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Literature, Immigration, and Diaspora in Fin-de-Siècle England

A Cultural History of the 1905 Aliens Act

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Chapter

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*Palaces and sweatshops: East End fictions
and East End politics*

I followed the people that came over in the same boat that I came by into the East End of London, and there I went into a place. They could see I had just come over, and there was a boot-finisher living in the same house, and he said it would be very wise for me to start learning the finishing trade. ... What hours were you made to work? – From 6 till 12 as a rule, barring Thursday night. Then it was a rule we always worked all night.¹

Here, in the East End ... there are no strollers. All day long the place is full of passengers hasting to and fro, pushing each other aside, with set and anxious faces, each driven by the invisible scourge of necessity which makes slaves of all mankind. Do you know that famous picture of the Israelites in Egypt? Upon the great block of stone, which the poor wretches are painfully dragging, while the cruel lash goads the weak and terrifies the strong, there sits one in authority. He regards the herd of slaves with eyes terrible from their stony gaze. What is it to him whether the feeble suffer and perish, so that the Pharaoh's will be done? ... If the Israelites desisted, they were flogged back to work with cats of many tails; if our workmen desist, they are flogged back by starvation.²

That road is the most cosmopolitan place in London; and on a Saturday night its interest reaches a climax. There one sees all nationalities. A grinning Hottentot elbows his way through a crowd of long-eyed Jewesses. An Algerian merchant walks arm-in-arm with a native of Calcutta. A little Italian plays pitch-and-toss with a German Gentile. And among the foreigners lounges the East End loafer, monarch of all he surveys, lord of the premises. It is amusing to see his British air of superiority.³

London's East End has a long history as an immigrant destination; between 1650 and 1800, it had been variously settled by the Irish, Sephardic Jews from Spain and Portugal, Huguenot refugees from France, and Lascar seamen. By the mid-nineteenth century, there were approximately 20,000 Jews in London, the majority in the East End, and when Daniel Deronda goes in search of Mirah's lost brother, he begins by 'rambling in those parts of London which are most inhabited by common Jews', named as St Mary Axe and Whitechapel, before walking

west towards Holborn (364). The area included some of the worst slums in London, an inexhaustible topic of discussion in pulpits and periodicals, and from the late 1880s onwards, the East End became the epicentre of anti-immigration agitation in Britain. The cluster of quotations at the head of this chapter offers a composite depiction of everyday life in East London in this latter period. Each moves beyond social observation towards social diagnosis, shaping mundane details into a moral economy and highlighting phenomena that readers could only ignore at their peril.

The selection commences with the recollection of an arrival, the only avowed statement of fact in the three examples cited. In evidence given on 29 May 1902, an anonymous Polish Jewish witness tells the members of the Royal Commission on Alien Immigration of his entry into England some two decades previously and his subsequent journey to Spitalfields where he lodged in 'a seven-roomed house' while learning his trade as a boot-finisher. Having informed the Commission that if his political views were to become known to his employers he would risk losing his livelihood, "Mr B" agreed to testify only on condition that his name was withheld from the public record. Although written in a very different register, the second passage provides some insight into the sorts of factors that might have fuelled his apprehension. Intensifying the visual power of the busy scene before him, its author consciously mythologizes the harshness of the East End labour market by likening it to a brutally archaic system of slavery in which the manager's indifference to his employees' hardship replaces the slave-driver's whip, but draws a Biblical parallel that carries a promise of deliverance. In the last of the three extracts, however, the fictional description of Whitechapel Road is diametrically opposed to the previous image and overturns every one of its assumptions. Here is the East End at rest, a thronging, demotic panorama of interracial and inter-religious fraternisation, in which London appears as a world city. It is not a comfortable tableau, for the figure of the British 'loafer' strikes a jarringly ironic note, a self-deluding 'monarch' whose 'air of superiority' encourages the knowing observer to smile with a certain 'superiority' of her own. This is a street scene that turns out, perhaps unsurprisingly, to be edged by violence, for the Englishman – 'looked upon as scum by his own nation' – is ready to forcibly eject the foreigners that pass before his supercilious gaze (13).

The Biblical comparison is taken from Walter Besant's *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* (1882), an enormously popular novel in its day which had a major impact upon urban policy in the East End, whereas the third passage is from a lesser-known work of fiction originally published under the pseudonym "John Law" as *Captain Lobe: A Story of the Salvation*

Army (1889), and republished in 1891 with the more topical title *In Darkest London*. Its author was Margaret Harkness. These two novels were closely connected; indeed, I argue that Harkness was deliberately attempting to write both a riposte and a supplement to *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* that would bring to the fore all of those aspects of the East End that Besant sentimentally repressed. Though deeply flawed, Harkness's work helps us to see that the racial homogeneity so characteristic of Besant's representation of the East End was a key condition for the idealized reconciliation between social classes that underpinned the novel's reformist ending. More than this, Besant's imaginary ending prefigured the construction of a real People's Palace for East Londoners which many hoped would permanently transform the cultural ethos of the entire area. These struggles over the meaning of the East End, and especially of East End *labour*, fed into and helped to define the racial politics in the 1890s as concern over immigration became increasingly vocal. Beginning with Walter Besant's writings and closing with Israel Zangwill's novel *Children of the Ghetto* (1892), this chapter explores competing accounts of the role of Jews and other migrants in the slum fiction and related literature of the period, examining the ways in which these texts interacted with and participated in the political arguments around alien immigration that came to a head with the appointment of a Royal Commission to look into this question in 1902.

If the East End was widely regarded as the most troublesome zone of the capital throughout the Victorian period, the final report of the Royal Commission on Alien Immigration can be read as an attempt to fix upon one particular narrative of the causes of cultural and economic impoverishment in which race and degeneration went hand in hand. Or at least this was the aim of those who had hitched their political reputations to the demand for immigration control. The path that led to the Royal Commission was prepared by exposés like Arnold White's collection of essays, *The Destitute Alien in Great Britain*, which appeared in January 1892, followed by its summer sequel, W.H. Wilkins's *The Alien Invasion*, six months later. Detecting a growing tendency across the civilized world 'towards the crystallization of national life from native elements only', White and his contributors sought to show why it was necessary to expel 'those alien constituents' whose increasing numbers were lowering wages, eroding working conditions, driving down living standards, destroying the vigour of the general population, and spreading disease.⁴ Because the nation's economy was a delicate but ordinarily self-regulating balance between capital accumulation and population growth, what the presence

of the alien set in play was not the virtuous cycle assuring the survival of the fittest, but rather an acceleration of those pathologies of industrial society glimpsed through the negative contra-Darwinian prism of degeneration theory. The East End served as a touchstone for these fears and, although there was no real uniformity as to the nature of the threat it posed, anti-alien polemicists constantly returned to this area of the city as a source of loaded examples of the damage that the alien caused, couched in the most lurid language. ‘There is need to go and see for oneself what life is behind Aldgate, in Bethnal Green, and where the Semitic face pushes out the “flat-nosed” Saxon’, wrote the East End clergyman, the Rev. G.S. Reaney, in his essay on ‘The Moral Aspect’ of ‘the Alien Question.’ There, what one would find was a kind of multifaceted Gresham’s Law, according to which ‘the language of the pavement’ was no longer ‘the English oath or the brutal Cockney jest’, for example, but a foreign tongue that ‘comes from over the sea’ spreading ‘street by street in Whitechapel’, spoken by a community that was only ever able to learn the vices of the host society. ‘As they come, so they remain’, Reaney concluded grimly: ‘aliens, children of another race, amongst us, yet not of us.’⁵

‘AN UTTERLY UNKNOWN TOWN’

Arnold White was one of the most energetic of the anti-alien lobbyists in the 1890s and his particular forte lay in presenting problems of poverty, race and immigration in the idiom of Victorian social medicine, especially that of eugenics. In focusing upon the metropolis – White’s first book in 1886 was *The Problems of a Great City* – he was able to join the style of urban social research pioneered by Henry Mayhew and Charles Booth with contemporary racial ideology. While trying to carve out a new career for himself in the early 1880s, White had become fascinated by the East End and developed numerous contacts among philanthropists, reformers and leaders of the trade union movement, with the result that he was invited to stand as the Liberal candidate for Mile End in 1886, albeit without success. As in the case of Margaret Harkness’s fiction, one way of reading the agenda advanced by White and his collaborators is as a robust and realistic counterweight to the phenomenally successful mawkishness of *All Sorts and Conditions of Men*, whose sales had reached a quarter of a million by 1905.⁶ For many middle-class readers, Besant’s novel *was* the East End, or at least an East End with which they felt comfortable, and he was frequently credited as the first writer to have put this name for the district into general circulation. In fact, the phrase was at

least a century older. At the beginning of the 1780s, for example, the term was used to describe the 'narrow, dark and ill-paved' zone from Ratcliff Highway to Limehouse 'inhabited by sailors and other workmen ... and by a great part of the Jews'.⁷ But it was Besant who popularised the idea of the East End as a city in its own right, 'immense, neglected, [and] forgotten' for too long.⁸

Besant's writings were part of a wider revival of interest in the area. Around the time that *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* was being serialised in the upmarket fiction magazine *Belgravia*, George R. Sims anatomized the plight of London's urban underclass with remarkable journalistic flair in a series of newspaper articles subsequently collected in *How the Poor Live* (1883). These articles seem to have inspired the Rev. Andrew Mearns's equally sensational pamphlet, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (1883). With its call for state intervention to alleviate the condition of 'the abject poor' that Mearns had observed in Ratcliff, Shadwell and also across the river in Bermondsey, it was one of the most influential publications of its kind. Much of the impact of Sims and Mearns's work stemmed from the fact that they saw the East End as part of a pattern of distressed communities across the capital, reflecting the economic downturn and the growing housing crisis after 1880. Both writers saw urban destitution as a breeding ground for socialism and communism, and were determined to bring home to their readers the harsh realities of grinding poverty. In their unsparingly bleak prognoses, moral degradation shaded into political chaos, and Sims, mindful of the example of the Paris Commune of 1871, raised the spectre of a Parisian-style revolutionary mob taking to the streets and threatening the entire social fabric if nothing was done.

