WOMEN, GENDER, AND THE PROMOTION OF EMPIRE: THE VICTORIA LEAGUE, 1901–1914*

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ABSTRACT. The Victoria League, founded in 1901 as a result of the South African War, was the only predominantly female imperial propaganda society in Britain during the Edwardian period. To accommodate women’s activism within the ‘man’s world’ of empire politics the League restricted its work to areas within woman’s ‘separate sphere’ while transforming them into innovative methods of imperial propaganda. Through philanthropy to war victims, hospitality to colonial visitors, empire education, and the promotion of social reform as an imperial issue, the League aimed to encourage imperial sentiment at home and promote colonial loyalty to the ‘mother country’. The League’s relationship with its colonial ‘sister societies’, the Guild of Loyal Women of South Africa and the Canadian Imperial Order, Daughters of the Empire, demonstrates both the primacy of the self-governing dominions in its vision of empire, and the importance of women’s imperial networks. The Victoria League illustrates both significant involvement by elite women in imperial politics and the practical and ideological constraints placed on women’s imperial activism.

I

Women are the great home-makers – the social weavers – and they have begun to use their gifts for Imperial purposes. They are following up the fight and struggle of men and finding ways to bind the citizens of the Empire together, ways which are slow, quiet, and unobtrusive, but none the less effective and lasting.

Times, 2 July 1910

At the height of the South African War, and shortly after the death of Queen Victoria, a small group of women dressed in mourning gathered at 10 Downing Street to harness their patriotism to practical ends. For, Lady Jersey recalled, ‘they were English women and the impulse of their race was not to sit with folded hands and tremble for the future but “out of this nettle danger to pluck this flower safety”’. They felt that ‘war had drawn the Empire together as

* I have to thank Alan Sykes, Deborah Thom, Stuart Ball, James Bothwell, and the editors of the Historical Journal for their comments on various versions of this article. I am also grateful to the Victoria League for Commonwealth Friendship for permission to quote from unpublished Victoria League papers, and to the following for permission to quote from unpublished personal papers: the relatives of Violet Markham; the Warden and Fellows of New College, Oxford (Violet Milner papers); T. G. Talbot (Meriel Talbot papers); and Lord Chandos (Edith Lyttelton papers).
never before, that a thrill of Imperial sentiment was flashing from land to land’. Without waiting ‘to ask what statesmen might propose or what Governments might ordain’ they acted to ‘seize the psychological moment for closer unity’.

The organization they founded, the Victoria League, was one of many patriotic and imperialist societies formed in the Edwardian era. One contemporary remarked that the period should ‘be known as the league age’ for ‘new leagues and associations rise on every side with startling rapidity’. These imperial propaganda societies have been the subject of much historical attention in recent years. The movement spearheaded by John M. MacKenzie to chart the impact of empire as integral to the social history of Britain, sees them – together with many other factors ranging from the music halls to juvenile literature – as influential in making imperialism a core component of popular culture. Patriotic and nationalist organizations have also been of interest to historians of the Edwardian Conservative party and popular conservatism before the First World War.

Yet, although most of these organizations admitted women as members, women’s involvement in the formation of Edwardian popular imperialism has been comparatively neglected. This neglect stems in part from the unwillingness of ‘traditional’ imperial historians to engage with gender history. Ronald Hyam’s dismissal of feminist history in his 1990 Empire and sexuality is only the most notorious example of this reluctance. Historians of imperial propaganda societies have thus tended to ignore, or give only a passing mention to, women’s participation. A second factor has been the direction taken by feminist research into the relationships between British women and imperialism. The focus of some of the earliest work in this area, to challenge long-held assumptions that the empire was ‘acquired in a fit of absence of wives’ and that ‘women lost us the empire’, naturally directed attention to the ‘dependent’ territories, for example Nigeria, Fiji, and Malaya. Later feminist scholarship came to focus especially on the roles of British women in India, not only as memsahibs but, in Barbara N. Ramusack’s words, as ‘cultural missionaries, maternal imperialists, feminist allies’ to Indian women. This

emphasis on India has persisted despite increasing interest in the development of British ‘imperial feminism’, a phenomenon Clare Midgely has traced back to the anti-slavery campaigns of the early nineteenth century. Of particular importance is Antoinette Burton’s work on the significance in British feminist thought of the imagined ‘Indian woman’. Envisaged as passive and helpless, requiring protection both from British law (for example, the Contagious Diseases Acts) and from Indian customs, the ‘Indian woman’ functioned to give British women an imperial role and bolster their claim to the vote.\(^5\) The prominence of India in feminist historiography has meant that the imperial networks formed between women in Britain and the self-governing dominions have only recently received substantial attention, with a recent collection of essays on the ‘transnational’ aspects of suffrage movements within the British empire, and Angela Woollacott’s study of Australian women in London and the imperial feminist contacts and organizations they created.\(^6\) Yet for many at the turn of the century the empire meant above all ‘Greater Britain’, the colonies of white settlement which shared a language and culture with the ‘mother country’, and most imperial propaganda societies thought primarily in terms of the ‘British world’ of the self-governing dominions.\(^7\)

The great expansion in the early twentieth century of patriotic organizations aimed at a mass electorate provided new opportunities for women to participate in imperial politics. As the opening quotation suggests, the increasing emphasis on the self-governing dominions, and on imperial reorganization rather than the conquest of ‘native’ populations,\(^8\) perhaps helped to legitimize their involvement (though we should note women’s participation in the movements for imperial defence). For Canada, Barbara Roberts has posited a similar transition from ‘hard’, culturally ‘masculine’ imperialism to ‘soft’, culturally ‘feminine’ imperialism after the Boer War.\(^9\) In Britain women had been active in the female emigration societies and the Primrose League for some time.\(^10\)


\(^8\) Ibid., p. 16.


During the Edwardian era they began to join such organizations as the League of the Empire, the Navy League and the Imperial Maritime League, the National Service League, and the Tariff Reform League, in significant numbers. But when in 1910 The Times reported on the progress of ‘woman’s work for the Empire’ it focused particularly upon the Victoria League, which ‘may… be said to organize and focus the feminine side of Imperial work’. Formed in 1901, the Victoria League was the only predominantly female imperial propaganda society. The League always admitted men as members, and from 1907 recruited male ‘experts’ to the executive committee (‘it’s obviously quite silly in work like this to divide the sexes’ wrote the League secretary in South Africa, ‘but the Colonials here as elsewhere are still more in mediaeval fog than we in England’). Nevertheless, membership remained overwhelmingly female, the League women benefiting from male experience without losing control of the organization. As a women’s association in the ‘man’s world’ of imperial affairs, the Victoria League adopted three main strategies. First, it insisted that it was ‘apolitical’. Always acutely anxious to avoid party-political affiliations, the League managed better than most imperial propaganda societies to sidestep close association with the Conservative party. Similarly, it steered clear of the tariff reform debate, ruling in 1904 that Violet Brooke-Hunt, founder of the Women’s Tariff Reform Association, should not speak at Victoria League meetings. Secondly, it presented itself in deliberately (but misleadingly) unassertive terms, aspiring in its constitution only to ‘support and assist’ imperial projects. Thirdly, the League restricted its scope of action to include only ‘practical’ work in areas that could be seen as a legitimate extension of the ‘domestic sphere’ that Victorian ideology granted to women. These tactics have encouraged imperial


12 Times, 2 July 1910.

13 Meriel Talbot, diary, 22 Oct. 1910, Maidstone, Kent Archives Office (KAO), Talbot papers, U1612 F222. Male executive members before 1914 included Leo Amery; the journalist E. T. Cook; E. B. Sargant (director of education for the Transvaal and Orange River Colony 1902–3), Professor Wyndham Dunstan (director of the Imperial Institute); and H. J. Mackinder.

historians to ignore the Victoria League, or to see it as an ‘imperial ladies auxiliary’ to the male-dominated Royal Colonial Institute and League of the Empire. Such interpretations, however, ignore not only the Victoria League’s fierce autonomy and its readiness to undertake large-scale projects, but also its innovation, both in developing new methods of propaganda and in enlarging women’s imperial role. Like Antoinette Burton’s ‘imperial suffragists’, the League women were ‘claiming their place in the Empire’ and asserting the value of women’s contribution to the imperial project.

For the Victoria League’s founders the spur to action was the South African War – which, like Chamberlain, they saw rather as a new opportunity for the empire (and sometimes for themselves) than as a blow to the ‘new imperialism’ of the late nineteenth century. Encouraged by the voluntary contribution of the colonial contingents from Canada and Australasia to the war effort, they hoped to link the self-governing dominions to the ‘mother country’ by the organization of imperial ‘sentiment’ against the rising tide of colonial nationalism. In this aim the Victoria League was supported both practically and ideologically by strong relationships with its colonial ‘sister societies’: the Guild of Loyal Women of South Africa, the Imperial Order, Daughters of the Empire in Canada, and a number of autonomous Victoria Leagues in Australasia. Particularly in its early years, the League’s work was directed especially towards South Africa, and at post-war efforts to Anglicize the former Boer republics and incorporate them as loyal constituents of the British empire. In part this reflected contemporary imperial priorities, also illustrated by the government-supported campaign to encourage female emigration to South Africa as a means of bolstering British influence. But it is significant that first-hand experience of South Africa, either shortly before or during the Boer War, had been responsible for transforming many leading Victoria Leaguers into active imperialists.

