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EVACUATION, HYGIENE, AND SOCIAL POLICY: THE *OUR TOWNS* REPORT OF 1943*

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ABSTRACT. *There has recently been much debate about social policy in Britain during the Second World War. This article takes up Jose Harris's suggestion that historians should look not at large-scale forces, but at 'those minuscule roots of idiosyncratic private culture'. As a way into the complex amalgam that comprised ideas on social policy in the 1940s, we look in particular at the report on the evacuation of schoolchildren entitled Our towns: a close up, published by the Women's Group on Public Welfare in March 1943. Of course it is undeniable that one report is unrepresentative of all the many surveys that were produced on the evacuation experience. However, the initial wave of evacuation in September 1939 was the most significant, and the Our towns survey, along with a famous leader article in The Economist, has already received some selective attention from historians. Here we subject the survey to a more intensive examination, looking at the backgrounds of its authors, its content, and its reception by various professional groups. The article argues that it was the apparently contradictory nature of the report that explains its powerful appeal – it echoed interwar debates about behaviour and citizenship, but also reflected the ideas that would shape the welfare state in the post-war years.*

I

There has recently been much debate about the nature of social change in Britain during the Second World War, both with regard to definable shifts in thinking on social policy, and in terms of developments in provision on the ground. This article takes up Jose Harris's suggestion that historians working on the early 1940s should look not at large-scale progressive forces, but at 'those minuscule roots of idiosyncratic private culture'.¹ As a way into the complex amalgam that comprised ideas on social questions in the 1940s, we look in particular at one influential report on the evacuation of schoolchildren in September 1939. This is *Our towns: a close up*, produced by the Women's Group on Public Welfare and published by Oxford University Press in March 1943. Of course it is undeniable that one report is unrepresentative of all the many surveys that were produced on the evacuation experience, and arguable that it

* For their help with this article, I would like to thank Elizabeth Darling in locating the Elizabeth Denby papers, the staff of the Fawcett Library, and the editors and referees of the *Historical Journal*.

¹ J. Harris, 'War and social history: Britain and the home front during the Second World War', *Contemporary European History*, 1 (1992), pp. 17–35.

may give a misleading account of changes. However, although children were also moved from cities during the blitz of 1940 and at the time of the rocket attacks in 1944, the initial wave of evacuation in September 1939 was in many ways the most significant. Moreover the *Our towns* survey itself does merit re-examination, not least because the book, along with a famous leader article in *The Economist*, has already received some selective attention from both traditional and revisionist historians.² Here we subject the survey to a more intensive examination, looking at the backgrounds of its authors, its content, and its influence and impact on contemporary debates.

For many years, the standard account of welfare during the Second World War was that provided by Richard Titmuss in his civil history, published in 1950 as *Problems of social policy*. As is well known, Titmuss argued that the evacuation and the blitz 'stimulated inquiry and proposals for reform long before victory was even thought possible'. Hence during five years of war, 'the pressures for a higher standard of welfare and a deeper comprehension of social justice steadily gained in strength'. Certain health and welfare services, that had been subject to striking class and regional variations in the 1930s, were now provided on a much more generous level. School meals and milk, for instance, were expanded quickly in the early 1940s as benefits that were available to all and were now 'free of social discrimination and the indignities of the poor law'.³ Subsequently, of course, Titmuss elaborated his thesis on war and social change to argue that earlier and later wars had generated a similar concern with the quantity and quality of the population – wartime demanded an increase in social discipline which the general public would tolerate only if there was a corresponding reduction in social inequalities.⁴

In the era of what David Cannadine has referred to as 'welfare state triumphalism', the Titmuss thesis had a considerable influence on the work of post-war historians. A. J. P. Taylor, for instance, concluded succinctly in 1965 that 'the Luftwaffe was a powerful missionary for the welfare state', while W. G. Runciman, writing of relative deprivation, argued that the contacts between social classes that resulted from the evacuation 'were not always harmonious, but they forced on many people, however unwillingly, comparisons which they would not otherwise have made'.⁵ Similarly, Derek Fraser noted in 1973 that the evacuation led to greater state involvement in social

² See, for example, E. Wilson, *Women and the welfare state* (London, 1977), pp. 136–9, 140; J. Macnicol, 'The evacuation of schoolchildren', in H. L. Smith, ed., *War and social change: British society during the Second World War* (Manchester, 1986), pp. 3–31; B. Holman, *The evacuation: a very British revolution* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 143–6.

³ R. M. Titmuss, *Problems of social policy* (London, 1950), pp. 507–17. For a different perspective on the writing of this book see A. Oakley, *Man and wife: Richard and Kay Titmuss: my parents' early years* (London, 1996; pb edn, 1997).

⁴ R. M. Titmuss, 'War and social policy', in R. M. Titmuss, *Essays on 'the welfare state'* (London, 1958; 3rd edn, 1976), pp. 75–87.

⁵ A. J. P. Taylor, *English history, 1914–1945* (Oxford, 1965), p. 455; W. G. Runciman, *Relative deprivation and social justice: a study of attitudes to social inequality in twentieth-century England* (London, 1966), p. 77.

policy, writing that 'the unkempt, ill-clothed, undernourished and often incontinent children of bombed cities acted as messengers carrying the evidence of the deprivation of urban working-class life into rural homes'.⁶ It was an interpretation that fitted a period characterized by comparative agreement on the welfare state and relative increases in health spending.⁷ Moreover, even after the real or imagined consensus on the welfare state began to evaporate following the oil crisis of the early 1970s and under the impact of Thatcherism, the Titmuss interpretation proved surprisingly tenacious. One recent social policy textbook, for example, notes of the evacuation that 'it was as if a stone had been turned to expose the real nature and extent of child poverty and deprivation'.⁸

