

## Research Article

Joanne Paisana\*

# How the Other Half Lives: *Under the Arch* with Lady Henry Somerset

<https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2017-0015>

Received April 24, 2017; accepted September 7, 2017

**Abstract:** The reforming work of Isabella Caroline Somerset (Lady Henry Somerset 1851-1921) is largely overlooked today. Dedicated to women's causes at home and abroad and to temperance in particular, having first-hand knowledge of the privileged and the underprivileged, this determined, multi-talented and opinionated woman uncharacteristically wrote a fictional novel, *Under the Arch* (1906). In the novel, London aristocrats are portrayed rubbing shoulders with slum dwellers, but there is little real connection. The problems that the social policies introduced by the Liberals from 1906-1914 would address are nevertheless highlighted. It can be no coincidence that Somerset was well acquainted with many of these politicians. The themes of relieving the poor, Christian doctrine, marriage, women's suffrage and imperialism are addressed, although Somerset's focus is simply on "doing good" and loving one's neighbour.

**Keywords:** Isabel Somerset, women reformers, temperance

## Introduction

The purpose of this article is to make better known an obscure fictional work by an important British female philanthropist, Isabella Caroline Somerset (1851-1921). Doubleday, Page and Co. published *Under the Arch* by Somerset under her married name of Lady Henry Somerset in 1906. Important elements of the novel will be correlated with similar experiences in Somerset's personal life, showing how she drew on her personal experiences to write the novel. Even though the book was never a bestseller and Somerset could never claim to be on the level of some of her publisher's other illustrious writers like W. Somerset Maugham or Joseph Conrad, nevertheless, it will be shown that by engaging the reader in a simple tale of love and betrayal she—albeit by somewhat clumsily advancing modern theories (socialism) and debunking outdated ones (paternalistic philanthropy)—proves she is more than the well-connected, exceptional campaigner/public speaker and committee woman she is generally known to be. She was simply following in the footsteps of so many other more obscure female writers who contributed short articles and longer fictional stories to periodicals such as the Religious Tract Society's uplifting *The Girl's Own Paper* and the many temperance almanacks/journals, in order to enhance their cause(s).

Written well after the so-called "condition of England" or "Industrial" novels such as Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845), Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854), and Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* (1854), nevertheless, there are similarities to be found between them. They all refrain from idealising poverty and deal with contrasts, inequalities and injustices of one kind or another mainly based on class, gender, geographic and economic circumstances, and examine the question of moral responsibility. *Under the Arch* is set in the Edwardian salons and slums of London and the backward, rural acres of its hinterland,

---

\*Corresponding author: Joanne Paisana, Dept. English and North-American Studies, University of Minho, Campus de Gualtar, 4710-057 Braga, Portugal, E-mail: jpaisana@ilch.uminho.pt

the aptly named Ilbury. Edwardian Britain was still recognisably divided into Two Nations but the days of laissez-faire were counted, and the basis for the Welfare State was being laid.

Like Disraeli *et al.*, Somerset aimed at enlightening the upper class, her own class, by describing opposing worlds and revealing old and new-fangled ways of alleviating the causes and consequences of poverty, of finding the hidden beauty described in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's opening epithet: "Under the arch of life, where love and death,/ Terror and mystery, guard her shrine, I saw/ Beauty enshrined." A menagerie of characters are showcased, some of whom struggle to find themselves through helping others and in so-doing expose a myriad of social ills—drink and child abuse, terrible living and working conditions and so on.

The late-Victorian and Edwardian periods are emblematic of times when women's philanthropy as a narrow concept of doing good works such as holding charity bazaars and visiting hospital and lunatic asylums is recognisably broadened to what can be described as a multifaceted social reform undertaking. Many late-Victorian women like Somerset were active in one or more public spheres (housing, social purity, suffrage, employment and temperance, among others).

## Isabella (Isabel) Caroline Somerset

Somerset was the beautiful, well-educated and independent-minded eldest daughter of the wealthy 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Somer. Her happy childhood was crowned with an arranged marriage at twenty-two years old to Lord Henry Somerset, the second son of the Duke of Beaufort. This turned out to be an unhappy union, and it ended in scandal and divorce mainly due to Lord Henry's homosexual relationships. She was largely ostracized from society after her annulment and thereafter turned her attention from the domestic to the public domain.

There is relatively little written about the once-famous Isabel Somerset. Jennie Chappell's<sup>1</sup> hagiography *Noble Work by Noble Women* (1900) places Somerset in the illustrious company of the wealthy philanthropist Baroness Angela Burdett-Coutts, the woman's rights campaigner Millicent Fawcett and Prime Minister William Gladstone's wife, Catherine. Olwen Niessen gives an excellent, more scholarly and very well researched/documented biography of Somerset in *Aristocracy, Temperance and Social Reform. The Life of Lady Henry Somerset* (2007). Ros Black's *A Talent for Humanity. The Life and Work of Lady Henry Somerset* (2010) is written for the general public and sympathetically portrays the veritable workaholic, defender of many women's causes and of temperance in particular, who was voted in 1913 by readers of the *Evening News* (London) as the woman they would most like to have as prime minister (Black 2).

