

OCTAVIA HILL'S

*A
major new
contribution
to women's
history*

LETTERS TO FELLOW-WORKERS 1872-1911

Edited by Robert Whelan
and Anne Hoole Anderson



Never before
published!

OCTAVIA HILL (1838-1912) was one of the most remarkable women of her time, whose achievements covered the fields of social housing, the relief of poverty, the environment, cultural philanthropy and the cadet corps.

Pioneer of social housing


Beginning in 1864, with assistance from John Ruskin, Octavia Hill pioneered a system of healthy and affordable housing for working-class tenants. Operating on the principle of ‘philanthropy and five per cent’, she gathered about herself a network of mainly female supporters to buy and manage thousands of units of property in London. From the beginning of the 1880s Octavia assumed an increasingly important role in the efforts made by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners to replace some of the worst slums of Victorian London with decent accommodation. The estates in Lambeth and Walworth, still in the possession of the Church Commissioners, stand as monuments to this partnership.

Founder of the environmental movement

Environmentalism began in the nineteenth century as the ‘open spaces’ movement. It grew out of a concern for the filthy conditions in which the urban poor were living, which contributed to the spread of disease. Octavia’s open spaces campaigning began with small spots like the reclaimed churchyard in Drury Lane and the site of Horsemonger Lane Gaol in Southwark. She moved on to the larger projects of Vauxhall Park and Parliament Hill Fields and then, moving outside of London, to the founding of the National Trust and its purchase of huge swathes of the Lake District, Kent and Surrey. Octavia was one of the earliest campaigners for clean air and smokeless fuels.


Making culture inclusive

Together with her sister Miranda, Octavia founded the Kyrle Society to bring beauty into the lives of the poor. The Hill sisters believed that art and culture should not be the exclusive preserves of the rich, and sought to improve the quality of life of poor people by promoting art, music and literature in areas of social deprivation.



2. Red Cross cottages and garden, Southwark, 1894.

“Looking out upon the public garden in Red Cross Street, Southwark, six four-roomed cottages have been built on land belonging to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners at a cost of £220 each. The fronts are in red brick partly rough-cast and slate-tang, and a bay window has been introduced in the first floor. They adjoin Red Cross Hall, which has been decorated by Walter Crane, and though among the fifty Southwark workhouses, are most pleasantly situated. Each cottage has its own yard with detached wash-house etc. in rear. The White Cross Cottages, which is parallel to Red Cross Street, are more four-roomed cottages of somewhat larger dimensions have been placed. The tenants greatly prefer these cottages to the sets of rooms in the blocks adjoining. Each cottage is self-contained, and has its own yard with washing and sanitary appliances. The cost of the White Cross cottages was £200 each.”
Text and photograph from: *The Dwellings of the Poor: Report of the Mansion House Council for the year ending December 31st, 1894*. London: Cassell. Reproduced by permission of the British Library.



3. Good Shepherd mosaic, Red Cross garden, Southwark.

“A present from Venice, a mosaic of lovely colours, has been sent to me, and it is light by its brilliant beauty a space on our garden wall at Southwark... The Shepherd lays His hands gently on the head of the lambs which feed around Him, and the words are those which tell of His love. But that love we may often think neither life nor death are those in from Him, nor storm nor change can shake our perfect peace.”
LETTER TO MY FELLOW-WORKERS, 1887
Photograph from: *The Red Cross Hall and Garden Report, 1900*. Reproduced by permission of the Church Commissioners.




4. Red Cross cottages, Southwark, 2003.



5. Mosaic of the Sower, Red Cross garden.

This mosaic, created by James Powell after a sketch by Lady Wainford, has been restored, and is the only one of the garden features and ornaments described by Octavia to survive. It was the gift of Miss Huxton, who also donated a sundial inscribed with the legend ‘An hour follows hour, God’s mercies are no slower’.
The band... has been executed at Messrs Powell’s by the same workers who did the mosaic at St Paul’s.”
LETTER TO MY FELLOW-WORKERS, 1906



28. Interior of cottage kitchen, Walworth, 1906.

This is one of the few surviving photographs of the interior of a property managed by Octavia Hill. From *The Ecclesiastical Commissioners’ Housing of the Working Classes, London Estates, 1906*. Reproduced by permission of the Church Commissioners.