Besant's perspective was far more benign. Unlike Mearns and Sims, he turned his inquiring gaze discreetly away from the very worst sights afforded by East London and located its social problems not in the insecurities of the casual labour market and the difficulties of finding steady employment, but in the remorseless rhythms of labour imposed upon those already in work. This was the message of the Biblical tableau cited at the head of this chapter. Besant believed that moral degradation in the East End was due, not to the unbreakable link between economic hardship and criminality identified in *How the Poor Live*, but to the absence of suitably edifying forms of leisure to compensate for the harshness of their working lives. In Ruskinian vein, Besant claimed that what was needed was the creation of a new cultural base that would bridge the divide between his middle-class readers and ordinary East Londoners, a gulf that arose from spiritual, not material, impoverishment.

Besant never really changed his mind about the East End, despite having good reason to do so. In 1901, after having been involved with the area for more than twenty years, he again described it as ‘an aggregate of nearly two millions of people, living all together in what ought to be a single city under one rule’, with a population size that placed it well ahead of ‘Berlin or Vienna, or St. Petersburg, or Philadelphia’ – phrases that might have been taken directly from his 1882 novel. Notwithstanding the distinguished company his comparisons invoked, the refrain running throughout Besant’s guidebook-cum-survey – that ‘no other city in the world is like East London’ – was predicated upon the continuing failings of this bleak urban tract of land: its miserable architecture, the lack of restaurants and hotels, an absence of major newspapers or weekly magazines, the loss of any sense of patriotism or civic pride, matched by a reluctance to move towards an integrated system of local government that might bring order out of the jumble of wards and parishes, where everything was ‘stamped with the unmistakable seal of the working class.’ Most saddening of all to a man who had been instrumental in founding the Society of Authors must have been the realisation that there was ‘not a single bookseller’s shop’ in this urban centre, ‘not a single place in which the new books of the day, the better literature, the books of which the world is talking, are displayed and offered for sale.’ What distinguished East London was its drabness, ‘the unparalleled magnitude of its meanness and its monotony’.⁹ It was a cultural desert wholly lacking in purpose and imagination.

Although *East London* was the last in a series of books on the capital to appear before Besant’s death in June of that year, it was not quite his final word on the subject. In 1902, his posthumously published *Autobiography* looked back over his long association with the East End to see what he had learned. Once more we see a proletarian metropolis, a ‘huge hive of working bees’ functioning entirely at the behest of a utilitarian present and therefore bereft of any useable past.¹⁰ Besant regarded this deracinated spectacle of ceaseless effort with profound ambivalence. On the one hand, industriousness and energy were extremely attractive qualities to a writer who had led a remarkably industrious professional life, combining a literary career with regular ventures into social and educational reform, and supporting himself for eighteen years as the chief administrator of the Palestine Exploration Fund, an organisation that he transformed into a highly remunerative network of local societies running the length and breadth of the country. In Besant’s eyes, ‘monotony’ was not the whole truth about the East End; on closer acquaintance, its mean streets were

full of life, providing an endless source of vitality and passion and hope for the future. On the other hand, no unprejudiced observer could fail to be aware that the inordinate demands made upon these poor unfortunates by their work were completely stultifying, as though all their energy were being compressed into an ill-fitting mould that left little room for more fully human forms of activity. As in *All Sorts and Conditions of Men*, the soullessness of wage slavery means that it *is* slavery.

Besant's own solution to what he regarded as a breakdown in the relationship between social classes took the form of a thought experiment in which two young people who come from opposite ends of society are able to meet and fall in love. Harry Goslett, the orphaned son of a sergeant who died in the Indian Mutiny, has been adopted by a Liberal peer Lord Jocelyn Le Breton and kept in ignorance of his humble East End origins until his twenty-third year. It is Lord Le Breton's 'humorous' fancy that, upon reaching maturity, Harry could return to East London as a cultural emissary, encouraging 'the lowest classes' to better themselves (21). Taking up residence in a boarding house in Stepney Green, Harry meets and falls in love with a dressmaker named Angela Kennedy, a young woman whose poor but respectable exterior also conceals an unexpected personal history. For not only is she one of the first Cambridge woman graduates – appropriately her subject is Political Economy – but she is in reality Angela Messenger, heir to an East End brewing fortune. As she tells a close Cambridge friend early in the novel, this makes her 'a native almost of Whitechapel', and her ambition is to introduce a different political economy into Stepney and Whitechapel and so improve the lot of her fellow East Enders (13). She sets up a dressmakers' cooperative in which the employees work shorter hours, belong to a profit-sharing scheme, and have ample leisure opportunities for lawn tennis, reading, singing and dancing. Angela believes, rather like Lord Le Breton, that once having tasted the fruits of culture, her workers will find that there is no going back, and from these small beginnings the East End will gradually be humanised. The 'Stepney Dressmakers' Association' is the antidote to the East End sweatshop, a spectre barely registered in *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* (but given greater, albeit still somewhat sanitised, substance in Besant's 1886 novel, *Children of Gibeon*).

Although Harry is as ignorant of Angela's true identity as his own, he has a vision of how the East End could be transfigured. What if a family fortune like that of the Messenger family was used to fund a recreational centre devoted to the arts, 'a Palace of Delight' for 'converting this dismal suburb into a home for refined and cultivated people!' (71). Angela

secretly takes Harry at his word and at the end of the novel she leads him to a splendid building ‘hidden away ... in a corner of vast Stepney’ where she reveals to him that his dreams have come true (405). In addition to a fine concert hall, a theatre, a gymnasium, and a reception room in which ‘a thousand couples may dance ... without crowding’, the Palace boasts a multitude of other rooms – ‘billiard rooms, card-rooms, rooms with chess, dominoes, and backgammon tables laid out, smoking-rooms for men alone, tea and coffee rooms, rooms where women could sit by themselves if they pleased, and a room where all kinds of refreshments were to be procured’ – while on a second floor were still more, rather smaller rooms, where those patrons of the Palace ‘who know already will teach the rest’ (411). The novel closes with the marriage of Angela and Harry, their false selves publicly cast aside, and the grand opening of the Palace of Delight to all the people of the East End. In a brief final paragraph we are told that the building ‘is in working order now’ and that ‘Stepney is already transformed’ (435). Predictably, the real East End story that was about to begin, only partially anticipated by *All Sorts and Conditions of Men*, proved to be far more complex than Besant had ever envisaged.

THE PALACE OF DELIGHT VERSUS THE PEOPLE’S PALACE

On 14 May 1887, Queen Victoria formally opened the Queen’s Hall of the People’s Palace in the Mile End Road and, just five years after the publication of his novel, Besant’s fiction ceased to be the ‘impossible story’ announced in the book’s subtitle. Of course it would be misleading to lay all the credit for this development at Besant’s door. The origins of the People’s Palace can be traced back as far as 1841, when insurance industry magnate and Mile End property-owner John Barber Beaumont left a legacy dedicated to promoting the ‘Intellectual Improvement and Rational Recreation and Amusement’ of people living in East London. Although this scheme had fallen into abeyance by the late 1870s because of administrative problems, new plans were drawn up by the Charity Commissioners in 1882 and, seeking to capitalise on the success of *All Sorts and Conditions of Men*, Sir Edmund Hay Currie (then Chairman of the Beaumont Trustees) sought Besant’s support in constructing a real ‘Palace of Delight’ within the purlieu of Mile End.

Currie was able to orchestrate an impressive roster of backers for the project by securing the patronage of the Royal Family and important sponsors like Lord Rosebery and the Duke of Westminster. The Prince of Wales himself was present at an inaugural fundraising soirée at Bethnal

Green Museum in 1884 where large donations were pledged and, together with Princess Alexandra, laid the foundation stone for the new building in June 1886, with Besant in attendance. However, despite royal involvement, financial difficulties continued to dog the venture and, after a further drive to secure adequate investment, a 'Queen's Fund' was set up in April 1887. In contrast to the imaginary 'Palace of Delights', persuading the West End to put money into the East End was never easy.

At first, the new institution went from strength to strength. In May 1888, a swimming baths was opened, then a technical school the following October, and shortly afterwards a long-awaited gymnasium was finally added. A Winter Garden was built in 1892, stocked with palm trees and exotic plants, and by the turn of the century the Palace's range of activities was quite phenomenal, including oratorios, choral and orchestral performances, organ recitals, chamber concerts, baby shows, dog shows, a variety of annual flower shows, music festivals, Shakespearian plays, and 'humorous entertainments and animated pictures, the latter being about the largest shown in London (the screen 30 feet square) and absolutely up-to-date', according to an official Palace guide, not to mention the Annual Costermongers' Donkey Show held in the gardens.¹¹ Even this list was by no means exhaustive. In 1891, for example, *The Palace Journal* advertised minstrel shows, Gilbert and Sullivan, a People's Palace Military Band, and popular lectures on such topics as the French Revolution.¹² However, this rich portfolio of attractions failed to satisfy Besant who became deeply disappointed by what he saw. What had gone wrong?