In 1894, for example, Alice Balfour (Arthur’s spinster sister) had visited Johannesburg before travelling by wagon across Matebeleland and Mashonaland. She felt that ‘the ever-smouldering irritation of the English at the inequality of treatment they suffer under the Boers’ was ‘ready to burst into a blaze’, and deprecated the ‘inability of the Boers to see that they will have to accommodate themselves in the end to the much larger and intellectually superior [British] population’. Alicia Cecil visited the Transvaal with her husband Evelyn, a Conservative MP, in the late summer of 1899: they discussed the situation with Paul Kruger and Jan Smuts before rushing for the coast in a train packed with refugees just as war was declared. Another

16 Burton, Burdens, p. 7.
20 Evelyn Cecil, On the eve of war (London, 1900).
prominent League member, Mary Arnold-Forster, spent six weeks - ‘a time of truly thrilling interest’ - in South Africa in late 1900 while her husband led the Land Settlement Commission on post-war soldier settlement.21

The three Victoria Leaguers, however, to whom South Africa meant most were Violet Markham, Edith Lyttelton, and Violet Cecil, whose African experiences were reinforced by intimacy with the high commissioner, Sir Alfred Milner, and in whom Milner inspired the kind of devotion he was later to engender in his ‘kindergarten’. Violet Markham, the twenty-six-year-old daughter of a Derbyshire industrialist, came to South Africa in June 1899 to recover from a nervous breakdown, leaving in early October just before war was declared. A Liberal turned imperialist in 1894 after visiting Cairo and reading Milner’s *England in Egypt*, she was overwhelmed by meeting Milner in person. ‘He has a personality which drag[s] the devotion and enthusiasm out of all the people, who know him’ she told her mother.22 Markham became an active propagandist for Milner’s South African policy, writing two books and several articles on South African themes between 1899 and 1906.23 Edith Lyttelton visited South Africa in 1900 with her husband Alfred, a Liberal Unionist MP who was chairing a commission investigating the commercial concessions granted by Kruger before the war.24 Edith, who already knew Milner, enjoyed many ‘really delightful walks and talks with Sir Alfred, who as he expresses it finds it a real relief to be quite indiscreet’. Primed with Milner’s views on South African politics and the war, she became ‘so keen about the future here, that I must try and help even ever so little’.25 Violet Cecil’s time in South Africa drew her even closer to Milner – so much so that she eventually married him in 1921. The sister of Leo Maxse, editor of the far-right, imperialist *National Review*, Violet had married Lord Salisbury’s soldier son, Lord Edward Cecil, in 1894. Though the marriage was not a success, she accompanied Lord Edward when he was posted to South Africa in July 1899. While her husband defended besieged Mafeking, Violet kept house for Cecil Rhodes (himself besieged at Kimberley), worked for the Cape Town refugees committee, organized a supply of comforts for the sick and wounded, ran an energetic campaign to improve the notorious army hospitals – and became increasingly close to Milner.26 While Milner described her as a ‘Godsend’, Violet told her sister, ‘I

25 Edith Lyttelton to Kathleen Lyttelton, 4 Sept. 1900, Cambridge, Churchill College Archive Centre (CCAS), Chandos papers, Chan. ii 3/14; Edith Lyttelton, diary, 26 Sept. 1900, CCAS, Chandos papers, Chan. 6/3.
think Milner saved my life – at least he has been everything just now and I owe him what I can never even tell him.’

South Africa provided not only the political stimulus for the founding of the Victoria League but also its blueprint and some of the colonial contacts that were to prove so important to it. In March 1900 Violet Cecil attended the inaugural meeting of the Guild of Loyal Women, started by her friend Dora Fairbridge, a third-generation Cape Colonist. Claiming to be ‘non-political, save for [its] determination to uphold the Imperial supremacy in South Africa’, the Guild hoped to ‘draw closer the ties which unite Great and Greater Britain’. The Guild became the model for the Victoria League. While at the Cape both Edith Lyttelton and Mary Arnold-Forster discussed its work with Fairbridge. In late 1900 the Guild sent Katie Stuart (a well-known temperance preacher, and a niece of Olive Schreiner) to Britain, in part to establish a sister society there. Together with Stuart, Violet Cecil recruited other women including Alice Balfour, Alicia Cecil, Edith Lyttelton, and the Primrose Leaguer Lady Jersey, plus (since the new organization was also to be ‘non-political’) a number of ‘Liberal ladies’. The inaugural meeting was hosted by Alice Balfour at 10 Downing Street on 2 April 1901. The twenty-five women who attended (including Lady Raleigh, Lady Gwendolen Cecil, Mrs Leo Maxse, Millicent Garrett Fawcett, Mrs St Loe Strachey, Lady Hilda Brodick, and Mrs Lyttelton Gell) represented Britain’s social and political elite. Reflecting the close ideological association between monarchy and imperialism, the new League was named after Queen Victoria. It was resolved to ‘support and assist any scheme leading to more intimate understanding between ourselves and our fellow-subjects in our great Colonies and Dependencies’; to promote ‘any practical work desired by the Colonies and tending to the good of the Empire as a whole’; and to aim at becoming ‘a centre for receiving and distributing information regarding the different British dominions, especially information of importance to women’.

Katie Stuart was delighted: ‘it is so nice to think that English women are at last throwing off their reserve, and are extending the right hand of friendship to their Colonial sisters’. She was perhaps too sanguine. Violet Cecil, class-
conscious and near-atheist, did not take kindly either to Stuart’s missionary fervour or to her colonial egalitarianism. It was the last straw when, at the inaugural meeting, Mrs Stuart, addressing the heavily pregnant Violet Cecil, ‘talked about my – coming – infant as a ‘loving link [of empire]!!’ 44 Nevertheless, the meeting was a success. Lady Jersey was elected president, a post she held for twenty-six years. The Liberal Lady Tweedmouth became vice-president; after her death in 1904 the post was filled by other Liberals, Lady Carrington, then Lady Crewe. Nellie Macmillan, American-born Liberal Unionist and mother of Harold, was treasurer from 1901 until the 1930s. As well as Violet Cecil, Alice Balfour, Edith Lyttelton, and Alicia Cecil, the first executive committee also included Georgina Frere (daughter of Sir Bartle Frere, South African high commissioner 1877–80), Lady Helen Munro-Ferguson (daughter of Lord Dufferin and wife of a Liberal Imperialist MP), and May Tennant (née Abrahams, the first woman factory inspector in England, now married to another Liberal MP on the imperialist wing). Later additions included Mary Emmott in 1902, Mary Arnold-Forster in 1903, Violet Markham in 1904, and two Canadians, Lady de Blaquiere in 1902, and Lilian (Mrs Herbert) Chamberlain in 1903. Meriel Talbot, former honorary secretary of Lambeth Charity Organization Society, was the League’s highly competent secretary from 1901 until 1916, when she left to join a series of government committees.

Funded by donations and subscriptions, and by grants from the Rhodes Trust,45 the League established a one-room office in Dacre House, Victoria Street. Though the League, like most imperial propaganda societies, was always run on a shoestring, by 1915 the League office employed ten paid staff and occupied six rooms of Millbank House, Westminster.46 A newsletter, the Victoria League Monthly Notes, was begun tentatively in 1910 and enlarged in 1912. The first two branches, Cheltenham and Nairn, were founded in 1902; by 1904 there were four more – Essex, Newlands Corner (Surrey), Wimbledon, and Gloucester – and a branches subcommittee was set up under Mary Emmott. The League now developed branches more rapidly, with twenty by 1908 and twenty-seven by 1914, though not all lasted more than a few years. Often started by members of the League’s inner circle – Lady Betty Balfour in Woking, Lady de Blaquiere in Bath – branches were concentrated in the wealthier areas of England, with a cluster around London and another around the River Severn, though there was one branch in Wales (Denbighshire) and three in Scotland (Nairn, Edinburgh, and St Andrews). The branches organized imperial lectures, picture talks, reading circles, competitions, and entertainments; encouraged the affiliation of local schools to the League; and

44 Cecil, ‘diary’, 23 Feb., 2 Apr. 1901, Bodleian, Violet Milner papers, F2/1; Milner, Picture gallery, p. 297.
45 Which granted the League £500 p.a. for a five-year term in 1907 and again in 1911. For the League’s finances, see Bush, Edwardian ladies, Appendix 1, tables 1 and 2.
arranged Empire Day celebrations with processions, sports, and speeches. Each
had its peculiarity reflecting the enthusiasms of the local committee. Harrow,
under the retired schoolmaster G. H. Hallam, especially recruited junior
members – over 800 in 1912. Newlands Corner, run by Amy Strachey, went
in for rifle clubs and first aid practice, reflecting St Loe Strachey’s forebodings
of war with Germany and imminent invasion of the British mainland.

