**A man ‘[a]s black as the Devil himself’: the radical life of Benjamin J. Elmy, secularist, anti-eugenicist and ‘First-Wave’ feminist (1838-1906)[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Introduction**

In the midst of debates reflecting the social and cultural turbulence of British society in the 1890s the free-thinking Republican poet Benjamin J. Elmy contended that the world’s ‘happy golden time’ would evolve only when women lived no longer under patriarchy, ‘robbed of freedom’s grace’.[[2]](#footnote-2) The poem which encapsulated these sentiments, the *Modern Marseillaise,* was published in April 1892 - a moment when both racial hygiene and concerns regarding the behaviour of the (allegedly) iniquitous ‘New Woman’ were hot topics of intellectual conversation.[[3]](#footnote-3) Elmy was resolute in his support for women’s socio-sexual, economic and political liberation and his poetry, together with a wider series of ‘revolutionary’ feminist texts, presented his opinions to public scrutiny.[[4]](#footnote-4) In common with other interpreters of eugenic ideology, Elmy considered what was ubiquitously termed the ‘woman question’ pre-eminently from the standpoint of a socio-biological discourse. And in what was a somewhat unusual position for a male commentator, he considered it the responsibility of his sex (in whom the moral imperative was deemed less prevalent than in womankind,) to adopt the moral high-ground in reproductive matters. He argued, for example that for humanity to thrive men must rid themselves of their ‘mad conceit’ of superiority. Rather, they must cease the ‘savage use’ of women’s bodies upheld both in religion and in law, which had promulgated what pessimists categorised as the diseases of human degeneracy.[[5]](#footnote-5)

By no means the least of these defects, Elmy asserted, was the ‘pathological’ symptom of menstruation – the ‘diseased or abnormal’ response to man’s amoral behaviour made manifest in woman.[[6]](#footnote-6) Elmy laid the curse of women at the door of men, and he advocated that only an egalitarian world-view would enable ‘full life’ to come to fruition; for only when ‘man [was] intelligent and woman [was] free’ - free both to understand and to control her fecundity - would the spectre of sickness and decay recede and a mystical, pure union of minds supersede the delights of bodily pleasures.[[7]](#footnote-7) Central to Elmy’s vision for society was the doctrine of ‘free-thought’ and he was a one-time Vice-President of the National Secular Society headed by his friend Charles Bradlaugh.[[8]](#footnote-8) His living out of free-thought ideals, however, did not mean adopting promiscuity. Rather he spoke of the education of human morals, and his commentary on the freedom of women to live independently of patriarchal domination stemmed from a wish to see the ‘separation of political, cultural and moral life from religion’ generally.[[9]](#footnote-9) Elmy yearned for the elevation of sexuality into a realm beyond mere human copulation in a society where ‘psychic’ love, not carnal lust, would rule in a bright Utopian world. Ultimately, the international ‘shared language’ of eugenic discourse helped him attain a role (albeit from the perspective of inverting its logic) in one of the most culturally and geographically diverse movements of the *fin-de-siècle*.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Considerable historical interest has focused on the discourse of degeneracy prevalent within late-nineteenth century British society. Particular emphasis, for example, has been placed upon the methods of social censure and control contemporary commentators deemed essential in the case of those (including the emancipated, independent ‘New’ Woman and the poverty-stricken, tuberculosis-ridden, metropolitan prostitute) whose sexual behaviour was judged as deviating from prescribed norms.[[11]](#footnote-11) As late-Victorian Britain plunged into an economic crisis, and the grimness of urbanised living was revealed and sensationalised by an ever-growing popular press, intellectuals cast around for scapegoats – those who, by living lives of licentiousness and debauchery, had tainted the nation with the twin spectres of ill health and immorality.[[12]](#footnote-12) Fears that such ailing, morally corrupt individuals had the ability to contaminate the gene pool and pass on defective characteristics to subsequent generations were endemic. Thus sex became, in the words of the essayist and individualist-feminist Mona Caird - a key member of Elmy’s immediate circle - the ‘red-hot heart’ of the battle for the future of the human race.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Efforts to stem the tide of racial degeneration, by both practical actions and theoretical debate, were widely practiced amongst the bourgeoisie - though the methods used and the stances taken were complex and evolved over time. Thus the actions of social purity movements, the impact of the discourse of eugenics and the influence of First-Wave feminists and literary commentators on the realm of public opinion have all offered fruitful avenues for researchers wishing to explore the intellectual pandemonium created by fears of racial putrefaction. Only recently, however, has the significance of secularism been considered as having provided a means to undercut prevailing opinions that the fitness of the race was threatened (in the words of Zionist and social critic Max Nordau) by those who held ‘contempt for traditional views of custom and morality.’[[14]](#footnote-14) George Robb has contended that the importance of the secularist response to the narrative of racial decline was that it provided a ‘counterparadigm in which degeneration was actually attributed to traditional morality’ - those social and cultural traditions which were rooted and grounded in the institution of Christian marriage and in the law. Ben Elmy was a noted, influential and controversial secularist, but while a study of his writing places him in alignment with Robb’s conclusion in some respects, his views were essentially in opposition to those contemporaries Robb notes as favouring either the unfettered practice of ‘free love’ for sexual gratification, or the institution of eugenic principles in order to determine a rational programme of selective parenthood.[[15]](#footnote-15) Elmy would never, for example, have so dismissed the value of any human life that he would have acceded to the ultra-conservative eugenicist stance that it be purposefully extinguished, something which appears to set him at odds with those overtly advocating Neo-Malthusian ideals.[[16]](#footnote-16) Elmy had been an outspoken member of the women’s movement since the 1860s, and his copious texts which openly and obviously discuss the discourses of sexuality (and in particular ‘free-love’) provide important sources for visualising new ways of organising socio-cultural relations between men and women.[[17]](#footnote-17)

This paper adopts a biographical methodology to explore Elmy’s motivations and philosophy and to highlight the contentious nature of the free-thought response to the concept of racial degeneracy. It does so first, to highlight the key elements in the life and ideals of a distinctive, yet neglected, male ‘feminist’ figure and, secondly, to offer a nuanced case-study from which to pose wider questions about the way in which sexuality, secularism and the science of eugenics impacted on the key issues of women’s emancipation and citizenship in the 1890s. Barbara Caine has argued that the recent trend which overlaps ‘biography and [intimately focused] micro-history’ offers rich pickings of historians seeking to research the past ‘using traces and fragments’ of the lives of more obscure individuals.[[18]](#footnote-18) Placing Elmy in his biographical context, therefore, opens up discussion of the important theme of his domestic life – where his home in Congleton was the epicentre of an international feminist network – and, also, it highlights his important literary contribution to feminism and social reform based on his commitment to a secularist agenda. Laura Schwartz has pointed out that ‘the possibility of a broader and more sustained Freethinking feminist tradition has’ only recently begun to be explored insofar as it concerns the women’s emancipation cause post-1850.[[19]](#footnote-19) This paper will, therefore, help to extend my initial biographical work on Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, the foundation for this fresh avenue of research, adding an important perspective.[[20]](#footnote-20) For Elmy, unlike many of his ilk, was an active anti-eugenicist who believed that the path to a heightened consciousness in sexual matters was one open to all. He can, therefore, be profitably viewed as an exemplar of a wider current of thought first defined by Edward Royle, who specifically noted the significance of the feminist interpretation of the secularist ideal - though of course we must acknowledge the difficulty of defining the term ‘feminist’ itself as existing before the 1890s.[[21]](#footnote-21) In its consideration of the life and ideals of one of Britain’s most extreme male feminists this paper builds on recent studies that have explored the role of eugenics and its interaction with feminist discourse in the *fin de siècle*.[[22]](#footnote-22) While many of these arguments have centred on the discussion via the medium of literary fiction (and this written principally by women) this article is distinctive in that it considers the poetry and prose texts of one of the first men to theorise (for an English audience) the precise nature of the French term “Feminism”, his article on the topic being published in the *Westminster Review* in early 1898.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Feminism was an evolving discourse in late-nineteenth century Britain and its provenance has been hotly debated by historians. Certainly discourses relating to secularist-feminists are only very recently coming to light for the period poat-1850. However, it is clear that, as Schwartz has pointed out, mid-Victorian ‘free-thinking women’s rights advocacy can be viewed as a “missing link”’ between the discourse of Owenism and that of the ‘New Woman’.[[24]](#footnote-24) Elmy, by his association with free-thought and sympathy to women’s issues, can be sited in a long tradition of those Sylvia Strauss once termed as *Traitors to the Masculine Cause* – men who, from Richard Carlisle to Robert Owen, William Ashurst and George Jacob Holyoake sought to prove that the lot of women was not to be bound fast, without legal or corporal freedom, by their relationships to men.[[25]](#footnote-25) While Arianne Chernock was rightly anxious recently to place Elmy as a member of a long-standing current of ‘champions of the fair sex’, rather than as a lone or ‘isolated’ voice, the aim here is to both consider the arguments put forward by him as a distinctive anti-eugenicist and to site them as products of the organisation that supported their publication, the numerically small and short-lived parliamentary pressure group the Women’s Emancipation Union (WEU) (1891-99) – links Chernock ignores.[[26]](#footnote-26) The work of the WEU has been historiographically marginalised, principally because of its inability to fit neatly within the two main strands of British suffrage history.[[27]](#footnote-27) Only lately, therefore, has research highlighted the importance of the organisation as both an exponent of British progressive political ideology and as a forerunner of the combative, ‘militant’ feminism which, from 1905, underpinned the sexuality debates of Christabel Pankhurst, chief strategist of the infamous suffrage organisation the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU).[[28]](#footnote-28) This paper develops the prior assertion that the WEU established a specific ‘rhetoric of resistance’ against sexual coercion and places Ben Elmy’s anti-eugenic ideal at the centre of this development.[[29]](#footnote-29) It is possible to show, for example, the influence of Elmy’s ideals on Christabel Pankhurst, whom Elmy and his wife had known since childhood and who spoke admiring on his dedication to securing ‘justice for women’ at his secular funeral on 6 March 1906.[[30]](#footnote-30) When Miss Pankhurst later maintained in her book *The Great Scourge* that the vote would aid the implementation of legislation to free a woman from the necessity of making a ‘permanent sex bargain for her maintenance’ she was echoing the words of Elmy, who had claimed in *Life to Woman* (1896) that the ‘hollow honour’ accorded to wives under the marriage contract was merely a corrupt society’s rationale for denying to one half of its people their civil, economic and political rights.[[31]](#footnote-31) While Pankhurst’s deeds and words are common historical currency, Elmy’s life and ideals remain largely unexplored. The picture this article reveals shows him to be much more than a ‘women’s suffragist’ and a part of a wider circle of secularist and feminist intellectuals who, as the remainder of this paper shows, engaged actively with current discourses of feminism, eugenics and citizenship. Clearly an important voice in First-Wave feminism, Elmy was, as a businessman, also well known as a fair employer and a humanitarian-internationalist – his network including such organisations as the Fair Trade Movement and the British Esperanto Association, whose journal reported his death with a fondly worded obituary.[[32]](#footnote-32) Elmy was also convinced that ‘the masculine point of view’ was critical if the world were ever to understand and honour ‘the individuality of woman’ and its importance for the ‘improved coming race of men’. A seemingly self-confident individual, Elmy believed himself morally enlightened, though he claimed categorically that his high ethical principals owed nothing to religious faith. And he placed himself in the forefront of the ‘steadily growing proportion’ of his sex whose mission, he believe, was to ‘cultivat[e] and [restore]...the [e]specially feminine genius and spirit hitherto so contemned or unrecognised’ to the service of humankind.[[33]](#footnote-33)