Earlier in this chapter I noted the continuities in Besant's writings on the East End, the repetition of tropes and sentiments indicating that his understanding of the area was relatively fixed. Yet as the fictional 'Palace of Delight' with its vast array of recreational rooms began to be displaced by the story of an actual People's Palace, its dreams and its disasters, a note of disenchantment started to colour Besant's cherished narrative outline. In 1891, looking back over his work as editor of *The People's Palace Journal*, Besant insisted that there was no one among 'the thousands' of young people he encountered who showed 'the least rudimentary indication of any literary power whatever'.¹³ It was, he later wrote in his *Autobiography*, 'a dead failure'.¹⁴ Nevertheless, in *East London*, Besant had just about been able to hold that sense of defeat at bay. While there was always 'a lurid picture' of the East End to be painted, he observed, the possibility remained that 'wherever the better things are offered' they would be taken up gladly, 'not by a few here and a few there, but by thousands'.¹⁵ Hope and disappointment are precariously balanced: not one amongst

'thousands' shows any sign of literary talent; 'thousands' are ready and eager to benefit from social improvement. Perhaps all was not quite lost.

Besant's growing disillusionment was symptomatic of a fundamental dilemma. In his *Autobiography*, Besant bemoaned a growing enthusiasm for technical education that was turning the People's Palace into 'a polytechnic and nothing else' and, exaggeration aside, his claim did reflect a real division within the Palace's budget as well as its *raison d'être*.¹⁶ The showcase exhibitions and entertainments centred upon the Queen's Hall were constantly running up substantial deficits, particularly under Currie's chairmanship, whereas the laboratories and workshops had been funded by the Drapers' Company, whose far more secure sources of income gradually increased its control over the Palace's day-to-day administration. Ultimately this *de facto* transfer of power only exacerbated the internal split within the institution and did nothing to resolve the issue of how to safeguard the long-term financial viability of the Palace's cultural mission. By the late 1940s, the Palace had finally run out of makeshift solutions and the last traces of Besant's 'impossible story' disappeared under a mountain of debt.

Nevertheless, as Besant's reflections suggest, the Palace's economic worries were also problems of cultural capital. In *East London*, he listed its many successes: 'the thousands of lads who attend the classes at the palace', the 'working-men' that came to the various lecture series – 'the most intelligent and the best educated of the whole population' – who 'crowd round' the speaker 'and beg him to come again', 'the balls given in the Queen's Hall [that] were crowded, and the people ... as orderly as could be desired.' But, against this rosy picture, Besant stressed the difficulty of instilling a love of books and reading. The East End 'craftsman ... has not yet begun to read books; at present he only reads the paper; [while] his children read the penny dreadfuls' and are only just starting to read books'.¹⁷ Behind these observations lay a fear that moments of cultural consumption might become occasions for collective disorderliness – a misgiving that was commonplace in Palace's early years. In 1887, five months after the building had opened, the *Echo* reported that the Library and Reading Room were 'for the third Sunday opened free to the public' from two in the afternoon until ten at night, with staff volunteering to work without pay. Reassuringly, the several hundred people who came along were entirely well behaved, 'a pleasant relief' after 'the rioting and disturbances which have taken place in the West-end during the last few days'.¹⁸

The reading public at the People's Palace was evidently smaller than that for other cultural activities – hundreds rather than the thousands that the Queen's Hall could accommodate. According to the *Echo's* correspondent, the most sought-after books were by popular novelists like Frederick Marryat, Edward Bulwer Lytton, and Charles Lever, whereas Dickens, Scott, Thackeray, and George Eliot followed at some distance behind them, with Carlyle as the leading author of non-fiction. In the early 1890s, the chief librarian noted a buoyant demand for sensation fiction – *Lady Audley's Secret* and *East Lynne* were particular favourites – and there was a keen interest in weekly publications with a strong visual appeal like the *Illustrated London News*, *Punch*, and the *Graphic*.¹⁹ This was a relatively brief episode in the Palace's history – its book-lending services were eclipsed by and absorbed into the Mile End Public Library in 1902 – but it points to a greater appetite for reading than Besant was prepared to credit. Some of the choices of texts and authors reveal the gendering of popular taste – the vogue for Tennyson's poetry among women was specifically mentioned – and it is likely that subtle class fractional distinctions of skill, craft, and experience also shaped East End reading habits. However, as in other parts of Britain, the broad split between popular fiction and "classic" novels suggests that many readers wanted more immediate forms of narrative pleasure than those apparently offered by Scott or Eliot.²⁰

Patterns of discrimination in popular reading can also be compared to preferences for other forms of recreation at the People's Palace: on the one hand, there were choral and orchestral societies or chamber concerts, drawing in a middle-class clientele, some from outside the East End proper; at the other extreme, and featured far less prominently, was the demotic carnivalesque world associated with the music hall in which one might find – to quote from a 1903 concert handbill – 'funny facial expressions, comic stand-up, comedienne, dancers and singers, female impersonator, ventriloquist'.²¹ When Angela reveals 'the Palace of Delight' to Harry in *All Sorts and Conditions of Men*, she announces that 'this is our own Palace, the club of the working people', as though these attributions were one and the same (411). Besant's deft sleight of hand neatly and unselfconsciously removes any hint of a gulf between middle-class philanthropists and the untutored masses, silently endowing the latter with the same high-minded sense of purpose as their presumed betters. And in so doing, Besant's novel deflected attention from the covert role of a 'Palace of Delight' in providing an antidote to indigenous working-

class institutions. Yet, as with their choice of reading matter, ‘the working people’ did try to make the Palace their own, exploiting the few opportunities that were open to them. Amongst the advertisements for concerts in 1903 was one publicising a benefit on 11 May for an unemployed workman with failing eyesight – a small exercise in mutual aid.

It is therefore revealing that the music hall is conspicuous by its absence in Besant’s novel. Early in his friendship with Angela in *All Sorts and Conditions of Men*, Harry mentions in passing a ‘theatre and a music hall in Whitechapel Road’, only to make it clear that the idea of ‘a Palace of Delight’ would offer an alternative to these dubious plebeian pleasures (70). In his other writings, Besant was more openly hostile to popular theatres, though he was sometimes prepared to concede that the music hall was a fairly harmless pastime. In *East London*, he alleged that the theatre was ‘an institution capable of ruining a whole generation’, but regarded the music hall as ‘vulgar enough, but not otherwise mischievous’.²² Attitudes to popular entertainment, and to the music hall in particular, were important markers of divergences in outlook among the Palace’s various publics, engaged in a struggle over what the social meaning of a ‘club of the working people’ might be. Strong opinions were in play from the start, but consistent argument was not. Well before the new building opened, the *Saturday Review* published an unusually forthright column, entitled “How to Spoil the People’s Palace”, which attacked the trustees for failing to apply for a liquor license and also for planning to allow entry on Sundays.²³

The contest for symbolic ownership of the People’s Palace took many forms and would never be definitively settled, but these cultural wrangles did matter and the stakes were very high. This was especially true when politics entered the very building which Besant had hoped would make it an irrelevancy – a case in point being a packed and well-publicised rally in the Queen’s Hall arranged by the British Brothers’ League, the largest and best-organised of all the anti-alien groups, on 14 January 1902. As we will see in the next chapter, the BBL was primarily a working-class organisation whose leadership was co-opted by zealous parliamentary lobbyists like the MP for Stepney Major William Evans-Gordon. By associating themselves with the People’s Palace the BBL were making a bid for respectability, moving out of the public house and into the concert hall, and it was significant that they were able to claim support for their cause from popular writers like Marie Corelli and Arthur Conan Doyle. Almost two years later, on 10 November 1903, anti-alien campaigners again turned out in force at the Queen’s Hall calling for the full implementation of the

Royal Commission's recommendations on immigration.²⁴ *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* has been described as 'that rare thing, a work of fiction that made something happen', but Besant had little, if any, control over what happened next.²⁵

‘ISRAEL IN EGYPT’

The phrase ‘all sorts and conditions of men’ was a deliberately loaded title, misleadingly implying a more inclusive view of London's inhabitants than Besant's novel was able to articulate. Besant's urban temple of culture too conveniently dissolves class antagonisms from opposite ends of the socio-economic spectrum by filling the void he believed to lie at the heart of the East End. This model of class harmony and reconciliation is proof of Harry Goslett's assertion that there is a ‘brotherhood of humanity’ – against Lord Jocelyn's insistence that only ‘one sort and one condition’ has any lasting importance and that is his own (23). For the novel's social alchemy to succeed, any internal divisions *within* these two major class blocs had to be, not so much denied, as discounted. Although Besant was keen to make his readers aware of the distance between respectable churchgoers and ‘the more numerous class of those who cannot call themselves respectable’, he tries to show that the most refractory problems can be solved if only they are tackled with spirit and determination. ‘Put down the roughs yourselves with a strong hand’, Angela tells the radical Dick Coppin firmly. ‘Clear out the thieves’ dens and the drinking shops’ (319). Indeed, in a rhetorical move designed to out-radicalise the radical tradition, a kind of popular sovereignty is presupposed, an age of the common people in which they ‘shall reign as never yet king was known to reign’ (264).

