

Caroline Playne: the Activities and Absences of a Campaigning Author in First World War  
London

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Caroline Playne (1857-1948) was a committed and influential pacifist and internationalist who dissected the causes of the First World War in four idiosyncratic published histories. Diagnosing the growing bellicosity of the peoples of Europe in the years before the war as a shared mental illness, she espoused many deeply conservative opinions, frequently echoing the moral outrage of contemporary temperance groups and purity crusades, for example. However, Playne was privately wholly absorbed in the charitable support of London's enemy aliens and their dependents, including unmarried mothers and illegitimate children. Evidence of this work survives in fragments in some archives, but is suppressed from her published works and from the papers she left to the University of London, along with much of the rest of her campaigning life. This article seeks to explore the motivations of Caroline Playne in what emerges as a sustained act of biographical erasure. The image ultimately presented is of a woman who secured a voice in the public life of the city through the suppression not only of her sex, but also her limitless human compassion, and so arguably her very self.

Keywords: Pacifism, First World War, Archive, Enemy Aliens, Gender, Female suffrage

Caroline Playne (1857-1948) was a passionate and effective campaigner for peace and internationalism, who published five substantial books with major London presses. While her commitment to the pacifist cause took her around the continent of Europe many times as a delegate and speaker at conferences and congresses, she passed almost her entire life in London. In addition to this comparatively public life in perhaps the most well documented city of the period, she was also an energetic correspondent to the press, and sat on a wide variety of charitable committees. However, when Playne was admitted to the pages of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, some fifty-six years after her death, her biographer, Sybil Olfield, was left with no choice but to remark that 'there is uncertainty about much of Caroline Playne's life'.<sup>1</sup>

Playne, crucially, has not been discovered and celebrated by the growing body of published work on women in pacifist and other radical movements in the early twentieth-century, for a significant part of which Oldfield is evidently responsible.<sup>2</sup> Even as other equally ambiguous figures are increasingly attracting significant studies, such as Eva Gore-Booth, Playne as campaigner is largely unknown and her work tends to be cited only as a source of reportage and observational detail of the war years.<sup>3</sup> This lack of analysis of her densely provocative texts in particular is all the more pressing in that not only is Playne's authorial motivation open to question, but so too is the extent to which she wilfully suppressed evidence, and presented other information which she knew to be unreliable or essentially untrue.

One key area where her presentation is potentially most misleading is in that of her own identity; indeed, the complex and constructed absence of Caroline Playne is arguably her defining characteristic, and her most relentlessly pursued aim. Playne's campaigning life barely left a trace, as she kept it rigorously separated from her writings. This article will seek to explore the ways in which the unavailability of the biography of this pioneering and occasionally disruptive woman, the ambiguity of her beliefs, and the unreliability of her evidence come together to represent sustained attempt to secure an audience through a pragmatic reconstruction of her authorial persona.

#### The uncertain life of Caroline Elisabeth Playne

On the death of Caroline Playne, her only obituary was a letter to her local newspaper, *The Hampstead and Highgate Express*. While sincere in its affection and its desire to honour her memory, it is also abundantly clear that the writer, B. C. Boulter, did not know his subject intimately or even well, but merely by casual acquaintance. He discussed how he would meet her 'shopping with her string bag', her love of watercolours and of pressing flowers, but little

more of the aims of this woman who 'leaves a fragrant memory.' He did note her publications, but only in vague details that suggest he had no real awareness of them. Similarly, he suggested that she might tell you that 'she was leaving tomorrow for Prague, or wherever it might be, to attend a Peace Congress', but his tone here is rather patronising, and the impression created is of something of a dilettante. Indeed, Playne, the 'gallant lady' in this one public memorial is suggested as an eccentric, well-meaning but essentially misguided and somewhat tragic figure in her total lack of impact on the world she sought to influence.<sup>4</sup>

To what extent a more attuned or sympathetic observer may have recorded deeper and more meaningful impressions is now a fruitless conjecture, but it is by no means clear where a researcher should turn to redress this balance and achieve any greater insight than Mr. Boulter. There are of course Playne's books as potential indicators of her life and values, the standard biography of Countess Bertha von Suttner, first female winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, and four idiosyncratic histories of the First World War, which are in effect just instalments of one 2,500 page meditation on the neurotic, militaristic failure of western culture.<sup>5</sup> It is from here that Oldfield assembles most of her evidence, and the analysis of the works she presents is both cogent and redemptive, for Playne's writing has been consistently overlooked. However, there remains a tension in that Playne, after the death of her mother in 1905, had transformed herself from an obscure romantic novelist into a committed and resourceful campaigner for peace, associating with societies and causes that made markedly more strident demands than her published prose ever would. She expended huge energy in committee rooms, missions and charitable visits and bazaars, and was a committee member of a number of organisations, including the Church of England Peace League, the Hampstead Peace Society, the League of Peace and Freedom, the Peace Society, the National Peace Council and the Union for Democratic Control of Foreign Policy (UDC), and more. Some of

these organisations, notably the UDC, were frequently accused of sedition, their publications the subject of official censure and destruction under the Defence of the Realm Act for undermining the national war effort.