Somerset's influence stemmed not only from her aristocratic title and forthright nature but also from her role as the second president of the biggest female temperance association of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the British Women's Temperance Association (BWTA). Her temperance work through this association would catapult her onto the public stage both nationally and internationally and would contribute to her acquiring the requisite knowledge and experience to be able to write *Under the Arch*. Temperance work has received relatively little attention from those interested in the broad field of *fin de siècle* social improvement, but as Smitley observes, the women's temperance movement was a "dynamic and influential component of the Victorian and Edwardian women's movement" (11).

The BWTA, a network of female temperance societies, was the most visible face of the movement. Established in 1876 by Margaret Lucas Bright, sister of the Liberal MP John Bright, this American-inspired network succeeded in guiding, highlighting and reinforcing the temperance work done by thousands of British women in their localities. It helped local organisations of women to encourage temperance by education and other means, and to agitate for the restriction of sales of alcohol. It had an international aspect when it became affiliated to the American World Women's Christian Temperance Union (WWCTU), Somerset accumulating the presidency of both organisations in 1900. One cannot discuss Somerset without referring to the BWTA and her temperance work for she came to believe that the liquor traffic was the cause

<sup>1</sup> Chappell, a prolific writer of children's fiction, also wrote a number of books featuring biographies of women she considered to be "worthy."

of poverty and crime. She signed the total abstinence pledge perhaps to encourage the tenants of her home estate Eastnor by example. Initially a nervous and shy public speaker, Somerset's fame as temperance advocate/orator gradually spread around the country, and she was invited to give ever more addresses, thus contributing to the changing perceptions towards women discernible in the public sphere. She travelled thousands of miles in Britain and later abroad.

## The Plot

Unlike Somerset's shorter temperance serial stories such as *One More Unfortunate*; *A Search-light Story*, *Under the Arch*, is a lengthy 336-page narrative. There are some similarities with the earlier sentimental or domestic fiction by writers such as Oliver Goldsmith, Maria Edgeworth or Catharine Maria Sedgwick. This literature is characterized by evincing an emotional response from the reader through showing the essential goodness of humanity and the importance of feelings as a guide to "doing the right thing." It usually features an orphaned heroine who either is or becomes poor and who is contrasted with an ignorant or incompetent other. She suffers then finds happiness through marriage to a strong male character. Certainly some of these elements are to be found in Somerset's work, as will be shown, but the didactic lessons in *Under the Arch* seem to be particularly directed at the reader and not on the self-discovery of the heroine(s) as in sentimental fiction.

The story starts with an emotional scene of farewell at a London train station involving three of the main romantic characters. They are going to fight in the Boer War. Chapter two is contemporaneous with chapter one and showcases a tenement in a London slum, foregrounding the remaining two romantic characters and discussing social problems and socialist theories for their resolution. From the third chapter, we are taken back in time a few years, and the story from this point is told without time jumps.

The narrative has two main female protagonists. The first is the orphan Elizabeth Maynell, described in the *dramatis personae* as a self-sacrificing and imaginative girl "much impressed by the sorrows of the people, who determines when her own happiness is shipwrecked to live for their good." She is somewhat naive and puts love and happiness above all else, telling her secret fiancé on hearing his bad financial news: "But Eric, dear, we have each other, and we shall be happy together" (93). "If you love me, Eric, really love me as I love you, can't we be happy together, even though we may never be able to live at Ilbury, and never be rich?" (96) She lives with a socially aspiring but austere grandmother and a severe, authoritative maiden aunt in the country, but has aristocratic family in the form of a kindly uncle, Lord Oxenholme. Her local rector says she is "a good girl, but full of the most exaggerated present-day theories" (53). The attractive but vain, self-seeking and unprincipled Londoner Eric Errington courts Elizabeth, dazzling her with his talk of London people and culture, promises to marry her while awaiting a supposedly rich inheritance, a rural estate neighbouring the property where she lives, but then drops her when he inherits and discovers it to be worthless. Elizabeth, unhappy after her rejection and the death of her own grandmother, takes her socialist friend Michael Fane's advice and moves to a London slum to live independently, although she takes her childhood nanny with her as a servant, and to help the poor in a very hands-on way. However, she is ultimately not really suited to social work of this nature, and when she and Michael marry at the end of the story, they live happily ever after in the countryside, where they offer temporary respite for needy Londoners.