The image of a working-class community that emerges in *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* has none of the insularity or recalcitrance which was to be a pronounced feature of the London slum fiction that began to displace Besant's vision of class cooperation later in the decade. Despite the novel's title, his portrayal lacks any feel for the cultural heterogeneity of these communities – an attribute that, along with the literary transcoding of working-class dialect, became one of the key signifiers of the otherness of “slumdom” (intriguingly, a word that also seems to date from 1882, the year of the book's publication). In peripheral figures like those of ‘Lascar Loo, living on one lung and the memory of past excesses’ in Rudyard Kipling's hugely influential short story ‘The Record of Bedalia Herodsfoot’ (1890), or the ‘little dark woman, who looked like a Jewess’ seen summoning

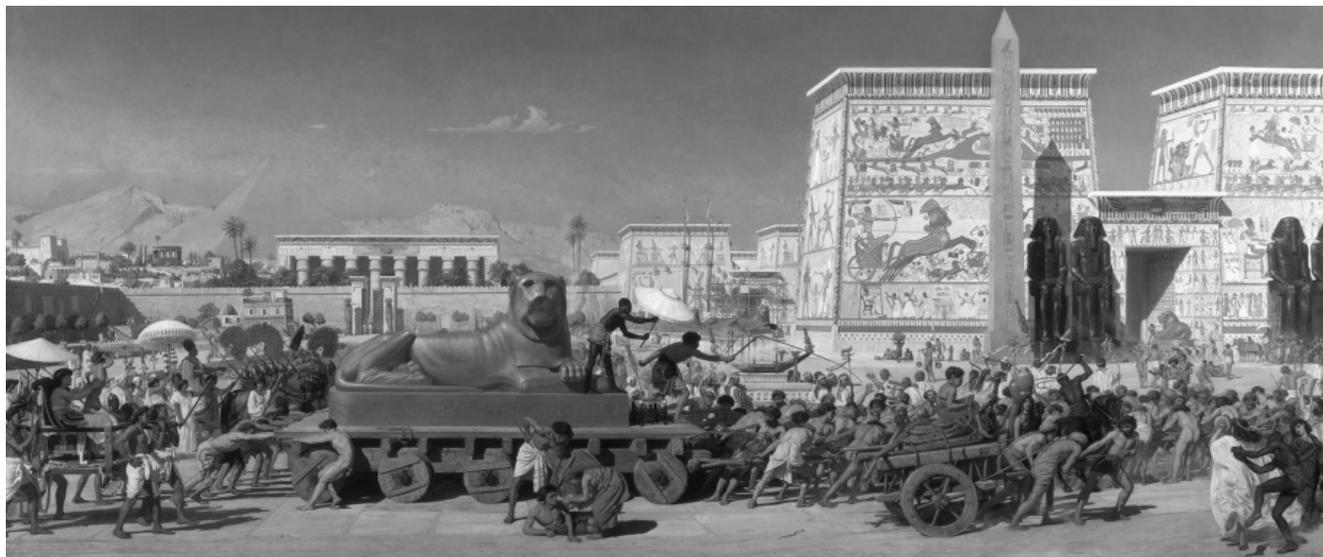


Figure 1. 'Israel in Egypt' by Sir Edward Poynter. By permission of the Guildhall Art Gallery, City of London.

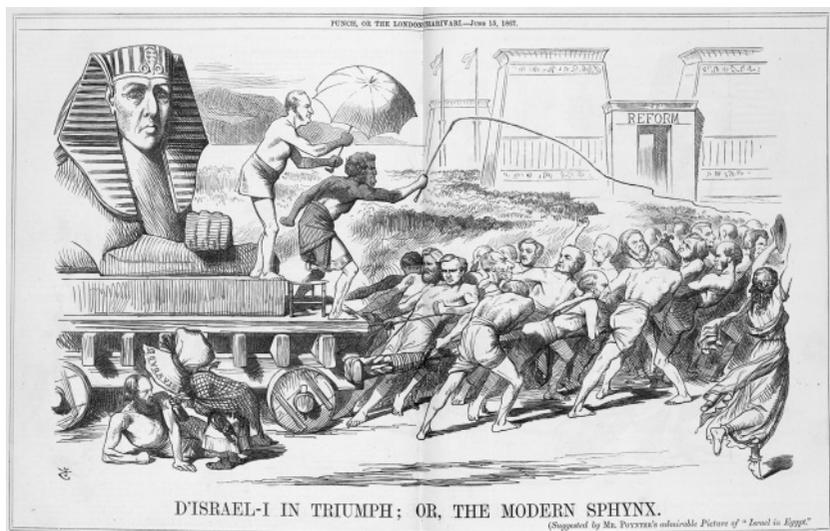


Figure 2. 'D'Israel-i in Triumph; or, The Modern Sphynx' by Sir John Tenniel.
By permission of Cambridge University Library.

up rough justice for the eponymous adulteress in Somerset Maugham's *Liza of Lambeth* (1897), we catch glimpses of a complex and diverse street culture ('Gunnison Street' or 'Vere Street') that defies any crude classification into the respectable and the rough.²⁶ Perhaps the most vibrant, but also the most troubled, of these street scenes is the description of Saturday night in the Whitechapel Road in Margaret Harkness's renamed novel *In Darkest London*, with which this chapter began. A moment's comparison with the passage from *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* with which it has been paired shows it to be precisely the type of 'lurid picture' that Besant sought to avoid. However, the contrast is more than merely suggestive; I argue that *In Darkest London* should be read in part as a critique of the politics enshrined in Besant's celebrated bestseller.

When Besant elevates the proletarian rat race by aligning it with Biblical suffering, the 'famous picture' to which he refers is undoubtedly Sir Edward Poynter's vast 'Israel in Egypt', an oil painting that made the artist's reputation when it was first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1867 (see Figure 1).²⁷ The verses from the first chapter of *Exodus* that inspired Poynter's canvas also supply an intertext for Besant's own cautionary narrative – 'And the Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigour. And they made their lives bitter with hard bondage'. The painting showed scores

of naked and half-naked slaves pulling a massive red granite lion while being lashed by overseers, and, although hugely successful, Poynter's work sparked considerable controversy among critics and visitors to the gallery.²⁸ The *Art Journal*, for example, thought it portrayed 'a disagreeable, not to say revolting subject', and this frisson of distaste was picked up in allusions to Poynter's work in other cultural sites, allusions that subverted the painting's disquieting overtones for narrowly political ends.²⁹ In the cartoonist John Tenniel's hands, the Biblical symbols were transposed, with 'D'Israel-i in Triumph; or, The Modern Sphynx' replacing 'Israel in Egypt' (see Figure 2). Here, instead of a granite lion, we find a Judaised sphinx bearing the impassive face of the leading Tory Benjamin Disraeli being pulled by a body of enslaved, half-clad Members of Parliament towards an archway labelled 'Reform' (i.e. the 1867 Reform Act).³⁰

In Tenniel's allegory of hauteur and power, the position of the Jew, emphasised by the archaic spelling of Disraeli's name in the caption, has been radically revised: it is now muscular Englishmen who take the place of the captive Israelites, in thrall to a figure who was often caricatured as an alien interloper (or, at best, an 'alien patriot').³¹ The qualities of remoteness and unfathomability embodied in the Egyptian statue were commonly ascribed to Disraeli, but here they stand in stark contrast to the feverish and strenuous movement of the other figures in the drawing. The Tory statesman – later dubbed 'the Primrose Sphinx' by Israel Zangwill in his book *Dreamers of the Ghetto* (1898) – sits above the fray, staring into the middle distance, as if these minions (including a clearly unsettled Gladstone) were beneath him, as they quite literally are in this sketch.³² Blank and unconcerned, Tenniel's representation of Disraeli plays into the conspiratorial stereotype of the Jew as parasite, living off the labour of others. And curiously enough, the description of Poynter's painting given by Besant arguably fits Tenniel's *Punch* cartoon better than the original canvas, because there is no figure in that tableau which corresponds quite so precisely to the 'one in authority ... with eyes terrible from their stony gaze,' the one who cares little 'whether the feeble suffer and perish' as Tenniel's Disraeli (85). It is as though Besant's memory had commingled caricature and Biblical narrative, erasing the differences between them.

Tenniel's foregrounding of contemporary anti-Semitic tropes in his ideological reversal of 'Israel in Egypt' in 1867 brings out what Besant's allusion to Poynter's narrative painting somehow manages to omit: the increasingly prominent role played by the Jewish Question in British politics and society. Besant seems to have been slow to register the changing social character of the Palace's locale, mentioning only the presence of

'honest Germans' amongst the shopkeepers of St George's-in-the-East, the numbers of 'foreign sailors' in the streets of Shadwell, and a small Swedish church congregation (131–133). The Seventh Day Adventists are said to be 'as much separated from their fellows as the Jews', but, oddly, no Jews are identified with the East End (332). Yet, as Todd Endelman has argued, by the middle of the nineteenth century, 'the small but steady trickle of Jews from Eastern Europe' was already putting pressure on community resources in London, where two-thirds of the capital's Jewish population lived in its eastern districts, and similar difficulties were also becoming apparent in Manchester and Birmingham.³³ It might be said in Besant's defence that his novel was composed at the tipping point of the rise in Jewish immigration that began in the pogrom years of 1881–1882, and that this explains why Margaret Harkness's fiction from later in the decade was so preoccupied with migrant Jewish labour. However, in the thirty years or so between 1850 and 1882, the numbers of Jews in London had risen from around 12,000–13,000 to more than 30,000. This figure had doubled by the time the House of Commons Select Committee on Emigration and Immigration reported in 1889.³⁴

In fact, Besant failed to find a place for the history of immigration until he wrote *East London* and, unlike his earlier work, that book included a generally optimistic chapter devoted to 'the alien' which gave pride of place to the new Jewish communities. For Besant, Britain's record of tolerance and the advantages of assimilation boded well for the future. And he described the quiet pleasure he had experienced sitting in a synagogue, meditatively listening to the hymns which were said to have been 'sung when Israel went out of Egypt'.³⁵ Yet by the time *East London* was published, the terms of the debate had shifted. 'Apparently Sir Walter does not see in the invasion of aliens the dangers that others do', a columnist for the *Illustrated London News* told its readers in April 1901, incredulous that Besant did not take immigration to be *the* major issue facing East Londoners.³⁶ 'That sleepless watch-dog, Mr. Arnold White' was therefore an altogether more reliable guide to the problems facing the nation, according to the *ILN*.³⁷ An anonymous reviewer of White's *Efficiency and Empire* in May 1901 raised a sceptical eyebrow at its overly polemical style, but thought the argument for 'the increasing degeneracy of our city-bred populations' was well-made. This was a book 'every Englishman should read'.³⁸

However, contrary to the impression created by the *ILN*, there were definite limits to Besant's philosemitism. Although he followed Charles Booth in believing that Judaic teaching stimulated the intellect, giving poor Jewish workers a market advantage over 'the dull mind, untrained

and simple, of the English craftsman', Besant thought that this competitive edge was confined to the lower rungs of the class structure and that it would be risky if it were not. If Jews were to show signs of achieving greater power and success in the professions than they already had, then their advancement might cause the kinds of fears and resentment that lead to anti-Semitism. 'So long as we can hold our own in the higher fields', Besant argued (the use of the words 'we' and 'our' are again symptomatic), 'there will be no Judenhete in this country'.³⁹ In short, it was in everyone's interests that Jews should know their place.