**Elmy’s path to Freethinking Feminism**

Elmy’s secularism is most-often discussed in historiographical circles via the controversies it provoked following his ‘informal’ marriage to the formidable Elizabeth Wolstenholme (the first professional employee of the British women’s movement) in the spring of October 1874. The bride was aged forty and already six-months pregnant by him.[[34]](#footnote-34) Though the couple were both political radicals and followers of the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment, their desire for a union outside the parameters of church or state was not (in their eyes at least) an excuse for licentiousness - the most extreme interpretation of wantonness the words ‘free-love’ suggests.[[35]](#footnote-35) It was, in fact, anything but. In the spring of that year the couple had exchanged, before witnesses, a ‘simple, equal and mutual’ pledge of fidelity, totally binding and undertaken in true admiration and love for one another; the ceremony planned deliberately to ensure the bride would not find her civil or bodily autonomy compromised thereafter.[[36]](#footnote-36) Nonetheless, the condemnation the newlyweds endured at the hands of some colleagues in emancipation circles was considerable enough to ensure a second, legal ceremony took place in the dour surroundings of Kensington Register Office in the autumn.[[37]](#footnote-37) Ben’s attempt to ensure his wife remained free from the constraints and gender subjectivities of English marriage law and able to lead the ‘full life’ of an autonomous individual had therefore ended in ignominious failure and it is alleged he ‘never forgave’ those ‘friends’ who had demanded it.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Elmy’s consideration for the feelings of his bride show vividly here, though his route to wider feminist sympathies is revealed only in glimpses in extant personal sources. For instance, he left no autobiography and there are no letters remaining between Elmy and his wife to aid an interpretation of their marriage as constructed between themselves. Though this is a serious loss to the researcher, it is through Wolstenholme Elmy’s voluminous correspondence with her closest friend, Harriet McIlquham and in the letters of well-known campaigner Josephine Butler to various mutual colleagues, that a picture emerges of a deep admiration on Elizabeth’s side for the man who was her ‘darling’ and deeply beloved.[[39]](#footnote-39) She also wrote a somewhat laudatory obituary after Ben’s death to attempt to claim for him a place as a feminist ‘pioneer’ – an innovator and visionary interpreter of the most advanced social theory.[[40]](#footnote-40) It is clear also from both private and published sources that by the time of the couple’s wedding Elmy’s alliance with both secularism and feminism were already well established. And in common with many women feminists who endured deep personal struggles against family and faith as they trod the ‘rebellious’ road to emancipation, his path had likewise been strewn with the boulders of conflict and doubt.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Of Suffolk lineage, Elmy was born in the parish of Wardleworth, Rochdale on 15 March 1838, the son of excise officer Benjamin Elmy and his wife Jane (née Ellis). As a young man he received his education in London but returned north to teach, an occupation for which, as one obituary suggests, he was admirably suited.[[42]](#footnote-42) However, on account of the growing scepticism that made teaching the required religious elements of the curriculum impossible, he abandoned his profession during the mid-1860s and entered the Lancashire textile trade as a factory manager in the town of Mobberley. Here he challenged cultural norms by taking care to pay the wages of married women employees ‘to themselves’ instead of passing them directly to their husbands (as was then accepted by custom and in law) to be gambled or drunk away.[[43]](#footnote-43) In 1869 Elmy relocated to the neighbouring county of Cheshire, taking the tenancy of a comfortable residence, The Low, in the hamlet of Buglawton.[[44]](#footnote-44) The move occurred contemporaneously with his purchase of the first of a three-mill empire of silk-crepe manufacturing sites in the nearby town of Congleton - though how he acquired the initial investment capital remains a mystery.[[45]](#footnote-45) Historically, Congleton had long been a centre of secularist adherence and, introduced via the town’s active philanthropic networks, Elmy met thirty-six year old Wolstenholme, then the proprietor and Headmistress of Moody Hall School for girls and a fellow questioner of religious faith.[[46]](#footnote-46) Mutually attracted, the couple’s initial joint venture was the establishment of a Ladies’ Education Society in the town – the first of many local reformist endeavours.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Wolstenholme’s private studies (undertaken as a teenage governess in Bedfordshire after 1852 and as Headmistress of her own boarding school in Worsley, Manchester from 1854) had led her to a position of increasing uncertainly regarding the power of religion to influence the humanitarian condition. She had been brought up in the tenets of the Independent Methodist faith and her family’s wider connections had been to Quakerism, which had instilled within her consciousness a pacifist mindset which never left her.[[48]](#footnote-48) Wolstenholme was still on her journey to full secularist adherence in 1869 but after meeting Ben, who had renounced the Anglo-Catholicism of his youth, the couple gained notoriety as exemplars of a free-thinking feminist tradition that had its roots in an earlier time. Secularists, as Schwartz has argued, claimed that ‘political, cultural and moral life should be separated entirely from religion.’[[49]](#footnote-49) And Elmy, whose political stance ripened into that of an ‘advanced socialist’, had been influenced by the ideals of Robert Owen and Charles Fourier to find Christianity incompatible with a utopian-socialist world view which prized the acknowledgement of a free and equal humanity.[[50]](#footnote-50)

The Wolstenholme Elmys (Ben linked his name with his wife’s for a time after their marriage in a gesture of defiance against cultural norms) never sought to hide their secularism. Their passionate commitment to it had, indeed, combined with their feminism to sanction, in their minds at least, the adoption of sporadic pre-nuptial co-habitation after Wolstenholme relinquished her school to take up a paid post at the Vigilance Association for the Defence of Personal Rights in January 1873.[[51]](#footnote-51) Their decision to live openly and to flout contemporary domestic conventions in favour of ‘free-love’ caused outrage, particularly as concern over the influences of modernity upon the sexual morality of the bourgeoisie induced a more conservative mindset among their circle.[[52]](#footnote-52) While some feminist friends, including devout Christian Josephine Butler, tried to be charitable, many more saw such sexual radicalism as doing harm to the women’s cause. Critics clearly did not appreciate that the Elmys ‘free union’ was a bold statement against the legal constraints placed upon the married woman’s sexual, as well as socio-civil freedoms – exactly the essence of the emancipation movement. This shows precisely the paradoxes and complexities that had to be negotiated by campaigners anxious to find harmony and unity of purpose. Elmy insisted that the patriarchal system had been under-pinned by the twinning of law with the irrational ‘“fear[s]” [inherent in] Christian dogma…in the pretended interests of morality.’ Lethargy, he wrote, together with servility, ignorance and mental agony were the miserable heritage for women, and a ‘serfdom in body and mind’ that would, in its turn, pollute the raising of the young by extending the atmosphere of punishment and eternal damnation to untaught minds. Religion, Elmy argued, was a ‘strange perversity’ and only the ‘inmost soul of science [could] assign finally the progress…of man’ and a reproductive order based on knowledge, justice and equality.[[53]](#footnote-53)

 Sex, as Michel Foucault has persuasively argued, became associated with what he termed as the ‘bio-power’ of post-Enlightenment modernity, in which ‘birth...health...reproduction and the family’ all became ‘objects of rule in new ways’.[[54]](#footnote-54) For Elmy, whose outspoken defence of married women’s claim to seek, and to utilise, legal recognition of their power to determine their own capacity for reproduction (and thus secure emancipation from the ‘sex slavery’ by which, as wives, they were all degraded,) challenging bio-power meant engaging with the socio-scientific discourses of sexology and eugenics in order to confront the interventionalist policies of Victorian governments who sought to control the spread of disease and ‘deviancy’. Elmy’s concern, however, was not (as was common in eugenic thought) to apply such intervention to promote the desire for the increasing fruitfulness and health of the middle-classes – those considered as the best of ‘fit’ and worthy parents. On the contrary; his vision was not for the world’s elites to triumph as the ‘fittest’ but for *all*, each and every individual of whatever merit, to become perfected and masters of their own destiny. This laudable vision, however, was not universally admired, and the way Elmy’s character and ambitions were perceived by contemporaries highlights a perplexing interpretation of the man described by his wife as a seer and visionary.

**A Problematic Character in Life and History**

As we have seen, the contemporary reaction from colleagues, (including that of Irish feminist Isabella Tod who contended Elizabeth had been suffering from mental incapacity when she consented to Ben’s suggestion of pre-marital cohabitation,) suggests at best a marginal sympathy for the Wolstenholme Elmys’ secularism.[[55]](#footnote-55) And the damage to their reputations suffered by the couple clearly supports Ginger Frost’s view that ‘the sexual limits for feminists’ in the mid-nineteenth century ‘could not have been clearer’.[[56]](#footnote-56) It is argued therefore too that, as a consequence, this censorious view has permeated the historiographical assessments of Ben Elmy’s place as an historical actor. Given his strident feminist credentials, and long record of helpful intervention in the single-issue feminist campaigns of the mid-nineteenth century, it might be assumed that Elmy’s convictions would have endeared him to his colleagues. Appraisals of his character are, however, singularly mixed - something which requires explanation before his most controversial ideas as a feminist anti-eugenicist are explored. While few memoirs remain, the influential 1931 autobiography of the socialist and militant suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst painted a blatantly hostile portrait. Having known Elmy since childhood, she asserted that this ‘stout, sallow man, [was] intensely disliked’ by many of his acquaintance, ‘his reputation…as black as though he had been the Devil himself.’[[57]](#footnote-57) Her mother Emmeline (founder of the Women’s Social and Political Union) also took a dislike to him, especially after one heated political meeting in 1892 when he had (allegedly) proclaimed her ticket to the gathering a ‘forgery’ and refused her admission to the speaker’s platform.[[58]](#footnote-58) The assessment of Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy’s closest confidant, Harriet McIlquham was kinder, though not wholly complimentary. In her opinion Elizabeth endured a life of ‘mixed happiness and sorrow’ with her husband, his personality being somewhat unstable and reminiscent of that of the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge.[[59]](#footnote-59) It was Sylvia Pankhurst, though, who cast the most significant slur on Ben’s character when she suggested he was ‘violently cruel and unfaithful’ to his wife.[[60]](#footnote-60) There is no evidence to either prove or refute these damming claims, so the reader must be urged to retain an open mind - with the proviso that early-twentieth century scholarship appears almost entirely critical of the couple’s morals in such a way as to marginalise (or exclude) them from women’s emancipation histories.[[61]](#footnote-61) It is also suggested that increasing historical awareness of the work of Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy has, perhaps, focused attention too specifically on the circumstances surrounding the couple’s unconventional marriage - the lure of sexual scandal taking precedence over deep interpretations of their writing. This risqué focus is, mercifully, changing, and mounting curiosity about their ideals and activities indicates that Ben Elmy’s texts are now deemed ripe for in-depth scholarly consideration.[[62]](#footnote-62) As an obvious consequence of this growing interest *Woman Free* was re-issued by Nabu during 2010.[[63]](#footnote-63)

