjukashonal Topix," which, with its atrocious misspellings and comically obtuse reasoning, was itself a vehicle for further ridiculing the women depicted in the *Gazette's* cartoons.

Another tactic employed frequently by the Visitors to masculinize the image of their profession was to portray their work as being fraught with physical danger. In the initial decade after the passing of the Education Act of 1870, when compulsory education was a new and unwelcome phenomenon in many working-class neighborhoods, one memorialist of the London



FOND MOTHER: Bless their little hearts, they've gone to school like a couple of hangels!

Fig. 2. "Fond Mother," *The School Attendance Gazette*, June 1902.

School Board claimed that both verbal abuse and physical assaults were common, albeit the former much more so than the latter.⁸⁹ Although the *School Attendance Gazette* reported only about a dozen assaults upon Visitors—fully half of which occurred in London—between April 1900 and September 1903, the editors portrayed such violence as ubiquitous. Dramatic stories of abuse, threats, and assaults upon Visitors appeared in nearly every issue. A 1903 excerpt from the *Leeds Daily News*, reprinted in the *Gazette*, reported that "the public . . . poke fun or throw flat irons at them. The baiting of school attendance officers has been reduced to a fine art in some of the slum districts, and the perils of a football referee are mild to the risks he has run."⁹⁰ Taken altogether, the periodicals covering the issue indicated that verbal insults were common, but physical violence was relatively rare. But stories published in the *Gazette* gave the impression that Visitors braved the streets in constant fear for their safety, never knowing when an enraged parent would let fly with a stone, an iron, a flowerpot, or, as happened on one storied occasion, a dead cat.⁹¹

For the Visitors, their portrayal of their work as physically dangerous was part of their broader struggle toward the interrelated goals of establishing their authority in domestic matters, their masculinity in their work, and their status as that of professionals within the educational hierarchy. The efforts of Visitors to secure their recognition as professionals can be broken down into

several specific campaigns for particular rights and privileges. In addition to independence of action from the demands of teachers, the Visitors argued primarily on two other issues of professional recognition. First, Visitors wanted a rationalized system of pay, promotion, and benefits in accord with that granted to other occupations with which they felt their work was comparable—government clerks, for example. And second, Visitors wanted clear recognition of their authority, both by working-class parents and by other groups within the public education hierarchy. Authority over parents themselves was not the only goal in this campaign. These men of humble origins, who often spent their days among the poorest of England's people, also wanted firm recognition by middle-class educational authorities of their place within the ranks of the respectable lower middle class.⁹²

Visitors' arguments for professionalization often appeared in what seem, at first glance, to be rather unexpected places. When, in 1891, the London School Board convened a special subcommittee to investigate the administration of the attendance bylaws, it interviewed individuals from many different levels within the educational system. Visitors, discussing how the current methods of enforcement could be improved, typically mentioned the morality of parents, the difficulties of their job, and the practical hindrances to their work. One Visitor, however, took an entirely different tack. Mr. Dobson, formerly of the Royal Navy, instead asserted that the lack of employment incentives for the Visitors was a major obstacle to the execution of the attendance bylaws in London:

He entered the service [nine years ago] under the impression that he was to rise to the 1st Class, and there were probably 50 others in a similar position to himself, and it was his opinion, that the existing plan of promotion was incapable of distributing the emoluments of office with even-handed justice, and as a consequence thereof, there existed among the [attendance] officers a solid and deep seated grievance, which urgently appealed to the Board for its redress.⁹³

Dobson's complaints about the stagnation of the profession were not without merit. In the first decade of its existence, the LSB granted pay raises to its Visitors on a fairly regular basis. In the 1880s, however, in response to a variety of developments both within the board and in the broader society, the career progress of the Visitors became much less consistent. With public pressure to reduce mounting costs, the concurrent ascendancy of the "economical" Conservative faction into control of the board, the increase in the number of Visitors on the payroll, and an economic recession, pay raises and

promotions became less frequent. By comparison, even the lowest class of clerks employed by the LSB was still guaranteed annual pay increases.⁹⁴ In retrospect, the members of the LSB should hardly have been surprised when Mr. Dobson took advantage of this unique opportunity to express his professional concerns to the highest authority. In replying in this manner to the questions posed on attendance laws, Mr. Dobson was implying, furthermore, that the failure of the LSB to address the issue of promotion was not just a matter of pecuniary concern. Dobson was arguing that the board's failure to regularly promote Visitors was a significant hindrance to the attendance work itself.