Besant has long been read as an incurable optimist whose sentimentality was closely linked to his notion of social reform. For reform to be feasible, the working classes in the East End had to be culturally impoverished, but not so bereft that cultural uplift was out of the question. The exaggerated premises underpinning Besant's novel are there to ensure that nothing needs to change fundamentally to guarantee that the 'impossible story' was indeed possible. In the final decade of Besant's life, these assumptions were becoming much harder to sustain, as a reading of Margaret Harkness's 1889 novel *In Darkest London* makes plain.

'THE SCUM OF LONDON'

In Harkness's narrative, Besant's imaginary consensus is brutally and summarily dispatched by an unnamed parish doctor ('a modern Prometheus') the loss of whose family and also his lover has driven him to devote his entire professional life to helping the East End poor. Quoting verbatim from Engels's *Condition of the Working Class in England*, he insists that the complacent residents of the West End are too 'bad' or 'mad' to recognise that 'the whole of the East End is starving', pointedly redirecting the charge of degeneracy usually levelled at the poor. The world of letters is complicit in this collective myopia, for 'people prefer to read the pretty stories about the East End made up by Walter Besant'. Not only do these cosy fictions hide the truth; they also generate a false sense of security. The doctor is sure that 'if things go on like this we must have a revolution', a day when the hungry East Enders will march on the West End, killing and destroying whoever and whatever stands in their path. Lest the obvious historical parallel be missed, his prediction is deliberately voiced at the opening of a chapter that takes its title from a visit to 'The Bastile' [sic], the name given to a Whitechapel workhouse (154–155).⁴⁰

Margaret Harkness was an unlikely chronicler of East End misery. The daughter of an Anglican country clergyman, she had initially trained as a nurse at London's Westminster Hospital and later worked at Guy's. But

while in London, her horizons widened and, supported by her second cousin, the social reformer Beatrice Potter, she began writing essays and fiction, moving briefly into radical socialist politics in her late twenties and early thirties as she did so. Her new friends included Eleanor Marx, Olive Schreiner, and Friedrich Engels, whose criticism of her first novel, *A City Girl* (1887), guaranteed her a permanent place in the history of Marxist aesthetics. Certainly she knew the East End well. In a letter to her sister Laura in November 1887, Eleanor Marx refers to Harkness as someone who has ‘lived there for years’ and ‘had *never* known anything approaching the distress this year’.⁴¹ The late 1880s saw Harkness at her most politically active: she helped Eleanor Marx to explore the East End in 1888, was for a short time a member of the Social Democratic Federation, and became a strong supporter of the Dock Strike in 1889. This intensely busy period was also notable for a remarkable outburst of creativity during which she published her three best-known London novels, together with a fourth set in the sweatshops of the Manchester garment industry. But in the early 1890s, her political views moved toward the right. She fell out with many of her former friends, including members of the Engels circle, who now saw her as politically suspect. Abandoning the East End for New Zealand and Australia later in the decade, she lived in India during the Edwardian era, writing and publishing intermittently until her death in Italy in 1923.

Engels’s celebrated caveat regarding the political limitations of Harkness’s realism in *A City Girl* has tended to obscure the specificity of the intervention that she was attempting to make in the late 1880s. But realism was a much debated concept in this period, and other critics read Harkness’s work quite differently to Engels. In an odd comparison, the *Whitehall Review* declared the ‘pictures’ in Harkness’s second novel *Out of Work* (1888) to be ‘as minute and faithful as are Frith’s “Derby Day”, “Ramsgate Sands”, and “Railway Station”’, invoking a widely admired set of paintings in which members of a variety of social classes harmoniously inhabited the same communal space in an unheroic anthropological counterpart to Besant’s dreams of cultural reconciliation.⁴² The parish doctor’s speeches from *In Darkest London* clearly show that this was not the effect that Harkness sought to achieve, but even her choice of subtitles was meant to signal a corrective to rosier views of contemporary society like that of Besant. In sharp contradistinction to the ‘impossible story’ that was *All Sorts and Conditions of Men*, Harkness deliberately labelled *A City Girl* ‘A Realistic Story’. Similarly, in an attempt to demonstrate that there was nothing exceptional about the East End, *A Manchester Shirtmaker* (1890) was tellingly identified as ‘A Realistic Story of To-day’. There was never any flirtation with the picturesque, nor any slide into

populist wish fulfilment, in her early fiction. Moreover, as Sally Ledger has noted, Harkness's work shows some obvious affinities with Zola's naturalism – an author mentioned by name in *Out of Work* and *In Darkest London* – though her view of the aetiology of urban degeneration tended to focus on the impact of the social environment upon the casual poor, in contrast to the role played by heredity in Zola and his British disciples.⁴³

This latter point was picked up by Engels who argued that *A City Girl* was 'not quite realistic enough'. Defining realism not merely as 'truth of detail', but as 'the truth in reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances', Engels argued that what was missing from Harkness's narrative was any sense of how the 'circumstances which surround them and make them act' enable them to resist their oppressors. The working-class figures in her novel appeared to lack any capacity for self-organisation, relying instead upon forces outside or 'above' their own social milieu to raise them out of their 'torpid misery'. Yet Engels ended his letter with an important qualification, seldom mentioned in accounts of this correspondence. Strictly speaking, he conceded, Harkness was right: 'nowhere in the civilized world are the working people less actively resistant, more passively submitting to fate, more *hébétés* than in the East End of London'.⁴⁴ So perhaps the stirring of proletarian militancy belonged to a more revolutionary future and to novels that were still to be written. A year later, Engels described the 1889 Dock Strike as proof that his conjecture had been correct. By being drawn into the modern trade union movement, the 'mass of broken-down humanity' that had been 'drifting towards total ruination' was transformed into a disciplined body that struck terror 'into the hearts of the mighty dock companies'.⁴⁵ But what of Harkness? Was her radical fiction waiting for just such a catalyst?

The answer is far from certain, particularly when one remembers the subsequent loss of her socialist beliefs. But there is little in her writing that offers hope of a better future. The fleeting experience of happiness is likely to be interrupted by grim reminders of life's remorseless realities for those at the bottom: by the death of the heroine's illegitimate child and desertion by her lover in *A City Girl*, or the involuntary separation between sweethearts that occurs in *In Darkest London*. And when Harkness focuses upon the downward spiral of trapped individuals, as in *Out of Work* or *A Manchester Shirtmaker*, her heroes and heroines finally succumb to death, suicide, or madness. Politically, Harkness's writing often acts as an irritant or a warning as much as an insider's perspective on slumdom, and already at this stage in her work the despair in her fiction sometimes seems to evoke scepticism about socialist politics rather

than commitment. At their most vivid and dramatic, her novels echo with clashing voices, contending positions, urgent pleas, and denunciations that the narrative can barely contain. In these moments, Harkness's work is unrestrainedly dialogic, in perhaps the strongest sense of this term, deliberately flouting realist conventions and, when necessary, introducing anomalous characters who 'do not exist in East London', as a didactic footnote insists in *In Darkest London* (82). Engels commended Harkness for avoiding the trap of the *Tendenzroman*, for choosing not to write what he called 'a point-blank socialist novel'. But the noisy heteroglossia of her fiction raises many more questions than it can answer.

Not that Harkness's novels lack conviction. In the opening to *Out of Work*, for example, the Queen's Golden Jubilee visit to the East End is described by an authoritative narrative voice that is unwavering in its concern to state the truth that the official version of events tries to cover over. The reporters at the celebrations are depicted as busily 'concocting stories of the royal progress' that will make no mention of 'the hisses which the denizens of the slums had mingled with faint applause as Her Majesty neared her destination'. There will be no 'hint that the crowd about the Palace of Delight had had a sullen, ugly look which may a year or so hence prove dangerous'.⁴⁶ The hisses from the crowd in fact prefigure the hisses directed against the police and soldiers in the Trafalgar Square unemployment riots of 1887, which form the brutal climax of the novel and are likened to 'a nightmare, after reading a chapter of Carlyle's "French Revolution"' (favourite reading at the People's Palace Library).⁴⁷ Nevertheless, in Harkness's writing the bloody intransigence of class politics is always haunted by other needs, different struggles, alternative narratives that agitate to make themselves heard and sometimes occur only in distorted form.

Thus her portrayal of the undifferentiated proto- (or, perhaps, sub-) revolutionary East End crowd in *Out of Work* needs to be juxtaposed with the representation of Whitechapel Road on Saturday night in her next novel, *In Darkest London*, which in turn offers a further comment on Besant's fictional world. In *All Sorts and Conditions of Men*, it is only in the West End that the inhabitants are able to lounge or stroll 'as if they had nothing to do' and 'forced labour is pushed into the background'; in East London, the careless figure of the *flâneur* is quite absent (85). In its apparently relaxed familiarity, Harkness's set piece brings something of the ease of the West End to Besant's frenetic East End streets – indeed, it is tempting to read its vernacular cosmopolitanism as an inventory of everything and everyone that Besant omits. But there is more going on here than such a reading would recognise.