None of this radical, even occasionally potentially criminal, activity is recorded in the printed works which Playne left behind her, and even this sketchy portrait of her life has been laboriously amassed from passing references in accounts of campaigns, and the inadvertent preservation of a few documents. To look for Playne in such a situation is not merely to indulge a human desire to know her, but to pursue a legitimate enquiry into a paradoxical and carefully wrought absence of the author in work of which the fragile integrity is largely maintained by a ringing authorial voice. What is chiefly discovered when researching Caroline Playne is an evasive absence, and this is certainly true in her own cache of evidence of life in wartime London carefully preserved for posterity.

#### The impersonal papers of Caroline Playne

The sense of Playne effortlessly and quite intentionally receding before the researcher emerges forcibly from the carefully selected collection of books and papers which she gave to Senate House Library, University of London in 1938, at the age of 81. She wrote to the librarian, Reginald Arthur Rye, that ‘my great desire is that the collection may be of use to future students in studying the psychological causes of the decline and fall of European civilization in our times’ (fascinatingly, Rye was himself a secret pacifist, and amassed huge quantities of suppressed anti-war propaganda, but from the evidence of his correspondence, he did not vouchsafe this to Playne).<sup>6</sup> She donated the books that had most influenced her own writing, and the evidence of her evolving thought in drafts and notes, cuttings and marginalia. This is an astoundingly rich horde of material, combining the ephemeral with the august, and representing all viewpoints from the anti-war rhetoric of the UDC to the strident

and jingoist nationalism of Horatio Bottomley's *John Bull*. However, sifting through this collection seventy-five years later, there is a wilful absence of any indication of her own activities during the war, and indeed of any indication of her own life. She preserves, for example, only one letter in a collection of many thousands of pieces of paper, and it is a withering rejection of the cause of pacifism from William Appleton, of the General Federation of Trade Unions. There is no record of the letter that presumably occasioned this response, but then in truth Appleton's words seem directed at his own sense of a generic pacifist rather than to any individual correspondent, for he openly classes Playne as one of 'many good people [...] who never can approach questions judiciously'.<sup>7</sup> Playne thus amassed a very considerable personal archive that not only failed to preserve her personality and life, but eschewed it in favour of a polymorphous paper collage of London's wartime life and discourse.

It is often by accident or oversight that Playne's papers provide biographical information, particularly into her activities and commitments during the war. For example, the archive contains an invitation to a party in Playne's own London garden in support of the UDC, one of the largest, most coherent and successful anti-war movements in Britain [Figure 1].<sup>8</sup> However, it survives only because Playne, in an act of characteristic thrift, used the reverse of the card to record notes on a speech by Lloyd George. Without this chance preservation, her direct link to this body would almost certainly be missing, for in no other archive dedicated to its activities could any reference to her be found. Playne appears to have pursued the concealment of personal details with the same determination and thoroughness with which she approached her campaigns.

Aside from such rare exceptions, the evidence of her archive would suggest that Caroline Playne spent the war in detached observation of the streets of London, most clearly represented in her own diaries for 1914-1918. Having begun as appointment diaries, by the

end of each year they became so grossly distended with Playne's cuttings and ephemera that she was forced to bind them with ribbon and twine, and to attach supplementary envelopes of material to them [Figure 2]. If one attempts to read these documents as personal diaries, promising insight into their author, they are undoubtedly disappointing and unhelpful. While many days remain quite blank, across the five years there are nonetheless several hundred entries, perhaps typified by her observation on Sunday, 18 March 1917, that 'the warmer weather and the Russian news seemed to make people a little more cheerful but not very much more so'.<sup>9</sup> The entries are marked by this carefully detached and dispassionate observation, where the writer's own view or emotional state is regarded as irrelevant.

There is a tension here between what Playne preserves and a growing sense of the diary as a formally and politically indeterminate genre which has frequently been congenial to woman writers; as Margo Culley and others have suggested, diaries allowed an 'inner life' where diarists were 'permitted, indeed encouraged, to indulge full "self-centredness"' and to document the private, domestic sphere associated with the feminine.<sup>10</sup> The future historian would most certainly not find this in Playne's own curt descriptions of the world outside her home, with entries such as 'news of Kitchener. Great depression.' Playne avoids almost all mention of her home or her private activities, presenting instead a very partial portrait of that city around her. This eschewing of the traditionally feminine-gendered realm does not lessen the value of these diaries as possible primary evidence, for as Rebecca Hogan suggests, the problem of defining the diary 'lies in its capaciousness as a form', where multiple motivations or genres exist simultaneously in 'elastic, inclusive texts'.<sup>11</sup> This fluid form can deliver for Playne at least one resolute function, to craft *aides memoires* to inform her published arguments about the folly and the madness of war. For example, she records her own observation of New Year's Eve celebrations in 1916, 'at 12 o'clock midnight there was a long continuance of hooting, shouting, firing rockets and a most heathenish din'.<sup>12</sup> That this

is intended as a draft of a later published work is seen in Playne's closing note, 'conclude Psychology with this recoil from war tension'; a chapter of her *Society of War* duly does close with a version of this description.

