



**“Disgruntled Missionaries:” The Friendship of and Mary Neal and Emmeline Pethick
Lawrence at the West London Mission”ⁱ**

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Mary Neal is best known today as a folklorist and music and dance educator but her first career was as a missionary. Having been a discontent young woman at home, in her late twenties Neal found her identity—her talent for working with children, her love of folk song, and her socialism—through her association with the West London Mission (WLM), based in Soho, and through friendship with another of the missionaries, Emmeline Pethick. Clara Sophia, who took the name of Sister Mary, was an early member of the West London Mission (WLM), arriving soon after it opened in the fall of 1887 to join its newly forming deaconess-like “Sisters of the People.” Emmeline Pethick (1867-1954) arrived in 1891. Their attachment was solidified by their similarity of background; and by the frank admiration for each other’s looks, voice, and wit that evokes what Sharon Marcus calls the “classic sentimental friendship” of the mid-Victorian decades. With Mary, seven years older, often as the navigator, the pair reckoned with the severe poverty of their district and began to comprehend the hardships of the teenagers in their evening club for working girls. They also negotiated the churning political and intellectual seas of the wider world of the 1890s. Over just a few years, from 1891 to 1895, when they left the Mission, Neal and Pethick transformed themselves from restless Christian daughters to educators, social thinkers, and founders of an innovative early settlement. Here I will consider the young

women's path within and then away from the structured and homelike environment of the Mission with its attractive "mother" and "father" figures in the form of the Mission's Superintendent, Hugh Price Hughes, and his still-young wife, Katherine Price Hughes (KPH). Resigning in the late summer of 1895, they established a productive new base in Somers Town, just north of the Mission's turf. The parts of their lives for which each is better known were still several years in the future.

These two are not among their age's fabled pairs of female friends or lovers such as Frances Power Cobbe and Mary Lloyd, or Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby. Indeed another leading Sister, told a Charles Booth assistant in the late 1890s that the Sisters were too busy for friendship; she believed that the Mission should actually avoid recruiting "that class of person" who comes seeking "many dear friendships." Emmeline and Mary disagreed. They were gregarious women, with enormous networks of deeply loved friends and kin; and their own relationship was a very intimate one that continued through their lives. Yet I think Mary was more tuned into her vaguer and flightier friend than vice versa. It was Mary who realized within minutes of their meeting in 1899 that Emmeline would marry Fred Lawrence-- interrupting the life the two women had created in Somers Town, a life which to Mary had seemed "would go on just so for ever." "But the gods had decided otherwise," Mary wrote, her tone of fatalism adding another dimension to the statement. Mary also reports a few instances of intense identification with her friend. As one example, when Emmeline, now a militant suffragist, was imprisoned and forcibly fed, in 1912, Mary Neal could not swallow for an entire evening.

The Sisters of the People were hardly "New Women." However mild and democratic the Sisterhood was, its members were uniformed, lived under a rule, and were enlisted in



Christian service as well as social work. Yet Emmeline defined her time at the Sisterhood as an exciting trek with “discovery at every step.” With the support of their Mission superiors, the Sisters moved into arenas in Methodism from which women had been excluded for decades. They were encouraged to do street preaching, and to conduct their own services. In doing this they could draw not only on the Salvation Army as a model but on the evangelical tradition of attributing such female religious activism to a calling from God rather than a freely made individual choice. But the Sisterhood’s members were at least somewhat analogous to the thousands of others of their generation who were part of a major women’s movement into the slums of Great Britain, only some of whom were connected with religious institutions. The WLM Sisterhood originated experiments in social services: old age pensions, employment registries, crèches, children’s play groups, country vacations for teens, programs for disabled children, and so on. Two of the Sisters became Poor Law Guardians. Few female social observers began their careers as missionaries, however, which make Mary Neal and Emmeline Pethick an interesting variant on the more usual forms of recruitment of women into slum work.