Yet while the Titmuss thesis has been influential, and is still followed in some historical accounts, there was evidence from the 1980s of increasing scepticism among revisionist historians. In the first edition of her biography of Beveridge, for example, Jose Harris had echoed Titmuss in arguing that the evacuation revealed to many middle-class people the extent of poverty among children in the cities, and variations in the quality of social services.⁹ However, by 1981 she had become more critical and suggested that, with the opening of some of the official papers, the Titmuss interpretation required 'some kind of refinement and modification'. She now argued there was little proof that the war 'in itself induced heightened government awareness of social welfare either as a tool of national efficiency or as a means of enhancing social solidarity'. And while she conceded there was evidence of a consensus on social policy issues, she suggested that it was a consensus of a peculiar kind.¹⁰ In more recent work, Jose Harris has placed social change in Britain during 1939–45 within the context of the wider European experience of the Second World War. The old 'home front' thesis, she claims, underestimates the fact that the war was fought largely in defence of the pluralism of British social life, fails to take sufficient account of the ambiguities and contradictions in the popular desire for post-war social change, and ignores the varied nature of wartime experiences.¹¹

In the specific case of evacuation, Jose Harris has suggested that the episode in fact confirmed middle-class stereotypes about the urban poor, while problems associated with head lice and bedwetting did not reduce but increased conflicts between social classes.¹² This was a thesis that had been put

⁶ D. Fraser, *The evolution of the British welfare state* (London, 1973), p. 195.

⁷ See, for example, P. Addison, *The road to 1945: British politics and the Second World War* (London, 1977; pb edn, 1994); P. H. J. H. Gosden, *Education in the Second World War: a study in policy and administration* (London, 1976).

⁸ R. Parker, 'Child care and the personal social services', in D. Gladstone, ed., *British social welfare: past, present and future* (London, 1995), p. 174. See also H. Glennerster, *British social policy since 1945* (Oxford, 1995), p. 63.

⁹ J. Harris, *William Beveridge: a biography* (Oxford, 1977), p. 381.

¹⁰ J. Harris, 'Some aspects of social policy in Britain during the Second World War', in W. J. Mommsen, ed., *The emergence of the welfare state in Britain and Germany* (London, 1981), pp. 247–62.

¹¹ Harris, 'War and social history', p. 34.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 28. See also Jose Harris, *William Beveridge: a biography* (Oxford, 1977; 2nd edn, 1997), p. 368.

forward by other revisionists. John Macnicol, in particular, had previously maintained that in the case of family allowances, civil servants conceded to public pressure in the 1940s, but did not necessarily accept the arguments of social reformers.¹³ Similarly, on the issue of the evacuation, Macnicol has argued that civil servants were reluctant to accept the evidence of deprivation among children, and maintained that education was more important than other measures to reduce poverty. Whereas Titmuss had drawn attention to such changes as increasing numbers of children receiving school milk, Macnicol has claimed that the expansion had been planned before the war; it was bound up with wider policies for food distribution and rationing, and the temporary cessation of means-testing was dictated by the needs of wartime. Above all, the evacuation had also served to strengthen a behavioural analysis of poverty, and this was reflected in the transition from the concept of the 'social problem group' to a new stress on the 'problem family'. Thus Macnicol argues that the evacuation merely reinforced differences between competing analyses of poverty, and he concludes that 'the ideological consensus of wartime, so stressed by Titmuss and some historians, was something of a myth'.¹⁴

Closer examination of the revisionist interpretation reveals that it has a number of different underlying strands. In the first place, it is suggested that Titmuss draws too stark a contrast between the interwar years and the 1940s, and provides a misleading account of health and welfare in the earlier period. In fact, spending by local authority health departments had been increasing, the more 'progressive' areas were taking on new responsibilities including municipal hospitals, and other advances in social policy were already under consideration. Secondly, the revisionists claim that the experience of evacuation did not reveal the predicament of the urban poor to a sympathetic rural middle class, but actually heightened class differences instead of dissolving them. The evidence of the health of evacuated schoolchildren was fragmentary and ambiguous – in this respect it was open to contrasting interpretations, and ultimately inconclusive. Furthermore, there was little evidence that civil servants now accepted that the solution to deprivation was higher wages and improved housing – rather minutes and memos show that they continued to put their faith in the education of both children and parents. Finally there is the suggestion, notably in the work of Macnicol, that the period witnessed a transition from the concept of the 'social problem group' to the new construction of the 'problem family'. The latter was more optimistic, in that rehabilitation was seen as the key, rather than segregation and sterilization as previously, but what was also clear was that pathological interpretations of poverty remained influential.

It is perhaps because of the apparently all-embracing nature of the revisionist interpretation that it has had such a considerable influence on recent accounts

¹³ J. Macnicol, *The movement for family allowances, 1918–45: a study in social policy development* (London, 1980), pp. 195–6.

¹⁴ Macnicol, 'The evacuation of schoolchildren', pp. 25–6. See also K. Jefferys, 'British politics and social policy during the Second World War', *Historical Journal*, 30 (1987), pp. 123–44.

of evacuation and of the Second World War. Anne Digby, for instance, has noted that 'evacuation probably reinforced class prejudices: the presence of some bed-wetting and lice-ridden child evacuees gave credence to stereotypes of working-class life-styles', while Virginia Berridge has agreed that the evacuation promoted as much class antagonism and prejudice as solidarity.¹⁵ Some have found it difficult to reconcile the allegedly limited impact of evacuation with the changes that did occur. Rodney Lowe, for example, has argued that greater contact between social classes increased rather than reduced prejudices, but he concedes that services had been shown as unacceptably uneven, and in this way calls for universal provision had been strengthened.¹⁶ But other recent studies have been adamant that the overseas evacuation scheme had a much more favourable impact on social change than its domestic equivalent, and have found little to substantiate the Titmuss thesis over a range of policy areas.¹⁷ In the same vein, Steven Fielding writes that evacuation did not necessarily promote egalitarianism, and responses were mixed – the middle class wanted to help the poor but continued to oppose state intervention, and put their faith in improvements to the education of working-class girls.¹⁸