The second heroine is the aristocratic Katherine Hornden (Lady Cliffe). When Eric's inheritance turns out to be worthless, he courts this beautiful, sentimental young heiress whom he genuinely comes to love. She, however, is oblivious to Eric's true, undeclared feelings for her and marries the upstanding Sir Jack Cliffe even though she does not love him with passion. Her preference for the unromantic, upstanding Sir Jack, "the tall, sunburnt, broad-shouldered man, who would everywhere be recognised as an Englishman" (3), over the frivolous, art-loving but morally questionable Eric is indicative of Somerset's foregrounding of the moral high ground. Eric returns wounded from South Africa, but the righteous Sir Jack is later killed in battle. Katherine looks after Eric before knowing of her husband's fate, and they have an unconsummated love affair which raises many eyebrows in her circle of family and friends. After a misunderstanding over

a locket leads Katherine to suspect wrongly that Sir Jack and Elizabeth had been lovers, Eric is exposed by Michael Fane as a cowardly self-seeker and is rejected categorically by Katherine. At the age of twenty-three, she contracts a fatal disease and sails to Madeira to spend her final days with her doting, well-meaning but snobbish mother, Lady Hornden.

Somerset provides redemption for all. Even Eric marries a wealthy American woman and is thus able to maintain his landed inheritance. Elizabeth reflects that Katherine, “had sailed toward the light, [and] had after all the better part, for life was often an ugly, sordid thing” (332). The final reflection allows the reader to appreciate Somerset’s religious faith for she exalts an eternal afterlife over a difficult earthly one.

## Contrasting Worlds

The April 21, 1906 edition of *The Spectator* contains a rare review of *Under the Arch*. The reviewer laments a somewhat weak beginning and “infelicitous” plot structure, which is probably a result of the author’s rather strained effort to align the different views on social problems with a robust and credible storyline. The lukewarm but positive comments lead the reader to expect a “carefully and cleverly written” novel about “modern society manners” (24). The novel is praised for its great merit of portraying authentic characters. Plot weakness is said to be compensated for by realistic social portraits and the depiction of the “two sides of modern social life” (24). Indeed, Somerset’s extensive travelling on temperance or other business, often lodging with a working man’s family, gave her first-hand knowledge of their “privations and temptations” (Chappell 46). She was thus thoroughly conversant with the proverbial Two Nations. The different worlds are described thus:

Lady Hornden had just returned from the station to her house in Park Lane, had eaten luncheon with unimpaired appetite, and after having changed her dress and draped herself in a clinging tea-gown was prepared for the usual stream of afternoon callers. The responsibility of selecting the right visitors rested with the butler. (11)

The first breath of wind made Elizabeth open the window [in her slum tenement], and the strip of sky above held her there. After a hideous afternoon of fog and rain and mud—a day that made ugliness more ugly and misery more miserable—that strip of sky was like a sight of green fields, like a breath of air from the hills; like the sound of the sea. (25)

The reader is given a glimpse of the rituals of aristocratic life through a description of Lady Hornden’s social schedule, revolving around servants, bounteous food, changes of attire and indoor entertainment in an exclusive area of London. This was Somerset’s world. In the wretched slums of the East End of London, on the other hand, the young heartbroken, lovesick heroine Elizabeth finds solace in a small piece of sky which is compared rapturously to her former home in the idyllic, green countryside. However, the reader is quickly reminded that although there may be gardens “gay with flowers that bees love best” (32), there are also problems in the rural parts of England:

To many that have been called to face the problem of cities, the illusion has remained that, unlike towns, country places are not infected by the social sickness. But a little experience soon shows that the thatched, rose-covered cottages and picturesque village streets are too often but white sepulchres, hiding behind fair exteriors the plague of overcrowding, bad water, unsanitary drainage, and other evils, which eat out the life of the slum dwellers. (34)

The idealised countryside is exposed as no better than the urban slum, and the reader is reminded of the shocking, stark reality of life facing the poor in both places.

## The Drink Problem

As aforementioned, Somerset was extremely well versant with the causes and effects of alcohol abuse. She believed among the chief causes of female drunkenness was “insufficient food, bad air, and dreary surroundings” (Chappell 55). The drink question is discussed under a number of guises in *Under the Arch*.

Elizabeth excuses the resort to drink by the destitute because one must “remember the conditions in which they live, in which they sleep—five or six in one room in a dark little street. . . . Do you wonder every taste is vitiated? I don’t. I hate drinking as much as you do, but I often feel that if I were in their place I should do the same” (145-46).