However, it is impossible to ignore the way in which at such moments this diary also begins to toy with that conception of the reflective female diarist in the privacy of her own home, looking out from a quiet, feminine space into a disruptive social world with which she is at odds. In a handful of rather heavily constructed entries, Playne depicts this tension of a female observer, oddly vulnerable in her status, looking out onto a threatening world. In another entry, she describes:

'Splendid hot weather. Night 2 to 3 degrees could not sleep, watched a beautiful dawn. Also a pale bright flickering light in the east, elongated and flickering and swaying, Star of the East, Morning star, or observation balloon?'<sup>13</sup>

This has all the trappings of that private feminine space, its intimacy heightened by the fact that the narrator elaborately emphasises that she has risen from that most private space, her bed. However, the bathos of the final question is too studied to be interpreted at face value, it is a piece of polished prose that is more reminiscent of the novels which Playne had written before the war. In these instances, and in their shadows in Playne's books, there is at least a suggestion of a calculated manipulation of her identity as a spinster with all of its attendant stereotypes. Moreover, Playne was certainly aware of the tradition and expected conventions of female diaries, as she helped to edit and privately publish the extraordinary diaries of Florence E. Lockwood, valued now as preserving the unmediated wartime voice of a private woman. Indeed, Playne even contributed a letter to the edition of the thirteenth part of the diary, assuring Lockwood that the text 'is exactly what the future historian will want, but not find, how the war affected people in their own homes.'<sup>14</sup>

Playne foresaw the need for such a record, but provided it only in heavily filtered flashes, resisting it almost entirely in the rest of the diaries. This is representative of a conscious playing with her identity which is encountered whenever an attempt is made to know her, or to ultimately define her specific beliefs and loyalties. Where this becomes clearest of all is in the vast range of activities that are simply suppressed from her diary, and from her published works, and yet would have qualified her to develop a highly informed critique of London during the war. When the details of Playne's actual life begin to emerge from other archives, despite her best efforts, these diaries become parts of a wider act of biographical reconstruction, the extent and thoroughness of which suggest a powerful motivation.

#### Miss Playne's war

Playne did not spend her years in the London of the Great War as a ubiquitous but passive recorder, but in fact redirected the effort and enthusiasm that she had brought to two decades of peace activism into an extraordinary outpouring of energy on behalf of those she saw as the blameless victims of the conflict. Within days of the declaration of war, Playne was a member of the Executive Committee of the Society of Friends' Emergency Committee for the Assistance of Germans, Austrians and Hungarians in Distress, helping those for whom she rightly surmised there was little public sympathy, the 'enemy aliens'. The minutes of this body make it perfectly clear that 'Miss Playne' as she is always described, was consistently at the heart of its activities as a powerful force in initiating activity, and an effective administrator in managing it. The Committee began by interviewing and assisting needy 'enemy aliens' and their dependents, dispensing monetary relief, coals, clothes and advice.<sup>15</sup> In this, Playne was the lead, reporting to the Executive Committee on how many cases have been assisted or interviewed, and frequently giving brief descriptions of notable or representative cases. Playne herself spoke to and assisted hundreds of those who came to



petition the committee, perhaps not least because she was, unusually amongst its members, multilingual. She soon formally assumed leadership of this work, and the Case Committee that oversaw it, and the scale of the operation is staggering. By 1 December 1914, just four months into the war, Playne reported that they had helped 2,718 families, not even recording those who had been turned away. The effort being put into such work is clear from a resolution agreed on 12 January 1915 that ‘the Executive expressed their strong opinion that the Case Committee shall not continue their present practice of sitting to an abnormally late hour’.<sup>16</sup> Although the activity fluctuated wildly, Playne’s accounts rarely report weeks where financial aid fell below £200, equivalent to around £9,000 today; the highest figure handed out was £1,402 in one week in August 1917, equating to well over £60,000 today.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, in addition to all of this work, Playne served on the Housing sub-committee, which operated children’s homes and a rest home for new mothers, as well as providing cheap, reliable rented rooms for families; the Hostel Committee, which provided overnight rooms for women waiting to emigrate or to be repatriated; and the Ladies’ Committee on Camp Christmas Presents. She also convened the Future of Interned Men Committee and served unenviably on the financial sub-committee tasked with looking ‘into the spending of the various departments’.<sup>18</sup>

None of this phenomenal level of activity is permitted even passing entry to the diaries, which thus become wholly unreliable testimony to any aspect of Playne’s life. There are numerous instances where it is beyond question that she had attended long committee meetings and other work on behalf of this charitable group, but where her only diary entries for the day are of the weather, or the mood of bus passengers. The details above are garnered from the archives of the Society of Friends, but even here it is as though Playne attempted to remove herself from the record. Her prominence in the Emergency Committee was such that after the Armistice, she was one of four officers charged with selecting which records from

across the whole organisation should be preserved for posterity; the destruction was almost universal, and the little preserved, essentially only the minute books of the topmost Executive Committee, was the bare minimum to give any indication of their activities. Amongst the thousands of papers that she gave to Senate House Library, there are five pamphlets or pieces of ephemera relating to this work, and not one of these has her name attached to it or printed on it. It is beyond question even from this brief account that Caroline Playne sought to eradicate her activism from her archival portrait of wartime London. However, this is not merely a case of suppression of personal detail, but more importantly of the abandonment of a vast body of experience and testimony which would have informed and strengthened her campaigning and her published texts. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that these books present an even more complex and more intricately constructed pattern of concealment.

