LETTERS TO FELLOW-WORKERS
1872–1911
Edited by Robert Whelan and Anne Hoole Anderson

A major new contribution to women’s history
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 Kyre 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.

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.
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

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‘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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