Bearing these points in mind, and acknowledging that censorious texts were either consciously or unconsciously designed by early-twentieth century authors to invoke an unfavourable impression, (Elmy, for example, had quarrelled bitterly with Sylvia Pankhurst’s adored late father, Richard,) it becomes clear on further exploration that Ben had his champions.[[64]](#footnote-64) One such was Agnes Henry, a West-country activist and long-term friend of key members of the Manchester network of northern radical thinkers (centred on the kinship networks of Radical-Liberal MP John Bright) to which the Wolstenholme Elmys belonged. Obviously smitten with Ben, Henry commented after one encounter in the spring of 1875 (at precisely the moment that others were voicing their censure) that she had returned ‘home feeling that life was richer and more worth having, for meeting with such a…noble minded…man.’[[65]](#footnote-65) The paradoxical nature of such comments is striking, but it was not only amongst women feminists that his ideals and lifestyle featured as a topic of comment. Men too expressed diametrically opposed views. Elmy’s work as a campaigner on behalf the Ladies National Association (LNA) for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts (CDA) from 1870-4, for example, was criticised by one contemporary, I. Whitwell Wilson, on the grounds that his secular and republican sympathies diminished his capacity to act in women’s best interests.[[66]](#footnote-66) Such traits in campaigners should not be encouraged, Wilson commented, for they represented part of a more general trend for ‘lawlessness and disrespect for recognised authority…not in accordance with God’s word’. Criticising Elmy’s increasingly prominent role within the LNA, Wilson concluded his doom-laden invective with the observation that if movements for social reform were placed in hands other than those of ‘religious people…Armageddon’ would surely result.[[67]](#footnote-67) Other commentators saw things more positively, and a fellow LNA campaigner reported that the organisation’s president, Josephine Butler, was keen to give Elmy a more prominent role in the organisation (as editor of its publication, *The Shield*) on the grounds that she ‘could trust’ his judgement.[[68]](#footnote-68) Butler’s wish was not granted, but her assessment adds to the contrasting evaluations of Elmy’s character, even within the boundaries of just one of the many organisations to which he was allied.

Thus, to shape an accurate reading of the personality which influenced Elmy’s literature is, as these commentaries suggest, problematic. However his involvement with the CDA campaign places him, from the 1860s, as having possessed a profound, and documented, interest in the ways in which issues of a sexual nature were influenced by contemporary cultural, legal and political practice.[[69]](#footnote-69) Elmy’s working life too had shaped the man for, as we have seen, his intimate knowledge of the textile trade had given him a deep insight into the economic hardships and cultural mores which had shackled women workers. ‘Man [had] fettered’ woman’s development ‘with more than [a] natural weight’, he later asserted in *Woman Free*, whether that woman was of ‘low or high estate’. His solution was that her ‘narrowed brain and…restricted range’, long seen as a given by the customs of ‘natural’ and man-made law, should be nurtured to new life in the ‘happy epoch’ of the *fin-de-siècle.*[[70]](#footnote-70) He understood modernity, then, as an era of opportunity as much as a period shot through with gloomy portents of disease and decay. The signpost to such prosperity was women’s freedom and his literary ambition was to help foster the climate in which women could ponder, reflect, and (to cite Lucy Delap’s phraseology) ‘introspective[ly]’ acknowledge a feminist mindset.[[71]](#footnote-71)Such views were echoed by Amy Hurlston, the daughter of a Coventry watchmaker and a WEU colleague. Hurlston had seen, during personally conducted research into the lives of women textile workers in the Midlands in 1893, that a ‘restless and convulsive energy’ was present among them, and a desire to be emancipated from the ‘tyranny of custom’ which blighted their lives. In common with Elmy, Hurlston understood feminism to be a bright hope held out before the ‘feeble and crushed’ women she met, and viewed it as a means whereby all women could, in the near future, be brought to understand themselves, their health and their significance as mothers to the progress of society.[[72]](#footnote-72)

**Elmy’s vision for the future**

Tantalising, therefore, as extant remnants of correspondence and memoir are in providing a conflicting glance into Elmy’s personality, it is nonetheless true that his feminism, including his repudiation of eugenic ideology, must in greater part be understood via his ‘several booklets’ and extensive journalism.[[73]](#footnote-73) Much of his prose was published in what has been categorised as ‘[t]he journals that did’, a periodical genre (including *Shafts*, the *Westminster Review* and the *Malthusian*) actively engaged in creating a ‘community writing about sex and its major publications.’[[74]](#footnote-74) As part of that community Elmy was fearless in advocating man’s obligation to secure woman’s freedom, and in an article for the *Westminster Review* he stated that man’s *duty* was to recognise both the ‘genius and autonomy of woman’, for only by so doing would both sexes be ‘elevated’.[[75]](#footnote-75)His five books, published under the *nom-de-plume* Ellis Ethelmer, are short discourses - with the notable exception of the prodigiously annotated *Woman Free*.[[76]](#footnote-76) Elmy bore solely the financial burden of their publication and dissemination, and this determination to ensure his opinion was heard led him to apply to their production increasing proportions of his reduced capital following his retirement from business in 1888. Distributed from his home, the books were well received amongst fellow radicals. For example, congratulatory messages from (amongst others) sexologist Havelock Ellis, socialist author Edward Carpenter, evolutionist Grant Allen and Frances Willard, president of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union in America, followed the publication of his two most famous works. These, *The Human Flower* (1894) and *Baby Buds* (1895) were ground-breaking studies on sex education for children from four years of age (in the latter case) to adolescence. Their message was relayed, in the words of Havelock Ellis, in a ‘simple and delicate manner’, Elmy having applied botanical analogies to illustrate key points in the reproductive cycle.[[77]](#footnote-77) Elmy’s desire, though, that increasing, honest and open education between parents and children in sexual matters would result in greater constancy in love, and place into women’s hands the means to control pregnancy by the psychic elevation of the male sex drive, also brought him into conflict with his peers – even those secularists whose broad sympathies he shared. Somewhat ironically, given Elmy’s background, the interpretation of ‘free-love’ was one cause of disagreement. Elmy, for instance, believed that women, given free choice, would nurture only those children their economic circumstances could support, thus ultimately achieving universal ‘racial’ vigour. Grant Allen, however, in *The British Barbarians* (1895) claimed the ‘divine instinct of love’, but only that freely practised among the genetically fit, would provide a solution to the falling birthrate.[[78]](#footnote-78) Allen’s more conservative stance focuses on a much narrower interpretation of eugenic fitness than Elmy’s and, while both men sought ways to secure a better, ‘fuller’ world, their interpretation of how sexuality and motherhood could help attain that fullness was decidedly at odds – principally, it is suggested, because of the shifts in interpretation demanded by a consideration of social class.

**The WEU and its contextual significance**

As we have seen, the *Modern Marseillaise* set out Elmy’s vision for a ‘new epoch of humanity’, a time when a ‘crowning race… of noble blood’ would be reared in an environment of freedom and justice.[[79]](#footnote-79) And, while the language applied in *Baby Buds* and the *Human Flower* was delicate and sensitive (as was of course fitting for an adolescent audience), his views of sexual egalitarianism were stridently expressed for adult readers in *Woman Free*, *Life to Woman* and *Phases of Love*. Elmy’s message throughout these key works of the 1890s was, in short, one of encouraging ‘women’s right to individuality’ in order to effect the ‘worthy replenishing of the race’; and though he was clearly an evolutionist he criticised Darwin’s *The Descent of Man* for an implicit ‘masculine sex-bias, not always absent in even the highest of male intellects’.[[80]](#footnote-80) Similar criticism was levelled at Allen’s *British Barbarians*, where the author was labelled as a ‘*sexual marksman* [who] could never again be counted as a friend to the woman cause’ after the book’s publication.[[81]](#footnote-81) Elmy can, therefore, be viewed as atypical of ‘free-love’ eugenicists, for many, like Allen, were opposed to feminism on account of their perception that its aim was to ‘enslave man to puritan ideals’ of chastity instead of celebrating the fecundity of the intellectually and physically ‘fit’. Secular pro-natalists firmly believed that while ‘free-love’ offered women a free choice of partner it should not (as the most ardent feminists desired) secure them freedom from pregnancy – merely offering them instead the choice of father for their offspring.[[82]](#footnote-82) This was far too narrow a discourse to secure Elmy’s support.