29. Recreation ground, Walworth, 1906.

From *The Ecclesiastical Commissioners’ Housing of the Working Classes, London Estates, 1906*. Reproduced by permission of the Church Commissioners.



30. Recreation ground, Walworth, 2003.

LETTERS TO FELLOW-WORKERS, 1872-1911

The Mansion House Council on the Dwellings of the Poor asked leave to photograph some of our cottages, and published a short account of them in their annual report. They thought the experiment of building a limited number of cottages in towns a valuable one.”
“The tenants in all our new cottages pay their own rates. It is one of which I continue to feel the great advantage. It gives them and us trouble, but some of our difficulties are over, and I think the plan will worth the effort. I have made no attempt to apply it to the blocks, partly for want of time to arrange for joint action with other bodies. Joint action would be essential where we had not a unique article like the cottages to offer. Partly I have delayed taking action because I am not sure that some movement may not be set on foot for the local authorities themselves to arrange for direct payment, with discount for payment in advance. This would be manifestly far better than our doing it, but, if it is not organised by others, we must try this experiment also. The rate of rates, and what is to my mind far worse, the gigantic accumulation of municipal indebtedness, have become so serious, direct payment would so obviously counteract the tendency simply and naturally, that one thinks it must be arranged for sooner. It was interesting to me to notice that I had a larger number of responsive letters with regard to this subject than I had ever had before to any paragraph I had written, they came from all over England, and many were very thoughtful and wisely far-seeing.”
“We have had the same kind hospitality offered to our poorer friends during the summer as in past years. Mr and Mrs Arthur Hill invited a large group of tenants this year, not to Erleigh, but to Shere, to the house of the rector, their son, where the beautiful rural village and welcoming kindness gave a most perfectly enjoyable day.”*Sir Frederick*

7. *The Dwellings of the Poor: Report of the Mansion House Council for the year ending December 31st, 1894*. London: Cassell. This edition of the council’s annual report included a two-page section headed ‘Cottage homes in London under the management of Miss Octavia Hill’. It contained brief descriptions of Gable Cottages, Southwark, Almond cottages in Charles Street (now Ramston Street), Marylebone, Red Cross and White Cross cottages, Southwark, and cottages in Garden Street and Dover Street (both now demolished) Westminster. The report was illustrated with photographs (see ill. 2, 4, 17, 19). The closest report comes to endorsing Octavia’s pro-cottage views in the sentence: ‘The tenants greatly prefer these cottages to the sets of rooms in the blocks adjoining’, which was probably written by Octavia.

8. Rev. Frederick Hill was rector of Shere from 1893 to 1910. He would assist in his aunt Octavia’s funeral in 1912. His hospitality is mentioned again in the letters for 1897, 1899 and 1900. The September 1899 edition of the *Slow Parish Magazine*