Consider the genealogy of the topical allusions in Harkness's titles. In the original 1889 version, *Captain Lobe* was taken from the name of a Salvation Army officer carried over from *A City Girl*. His movements back and forth across the East End unify the disparate scenes in what would otherwise be a largely episodic novel: hence the subtitle 'A Story of the Salvation Army'. However, when *Captain Lobe* was republished in 1891 in 'a new and popular edition', as *In Darkest London*, the aim was to capitalise on the Salvation Army device by invoking General William Booth's evangelising tract from the previous year *In Darkest England and the Way Out* and clinching the connection by commissioning Booth to write a short introduction to the novel. Booth's title was itself a play upon another success story from 1890, Sir Henry M. Stanley's *In Darkest Africa*, which had been a follow-up to Stanley's bestselling travelogue *Through the Dark Continent* from 1878. In a question from *In Darkest England*, General Booth laid bare the rhetoric of equivalences that had emerged and hardened during the 1880s: 'May we not find a parallel at our own doors, and discover within a stone's throw of our cathedrals and palaces similar horrors to those which Stanley had found existing in the great Equatorial forest?'⁴⁸ No answer was necessary, and Booth's formula soon became ubiquitous. So, in the same year that Harkness's novel was repackaged, the Rev. A. Osborne Jay, vicar of Holy Trinity in Shoreditch and a powerful advocate of slum clearance, published his *Life in Darkest London*, amalgamating the cultural idioms of General Booth and George Sims.

As John Marriott has shown, the rediscovery of the metropolitan poor in this period took a variety of forms, without any unitary rationale or overarching interpretation.⁴⁹ But the idea that the East End represented an urban 'dark continent' circulated widely in the early 1890s. At one point in her novel, Harkness maps this idea onto the contrast between day and night. In the daytime, 'the worst London districts ... put on a veneer of civilization; but at night the slummers show themselves to be worse than savages' – an observation supported by reference to Professor Huxley's dictum 'that it is better to be born a savage in some heathen land than a slummer in Christian England' (196).⁵⁰ Yet her description of Saturday night in Whitechapel complicates this judgement by installing a different set of oppositions. The efflorescence of 'nationalities' withers very quickly as Hottentot, Algerian, Indian, and Polish Jew are resolved into the composite term 'foreigners', and the perspective inscribed in the passage, though heavily ironised, becomes that of the imperious East End layabout – 'monarch of all he surveys, lord of the premises', yet 'looked upon as scum by his own nation'. This self-aggrandising figure in 'a

tattered cap' regards himself as British to the core and is ready 'to kick the foreigner back to "his own dear native land" if only Government would believe in "English for the English" and give all foreigners "notice"' (13).

The omniscient narrator is careful to generalise the type of the 'loafer' into that of 'the parasite', noting that this is a social individual who can be found in West End clubs as much as in East End pubs. However, like the later suggestion that 'the worst part of this slum belongs to the Prime Minister', this passing observation remains unexplored (196). Of far greater significance is the treatment of xenophobia as a peculiarly working-class phenomenon, a theme that also appears in the novel's predecessor, *Out of Work*, where hatred of the 'foreigner' is a constant refrain, doubling as invective and explanation. "Why should they come here, I'd like to know?" demands one 'rosy-cheeked little woman'. "Why should all them foreigners come here to take food out of our mouths, and live on victuals we wouldn't give to pigs?" she continues, indignant that London is now 'just like a foreign city'. Her outburst is no isolated cry: we are told that the 'chiefly political' songs at the music hall like "England for the English, and Heaven for us All" take up the same chorus, orchestrating the desire 'to "chuck" the foreigner back to "his own dear native land"' while the audience 'wave their handkerchiefs' and call for encore upon encore. And when *Out of Work's* central character, the unemployed carpenter Jos Coney, returns to his village having failed to find work in London, he overhears the same complaint in his local pub: "The country's going to the dogs along of these foreigners. I'd like to weed 'em out."⁵¹

In *Out of Work*, xenophobia has no single target and can as readily embrace the royal family as the foreign worker. The prime candidate for such bigotry, the figure of the Jew, is presented as a peripheral figure, divided into the all but assimilated and the *outré*: on the one side, the mild and always sympathetic barber and dentist Uncle Cohen who lives in a local boarding house and is so unassuming that he is imagined to be a potential convert; and on the other, the 'little Jewess' in the adjacent gin-shop, 'holding a fowl in her arm, which would by-and-by be killed in Hebrew fashion'. At only one point do these stereotypes begin to coalesce with the discourse of the foreigner to produce a focussed anti-Semitism, when Jos Coney's sweetheart casually informs her Methodist class-leader that the unwanted carpenter 'thinks Jews and foreigners do jobs so cheap he hasn't a chance'.⁵²

But within *In Darkest London* the Jew has become the archetypal foreigner and any real distinction in usage has collapsed. Among the most class-conscious and directly political characters in the novel is the

'labour-mistress' or forewoman of a sweet factory named Jane Hardy who 'belong[s] to a circulating-library' and believes in 'combination, fighting the upper classes, and justice' (92). Yet she is adamant that she would 'never take on a Jewess. The East End is just overrun with foreign people, and that makes matters worse for us English' (95). Moreover, her prejudices are given the stamp of authenticity by being presented as the observations of a knowledgeable eyewitness. Jane attests that she has travelled 'to Hamburg in a sailing vessel', returning in a ship that 'was full of Polish Jews and Russian beggars, with bundles of rags for luggage and enough babies to fill a cabin', utterly 'miserable', 'hungry and sea-sick' (95). No one wants these unfortunate men and women, 'the scum of Europe', as Jane later calls them (219). At first their destitute condition prevents them from landing; then, once they are off the ship, the captain refuses to have them back on board and they are taken away by a policeman. After a night in the cells, "'The Jewish Board of Guardians will fetch 'em,'" says he, "and some sweater will take 'em into his shop to undersell us English'" (96). The policeman's words and Jane's vituperative commentary are seamlessly fused together in the telling of her story.

Jane Hardy's anti-Semitism is particularly disturbing because it is always knitted into her insight into social conditions, a symptom of the frustration she expresses that is articulated as a set of facts. Her voice is that of a compromised socialist who believes that 'the social revolution' is 'no nearer than when I first began to study these questions', and at the end of the novel she is contemplating leaving England and becoming a migrant (220). A blunt Northern autodidact, she is presented as an admirable woman and also as a social type that 'one comes across' regularly (one of a number of signs that Harkness is trying to heed Engels' earlier criticisms), 'full of energy, pioneers of their sex in questions connected with female labour', and unwilling to be treated differently from men (221). But, like 'the modern Prometheus', her tough-mindedness comes at a price. She asserts on more than one occasion that it would be better for the 'girl babies' of the poor to be strangled at birth, as she insists they are in China, including her infant self in this Swiftian programme of eugenics. At the same time she is a pragmatist, a spinster who puts her 'principles in [her] pocket' in order to support her aged mother, and a disciplinarian who has the tight lips of a repressed hysteric: while the sight of a mouse would bring on a fit, she is 'the sort of woman ... that buries her dead tearless' (92–94). If the Promethean doctor can describe himself as a victim of 'the disease of caring', Jane Hardy also stands for a socialism that carries the stigmata of its pathological origins. And, like the Salvation Army, its closest competitor for the hearts and minds of the East End slummers, socialism tends to

appear as a limited and noticeably deformed doctrine striving for something better. What makes *In Darkest London* so bleak, however, is the constantly nagging doubt that the East End could ever produce the human resources needed to create a just and decent society. Every scenario – the workhouse, the ‘penny gaff’, the sweet factory, the police court – reveals that its people have adapted themselves to the very conditions that are destroying them, conditions they are powerless to surmount or improve. Socialism is often little more than a distressed cry of pain.

In Darkest London ends with a scene at Tilbury Docks where hundreds of young women are emigrating to Australia, much to the anger of Jane Hardy who remonstrates with them for letting in ‘the scum of Europe’ (219). The word ‘anti-Semitism’ does not explicitly appear in the text and had in fact had only come into the English language in the early 1880s, but the figure of the Jew goes to the heart of *In Darkest London*’s radical scepticism about the future. The open sense of hostility towards Jews takes two forms in Harkness’s novel. Initially, it is a cultural reflex, belonging to the history of jingoistic sentiments that are paraded in the music hall and the public house. But later, from the lips of Jane Hardy, anti-Semitic prejudice becomes more self-conscious and is aligned with an educated discourse, or at least with a subject who has been diligently pursuing an education: hatred of Jews is linked to discipline and self-denial, as though it were somehow earned, the fruit of bitter experience. This sense of a hard-won anti-Semitism is exceptionally pernicious, in part because it legitimises itself in terms of a movement across the line that divides the respectable from the rough, a line that plays a central role, as we saw in the work of Walter Besant, in sustaining the project of cultural uplift. Here is an anti-Semitism that is ready to leave the street corner for the political platform, to make its stand as something other than vulgar prejudice.