Membership of the League was differentiated on a money basis – five
guineas for vice-president, one guinea for council membership, five shillings
for ordinary membership, and one shilling for associate membership. Junior
members, admitted in 1907, paid threepence or sixpence, depending on age.
Members could join either a League branch or the League central. Total
membership was given as 148 by 1 May 1901; 2,350 by 1907; ‘close upon
4,000’ by 1908; and 6,500 by 1915. Correlating well with branch membership
figures given in the annual reports, these figures may be considered reasonably
reliable. League membership was overwhelmingly upper and middle class.
The more energetic Victoria Leaguers were aware, however, that the League’s
‘Society’ connections, though often a source of strength, were also a sign of
weakness, and the League made spasmodic attempts to establish a broader
base. The Liberal landslide of 1906 and the emergence of the Labour party
brought home to many the significance of the working-class vote. In Edith
Lyttelton’s words, since ‘working men’ were ‘going to determine all elections
in the future’, imperialists of all parties ‘must see that they care for the Empire.
The VL must work harder than ever’. Meriel Talbot told Violet Markham,
‘we must aim, I feel, at diluting the aristocratic element largely and at getting
in touch with working-class organizations whenever possible’. It was only in
1911, however, that the reactions of the Workers’ Educational Association
Oxford summer school to a Victoria League lecture – ‘suspicion … hostility to
the subject … considerable indifference to the conditions prevailing in the
Colonies’ – prompted a determination to take ‘the educational work of the
League into the industrial centres’. Markham and Talbot therefore ‘embarked
on the forlorn hope of trying to persuade the working man in the North of
England that the Empire is a system of governments of great political and
economic importance and that it doesn’t mean jingoism flag wagging and
aggression’. New branches were founded at Newcastle, Sheffield, and
Liverpool, but unlike some other imperial pressure groups (notably the Tariff
Reform League which staged smoking concerts in pubs and dinner hour
meetings at engineering works and Liverpool docks) the Victoria League

37 Victoria League Annual Report (AR) 1911–12, p. 35.
38 AR 1901–3, p. 9; 1906–7, p. 9; 1907–8, p. 12; Sargant, ‘Victoria League’, p. 593.
39 For 1913 British and overseas membership figures, see Bush, Edwardian ladies, Appendix 1,
tables 3 and 4.
40 Lyttelton to Violet Markham, 22 Jan. 1906, BLPES, Markham papers, 23/31; Talbot to
Markham, 25 Jan. 1906, BLPES, Markham papers, 26/28.
41 Executive, 21 Sept. 1911; Violet Markham to Hilda Cashmore, 1 Oct. 1911, BLPES,
Markham papers, 25/12.
never managed to reach ‘the working man’, despite adding the Workers’ Educational Association secretary, Albert Mansbridge, to the executive in 1912. Particularly disastrous was the League’s brief encounter with the Industrial Syndicalist Education League (the anarchist trade union movement’s propaganda branch). Though speaking by invitation, the Victoria League lecturer, H. J. Mackinder, addressing a ‘strongly prejudiced audience’ of ‘between 60 and 70, mainly young men’, had to contend not only with ‘a somewhat cynical reception’ but also with ‘a small bomb’.43

II

The Victoria League specialized in turning areas of work acknowledged as ‘feminine’ to imperial use, and in disguising the political nature of its objects under the cloak of gender. Working ostensibly within women’s expanding ‘separate sphere’ the League turned ‘Home, Society, Education, Philanthropy’ to political ends. By organizing war charities, providing ‘imperial education’ to children and the working classes, offering hospitality to colonials visiting Britain, supplying literature and art to the imperial frontiers, and pushing social reform as an imperial issue, the Victoria League aimed to promote a broadly Milnerite imperialism: Anglicizing South Africa, keeping Canada British, strengthening the bonds between the self-governing dominions and the ‘mother country’, and ensuring the maintenance of the ‘imperial race’.

Established at a critical point in the South African War, the League began by founding charitable funds for the war’s victims. Philanthropy had long been seen as ‘the leisured woman’s most obvious outlet for self-expression’, an activity in which ‘woman’s nature and mission joined in near perfect harmony’.44 The League was accordingly anxious to stress that, despite its imperial aims, its war work was ‘purely philanthropic, absolutely non-political’.45 The League raised funds for three causes – British refugees from the Boer republics; Boer women and children in the concentration camps; and preserving the graves of British soldiers killed in South Africa.

Of the 450,000 soldiers who fought for the British in the Boer War, 22,000 died.46 The government took responsibility for major cemeteries, but ‘the number of small skirmishes … made the task of keeping each grave in order very hard, while the [frequent] necessity … of marching a few hours after men had been killed made even the marking of graves difficult’.47 Anticipating the Imperial War Graves Commission and the voluntary organizations of the First World War, the Guild of Loyal Women undertook to find, identify, and mark

43 Executive, 27 May 1914.
45 Times, 16 July 1901; Cape Times, 9 Aug. 1901.
46 Pakenham, Boer War, p. 572.
47 Lord Methuen, quoted in the Times, 14 Oct. 1904.
permanently these scattered graves. Its sister societies – the Victoria League and, in Canada, the Imperial Order, Daughters of the Empire, and Lady Minto’s South African Memorial Association – acted as intermediaries between bereaved relatives and the Guild, and helped raise funds for the project. Guild representatives had raised £1,100 in Britain by autumn 1901, and the Victoria League eventually sent over £8,000 to South Africa. Such organizations as the Imperial Yeomanry and the Lord Mayor’s Fund made sizeable contributions. The donations, said Violet Cecil, ‘varied from these large sums down to a few penny stamps sent by some poor widowed woman for her husband’s or her son’s grave’. The rhetoric of the graves committee echoed the values of patriotism, glory, and service celebrated by Boer War memorials; overtones of the Victorian revival of chivalry identified by Mark Girouard are also perceptible. At its 1902 annual meeting one speaker quoted Wordsworth’s ‘Character of a Happy Warrior’; another proclaimed that ‘the graves in South Africa proved that the best traditions of British courage had been preserved in this war’. The tending of war graves was seen as an appropriate way for women to express their imperialism. Alone among the Victoria League’s early committees, the graves committee was an all-female affair. The ‘poor widow’ was the archetype for all the relations whose gratitude to the League and the Guild was chronicled in The Times and the annual reports. Who but women could provide the ‘patient and loving care’ needed to maintain the graves? The Victoria League, however, was not concerned only with the dead. In June 1901 Edith Lyttelton suggested that the League ‘should appeal for funds to provide extra comforts for the women and children’ in the concentration camps. These camps, the side-effect of Kitchener’s ‘scorched earth’ policy in South Africa, had recently become a public scandal after Emily Hobhouse revealed to the British public the camps’ deficiencies in basic supplies and hygiene, and the resultant escalating mortality rates among the inhabitants. Her report caused an outcry, government supporters defending the policy

The Guild also cared for Boer graves ‘wherever practicable, as it is when they are buried beside our own men’ – a gesture intended to promote reconciliation, though one Boer newspaper reacted with the headline ‘Hands off, ye Ghoul!’ (Times, 27 Sept. 1901; M. G. Fawcett, Impressions of South Africa in 1901 and in 1903, Contemporary Review, 84 (1903), pp. 635–53, at p. 655).


Executive, 21 June 1901.
while the Liberal leader Campbell-Bannerman denounced the camps, precipitating a serious split with the Liberal Imperialists.\(^{34}\) The League’s ‘Dutch women and children fund’ was therefore controversial: ten council members had resigned over the issue by October.\(^{34}\) However, the Victoria League appeal, backed by the secretary of state for war, St John Brodrick, and by a *Times* leading article, deliberately distanced itself from Hobhouse and her ‘pro-Boer’ committee, emphasizing its support for the government and the war effort. By providing ‘additional comforts for these non-combatants who have now become our fellow-subjects’, the League created an outlet for patriotic humanitarianism.\(^{55}\) It also hoped to minimize the bitterness of the Boers against Britain and stimulate a belief in British good intentions – hence a suggestion that a ‘simple little leaflet in Taal’ should be attached to the Victoria League goods explaining ‘that these things were given not by the Govt. as part of the ordinary ration but by the kindness of the very people who wish to go on with the war’.\(^{56}\) The fund (£1,925 2s 8d by October 1901) was dispersed through the government-appointed Committee of Ladies recruited in July to report on the concentration camps under the leadership of Millicent Garrett Fawcett. The ladies’ committee spent some of the League fund in the camps, establishing soup kitchens; buying lemons (against scurvy), tinned milk, baby food, and flannel; and supporting a school.\(^{57}\) In November 1901 £1,400 remained. Feeling that this ‘would go no way at all’ towards ‘any substantial improvement in rations or fuel supply for nearly 100,000 people’, the ladies’ committee suggested spending it on ‘the promotion and improvement of the education given in the camps’. Ultimately £300 from the fund was given to the director of education, E. B. Sargant.\(^{58}\) These camp schools, though attendance was voluntary, were the first step of Milner’s Anglicization scheme for the Boer republics.\(^{59}\) It is difficult to believe that the money could not usefully have been spent on more purely humanitarian schemes. The ladies’ committee, though not uncritical, had a generally impatient attitude to complaints about camp conditions and disliked...

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\(^{35}\) Executive, 24 Oct. 1901.

\(^{36}\) Edith Lyttelton to Millicent Garrett Fawcett, 25 July 1901, BLPES, Lucy Deane Streatfield papers, 2/4. There is no evidence this suggestion was followed.