The West London Mission’s Sisterhood along with Mary Neal and Emmeline Pethick have important places in the stories of British religion, social work, and women’s work, as well as female relationships. The Sisters of the People is an institution almost completely neglected by historians, yet larger (36 full-time Sisters in 1895), more active, and more innovative than many of the better-known women’s (or men’s) settlements of the same era. And though the Booth researchers expected the organization to decline as the founding Sisters aged, the Sisterhood renewed itself continuously and was very active through the Second World War. Mary Neal and Emmeline Pethick are also significant



historical actors. Emmeline Pethick figures as a main player in the suffrage movement, one of its most effective orators, but the Mission phase of her life—in which she learned public speaking—is little appreciated. In Mary’s case, the story of the English folklore revival of the early 1900s is currently being enriched and complicated through recognition of her part in it. The recovery model is especially apt in the case of Mary Neal, whose leadership in the early 1900s movement to preserve and re-enliven English folk music and dance was almost literally stolen by her colleague Cecil Sharpe, whose successors succeeded in obliterating her from the history of their movement. Their Folk Music Journal barely mentioned her until Roy Judge, a professional Morris dancer, got interested in Neal and in 1989 published a detailed article on her place in their movement. Her great-great grandniece Lucy Neal, in London, an arts administrator and activist in community theater, has been working to revive the memory and the passions of her fascinating forbear—as demonstrated by Mary Neal Day at Cecil Sharp House in London (February 7, 2009).

The early 1890s

Emmeline and Mary—like most of the Sisters—came from the wealthy business classes. Mary was the daughter of a successful Birmingham button manufacturer, Emmeline’s farm and merchant family had moved from Bristol to Weston-super-Mare (Somerset) when she was a child. Family issues of different kinds pulled both of them from these homes. Mary was repelled by the hypocrisy of her household and at the “utter unreality of everyday life, the complete cleavage between what one really was and liked or disliked, and the outward life of conventional ideas and conduct.”ⁱⁱ For Mary, all it took was hearing about it to experience the “instant appeal” of the Sisterhood. She was in London



within just of few weeks. For Emmeline it was personal and family connections with the Mission personnel that drew her to London. Mark Guy Pearse, a popular religious speaker and writer, and eventually second in charge of the Mission, was a neighbor and good friend of the Pethicks. From childhood, Emmeline had been enchanted by the playful and affectionate Pearse, and she was also a close friend of his daughter Mabelle.

Both women seem to have been good evangelical Christians on their arrival in Soho. They were temperance advocates and street preachers; they visited the local poor and the Mission's members daily, Bibles in hand. They easily accepted the Mission's injunction against dancing in the girls club that they ran, and exacted a promise from club members that they would "sing no songs which they would not like Jesus Christ to hear." They rejoiced at the conversions they made among the girls. Their loyalty to and importance in the Mission, which both minimized in their later life accounts, may be seen through the number and variety of their efforts on its behalf—on top of their regular Mission work. Emmeline joined numerous fundraising delegations to other cities and undertook regular visiting at the St. Pancras Workhouse. Mary ran an employment office for domestic servants, and seemingly took a big role in the production of its monthly magazine, Advance!

Each young woman, encouraged by their "Sister Superior," Katherine Price Hughes, developed new skills and strengths. Mary was a prolific writer for Mission and several other publications. Emmeline, whose "very attractive speaking voice" and slight West Country accent Mary noticed immediately, found a calling as a public speaker. The recognition she got for this made her "aware of new power." She was often the object of Price Hughes's admiration, and he was generous in his praise. When it was her turn to



speak, he wrote, describing a Mission event in 1894, “Sister Emmeline followed with an oration of such stately and classical eloquence as she has accustomed us to expect.”