If there is a curious indeterminacy about *In Darkest London*’s anti-Semitic prejudices, it is not because their warped judgements resist correction or defy interrogation. Rather, the problem lies in the uncertain positioning of the reader. In the case of ‘the East End loafer’, it is made abundantly clear that his bigotry is inseparable from his self-delusion and that his beliefs are unworthy of serious consideration. With Jane Hardy, the question becomes: how serious can she be? When she talks of infanticide, of unsentimentally slaughtering ‘the girl babies’ at birth, she makes out that such a fate would be ‘so good for ‘em and so bad for the capitalist’, ‘shaking her fist’ in conclusion, so that this tirade involves her in deliberately striking a pose (93). Is her anti-Semitism a pose of a similar kind, a method of psychically distancing herself from what she regards as the useless kind-heartedness of the young factory girls whom she

supervises, a way of suppressing emotions that she cannot allow herself to feel? We cannot be sure. And because Jane's socialism is set off against the dedication of the Salvation Army, men and women whose work she respects despite having no religious sympathies of her own, it is possible that Christian self-sacrifice is intended as the necessary practical supplement to a heartless politics. Crude and underdeveloped, the depiction of Judaeophobia in Harkness's *In Darkest London* fails to provide the seeds of a critical microhistory of what Hannah Arendt once called 'leftist anti-Semitism'; instead, it remains a side narrative of emotional exhaustion that inconclusively flickers in and out of focus.⁵³

THE ALIEN SWEATER

Harkness's later writings bear witness to the strains associated with her increasingly jaundiced vision of working-class politics. By 1905, when *George Eastmont: Wanderer* – her retrospective of the 1889 Dock Strike – appeared, she was ready to have her eponymous hero consider quitting the city for a rural socialist utopia in the shape of an Owenite farming community. Well before that stage had been reached, however, any last vestige of a distinction between the sentiments voiced by the narrator and those identified with her characters was becoming hopelessly confused. This was not a new problem in Harkness's work and is perhaps most apparent in her fourth novel, *A Manchester Shirtmaker* (1890), which treats the city it names 'Cottonopolis' as a straightforward extension of London's East End, underwriting this effect through the disingenuous claim that the local dialect 'has been translated into English'.⁵⁴ In this book, anti-Semitism also looms large, but now it has ceased to be a characterological quirk and has become instead an integral component of the main plot. Harkness resumed her attack on the practice of 'sweating', the hyper-exploitation of labour associated with a subcontractor or middleman – originally taken up in *A City Girl* and a major concern among social reformers and anti-immigrant lobbyists in the 1880s – but here she condenses its evils into a single fantasmatic individual: 'the miserable Jew', Joseph Cohen.

Cowardly, tyrannical, and rapacious, Cohen is the archetypal parasite who fears for his life when his workers gleefully crowd round him waving their scissors and knives and crying "'Sweater! Sweater!'" (58–60). Yet he thinks nothing of confiscating the money that Mary Dillon, a widowed seamstress, has had to pay him for the cloth she must use, or of refusing to pay for the work she has done – an act which finally robs her of her livelihood as an outworker by forcing her to pawn her sewing machine. Once

her money has run out, Mary is unable to feed her baby or herself and in the end is driven to murder her own child. Weak from hunger and utterly destitute, Mary repeatedly imagines that she is being haunted by Cohen's grasping presence. In her delirium she fantasises that he is wrenching her wedding ring from her finger, though she has, of course, already had to pawn it. And on the morning after she killed her baby, she seems to see 'the Sweater' again, this time 'followed by a crowd of angry women' (109). Cohen's grotesqueness is heightened by his calculated use of patois – written out phonetically, unlike the other 'translated' accents – rendering him thoroughly alien. A Mancunian by birth and proficient in 'the Lancashire dialect', he has resisted assimilation by electing to speak 'a sort of heathenish gibberish, because he thought that it impressed his hearers with a sense of his importance as an employer of labour' (70). One chapter takes his intransigent words as its title: "No Vork without Monish!" As with the 'middle-aged Jewess' who sides with Cohen when the heroine appeals to her for help, standing with hands on hips and showing 'two rows of white teeth in absolute silence', Jewishness is consistently figured as persecutory, aggressive, unfeeling, the embodiment of capitalism at its worst (77–78). It is as if *A Manchester Shirtmaker* were being narrated by Jane Hardy on a return visit to the North.

'Sweating' could scarcely have been more topical in 1890, for in April of that year the Final Report of the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Sweating System was published. This body had been in session since March 1888, following a controversy that had arisen in the wake of a Report to the Board of Trade in September 1887 on sweating in London's East End. Drafted by John Burnett, a former trade unionist who was the Board's first Labour Correspondent, this analysis had aroused considerable interest, not least among anti-alien activists. Arnold White, together with Lord Dunraven, had co-founded the Society for the Suppression of the Immigration of Destitute Aliens in 1886 and on 15 December 1887, he led a deputation to the Home Secretary in order to reinforce the connection that Burnett had made between foreign immigration and the trade in sweated labour. So it was highly significant that, when the Lords Select Committee began to sit, Dunraven was appointed as its chair. In fact, official and semi-official investigations into the practice of sweating were plentiful in this period. Burnett had also looked into sweating in Leeds in 1887, as had the medical journal the *Lancet* in April and June 1888 (with a study of tailors in Manchester in the April report), and, in addition to a number of essays in prominent periodicals like the *National Review* and the *Fortnightly Review*, there had been several inquiries of a more

journalistic nature, such as the two volumes put out under the auspices of the *British Weekly* in 1889, entitled *Toilers in London*, which Margaret Harkness had been involved in editing.

As Norman Feltes has argued, the Lords Select Committee report was a defining moment in the history of sweating because, much to the chagrin of White and others, it reversed the conventional wisdom on the subject.⁵⁵ Sweating, as Beatrice Potter told the Committee in her evidence, was not a 'system' at all; it was simply labour carried out in small workshops or at home, where control over working conditions was either weak or non-existent. Much energy had been expended by the Committee in seeking to define the peculiarities of sweating – almost an obsession with Dunraven – but in the end there had been a coup and the chairman had found his initial report brushed aside. Placed in an impossible position, Dunraven was effectively suspended from the committee while a new report was prepared and the chair passed to Lord Derby. The main casualty was Dunraven's endeavour to gain an official endorsement of his claim that sweating was indissolubly linked to low-cost immigrant labour. When the heavily revised report finally appeared, it was clear that Potter's views had won the day – not altogether surprisingly, given that, as her later account of this episode in *My Apprenticeship* (1926) reveals, she worked hard behind the scenes to influence the views of Dunraven's opponents. Reviewing the report's achievements, Potter (now Beatrice Webb) saw her contribution as twofold: first, employers were made legally responsible for the conditions under which home workers laboured; and second, that the 'idea of the sub-contractor, the middleman, the alien or the Jew being the "cause" of sweating' was completely discredited and consequently 'disappeared'.⁵⁶ In an address to the Co-operative Congress in 1892 (quoted extensively in *My Apprenticeship*), Potter told the meeting that before she had 'studied the facts of East London industries for myself I really believed this horrible creature existed'. But her investigations showed that 'either he was a myth, or that the times had been too hard for him, and that he had been squeezed out of existence by some bigger monster', a monster which was 'in fact, the whole nation', insofar as everyone was now enmeshed in the social relations of capital. In those predominantly Jewish areas of manufacture like 'the coat trade' or 'the low-class boot trade', where middlemen could still be said to exist, Potter found that these individuals 'work as hard, if not harder than their sweated hands' and often 'earn less than the machinists or pressers to whom they pay wages'.⁵⁷

From Potter's perspective, the figure of 'the miserable Jew' found in Harkness's work represented a rearguard attempt to resurrect and substantiate the mythological creature that history and reason were threatening

with extinction. But Harkness did more than perpetuate a simple category-error: her entire narrative lent support to Lord Dunraven's Tory paternalist vision in which it was the political duty of the great and the good to protect the British working class against the depredations of the alien. In *A Manchester Shirtmaker*, there is no one who will take the side of the heroine: the garment workers are a sadistic but ultimately ineffectual mob while, on the other side, a philanthropist idly complains of the problems caused when a 'hereditary class of vagabonds' is allowed to breed, two doctors discuss social philosophy and their careers while the heroine dies, and the only assistance she receives from a local millionaire is the silk handkerchief which she uses to take her own life (144). As elsewhere in Harkness's fiction, the novel hollows out a space for political agency and reflection, but leaves it vacant. Beatrice Potter came to think of Harkness as politically unprincipled, noting in her diary that her cousin Margaret lacked 'the masculine standard of honour and integrity' so essential to a campaigning woman in the public sphere.⁵⁸ Harkness's attachment to the myth of the sweater helps to explain why these two women writers, who had once shared similar socialist beliefs, found themselves increasingly at odds with each other at the beginning of the 1890s.

Contrary to Potter's claims, the Select Committee's final report on sweating did not banish 'the sweater' from political discourse, least of all in its alien or Jewish incarnations. Sweating continued to play a vital part in the bestiary of the anti-immigration lobby until well into the Edwardian era. Barely two years after the Lords had published their report, for example, W.H. Wilkins's *The Alien Invasion* referred to the sweater as 'the bloated human spider, who ... sucks the life-blood of his victims', appropriately pictured 'in the pages of *Punch* as a gorgeously-apparelled, champagne-drinking, cigar-smoking Hebrew', laughing as he rakes in his gold.⁵⁹ Indeed, the figure of the alien sweater returned with a vengeance in the proceedings of the 1902–1903 Royal Commission on Alien Immigration. "Mr B", whose evidence was cited earlier, had been one of the original witnesses before the House of Lords Committee in 1890 and now thought the entire proceedings had been a waste of his time. 'The result,' he declared curtly, 'was nothing'. There was no improvement in the conditions of the boot and shoe workers until they left their home-based 'sweating dens', joined forces with their fellow English trade unionists, and successfully fought for 'indoor workshops' and union rates of pay. In a series of tense exchanges with Major Evans-Gordon (who was clearly annoyed at having an ally publicly rubbished), "Mr B" singled out Arnold White's role in orchestrating testimony before the House of Lords Committee as particularly blameworthy, because he

had brought Jewish workers to give evidence immediately after their shifts, when they 'had been sweated all night' and were still 'dirty', and so had made them appear as less respectable witnesses than they might otherwise have been.⁶⁰ In fact, "Mr B"'s resentment was only the tip of the iceberg. The House of Lords Committee had been a personal disaster for White and had severely dented both his reputation and his wallet. Carried away by the rectitude of his cause, White had descended into abusive and libellous statements, based upon grossly misleading information that he had failed to check, and the considerable sums of money that he spent in searching out evidence had been frittered away – a lesson White never forgot.