If there has been a sense of an emerging consensus on the impact of the evacuation, there have also been signs that other historians have reverted to the traditional interpretation. Bob Holman, for example, has argued persuasively against the Macnicol thesis, while one of the most recent social histories of the period has concluded that 'evacuation of deprived inner-city children, sometimes displacing the comfortable classes from spacious homes, was a shock all round'.¹⁹ Moreover, it is an interesting paradox that while Macnicol argues that the impact of the evacuation of children has been exaggerated, he concedes that the parallel movement of the elderly did catapult the situation of old people into the political arena.²⁰ This suggests that these debates have only served to raise a number of further questions. These include the extent to which evacuation did create a mood for social reform, how far these changes were

¹⁵ A. Digby, *British welfare policy: workhouse to workfare* (London, 1989), p. 55; V. Berridge, 'Health and medicine', in F. M. L. Thompson, ed., *The Cambridge social history of Britain, 1750–1950, III: Social agencies and institutions* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 239.

¹⁶ R. Lowe, 'The Second World War, consensus, and the foundation of the welfare state', *Twentieth Century British History*, 1 (1990), p. 176; idem, *The welfare state in Britain since 1945* (London, 1993), p. 272.

¹⁷ P. Y. Lin, 'National identity and social mobility: class, empire and the British government overseas evacuation of children during the Second World War', *Twentieth Century British History*, 7 (1996), pp. 310–44; H. L. Smith, *Britain in the Second World War: a social history* (Manchester, 1996), pp. 2–27.

¹⁸ S. Fielding, 'The good war: 1939–1945', in N. Tiratsoo, ed., *From Blitz to Blair* (London, 1997; pb edn, 1998), pp. 34–5.

¹⁹ Holman, *The evacuation: a very British revolution*, pp. 128–35; P. Clarke, *Hope and glory: Britain 1900–1990* (London, 1996; pb edn, 1997), p. 207. See also H. Hendrick, *Children, childhood and English society, 1880–1990* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 53–5.

²⁰ J. Macnicol, 'Beveridge and old age', in J. Hills, J. Ditch, and H. Glennerster, eds., *Beveridge and social security: an international retrospective* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 81–2.

taken on board by civil servants, and whether they were consolidated in provision on the ground. Other questions relate to how far ideas on social policy marked a decisive break with the previous decade, and whether continuities may have been as striking as any changes. Here we use the *Our towns* report produced by the Women's Group on Public Welfare as a means of undertaking the task suggested by Harris. The article argues that it was the apparently contradictory nature of the report that explains its powerful appeal in wartime – it echoed interwar debates about behaviour and citizenship, but also reflected the ideas that would shape the welfare state in the post-war years.

II

Before moving on to consider the content and impact of the *Our towns* report, it is important to try to uncover the backgrounds of individual committee members, and some of their ideological commitments and connections. The actual drafting of the report is difficult to follow since the papers of the Women's Group on Public Welfare preserved at the Fawcett Library are incomplete for this early period. Moreover, tracing and contextualizing the members of the committee generates other methodological problems. But Elizabeth Denby's private papers provide a fascinating guide to the writing of the report in the period up to April 1941. What is clear is that the group was both part of a longer-term tradition of the involvement of women in social questions, and a more specific reflection of the political culture of the early 1940s. Similar groups had been involved in the campaigns for improvements to maternity and child welfare provision in the early 1900s, in the movement for family allowances, and in debates about child poverty in the 1930s.²¹ The survey was undertaken by the hygiene sub-committee of the Women's Group on Problems Arising from Evacuation, specifically as a response to the debates generated by the evacuation of schoolchildren in September 1939, and under the umbrella of the National Council of Social Service (NCSS). This became the Women's Group on Public Welfare in July 1940, aiming to focus on social services, and subsequently produced other reports in the post-war period, including on the issue of child neglect. There is evidence that other groups were disdainful of the Women's Group on Public Welfare, at least in the late 1940s. James Hinton has pointed out that members of the Women's Voluntary Service referred to it as 'an assembly of impractical theorists', claiming that this was an example of a powerful anti-intellectual ethos that had deep roots in female philanthropy.²²

The *Our towns* report was written by women, based largely on interviews with women, and was designed to influence policy-makers who were predominantly men. Whether the Women's Group on Public Welfare spawned equivalent

²¹ See, for example, J. Lewis, *The politics of motherhood: child and maternal welfare in England, 1900–1939* (London, 1980).

²² J. Hinton, 'Voluntarism and the welfare/warfare state: women's voluntary services in the 1940s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 9 (1998), p. 283 n. 47.

bodies to its hygiene sub-committee is not known, nor if the latter produced any other surveys. All we know is that, following pressure from the National Federation of Women's Institutes and National Union of Townswomen's Guilds, the NCSS convened a conference in September 1939 to consider certain problems arising from the evacuation. A body known as the Women's Group on Problems Arising from Evacuation came into existence in November 1939. This was chaired by Margaret Bondfield, its members included Marjory Allen of Hurtwood, and the secretary was Letty Harford of the NCSS.²³ A sub-committee was set up on rural sanitation, water supply and personal hygiene, chaired by Amy Sayle. Its terms of reference were 'to explore the problems of rural water supply and sanitation, and of manners and customs in the home, that have been raised as the result of evacuation'. The minutes of the first meeting, held on 28 November 1939, show that it was attended by Amy Sayle, Irene Barclay, Elizabeth Denby, Mrs Henry Haldane, Letty Harford, and Dora Ibberson.²⁴

The membership of the group bears closer examination. Marjory Allen of Hurtwood is best known for her famous letter to *The Times*, published in July 1944, that was instrumental in the setting up of the Curtis committee. Widow of Clifford Allen, active in the Labour party until he accepted a peerage in 1932, she had been a prominent figure in the Nursery Schools Association during the interwar period. Marjory Allen had first met Elizabeth Denby at Independent Labour party summer schools, and was a close friend, but she herself was to play no active part in the deliberations behind *Our towns*.²⁵ Margaret Bondfield, on the other hand, was to remain chairman of the Women's Group on Public Welfare until 1948. She had previously been Labour MP for both Northampton and Wallsend, and minister for labour 1929–31.²⁶ Amy Sayle had earlier written on public libraries and housing, had been involved in the Women Public Health Officers' Association, and was a member of the women's health enquiry committee.²⁷ Of the other members, Mrs Henry Haldane represented the National Federation of Women's Institutes, Dora Ibberson was a civil servant, and Irene Barclay worked for the St Pancras House Improvement Society.