The *School Attendance Gazette* was the most popular forum for the professional demands of the Visitors. This was, after all, the periodical of the School Attendance Officers' National Association, an organization whose purpose, since its founding in 1884, had been to promote and protect the interests of Visitors. In particular, the issue of pensions—referred to as “superannuation”—was a popular topic of discussion. It was clear from the arguments made in favor of pensions that the Visitors viewed their role not as that of mere errand boys for the school boards. They saw themselves as public servants of the state and therefore deserving of the same rewards as others who fell into this category.⁹⁵ As one Visitor wrote, “The officer who devotes the best years of his life to the public service, who practically has the care entrusted to him of safe-guarding the educational equipment of future generations, should be able when his hair is grey, his mind and body feeble, to receive a well-earned rest from trouble and anxiety, and is as deserving of recognition for his services as the policeman, soldier, sailor, or civil servant.”⁹⁶ Of course, members of the other occupations that this author mentioned were, at the time, going through their own struggles to establish their professional identities, but with the exception of the civil servant, they were all exclusively male employments.⁹⁷ Visitors' explicit inclusion of their occupation among these others was an attempt to distance themselves from the working-class population among whom they performed their duties.

A rationalized system of pay, promotion, and pension would have given the Visitors some of the economic trappings of a white-collar profession, but they would not have fulfilled their need for public recognition of their status. The men who worked as Visitors wanted such public acknowledgment both from working-class parents and from the school boards that employed them. The relationship between working-class parents and the Visitors was a complex one, but working-class respect for Visitors' authority on the subject of children, home life, and labor was not a significant factor in it, at least not from the point of view of the Visitors. Especially in the first decade after the passing of the 1870 Education Act, Visitors had experienced considerable difficulty just being

recognized as legitimate representatives of the educational authorities. This obstacle was compounded by the absence of an official uniform or badge of office.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, working-class urban neighborhoods were frequently canvassed by all manner of "outsiders," from police and charity workers to traveling salesman. Some of these were more welcome than others. In one case, a Brighton Visitor was assaulted by a parent who, the Visitor later learned, had simply not recognized who he was and what organization he represented. In an account of the incident printed in the *School Board Chronicle*, the Visitor suggested that an obvious indicator of his position would prevent such misunderstandings in the future: "In conclusion, Mr. Bennett suggested that he should be provided with a uniform, to give him some appearance of authority, and let people know who he was, as he was frequently mistaken for an insurance agent, a tax collector, a tallyman, or a quack doctor, people declaring that they did not want any of his physic."⁹⁸ Judging by the catcalls, flight, or violent attacks that sometimes greeted the appearance of Visitors in the 1880s and 1890s, however, it seems that, after the initial years of introduction, working-class parents and children had little trouble recognizing the arrival of the "school board man."

Beyond issues of public recognition in working-class neighborhoods, Visitors' authority over parents was mitigated by several factors beyond their control, chief among them the attitudes of police court magistrates toward compulsory attendance cases. What was equally frustrating to the Visitors, and potentially more damaging to both the effective enforcement of the laws and their efforts at achieving status within the educational hierarchy, was a lack of support and recognition from the school boards that employed them. Visitors felt that, for all their exhaustive work in an often hostile environment, they at least deserved the support of their superiors and an appreciation for their dedication. Instead of acknowledgment, the Visitors claimed, they received public criticism that undercut their moral authority, their autonomy, their honor, and their public reputation—four key elements of middle-class Victorian masculinity—in the worst possible way. One Visitor described such a situation in detail:

In one of the Divisions it is a quite common occurrence at the Notice B meetings for the official, even in the presence of the defaulting parent summoned to appear before the Committee, to offensively call into question the statements and action of the visitor. I submit such is neither the time nor the place to administer rebuke even if deserved, or to pass any, much less brow-beating remarks, on the

conduct of any officer. Such conduct is, in the highest degree, detrimental to the best interests of the work, and completely destroys the authority and influence of the visitor.⁹⁹

The Visitors accused the London School Board, in particular, of failing to give proper respect and appreciation to the Visitors who worked under it, and some were unable to contain their glee when the board itself faced dissolution. In celebrating the imminent disbanding of the LSB in 1904, one London Visitor wrote, “Attendance officers are the basis of the whole system of School Board work. . . . Their work is the backbone of the whole system, yet their services are underrated and underpaid. The esprit de corps in some divisions is killed by unsympathetic officialdom and automatic routine. Success can never follow in the wake of suspicion nor efficiency in that of mechanical government.”¹⁰⁰ Another London Visitor accused the LSB of basing the appointment of attendance officers and their superintendents on personal politics rather than on qualifications for the post: “The candidate who has no practical knowledge of the work he will be called upon to superintend, stands the best chance—provided his politics are strictly orthodox—of receiving the appointment, and the logical consequence is blundering, bungling, and unsatisfactory results.”¹⁰¹ The solution this Visitor proposed, which was echoed by a number of his colleagues in other articles, was to place the Visitors under the direct authority of the Education Department. It is clear why the SAOs, considering their personal and professional goals, would have seen this option as quite a favorable one indeed. First, it would have granted them a level of independence far in excess of what they enjoyed under the authority of the school boards. And second, association with a national, rather than local, body of governance would have raised their status immeasurably in relation to other groups in the educational hierarchy. For London Visitors, this lofty goal would remain unfulfilled. With the dissolution of the London School Board in 1904, the Visitors were brought under the authority of the London County Council, an organization of broader influence than the LSB, but still one whose auspices did not extend beyond the borders of the metropolis.