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DURING 1895

and Lady Pollock again invited us to Hindhead; the driving in the lovely country, the dinner in the tent, and, above all, the sympathy and kindness, gave great joy. Mr and Mrs Edmund Maurice and Miss Johnston again welcomed us to their homes, and sent many back with a memory of peace and kindness. Several of my fellow-workers organised a day in the country for their own tenants. Dr and Mrs Longstaff entertained repeated parties during the summer. They also offered during the whole summer the cottage in their garden, to be occupied for a fortnight at a time by two guests. We had the extreme pleasure of thus inviting many an old couple, many hard-worked sisters, many delicate people to have a summer fortnight of quiet country life. Red Cross Hall has this year sustained the very greatest loss in the departure for a long voyage of our able and valued honorary secretary, Miss Plunkett. She had for some five years borne the real weight of all the work there; indeed, it had grown from small beginnings to be what it is under her fostering care. The business was done so excellently that I never had an anxiety about it. She had made her place. The people’s hearts had grown round her. I do not think her place can ever be filled. It remains for us to see whether we can carry on the same work or not. So far we have managed the autumn session with great success, but it will not be possible to me in the further future to devote so much strength to this one work, what can be done there in the future will depend on what capable help gradually comes round me. It is the central place which is so difficult to fill, and into which no one can step, they must grow into it. Of the loyal, the hearty, the kind co-operation of the many friends who have helped there I cannot speak too gratefully. We have had again a successful May Festival, a flower show, a regular course of winter entertainments and Sunday gatherings with much beautiful music.”

I have also to thank many friends for presents of bulbs, plants and flowers. May I here add grateful thanks to a former pupil, now a missionary in India, who has yearly sent us to and the Kyrle Society beautiful Indian draperies.

I do not this year thank the Red Cross account to this letter; it is printed with a separate report.

continued an account of the outgoing... on the first of August... we were enabled to entertain the large party of London poor brought down by Miss Octavia Hill, under the best possible conditions. The Londoners enjoyed “a real good day in the country”, and went away thoroughly impressed with the wonderful beauty of Shere and its surroundings.”

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DONATION ACCOUNT, 1895

RECEIPTS		£	s	d
In hand January:				
Special Fund:	50	0	0	
Appropriated:	96	0	7½	
Per Miss Yorke:	146	6	7½	
Amey, Miss:	1	0	0	
Allen, A. E. Esq.:	2	0	0	
Allen, Mrs. Hill:	2	0	0	
Brooks, Miss:	1	0	0	
Bunnett, Miss (for Women’s University Settlement):	5	0	0	
Bostic, Charles, Esq.:	1	0	0	
Braden, Charles, Esq.:	5	0	0	
Bridgeport, Mrs.:	2	0	0	
Bryce, Patrick, Esq.:	1	0	0	
Burns, Miss A.M.:	0	10	0	
Cassidy, Catherine, Esq.:	50	0	0	
Cockfield, Sydney C., Esq.:	2	0	0	
Dundas, Lady Esq.:	20	0	0	
Dunworth, Hill, The Manor (Education):	7	0	0	
Ede, Miss E. (Queen’s University Settlement):	10	0	0	
Ede, Miss E. (Revd.):	10	0	0	
Forsyth, Miss:	10	0	0	
Franklin, Miss:	4	0	0	
Gossett, Miss:	1	0	0	
Gillon, Mrs.:	5	0	0	
Gardiner, General:	1	0	0	
Harfield, Miss (for improvement of houses):	5	0	0	
Harris, Miss E.:	1	0	0	
Hastings, Thomas, Esq.:	10	0	0	
Hill, Alfred, Esq.:	10	0	0	
Hovell, Miss:	10	0	0	
Johnston, Miss:	20	0	0	
Keene, Miss (for 1894):	10	0	0	
Lea-Warner, Miss:	0	10	6	
Lindfield, W.R. Esq.:	20	0	0	
Linscomb, Mrs.:	2	0	0	
Manning, Mrs.:	1	0	0	
Mallett, Rev. H.:	2	10	0	
Marris, Frank, Esq.:	1	0	0	
Manby, Mrs.:	4	5	0	
Marsden, Mrs. James:	5	0	0	
Oldfield, E. Esq.:	5	0	0	
Plummer, Rev. Charles (for 1896):	5	0	0	
Pullin, Miss:	5	0	0	
Pullock, Sir Frederick (for tenants’ fares in Hackney):	5	11	0	
Repton, Mrs Leslie (the Rev.):	10	0	0	
Richardson, Mrs.:	5	0	0	
Shedden, Mrs.:	10	0	0	
Sherr, Rev. Edward:	1	0	0	
Simpson, Mrs.:	1	0	0	
Sherwell, Miss (for 1900):	1	0	0	
Thompson, J.P. Esq. (for Women’s University Settlement):	20	0	0	
Trotter, Miss:	2	0	0	
Thompson, Mrs Charles:	2	0	0	
Webb, Miss Mary:	5	0	0	
Webb, Mrs.:	50	0	0	
Yorke, Miss Harriet (special for invalid):	2	18	1	
Interest:	0	2	8	
Account (for invalid):	380	24	7½	