Mrs Catchpole, the drunken and lazy mother of children Sally and Billy, lets her new baby fall out of a window to her death when she is too drunk to watch her properly. She subsequently elicits money from Elizabeth, who against her better judgement advances a sum for the funeral. Despite her empathy with the poor in general and perhaps because Mrs Catchpole is shown as other than heroic in the face of difficulties, Elizabeth explodes in anger at the mother’s neglect. When hungry Billy, a tough child who knows how to defend himself, is later sent to a reformatory for stealing a potato the reader is left to feel that the mother’s drinking was to blame despite his mother’s claims that he had “allus been a bad boy” (316). Although the mother and father are both drunkards and the children “haven’t a chance, humanly speaking,” they are the “most warm-hearted darlings that ever lived” (147). Sally is shown to be very protective of her baby sister, a good singer with a pious nature and is eventually saved by being employed as a maid in Elizabeth and Michael’s country household. Their abusive childhood—“mofer comes back boozed, an’ last night when she seed us she kicked Billy, and she ‘it me” (293)—is shown as just one more consequence of poverty.

The common habit of giving babies alcohol is mentioned—“She likes her little sip” (304)—when Katherine disguises herself as a working class woman and consults a doctor in the local public hospital, anxious to find out what is really wrong with her and what her own doctors and family are keeping from her. Hunger, ill-health, drink, debauchery, disease and age are listed as the main reasons people filled the waiting room. The hospital staff had stopped feeling great sympathy for them because, as the author explains, they were exposed to the suffering on a daily basis.

Elizabeth laments the fact that strike meetings were held in public houses because money, although scarce, was always found to buy a drink at these times. A strike leader, Mr Sumner, derides hypocrisy by stating that other (wealthier) men meet at their clubs without criticism so the poor man should be able to meet in his club, the pub (149). Temperance Friendly Societies were one solution to this problem/temptation and had thousands of members at the turn of the century. At a time when there were few places available for public meetings, one of their characteristics was precisely that they did not meet in pubs.

The rag and bone “lady” Mrs Green is described as wandering drunkenly down the street and falling in front of Elizabeth’s house. Elizabeth listens for thirty minutes to her ramblings about the misfortunes that had befallen her, knowing the stories to be true, and peeks out through her window to see a passing policeman not only help her to pray the Our Father but to raise her up and go home. The kindly portrayal of the authority figure contrasts with a reality where the police at this time generally acted as moral missionaries by enforcing compliance with drink, gambling and other laws.

## Helping the Poor

The doctrine Elizabeth and others tried to follow in *Under the Arch* was that of Samuel Smiles’ Self Help: “to help them [the poor] help themselves” (108). It is “The Housing Question” that Elizabeth Maynell is first directed to help alleviate when she arrives in the East End of London. She is given the task of collecting the rents from the slum tenants, and this enables her to become acquainted with the people and their problems first-hand. As Somerset was a prodigious committee woman, so Elizabeth helps the destitute to help themselves by attending strike support meetings, The Factory Girls’ Club and so on in an effort to improve living and working conditions.

Somerset would have been familiar with the Riots in Trafalgar Square in the 1880s that highlighted the plight of the many homeless camped out in the centre of London. The Housing Acts resulting from the Royal Commission set up by PM Lord Salisbury in 1883 acknowledged the radical possibility of the state taking responsibility for housing the working classes. In 1895, Somerset’s editorial in the monthly *The Woman’s Signal Budget* (Vol. 1. No. 5, 37) urged her fellow London BWTA members to help with the work of the progressives on the London County Council (LCC) for no official body “had done more to assist just

legislation, and nothing can be of vaster importance than the return to power of men who understand the sacred responsibilities of true citizens” (1). However, the LCC was slow to intervene in the working-class housing crisis. By March 1900, over 10,000 persons had been housed in forty-eight blocks, although the poorest were generally excluded and subsidized housing was rejected by the Progressives and Moderates on the LCC (Fraser 273). Thousands thus waited in vain for a decent place to live.<sup>2</sup> Ironically, Somerset had inherited, along with large estates at Eastnor (Herefordshire) and Reigate Priory (Surrey), lucrative London property including the working-class district of Somers Town, St. Pancras, with 125,000 tenants. She was criticised for not doing enough to ameliorate the rundown area and printed an explanation in *The Woman's Signal Budget* (January 1895) claiming long leases hampered her actions, but a reform plan backed by the LCC was said to be in place. (38)

The saintly Father Martin is “the embodiment of good” (120). He helped the London dockers, car drivers, costers and other labourers to find work and encouraged them when they faltered, irrespective of drink abuse or personal failing, pulling them out of the pub when need be. He helped them in sickness, baptised, married and buried them. He is a believer in getting back to a right understanding of natural life, for Christ had come to common people and taught them common things. The important thing is “the atmosphere created by each individual, who carries about with him his own world, and in the inner workings of his own heart creates a force for good or evil” (153). Some called him a socialist, a fraternizer with dissenters and agnostics, and he is disliked by his fellow clergy. He had lived and worked for over thirty-five years in the London slums, where he is “one of the best-known men in the poorest part of that district [his parish]” (120). He worked there before there was widespread interest in the deprivation of the area, “when no journalist described their horrors and no enthusiasts founded settlements or clubs” (120). He claims that duty is the foundation of all true life, namely Christian duty to do good. This is his reason for not only transgressing normal church practice (he administered to parishioners of another parish thereby engendering suspicion from other clergy), but more importantly for criticising the Catholic hierarchy for misusing money and, in effect, not helping the poor. Somerset was an Anglican and not averse to pointing out failings in that religion too, (she returned to this church after a period of disenchantment). The authorial voice in the novel disapproves of the close observation and judgmental attitude of an Anglican congregation concerning the behaviour in church of prominent individuals, for example (48-9).