In their attempts to exclude women from state-sponsored social reform, to define themselves as lower middle class, and to secure recognition of their work as both masculine and professional, School Attendance Officers faced a difficult task. To establish their work as most fit for male professionals, SAOs advocated social distance, bureaucratic methods, and, when necessary, legal coercion. According to the Visitors and their superintendents, the inherent weakness of women’s morality, their inability to serve as legal representatives

in the courts, their lack of professionalism, and the ubiquitous physical danger of attendance work made it unsuitable for women. To perform their duties successfully, however, and to counter the hostility of working-class parents, criticism from other members of the educational bureaucracy, and public vilification by opponents of compulsory education, SAOs rapidly integrated the established approach of middle-class women's volunteer philanthropy, which stressed persuasion, knowledge, and personal connection with working-class parents. These latter methods were dependent on both the "natural" affinities of women and the disparity in social status (and therefore moral authority) between middle-class female reformers and working-class parents. The modest social origins of the men who became SAOs, men who were often drawn from the artisan class, were of little help in this regard.

As a substitute for the putative advantages of gender and social position that middle-class women enjoyed in their dealings with working-class parents, SAOs constructed an ideal of masculinized domestic moral authority. In committee meetings, reports, and the pages of the SAO's professional journal, the Visitors and their superintendents asserted that the failures of working-class women's domestic morality and the subsequent degradation of the home could be ameliorated only by the intervention of professional, male reformers. Armed with their diverse employment experience, their physical fortitude, their moral rectitude, and the strength of character that came from their struggles against adversity, SAOs would uplift the working-class home and interrupt the cycle of moral degradation that would otherwise curse all succeeding generations. In doing so, the Visitors aimed to prove not only that this was employment fit for men, but that the men who performed it possessed qualities that elevated them, morally and socially, above their working-class charges. State-sponsored social reform, they asserted, required the character, background, and moral authority that only the "right sort of man" possessed.¹⁰²

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NOTES

1. In 1763, Prussia, under Frederick II, became the first major European nation-state to make elementary education mandatory. The first U.S. state to adopt compulsory school attendance was Massachusetts, which did so under the leadership of Horace Mann in 1852. Austria introduced mandatory education in 1874. France adopted the policy in 1881 with the Jules Ferry Laws.