#### The published works of C. E. Playne

Playne's histories are challenging, highly seasoned works, driven on by a relentless passion that occasionally threatens the unity of argument, and sometimes expressed with a disorientating irony that distances the author from her pen. Her argument is amassed through vast quotation of a startling range of primary and secondary sources, with substantial reference to nineteenth-century philosophy and to autobiographies of the powerful from across Europe. Indeed, one of the few reviews of Playne's first major work, *The Neuroses of the Nations* (1925) that is not purely dismissive remarked unkindly that 'the ultimate value of the book [...] will lie in its availability as a mine of useful quotations'.<sup>19</sup>

All of this material is put to use for one overriding purpose, to diagnose the ills of her society. Mental illness is Playne's metaphor and diagnosis for what had happened to her culture, while its greatest symptom, and its greatest vector for further neurosis, was the Great

**Commented [SG1]:** That's really fascinating, given the parallel career of the metaphor of 'shell-shock' [see the special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary History*, 35:1 (2000)]. Just a thought, but no need to expand on this in the article.

War. One lengthy quotation will perhaps demonstrate both the tone and the direction of Playne's whole oeuvre, in its passion and its certainty; there had been a:

failure of men's nervous systems to adjust themselves to the ever-increasing strain of life under highly stressed and complicated conditions of existence. Out of this failure of adjustment arose nervous excitement, nervous depression, general irritation, resulting in anger and passion. Primitive passions burst forth, accompanied by emotions of instinctive type. The effect of this upthrust of ancient and obsolete furies into the nervous order was so turbulent, that, as has been said, they swept the masses out of the path of reasonable advancement and plunged them into a series of group-neuroses<sup>20</sup>

Playne portrays a society where every facet of life, from the religious to the sexual, from music to engineering, has been perverted by these 'primitive passions'.

Her books are dominated by this elevated register, and by her displays of learning, but they also mine incongruous seams of social reportage, overheard conversations, music hall jokes and newspaper gossip. This material pushes Playne's text, deeply conservative in many respects, towards a formally subversive modernist shape. Playne finds herself relating the most trivial, and unsubstantiated sources, for example supposedly repeating a 'direct exchange of remarks overheard at a railway halt in the West country'; in another instance when analysing food waste she repeats an entirely unsubstantiated report of 'four performing bears with a daily consumption of sixteen loaves per bay each day [...] in any town where they happened to be quartered'.<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile, she had conducted hundreds of hours of interviews with the desperate dependents of enemy aliens, working and living in a huge range of situations across the capital. She was obliged to draw from them in testimony their own detailed narratives of their sufferings and deprivations in order to justify assisting them. As a historian attempting to document the impacts of the war on London society, she was uniquely handed a vast wealth of primary evidence, on which she wholly turned her back. In print, she discusses the work of the Emergency Committee, its reception in the press and its shortcomings, but does not once

betray her own involvement. While Playne's daily life was therefore wholly dominated by a compassionate and directly involved intervention in the wartime suffering around her, which is in itself her subject, what she publicly recorded was a detached observation. It is not an exaggeration to speak of this as an erasure of her actions which critically hampers her ability to construct informed argument.

The only plausible explanation of this is that revealing her source would have jeopardised something of greater importance to Caroline Playne, and that this material was simply incompatible with her understanding of the books as she constructed them, or perhaps of their no less consciously constructed author. It is arguably relevant here that Playne published her first works under the sexless initials, 'C.E. Playne'. While the fact that Playne was a woman is not sufficient to account for her critical marginality, though it almost certainly contributed to it, it may have importantly contributed to her own determination to enact her biographical evasion. Those whom Playne helped were overwhelmingly women, and the help they required was with running a home and caring for their children. Such work lay in a long tradition of feminine charity, which Playne had even satirised in an early novel in a caricature of an interfering 'bustling middle-aged dame, whose existence was one long rush of good works'.<sup>22</sup> This impatience with such philanthropy is still witnessed in Playne's later works, where she said 'the problem of saving the working-class from the Relief Committees has got to be faced'.<sup>23</sup>

Distancing herself in print rather forcefully from the work in which she was wholly immersed, she sought not to entertain the amelioration of the temporary suffering of victims, but to allow her audience to understand something deeper. She sought to hold a mirror to her reluctant culture, and demonstrate to it that its own 'perverse lusts prostitute its mystic idealism', that 'unhealthy exaltation of the collective ego, strange incoherencies, blinded judgment' had caused 'unhinged furies [to] take possession of the higher reaches of the

mind'.<sup>24</sup> This perspective required an omniscience and an elevation above society that might have seemed inaccessible to a woman, it was of the 'public world of work, politics, and city life from which women were excluded'.<sup>25</sup> Such a viewpoint was arguably available only to men, and certainly not to the kind of well-meaning charitable organiser that Playne became in Boulter's obituary.