The inspiration for the Sisterhood was KPH’s, based in large measure on her reading of Giuseppe Mazzini, though Quakers, Catholic nuns, and Salvation Army lassies also figured in her thinking. Mazzini, exiled from Italy and then Switzerland, arrived in England in 1837 with the blessing of the British government, which implausibly hoped that residence in Britain would enable him to efficiently disseminate Protestantism in Italy. Mazzini came to consider England his home and moved in Liberal circles there, but also was active in the International Working Men’s Association (First International) until Marx managed to get him and his followers expelled. Mazzini championed not only democratic but also women’s causes in England, while engaging in intense debates about Italian politics. His collection of essays from the 1840s, titled in English The Duties of Man, was a runaway best seller for decades and even during his life “something resembling a personal cult developed around him.” A religious outlook, women’s rights, democracy but not socialism, solidarity with the poor—these ideas appealed to a young clergyman’s wife in Brixton Hill in the mid 1880s who conceived the idea of a sisterhood in a talk with a friend at her fireside.

The West London Mission was remarkably successful by any measure and the Sisters were the secret of its success. They carried out the lion’s share of the extensive social and religious work that connected the church with the community surrounding it. In addition to daily house-to-house visiting in the district, they worked at projects they themselves chose, such as running a dispensary, preaching in the streets and parks,



visiting the sick or dying, working in the crèche the Mission had inherited from Maude Stanley, or organizing entertainment for the workhouse elderly. Most of the Sisters, including Mary and Emmeline, in the early 1890s, also held the semi-official position of class leaders, running the weekly meetings that were required of full members of the congregation; KPH confessed that she felt very much like a member of the clergy in this setting.

The Sisterhood was a lifetime career for many, a way station before marriage to others, and a stepping-stone to a career outside of Methodist circles for still others. Among the latter are Ada Salter (Sister Ada [Brown]) attached to the Bermondsey Settlement, which was associated with the WLM. She married another settler, ILP activist Albert Salter, and was herself was a longtime Labour activist and mayor of Bermondsey; Grace Kimmins, who originated the “Guild of the Brave Poor Things” while at the West London Mission and later founded the Heritage Craft School for disabled children; Kathleen Fitzpatrick, who headed an orphanage that was part of a complex of homes for women and children; and the two subjects of this paper.

Neal and Pethick’s special responsibility was a nightly (four evenings a week) club for teenage working girls in Cleveland Street, Fitzrovia. The club had failed in its first incarnation, before Mary took it over, after the complete trashing of the meeting space by its clients (the riot was over dancing, forbidden by the Mission), but there had also been dead cats tossed into the clubroom windows, knots of young people leering at the members inside at street level, and so on. Mary’s charisma, her organizing ability, her tall stature, and possibly the fact that she was already in her late twenties, brought the dysfunctional club back to life. She admitted only four girls on her first night, and gradually allowed



more. Together she and Emmeline, who joined her in running the club, found they had a talent for befriending and also guiding exuberant and irreverent young girls. As the eldest of a large family with an invalid mother, Emmeline had often been responsible for the younger ones, and was well versed in games and stories. Mary expressed her enthusiasm by referring to the girls grandiosely as the Lord's "handmaidens" who would inaugurate a "blessed" generation. Her fascination with poor children had in fact begun early in childhood: she and her brother had regularly enjoyed playing "street Arabs" by taking off their shoes and begging under street lamps, even blacking their faces—until they were reported and reprimanded.

Both Neal and Pethick deeply enjoyed their new role as "big Sisters." After an initial period of reluctance, Mary recognized that "this was the work which God wanted me to do" and she settled on the club as her main commitment. The leaders praised the girls' camaraderie, generosity, and kindness, and were "touched by their love for each other." The young women's openness and freedom from many inhibitions Neal and Pethick found thrilling. The club leaders developed ways to sustain the club as a community and to keep up contact with former members. Older club girls "graduated" to doing other work at the Mission. Neal and Pethick held reunions, the first one in September of 1894. More than a few of their girls became the leaders' lifelong friends; some sent regular gifts for decades, and two went to work for Emmeline and Frederick Pethick Lawrence not as servants but as skilled secretaries and administrators. Other girls went on to prosperous lives and good careers.