Elizabeth's friend and future husband Michael Fane is a keen socialist. He genuinely cares for the poor and together with Elizabeth he constitutes the moral compass of the novel. Michael is shown carrying out both urban and rural relief initiatives for he comes from Ilbury but lives and works in London. He laments Elizabeth's absence at a thrilling London meeting about affordable housing for the low paid, for “You would have enjoyed it. Gessner<sup>3</sup> was superb. I have never heard him better; he absolutely demolished Blount and his miserable individualistic theories.<sup>4</sup> I'm most awfully sorry you weren't there” (21). Michael is looked upon with suspicion in Ilbury for even though the country people do not know what being a socialist entails, they nevertheless feel it is a dangerous thing. Moreover, he never goes to church. Eric's uncle, the old Mr Errington, has a very low opinion of the ranting “Radical” and exclaims with some sarcasm:

Why, I understand he held a meeting about the state of the cottages; said every labourers ought to have at least three bedrooms, and a drawing room and a piano, I suppose! A man without a penny of his own to bless himself with telling land-lords what they ought to do—it's unbearable. (54)

<sup>2</sup> The LCC evicted over 5,000 in this slum clearance programme but very few moved into the newly built Boundary Estate. Rents were too high. Most moved to other parts of the East End, simply relocating the problem from one geographical area to another (“The Great Estate”).

<sup>3</sup> Hubert Gessner built The Worker's Home in 1902-3. He was one of the first New Wave designers to embody socialist ideals in his designs, for example by designing multi-functional low-cost homes for the poor and underprivileged. (Howard 76)

<sup>4</sup> Individualism stresses that the interests of the individual are paramount and they have political or economic rights with which the state must not interfere.

He was, not surprisingly, a tireless and selfless worker for the improvement of the living and working conditions of the urban and rural poor. He is chided by Elizabeth for talking as if he were at a public meeting (23) and does give the impression that a soap box would be a fitting accessory for him. He tries to awaken “the sleepers all round us” (22) so they can act to alleviate the misery of the poor. Rejecting the notion that suffering will be rewarded in the afterlife, he promotes good works to relieve suffering in the present and to bring justice to all. In a key passage of the book, Michael lays bare what he sees as class hypocrisy, oppression and injustice:

Fancy, if you could really show men that the commandment which rich men listen to with such complacency every week, “Thou shalt not steal,” with a comfortable feeling that it does not apply to them, is the very one that they are breaking, in common with the tramp who sneaks a loaf, or the poacher who bags a rabbit; only theirs is a crime black and hideous, whereas the other is often excused a thousand-fold by circumstances. The poor man is caught and put into prison; that doesn’t prove his guilt. The other sits to condemn him on a magistrate’s bench, or is made a baronet or a peer, and patted on the back as a valuable member of society, and all the while his slum dwellings are the breeding places of crime. But if he were to clear them he would lose income, and so, to benefit himself, he steals the health and happiness of men and women and little children. Most people never look on things as they are, but are contented with what they seem. That is why the horrible, hideous hypocrisy of it all has eaten into our national life. (23)

Alluding to Ilbury allows Somerset to comment on the plight of rural workers (especially their poor wages and housing) and on the duties of any large landowner, whether titled or not. The aforementioned avaricious and miserly old banker Mr Errington, Eric’s uncle, is the owner of a 10,000-acre estate which had been in his family for generations. He is hated by his tenants whereas another large landowner, Lord Oxenholme, despite paying his bills late and therefore prejudicing his workers, is held in affection by his. The former controls his workers closely and forces them to attend church on Sundays, even when ill, showing not only his wilful inhumanity but also the decidedly ungenerous face of the established church. The latter hurts them largely through ignorance.