As C. E. Playne, not only did Playne eschew the evidence of the committee room, but she replaced it with the evidence of the street, of observations and eavesdroppings from the London crowd. She moved her authorial voice from a charitable, enclosed sphere to the city itself, a city of which she demanded the right to wander and to record. In her stance, she arguably turns from one contested figure, the do-gooding society woman, to another, that of the flâneur. Janet Wolff has influentially stated that a female counterpart to this essentially masculine figure, the flâneuse, was impossible as 'women could not stroll alone in the city'.<sup>26</sup> What Harriet Blodgett gleans from the diaries of British wartime women is exactly this sense that they wanted 'foremost to escape the cotton-wool confinement of privileged lives that forbade them [...] to walk unaccompanied'.<sup>27</sup> Playne's wealth, involvement in war work and her determination allowed her to do exactly that, but it is no transgressive character of the flâneuse, defying gender identities, which she effects.<sup>28</sup> Rather, Playne seems to have chosen to use this freedom to deliver judgment and observations on her fellow women, and to further conceal herself behind a brittle and manufactured persona.

'Made up ladies enjoying pleasure after their kind'

What Playne witnesses when she walks the streets of London is reminiscent of what many a male flâneur may have recorded, the presence of sexualised female bodies. Everywhere, both in print and in her archival notes, the unwelcome display of women's bodies becomes for Playne a symptom of the war itself. For example, she reported of London women that

‘French fashions [...] were as extreme as modicum of conscience would allow. Ladies wore short silk socks and showed bare legs and the skirts were shorter and scantier than ever’.<sup>29</sup> Playne surveys her city and finds it filled with ‘much dressed, dissolute-looking [...] made-up ladies [...] enjoying pleasure after their kind’ (a phrase she took from her diary entry for 1 January 1916) [Figure 3]. She begins to sound a decidedly moralist note, and records with mocking urbanity that ‘in wide circles the idea of marriage for life was irrelevant. Marriage might be fixed up between a man and a woman casually acquainted at a restaurant, or it might not’. However, the real agent of such liaisons is clearly the women, for, as Playne assures us, ‘it was not unusual that quite young women married three times or so during the war. It might be that the friend of the husband killed became, on his next leave, the war-widow’s bridegroom’.<sup>30</sup> It is notable that Playne focuses on the wives and partners of British servicemen, for her knowledge and real understanding of such issues would inevitably have been related to the embattled community of enemy aliens. The extent to which Playne derived any of this argument from genuine observation or knowledge is intriguingly explored through her remarks about one venue which for her began to typify the immorality of her city.

Playne described with withering contempt how ‘in London [...] more and more premises were given up to gaiety and riotous living. Among these the Grafton Galleries, where picture exhibitions were held, was diverted to the pursuance of grosser pleasure’. Playne develops this case study at some considerable length, and it is accompanied by those same markers of immorality that she elsewhere depicts, for it is a place where ‘young officers and much “made-up” ladies might nightly be seen alighting in numbers to indulge in all kinds of joys. These must have been fast and furious, for in due course the Grafton Galleries was ruled out of bounds for officers’.<sup>31</sup>

Again, Playne dispenses here with her punctilious references and quotations, and relies rather on seeming personal testimony of witnessing arrivals at the gallery, and the reporting of a military ban on attendance. It is true that there were numerous dances held at the galleries, and that it was rendered out of bounds on 12 March 1917. This action was largely the result of a brief flurry of outraged articles in the press, initiated by General Sir Horace Lockwood Smith-Dorrien, decorated hero of the Boer War, and by 1917 Lieutenant of the Tower of London and self-appointed crusader for moral purity in the capital.<sup>32</sup> However, the ban was overturned a mere twelve days later, and it had been originally issued by General Sir Francis Lloyd, whom Jerry White describes as a ‘well-known temperance speaker’. Indeed, the pursuit of moral purity was more pronounced in the senior officers of London than anywhere on the continent of Europe, as White again suggests, they ‘were deeply steeped in a cult of puritan manliness formed on temperance, celibacy [...] and an unquestioning faith in God and the Church of England’.<sup>33</sup> It does not require criticism of such a worldview to suggest that such a man may have had views of night-clubs that were at odds with the moral opinions of the wider society.

Moreover, there was also a wealth of evidence to convince Playne that her portrait of the Grafton Galleries was unreliable. For example, in the year of the ban, the Bishop of London held a charity meeting and a sale to aid foreign missions there. One month before the ban was issued, the galleries were hosting an exhibition on Shakespeare, visited by the Queen, as was reported repeatedly in *The Times*. Indeed, the Queen visited again just two days after the ban was issued, to an International Art Club display, and in total over a dozen times during the war, twice in the company of the monarch. In the very month of the ban, the King let it be known that he would be the Patron of the next exhibition there, which was opened by Field Marshall the Viscount French, so there was seeming disagreement about the impact of the space on the morals of the Army. Indeed, in October 1918, a committee of

senior officers organised the 'United Allies Dance' for officers, to be held in the Grafton Galleries, so that presumably restrictions on access had been wholly waived.<sup>34</sup>