The tradition of wealthy individuals hosting "the poor" at their country estates was an old one, and popular with WLM Mission personnel. But "the first really revolutionary



idea that occurred to us,” was Mary and Emmeline’s scheme, in June of 1892, to take the club girls for a weeklong country holiday. This involved painstaking work getting days off from the girls’ employers and their promise to let the girls resume work after their holiday. A Bristol “At Home” raised twenty pounds toward the holiday. The club’s country excursions, annual after that, were a high point in Neal’s and Pethick’s years at the Mission. Emmeline’s account of n 1893 holiday in a Cotswold village is written in her customary extravagant style. “We feel that the bright threads woven out of those hours of sunshine and companionship are strong enough to bind us together in life and sympathy for all the time to come.” The sight of the happy girls in their pink sunbonnets in 1894 gave twenty- and thirty-somethings Emmeline and Mary “all the pride of the typical grandmother.” Mary’s reports on that holiday relayed anecdotes about, for example, the citified girls’ terror of cows. And they also reported serious moments of “strong comradeship and happy fellowship” as, for example, when the Sisters held a kind of informal Sunday service for the girls and learned there still more about “the virtue so hardly won, the gentle unselfishness.”

The Sisters came to know the ravages of Soho’s poverty at very close range. The ordinariness of the revelations they heard made poverty more vivid and personal than the statistics on overcrowding, incomes, and infant mortality with which they were familiar. A club girl whom they reproached for sending a postcard rather than a letter thanking a benefactor mildly explained that buying that postcard meant she could have no supper that day. On country holidays they found that many had never seen stars, and that their worn boots made walking uphill difficult. Mary and Emmeline were haunted—both recounted the story years later in several forms--by the widowed mother who descended into mental

illness, as did one of her children, as her search for work failed month after month and the workhouse got closer. (Emmeline impulsively gave her own warm coat to a surviving daughter as she saw her off on a ship to America, and describes encountering the younger woman years later in California as a college-educated middle-class matron with a lively mind and sparkling personality.) The girls became central to Mary's analysis of capitalism and English class society, as the children of Deptford would be to Margaret McMillan.

Mary Neal wrote "If what John Ruskin says is true, that 'The worst thing that can be said of any nation is that it has made the lives of the young girls sad and weary' then England can write many bitter things against herself." Mary's visit to a suburban boarding school a few years after taking charge of the girls' club was a painful revelation. She was awake to the "bitter contrast" between healthy, beautifully dressed middle-class girls and "those whom I meet four nights a week." And she knew, too, that "the fathers of my girls were creating the wealth on which the fathers of those other girls send their daughters to suburban boarding-schools."

Girls clubs, Neal and Pethick hoped, could help to improve the lives of the whole working class. Clubs would be "training schools for working women who will be instrumental, in the near future, in altering the conditions of the class they represent." Much of the curriculum was quite conventional: cooking, sewing, reading, writing arithmetic, games, health, "systematic musical drill" and singing—taught by the Mission's respected musical director, Heath Mills. But the club also discussed trades unions, the Salvation Army, "penny novelettes, temperance, sweethearts, street organs, dancing, and dress." In 1890 Mary dreamed of the girls someday working eight hours a day in a village factory or workshop, frolicking in the snow, sitting by a warm fire. With "no capitalist . . .

taking ten per cent, from my girls, and I see no middleman pocketing their earnings as he merely transfers their goods to a consumer.”

Both of the young Sisters became better educated in contemporary social issues, and, Mary especially, knowledgeable about socialism, trades unionism and working-class politics. This did not make them mavericks at the Mission, however. Hugh Price Hughes was one of the few Wesleyan Christian Socialists. The Mission actively supported the 1889 dock strike by raising money and sending its superintendent to speak at strikers’ events. Hughes, a few Sisters, and Mrs. Sheldon Amos (intimate friend of Mrs. Hughes and a close associate of the Mission) were at the inaugural meetings of the Women’s Trades Union Association later that year. And the 1890s, as Stephen Yeo showed so persuasively, offered an open-ended socialism compatible not only with Christianity, but also with dress reform, sexual experimentation, vegetarianism, land reform, Ibsenism, Marxism, feminism, and artistic experimentation. Being a socialist could be as religious an experience as being a Methodist. As Blatchford said, socialism indeed “must be a religion” and socialist “conversions” were registered with passion and enthusiasm. Later in her life Mary too defined 1890s socialism as “a religious movement” which “was an advance on the more orthodox church organizations.”