The resignation to adversity so characteristic of the rural poor of the time is seen in old Betsy, who submits to life as it is. The bent figure whose life had been hard and full of pain, whose three children had all died before her, believed it would all “cum right,” her children safe in death waiting for their mother to join them. Martha, Elizabeth’s longstanding nanny, is also a believer in divine ordination:

It’s no use, Miss Elizabeth, God made some rich and some po’r; and we are distinctly told, and I see no reason for giving up my religion, that we’ve to order ourselves lowly and reverently to all our betters, and be content with that state of life to which it ‘as pleased God to call us. There must be differences, and there is [sic] differences. . . . God has put the rich man in ‘is castle, and the po’r man at his gate, and not all the learning in all the world is going to alter it, till we’re equal in ‘eaven. (31)

Somerset herself was initially no different to the proverbial paternalistic do-gooder, for she visited her tenants’ homes, took Bible readings in their kitchens, advised on child rearing and so on. She holds this approach up to ridicule in *Under the Arch*, however, by portraying the stereotypical upper-class charity worker as Lady Augusta Leaven. Lady Augusta is conscious that times are changing, but believes the “passing fashion of an hour has no real significance; it is birth only which really sets distinction on the individual” (134), thinking she held both distinction and worth. Critical of the “noisy movements that force women to the front” (137), she opposes those women who want “rights and that sort of thing,” i.e. the suffrage (138), preferring a quieter approach through influence. She confesses to putting aside two days a week “for doing good” in the East End and is unaware that she might in fact not be the best judge of what that entails. She is a staunch defender of the class system and disapproves of classes mixing: “one can never be really friends with people of another class, but of course, it must do them good to know you take an interest in them” (144). She does not fear socialism, believing that the social divide benefits the poor—those to fear are the upwardly mobile middle class: “The lower orders are perfectly aware of the value of the aristocracy. . . . Once the people understand who are their true friends they will rally round us. It was so in the French Revolution” (135). For her, the thrift clubs, Mothers’ Meetings, Band of Hope and Clothing Clubs offered plenty of help. Her patronising attitude is obviously out-of-touch:

I go to the East End where I conduct a class of mothers. One hundred women under my control. I tell them what they should do, how to manage their homes. I keep them from drink, and then, you see, . . . I show them how impossible it is for the masses to exist without the classes.(134)

The difficulty I find . . . is to get any idea of thrift into their heads. They are so wasteful in their cooking, and in dress, and in fact in everything. They will not learn to make a *pot au feu* with broken bits, or how to cook little dainty things which can be made so cheaply without meat, in my Thrift Club. (145)

Katherine Hornden, on the other hand, although well-intentioned, has an ignorant, idealistic philanthropic vision that does not involve real contact with the underprivileged and any dirtying of hands. After showing interest in what was happening in the East End of London, she is taken by Lady Augusta to visit Elizabeth. Indeed, Elizabeth is to be shown off rather like an exotic exhibit in a museum. When invited actually to meet some of Elizabeth's pauper neighbours, however, Katherine shows utter aversion and a preference to stay and talk. She had visions of dirty staircases and ill-smelling rooms: "[i]t's the dirt that must be so trying" said Katherine. 'Oh, you can get used to anything,' said Elizabeth, pouring out the tea" (147-48). Katherine later sends flowers from her own garden to a children's hospital in order to appease her conscience but fails to realise that this will not feed a hungry child. When she cautions: "[i]t was very difficult to do good in London, one was so likely to be taken in" (140), the old division of deserving and undeserving poor comes to mind. This was the very basis of the 1834 New Poor Law, a utilitarian measure designed to restrict relief so the receiver/poor house inmate would be worse off than someone gainfully employed. In 1906, the time the novel was written, and even today there are fears that some people (the undeserving) are taking advantage of the welfare system to the detriment of those who really need help (the mentally and physically sick and disabled, the temporarily unemployed and so on).

The new mania of visiting the slums of Whitechapel, Limehouse "or some such hole," slumming, is mocked by Somerset. Lady Hornden declares that the slums are "nasty typhoid places, smelling bad smells," where the women foolhardy enough to go there could carry back microbes in their skirts (245). Sir James decries this new craze: "I've seen many new manias, from crinolines to motor cars, but upon my soul, that taste beats me altogether. Everybody's mad" (245). He laments its preposterousness: "[w]hy not stick to our end of the town, and enjoy what the gods send us?" (246) Miss Sherringdon, normally pretty, personifies the negative consequences of the fad, being described as dirty-faced, looking tired and "draggie-tail" (245). She admits that although her slumming does little good, "everybody goes now" (246), revealing a lack of real empathy and a fascination with what today could be the subject of a reality TV programme.

## Women's Place

Somerset paints a picture of a patriarchal society where women generally defer to the male opinion. For example, Eric asks Elizabeth to keep their engagement secret, and when she asks him if this would be right he replies benignly: "Yes, because I tell you . . . and you had better begin to practise obedience now, for you will have to do so very soon" (73). The same Eric, feeling useless at the news of his uncle's death, wants to relieve his widowed aunt of her burdens by offering to make all the funeral arrangements. "The little woman" acquiesces with "the lifelong habit of obedience reasserting itself" (78). Not everyone could defer, and one of the reasons Elizabeth leaves Ilbury is because she is given an ultimatum by her aunt to "submit" to her authority. Interestingly, it is not a male but a female demand for obedience that drives her out.