\(^{37}\) Executive, 24 Oct. 1901; *Report on the concentration camps in South Africa by the committee of ladies appointed by the secretary of state for war* [Cd. 893] 1902, pp. 60, 67–8, 70, 161.

\(^{38}\) Fawcett to Edith Lyttelton (copy), 15 Nov. 1901, BLPES, Streatfield papers, 2/4; *Report on the concentration camps*, p. 6; *AR* 1901–13, p. 10.

\(^{39}\) Leo Amery, *The Times history of the war in South Africa* (London, 1909), vi, pp. 34–6. When peace was declared £600 remained: it was distributed to GLW philanthropic projects in Pretoria and Bloemfontein (Executive, 9 May 1902, 3 June 1904, 3 May 1905).
'indiscriminate charity’ on principle. Together with the League’s ambiguity over the camps issue, this led to a substantial proportion of the fund being directed to purposes other than those for which it had been collected.

As a deliberate counterweight to the concentration camps fund, a Victoria League British Refugees committee was established at the same meeting in June 1901. Though not entirely uncontroversial among the League’s Liberal members, this committee was more in tune with League sympathies. Violet Cecil had spent months working for Dr Jane Waterston’s women’s committee in Cape Town, organizing relief for ‘Uitlander’ refugees from the Boer republics. The orthodox imperialist reaction to the concentration camps controversy was to urge that ‘the wants of our own people must … remain the first charge on the generosity of this country.’ That the League appeal raised £6,379 7s 11d by November 1902 suggests this feeling was widely held. Joseph Chamberlain sent two donations with the charitable rider, ‘Not a penny please for the Boers.’ The fund was mainly distributed in South Africa through the Mansion House Cape committee, though about £1,000 was spent on goods sent out to South Africa and £600 on assisting refugees temporarily returned to England. In late 1901 Georgina Frere visited South Africa to assess the refugee situation. After visiting the Cape, in early 1902 she arrived in Johannesburg, the new sphere of action as refugees began to return home. Finding ‘rows and rows of once neat and prosperous little houses, now broken-windowed, dilapidated, and absolutely without a fragment of furniture left’, Frere saw ‘a large scope for the sympathy and help of their fellow-subjects at home’. The fellow-subjects responded generously: in October 1902 the League gave Milner £1,000 for returning refugees, and when the appeal was wound up shortly thereafter a £400 surplus remained to buy them useful Christmas presents. In November 1902 Violet Cecil, independently of the League, started a new fund for returning loyalists that raised £9,000 in three weeks. Behind both funds was a recognition of the psychological and political as well as humanitarian importance of aid to loyalist refugees in South Africa. Letters from South Africa

60 Report on the concentration camps, p. 4.
63 Violet Markham, ‘Miss Hobhouse and the concentration camps’, Times, 3 Sept. 1901; see also Krebs, Gender, p. 47.
64 Times, 22 Nov. 1902.
65 Chamberlain to Edith Lyttelton, 26 July 1901, CCAS, Chandos papers, Chan. ii 3/27.
published in the League’s annual report stressed the ‘moral effect’ of the refugee fund. ‘The knowledge that ladies have not only felt sorrow and compassion, but have worked hard to prove their sympathy, has had a wonderful effect in giving fresh courage to hundreds who have suffered cruelly through the war’ wrote a Guild of Loyal Women organizer. Demonstrating that the mother country had not forgotten them, the funds aimed to stiffen the morale of loyalist refugees in wartime and their determination to assert British power in South Africa after the war.

Once peace broke out the Victoria League’s main priorities became hospitality and education. Rudyard Kipling had suggested to the League ‘the need … for hospitality to be offered for Colonials when visiting England’. The number of travellers from the colonies to Britain – for education, politics, or pleasure – climbed sharply in the later nineteenth century as the voyage became increasingly quick, comfortable, and cheap. At the 1911 census 2,980 males and 3,052 females were recorded as ‘visitors’ from the empire. Kipling’s suggestion reflected the widespread feeling that hospitality generously offered to British visitors in the colonies was too often returned inadequately, or not at all, when colonials visited Britain. There were fears, too, that such negligence might have political consequences in an age of rising colonial nationalism. ‘Canadians of influence have had their white hearts towards England turned inky black by C[olonial] O[ffice] neglect’ warned Lord Grey, the Canadian governor-general, in 1906. Grey wanted a government scheme to address the problem. But, as Edith Lyttelton pointed out (while ‘pegging quietly away at the social recognition and care of our Colonial visitors’ during her husband’s term as colonial secretary), there was not ‘the slightest chance of getting that done as it would cost money’. Instead, the task of ‘imperial hospitality’ devolved upon the ladies of the Victoria League.

The coronation year of 1902, marking as it did the end of the war and the beginning of a new century, attracted record numbers of colonial travellers to London: 4,000 visitors were entertained by the League that summer. Some

88 AR 1901–3, pp. 13–15. Cf. Rudyard Kipling to Violet Cecil, 15 Nov. 1902, urging a Mansion House fund because ‘The [Afrikaner] Bond would realize that the Loyalists were not wholly without friends across the water … It would be the best conceivable chance for the Empire to show what its real feelings to the Loyalists are … the moral effect all round would be incalculable’ (Bodleian, Violet Milner papers, C395/5).
89 Executive, 7 June 1901.
92 Grey to Markham, 17 Nov. 1902, Markham papers, 25/33.
Victoria Leaguers, at least, had deeper motives than simply making colonial visitors feel valued and ‘at home’. ‘Colonials are “the fashion”’, wrote Violet Cecil, ‘and our South African friends are to have a really Royal time. There are quantities of disloyalists too, who are I hope grinding their teeth at being out of all the fun. I do want to make loyalty “pay” for once.’ Soon the League was regularly entertaining over 1,000 visitors a season to tea, garden, and evening parties, rifle competitions, polo matches, the trooping of the colours, and other social events. Most importantly, it resolved to show colonial visitors ‘the home life – the real England – and that, not only for their sakes, but equally for a truer understanding here of our fellow subjects overseas’. The Edinburgh and Oxford branches also befriended colonial students. In London the Victoria League acted as a tourist information service, providing details on ‘such matters as apartments, nursing homes, doctors, dressmakers, country inns, schools (day and boarding) etc.’, an arrangement formalized in 1913 with the opening of an Information Bureau. The League also founded the Ladies’ Empire Club in Grosvenor Street, ‘in order that ladies living in England and visiting London from all parts of the Empire might have a centre for meeting, in addition to the ordinary advantages of a club’. Like all the League’s hospitality work, the Ladies’ Empire Club was as much political as social. The Spectator, urging the foundation of a similar club for men, made the connection explicit. ‘A club, a first-class club … to which all good Colonial clubs should be affiliated’ would provide a ‘genuine social meeting-ground of Englishmen and Colonials’, where the colonial visitor might realize ‘what he still dimly believes – that behind the stolidity of the average Briton there is a real and Imperial brotherhood’.

Like the great political hostesses of the nineteenth century, the Victoria League used social means to political ends. Leonore Davidoff has argued that English Society ‘by regulating yet allowing the flow of new personnel … prevented the formation of angry, alienated newcomer groups barred from full social recognition’. The Victoria League extended this process to include temporary visitors from the dominions; by acting as middleman, receiving introductions and soliciting invitations, it admitted colonials to the level of social integration to which their status at home entitled them. Discrimination was therefore essential. ‘It would be a great mistake to entertain indiscriminately and to invite people to meet who would not know each other at home’, Edith Lyttelton told Grey. ‘Therefore we must have some personal introduction and first hand knowledge. The Agents-General and the

76 Talbot, ‘Early history’, p. 12.
78 AR 1903–4, p. 9; 1912–13, p. 9.
Colonial Institute’, she complained, ‘do not know these social distinctions.’ This precondition having been met, however, colonial visitors of social and political importance gained admittance to London Society, a process that at once prevented colonial resentment at unwarranted social exclusion, underlined the essential unity of Britain and her dominions, and – with luck – created a web of personal ties that, more than the faltering attempts at formal imperial union, might suffice to hold the empire together.