The West London Mission’s location also facilitated the two young women’s participation in fin de siecle cultural and political ferment of the 1890s. Being in and near Soho offered Mary and Emmeline access to hundreds of lectures and to the possibility of meeting major figures like G.B. Shaw, who lived near the Sisters’ main residence in Fitzroy Square. It was very easy to arrange for leading activists to visit the Mission and these included Beatrice Webb, Clementine Black, Alys Russell, and H.M. Hyndman. The Mission

personnel, however, strictly avoided the theaters, around which so much questioning of women's place circulated—Hedda Gabler and A Doll's House were both produced in 1891 and A Doll's House had also appeared in 1889. So Mary and Emmeline were cut off from much of the intense discussion of “the woman question” that buzzed around them.

Mary and the Miners

Mary Neal clumsily sought a framework that promised amelioration for the poor, as we see in her contributions to various *Mission* publications. In some of her early attempts, in 1891 and 1892, she spoke within the *Mission's* conventional appeals for money or services from sympathizers. Mary gained confidence, though, in the value of the knowledge she (and thousands of other women like her) derived from their daily experience as urban explorers. But how could it affect the wider world and bring about change? A conversation with veteran philanthropist and fellow girls club leader Maude Stanley in 1892 gave her “fresh heart and inspiration,” she reported. Stanley assured Mary that missionary and charity work generated “knowledge about social conditions which can shape legislation.” A few months later, Mary was repeating this position that social investigators' intimacy with the poor could be a means of enlightening “those who had a part in the legislation of this country.”

For all the misery she encountered in Soho every day, though, it seems possible that the West Yorkshire miners' strike and lockout in 1893 was a turning point in Mary's political radicalization. She became involved in the details of a major industrial dispute, spoke with workers and managers, and heard this prototypical confrontation of industrial



capitalism discussed in detailed and complex terms. The strike introduced her to workers very different from her neighbors in Soho: unionized, class-conscious, family-oriented, and mainly Methodist.

This adventure began in November of 1893, when Hugh Price Hughes volunteered the Sisters to look after forty-one wives of striking miners from the Yorkshire town of Castleford. They had been brought to London by The Sun newspaper to generate support and raise funds, and Hughes asked Mary to accompany the wives for three weeks at their hotel in Smithfield and to look after them throughout their visit. As Price Hughes cautiously put it at first, this was an act of charity more than of solidarity with the strikers: “Whatever views may be taken of the merits of the “coal war,” it is our duty to feed the starving thousands of women and children . . .” Eventually Hughes supported the strikers whole-heartedly. He wrote extensively about it in The Methodist Times and raised money in a packed Sunday afternoon address in St. James’s Hall where the miners’ wives joined him on the platform. Here he denounced the “delusion” that the law of supply and demand is “some irresistible thing like the forces of nature.” He also carefully analyzed and refuted the employers’ claims that without cutting the miners’ wages they would lose out to competitors in other regions or countries.

The Mission’s brass band and The Sun’s staff assembled to greet their train made the Castleford women’s arrival a vivid spectacle, but the events that followed (which included Mary’s visit to the town and her journey down into its mine) left a still more vivid impression on Mary. She joked about the wives’ rustic manners: they swarmed a postman in Piccadilly one night asking for letters from Yorkshire; they moved too slowly to make it off the Circle Line train at their stop before it departed again. But she witnessed the

consequences of the lockout for the miners' families: starvation, the pawning of precious belongings, children dying because they lacked food or medicine. And she encountered first hand "their patience and their courage, and their wonderful self-control." Mary presented the miners as Christ-like martyrs, and urged her readers to imitate Saint Veronica, who, as Christ struggled up the hill carrying the cross, wiped the sweat from his brow. Christ was not only in the miners but also in all of the members of the mining communities who sacrificed so much to sustain them and their families.