One of the most interesting personalities in the group was Elizabeth Denby. She had previously worked for the Kensington Housing Trust (1926–33), had been involved in the New Homes for Old exhibitions on slum clearance, and

²³ Fawcett Library, London, Women's Forum A1, minutes of the Women's Group on Problems Arising from Evacuation, 30 Nov. 1939.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, minutes of the sanitation, water supply and personal hygiene sub-committee, 28 Nov. 1939.

²⁵ On the Curtis committee see S. M. Cretney, 'The state as a parent: the Children Act 1948 in retrospect', *Law Quarterly Review*, 114 (1998), pp. 419–59; and, more generally, M. Allen and M. Nicholson, *Memoirs of an uneducated lady: Lady Allen of Hurtwood* (London, 1975).

²⁶ M. Bondfield, *A life's work* (London, 1950), p. 350.

²⁷ A. Sayle, *Village libraries: a guide to their formation and upkeep* (London, 1919); *idem*, *The houses of the workers* (London, 1924).

worked with the architect Maxwell Fry on the influential Kensal House development. She was a member of the avant-garde Modern Architectural Research Group (MARS) founded in 1932, and on the fringes of the Architects and Technicians Organization (ATO), formed by Berthold Lubetkin in 1935.²⁸ Elizabeth Denby was a forceful personality, as her paper to the Royal Institute of British Architects, given in November 1936, and the reaction to it, make clear. Even Marjory Allen, one of her closest friends, conceded that 'Elizabeth's downright north-country ways did not suit everyone.'²⁹ But Denby was also an imaginative thinker whose Leverhulme fellowship, spent exploring low-cost housing in various European countries, led to a book-length study.³⁰ It is tempting to regard Denby as holding very different views from the other members, but in fact she shared many of their ideas, and had been active, for instance, in the movement for nursery schools in the 1930s.

The fact that the NCSS provided the secretarial support is interesting in light of its work in both rural and urban areas in the interwar period. Following its creation in 1919, this body had been involved in the setting up of rural community councils, and in social work in connection with unemployment. Another dimension to its activities was provided by the New Estates Community Council (NECC), founded in 1928, and chaired by Professor Ernest Barker. The NECC thought that the greatest problems facing society were leisure and the breakdown of the traditional society, and it advanced a vision of 'community' based on centres and associations. Its role was that of an enabler, but it never attracted resources from the state. It has been suggested that its views were ill-conceived, and that it had unreal expectations of both the working and the middle class. The NECC regarded housing estates such as Becontree as flawed and dangerous, but it never tried to find out what the tenants of estates themselves wanted. Moreover, its solutions were drawn from classical Greece, and they ignored the realities of party political, industrial, and class conflicts.³¹ Partly for these reasons, by the end of the 1930s the NCSS had begun to rethink its role, and underwent some preliminary restructuring at the outbreak of war, including the creation of the Women's Group on Public Welfare.

If the influence of the NCSS was one strand, some of the members of the hygiene sub-committee had previous links with housing management. As a technique for civilizing tenants, this went back to the late nineteenth century and to Octavia Hill. As is well known, in 1866 she and John Ruskin had bought

²⁸ K. Frampton, *Modern architecture: a critical history* (London, 1980), p. 253; P. Coe and M. Reading, *Lubetkin and Tecton: architecture and social commitment: a critical study* (London, 1981), pp. 44-66, 89-93.

²⁹ E. Denby, 'Rehousing from the slum dweller's point of view', *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, 44 (1936), pp. 61-80; Allen and Nicholson, *Memoirs of an uneducated lady*, pp. 114-16.

³⁰ E. Denby, *Europe re-housed* (London, 1938).

³¹ M. Brasnett, *Voluntary social action: a history of the National Council of Social Service, 1919-1969* (London, 1969), pp. 55-88; A. Olechnowicz, *Working-class housing in England between the wars: the Becontree estate* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 8-10, 137-48, 223-7.

houses in London to let in weekly tenements to the poor. However, she also wrote in 1864 that sanitary improvement depended on education, 'that they must be urged to rouse themselves from the lethargy and indolent habits into which they have fallen, and freed from all that hinders them from doing so'.³² Along with games for children, playgrounds, and maypoles, an opportunity to see each family was provided by the weekly visits of the rent collector. Thus female housing managers collected the rents, supervised the cleaning, and gave advice on repairs and improvements. Other forms of help aimed not to destroy independence – helping tenants to find work, collecting savings, supplying them with flowers, teaching them to grow plants, and providing amusement.³³ This continued to be the most important principle. In 1907 for instance, Octavia Hill wrote that 'building was never what I felt our main duty. It was always the right management of the houses which I felt the greatest need.' It was a system that was based on experience rather than theory, and which depended on her individual capacity to work with the poor. She was convinced that the regular visits of the rent collectors would lead to better habits among the tenants. The fundamental aim was to remoralize relations between the landlord and the tenant.³⁴

There were some problems with management in practice. By the 1880s and 1890s, it was difficult to get caseworkers as well as tenants, and Octavia Hill was ready to consider a more formal attempt at training workers. Nevertheless, housing management remained an issue through the interwar period. Neville Chamberlain, minister for health, for example, argued in 1933 that 'no scheme of slum clearance, or slum reconditioning will solve the problem or prevent the re-creation of slums, unless it is followed by enlightened and thoughtful management'.³⁵ The London county council (LCC) appointed a housing manager in 1912 and the Association of Women Housing Workers was formed in 1916, later becoming the Society of Women Housing Estate Officers. Furthermore, the Moyne committee on housing recommended that the Octavia Hill system should be extended, and housing management was exported to other countries in the 1930s, including South Africa.³⁶ Recent debates have indicated that housing management continues to be advocated by some as a solution to social exclusion on large housing estates.³⁷ But in the 1930s, this remained an undeveloped area of public administration. The

³² O. Hill, *Homes of the London poor* (London, 1875), p. 14.