Playne frankly mischaracterises the gallery, which, it is important to stress, is the only entertainment venue she names; what is most suggestive is that she does so quite knowingly. Not only must she have been aware of such activity from daily newspapers, but she had several annotated press cuttings relating to patriotic events in the Grafton Galleries amongst her papers, and indeed owned a programme from the Shakespeare exhibit and so had presumably attended. In truth, Playne cannot easily be seen as doing anything but intentionally manufacturing for publication a mask of moral outrage, built upon evidence which she knew to be erroneous. This outrage is deeply suspect in that such views were not part of the mission of the Quakers' Emergency Committee, which was almost alone amongst charitable groups in helping women cohabiting with German men outside of marriage, and certainly any children born of such a relationship; more than once it is recorded in their minutes that 'need must be the final criterion'.<sup>35</sup> It is not an exaggeration to say that Playne was daily immersed in assisting, protecting, feeding and housing unmarried mothers, and so her profession of outrage at short socks or make-up on the streets of London is at best suspect. Whatever her private opinions may have been, she could clearly suppress them for her charitable works, but not in her public persona.

It is plausible to suggest that Caroline Playne may have adopted these views, albeit based on false evidence, in order to occupy a moral position that might secure her an audience that might have been alienated by her sex and her involvement in charitable work. This argument is given some further credence by the evidence of reactions to other campaigning women in London.

'Women who had devoted themselves to the suffrage struggle'



A plausible explanation for Playne's inflexible stance in print may be found in the reaction to another group of active women on the streets of London, the campaign for female suffrage. Again, a fragmented archival record demonstrates that Playne was at least sometimes to be found amongst such women, even as the war raged around her. She was one of 'upwards of 180 women' lobbying the Home Secretary in 1915 to be given leave to attend the International Congress of Women in The Hague.<sup>36</sup> The two founding principles of that conference were that the war should be ended, and that suffrage should be extended to women. Playne felt sufficiently strongly that when she, and all other British delegates, were unable to travel due to government restrictions, she sent a telegram reading, 'Deeply grieved prevented attending Congress please announce. Caroline Playne,' which was published in their proceedings.<sup>37</sup> In a manner that is now becoming familiar, however, Playne again did not record this in her work or allow it to be discernible from the papers which she left to the library. In print, she is at best coolly supportive of these campaigns, for example suggesting that 'it lies in the true line of human development that women, in the fullness of time, should seek to share social privileges hitherto reserved for men'.<sup>38</sup> This claim is so weak and contingent, postponing fruition and limiting it to the social realm, that it is a bureaucrat's obfuscation, not a campaigner's rallying cry.

However, what is truly remarkable is that she is often starkly critical of the campaign, for example remarking with an icy disdain that 'never has a government been placed in a more unpleasant position by any other agitation' than the 'irrationalities' of the suffragists. Clearly, the campaign for female suffrage was multi-faceted and subject to many internal divisions over aims and methods, but it is important to be clear here that Playne is all but universally critical of all its manifestations. She repeatedly attacked campaigners, moreover, by using the language of sinister, disruptive and specifically female forces which at least reflect established misogyny. She described the Suffragettes as 'Furies,' reaching back to

ancient models of abject femininity, and even as ‘harbingers of war madness.’ She felt that their campaign was marked by their ‘arousal of primitive passions among women, the mad abandonment of reason and restraint, [...] – all this constituted a state of mind which easily rebounded later on to the primitive combative war-spirit’.<sup>39</sup>

Such aggressive repudiation of a campaign of which she was part suggests either that she wholly changed her opinion, or that she felt that such views were inadmissible to her reading public, and so she performatively rejected them. Given the wider context of biographical evasion and manipulation studied above, it seems reasonable to explore the second possibility. Certainly, in tactically distancing herself from such groups, Playne would have been in company with several other women authors of the period. As Barbara Green suggests in her perceptive critique of suffrage texts, there were numerous reasons why committed suffragist women might rigorously edit and control the perception of any feminine presence on the streets of London. Green suggests that many suffrage campaigners were wary of a ‘threatening spectacle of women’ in urban spaces where they did not traditionally belong. Indeed, Green argues of some lesser writers of the movement that they felt that the campaign for ‘suffrage undercuts its own project through an affiliation with disruptive femininity’.<sup>40</sup>

Playne’s editing of her own life story, and some of her seeming contradiction of her own espoused views, can be presented, therefore, as a tactical recrafting of the authorial voice. This argument is seductive not least in that it offers an opportunity to embrace the inconsistencies and vagaries of her arguments as evidence of her own personal struggle. However, there are places in Playne’s texts where the pitch of her discomfort around the visible female body strains the credibility of this model. Playne can become vitriolic when surveying the impact of this disruptive female sexuality, and most strikingly, she synthesises the sexual, political and psychological disruption of woman:

The women who had devoted themselves to the suffrage struggle, women who had unnaturally estranged themselves from men, now yielded themselves up if only they might commit mass harlotry and advance men's belligerency. They gave themselves up to be used and broken, in the intoxication of nationalist fanaticism.<sup>41</sup>

It is frankly difficult to judge here exactly what Playne considers such women did, though 'mass harlotry' clearly has a sexual overtone. Pressingly, she is damning the entire female suffrage struggle here, not any of its specific manifestations. While there are hundreds of other contributory causes to a toxic national belligerence in Playne's work, it is extraordinary that she should draw so many strands together in the body of campaigning women, of which she is inescapably one.