Similarly, the League arranged for the reception of British emigrants arriving in the colonies. The belief that continuing British settlement in the dominions was the best safeguard of colonial loyalty was widely held, and, particularly in the aftermath of the Boer War, the female emigration societies looked to women especially to pass on British values to the next generation. The war ‘added a younger generation of committed imperialists to the ranks’ of the main female emigration society, the British Women’s Emigration Association (BWEA) who rapidly became involved with South African emigration. Demonstrating the existence of a closely knit network of imperial activists, many of these women were also active in the Victoria League. Similarly, the Colonial Intelligence League, an emigration society aimed at ‘educated women’, enlisted many Victoria Leaguers when it was founded in 1910. Meriel Talbot later worked for the Society for the Oversea Settlement of British Women, the post-war quango that amalgamated and replaced the older emigration organizations. Even those who did not ultimately join the emigration societies were attracted by the idea. Violet Cecil, collaborating with Kipling in 1902 in a land settlement scheme for the Orange River Colony, found herself ‘very like Mrs Jellaby … Really, “settling our surplus population on the banks of the African rivers” is my chief thought.’ Though it had collaborated with the BWEA’s South African Expansion committee helping ‘Uitlander’ refugees return to South Africa, the League was anxious not to overlap with the emigration societies. But in 1909 it inaugurated a settlers’ welcome committee, chaired by Lady (Margaret) Talbot, which provided prospective emigrants bringing satisfactory references with letters of introduction to the League’s sister society in the appropriate colony. Numbers remained fairly low: although 145 emigrants (most heading for Australia or Canada) had been assisted in ten months of 1911, the total number by March 1914 was only 600. However, the League claimed to have reached ‘very

84 Kipling to Violet Cecil, 24 Sept. 1902, Bodleian, Violet Milner papers, C395/2; Cecil, ‘diary’, 23 Jan. 1903, Bodleian, Violet Milner papers, F2/2.
86 Times, 8 May 1909. Talbot’s husband, Sir Reginald, had been governor of Victoria 1904–8.
87 Executive, 26 Oct. 1911; AR 1913–14, p. 9.
varied types of applicants’ ranging from accountants to wheelwrights. Most came to the League via the colonial agent general or the emigration societies, but in the years immediately before the war the committee made increasing efforts to advertise the scheme through churches, charities, labour exchanges, and the British Passenger Agents Association.88

K. S. Inglis has noted the continuing resonance in Australia of the image of Great Britain as ‘home’. Rooted in the experience of emigration from Britain to the dominions, the idea of ‘home’ persisted despite increasing numbers of ‘native-born’ and the development of separate colonial nationalisms. Visiting Britain could confirm the sense that the ‘motherland’ was ‘home’, but it might also reinforce the consciousness of an independent national identity at the expense of the imperial tie. Angela Woollacott argues that white Australian identity in this period was ‘premised on a shared British heritage’ and on ‘notions of England as “home”’, but she also comments that ‘being in London often produced a sense of conflicted loyalty between metropole and colony’, frequently due to resentment at condescending British attitudes towards white colonials.89 It was therefore the Victoria League’s mission to foster in visitors from the dominions a feeling of being ‘at home’ at the imperial centre, and to strengthen the imperial connection by a network of personal links and happy memories. Similarly, the settlers’ welcome scheme served to impress upon British emigrants the interconnectedness of the mother country and the dominions, aiming to make them feel ‘that they are only in another part of home’.90 Using the gendered language of ‘home’ also helped to legitimize the League women’s imperial activism: extending the traditional role of hostess became a route into the masculine domain of empire politics.

If hospitality was one acceptable arena for women’s imperial activism, another was the education of children and the reproduction of British ideals. Accordingly, the Victoria League’s other main area of work was ‘imperial education’ – the promotion of empire through educational or cultural routes. By the early twentieth century it was widely accepted that education ‘had a vital role to play in the promotion of imperial unity’ and, despite intermittent protests from Milner and other imperialists that ‘Empire Education’ was neglected, the Victoria League was here following a well-beaten track.91 Indeed, John M. MacKenzie has argued that imperialism was an integral part of the British school curriculum, expressed particularly through history and geography textbooks, while the use of drill, rifle clubs, cadet corps, and (in the public schools) the cult of athleticism promoted militarism, discipline, and patriotism. Beyond the school gates the task of promoting imperialism in the

89 Inglis, ‘Going home’, pp. 127–30; Woollacott, To try her fortune, pp. 35, 141.
90 Monthly Notes, Aug. 1912, p. 69.
British public was pursued by the Boy Scouts, the Girl Guides, and many other organizations, of which the Victoria League was only one. Most similar to the latter was the League of the Empire, also founded in 1901 by women with links to South Africa. Originally aiming to make children ‘efficient citizens in any part of the Empire’ (i.e. potential settlers), the League of the Empire developed a wider interest in empire education, running a highly successful ‘comrades correspondence’, or penfriend, scheme for schools. Under its ‘Bismarckian’ secretary Elizabeth Ord Marshall it promoted educational co-operation between Britain and the dominions, organizing a Federal Conference on Education in 1907 that attracted delegates from across the empire. The Royal Colonial Institute was also interested in education, particularly after 1910, when it employed a professional speaker, W. Herbert Garrison, to give lantern lectures. The Victoria League’s contribution to empire education is significant both for the wide variety of methods it employed in Britain and the dominions, and, particularly in the early years, for its role as an auxiliary in Milner’s scheme to Anglicize the new South African colonies. It also recruited some of the foremost educationalists of the day including H. J. Mackinder, geographer, tariff reformer, and member of the coefficient and compatriot movements; H. O. Arnold-Forster, naval and military reformer, and writer of patriotic textbooks; and Michael Sadler, national efficiency campaigner and director of special inquiries at the Department of Education.

‘Next to the composition of the population, the thing which matters most is its education’ Milner wrote of the annexed Boer republics in 1900. ‘Everything that makes South African children look outside South Africa and realize the world makes for peace. Everything that cramps and confines their views to South Africa only … makes for Afrikanderdom and further discord.’ The Victoria League echoed these concerns. At its inaugural meeting Violet Cecil spoke on ‘South African objects, the need for wholesome political literature and of good history books for schools’.

The League’s education committee, founded June 1901, quickly arranged to send to South Africa lectures and magic lantern slides on British and imperial themes, a scheme encouraged in late 1902 by Millicent Garrett Fawcett’s offer to give League lectures there. Fawcett, who was revisiting South Africa to see her daughter Philippa (then working for the Transvaal education department), delivered around thirty illustrated lectures on the four themes of ‘the life of Queen Victoria, a Visit to

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92 MacKenzie, Propaganda, chs. 7 and 9.
93 Henrietta Trimen and Alys Fane Trotter, both married to former Cape Colony civil servants.
97 Milner, Picture gallery, p. 237.
98 Executive, 24 Oct. 1901, 13 Nov. 1902.
London, the Country Houses and Gardens, and the Institutions of England’.99 Fawcett certainly seems to have been successful in stirring up loyalist feeling. Emily Hobhouse complained in 1903 that, since Fawcett’s lecture in Klerksdorp in the Transvaal, an acquaintance in that town had ‘joined the Loyal Women’s Guild and does not wish to know me.’100

The Victoria League had aspirations for a bigger scheme to bring ‘imperial education’ both to Britain and the dominions. In early 1902 Violet Cecil described to Rhodes its plan ‘by means of lectures to bring home to English people in Great and Greater Britain what the Empire is, where it is and why we have got it and above all, what responsibilities such a possession – such a partnership entails’.101 After Rhodes’s death that March, the Victoria League ‘Plan for Imperial Education’, devised primarily by Michael Sadler, was submitted to the Rhodes Trust. Intended to ‘produce among the masses of the population … a clear and reasoned conviction of the importance of maintaining and strengthening the unity of the British Empire’, the plan was in two parts. Part one called for public education across the empire through lantern lectures on imperial themes. Part two involved an elite corps of specially trained young men who would tour the dominions giving similar lectures, ultimately forming ‘the nucleus of a school of thought which would be of great value to the Empire’.102 But (though the colonial office Visual Instruction Committee (VIC), also advised by Sadler, subsequently adopted a very similar scheme) the Rhodes Trust refused funding, and the Victoria League, while continuing to give lectures in Britain, subsequently restricted itself to less direct methods of imperial propaganda in the dominions.103

Most important of these was the League literature committee founded in early 1903 ‘to organize the distribution of English literature in South Africa … and to form the nucleus of lending libraries to be attached to Schools and elsewhere throughout the country’. It aimed to promote ‘a knowledge of English history and life’ and ‘the English language and literature’ among South Africans – in other words to encourage Anglicization while contributing to the broadening of vision Milner hoped to produce in the next Boer generation. ‘The illustrated papers’, reported a Transvaal school inspector, ‘are most keenly appreciated by the Boer children, and will prove very valuable in making them familiar with other scenes and phases of life outside South Africa’.104 By 1912 (though responsible government and the Union of South Africa had undermined the original raison d’être and exposed the

100 Emily Hobhouse to Lady Hobhouse, 30 Aug. 1903, in Rykie van Reenen, ed., Emily Hobhouse: Boer War letters (Cape Town, 1984), p. 277.
102 Victoria League Plan for Imperial Education, Bodleian, Milner papers, 467/305–12.
103 MacKenzie, Propaganda, p. 162; Violet Cecil to Milner, 1 July 1903, Bodleian, Milner papers, 216/19.
League to Afrikaner hostility) it had sent some 22,000 books to the Transvaal and over 6,000 to the Orange Free State. In a similar development, an art committee advised by the young Irish art critic Hugh Lane was founded in 1911 to send Medici art prints to South Africa. Shown only in the Transvaal and Orange Free State, the exhibition perhaps represented an analogous attempt to win the Dutch population (particularly the children) away from inward-looking Afrikaner culture and towards the European cultural heritage.