Mary's sense of class antagonism sharpened in her strike-related journalism of 1893. In response to accusations that the miners lived in luxury, ate salmon for breakfast and provided their wives with grand pianos, she lashed out: This was not true but

Why should it be unseemly for a man who does hard physical work for ten hours a day, underground, to eat salmon when a man who spends his time lounging about a West End club may eat every dainty, in season and out, every night in the week?

She urged support for the miners "in their brave fight against monopoly and greed and gambling, and we must see that in the future the price of an honest day's work shall be a living wage." She followed this up a month later with further analysis of the strike, as part of "the momentous and ever-narrowing struggle between the privileged classes and the proletariat, between capital and labour, between the political economy of Adam Smith, and the economics which are slowly evolving and which base their assumptions on the fact that . . . a man is capable of more than the two primitive motives, self-interest and love of family."

Breaking with the West London Mission

Mary and Emmeline did not develop politically in lockstep. Mary was the sharper and more systematic political thinker of the two at this time and apparently was more fully tuned into the tensions the pair began to generate at the Mission. Emmeline would come into her own later in the suffrage movement as an astute and knowledgeable political thinker. At the time of the strike, in the fall of 1893, Emmeline's interests seem amorphous, vaguely mystical, and inconsistent. She wrote about the value of "daily contact" with small groups of friends, and "heart touching heart" in demonstrating Christ's power. Christ and his disciples were a model of such relationships and Emmeline seems to be saying that individuals are each the center of a personal circle and that ties of friendship should be valued. A January, 1894, "Lantern Service" at the Mission made her eager to "see" Christ, "so that we might be drawn to follow in his very footsteps in deed and in truth," and show Christ to the people. Pethick gave a lecture in February 1894 stressing the intermingling of the "sacred and the secular, the spiritual and the non-spiritual" "and the presence of the most holy in every aspect of life." She went on to say provocatively a few months later, also in 1894, that what the people need is not religion, but the benefits of "human sympathy" sociability, and intellectual stimulation.

Tensions began to appear in the 1894-95 winter, between, on the one hand, these two Sisters (also, it appears, Sister Kathleen and young clergyman Arthur Sherwell) and, on the other, the Hugheses and several of the other Mission clergy. "A leaven was working in our midst," wrote Neal later. Some of the more orthodox Mission officials began to refer to "that element." When Emmeline described to her WLM co-workers a moment of intense personal communion with a girl in prison, saying, in her gushing style that "the spirit of the girl" was given to her, some began to feel that she was "getting off the right lines!"



When, in another setting, Mary said publicly that the people needed material help more than they needed Christ, she was “pulled up and warned of danger!” Meanwhile, in the winter and spring of 1894-1895, along with its usual reports of country outings and children’s teas, Advance!, the Mission newsletter, was including articles on new subjects: “The Labour Church,” “Books for Social Workers,” the work of Edward Carpenter, Walt Whitman’s “Prayer of Columbus,” and a densely researched piece of social observation, probably by Arthur Sherwell, investigating the lodging house dwellers of Soho. In spring of 1895 Neal and Pethick organized a conference on the “attitude which should be taken by the leaders of the Girls’ Clubs toward those industrial questions which affect the welfare of working girls.” A report by Neal on that event argued that teaching the girls a higher standard of conduct is “a bitter mockery” until their living conditions are improved; “such things as housing, wages, and hours of work.”