³³ E. S. Ouvry, ed., *Extracts from Octavia Hill's 'letters to fellow-workers' 1864 to 1911* (London, 1933), p. 13.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 60. On housing management see N. Boyd, *Josephine Butler, Octavia Hill, Florence Nightingale: three Victorian women who changed their world* (London, 1982), pp. 150–63; G. Darley, *Octavia Hill* (London, 1990), pp. 270–84; J. Lewis, *Women and social action in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Aldershot, 1991), pp. 51–64.

³⁵ Ouvry, *Extracts from Octavia Hill*, p. iii.

³⁶ PP 1932–3, xiii (Cmd. 4397), *Report of the departmental committee on housing*, pp. 10, 12–13, paras. 18–19, 23; J. Robinson, 'Octavia Hill women housing managers in South Africa: femininity and urban government', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 24 (1998), pp. 459–81.

³⁷ A. Power, *Property before people: the management of twentieth-century council housing* (London, 1987), pp. 22–39; R. Whelan, ed., *Octavia Hill and the social housing debate* (London, 1998), pp. 1–39.

Institute of Housing was a rival body safeguarding the interests of local government officers, and only fifty-six women estate managers were employed by thirty-four councils in 1935, managing less than 5 per cent of the total council stock. The women housing managers were on the defensive and their views largely ignored – wartime debates on social policy offered a platform for their ideas.

In these ways, the *Our towns* report and its authors can be located in the context of social thought in the 1930s. And though set up as a way of pooling expertise, it is clear that from the outset this diverse group had rather different ideas. An early memo circulated by Dora Ibberson, for example, argued that the problem before the sub-committee was that of ‘the ways of living of the town mother’. In her view, the group’s main objective should be to find out how homes had produced girls who as mothers were ‘insanitary and offensive in their personal habits’.³⁸ This predominantly educational focus was in contrast to the more overtly political stance taken by Margaret Bondfield. In a radio broadcast of December 1939, for instance, she argued that evacuation strengthened calls for social reform, noting that ‘we have not cared enough about the poverty, unemployment, and ill health that have made havoc of people’s lives’. Her talk was subsequently reprinted in the press, with the title ‘Towards a better Britain’.³⁹ The suggestion that the group was fractured by disagreements is supported by other sources. In her autobiography, Irene Barclay confirmed that there were tensions between Amy Sayle and Elizabeth Denby, and claimed that she and Letty Harford were the mediators.⁴⁰

Although the stated aim was to study both rural sanitation and urban customs, by the time of the next meeting, in December 1939, the emphasis had shifted more towards cleanliness and personal habits.⁴¹ Indeed, this was reflected in a change of name, since by January 1940, the group had become the hygiene sub-committee. Otherwise it proceeded in the normal way, given limited resources, by examining evidence, allocating tasks to individual members, and interviewing witnesses. Thus Elizabeth Denby surveyed the medical officer of health (MOH) reports for Manchester, Liverpool, Derbyshire, and Hampshire, and there were studies of individual areas, in which Denby looked at Paddington, Sayle at Battersea and Shoreditch, Barclay at St Pancras and Stepney, and Harford at Sheffield. The group passed various resolutions relating to ministry of health policy on housing and slum clearance.⁴² In later months, the meetings of the sub-committee were primarily

³⁸ Building Research Establishment, Garston, Hertfordshire, Elizabeth Denby papers, 116674, D. Ibberson, ‘Hygiene in the home and person’, 28 Nov. 1939.

³⁹ Fawcett Library, Women’s Forum A40, ‘draft for broadcast talk’, 12 Dec. 1939, p. 5; *ibid.*, cutting from the *Manchester Guardian*, 29 Dec. 1939.

⁴⁰ I. Barclay, *People need roots: the story of the St Pancras Housing Association* (London, 1976), pp. 86–8.

⁴¹ Denby papers, minutes of the rural sanitation, water supply and personal hygiene sub-committee, 15 Dec. 1939.

⁴² *Ibid.*, minutes of the hygiene sub-committee, 12 Jan. 1940, 6 Feb. 1940.

taken up with hearing the evidence presented by a total of twenty-seven witnesses. These comprised health visitors, head teachers, housing managers, social workers, billeting officers, representatives of voluntary organizations, and local government officers. All but two were women, and most had worked or were working in the London area.⁴³ The sub-committee also drew on other studies of evacuation, such as the report published by the National Federation of Women's Institutes, and the preliminary results of the Cambridge study that had been conducted by Susan Isaacs.

By May 1940, the sub-committee had planned an outline for the report and had begun to arrange for the drafting of individual sections. The meetings now included a couple of additional members, Fabian Brackenbury, a lecturer in health education at Avery Hill Training College, and Cicely McCall, of the National Federation of Women's Institutes.⁴⁴ In June, the sub-committee considered an analysis, prepared by Letty Harford, of the evidence of the expert witnesses on 'personal hygiene and insanitary habits' under the headings 'facts', 'causes', and 'remedies'. Subsequently, Dora Ibberson agreed to draw up a synopsis of the report and to draft recommendations.⁴⁵ Other papers by individual members of the sub-committee were also discussed at a meeting in July 1940. These included papers by Denby on slum clearance in Vienna, by Harford on hygiene, by Brackenbury on health education, by Barclay on housing, and by Sayle on hygiene. A further paper by McCall, on relationships between town and country, was also considered in August 1940.⁴⁶

The sub-committee agreed that there should be two final reports – one short and popular in tone, the other longer and suitable for serious discussion – and Ibberson agreed to write them.⁴⁷ Drafts of the final report were ready for discussion by March 1941, when it was agreed that those passages relevant to local and central government should be summarized and presented to suitable representatives. In addition, it was agreed that a shortened and popular form for the general public should be printed and sold for 6d.⁴⁸ Unfortunately at this point Elizabeth Denby dropped out of the meetings of the sub-committee, since she had become involved in preparing the reports on Shropshire, Herefordshire, and South Worcestershire for G. D. H. Cole's Nuffield College Social Re-

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 'The women's group on problems arising from evacuation'.