However, Somerset uses her authorial voice to comment on courage and gender, claiming that its nature is different in each sex:

Men may lead the forlorn hope, may stand by the colors, and never flinch, may grasp the hand of death and never waver, when honor and duty hold him to his post; but woman can smile when the wolf gnaws beneath into the living flesh, or laugh when she holds the asp to her white breast. Hers is the courage of endurance, the power to be wounded and never murmur, to hide the wound through long days of suffering and go on fighting. (97)

One is reminded of her own personal need for endurance on occasion of her protracted and very public



divorce and child custody case, a scandal of the time.

The proverbial New Woman is portrayed in *Under the Arch* by a Miss Osterley, who initially acts as Elizabeth's mentor in the slums. An atheistic defender of women's rights, she regards marriage as moral slavery. She is described somewhat disparagingly by Somerset as being on the lookout for a social grievance. Osterley is used to espouse the more contentious contemporary ideas of the day such as votes for women and female labour rights, and also the new methods for exposing social ills via "plucky young girls, who go disguised to all sorts of places, and bring back most valuable evidence" (311). Male fact-finders were nothing new (Charles Dickens and Joseph Rowntree, for example) but attention is given here to the increased intervention in this public sphere by young females. The reference to disguise is reminiscent of the tactics being used in 1906 by suffrage and temperance activists at hustings and elsewhere when admittance was dependent on not being recognised at the door. Somerset was herself an avid supporter of women's rights, writing in favour of female suffrage in *The Women's Signal*. She thought women could eventually vote for MPs who supported temperance legislation and thereby facilitate improved conditions in the home:

In working thus for legislative reform we cannot but be strengthened in our convictions that the women's vote must be the weapon with which the final blow will be dealt to an evil which more than any other affects the home. (vol. 1 no.5 37)

By printing the Rev. John Henry Barrow's letter "The Ideal Woman" in the aforementioned journal she certainly does not show herself to be radical on this topic. He writes: "[a]nd I believe you have been educated for the home, and not away from the home" (41). This was the thinking of Somerset's very good friend and ally the American activist Frances Willard among others. However, it is clear in a letter written to BWTA members on July 21, 1893 to clarify her position on this subject that while she will not involve this organization with the suffrage cause she very much supports it on an individual basis:

I understand there has been some misapprehension concerning the formation of the United Committee of which Mrs Henry Fawcett is Chairman, and the object of which is to secure a large petition of individual signatures in favour of Woman's Enfranchisement. . . . I have joined in this movement with the explicit understanding that my action was in no wise to implicate the British Women's Temperance Association, and I hope that this statement may set at rest any rumours to the contrary that have been made, in the press or elsewhere. (Letter 1893)

Marriage and illegitimacy are mentioned briefly when Michael informs Elizabeth that militiaman Joe Carter, blinded by patriotism, has gone to war and left his unmarried, pregnant partner alone and destitute. Elizabeth says she will do what she can for her and call on her the next day (24). There is no disparaging moral judgement here but rather a humanitarian approach to a difficult situation.

## Patriotism

Sir Jack and Eric's participation in the Boer war is the vehicle for Somerset's discussion of Britain's imperial policy. This is the only time she takes an overtly political stance. Showing realism of the dangers involved, through Michael we learn that war is "the bitter fruit we are reaping of that shameful raid, [Jameson Raid 1895<sup>5</sup>] and we are going to have a tougher job than they dream of for the Boers are sharpshooters and hard riders" (116), and Elizabeth asks what is to be gained in return for the misery. She puts Christian principles before revenge saying she supposes if they were patriotic "we should be shouting 'Avenge Majuba' with the rest"; but a war of revenge did not seem very glorious from a Christian Standpoint. (117)

Somerset juxtapositions very different kinds of battles, never letting the reader forget that each is a deadly struggle and hypocrisy is not far away. Michel says:

The god of battles is not the Christian's Christ, and yet every parson and minister in the country will be applauding our patriotism and slanging the Boers, and blowing the war flame into stronger blast; people who would not have a moment's enthusiasm for the battle which we try to fight at home for clean living and decent homes for their own country-men. Bah—we are a nation of hypocrites. (118)

<sup>5</sup> An ineffective attempt to overthrow President Paul Kruger of the Transvaal Republic in December 1895.

Elizabeth cautions that Michael's realism may be taken as treason by others and warns him to be silent or to vent his anger with his friends, in private, but his angry assertion that war postpones the resolution of social problems and "diverts men's minds from living issues at home" is heartfelt (119). The immediate aftermath, according to Father Martin, is a dangerous headlong rush of enthusiasm to cure the ills at home involving unemployment, poor financial resources and high taxes, "[t]hat's the home-coming—the end . . . I think we Socialists have found the truth that the greater and more real the patriotism the wider our sympathy for all humanity. By-and-by we shall understand better that God has made of one blood all the nations of the world" (119-20).