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DONATION ACCOUNT, 1895

EXPENDITURE		£	s	d
Women’s University Settlement*:	121	13	6	
Training and Boarding Out:	97	4	2	
Prisoners and other relief:	37	5	0	
Excursion and Country Holidays:	15	19	11	
Red Cross Hall:	14	0	0	
Keat and Storey Committee of Commons Preservation Society:	13	10	6	
Calet Cottage (Southwark):	11	1	0	
Yield Hill Farm:	10	0	0	
Playground, Freshwater Place (Carcating):	10	8	0	
High School and Commons:	7	15	1	
Mrs Forster, Freshwater Place:	6	9	5	
Blind (Prisoners’):	5	0	0	
Stationery, Postage, Carriage, &c.:	5	2	11½	
Houses (Improvement of), Special Donations:	4	3	0	
Printing Letter to Fellow-Workers:	4	3	0	
Plans:	0	19	10½	
Education:	0	12	0	
Cash in hand (Special Fund):	104	19	10½	
Cash in hand (Available):	20	0	0	

* Much of this was sent for the permanent improvement of the settlement houses in response to my letter of 1894.

† The amount I have in hand seems to me so satisfactory that in spite of the amount I find it necessary to keep in hand for these old pensioners and boarded-out children, for whom I am already responsible, I hope to be able in the opening year to take charge of one or two more.

Andrich and Good correct, P.L. 18th, January 6th, 1896.

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Writing the letters

In 1872 Octavia Hill began to write short accounts of her year’s ‘work among the poor’, covering all of these different interests. These ‘letters to fellow-workers’ run to over 130,000 words, exceeding everything else that Octavia wrote put together. Printed and circulated

privately, they have never been published before, except for some brief extracts. Because Octavia refused to form an organisation to manage her work, everything was done on an informal basis, and the letters were the links between those involved. They are the key to an interlocking network of social reformers.

A selection of spreads from the book.

Top left: *The Red Cross project in Southwark, Octavia’s ‘village in the city’, brought together all of her interests: housing, open spaces, community and cultural activities and cadets. The garden has recently been restored by the Bankside Open Spaces Trust to its original design.*

OCTAVIA HILL'S

LETTERS TO FELLOW-WORKERS 1872–1911

- ◆ The full text, including the accounts, of all 39 letters to fellow-workers
- ◆ Over 400 footnotes explaining the people, places, organisations and events mentioned
- ◆ The two accounts of the Walmer Street Industrial Experiment
- ◆ Chronology of Octavia Hill's life
- ◆ Bibliography of Octavia Hill's published writings
- ◆ Appendices on Octavia Hill's work for the Ecclesiastical Commissioners and the Kyrle Society
- ◆ Over 30 illustrations of properties and places mentioned in the letters
- ◆ List of donors
- ◆ Index

'Timely and fascinating, Hill's letters provide a splendid introduction to the panorama of philanthropy and social reform.'

Frank Prochaska, author of *Women and Philanthropy*

'Octavia Hill's Letter to Fellow-workers constitute a first-hand and very personal record of Victorian social reform. Her approach tackled every need, from the practical to the pleasurable, and her voice and emphasis ring out from the pages of Robert Whelan's useful and fully annotated new edition of the privately printed letters.'

Gillian Darley author of *Octavia Hill: A Life*

'This book will act as a springboard for further research among social historians and historical geographers, those in housing and social policy, and women's studies.'

Alison Kay, *The Victorian*

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