⁴⁴ C. McCall, *Women's Institutes* (London, 1943).

⁴⁵ Denby papers, minutes of the hygiene sub-committee, 31 May 1940, 25 June 1940.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, E. Denby, 'Problems of character: constructive treatment of slum character in Vienna, 1930–1935, by the municipality, constructive treatment in some Italian cities, 1918–1940', 15 July 1940; M. L. Harford, 'Personal hygiene and sanitary habits', 15 July 1940; E. F. Brackenbury, 'Health education in the school', 12 July 1940; E. Denby, 'Suggested short-term policy', 23 July 1940; I. T. Barclay, 'Notes on the connection between housing conditions in large towns and the lack of hygiene and character training of all children', 22 July 1940; A. Sayle, 'Causes of and remedies for low standards of personal hygiene and sanitary habits', 20 July 1940; F. Brackenbury, 'Health education', 24 July 1940; C. McCall, 'Town and country – a new relationship', 5 Aug. 1940.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, minutes of the hygiene sub-committee, 30 July 1940.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 'The conditions of English town life as disclosed by war-time evacuation'; minutes of the hygiene sub-committee, 30 Apr. 1941.

construction Survey.⁴⁹ But it is clear that discussions about the final form of the report were still continuing when she was able to resume work on *Our towns* in September 1942. As earlier, this had been drafted by Ibberson, but the title page was reworded, including the dates 1939–42 and omitting the word ‘evacuation’, in order to give the impression that the report had not been delayed quite so much.⁵⁰

It is not clear why the publication of the survey, very much a study of the initial wave of evacuation in September 1939, was delayed until March 1943. Certainly it cannot be explained in terms of the survey’s methodology or scope, which verged on the superficial and amateurish. It is, of course, quite possible that the report was completed at an earlier date, put aside, and then hurriedly issued in the aftermath of the Beveridge report. But the explanation is more prosaic, namely, problems with publishers that were perhaps inevitable in wartime. Penguin had exceeded its paper quota and Oxford University Press would only publish the book at a cover price of 5s if the text was cut to 50,000 words. This editorial work was undertaken by Celia St Loe Strachey, whose husband John had been Labour MP for Aston in 1929–31. Indeed, publication at a subsidised price, of 5s instead of 6s, was only possible because the Russell Sage Foundation contributed \$500 towards the printing costs of the report, following an address by Margaret Bondfield at the National Social Work Council in New York.⁵¹

Most of the underlying tensions were hidden in the published version of the text. The only addition to the members mentioned above was P. Spafford, secretary of the Ling Physical Education Association. It is interesting to compare the report’s methods with some of the other evacuation surveys, such as the Cambridge survey conducted by Susan Issacs, and the report by Mass Observation. While the *Our towns* survey relied on methods that might appear rather amateurish, it was also noticeable that on some issues the committee had taken steps to draw on expert opinion. Its authors stated that they had conducted their survey largely through interviews, but also thanked a few prominent scientists and doctors for their help. These included Dr Kenneth Mellanby, a scientist based at the Sorby Research Institute, University of Sheffield, Dr Alison Glover of the ministry of health, and Dr Samuel Gill of the Guardianship Society in Brighton – all of whom had written elsewhere on aspects of the evacuation.⁵² Despite Glover’s involvement, the reality was that the ministry of health had refused to take any official responsibility for the report, and offered only informal comments on earlier drafts.⁵³ In commercial

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, G. D. H. Cole to E. Denby, 9 July 1941.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, letter from M. L. Harford, 17 Sept. 1942; A. Sayle to E. Denby, 18 Sept. 1942.

⁵¹ Fawcett Library, Women’s Forum D4, S. M. Harrison to L. Harford, 11 Feb. 1942.

⁵² K. Mellanby, ‘The incidence of head lice in England’, *Medical Officer*, 66 (1941), pp. 39–43; J. A. Glover, ‘Epidemiological aspects of evacuation’, *British Medical Journal* (1940), pp. 629–31; S. F. Gill, ‘Nocturnal enuresis: experiences with evacuated children’, *British Medical Journal* (1940), ii, pp. 199–200.

⁵³ Fawcett Library, Women’s Forum D4, D. Ibberson to L. Harford, Mar. 1942.

terms, at least, it seemed to be a successful formula – Letty Harford reported in April 1943 that the first edition of 5,000 copies was almost sold out, and *Our towns* had gone through four impressions by October of that year.⁵⁴

III

What then was it about the content of the survey that made it an unlikely commercial success? The report opened with a quotation from the final volume of Charles Booth's social survey, and it comprised an introduction, four chapters, and a bibliography, along with some fourteen appendices. In effect, the first chapter provided an overview of the evacuation of schoolchildren in September 1939, and of some of the debates that had been generated by the experience. Chapter 2 was entitled 'Living below standard (1)', and included sections on such matters as 'wrong spending', 'juvenile delinquency and want of discipline', and 'dirty and inadequate clothing'. The third chapter followed with 'Living below standard (2)', and this looked among other topics at 'insanitary habits' and 'bodily dirtiness'. The fourth chapter examined the future of social reform, notably with regard to what could be done in terms of both education and the environment, and it was followed by a brief conclusion. In all, the pocket-size report numbered some 143 pages.