Pro-natalism was, however, also espoused by others in Elmy’s circle, including George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells.[[83]](#footnote-83) It also had its fair share of women adherents, including the novelist Sarah Grand, who in the novel *The Beth Book* (1897) wrote that ‘pains [should be] taken to prevent the appearance of any more of [society’s] “unfit”’ – the poor, the diseased and the mentally defective.[[84]](#footnote-84) The powers of pro-natalism were effectively undermined by the anti-eugenicists, however, whose radical-feminist ideals posed a forthright challenge to the call their opponents made for a public sphere built on the virtues of middle-class, ‘civic motherhood’ with an emphasis on state control. Rather than health ‘engineered’ by decree the ‘antis’ privileged individualism and, equally importantly, worked personally to raise awareness of a feminist ‘consciousness’ in women of all walks of life through the networks by which they were linked.[[85]](#footnote-85) One of the most under-researched of these networks has been that of the Women’s Emancipation Union, founded by Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy (after a widely reported marital scandal) in the autumn of 1891.[[86]](#footnote-86) Ben Elmy’s sympathies, unsurprisingly, ensured his wholehearted support for the WEU’s manifesto, which demanded for women ‘equality of right and duty with men in *all* matters affecting the service of the community and the State.’[[87]](#footnote-87) This was the broadest programme of any nineteenth century women’s emancipation association and made those who supported it into a pioneer feminist forum rather than, as Wolstenholme Elmy potently remarked, a ‘mere suffrage society’.[[88]](#footnote-88)

Such was the broadly-based construction of the WEU’s four-point manifesto and the confident radicalism expressed by the speakers at its inaugural conference in 1892 that a reporter from the *Glasgow Herald* wrote that attendance there had been akin to ‘passing from a fog into a cold, clear biting atmosphere’ of reform.[[89]](#footnote-89) Founded some three years after a significant schism in the suffrage movement had left it disunited and lacklustre, the WEU’s ‘radical-independent’ members were anxious to capitalise on the first tentative moves to link propertied women’s citizenship ambitions to the grievances of those of the labouring classes, which were centred not only on the absence of the vote but on issues regarding employment and economic inequalities.[[90]](#footnote-90) The WEU understood that the matter that united women as a whole sex was that of motherhood and sexuality and upon this it based its claim for reform. Though the journalist from the *Glasgow Herald* had castigated less animated feminists for treating the women’s suffrage campaign as a ‘sentimental hobby’, he (and here I assume a male author) nonetheless urged that the WEU not be too ambitious, as the essential doctrine of ‘Nature’ would ensure women travelled ‘[t]hus far and no farther’ in their quest for freedom.[[91]](#footnote-91) It was precisely to confront such assumptions, *i.e.* that the human males’ physical strength would triumph over the ‘weaker’ female quest for equality, that Ben Elmy’s texts were written. *Phases of Love* (referred to in Wolstenholme Elmy’s correspondence by its working title, *The Evolution of Love*) contended that man’s ‘petty powers’ and ‘one-sexed thought’ had rendered women weak and ‘physically servile’, and that his ‘endarkened selfishness [and] continued restraint’ of her person had conspired to trap both sexes in a ‘baser course’ of living. The ‘unreasoned passions’ of the sexual act were not love, as Elmy defined them. In his eyes a true union could only be obtained by ‘the accession of reason and justice’ by every couple - justice in this context not only signifying a conscious, moral acceptance of egalitarianism but also a commitment to ensuring that women be legally designated as man’s human equal.[[92]](#footnote-92) True recognition, both by law and by society, of such ‘psychical’ unions would grant women a worthy independence and, in turn, freedom from ‘the compulsory liability to motherhood’ which, hitherto, had dominated their lives.[[93]](#footnote-93) Elmy’s Foucauldian discourse of ‘bio-power’, then, was placed squarely within the context of its social construction. This was something which had important consequences when the WEU initiated a rephrasing of the demand for women’s enfranchisement, not on the traditional premise of the service they could offer to the state, but on the controversial issue of their consent to maternity.

Those gathered into the 5000-strong international network of WEU activists and correspondents comprised many whose roots lay deep in the soil of the political left – individualists, radical-Liberals, socialists and trade unionists being its principal figures.[[94]](#footnote-94) Broadly, they subscribed to what Sandra Stanley Holton has defined as ‘the distinctive nature of the Radical suffragist conception of the citizenship of women’, namely a holistic approach to their subjection which placed an equal stress on civil and political disabilities.[[95]](#footnote-95) While such an eclectic coalition arguably had little realistic chance of pressurising the legislature to secure the reforms it demanded, Wolstenholme Elmy had been encouraged to form the group after the *Manchester Guardian* published her résumé of the effects of the legal judgement in the case of Regina *v.* Jackson the preceding spring.[[96]](#footnote-96) Edmund Jackson had sought restitution of conjugal rights after abducting and imprisoning his wife Emily against her will, but after the Court of Appeal released her under a writ of *habeas corpus* the public outcry over this significant challenge to the doctrine of coverture escalated. It also put the ‘woman question’ firmly in the forefront of public discourse once again, only months after the tumultuous response in the press to Mona Caird’s 1888 *Westminster Review* article ‘Marriage’ prompted 27,000 letters to the *Daily Telegraph*.[[97]](#footnote-97) Caird had supported a view that ‘the nature of women is the result of their circumstances’ and had claimed that many modern marriages were a restrictive combination of ‘false sentiment and shallow shrewdness’ cemented on the premise of ‘legalised prostitution.’[[98]](#footnote-98) Caird’s tone here expresses elements of the views she shared with Ben Elmy and she immediately accepted Wolstenholme Elmy’s offer of a place on the WEU’s twenty-strong Executive Council, alongside other committed radicals including Lady Florence Dixie, Agnes Pochin and Harriet McIlquham.[[99]](#footnote-99) It was a happy collaboration and as a fellow Neo-Malthusian Caird was a strong contributor to the demographic debate, offering helpful criticism to Ben while the structure of *Phases of Love* took shape. In company with many others amongst the WEU’s membership, both reformers shared the view that in the struggle for independence for women maternity was the central feminist battleground. Elmy believed only openness in discussion and in sex education could secure humanity’s health and progress, and evidence such as this surely contradicts the assessment of Melanie Phillips that a puritanical outlook characterised radical feminist writing. And although it could be argued that Elmy’s ultimate goal was for couples to practice ‘psychic’ rather than ‘physical’ intercourse, his work is as much concerned with the mechanics of sex as it is with esotericism.[[100]](#footnote-100)

 The most obvious physical issue with which Elmy (or, more precisely, Ethelmer) deals is menstruation. This monthly purging is categorised in *Life to Woman* as a ‘physical infirmity’, and named as being rooted not in the physiological, as a ‘normal function’, but instead as a pathological, ‘abnormal’ symptom of a gendered oppression which had, over centuries,restricted and stunted women’s growth and denied them (and their children) the opportunity to thrive.[[101]](#footnote-101) Quoting from Mary Wollstonecraft’s posthumous work *The Wrongs of Woman* (1800), Elmy asserted that by encouraging male ‘libertinism’ society had ‘made monsters’ of men. Not only had they bound women in thrall by the application of gendered ‘norms’ of ‘political and social subordination and deprivation’, they had added to the denigration by the ‘inconsiderate, persistent…wrong and excessive’ use of women’s bodies for sexual gratification.[[102]](#footnote-102) Menstruation was, therefore, categorised as a disease not of women but of society, and although Ethelmer’s interpretation of physiological science was clearly erroneous, he had entered the realm of scientific debate in order to theorise on the nature of individuality, progress and racial health. While it is possible to criticise his naïve approach to biological issues, it is much harder to condemn his reasons for engagement and commentary upon them in the name of progress. Moreover, as we have seen, Elmy viewed the *fin-de-siècle* as an era of promise, and a time when men would ‘decline to participate and condone the errors of [their] fathers’. Some males, he believed, had realised the damage done to the ‘mothers of the race’ by past injudiciousness and now understood that, for the good of all, women should be ‘free and strong, in body and soul’ to take their place as equal partners in humanity’s rise.[[103]](#footnote-103) However, and mourning the ‘survival of barbarism’ he perceived in some men, he put his real faith in ‘the [radical feminist] current which [was] increasingly carrying woman forward’ and which he understood to have had a significant impact in ‘sway[ing]…male objectors’ to her cause.[[104]](#footnote-104)

 The activists of the WEU played a significant part in the publicity for and distribution of Ethelmer’s books. The organisation held over 150 public meetings on its own account between 1892-6, and, as many members had multiple organisational affiliations, publicity material was spread the length and breadth of Britain.[[105]](#footnote-105) In addition, and by means of the Elmys extensive correspondence network, copies of books and articles were sent to Australia, New Zealand, the United States of America, South Africa and to nations throughout Europe. Even the British Royal Family was drawn into the circle, and Ben received a kind acknowledgement from Queen Alexandra upon receipt of a translation of *Baby Buds* into her native Danish in 1903*.*[[106]](#footnote-106) Although, obviously, suffragist groups campaigning for the parliamentary franchise were an important outlet for disseminating publicity Ben allied himself even more purposefully with the suffrage cause by founding the first specifically male campaign group, the Male Electors’ League (MEL) in early 1897. Working with him on the society’s Executive was Charles W. Bream Pearce, a Glaswegian wine importer, whose wife Isabella was an important Scottish socialist and a regular contributor to the Independent Labour Party’s (ILP) journal, the *Labour Leader.[[107]](#footnote-107)* This alliance was significant, for following the failure of a women’s suffrage bill in parliament in 1892 a new approach to suffrage campaigning had been advocated in order to inject dynamism into a sluggish movement – that of cross-class collaboration. It achieved much, and, as has been argued elsewhere, the resulting partnerships across class divides facilitated not only a mass protest force of potentially hundreds of thousands of newly politicised women, but also offered new opportunities for the education of labouring women into the causes of their subjection.[[108]](#footnote-108) The WEU’s leadership (at both national and regional level) were at the forefront of such initiatives and took an active part in bringing the message of freedom for women to Co-operative halls, Trades Union groups and, in alliance with socialist speakers including Isabella Ford (head of the Leeds Tailoresses’ Union) and Isabella Bream Pearce, to crowds gathered outside factory gates.[[109]](#footnote-109) Operating under a resolutely non-party political ethos, the organisation’s members held firmly to their shared abhorrence of what Elmy’s *Life to Woman* had classified as monstrous ‘libertinism’ and instead promoted equal moral responsibility. Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, for instance, categorised ‘the *true* meaning of women’s suffrage’ as being the fight to demolish the double standard of sexual morality.[[110]](#footnote-110) And Ben Elmy,in *Phases of Love*, offered a solution which would redeem the effects of disease and despair that afflicted not only the women of the working-class who earned their living in the shadow of ‘starvation and the…workhouse’, but also the middle-class ‘sisters’ who worked in direct contact with them to awaken their feminist consciousness.[[111]](#footnote-111)

**A Matter of ‘Consent’**

Judith Walkowitz’s classic study *Prostitution and Victorian Society* criticised Christabel Pankhurst’s eloquently phrased solution (‘Votes for Women and Chastity for Men’) to the problems caused by venereal disease on the grounds that it contained ‘no positive assertion of female sexuality’ and was ‘couched within the terms of a “separate sphere” ideology’. Pankhurst’s *Great Scourge* (1913), Walkowitz suggests, had been written in a style which portrayed women as needing ‘protection [from] carnal men’ and in a manner which ignored the ‘economic basis’ of their subjection – something which led directly and far too often to their participation in prostitution.[[112]](#footnote-112) More recent studies have radically revised this position – Linda Martz, for example, pointing out that Pankhurst’s criticism of women making marital ‘bargains’ for their livelihood was, in fact, the ‘crux’ of militant suffragism – and have accurately linked Miss Pankhurst’s assertions to the influences of radicals including the Elmys, with whom she was well acquainted.[[113]](#footnote-113) Ben Elmy too asserted the direct link between economic subjection and promiscuity, and urged the adoption of psychic love precisely because he had first-hand and bitter knowledge of the terrors that could befall working women should fluctuating demands for their labour propel them onto the streets. *The Human Flower* illustrated this for adolescent readers by highlighting succinctly how women were ‘too frequently driven by sheer poverty into procuring a wretched subsistence by submitting’ to vice.[[114]](#footnote-114) In 1894 Elmy, now in retirement, had also acted as foreman of the Congleton Jury at an inquest into the death of an unemployed mill-worker, Emma Carter – the verdict brought in by the Coroner being ‘death by starvation’.[[115]](#footnote-115) Carter had lived in a crowded house with numerous relations, all but one unemployed, and had slipped from the world poignantly, almost without notice, as her family struggled with myriad problems. By choosing virtue over vice Carter had suffered a sorry fate, and the pitiful account of her death highlights clearly the burdens carried by all working wives (whose responsibilities also, of course, included the rearing and feeding of the wretched children the laws of coverture required they bear without limit).[[116]](#footnote-116) Making these pities of women known are a central theme in the form Elmy’s writing took and his anti-eugenic stance was a direct result of wanting to elevate all classes to physical and moral health. His remedy for suffering was to ‘strengthen and instruct the coming womanhood…through [the] perfect freedom of full education - personal, social and political.’[[117]](#footnote-117) Classified by his wife as a ‘natural’ teacher, Elmy saw his works as manuals for highlighting how life *should* be lived.[[118]](#footnote-118)