Meanwhile, the literature scheme was extended to Canada in 1904 through the Aberdeen Association, which provided reading material for frontier settlers. Though the anti-British threat was less significant than in South Africa, there were fears that the recent wave of east and central European immigration to western Canada might undermine the peculiarly British character of the dominion. The League hoped ‘to introduce a distinctively patriotic element’ into the literature work ‘for the sake of the numerous foreigners who are pouring into Canada’ and appealed for ‘any books or magazine articles likely to produce appreciation of and attachment towards British institutions’. Pursuing the same objects, in 1905 the League introduced a ‘newspaper scheme’ bringing together those in Britain willing to send papers or magazines to the dominions on a regular basis, and those in the dominions wishing to receive them. As well as the personal tie that might be, and apparently often was, created between sender and recipient, the scheme was intended to strengthen the imperial bond by keeping British settlers in touch with British news and culture. ‘The papers keep the love of country and the pride of Empire alive within us’ a settler wrote from the Transvaal. In Canada it was hoped to counteract the prevalence of American periodicals in the north-west. ‘I was glad to sit down and enjoy some good, reliable news’ wrote a clergyman from Saskatchewan. ‘At present this part of the British Empire is flooded with cheap American literature – ungrammatical, ill-spelt, of the “Uncle Sam first and John Bull nowhere” type.’ The League therefore campaigned for lower postal rates on British newspapers to the dominion, Violet Markham warning that Canada was ‘being Americanised against her will and against what she feels to be the best interests of her people’.

The League’s directly educational work, after the failure of the Plan for Imperial Education, was concentrated on the home market. The League worked through state and private schools ‘to bring home to the scholars the realities, responsibilities and duties of the Empire, the fortunes of which will one day be entrusted to them.’ Essay competitions were held on imperial themes – ‘Imperial Citizenship: its Privileges and Responsibilities’, ‘The

105 By 1915, 66,361 books had been sent overseas (Sargant, ‘Victoria League’, p. 591).
Significance of the Monarchy to the Empire’ (a coronation year special), and ‘The Meaning and Ideals of Empire Day’. Requested by a Surrey school-master, in 1904 the Victoria League took up school linking between Britain and the colonies (despite protests from the rival League of the Empire, which had invented the idea in 1902). With the help of the Victoria League’s colonial ‘sister societies’, by 1906 thirty-four and by 1910 one hundred British schools were corresponding, some with schools in more than one country, and often with places of the same name. In 1909 (the organizers of the League of the Empire’s Comrades Correspondence having defected to the Victoria League after plans to amalgamate the two Leagues failed) the latter began a penfriend scheme, also run primarily within schools, through which letters, postcards, flags, and pressed flowers or the seeds of local plants were exchanged. Both schemes were intended to broaden the children’s horizons, to illuminate for them the history and geography of the empire, and to create personal links which, as the children grew older, might develop into a political leaning towards the preservation of imperial ties.

Adults too, particularly the working classes, were thought to need imperial education. It was delivered primarily in the form of lectures or picture talks illustrated with lantern slides. In 1902, with a £100 donation from Sir Vincent Caillard, the League engaged H. J. Mackinder to give lectures in large towns at £10 a lecture; the education committee began planning a smaller lecture scheme for ‘villages and country towns’. The prize-winning lectures from a competition held in 1904 became the nucleus of the Victoria League collection and a Reader, Miss Percy Taylor, was appointed in January 1905 and later retained as a permanent lecturer. By 1909 fifteen different lectures (twelve on different countries plus ‘Native Races within the Empire’, ‘A Journey Round the Empire’, and ‘Our Mediterranean Possessions’) were available to any organization complete with reader and lantern slides for a fee of between £2 and ten guineas, plus travelling expenses. Victoria League branches also had a choice of six picture talks (slides and lecture notes) on Canada, South Africa, India, Australia, New Zealand, or ‘Round the Empire’ at 5s each. An impressive array of auxiliary League lecturers included John Buchan and Leo Amery. Visiting colonial speakers – such as the New Zealander William Pember Reeves and the Canadian mountaineer Julia Henshaw – were also pressed into service. From the initial ten lectures over the winter ‘lecturing season’, lectures organized by the League rose to fifty-one in 1905–6, sixty-nine in 1908–9, and ninety-eight in 1913–14. League figures suggest that by 1914 around one third of lectures were given to working-class audiences, mainly

Executive, 19 May, 30 June 1904; AR 1905–6, p. 20; 1909–10, p. 15.
Executive, 13 Nov. 1902; Times, 8 Aug. 1904; AR 1904–5, p. 13; 1905–6, p. 18.
AR 1908–9, inside front cover.
AR 1905–6, pp. 18–20; 1908–9, pp. 19–20; 1913–14, pp. 11–12.
through working-men’s clubs, settlements, and the Workers’ Educational Association, while in 1909–10 a series of lectures was given at Hollesley Bay Labour Colony, Suffolk, a former ‘Colonial College’ for gentlemen emigrants converted to train the London unemployed in rural industries.\(^{115}\)

As back-up resources for the lecturing scheme, the Victoria League assembled a library and lantern slide collection. The library, largely funded by the Transvaal gold magnate Alfred Beit and intended to contain ‘not only the standard works on the different Colonies, but also the best fiction dealing with colonial life’, was selected with care. Sending him the list, Violet Cecil told Milner, ‘I haven’t even heard of most of these books and we don’t want 1) to buy poison, 2) to buy rubbish … I want to make no mistakes.’\(^{116}\) The League’s slide collection grew rapidly through donations from amateur photographers, colonial organizations, businesses, and government bodies. The success of the League’s illustrated lecture programme attracted the attention of the colonial office VIC, whose own similar and lavishly funded scheme seemed likely to grind to a halt. Proposing to split the scheme into two halves, ‘that suitable for Government control connected with the preparation of books and slides’, and ‘propaganda work in the country, which had best be done by an efficient unofficial organization’, the VIC suggested that the League might take over the latter. Eventually the rival claims of imperial societies and the fear of losing patronage and funding dictated that the VIC stayed at the colonial office, and though it was transferred to the Royal Colonial Institute during the war it was never a real success. One reason for its ineffectiveness was a reactionary attitude to new technology: in 1908 the VIC resolved not to use cine cameras.\(^ {117}\) The Victoria League was not so hidebound and in 1912, discussing ‘the ever-increasing influence of picture shows’, began to consider ‘whether this popular method might not be used to promote a better knowledge of British history and events’. Inquiring through its colonial sister societies about the possibility of obtaining ‘cinematograph’ films on imperial subjects, the League received an enthusiastic response, the Tasmanian branch even sending films to London.\(^ {118}\) Though the cinematograph scheme was halted by the outbreak of war, it illustrates the League’s openness to innovation while more ‘establishment’ imperial propaganda societies held firmly to traditional methods.

Greenlee describes the educational approach of the Royal Colonial Institute as ‘Kiplingesque’ with an emphasis on ‘duty and self-sacrifice … the grandeur, romance and moral benefits of the empire’. The Victoria League, priding itself on its ‘sane imperialism’, preferred to play to a lower key.\(^ {119}\) Violet Cecil, reading ‘one of the new type of British Empire lesson books’, found it

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\(^{115}\) AR 1909–10, pp. 10–11.

\(^{116}\) AR 1909–10, p. 12; Cecil to Milner, 7 Jan. 1904, Bodleian, Milner papers, 216/229.

\(^{117}\) MacKenzie, Propaganda, pp. 162–6; Executive, 21 Sept. 1911.

\(^{118}\) Executive, 16 May, 17 Oct., 21 Nov. 1912, 19 June 1913.

very trashy and clap-trappy ... The intention of all of them is good but there is too much about ‘Impregnable Gibraltar’ when one knows it is quite pregnable ... instead of which one ought to say, ‘our forebears by courage and constancy did all this for us, and we have to see that it is properly defended and used’. Birrell’s description of the Daily Telegraph as a ‘Rowdy Philistine’ would apply to all these so-called Imperial books.\footnote{120}

This is very close to the attitude Milner felt should be produced by contemplation of the British empire: not boastfulness, aggression, and Jingoism but ‘a spirit of humble admiration for the efforts and sacrifices of the past ... a deep anxiety to preserve anything so precious ... a desire to be worthy of privileges so unique.’\footnote{121} The League also believed that knowledge of the empire – not its grandeur and romance but the nitty-gritty economic facts of geography, population, farming, and industries – would automatically inspire a properly imperial attitude. In 1910–11 the Leeds and Victoria branches of the League organized an exchange of slides: one set illustrating ‘the whole wool growing industry, including mustering, dipping and shearing etc.’ in Australia, the other ‘showing the process of manufacturing the wool in the Leeds district.’\footnote{122} Educational in itself, full of local interest, and demonstrating most vividly the interdependence of Britain and her colonies, this project exemplifies the League’s approach to imperial education.

