

## Life at the Kerbstone

*Pygmalion* was published at a key moment in the lives of women like Eliza Doolittle. The years 1912-13 marked the height of the so-called Edwardian crisis, a period of turmoil for British society. The wretched existence of poorly educated girls, earning their living on the street with few prospects and limited civil rights was beginning to change.

There is no doubt that the life of a street trader was harsh. The journalist and social campaigner George Sims wrote an evocative description of the hardships:

*They come day after day many of them to the same pitch, and stand through winter's cold and summer's heat, through drenching rain and biting blast, and at a certain hour they go. They silently steal away. They have neither luncheon hour, dinner hour, nor time for tea. And they have no holidays. They are a human fringe to the pavements of London, a fringe that only completely disappears when the first hour of a new day has struck, and the last hope of a copper has departed.* (G. R. Sims, *Living London*, 1901-03)

At the turn of the century London was one of the few big cities in Europe with large-scale street trading. The proportion of street traders to the city population increased by approximately 25 per cent between 1851 and 1901. The main reason for this was the widespread poverty identified by Charles Booth in his magisterial seventeen volume study: *Life and Labour of the People of London* published in 1902. Booth classified around 30 per cent of the London population 'in poverty'; that is, with 'means sufficient but barely sufficient, for decent independent life'. Central to this group were the 400,000 casual traders who, like Eliza, relied on the precarious economy of the street for their employment. It was estimated that at the very beginning of the twentieth century that between 12,000 and 20,000 children worked as street traders in London. The roads, courts and alleyways of the city teemed with activity and noise. Traders had to make themselves heard above the din of the traffic, the declamations of street performers accompanied by the hurdy-gurdy or barrel organ, the shouts and cries of the children for whom the city streets formed an enchanting playground, and of course the voices of the other vendors with whom they were in competition.

Yet, life for young women like Eliza was beginning to change. In 1911 Parliament passed a bill to prohibit street trading by children and young persons. The advent of motorised traffic widened streets and made them more hazardous for the casual traders. The London labour market changed too, with rising wages and increasing job prospects which gathered pace with the coming of war. Young women became an increasingly attractive source of cheap labour in the expanding retail, clerical and industrial sectors. Girls' wages were increasingly competitive and they were paid the same, or even more, than boys until their late teens. Unlike life on the street, working hours in the corporate sector were strictly regulated with the enforcement of a 48 hour week. The number of department stores quadrupled and these retail outlets enabled both economies of scale and scope to be achieved over the street seller. They offered a wider variety of higher quality and cheaper goods and thus had a competitive edge. The attractions of employment as a shop assistant, secretary or factory girl offered young women the opportunity of working in relative comfort compared with the stress of street life.

These trends transformed the London street environment irrevocably. It was not that the streets were less busy but that they were used for less. The role of the street became a means of access and

communication. Its configuration privileged mechanised transport rather than the pedestrian. The street was not a place to linger but to pass hurriedly through.

Eliza would have witnessed other changes too. The formation of the Labour Party provided an alternative to the traditional two-party politics of Conservative and Liberal. The party offered a voice for the increasingly militant working class voters although it is also true that the two established parties had adapted their message for the changing electorate. Confrontation in the political arena was matched by severe strife in employment industrial relations. The increased militancy was to some extent inspired by young women like Eliza. In July 1888 a group of 200, mainly girls aged between 12 and 15, left their work at the Bryant and May factory to ask a radical journalist, Annie Besant for her help in a protest against the sacking of three of their colleagues. With her help they orchestrated a feisty and ultimately successful campaign. The Bryant and May management accepted all of their demands and the women went on to establish a successful trade union. Ben Tillet, a leading trade unionists described the strike as 'the beginning of the social convulsion which produced the New Unionism.' The revival of militant politics owed its genesis to teenage girls rather than to hardened union men.

Eliza may also have witnessed the increasingly confrontational campaigns of the women's suffrage movement. After 1908 there was a resurgence in militancy illustrated most dramatically by the attacks on commercial and private property. In 1912 Piccadilly, Regent Street and Oxford Street witnessed some of the most destructive activities when women suddenly produced hammers and other weapons from their bags and fell to smashing shop windows. Damage amounting to thousands of pounds was effected in a few moments. Famous shops and establishments such as Lyons, Swan and Edgar, Marshall and Snelgrove and Liberty's were targeted. Although it is the middle-class leadership of the suffrage movement who have received most attention, equally important were the working-class activists. Women such as Annie Kenney, Hannah Mitchell, Jennie Baines and Mary Leigh gravitated towards the more radical organisations such as the Women's Social and Political Union and the Women's Freedom League. Mary Leigh for example smashed the windows of 10 Downing Street, threw a hatchet into Asquith's carriage and set off small bombs in Dublin's Theatre Royal. She was imprisoned several times, insisted on being treated as a political prisoner and was force fed under the terms of the notorious 'Cat and Mouse Act' of 1913. Working-class activists were treated more harshly than their well-connected colleagues. Lady Constance Lytton was imprisoned and realised that although she went on hunger strike she was not forcibly fed by the authorities. She later disguised herself as a Miss Jane Warton, a working woman and was force fed eight times without medical examination in Walton Gaol.

The educational advancement of women and girls remained limited in the Edwardian period. The school curriculum for girls was dominated by the assumption that the role of education was to foster their domestic skills. In 1862 the Revised Code made the teaching of needlework compulsory in state schools. The stress was on *plain* needlework with inspectors bemoaning time spent on fancy and ornamental sewing. After 1878 'domestic economy' was a compulsory specific subject for girls with a focus on cooking, laundry and household management. Concern about the general health of the nation and the 'degeneracy' of the population was laid firmly at the door of working-class girls who spend their time 'doing education which is not suitable for them.' There was little incentive or reward for educated girls with reading, writing and mathematical accomplishments.

Independent young women like Eliza were experiencing the cusp of change in this period. Their aspirations and prospects would be considerably advanced in coming years. But it is important not to romanticise their lives. Poor girls were still numerous and their life choices more limited than their more comfortable working-class neighbours. Their access to education was still severely curtailed. They remained rooted in poverty on the fringes of society. However, very few faced the prospect of living off their wits at the kerbstone and that must be seen as a significant advancement.

**Sarah Richardson**

**University of Warwick**