Such opinions made Elmy an obvious ally of the educational, collegiate spirit promoted by those tapping into the new mood of class cooperation within the women’s movement. The activists of the WEU were in the vanguard of testimonial, personalised reporting of working-class lifestyles – and produced early examples of a genre Theodore Roosevelt would later name as the ‘muckraking’ approach of American Progressives - including the Wolstenholme Elmys’ close associate Charlotte Perkins Stetson Gilman.[[119]](#footnote-119) Such authors shared Mona Caird’s belief that it was far from ‘folly to protect the weak against the strong’; and Elmy’s texts are perfect examples of a literature which proposed that, if freed by law from the burdens of excessive childbearing, the health of every woman (and in consequence that of every child) would blossom.[[120]](#footnote-120) The example of Amy Hurlston’s research given earlier suggests that the practical likelihood of working-class women – should legislation be passed – *actually* levying charges of rape against their husbands was doubtful. This, however, was not the ‘muckrakers’ greatest concern. That the option be made available, on the premise of preventing unwanted births into often squalid and insanitary homes, was the root of the matter. With a legal safeguard against rape in place, and with enlightened educational ideas flowing from woman to woman in a supportive environment, Elmy’s texts expressed the hope that both man’s sexual drive and woman’s sexual exploitation would be tamed by a respect between couples, that was predicated on ‘reason, justice and sympathy’.[[121]](#footnote-121)

Ben Elmy was not, however, naïve enough to think his message of temperance and caution in sexual relations would be adopted, or even understood, by all social groups immediately. On the contrary; for in *Phases of Love* he wrote that the path to psychic enlightenment would be one of ‘long and patient endeavour’. Nonetheless, he remained steadfast in his belief that even the lowest could be perfected. Even in ‘primitive’ cultures he argued, there was ‘within the being an intelligent and heritable faculty, which could modify the primal physical action in accordance with previous experiences of the creature or its progenitors.’ Thus he considered carefully how the intellect could be educated to triumph over the physical and more ‘barbaric’ elements within man.[[122]](#footnote-122) Elmy claimed that as men had tamed, controlled and elevated their behaviour to rise above the beasts in all but the ‘incidence of [the] reproduction of the race,’ it was now time to subject that ‘passion’ too to ‘rational control’. To do any other was an ‘insult to Nature’ herself and the justice she demanded – the legal removal of women’s suffering from the ‘slavish fate’ of childbearing.[[123]](#footnote-123)

This paper has taken pains to highlight Ben Elmy’s feminist ideology over and above that of his wife. However it is a truism to state that they shared an adherence to Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy’s view that ‘enforced maternity’ was a ‘crime…against the mother, the child, the race and humanity’ and should be punished accordingly, under law.[[124]](#footnote-124) Ethelmer wrote that from classical antiquity to the present the ‘restriction of [woman’s] native individuality’ had been fostered by the shackles of childbirth, and had been made at an ‘incalculable loss to humanity’. ‘Self-sovereignty’ he argued, enshrined in laws that would make women equal in ‘human and civic personality,’ would grant them the power to sanction ‘parentage – and its physical preliminaries – [only] when accompanied by mutual power and desire and intent for the good of the offspring’. The results of such action would be that ‘humankind – thanks to conjugal self-restraint in unfitting conditions, and to birth under salutary parental qualifications alone – [would] become ever more virtuous and healthy and beautiful in body, even higher and more vigorous of soul.’[[125]](#footnote-125) *Phases of Love*, then, offered a blissful vision of ‘psychic love’, but it was predicated, as was *The Human Flower*, on an assumption that the ‘sexual act…in the cultured couple…is controlled by *reason*’ and intellect.[[126]](#footnote-126) This, from a superficial reading, appears to suggest that the labouring classes could not aspire to such fine understanding. However, as has been consistently maintained, Elmy’s belief in the ‘advancing ethics of human relation[s]’ opens up the delights he envisages to all, not merely those deemed ‘fit’ in eugenic circles.[[127]](#footnote-127) His humanitarianism denied none the gift of ascending to a higher consciousness. Neither he, nor his fellow authors in the WEU, deprecated the effects of ‘awakening’ working class women to feminism: for as Isabella Bream Pearce asserted such women were no longer content to ‘sell [their] birthright…for a “mess of pottage”,’ either in their labouring or their intimate lives.[[128]](#footnote-128) Placed in the context of the WEU’s re-classification of the suffrage demand upon the premise of women’s consent to maternity this was a crucial consideration.

The shift in ideology that transformed some women’s suffrage campaigners from constitutional ‘suffragists’ into militant ‘suffragettes’ has been long debated by scholars. Only recently however, have these links to the theories of citizenship and individuality been envisaged as having taken place in the Elmy household in the 1890s.[[129]](#footnote-129) The essence of the membership of the WEU was that, despite very diverse party-political allegiances, they sought to co-operate on ‘higher issues’ of morality and human progress. This lack of firm alliances contributed to a dilution of the power the group could assert politically and, it can be argued, to the group’s historiographical marginalisation. What is undeniable though is that Ben Elmy, as one of the WEU’s principal authors, engaged with theories of citizenship and democracy at a time when both were undergoing fundamental revision.[[130]](#footnote-130) Contextually significant also is the fact that the Liberal Party was in a state of flux, and the unity which had previously made it such a formidable force in social reform had been rent asunder by the defeat of the Irish Home Rule Bill in 1885. Gladstone’s administration was finally brought down in July 1886, and many within an electorate now swollen to five-and-a-half million men (60% of the total male population) after the extension of the householder franchise under the terms of the Third Reform Act, 1884 were seeking new options. Some first-time voters, for instance, did not consider the established two-party system offered what they sought, and found alliances instead with new groupings including, post-1893, Keir Hardie’s Independent Labour Party. Amongst the un-enfranchised, including the radical-independent women of the WEU, impatience with a stagnating situation grew, and they began to consider the long-practised methods of the ‘politics of disruption’ (heckling at political gatherings and protest rallies) as a lever to secure their objectives.[[131]](#footnote-131) The WEU’s subscribers were unique, however, in suffrage circles, for by refashioning the discourse surrounding female bodily autonomy in order to link the issue of ‘consent’ to maternity to ‘consent’ in matters of government they created a rhetoric of resistance to sexual subjection which was placed in direct correlation to women’s continuing consent to remain passive under the man-made laws by which they were governed. The seeds of Edwardian suffragette militancy, as principally (though not exclusively) expressed by the cross-class, woman-only membership of the Women’s Social and Political Union, were sown in this discourse, and sexuality was its combat zone.[[132]](#footnote-132)

**Ben Elmy as WEU militant**

Margaret Sibthorpe, editor of the feminist periodical *Shafts* considered Ellis Ethelmer’s *Woman Free* ‘a book which every woman, backward or advanced, should read.’[[133]](#footnote-133) The volume, the anonymous writer declared, was ‘eminently suitable to the present time’ and the ‘physical questions [addressed were] met and answered in a spirit of utmost purity and truthfulness.’ *Woman Free*, in short, was considered to be a rallying call, and something which would help women ‘rise to a new…vigour’ in the quest for their emancipation.[[134]](#footnote-134) Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, principal among the WEU’s theorists, had criticised the ‘accepted’ link between physical strength and citizenship, and had argued that women ‘risk[ed] their lives’ daily in childbirth in circumstances equally (if not more) perilous to health than men’s military service.[[135]](#footnote-135) Similarly, in the endnotes to *Woman Free*, Ethelmer took to task an article from the *Times* which declared that ‘men can demand a share of political power…because they possess *de facto* a share of the physical force upon which all political arrangements ultimately repose.’ He systematically demolished this argument as one based on the unreasoned ‘fear’ of the author, and claimed instead that if trained together in the ‘mutual sports of sinew and of brain’ (and here he allies himself closely to the benefits of fresh air and exercise in the development of healthy bodies) nothing should prevent an ‘equal power of rule’ or, indeed, the presence of a woman’s ‘voice in council[s]’ of state.[[136]](#footnote-136) Elmy believed the moment for change had come, and while it must not be forgotten that, even if the parliamentary vote were granted to women, it would initially be to a select, property-owning few, *men* had gained their citizens’ rights in stages and as a response either to arguments of reason or of ‘the stone’.[[137]](#footnote-137) In the *fin-de-siècle*, as women began to engage in open-air discussions of their plight, and to take their arguments onto the streets, Elmy, by asserting that for humanity’s sake motherhood should form the principal qualification of citizenship, helped overturn the traditional view of the quiet, pious nurturing by mothers of their children as supplying the best moral imperative for change. In its place came an active, dynamic vision of societal progress, in which there was room for every woman’s aspirations for the future. The bedrock on which it was formed was the equal contribution to childhood development of both parents who were both citizens of their country, and it was an ideal which excluded no-one on grounds of racial ‘fitness’ or of class.