2. W. P. McCann, "Trade Unionists, Artisans, and the 1870 Education Act," *British Journal of Education Studies* 18 (1970): 136–37.
3. The School Board for London was colloquially referred to in most correspondence as the "London School Board" or the "LSB."
4. *School Board Chronicle*, 1 July 1871, 200 (hereafter *Chronicle*).
5. Ibid. The contested status of children's labor was also central to debates over compulsory education. See Sascha Auerbach, "'Some Punishment Should Be Devised': Parents, Children, and the State in Victorian London," *The Historian* 71, no. 4 (November–December 2009).
6. *Chronicle*, 24 August 1872, 36. This wage scale put the average salary of male Visitors well above that of women teachers. At the beginning of the LSB's tenure in London, female teachers were paid between £50 and £70 per annum (their male colleagues earned an average of £90–100 per annum). *Chronicle*, 23 March 1871, 167.
7. Thomas Gautrey, "Lux Mihi Laus": *School Board Memories* (London, 1937), 35. *Minutes of Evidence Taken Before the Bye-Laws Committee With Reference to the Uniform Enforcement of the Bye-Laws in the Metropolis* (hereafter *Uniform Enforcement*), SBL 129, 31 March 1874, 45 (London Metropolitan Archives).
8. The Cardiff School Board, for example, after hiring a female officer in 1881, concluded scarcely a year later that "the results did not justify the experiment," and promptly released her. *School Attendance Officer's Gazette* (aka *School Attendance Gazette*, hereafter *Gazette*), January 1903, 18.
9. Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, eds., *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Policies and the Origins of Welfare States* (New York, 1993), 2.
10. Dina Copelman, *London's Women Teachers: Gender, Class, and Feminism, 1870–1930* (London, 1996); Susan Pennybacker, *A Vision for London, 1889–1914: Labour, Everyday Life, and the LCC Experiment* (London, 1995); Joyce Goodman and Sylvia Harrop, eds., *Women, Educational Policy-Making, and Administration in England: Authoritative Women Since 1880* (London, 2000); Jane Martin, *Women and the Politics of Schooling in Victorian and Edwardian England* (London, 1999).
11. In order to qualify for hiring, candidates had to take a competitive examination in math, writing, and clerical skills. Rosemary O'Day and David Englander, *Mr. Charles Booth's Inquiry: Life and Labour of the People of London Reconsidered* (London, 1993), 43.
12. Although Victorian philanthropic organizations such as the Society for Relief of Distress (f. 1860) and the Charity Organization Society (f. 1869) were sometimes managed by men, the ranks of "visitors" who performed their daily work were overwhelmingly female, so much so that, by the early 1880s, the written instructions of the COS used the female pronoun exclusively when describing their work. F. K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1980), 108–11.
13. David Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker: A Study in Class Consciousness* (London, 1966; rev. ed., Oxford, 1989); Geoffrey Crossick, ed., *The Lower Middle Class in Britain, 1870–1914* (London, 1977); Gregory Anderson, *Victorian Clerks* (Manchester, 1976), and Pennybacker, *A Vision for London*.
14. A. James Hammerton, "Pooterism or Partnership? Marriage and Masculine Identity in the Lower Middle Class, 1870–1920," *Journal of British Studies* 38, no. 3 (July 1999): 293–94.

15. John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home* (New Haven, 1999), 1.
16. Hammerton, "Pooterism or Partnership," 303.
17. Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London* (Oxford, 1994); Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor: Home, School, and Street in London, 1870–1914* (London, 1996).
18. *Gazette*, September 1901, 198.
19. Patrick Joyce, *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1994), 16–17.
20. Women comprised a small minority of the London School Board membership, but they were active in the committee that dealt with compulsory attendance. *Annual Reports of the School Board for London*, 1891 (London Metropolitan Archives).
21. *School Board Chronicle*, 15 June 1872, 174.
22. *Uniform Enforcement*, 31 March 1874, 45, SBL 129, 45.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. Goodman, *Educational Policy-Making*, 59; *Minutes of the Bye-Laws Committee*, 26 January 1881, SBL 139, Records of the London School Board.
26. Seth Koven, "Borderlands: Women, Voluntary Action, and Child Welfare in Britain, 1840–1914," in *Mothers of a New World*, ed. Koven and Michel, 106.
27. Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850–1920* (Chicago, 1985), 22; Ross, *Love and Toil*, chap. 1.
28. Koven, "Borderlands," 2.
29. *Ibid.*, 3. See also Ross, *Love and Toil*, 18–21; George Behlmer, *Friends of the Family: The English Home and Its Guardians* (Stanford, 1998), 60–61.
30. Vicinus, *Independent Women*, 212.
31. Koven, "Borderlands," 103.
32. *Uniform Enforcement*, 45; *Report of the Special Sub-Committee of the Bye-Laws Committee [of the LSB] on the Administration of the Bye-Laws*, 1891, 122–29, SBL 1407 (hereafter RSSC).
33. RSSC, 96, 92.
34. *Gazette*, April 1900, 9.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Gazette*, June 1902, 105; July 1900, 62.
37. Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago, 1992), 34.
38. Vicinus, *Independent Women*, 217; Behlmer, *Friends of the Family*, 35.
39. Goodman, *Educational Policy-Making*, 61; Behlmer, *Friends of the Family*, 38; Lynn Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People* (Cambridge, 1998), 271.
40. Koven and Michel, *Mothers of a New World*, 9.
41. Behlmer, *Friends of the Family*, 31.
42. There is a rich literature on the topic of respectability as both an observed quality and a performed identity. See Thomas Lacquer, *Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and Working-Class Culture, 1780–1850* (New Haven, 1976); Peter Bailey, "'Will the Real Bill Banks Please Stand Up?' Towards a Role Analysis of Mid-Victorian Working-Class

Respectability," *Journal of Social History* 12, no. 3 (1979): 336–53; Ellen Ross, "'Not the Sort that Would Sit on the Doorstep': Respectability in Pre–World War I London," *International Labour and Working-Class History* 27 (Spring 1985): 39–59; Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1840–1914* (Cambridge, 1997).

43. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, 34–35.