The introduction stated that the survey aimed to take the accusations that had been levelled at the evacuees, to see what evidence existed for them in urban areas, and to suggest ways in which the problems might be solved. Interestingly, the report immediately launched into an examination of the 'residuum', writing that the 'submerged tenth' unearthed in the social surveys of Charles Booth still existed in towns, 'like a hidden sore, poor, dirty, and crude in its habits, an intolerable and degrading burden to decent people forced by poverty to neighbour with it'. And it alleged that within the 'submerged tenth' were the 'problem families', who were 'always on the edge of pauperism and crime, riddled with mental and physical defects, in and out of the courts for child neglect, a menace to the community of which the gravity is out of all proportion to their numbers'.⁵⁵ The concept of the 'social problem group' had been a minor but important aspect of social thought in the early 1930s, following the publication of the Wood Report on Mental Deficiency. The group was seen as being incapable of being rehabilitated, so that the solutions were segregation or sterilization. In contrast, 'problem families' were perceived as being individual families – although mental deficiency was still regarded by some as a cause, there was a more general belief that, through lessons in home-making, they could be rehabilitated.⁵⁶

In many respects, therefore, the Women's Group on Public Welfare can be seen to have been a group whose interpretation of social problems was

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, A14, minutes of the Women's Group on Public Welfare, 6 Apr. 1943.

⁵⁵ Women's Group on Public Welfare, *Our towns – a close up: a study made in 1939–1942 with certain recommendations by the hygiene committee of the Women's Group on Public Welfare* (London, 1943), p. xiii.

⁵⁶ C. P. Blacker, ed., *A social problem group?* (Oxford, 1937). See also J. Macnicol, 'In pursuit of the underclass', *Journal of Social Policy*, 16 (1987), pp. 293–318.

permeated by an emphasis on behavioural rather than environmental factors. While this was not necessarily eugenic, the report did echo if not anticipate the position of the Eugenics Society, not least in suggesting that the ‘social problem group’ of the 1930s had become the ‘problem families’ of the 1940s. And there was much to substantiate these views in the remainder of the survey. The first question that the report dealt with, for example, was that of ‘wasteful spending’ on drinking and smoking, the football pools and betting in general, and on sweets, comics, and pocket money. On the issue of alcohol, for instance, *Our towns* stated that ‘the troubles of the “problem family” generally include excessive drinking by some of its members, and the worst mother is still generally the drinking woman’.⁵⁷ Similarly, the report took a puritanical approach to smoking, noting that it was both damaging to health and encouraged ‘selfish spending’.⁵⁸ Although comments on the fecklessness of working-class parents were a staple of social surveys, this tone also permeated the survey’s attempts to discuss a range of other issues.

The evacuation, and the experience of winter in the countryside, had shown that many city children had footwear and clothing that were inadequate – large numbers wore the plimsolls that were sold in street markets. *Our towns* proposed that the board of education should promote needlework lessons for parents in schools and clubs, and in other institutions including maternity and child welfare centres and evening institutes. It was suggested that boys could also be taught tailoring, mending, and knitting, and that the older children might learn how to make boots and shoes.⁵⁹ Similarly, the issue of malnutrition among children had been a controversial issue during the 1930s when both the assessment of malnutrition at school medical inspections and the provision of school meals in depressed areas came under closer scrutiny. The *Our towns* report was critical of the ‘slum diet’ of the interwar years, arguing that its reliance on white bread, tea, sugar, sausages, jam, and margarine was ‘the worst ever devised by mankind, so grossly lacking is it in protective elements’. But it recommended that better eating habits should be encouraged through a publicity campaign on nutrition, and by educating both parents and children about diet and different ways of preparing food.⁶⁰ In this, the *Our towns* survey echoed the emphasis on education that had been a core feature of official propaganda on malnutrition in the interwar period.

The evacuation experience had suggested that schoolchildren in some urban areas had a high incidence of head lice and skin disease, and it was this issue that had caused problems between evacuees and their hosts in September 1939. It was claimed of children evacuated from Manchester to Grimsby and Hull, for example, that their clothes had had to be burnt, they were so ‘dirty and verminous’. As was the case on the question of nutrition, the *Our towns* survey took a punitive approach to the problem, and again focused on the importance of education. It recommended that the Home Office should send a circular to magistrates on the treatment of ‘neglectful’ parents, and that the Central

⁵⁷ Women’s Group on Public Welfare, *Our towns*, p. 13.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

Council for Health Education should mount a publicity campaign.⁶¹ On skin diseases, too, the report associated complaints such as impetigo and scabies with 'wrong feeding' and neglect. It recommended that health visitors should step up the pace of home-visiting, and thought that families would be treated more effectively in the new health centres envisaged as part of the National Health Service. The question of skin disease led the report's authors to look more carefully at the issue of cleanliness, but again it echoed the board of education in arguing that the development of physical training, swimming, and games had achieved much in improving hygiene.⁶²

Although the report was predominantly concerned with aspects of the physical condition of children, it also devoted some space to their mental health needs. In this respect, the report was preoccupied with an alleged increase in juvenile delinquency. It linked this to poor housing and overcrowding, but also associated it with subnormal intelligence and 'bad training', noting that 'those in whom it is lacking are often not so much perverted as socially untrained'.⁶³ One reason for concern was that the number of children classified as 'dull and backward' was believed to be on the increase – separate classes should be provided for them in schools. This might have had positive implications had the report not gone on to make several other dubious assumptions. For *Our towns* claimed that 'dull' children grew up to increase the number of the 'feeble-minded' and produced 'problem families' – their lack of intelligence led to 'bad spending and household management, undeveloped character and lack of parental control'.⁶⁴ In particular, it was thought that the key to juvenile delinquency lay with the 'problem family', so that further investigations of this phenomenon were desirable if not essential.