Despite the support it was able to muster, the first phase of anti-alien agitation of the 1890s must be judged a failure. Its leaders, Lord Dunraven and Arnold White, were effectively blocked from achieving their aims in the House of Lords Select Committee on the Sweating System, and a parallel committee in the Commons to look at immigration fared no better, again in no small measure because of White's ineptitude. In May 1891, desperate to repair the damage to their cause and eager to take advantage of worsening economic conditions, Dunraven and White launched a new pressure group, The Association for Preventing the Immigration of Destitute Aliens. This organisation was a significant improvement on its predecessor. By drawing on the support of public figures as various as the Bishop of Bedford and the dockworkers' leader Ben Tillett, Dunraven and White ensured that it received substantial press coverage. Yet in spite of its high profile, the APIDA failed to make the sorts of inroads into the East End that would have given it a popular base, primarily because its leaders never fully appreciated the complexity of local political conditions. Contrary to its popular image, the East End in the 1880s and 1890s was far from being a zone of unrelieved poverty and casual employment and its patterns of political affiliation were likewise extremely variable.⁶¹ As Marc Brodie has observed, between 1885 and 1914, 'only four of the eleven constituencies within the East End ... voted Conservative in any consistent way' and of these, Mile End and Stepney 'were overwhelmingly the wealthiest in the area'.⁶²

At the same time, other images of East End life were beginning to find an audience. In 1892, Israel Zangwill published *Children of the Ghetto*, creating the first Anglo-Jewish bestseller, and was promoted as 'the Jewish Dickens'. Commissioned by the Jewish Publication Society of America to write a Jewish version of another bestseller, Mrs. Humphrey Ward's celebrated crisis of faith novel *Robert Elsmere* (1888), Zangwill was determined

that his book would be a very different kind of narrative, a fictionalised version of the Jewish East End over several generations, contrasting the immigrant experience with that of their children and grandchildren in the 1880s, and with the affluent world of Jewish West London. While drawing on his own early life in Whitechapel (with the character Esther Ansell as a kind of writerly alter ego), Zangwill also reworked several topical events including the furore surrounding the publication of Amy Levy's novel *Reuben Sachs* in 1888 and the East End tailors' strike in 1889. When the proto-Zionist Holy Land League assembles or the militant workers meet, Zangwill's keen eye for detail and his gift for social comedy provide a measure of the omissions in *Daniel Deronda's* portrait of Jewish life and show much had changed. And though the speeches heard at such gatherings hark back to the debate at the *Hand and Banner*, they contain formulations that have no place in Eliot's novel. Here 'the poet of patriotism and Palestine' can confidently proclaim that 'Socialism is Judaism and Judaism is Socialism' – a sign of the 'Messiah-times' to come.⁶³

In a phrase dating back to the fifteenth century, the book's subtitle defined *Children of the Ghetto* as 'a study of a peculiar people', a distinctive, singular, and above all *different* people that had been chosen by God – for, by embracing what is odd or queer as well as special, the word 'peculiar' carries something of the ambivalence associated with 'the uncanny' and is a similarly unstable term. Moreover, in calling his novel 'a study', Zangwill was also associating his thronging narrative with the sociological empiricism typified by Charles Booth's voluminous *Life and Labour of the People in London*. More radically, Zangwill's corrective to hostile or indifferent representations of the Jew should be seen as an example of what James Buzard has usefully identified as 'metropolitan autoethnography', a species of writing that is 'insistently positioned as the outsidership of a *particular* inside', presenting the inner life of a community to a wider public through the interrogatory resources of narrative fiction.⁶⁴ Buzard's gloss brings out Zangwill's importance as a mediator of Jewishness within late-nineteenth-century British culture, a point that is reinforced by the way in which his novel tacks between East End and West End settings.

But it is the East End that is privileged in *Children of the Ghetto*: its soup kitchens, jokes, rituals, entertainments, and internal wrangles. And where *Robert Elsmere* had focussed upon a questioning of religious belief through the doubts of a single, agonised individual, the episodic structure of Zangwill's novel follows the ethical quandaries faced by a multitude of characters within the ghetto as they struggle to make their lives in a rapidly changing world. Zangwill was to write of the ghetto's

'slow breaking-up in our own day' and it is this decline, together with the absence of any coherent substitute for the beliefs and solidarities which were irretrievably being lost, that gives the Jewish East End its poignancy.⁶⁵ In Zangwill's vision, as expressed in the novel's opening 'Proem', the ghetto is already being 'abandoned' as the old communal ties extending between rich and poor are being replaced by the harsher class divisions of the 'larger, freer, stranger' society into which Jews are increasingly passing. 'In the early days of the nineteenth century, all Israel were one': but no longer (62). In Zangwill's overblown Disraeliesque cadences, 'respectability crept on to freeze the blood of the Orient with its frigid finger, and to blur the vivid tints of the East into the uniform grey of English middle-class life' (67).

Instructively, the novel's second chapter is devoted to 'The Sweater', introducing the reader to Bear Belcovitch (formerly Kosminski), a Polish immigrant who is as many-sided as 'The Pauper Alien' who works for him: Esther Ansell's extraordinarily versatile father Moses, who is introduced more fully under this stereotyped heading a little later. Although in the 'Parliamentary Blue Books, English newspapers, and the Berner Street Socialistic Club', Bear Belcovitch is identified as a sweater, he cuts a very different figure from the man with 'a protuberant paunch and a greasy smile' that the 'comic papers' like to imagine. He is 'a tall, harsh-looking man of fifty, with grizzled hair', whose appearance belies the 'God-fearing, industrious, and even philanthropic citizen' within, a pillar of his community. Belcovitch can be curiously sentimental as well as austere – in celebration of his daughter Fanny's betrothal he hands over a shilling (in farthings) to a recently arrived immigrant 'greener' – and while he abhors 'waste', his family can be certain that he will not miss his soup, when they plan to give it to the desperately poor Ansell family upstairs without telling him (84–85).

Belcovitch has known better days. In Poland he had owned 'a brass wash-hand basin, a copper saucepan, silver spoons, a silver consecration beaker, and a cupboard with glass doors', whereas in England he settles for 'the simplest and shabbiest' décor and knows how to infuse and re-infuse a quarter of a pound of coffee to make it last a week (84). His generosity is in part a token of his earlier life when he made it his habit to lend money to Polish officers hard-pressed at cards, and now he never hesitates to provide loans to poorer Jews in the ghetto, loans that are hardly ever repaid. As an agent of exploitation, Bear Belcovitch is a most ambiguous taskmaster. He is the workers' enemy during the strike, but after the labour leader Simon Wolf has been marginalised and his party has dropped him, following the

intervention of the local Jewish MP (the stockbroker Gideon, said to be modelled on Whitechapel's Sir Samuel Montagu), it is Belcovitch who takes Wolf back into his business and supports him, despite a lifelong ban on employing union labour. When Esther last visits the Belcovitch household towards the end of the novel, the family has moved to a different floor of the house they occupied, but is otherwise unaltered.

Although he believed that the ghetto was dwindling, Zangwill gave scant attention to the relations between Jews and non-Jews or of the difficulties of being accepted as an English Jew – matters which he took up in some of his later stories, like 'Anglicization'. When the aspiring, Oxford-educated editor Raphael Leon tells his hostess at a West End dinner party, 'There are thousands of families in the East End now among whom English is read if not written', the context of their exchange might lull the reader into thinking that the ghetto *was* the East End, give or take a few 'Christian roughs' (309, 349). In fact, East London would have been better described as 'a quilt of contrasts', or extending the analogy, 'a patchwork quilt of settlements with interwoven subcultures'.⁶⁶ And to recognise this plurality is also to raise the question of who 'the people' that might be the true East End constituency of the People's Palace actually were. As we have seen, Walter Besant and Margaret Harkness gave very different answers to this question; the British Brothers' League gave another.

"Mr B"'s testimony reminds us that the organisation of industrial action was one instance where inter-communal rivalries were suspended and a new sense of popular solidarity flickered into a life – an insight that is lost in the version of the tailors' strike recounted in *Children of the Ghetto*. Despite these *lacunae*, Zangwill's own career – and especially the immense success enjoyed by *Children of the Ghetto* – was a powerful exemplar of the conversation between others that might be said to be autoethnography's fundamental *raison d'être*. It would doubtless be too much to claim, as did Zangwill's brother Louis in a letter to the *Jewish Chronicle* in May 1894, that the Conservatives jettisoned their planned Aliens Bill 'under the direct influence of his writings.' Nevertheless, Zangwill's voice was not without effect. When he embarked on a nationwide lecture tour of Britain in the mid-1890s (including the People's Palace), not only could he record houses of 3,000 or so, but the audiences that came to hear him were often 'mainly Gentile'.⁶⁷ Yet in bringing the ghetto out of London's East End and into the wider political arena, Zangwill was speaking out as well as speaking to his readers. The forces that Zangwill was speaking *against* form the topic of the next chapter.