The “leaven” in their midst, I assumed when I first read about this episode, was a secularized socialism competing for the two women’s allegiance with the Mission and Christianity. Their trajectory from church to social work to socialism would resemble the path that Beatrice Potter and many others had recently trod. Yet the tipping point came from a dark horse in the form of St. Francis of Assisi. Paul Sabatier, a French Protestant clergyman, had just written the first modern study of St. Francis (1893). Hugh Price Hughes was reading it in the spring of 1895 while on a rest break in Italy, and sending back his reflections to the Methodist Times. Neal and Pethick were profoundly moved by the saint’s embrace of poverty and simplicity, his friendships with the poor, the “great and holy cause” to which he dedicated his life, and his perfect willingness to endure great discomfort for the common people and for God. The Mission began to look, as Mary later wrote,

“horribly conventional and uninspired,” at a far remove from its founding ideals. The Sisters’ residence resembled “a quite comfortable middle-class household with servants, regular solid meals” and a sectarian atmosphere that had not been there in the beginning. Neal and Pethick wanted to live more austerely, and among the people of the district rather than in the genteel residence in Fitzroy Square so as to “establish real, as apart from professional friendship.” So the two Sisters requested permission to live “amongst the people” and to be “one of them so that real friendship could develop.” Hugh Price Hughes “took alarm” at this plan, and personally came to their residence to “administer a severe rebuke.”

Hughes, despite his enthusiasm for St. Francis, and nearly all of the other Sisters as well, rejected Neal’s and Pethick’s new impulses. “These new-fangled notions must stop,” is how Mary remembered his position. At a Mission meeting called to discuss the proposal, there was a remarkable scene that could have come directly from the life of St. Francis. Mark Guy Pearse, Hughes’s dear friend and fellow missionary, jumped to the young women’s defense. Pearse declared it wrong to crush the dissidents’ enthusiasm and inspiration, forces to be treasured. “Don’t play the Pope to Saint Francis,” he begged his friend.

As their lavish and transgressive parting gift, in 1895, the two Sisters produced a spectacular flower-festooned May Day Festival at Cleveland Hall. A hundred girls dressed in white with “quaint green caps,” complete with a Maypole, performed twice that day and again on the next for large audiences that included scores of old women from local workhouses, and staff and children from Mary Ward’s nearby settlement, which was a pioneer in music education. Emmeline’s generous £38 gift to the Mission in May suggests



that she may have bankrolled the event herself. Preparation had begun weeks earlier as the children learned a number of old English folk songs. The two Sisters had been stressing the pleasure that English folk songs like “Annie Laurie” could bring to the Mission’s constituents by noting that the children had taken “the sweet simple songs into their homes,” and that soon the neighborhood reverberated with them. A passing Sister had indeed heard one of the fathers “working at some drains” singing a piece, the sound seeming to emanate from the ground itself.

Emmeline wrote up the May Day pageant in an illustrated and unusually long article for Advance. One has to acknowledge the forbearance and generosity of the Mission’s authorities who permitted this unorthodox event to take place and allowed its top billing (and Emmeline’s over-the-top prose) in the newsletter that served as a link to wealthy donors all over the country. For the performance itself, the children “joined hands and tripped and danced” around that pagan Maypole and “played their pretty quaint old English games to music.” The event, wrote Emmeline, “had a deeper meaning than any visitor could have guessed—it summed up and expressed much of our idea with regard to our past work of the winter, to give the children their own childhood, to lead them through the ‘ivory gate and golden’ into the land of lovely dreams and sweet imaginings . . . “ Onto this celebration of pagan origin was, she pointed out, appropriately superimposed the more recent meaning of May Day as the “international holiday of the Sons of Labour all the world over.” Ultimately, Emmeline imagined a future human race redeemed as “sons of God.” After this rhetoric, admittedly more Edward Carpenter than St. Francis, she ended her written account with Carpenter’s hymn “England, Arise!” The two directors of this extraordinary event now, as a pair--and connected by their years of partnership as urban



social explorers, their shared love for children and for folk music, and their new devotion to “the Sons of Labour”---were launching a new phase of their lives.

¹ Copyright Ellen Ross 2009. Readers who would like copies of this paper with full references may contact me at eross@ramapo.edu. This paper was presented in different versions at Goldsmith’s College, University of London; Columbia University Seminar on British History, and at the Third Research Conference, Voluntary Action History Society, University of Liverpool, July 16-18, 2008. I would like to thank these thoughtful audiences. Mary Neal’s manuscript biography was in the possession of Lucy Neal, London, when I read it, and I would like to thank her too for her warm hospitality

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