Reasonable attention is given to the patriotic feelings of ordinary British soldiers and officers. For example, Elizabeth says that "[t]he men who went felt it their duty, and they are willing to die for it. The war may be a criminal mistake, but it has called out splendid qualities in the men who have risked everything to go" (24). The Boers are also acknowledged to believe in the righteousness of their cause (118). As for the opinions of Boer women, the motives for fighting are discussed, and it is patent where Somerset's sympathies lie: although she does not condemn the ordinary soldiers for their sincere patriotism, she derides the hypocrisy of an imperialism driven by a financial gain that she believes governs British policy. Michael comments, "If the mud in South Africa did not hold these cursed baubles, and men did not think their souls well lost for money . . . we should care nothing for suzerainty. If Griqualand had no diamond fields we could afford to let the Boers feed their cattle on the veldt" (117).

## Conclusion

After reading *Under the Arch* and knowing something of Isabel Somerset's life, it is obvious that she drew on personal experience and knowledge to write her love story of hardship and hope. President of the BWTA and landlady of a London slum district as well as other more salubrious properties, having many aristocratic friends and family, she had/attained the requisite know-how to write this novel. By addressing issues related to drink abuse, imperialism, women's rights and the responsibility of the upper social classes towards the lower, some of the social problems and reforms in vogue at the time of writing are revealed but moral responsibility is not really apportioned. Somerset offers a space for reflection. She rehearses the old, tired justifications for social and gender inequality and for empire, comparing them with modern alternatives.

*Under the Arch* shines a light on the class divide and reveals love in many guises. Elizabeth loves above her station and is disappointed until, through loving the poor, she reveals her nature to Michael, who loves her for who she is. Their love has a ripple effect when they host visits from London slum children and the elderly in their country home. Katherine is dazzled by Eric's superficiality but learns, too late, the meaning of true love. She learns from Elizabeth and shows the reader both effective and ineffective aid to the needy. Sending flowers to poor sick people will not fill their stomachs, but a decent job and good housing will go a long way to closing the gap between the Two Nations. It is, ironically, in a hospital waiting room that she finally comes face-to-face with the destitute and the truth. Father Martin, Miss Osterley and Michael Fane engage in what can be considered modern social work, which is not demonised under the tag of Socialism and is far from the voyeurism of the do-gooding slummers. Indeed, Somerset shows the oft-voiced opposition to radical socialist ideas through the comments of old Mr Errington and others but nevertheless portrays Michael Fane as an earnest friend of the poor.

Aristocrats were out-of-touch with the modern world and unable to discharge their age-old social responsibilities. Paternalism was on the way out, increased state responsibility on the way in. It is patent that Somerset wanted to make the reader think, and possibly to act. With this in mind, and given that welfare legislation was passed by the Liberal government from 1906, the year the book was published, one could conclude that Somerset's novel may have helped the reformers' cause a little.

## Works Cited

- Anon. "Rev. of *Under the Arch of Life*." *The Spectator*. (21 April 1906). Web. 19 April 2017 <<http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/21st-april-1906/24/under-the-arch-of-life-by-lady-henry-somerset-hurs>>
- Black, Ross. *A Talent for Humanity. The Life and Work of Lady Henry Somerset*. Chippenham and Eastbourne: Anthony Rowe, 2010.
- Chappell, Jennie. *Noble Work by Noble Women*. London: S. W. Partridge, 1900.
- Frazer, Hamish. "Municipal Socialism and Social Policy." *The Victorian City. A Reader in British Urban Housing 1820-1914*. Eds. R. J. Morris, R. Rodger. London: Longman, 1993: 258-280.
- Howard, Jeremy. *Art Nouveau. International and National Styles in Europe*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996.
- Niessen, Olwen C. *Aristocracy, Temperance and Social Reform. The Life of Lady Henry Somerset*. London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2007.
- Smitley, Megan K. "'Woman's Mission': The Temperance and Woman's Suffrage Movements in Scotland c. 1870-1914." Diss. University of Glasgow, Glasgow, Scotland, 2002. Web. 19 April 2017. <<http://theses.gla.ac.uk/1488/1/2002smitleyphd.pdf>>
- Somerset, Lady Henry. *Under the Arch*. New York: Doubleday, Page & Co. (1906) Reprinted by Kessinger Publishing Legacy Reprints, n.d.
- "The Woman's Signal." Circular letter. n.d. (BWTA archives, Solihull, England).
- "A New Year Letter." *The Woman's Signal Budget* 1.5 (January, 1895). (BWTA archives, Solihull, England).
- "Letter." Supplement to *The British Women's Temperance Journal* (August 1893). (BWTA archives, Solihull, England).
- "The Great Estate. The Rise and Fall of the Council House." Web. 19 April 2017. BBC documentary, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WVGMyo40SyE>>