For women to understand their own ‘individuality and character’ *Phases of Love* declared, was to also ‘ennoble…either sex of her progeny’ on an upward path to worthiness. And for man’s ‘sisterly comrade[s]’ the acquisition of an equal ‘civic personality’, while obviously significant, was only a ‘stepping-stone’ to the ultimate goal – the understanding of the ‘higher voice’ of her own merit.[[138]](#footnote-138) Elmy’s literary mission was, therefore, to help each woman to hear ‘*in her own manner*’ the freedom-voice of feminism. If the road to that freedom lay in either electing not to bear children, or in the exercise of acts of militancy in the quest for political representation, let each woman, informed by ‘the fruits’ of her learning consent to her own destiny.[[139]](#footnote-139) The potency of Elmy’s construction of anti-eugenic feminism lay, therefore, in its potential for socio-sexual, economic and political egalitarianism. And the controversial nature of this message, the ideal that lay within the heart of his literature for the young, *The Human Flower* and *Baby Buds*, was the transformation of the traditional ordering of society. This overt linking between the narratives of citizenship and sexuality applied so definitely in educational works for children of both sexes cannot be overstated – for as Liggins points out, ‘it was deemed appropriate only for men to talk and read about marital sexuality.’[[140]](#footnote-140) Little wonder, then, that Bland considered Ethelmer’s works culturally ‘revolutionary’. Susan Kingsley Kent suggests that these two slim volumes contributed much to the ‘ultimate goal’ of radical feminists – a ‘profound transformation in the sexual culture of Britain’; and yet, while this is true, Elmy’s readership also incorporated those women who in his words ‘knew as little as the veriest savage the operation of their own bodies’ and those who would choose to forsake motherhood itself.[[141]](#footnote-141) Designed to serve an educational purpose not only for the child listener, but also for the reading mother whose own sexual ignorance could be redeemed in the act of instructing her child, the works are unique examples of what, in the next century, would become a global literary genre – the adolescent sex manual.

**Conclusion**

As *Baby Buds* draws to its conclusion Ellis Ethelmer writes of the true value to society of the ‘educated human being’; for the fruit of education would be to shape an understanding in children’s minds of ‘the solemn duty and privilege of continuing the life of the nation, and adding to its well-being and greatness by becoming the parents of healthy children.’[[142]](#footnote-142) He considered there to be few more important gifts bestowed on any infant than supplying the means to its own progress and enlightenment. Elmy’s vision for humanity’s success is, however, illustrated most fully in the closing pages of *Phases of Love.* Placed in the context of the author’s association with the Women’s Emancipation Union and its determination to close the ‘class-divide’ by fostering the development of a ‘women’s army’ which would fight to interest itself ‘in any and all questions,’ it is indeed a vision that places women’s sexuality at the heart of the battle for ‘the race’.[[143]](#footnote-143) The enlightened couple, drawn together by psychic and physical bonds, would see

deep buried the dead past of conventional and unjust conditions of the status of woman [and] the advance of intellect and love dispel all the false and cruel traditions and usages in this regard. [When] the sexes are trained together in the home and in the school; their companionship and education equal; the avenues and careers of the world [will] open to woman as freely as to man. [When] physiological teaching and the comprehension of parts and powers in either sex leave no place for pruriency or prudery; [there will be] in each the true innocence – the perfect moral cleanliness – which is the sure outcome, not of ignorance, but of full knowledge.[[144]](#footnote-144)

Elmy, then, a man reviled for his ‘devilish’ ideals, for his anti-clericalism and for his personal immorality, believed instead in the beauty of the human condition. He argued that the nation’s depraved morals, mired as they were in an age of ‘decadence and decay’, could, if assisted by revised laws, refashioned customs and enlightened ideals, be redeemed. His vision was not for the world’s elites to triumph as the ‘fittest’ but for all, each and every individual of whatever merit, to become perfected. Given the scope of this utopian dream it seems almost guaranteed that it would fail, but that did not deter the effort made. Elmy’s commitment to free-thought, anti-eugenic feminism, humanitarianism and to combating the effects of bio-power formed the cornerstone of his ideology. He believed in no didactic creed, and his faith was one that urged humanity to seek its own potential and greatness. His extensive labours remained largely unknown beyond his personal networks and to seek to mitigate that exclusion the most notable of the obituaries published after his death in March 1906 was written by his wife. Titled *Pioneers! O Pioneers!* its purpose was to secure public respect for a man for whom ‘the woman question and the social question were but two aspects of the same question, each for ever insoluble without the just solution of the other.’ Wolstenholme Elmy wrote of her husband that the ‘*active co-operation* in thought and deed of earnest womanhood’ would, for him, be a sign that women had become awake to their individuality, would walk unafraid the path to freedom, and ensure, through the achievement of their citizenship, the nation’s greatness.[[145]](#footnote-145) The fact that Christabel Pankhurst (the woman whose deeds and ideals would inspire thousands of her countrywomen to march the streets in processions of feminine solidarity during the Edwardian era,) led the tributes at Elmy’s funeral may suggest that, to some extent, his request was fulfilled.

1. My thanks to the Arts and Humanities Research Council, sponsors of this research 2005-07, and to the Josephine Butler Memorial Trust, sponsors during 2011. Thanks are due to Sue Morgan, David Andress and Brad Beaven for their pertinent criticism of earlier drafts of this article and to the anonymous reviewers of *Gender and History*.

 E. Sylvia Pankhurst, The Suffragette Movement: an intimate account of persons and ideals, (London: Virago, 1977, [first published 1931]); p.31. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Benjamin Elmy, ‘The Modern Marseillaise’, Women’s Herald, 30 April 1892. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For recent studies of feminist literature of the 1890s, see, Anne Humphreys, ‘The Journals that Did: Writing about Sex in the late 1890s’, Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century’, Vol.19, No.3, 2006; pp.1-19. Linda K. Hughes, ‘Daughters of Danus and Daphne: Women Poets and the Marriage Question’, Victorian Literature and Culture, Vol.34, 2006, pp.481-93. Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis (eds.) The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact: Fin-de-Siècle Feminisms, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001). Julie-Marie Strange, ‘I believe It To Be a Case Depending on Menstruation’: Madness and Menstrual Taboo in British Medical Practice, c. 1840-1930’, in Andrew Shail and Gillian Howie (eds.), Menstruation: a Cultural History, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp.102-113. Roy Porter and Lesley Hall, The Facts if Life: The Creation of Sexual Knowledge in Britain, 1650-1950, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Lucy Bland, Banishing the Beast: English Feminism and Sexual Morality, 1885-1914, (London: Penguin, 1995), pp.141-43, here p.142. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ellis Ethelmer [pseudonym of Benjamin Elmy], Woman Free, (Congleton: Women’s Emancipation Union, 1893), Stanza XVII. These diseases included not only physical maladies but also infertility and insanity. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ellis Ethelmer, Life to Woman, (Congleton, 1896), pp.7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ethelmer, Woman Free, Stanza XXI and XXVII. Ethelmer, Life to Woman; p.12. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For a classic study of the secularist movement see Edward Royle, Radicals, Secularists and Republicans**:** Popular Freethought in Britain, 1866-1915, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980). Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891) was Britain’s most notable secularist. In 1860 he co-founded the journal *The National Reformer* and established the National Secular Society in 1866. For his close relationship with Elmy see, Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, *Charles Bradlaugh*, Vol. II (London and Leipzig: T. Fisher Unwin, 1908), pp. 54–5. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Laura Schwartz, Infidel Feminism: Secularism, Religion and Women’s Emancipation, England 1830-1914, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2013), p.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Elmy was an advocate of the doctrine of utopian socialism, first practised by Robert Owen in the early decades of the 1800s. The objective of Owen’s sympathisers had been the institution of a ‘classless society’ and a ‘sexual democracy’, an idea Frederick Engels later criticised as esoteric, seeking as it did ‘to emancipate all humanity at once’, rather than privileging the working-classes. By mid-1845 the communities established to endeavour to live out Owen’s ideal of an equal society had collapsed, but utopian socialism left an enduring mark on later radical politics, and particularly on the ideals and work of George Jacob Holyoake, a personal friend of the Elmy family. Barbara Taylor, Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century, (London: Virago, 1983), p.xiv. For Elmy’s connection to the Holyoake family see, Maureen Wright, ‘The Women’s Emancipation Union and Radical Feminist Politics in Britain’, Gender and History, Vol.22, No.2, 2010, pp. 382-406.Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine (eds.) ‘Introduction’, in The History of Eugenics, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.4. For a discussion of ‘psychic love’ see, Sheila Jeffreys, The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880-1930, (London: Pandora, 1985), Chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See, for example, Kelly Hurley, ‘Hereditary Taint and Cultural Contagion: The Social Etiology of Fin-de-Siècle Degeneration Theory’, Nineteenth-Century Contexts, Vol.14, 1990, pp.193-214. Anna Clark, Desire: A History of European Sexuality, (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), Chapter 9. Ann Taylor Allen, Feminism and Motherhood in Western Europe 1890-1920, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007 [first published 2005]). Michael Mason, The Making of Victorian Sexuality, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For the life of the journalist considered most responsible for the creation of the ‘new’ journalism see, W. Sydney Robinson, Muckraker: The Scandalous Life and Times of W.T. Stead, (London: Robson Press, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Mona Caird, The Daughters of Danus, (London: Bliss, Sands & Co., 1894), quoted in Susan Kingsley Kent, Sex and Suffrage in Britain, 1860-1914, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); p.5. McElroy defines individualist feminists as those who believe that ‘equality refers to equal treatment under laws that protect natural rights. When such laws are applied impartially to both men and women equality has been achieved.’Wendy McElroy, Individualist Feminism of the Nineteenth Century: Collected writings and biographical profiles, (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2001), p.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Max Nordau, Degeneration, (New York, 1895), p.5 cited in, George Robb, ‘The Way of All Flesh: Degeneration, Eugenics, and the Gospel of Free Love’, Journal of the History of Sexuality, Vol.6, No.4, 1996, pp.589-603 here p.590. Schwartz, Infidel Feminism. Laura Schwartz, ‘Freethought, Free Love and Feminism: Secularist debates on marriage and sexual morality, England *c.* 1850—1885’, Women’s History Review, Vol.19, No.5, 2010, pp.775-793. Dan Stone, Breeding Superman: Nietzsche, Race and Eugenics in Edwardian and Interwar Britain, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Robb, ‘The Way of All Flesh’, p.590. Schwartz, Infidel Feminism, p.8. Schwartz also notes the debates in the free thought movement on the ideas of ‘free-love’ the promiscuity, its periodical *The Reasoner* expressing the view that the ‘object’ of secularists was ‘to promote personal morality’. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Bland and Hall highlight the view of one such conservative, Anthony Ludovici, whose right-wing views allowed toleration of ‘post-natal selection through tolerated infanticide of “faulty, abnormal and unsavoury” offspring.’ Lucy Bland and Lesley A. Hall, ‘Eugenics in Britain: The View from the Metropole’, in Bashford and Levine (eds.) History of Eugenics, pp.213-27, here p.216. Despite his more socialist ideals, Elmy was a member of the Neo-Malthusian League, something which offers a paradoxical view of his personality. Lucy Bland discusses that such contradictions were quite common among the members of the League, as they sought to channel ‘the greater availability of sexual knowledge.’ Bland argues that Elmy’s views can be assessed as being the product of his view that ‘fertility control [involved] the highest reason’ by the individual. His desire to promote sex instruction, and therefore an improved capacity to reason among those of the labouring classes supports this opinion. Bland, Banishing the Beast, pp.215-7. Schwartz, Infidel Feminism, pp.200-201. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Schwartz, Infidel Feminism, p.189. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Barbara Caine, Biography and History, (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.111. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Schwartz, Infidel Feminism, p.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Maureen Wright, Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy and the Victorian Feminist Movement: the biography of an Insurgent Woman, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Edward Royle, Radicals, Secularists and Republicans, see Chapter 13. Many historians have debated the usefulness of the term ‘feminist’ for considering the lives and actions of Victorian women’s emancipation activists before the 1890s. I apply to Elmy Philippa Levine’s premise that he recognised women’s collective oppression and aided them widely in their political struggle. Philippa Levine, Victorian Feminism, 1850-1900, (London: Hutchinson, 1987), p.14. See also, Karen Offen, ‘Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach’, *Signs*, Vol.14, No.1, 1988, pp. 119-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For examples see, Emma Liggins, ‘Writing against the “Husband-Fiend”: syphilis and male sexual violence in the New Woman novel’, Women’s Writing, Vol.7, No.2, 2000, pp.175-95. George Robb, ‘Eugenics, Spirituality and Sex Differentiation in Edwardian England: the case of Frances Swiney’, Journal of Women’s History, Vol.10, No.2, 1998, pp.97-117 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Though the term ‘feminism’ was a new and evolving one in the 1890s, Elmy was among the first to apply it theoretically in Britain, e.g., Ellis Ethelmer, ‘Feminism’, Westminster Review, January 1898, pp.50-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Schwartz, Infidel Feminism*,* p.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Sylvia Strauss, Traitors to the Masculine Cause: Men’s Campaign for Women’s Rights, (Greenwood Press, 1982). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Arianne Chernock, Men and the Making of Modern British feminism, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), pp.134-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Contemporary, ‘constitutionalist’ historians of women’s suffrage were often contemptuous of Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy and were likewise ambivalent towards the WEU because of its links to her. Helen Blackburn and Ray Strachey, for example, in their important accounts of what is categorised as ‘non-violent’ suffragism fail to acknowledge the group’s existence. Key ‘militant’ narratives were also dismissive, in part because WEU activists had not suffered the indignities of ‘imprisonment, hunger-strike and forcible feeding’ – the mantra of genuine militant activity upon which Hilda Kean has suggested so many suffragette accounts had been founded. Helen Blackburn, Women’s Suffrage: A Record of the Women’s Suffrage Movement in the British Isles,(London and Oxford: Williams & Norgate, 1902); Ray Strachey, ‘The Cause’: A Short History of the