If hospitality and the education of children and the working classes were acceptable occupations for Edwardian ‘ladies’, so too was the promotion of social reform. Older forms of philanthropy often developed into a wider concern with social conditions. Presenting their work as ‘social housekeeping’, women had been active in local government since the 1870s – a development welcomed even by anti-suffragists.\footnote{123} Concurrently, social reform began to enter the imperial agenda as imperialists worried about the physical condition of an increasingly urbanized population and the implications of this for national greatness. The Boer War compellingly illustrated the national aspects of high infant mortality and low standards of fitness in the urban working classes. An Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration was set up, reporting in 1904,\footnote{124} and Lord Rosebery and the Liberal Imperialists began campaigning for ‘national efficiency’ – ‘a condition of national fitness equal to the demands of our Empire’.\footnote{125} Against this background a Victoria League industrial committee was established in 1905 by Violet Markham and Edith Lyttelton, with May Tennant and Maud Pember Reeves (subsequently

\footnote{120} Cecil, ‘Diary’, 3 May 1904, Bodleian, Violet Milner papers, F2/2.
\footnote{122} AR, 1910–11, p. 45.
the author of the feminist Fabian Tract, *Round about a pound a week*) among its members. Both Markham and May Tennant were active Liberal Imperialists with a strong interest in social reform and a conviction that Britain’s imperial strength depended upon a healthy population at home. The committee’s first project was ‘to collect and compile all the factory laws of the self-governing Colonies, and to publish the same in a handbook, with comparative tables’, providing a guide for reformers and acting as the voice of conscience to countries whose industrial laws were found wanting. The task proved more onerous than expected, partly due to lack of information. ‘It’s really comic the number of Imperial enquirers in this country’ wrote Markham visiting Canada in 1905, ‘I am looked on as heavily industrial and labour laws! As the latter hardly exist in Canada – more’s the pity – I have collected more theories than facts.’ So it was not until 1908 that the handbook, covering Britain, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and Cape Colony, was finally published, to good reviews from the major journals.

In her introduction, May Tennant warned that ‘a high standard in industrial conditions’ was ‘vital to the well-being of the whole Empire’. She hoped that by an interchange of industrial statistics and a comparison of industrial laws, the Mother Country can show to the younger countries by her longer and frequently bitter experience the errors to avoid; and the daughter States can in their turn lead the Parent State to a more hopeful and original treatment of problems which threaten alike the welfare of all.

The same desire to bring together British experience and colonial innovation prompted the committee’s 1914 Imperial Health Conference, held over four days at the Imperial Institute alongside an illustrative exhibition organized by the Co-partnership Tenants Committee. Delegates from Britain, the dominions, and the USA discussed the subjects of housing, town planning, and ‘the Care of Child Life’. These were all key topics in Edwardian debate. Both in calling for better town planning, housing reform, and state intervention to improve infant and child health, and in claiming it as ‘essentially...

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127 *AR* 1904–5, p. 22.
128 Violet Markham to Rosa Markham, 24 Oct. 1905, BLPES, Markham papers, 27/58.
129 The factory and shop acts of the British dominions: a handbook compiled by Miss Violet Markham; together with a general view of the English law; and a preface by Mrs H. J. Tennant [issued by the industrial subcommittee of the Victoria League] (London, 1908). For reviews see e.g. *Contemporary Review*, 93 (1908), Literary Supplement, pp. 20–1; *Spectator*, 100 (1908), pp. 192–3.
130 *Factory and shop acts*, p. v.
Imperial work”, the Victoria League was striking a contemporary chord.

III

In all its work the Victoria League aimed to ensure the continuing loyalty of the self-governing dominions, and the League’s association with its ‘sister societies’ in Australasia, Canada, and South Africa was fundamental both to its work and its self-image. An increasing number of Victoria Leagues had existed in Australasia since 1903. In Canada the League worked through the Imperial Order, Daughters of the Empire. Founded in 1900 by a Montreal Scot, Margaret Clark Murray, the Daughters of the Empire had 137 ‘chapters’, or branches, by 1910. In 1909–11 Meriel Talbot toured the dominions for the League, aiming to stimulate the work of allied associations, to establish new branches, and to strengthen personal links between the League and its colonial allies. Throughout her tour Talbot illustrated the Victoria League’s belief in the importance of ‘imperial sentiment’ and personal ties in holding the empire together. ‘The Hall decorated with red, white and blue flowers and hangings and a great Union Jack behind the little dais’, she wrote of a Tasmanian meeting, ‘Touching farewells all round … “God Save the King” sung with a real thrill.” With this faith in ‘sentiment’ went something of Richard Jebb’s appreciation of the force of colonial nationalism.

While the organization of sentiment might be a suitable ‘womanly’ occupation, the reorganization of the empire’s political structure assuredly was not. And if the Australasian Victoria Leagues (though technically autonomous) were happy to work with the London League, the Daughters of the Empire, and Guild of Loyal Women proved fiercely independent. Talbot thought the Daughters ‘gloriously vague’ and longed to divert them from ‘these silly fountains and hospital cots, to get money for which they get up dances and follies of all sorts’ to ‘the VL practical things’, but she was unable to win the co-operation of their autocratic president, Mrs Nordheimer. With the Guild of Loyal Women, in disarray since the Union of South Africa, Talbot was more successful: she persuaded its leaders to transform the Guild into the Victoria League of South Africa, admitting men as members, adopting a list of aims similar to the British League, and able to attract some Dutch support.
Nevertheless, ‘three recalcitrant branches’ refused to dissolve, staking a claim to the Guild funds.\textsuperscript{138} Despite such problems, however (and despite the tendency, identified by Julia Bush, for British imperialist women to think of their colonial contacts in terms of mother–daughter rather than sisterly relationships),\textsuperscript{139} the emphasis on colonial autonomy also reflected the wider views of at least some of the Victoria League executive. ‘To me true nationalism is the basis of all true Imperialism’ reflected Violet Markham visiting South Africa in 1912.\textsuperscript{140} Addressing the new Bloemfontein Victoria League on ‘the League and its ideals’, she described its motto as ‘Unity in Diversity’:

It was a source of pride … that the Leagues in different countries were self-governing bodies, following the lines of their own individuality … There was absolutely no conflict between the spirit of Empire and nationality, for nationality was inseparable from Empire. It was because the nations were so different that they were so strong. But … they must stretch out the hand of their friendship to the other members of the family.\textsuperscript{141}

Turning its back on ‘big sounding financial and other union which result in little’, the Victoria League pinned its faith for imperial unity on ‘personal work … with its far-reaching results in bringing British people closer together’.\textsuperscript{142}

Like most Edwardian imperial pressure groups, the Victoria League had trouble incorporating India into its vision of empire, which was essentially founded on the ‘white dominions’.\textsuperscript{143} The League’s reaction to the proposal that Indian students studying in Britain should be included in its hospitality programme illustrates this problem. By the early twentieth century the number of Indian students studying in Britain, mostly for the bar or the Indian civil service, was substantial (over 700 in 1910). As numbers rose there was increased concern to regulate their activities, both politically (after the emergence of the nationalist India House centre in Highgate) and socially.\textsuperscript{144} In 1907 the League was approached by several individuals who ‘considered that a great deal more could and should be done with Indians coming to this country, either for education or as visitors’. It called a conference of societies

\textit{League for the Transvaal Province held on 29 November 1912; Constitution of the Victoria League of South Africa.}

\textsuperscript{138} Executive, 21 Mar., 20 June 1912.

\textsuperscript{139} Bush, Edwardian ladies, ch. 6.

\textsuperscript{140} Markham, diary, 15 Dec. 1912, BLPE, Markham papers, 27/8. Cf. Edith Lytton to Milner, 3 July 1905, on the Victoria League’s relations to colonial Leagues: ‘complete autonomy and help and sympathy whenever possible – imitating I hope in this way a far larger confederation’ (Bodleian, Milner papers, 216/102).

\textsuperscript{141} Monthly Notes, Mar. 1913, p. 20.

\textsuperscript{142} Talbot, diary, 14 Mar. 1910, KAO, Talbot papers, U1612 F221.


connected with India – the Northbrook Society, the National Indian Association, the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College Association, and the Indian Women’s Association – which agreed that ‘the help of the Victoria League would be of especial value’. The League consented to offer hospitality to ‘Indian girls and ladies coming to England’; a three-man committee was delegated to consider the more sensitive question of a predominantly female society ‘extending personal friendliness’ to young Indian men. Two of the committee – Sir Curzon Wyllie and Sir Theodore Morison, both of whom had considerable Indian experience – gave a cautious welcome to the proposal. The third member, Lieutenant Hordern RN, advised that the Victoria League ‘should not undertake any responsibility itself, though it might furnish the names of any members willing to receive Indian students’ to the relevant societies.

Violet Cecil took the gloomiest view of the whole affair:

I am not very hopeful of saving the League … the dear nice innocent women all think that Mohammedans have only got to see them to become Westernised … It is a disappointing thought that the VL should dash itself to pieces on this rock … I am going to fight until the last ditch and then resign when I am beaten.

Lord Curzon, applied to for support, revealed her profound ignorance of the subject (‘You write as if they would in the main be Mohammedans [but] … the number who come to England must be small in comparison with the Hindees’). Curzon counselled that ‘the question whether [they] should be allowed to mix with English ladies is one of the most difficult that arises in India’. The ‘high-born young Indian’ with a European education, and ‘the cultured Hindu of position and experience’ could be trusted, but, he warned, ‘the average Indian of 17 to 20’ was likely to ‘misjudge the position’ and ‘acquire contempt for a social freedom which suggests to him moral laxity or worse’. Curzon concluded that ‘everything turns upon the class and age of the individuals for whom you are asked to cater … the experiment should not be undertaken except with great caution and the most stringent guarantees’. At the next executive meeting Hordern warned that the proposal was ‘distinctly dangerous’; nor were other members of the executive much more enthusiastic. Most damningly, ‘Mr Rudyard Kipling having been invited to become a Vice President had written to say that should the League undertake to offer hospitality to young Asians residing in England he could not accept any connection with the League.’ (Kipling, a zealous advocate of British rule in India, regarded

145 Executive, 7 Feb., 27 June 1907. For the Northbrook Society and the National Indian Association, see Antoinette Burton, At the heart of the empire: Indians and the colonial encounter in late-Victorian Britain (Berkeley, 1998), pp. 55–63. See also Bush, Edwardian ladies, pp. 119–21.