What is most starkly absent here is not just Playne's compassion but also her evidence, the quotation with which elsewhere she punctiliously, frankly excessively, fills her work. One can only ask how she knew any of this, or rather whether she knew any of this. There are multiple separate strands coming together here in the contested physical presence of women on the streets of London, including herself: of a deliberate suppression of evidence of which she was uniquely aware, of the wilful mischaracterisation of evidence, and lastly of the inflation of minimal evidence into somewhat grandiose and inclusive claims. In the process, Playne, perhaps inadvertently, strayed into a misogyny that reduced women to an unreasoning mass, set against an unspecified masculinity from which she must remain excluded. It seems beyond question that in places Playne sought actively to conceal her own identity and to fashion for herself a more acceptable authorial persona, which tends towards that masculinity, but it sadly seems equally evident that this attempt overwhelmed both her and her voice. The position into which she drove herself seems reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's remarks in *A Room of One's Own*, published in the middle of Playne's writing career, that many a woman's writings 'lie scattered, like small pock-marked apples in an orchard, about the second-hand book shops of London. It was the flaw in the centre that had rotted them. She had altered her values in deference to the opinion of others'.<sup>42</sup> While the

fruits of Playne's pen have much to recommend them, they are nonetheless suspect as both objective reportage and as a genuine reflection of her subjective judgment because of exactly such an attempt to alter her values.

### Conclusion

The extent to which Playne exaggerated or manufactured any of the forceful moral opinions she expressed is clearly beyond our knowledge, though to draw attention to these tensions is perhaps to recognise the nobility and passion of her struggle. However, one wholly uncharacteristic diary entry from Playne demonstrates that at least at moments, the tension between author and campaigner, between compassionate helpmate and moral crusader, pressed all too heavily upon her. She had spent the evening of New Year's Eve of 1917 with a family friend and Army Major and wrote:

One listened and wondered not so much at the horror of his work, nor at the diabolical competition in deadly gases nor at the horrible, heaped up slaughter but that a well-brought up boy should be telling it all in a plain, natural way & that one could listen without sickening or getting upset [...] The coolness, & calmness of it all, told in a pretty drawing room under a reproduction of Botticelli's Venus – this was the nightmare <sup>43</sup>

Playne's uncharacteristically vivid phrasing here betrays a great gulf between the limitless horror of the war and the enclosed sphere of her own home, which recalls once again the entrenched conception of the proper sphere of a woman's diary. Her inability to experience an emotional response recalls the critical observer into which she has made herself, but is also cast as a nightmarish paralysis.

In this one moment, which she vouchsafed to -Senate House Library amongst her papers but never attempted to recycle into any published work, Playne seems to be engulfed by uncertainty, and can only remark with a powerful and despairing brevity that 'Reality is too superbly awful to be coexistent'. It is as this instant of the vertiginous withdrawal of certainty that she also finds herself trapped most forcefully in her femininity, in that 'pretty

drawing room under a reproduction of Botticelli's Venus'. Beneath an archetypal, sexualised, and reductive, image of woman, Playne described her home in trivialising terms, the empty value of prettiness set starkly against the 'heaped up slaughter'. That the drawing-room in which she experiences this is an apt image of oppressive womanly stereotypes is again described by Woolf, who said of the attitude of the reviewer picking up a new book: 'this is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room'.<sup>44</sup> Playne is struggling all too openly to escape this female realm into the securely important one of the war, but the very emotions that have motivated her entire campaigning life and which will paradoxically fire her writing, become as fatally feminine as that drawing-room, and both they and her ability to master them fail her.

Playne seems to sense in this despairing revelation that the two realms of public and private, or analytical and emotional, and even problematically male and female, could not be reconciled. At this moment, she grasps this irresolvable tension and her published works are her response; though her texts were driven into coiling knots of concealment, outrage and contradiction that obscured her own authentic voice, she nevertheless embodied a vigorous and unflinching response across thousands of pages. For that voice, she knowingly denied her life and her campaigns, and the limitless compassion that had motivated it all. We must ultimately set aside our desire to know Caroline Playne, and merely honour the memory of a woman of such purpose and fortitude that she could continue to write in a world which she knew was too awful to be coexistent with it, and who hurled at an uncomprehending world her last peaceful weapon, her own heroic self-destruction.

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<sup>1</sup> S. Oldfield, 'Playne, Caroline Elizabeth (1857–1948)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn) [accessed 12 October 2015].

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, S. Oldfield, *Women Against the Iron Fist: Alternatives to Militarism 1900-1989* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1989); A. Wiltsher, *Most Dangerous Women: Feminist Peace Campaigners of the Great War* (London: Pandora, 1985); J. Vellacott, *Pacifists, Patriots and the Vote: The Erosion of Democratic Suffragism in Britain during the First World War* (London: Palgrave, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, S. Tiernan, *The Political Writings of Eva Gore-Booth* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015); for the use of Playne's work as primary evidence see, among others, A. Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> B.C. Boulter, 'Obituary: Miss C. E. Playne', *Hampstead and Highgate Express*, 6 February 1948, 4.