44. *Life and Labour of the People of London*, The Charles Booth Collection, 1885–1905, pt. 3: The Poverty Series, School Board Inquiry and House to House Visits, Group B, School Board Visitors' Notebooks (British Library of Political and Economic Science, London School of Economics, London; Emory University Library, Atlanta).

45. Davin, *Growing Up Poor*, 134.

46. Ross, "Not the Sort," 48.

47. Koven, "Borderlands," 99.

48. Behlmer, *Friends of the Family*, 39–40.

49. *Ibid.*, 56–57.

50. Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship Between Classes in Victorian Society* (Oxford, 1971), 148.

51. Judith Walkowitz argues that establishing "psychological oppositions that distinguished the Self from the low-Other," was a common dynamic among middle-class, male "urban explorers" such as Friedrich Engels, Henry Mayhew, James Greenwood, George Sims, and Charles Booth. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, 32–33.

52. Behlmer, *Friends of the Family*, 98.

53. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, 34; Albert Fried and Richard Elman, eds., *Charles Booth's London* (New York, 1968), 4.

54. Charles Booth in Fried and Elman, *Charles Booth's London*, 292–93.

55. *Ibid.*

56. O'Day and Englander, *Mr Charles Booth's Inquiry*, 51.

57. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, 31.

58. Booth in Fried and Elman, *Charles Booth's London*, 332.

59. *Ibid.*

60. RSSC, 126.

61. David Rubinstein, *School Attendance in London, 1870–1904: A Social History* (Hull, 1969), 95–97.

62. *Gazette*, March 1901, 197; August 1902, 41.

63. *Gazette*, June 1901, 253.

64. Behlmer, *Friends of the Family*, chap. 1; Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy*, chap. 4; Ross, *Love and Toil*, chap. 1.

65. *Gazette*, April 1900, 5.

66. *Ibid.*, 6.

67. *Gazette*, July 1902, 125.

68. See note 24 above.

69. Crossick, *The Lower Middle Class*, 28.

70. *Gazette*, June 1901, 253.

71. *Gazette*, December 1902, 225.

72. According to the article, Salter was no. 15 on the rolls of the Society.

73. *Gazette*, August 1902, 141.

74. *Gazette*, July 1902, 121.

75. *Gazette*, March 1901, 197, and May 1902, 81.
76. *Gazette*, July 1902, 121.
77. *Gazette*, September 1903, 145.
78. *Gazette*, September 1901, 217.
79. *Ibid.*
80. *Gazette*, March 1901, 197.
81. *Ibid.*, 198.
82. *Gazette*, September 1903, 145.
83. For the prevalence of this argument among volunteer "visitors," see Behlmer, *Friends of the Family*, chap. 1.
84. One notable exception was missionary societies, which encouraged both male and female participation.
85. Anon., *Compulsory Education as Opposed to the Liberty of the Citizen* (London, 1875), 7. See also Behlmer, *Friends of the Family*, 22–24.
86. Ernest Pomeroy, *The Education Tyranny: The Education System Examined and Exposed, Together with Practical Aids for Persecuted Parents* (London, 1909), 65.
87. *Gazette*, October 1901, 349.
88. *Life and Labour of the People of London*, The Charles Booth Collection, 1885–1905, pt. 3: The Poverty Series, School Board Inquiry and House to House Visits, Group B, School Board Visitors' Notebooks, B39: Mr. Bruce, Shoreditch, 1887.
89. Gautrey, *Lux Mihi Laus*, 35.
90. *Leeds Daily News* excerpted in the *Gazette*, May 1903, 98.
91. First reported in Gautrey, *Lux Mihi Laus*, 35.
92. For the essential role of "respectability" in LMC identity, see Hugh McLeod, "White Collar Values and the Role of Religion," in Crossick, ed.; Hammerton, "Pooterism or Partnership," 307.
93. RSSC, 98.
94. *Final Report of the School Board for London* (London, 1904), 322.
95. Andrew Miles, *Social Mobility in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century England* (New York, 1999), 113.
96. *Gazette*, April 1901, 231.
97. See Carolyn Steedman, *Policing the Victorian Community: The Reformation of the English Provincial Police Forces, 1856–1880* (London, 1984); Pennybacker, *Vision for London*.
98. *School Board Chronicle*, 7 September 1872, 100. There was no real consensus on the uniform issue. As one Visitor pointed out, being inconspicuous had its own advantages, "by wearing no uniform I am thereby enabled more easily to pick up truants" (*Gazette*, February 1901).
99. *Gazette*, July 1901, 296.
100. *Gazette*, March 1904, 215.
101. *Gazette*, June 1901, 276.
102. *Uniform Enforcement*, 45.