146 Wyllie in the Indian army; Morison as an educationalist. By a curious irony, in 1909 Wyllie was assassinated by an Indian student (in protest at the partition of Bengal) at a National Indian Association entertainment.

147 Executive, 7 Nov. 1907.

148 Violet Cecil to Lord Edward Cecil, 10 Nov. 1907, Bodleian, Violet Milner papers, C705/23.

149 Curzon to Violet Cecil, 11 Nov. 1907, Bodleian, Violet Milner papers, C254/9.
western educated Indians as ‘hybrid university-trained mules’ and probably nationalist agitators.) Finally the executive resolved, with unanimous relief, to drop the proposal ‘without pronouncing an opinion on the merits of the case … owing to the widespread feeling against it which exists among friends and well-wishers of the Victoria League.’

The episode is particularly interesting for the clear distinction made between Indian women, accepted in principle almost with enthusiasm, and Indian men. The anxieties raised by the proposed social interaction between English women and Indian men, evinced in talk of ‘serious difficulties’ and (sexual) ‘danger’, were commonly felt, both in India (where preserving the ‘social distance’ between rulers and ruled was the special duty of white women) and in Britain. India Office correspondence concerning Indian students in London reveals concern, not only at the perceived attractions of white women for Indian men, but also the reverse – English women were said to ‘rush at them’, ‘only too willing to become their victims’. (Ironically, male Indian travellers to late nineteenth century London were often disconcerted by their enforced proximity to women on public transport, and by finding themselves ‘singled out for scrutiny and sexual encounter’.) That the Victoria League should have retreated from such a ‘dangerous proposal’ as including Indian men in its hospitality scheme is therefore unsurprising; given the aims of the scheme it was none the less unfortunate, since for many Indian nationalist leaders ‘it was partly their experiences in Britain that honed their appreciation for the injustices of imperial rule.’

The Indian students debate highlights not only the pervasiveness of racial theory in Edwardian imperialism but also some of the constraints placed on the League women’s freedom of action by contemporary gender ideology. The League’s founders may be compared to the young men of Milner’s ‘kindergarten’ in the source of their inspiration and their devotion to Milner’s vision of South Africa, but their options for active imperialism were very different. Social conventions, lack of political power, and the dominant ideology of ‘separate spheres’ limited their opportunities. The imperial education movement provides an illustration. Male imperialists’ involvement tended to reflect disillusionment with imperial federation schemes and the search for an alternative, ‘non-political’ approach to imperial unity. For an


151 Executive, 5 Dec. 1907. A comparable episode, involving the inclusion of Jamaican children in the League’s Personal Correspondence scheme, ended more positively when, at the instigation of the Victoria League’s Jamaica branch secretary, Mrs Roots, the words ‘of European descent’ were omitted from the regulations (Executive, 17 July 1913).


154 Burton, Heart of the empire, p. 64.

155 Greenlee, Education, p. iii.
independent female imperialist society (as opposed to the ‘ladies’ branch’ of a men’s organization) only the latter approach was open. These limitations were reflected, too, in the League’s studied vagueness about the kind of imperialism for which it stood. Seen positively, this allowed it to act as an umbrella organization uniting Liberals and Conservatives, free traders and tariff reformers, federalists and proponents of ‘organic unity’. Even during the 1914 Ulster crisis the League was able to continue its work almost regardless of increasingly bitter party divisions. The price it paid was an inability to engage as an organization with Edwardian debates about the future of the empire. In an age of active party-political women’s organizations and an increasingly militant suffrage campaign, the League, pinning its imperial hopes on the ‘organization of sentiment’, harked back to an earlier tradition of indirect influence. But the actions of the Victoria League as an institution should be contrasted with the political participation of its members as individuals. Most of the Victoria League’s prominent members were also involved in Conservative, Liberal Unionist, or Liberal women’s organizations, and many were hotly involved in imperial controversies. While in South Africa Violet Cecil, a strong believer in backstairs politics, bombarded her Conservative party contacts with instructions to sack General Butler, improve military hospitals, and begin army reform; during 1906 she tried to persuade the Liberals that the new Transvaal constitution should put the interests of British settlers first. A supporter of tariff reform, she was outraged by the League’s decision to bar well-known protectionists from speaking for it. Similarly, Violet Markham became well known as a writer on South African politics, and she and May Tennant helped found a Liberal Imperialist ginger group, the Liberal Colonial Club.

It is clear, therefore, that individual Victoria Leaguers were willing and able to use their talents, their contacts, and the established women’s party political organizations in attempts to influence imperial politics. But the Victoria League itself, as a women’s organization aiming at a wide membership, cultivated blandness and a ‘non-political’ approach. For there was considerable resistance to the idea of women interfering with the masculine world of empire politics, which was articulated most clearly through the anti-suffrage campaign. Two of the most prominent women ‘antis’, Lady Jersey and Violet Markham, were members of the Victoria League executive. Many other female imperialists, like Flora Shaw, colonial editor of *The Times*, and Ethel Colquhoun, of the Royal Colonial Institute, also opposed woman suffrage.

156 E.g. Violet Cecil to Joseph Chamberlain, 9 Aug. 1899, Birmingham University Library, Chamberlain papers, JC30/3/9/6; Violet Cecil to Arthur Balfour, 23 Jan. 1900, 9 May [1900], Edinburgh, Scottish Record Office, Balfour papers, GD433/2/39/18; GD433/2/39/22; Violet Cecil to Lord Crewe, 18 Feb. 1906, Cambridge University Library, Crewe papers, C/34.


For anti-suffragists, Britain’s imperial role was a key reason why women should not be given the vote. Women were considered incapable of understanding the complexities of imperial rule (‘Imagine the women of England governing India’, scoffed Goldwin Smith). It was feared that admitting women to national politics would undermine Britain’s authority with the ‘native races’ of the empire. And women were said to lack the ‘physical force’ upon which, claimed the antis, Britain’s control over the empire ultimately depended.160 Markham, herself so involved with imperial politics, used all these reasons, among others, to argue that women should restrict themselves to the more ‘womanly’ work of local government.161 Antoinette Burton’s studies of ‘imperial suffragism’ have demonstrated that imperialism and feminism in this period were by no means mutually exclusive. On the contrary, feminists used imperial arguments to justify their claim to the suffrage, citing British women’s imperial responsibilities as ‘mothers of the race’ and their self-imposed role as protectors of colonized women. There were also strong links between feminists in different parts of the empire, with suffrage victories in New Zealand (1893) and Australia (1902) providing British feminists with examples of the positive effects of the female franchise.162 The Victoria League itself included many suffragists, including Meriel Talbot, ‘a suffragist of life-long conviction’, and May Tennant, who supported universal adult suffrage.163 Nevertheless, the background of hostility towards female activism in imperial politics, and the gender conservatism of at least some of its leading members, led the Victoria League to take a low-key and unchallenging approach. Employing a tactic also used by the Primrose League, with which it shared an overlapping membership and a belief in ‘indirect influence’, the Victoria League quietly expanded women’s public roles by enlarging their ‘private sphere’ responsibilities.164 If the Victoria League highlights the limitations on the imperial activism even of elite women, it also provides evidence of a nucleus of strongly imperialist women based mainly in London and active in more than one imperial propaganda society, and of a wider network of women imperialists across Britain. The League’s association with its ‘sister societies’ in Australasia, Canada, and South Africa provides an insight into the workings of the dense web of imperial women’s networks now beginning to be charted by historians such as Angela Woollacott; it also illustrates some of the tensions inherent in ‘imperial sisterhood’. More broadly, the early history of the Victoria League,

and of the other imperial propaganda societies with which it co-operated and clashed, provides some evidence to back John M. MacKenzie’s claim that popular imperialism became a stronger, not a weaker, force in British society during the Edwardian era. Women’s activism through imperialist organizations arguably peaked in this period. Most of these societies had not existed, or had not welcomed women’s participation, before the South African War; while for many prominent imperialist women the Great War provided an opportunity to move into official, or quasi-official, circles. For women like Meriel Talbot, Violet Markham (a stalwart of interwar government committees), and Edith Lyttelton (who went on to work for the League of Nations), their earlier work for the Victoria League and similar societies provided a stepping-stone towards greater opportunities in the post-war world. Much has still to be written on women’s involvement in Edwardian imperial politics. The association of women like Violet Cecil and Ethel Colquhoun with ‘radical right’ causes such as tariff reform, national service, and naval supremacy, and of Violet Markham and May Tennant with Liberal Imperialist organizations, suggests a much wider degree of participation than historians have been willing to allow. The work of the Victoria League demonstrates that women’s contribution to Edwardian imperial propaganda has been seriously underestimated; it is a reminder, too, of the breadth and vigour of women’s political culture before the vote was won.