Women’s Movement in Great Britain,(1928; repr. London: Virago, 1978). Hilda Kean, ‘Searching for the Past in Present Defeat: The Construction of Historical and Political Identity in British Feminism in the 1920s and 1930s’, Women’s History Review, Vol.3, 1994, pp. 57–80, here p. 73. For an explanation of the key categories of British suffragism, see Sandra Stanley Holton, ‘The Making of Suffrage History’, in June Purvis and Sandra Stanley Holton (eds), Votes for Women,(London and New York: Routledge, 2000),pp. 13–33. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Wright, ‘The Women’s Emancipation Union’. Laura E. Nym Mayhall, The Militant Suffrage Movement: Citizenship and Resistance in Britain, 1860–1930,(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 12–24. Sandra Stanley Holton, ‘Now You See It, Now You Don’t: The Women’s Franchise League and its Place in Contending Narratives of the Women’s Suffrage Movement’, in Maroula Joannou and June Purvis (eds), The Women’s Suffrage Movement: New Feminist Perspectives, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 15–36. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Wright, ‘The Women’s Emancipation Union’, p.385. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy to Harriet McIlquham, 7 March 1906, fol.227. Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy Papers, Add Mss. 47449-55. British Library. (Hereafter EWE to HM and EWEP.) [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Christabel Pankhurst, The Great Scourge and How to End It, (London: Woman’s Press, 1913), p.115, quoted in Elisabeth Sarah, ‘Christabel Pankhurst: Reclaiming Her Power’, in Dale Spender (ed.), Feminist Theorists: Three Centuries of Women’s Intellectual Traditions, (London: Woman’s Press, 1983), pp.256–84, quotation on p.271. Ethelmer, Life to Woman, p.45. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Anon, ‘Ben Elmy’, The British Esperantist, Vol. II, No. 17, May 1906, pp.45-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ben Elmy, ‘The Individuality of Woman: From a Masculine Point of View’, Westminster Review*,* November 1902, pp.506-14, pp.506-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. For a full account of the Elmy marriage see, Maureen Wright, Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy and the Victorian Feminist Movement: the Biography of an Insurgent Woman, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2011), pp.98ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See, for example, EWE to HM, 6 March 1904, fol.251. EWEP. BL. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Enclosure by Josephine Butler in a letter from Isabella Tod to Helen Priestman Bright Clark, 16 November 1875. Millfield Papers, Clark Archive, C & J Clark, Street, Somerset. My thanks to the Trustees and Staff of the Clark Archive for permission to quote from this material. EWE to HM, 6 March 1904, fol.251. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. The feminist who is alleged to have led the pressure on the Elmys to marry was Ursula Mellor Bright, sister-in-law of radical-Liberal leader John Bright, MP. Perhaps the most famous evidence of the feminists disquiet over the issues is, however, to be found in a letter from Millicent Garrett Fawcett (from 1897 President of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies), who wrote to Wolstenholme Elmy that her actions during 1874 had ‘dealt a heavy blow at the very movement you had previously done so much for’. Millicent Garrett Fawcett to Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, 10 December [1875]. Autograph Letter Collection, Strand/09. Women’s Library, London School of Economics and Political Science. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Pankhurst, The Suffragette Movement, p.31. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. EWE to HM, 3 March 1906, EWEP, fol. 221–2. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ignota [pseudonym of EWE], ‘Pioneers! O Pioneers!’, Westminster Review, April 1906, pp.415-17, here p.415. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. One of Wolstenholme Elmy’s close associates, Frances Power Cobbe was banished from her family home on account of her obstinacy in refusing to attend family prayers. Pauline Polkey, ‘Reading History through Autobiography: politically active women of late nineteenth-century Britain and their personal narratives’, Women’s History Review, Vol. 9, No. 3, 2000, pp.483-500, here p.489. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Ignota, ‘Pioneers!’, p.415. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. EWE to HM, 19 September 1901, EWEP, fol.203-4. Not until the passage of the Married Women’s Property Act, 1870 did married women secure protection for their earnings. Both Ben and Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy were highly active in the campaign for this reform. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. EWE to HM, 19 September 1901, EWEP, fol.203-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Lyndon Murgatroyd, Mill Walks and Industrial Yarns: a History of the Mills and Businesses of the Congleton District, (Privately published, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Congleton had long-standing links to secularism from the Chartist era. Edward Royle, Victorian Infidels: The Origins of the British Secularist Movement 1791–1866,(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974), p. 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. W.B. Stevens (ed.), History of Congleton,(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1970), p. 291. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Wright, Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, pp. 12, 20, 29, 131 and 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Schwartz, ‘Freethought, Free Love and Feminism’, p.777. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. See fn.8. Also, Ignota, ‘Pioneers!’, p.415. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. EW to Thomas and Anna-Maria Haslam, 28/1/1873, Haslam Collection, DX/66/1, University of Hull Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Barbara Taylor, Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century,(London: Virago, 1983) p. 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Ellis Ethelmer [pseudonym of Benjamin Elmy], ‘Fear as an Ethic Force’, Westminster Review, March 1899, p.300-309, here 300, 307-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Vol.1. ‘An Introduction’, trans. Robert Hurley, (Harmondsworth, 1990), p.43, quoted in H.G. Cocks, ‘Historiographical Review: Modernity and the Self in the History of Sexuality’, The Historical Journal, Vol.49, No.4, 2006, pp.1211-1227, here p.1212. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Isabella Tod to Helen Priestman Bright Clarke, 16 November 1875. Isabella Tod to Helen Priestman Bright Clarke, 30 November 1875. Both MP. See also, Josephine Butler to Millicent Garrett Fawcett, 8/12 [1875], 3/JBL/14/04. Josephine Butler Letter Collection. Women’s Library, London Metropolitan University. (Hereafter WL.) [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Ginger S. Frost, Living in Sin: Cohabiting as Husband and Wife in nineteenth-century England, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2008), p.200-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Pankhurst, The Suffragette Movement, pp. 31-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. June Purvis, Emmeline Pankhurst: a biography, (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p.37. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Harriet McIlquham to Frances Rowe, 11 August 1901, EWEP, fol.195. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Pankhurst, The Suffragette Movement, p.32. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. The only contemporary histories offering truly positive portraits of Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy are, Ethel Hill and Olga Fenton Shafter (eds), Great Suffragists and Why: Modern Makers of Future History,(London: Henry J. Drane, 1909), pp. 11–13 and 66–70. Dora B. Montefiore, From a Victorian to a Modern,(London: E. Archer, 1927), pp. 43–4. For Ben Elmy the most positive contemporary reflections on his work appear in the *Fair Trade Journal*. See, for example, Anon., ‘Congleton Meeting’, Fair Trade Journal, 20 January 1888. Anon., ‘National Fair Trade League’, Fair Trade Journal, 8 June 1888. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Fran Abrams, Freedom’s Cause: Lives of the Suffragettes,(London: Profile, 2003), pp. 1–15. Elizabeth Crawford, The Women’s Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide 1866–1928,(1st edn, UCL Press, 1999; rev. edn, London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp.188-206. Sandra Stanley Holton, Suffrage Days: Stories from the women’s suffrage movement, (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), especially Chapters 1 and 2. Sandra Stanley Holton, ‘Free Love and Victorian Feminism: the Diverse Matrimonials of Elizabeth Wolstenholme and Ben Elmy’, Victorian Studies, Vol.37, No.4, pp.199-222. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Ellis Ethelmer, Woman Free, (Nabu Reprints: Milton Keynes, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Pankhurst’s treatment of Elmy is only one of a series of subjective assertions she makes in *The Suffragette Movement*. For a full discussion, see June Purvis and Maureen Wright, ‘Writing Suffragette History: The Contending Autobiographical Narratives of the Pankhursts’, Women’s History Review, Vol. 12, 2005, pp. 405–33. See also Kathryn Dodd, ‘Introduction’, in Kathryn Dodd (ed.), A Sylvia Pankhurst Reader,(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 1–30. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Agnes Henry to Anna-Maria Priestman, 2 May 1875, Clark Archive, C & J Clark Ltd. MP. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Under the provisions of the CDA (first instituted in 1864 and extended in 1866 and 1869), women suspected of prostitution in certain designated districts, even where the matter was not proven, could be forcibly examined and detained in a medical facility against their will. This was, feminists insisted, the grossest infringement of women’s civil rights. For an appraisal of the effects of the CDA see, Lawrence Goldman, Science, Reform and Politics in Victorian Britain: The Social Science Association 1857-1886, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp.127-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. I. Whitwell Wilson to Henry Wilson, 20 December 1875, 3/JBL/14/11. JBL. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Mr. Llewelyn to Charlotte Wilson, 7 October 1875, 3/JBL/13/9. JBL. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. See, for example, Ben Elmy, ‘Public Meeting at Leek’, The Shield, 4 October 1873. Ben Elmy, ‘Medical Morality’, The Shield, 1 June 1874. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Ethelmer, Woman Free, Stanzas XVI, XVIII and XIX. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Though Delap understands this ‘introspective turn’ within feminism to have reached its apogee during the 1910s and 1920s in the actions of, among others, the WSPU’s Dora Marsden, from the earliest days of the WEU its local organisers had recorded an embryonic shift in this direction. Lucy Delap, The Feminist Avant-Garde: Transatlantic Encounters of the Early Twentieth Century,(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 19–21 and 315–16. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Amy Hurlston, The Factory Work of Women in the Midlands, (Manchester: Women’s Emancipation Union, 1893), pp.6-7 and 9. Papers of the Women’s Emancipation Union, British Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Ignota, ‘Pioneers!’. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Hughes, ‘The Journals that Did’, p.13. