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Jonathan Ouvry

Gillian Darley

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BOOK REVIEW
by Jonathan Ouvry

OCTAVIA HILL A LIFE

by Gillian Darley

Published by Constable, £17.95

I find that objectivity is difficult to achieve when considering a work by or about someone with whom I have a family relationship, however distant. In the case of Octavia Hill, my great-great-aunt, I have been aware of her all my life as a figure revered in the family. Outside the family I have been aware of her work in the field of housing through my involvement with the Housing Association that bears her name, and of her role as one of the three founders of the National Trust.

It is perhaps surprising that there has been no full length biography, since Moberley Bell's some 50 years ago, of one of the truly great Victorian women, whose public stature in her own time can be appreciated in the fact that, as one of the three women who had most influenced the course of Victorian Britain, she was chosen, together with Florence Nightingale and Josephine Butler, as the occupant of a seat in Westminster Abbey for the Service of Thanksgiving for Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee.

Gillian Darley's biography provides what must be the definitive Life, clearly the result of most thorough research and of a wide knowledge of the background to Octavia's work and of the people with whom she was involved. Particularly interesting to me is the detailed information about Octavia's distinguished grandfather Dr. Thomas Southwood Smith, whose work in the field of public hygiene and sanitary reform did not receive the recognition it deserved in his lifetime, and about her mother, Caroline Southwood Hill, whose views on the education of young children are still, in the present educational climate, worth careful consideration.

The essential element of Octavia Hill's work in the housing management field was regular personal contact, and friendship, with tenants often living in the most degrading and impoverished circumstances. The owners for whom the properties were managed were promised, and received, a commercial return on their money, which meant that non-payers of rent were evicted with a rapidity that in this day and age seems almost brutal. What happened to those

at the very bottom of the heap was not Octavia's concern, as it was the concern of others such as her friend Henrietta Barnett, wife of Canon Samuel Barnett, the founder of Toynbee Hall. Octavia's system nevertheless did result in the provision of clean and decent homes for many in London who would otherwise have continued in lives of squalor in slum properties. As her methods became known they spread throughout Britain, to Europe, particularly through the close interest of Queen Victoria's daughter Princess Alice of Darmstadt, and to America.

It is sad that, nowadays, even in the Housing Association movement of which Octavia Hill may be said to have been the pioneer, increased bureaucracy and government interference, coupled with the enhancement of the role of the Housing Associations in providing 'public' housing on the running down of the Local Authorities' housing role, means that the practice of Octavia Hill's methods involving close personal contact with tenants no longer applies, and the results in terms of vandalism and massive rent arrears (no instant eviction these days!) are all plain to see.

And why should a life of Octavia Hill be reviewed for the George Eliot Fellowship Review? As Margaret Wolfit (well-known for her fascinating stage portrayals of George Eliot) discovered when asked to present a similar dramatic portrait of Octavia Hill for the National Trust, there is a family connection. Octavia's sister Gertrude married in March 1865 Charles Lee Lewes, the eldest son of George Henry Lewes, described by Gillian Darley as George Eliot's stepson. GHLE remarked in his Journal that "happier prospects never smiled upon a marriage". George Eliot herself had been delighted with the engagement, particularly with one of its results, writing in August 1864 that Charles's "attraction to Hampstead (where Gertrude lived) gives George and me more of our dear old tete-a-tete, which we can't help being glad to recover".

As Gillian Darley comments, Octavia Hill had gained an influential friend and great moral support in George Eliot as a new member of her family. George Eliot and George Henry Lewes continued during the remainder of their lives to take an active interest in Octavia's work, making contributions to it both financial and in terms of involving the interest of influential friends.

Gillian Darley's biography must be highly recommended to all members of the Fellowship interested in the lives of the great Victorians. Well written, interestingly illustrated and handsomely produced, it is a book which I am extremely glad to possess.