<sup>5</sup> *The Neuroses of the Nations* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1925); *The Pre-War Mind in Britain: An Historical Review* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1928); *Society at War: 1914-1916* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1931); *Britain Holds On: 1917, 1918* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1933); *Bertha von Suttner and the Struggle to Avert the World War* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1936).

<sup>6</sup> University of London Archive, Senate House Library, UoL/UL/4/18/54.

<sup>7</sup> Caroline Playne Archive, Senate House Library, University of London, MS1112/91.

<sup>8</sup> MS1112/134.

<sup>9</sup> MS1112/111.

<sup>10</sup> M. Culley, *A Day at a Time: The Diary Literature of American Women from 1764 to the Present* (New York: Feminist Press, 1985), 4.

<sup>11</sup> R. Hogan, 'Engendered Autobiographies: the Diary as a Feminine Form', *Prose Studies*, 14 (1991), 97, 100.

<sup>12</sup> MS1112/6.

<sup>13</sup> MS1112/6, 2 August 1916.

<sup>14</sup> C.E. Playne, 'Preface', in F. E. Lockwood, *Private Diary Part 11: Before the War* (Eastbourne: [Gazette and Herald], [c. 1921]). On public and private spaces in wartime London, see E. Cronier, 'The Street', in Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert (eds.), *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919*, vol. II: *A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 57-107 and C. Rollet, 'The Home and Family Life', in *ibid.*, 315-53.

<sup>15</sup> For an overview of the Committee's activities, see R. Fry, *A Quaker Adventure: the Story of Nine Years' Relief and Reconstruction* (London: Nisbet, 1926).

<sup>16</sup> Emergency Committee Executive Committee minutes, Library of the Society of Friends, YM/MfS/FEWVRC/COMM/EME, vol. 1.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3.

<sup>18</sup> ~~Ibid.~~, *Ibid.*, vol. 3, September-18, 1917.

<sup>19</sup> L. G. Robinson, Review of *The Neuroses of the Nations* by C. E. Playne, *Economica*, 16 (1926), 99.

<sup>20</sup> Playne, *Neuroses of the Nations*, 18-19.

<sup>21</sup> Playne, *Britain Holds On*, 106, 68.

<sup>22</sup> C. Playne, *The Romance of a Lonely Woman* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1904), 45.

<sup>23</sup> Playne, *Society at War*, 103.

<sup>24</sup> Playne, *Pre-War Mind*, p. 64.

<sup>25</sup> J. Wolff, 'The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2 (1985), 37.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>27</sup> H. Blodgett, *Centuries of Female Days: Englishwomen's Private Diaries* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 239.

<sup>28</sup> For the wider experience of women in wartime London see also S. R. Grayzel, 'Men and Women at Home', in J. Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, vol. III: *Civil Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 96-120.

<sup>29</sup> MS1112/43.

<sup>30</sup> Playne, *Society at War*, 338, 238.

<sup>31</sup> Playne, *Society at War*, 238.

<sup>32</sup> For Smith-Dorrien's moral campaigns, see A. J. Smither, *The Man Who Disobeyed: Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien and his Enemies* (London: Leo Cooper, 1970).

<sup>33</sup> J. White, *Zeppelin Nights: London in the First World War* (London: Bodley Head, 2014), 50, 49.

<sup>34</sup> All of this activity is recorded in the Court Diary and social pages of *The Times*.

<sup>35</sup> Emergency Committee Executive Committee minutes, vol. 4, 9 April 1918.

<sup>36</sup> *Hansard*, HC Deb, 27 April 1915, vol. 71, cc. 566-8.

<sup>37</sup> *International Congress of Women: Report / Bericht / Rapport* (Amsterdam: International Congress of Women, [c. 1917?]), 206.

<sup>38</sup> Playne, *Pre-War Mind*, 288.

<sup>39</sup> Playne, *Pre-War Mind*, 292, 296.

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<sup>40</sup> B. Green, 'From Visible Flâneuse to Spectacular Suffragette?: The Prison, the Street, and the Sites of Suffrage', *Discourse*, 17 (1994-5), 69.

<sup>41</sup> Playne, *Society at War*, 136.

<sup>42</sup> V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth, 1929), p-111.

<sup>43</sup> MS1112/111.

<sup>44</sup> Woolf, *A Room*, 111.

#### Figure Captions:

Figure 1: A surviving invitation to a UDC fundraising event in Caroline Playne's garden (Caroline Playne Archive, Senate House Library, University of London, MS1112/134)

Figure 2: One of Playne's grossly distended wartime diaries (Caroline Playne Archive, Senate House Library, University of London, MS1112/6)

Figure 3: A typical diary entry from Caroline Playne, bemoaning the pleasures of 'got up ladies' (Caroline Playne Archive, Senate House Library, University of London, MS1112/6)

#### Notes on Contributor

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