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Elmy, ‘The Individuality of Woman: From a Masculine Point of View’, p.509. My Emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. There has been some historiographical debate regarding Ethelmer’s true identity. Sheila Jeffreys and Barbara Gates suppose the pseudonym to be that of Wolstenholme Elmy alone, as does the British Library cataloguing system. Susan Kingsley Kent claims Ethelmer to be a nom de plume of the Elmys jointly. Lucy Bland and Sandra Stanley Holton suggest that Ethelmer’s texts are the work of Ben Elmy, but acknowledge that Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy’s ideals influenced his writing to varying degrees. Here I follow Wolstenholme Elmy’s own acknowledgement that her husband was Ethelmer, but acknowledge that both her views, and their shared life, impacted on his textual production. Jeffreys, Spinster, p. 29; Barbara T. Gates, Kindred Nature: Victorian and Edwardian Women Embrace the Living World,(Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 131–3; Kent, Sex and Suffrage, p. 110; Bland, Banishing, pp.339–40; Holton, ‘Free Love’, p. 219; Ignota ‘Pioneers!’,p. 415. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. EWE to HM, 2 October 1895, EWEP, fol.221-3. Havelock Ellis, Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Vol.6, (Teddington: Echo, 2007 [first published 1910), p.56. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Grant Allen, The British Barbarians, (Teddington: Echo, 2006 [first published 1895]), p.65. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Elmy, ‘The Modern Marseillaise’, Women’s Herald, 30 April 1892. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Elmy, ‘Individuality of Woman’, p.512. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. EWE to HM, 19 February 1895, EWEP. fol.178. Emphasis in original. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Robb, ‘The Way of all Flesh’, p.602. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. See, for example, EWE to HM, 3 August 1903, EWEP, fol. 149–50. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Sarah Grand, The Beth Book, (Toronto: N.G. Morang, 1897), p.422, quoted in Angelique Richardson, ‘”People Talk a Lot of Nonsense about Heredity”: Mona Caird and Anti-Eugenic Feminism’, in Richardson and Willis (eds.), The New Woman, pp.183-211, here, p.203. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Richardson, ‘Mona Caird and Anti-Eugenic Feminism’, p.185. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. For a summary of this judicial statement, known colloquially as the Clitheroe case, see, Ginger Frost, ‘A Shock to Marriage? The Clitheroe Case and the Victorians’, in George Robb (ed.), Disorder in the Court: Trials and Sexual Conflict at the Turn of the Century,(New York: Palgrave, 1999), pp. 100–18; [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. WEU, Final Report, 1899, pp.1-2. Women’s Emancipation Union Papers, British Library. Shelfmark 8416.h.40. (Hereafter WEUP). [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Women’s Emancipation Union, Inaugural Report, 1892, p.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. The four key principles of the WEU’s ideology were: equality of right and duty with men in all matters affecting the service of the community and the state; equality of opportunity for self-development by the education of the schools and of life; equality in industry by equal freedom of choice of career; and equality in marriage and in parental rights. WEU, Inaugural Report, 1892, p.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Radical independents are best defined as progressives who ‘agreed on issues across party lines *. . .* [exhibited] hostility towards aristocratic privilege and corruption *. . .* [and] sought collectivist solutions’ to the problems of the age in the belief that ‘justice would prevail’. Laura E. Nym Mayhall, The Militant Suffrage Movement: Citizenship and Resistance in Britain, 1860–1930,(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 12–24, here p.23. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Anon. [Editorial], Glasgow Herald, 27 October 1892. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Ethelmer, Phases of Love, pp.14-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Ethelmer, Phases of Love, p.24. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. The formal membership of the WEU never exceeded 200. However, Wolstenholme Elmy records that its correspondence network, who were mailed twice annually with details of its activities, was approximately 5000. Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, The Women’s Emancipation Union, (Manchester: n.p., 1891),p.3. WEUP. For full membership details see WEU Reports of 1892, 1896 and 1899. WEUP. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Holton, Suffrage Days, p.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, The Decision in the Clitheroe Case, and Its Consequences: A Series of Five Letters, (Manchester: Guardian Printing, 1891). [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Sally Ledger, The New Woman: fiction and feminism at the fin de siècle, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.22. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Mona Caird, ‘Marriage’, Westminster Review, August 1888, Vol.130, pp.186-201, here pp.193-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Women’s Emancipation Union, Inaugural Report, 1892. List of Council Members. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Melanie Phillips, The Ascent of Woman: A History of the Suffragette Movement and the Ideals Behind It,(London: Little Brown, 2003), p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Ethelmer, Life to Woman, p.16. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Ethelmer, Life to Woman, p.8. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Ethelmer, Life to Woman, p.9. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Ethelmer, ‘The Individuality of Woman’, p.508. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. The WEU’s members were linked, amongst other groups, to the Primrose League, The Women’s Liberal Association, the Women’s Liberal Federation, the Social Democratic Party, the Independent Labour Party, the Women’s Co-operative Guild and the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies from 1897. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. EWE to HM, 27 November 1903, EWEP, fol.205. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Bream Pearce wrote for the *Labour Leader* using the pseudonym “Lily Bell”. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Wright, ‘The Women’s Emancipation Union’, p.384. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Radical-Liberal-turned-Socialist campaigner Isabella Ford, head of the Leeds Tailoresses’ Union, spoke on the WEU’s behalf at a series of outdoor rallies in the East End of London in the autumn of 1895.WEU, Third Report, 1896, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, ‘Women’s Suffrage’, Shafts, March 1897, p. 84. Emphasis in original. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Hurlston, The Factory Work of Women in the Midlands, p.8. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Judith Walkowtiz, Prostitution and Society: Women, Class and the State, (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982 [first published 1980]), p.256. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Linda Martz, ‘An AIDS-Era Reassessment of Christabel Pankhurst’s *The Great Scourge and How to End It*’, Women’s History Review, Vol.14, 2005, pp.435-46, p.441. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Ethelmer, The Human Flower, p.38. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. ‘Buglawton Inquest’, Congleton Chronicle, 14 April 1894, p.8. See also, EWE to HM, 17 April 1894, EWEP, fol.109. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Coverture can be defined as the legal sublimation of a wife’s person to that of her husband. Ignota [Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy], ‘Judicial Sex Bias’, Westminster Review, Vol. 149 (1898), pp. 279–88. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Ethelmer, The Human Flower, p.86. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Ignota, ‘Pioneers!’, p.415. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. On Stetson Gilman’s feminism see, Judith A. Allen, The Feminism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Sexualities, Histories, Progressivism, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. Mona Caird, ‘The Human Element in Man’, reprinted in Ann Heilmann (ed.) The Late Victorian Marriage Debate: a Collection of Key New Woman Texts, Vol.1, (London and New York: Routledge and Thoemmes Press, 1998), p.233. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. Ethelmer, The Human Flower, p.51. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. Ethelmer, Phases of Love, pp. 9 and 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. Ethelmer, Phases of Love, pp.16-7. Ethelmer, Woman Free, Stanza XI. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, ‘The Marriage Law of England’, in Women in Industrial Life: The Transactions of the Industrial and Legislative Section of The International Congress of Women, London, July 1899, ed. Countess of Aberdeen (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1900), pp. 115–19, here p. 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Ethelmer, Phases of Love, pp. 25, 32, 49-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. Ethelmer, Phases of Love, p.50. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. Ethelmer, Phases of Love, p.54. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. Mrs. C. W. Pearce, Women and Factory Legislation, (Manchester: Women’s Emancipation Union, 1896), p.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. Wright, ‘Women’s Emancipation Union’, pp.394-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. Jon Lawrence, Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867–1914,(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. Lawrence, Speaking for the People; Duncan Tanner, ‘Ideological Debate in Edwardian Labour Politics: Radicalism, Revisionism and Socialism’, in Eugenio F. Biagini and Alistair J. Reid (eds), Currents of Radicalism: Popular Radicalism, Organised Labour and Party Politics in Britain, 1850–1914,(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 271–93. Mayhall, Militant Suffrage Movement, p.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. Wright, ‘The Women’s Emancipation Union’, p.385. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. Anon., (Margaret Sibthorpe), ‘Woman Free’, Shafts, Match 1893, p.13. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. Anon., ‘Woman Free’, Shafts, March 1893, p.13. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. Wright, ‘The Women’s Emancipation Union’, p.393. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. Ethelmer, Woman Free, pp.150, 166 and 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. Direct physical assault on the institutions of the state was not a new phenomenon in British politics. For example, prior to the passage of the 1832 Reform Act, public buildings in the cities of Nottingham and Bristol had made attractive targets for the violence perpetrated by the disenfranchised in their quest for inclusion in the body politic. George Rudé, ‘English Rural and Urban Disturbances on the Eve of the First Reform Bill, 1830–1831’, Past & Present, Vol.37, 1967, pp. 87–102, here pp. 97–8. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. Ethelmer, Phases of Love, pp.13-14 and 32. Ethelmer, ‘Feminism’, p.53. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. Ethelmer, Phases of Love, p.39 and p.49. Emphasis in original. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Liggins, ‘Writing against the “Husband-fiend”’, p.179. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. Kingsley Kent, Sex and Suffrage, pp.110-111. Ethelmer, The Human Flower, p.9. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. Ethelmer, Baby Buds, p.40. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. E. O. Fordham, The Duty of Woman: Towards Humanity and our Country: Towards our Family: Towards

Ourselves,(Congleton: Women’s Emancipation Union, 1894), p. 1, WEUP. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. Ethelmer, Phases of Love, p.48. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. Ignota, ‘Pioneers!’, p.416. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)