Some health problems were regarded as being inherent in certain social classes. The hygiene sub-committee wrote of bedwetting for instance, that 'no other aspect of evacuation produced greater scandal and none suggested more squalid aspects in the home life of some of our town population'.⁶⁵ It argued that bedwetting was primarily caused by poor training in infancy, and could not be cured in later life – it was both a case of 'inferior maternal care or standards' and a problem of 'certain social strata'. Noting that families living in tenement blocks did not have easy access to toilets, the report remarked that 'to the lazy and weak they are an encouragement to dirty habits', and it recommended that this should be tackled through health education.⁶⁶

Yet while this behavioural emphasis was clearly evident in the report, other readings are possible which suggest that it had a different character. Although the authors hoped that their findings would help to consolidate support for a new survey of the 'social problem group', *Our towns* also had an environmental bias that was more in keeping with the outlook of the reconstruction movement. Thus in the words of the authors, the evacuation of schoolchildren had provided 'a window through which English town life was suddenly and vividly

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 103.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 80–1, 96–7.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 85–6, 88–9.

seen from a new angle'.⁶⁷ Throughout the introduction, the authors wrestled with the question of whether improvements in education, or progress on environmental factors, were more likely to solve the problem of poverty. At the same time, the report was critical of official reports that simply described health and welfare services, failed to explore the extent of need, and ignored the reasons why people failed to take up the existing services.

On the question of juvenile delinquency, for instance, the report suggested that further efforts should be made to 'detect' those children subsequently classified as 'dull and backward', and to improve provision for them. It was argued that greater use should be made of the 1930 Children and Young Persons Act, and parents who persistently neglected children should be prosecuted.⁶⁸ The *Our towns* report suggested that there should be more psychological studies of the way that family and sexual relationships were affected by poverty and overcrowding. And above all, juvenile delinquency was seen as being as much an environmental as a behavioural problem. Thus the solutions proposed were those 'which promote happy home life, such as economic stability, good housing, provision of a wide range of recreational interests for both parents and children, and good education in parenthood'.⁶⁹

Other psychological problems, such as the issue of bedwetting, led the report's authors to consider more fundamental issues such as housing. Given the composition of the group, this was an area where it had particular expertise. It noted that bedwetting was caused by a combination of social, medical, and psychological factors, and argued that these deserved much more attention than they had received hitherto. Above all, the issue of bedwetting led the hygiene sub-committee to confront the question of poor housing. It admitted that many towns still had primitive systems of sanitation that relied on privy middens and cesspools – toilets were often accessible only across waste ground, and many were in a 'disgraceful' condition.⁷⁰ In the London borough of Clerkenwell, for instance, each toilet was shared by seven or eight families, while a survey of 400 children had revealed that only 104 had an indoor water closet. The authors of *Our towns* argued that these conditions made it very difficult for mothers to train their children, and they also noted that toilet blocks in schools were often of a poor standard. They recommended that each family should have a toilet accessible without going down more than one flight of stairs, and also thought that MOHs should inspect sanitation in homes and schools.⁷¹

As we have seen, the report blamed parents for the state of the evacuees' footwear and clothing, and recommended needlework classes in schools. But *Our towns* also produced a perceptive account of a problem that had remained largely hidden throughout the 1930s. It found that although school medical inspections in London suggested that most children were well clothed, 13 per cent of the 31,000 children registered for evacuation in Newcastle had footwear

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 85–8.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 88–91.

that was classified as 'poor', and 21 per cent had clothing deemed 'inadequate'.⁷² The report suggested that the use of standard outfits might improve the accuracy of the statistical information obtained at medical inspections, thought there was too much reliance on averages in official reports, and argued that it was only unannounced inspections that would produce reliable information. If *Our towns* offered incisive criticisms of official reports, it also showed a sensitive grasp of the way that the problem of child poverty was illustrated by their footwear and clothing. Children from poor families slept in their underwear as they had no night-clothes, they never wore overcoats or raincoats, and they had no spare sets of underwear – in the case of shoes, children often obtained footwear through school clubs, and repairs placed a heavy strain on family budgets.⁷³

On the question of malnutrition, the report was critical of the statistics that had been generated by school medical inspections. Again this had been a persistent bone of contention between the board of education and its critics throughout the interwar period. *Our towns* helped to turn the tide by showing how the system produced subjective statistics, depressed areas had generated improbable results, and the board's statements about malnutrition had been contradicted by John Boyd Orr and other experts. It is likely that this section was drafted by Dr Alison Glover, given his earlier unpublished comments on malnutrition and school medical inspections. While we have already noted that the report was critical of the 'slum diet', it also conceded that this was as much a matter of money as an issue of ignorance. Housewives who had no proper storage facilities had to avoid fresh milk and fish, they shopped just for the next meal, and they relied on take-away food – meals took on the character of picnics because they were prepared in 'picnic conditions'.⁷⁴ Some of the suggestions were based on improving knowledge of food preparation and cooking. But the *Our towns* report also thought that restaurants, pubs serving food, and milk and potato bars should be established in the poorer urban areas. More generally, the provision of school meals should be expanded, and wartime rationing form the basis of a permanent policy to ensure that every household received an adequate diet.⁷⁵

One of the most persistent allegations levelled at the evacuees had concerned the high incidence of head lice and skin disease. Here again the approach and conclusions of the *Our towns* report were striking. On head lice, the report contrasted the figures generated by school medical inspections with the results of Kenneth Mellanby's survey, and argued that accurate figures could only be obtained by unannounced examinations. Similarly, the national averages for skin disease in the annual reports of the chief medical officer disguised the incidence among urban children, and it was suggested that the presentation of statistics should receive 'urgent attention'.⁷⁶ The survey reflected other currents of the mid-1940s in arguing that the training of school doctors and the

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 55–62.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 31–41.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 42–6.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 78–81, 95.

curriculum of medical schools should be supplemented by the new discipline of social medicine. Perhaps most importantly, these questions directed attention to the issue of housing. Here *Our towns* argued that the pace of rehousing and slum clearance should be accelerated, sanitary inspection strengthened, and local authorities make full use of their powers, particularly with respect to water supplies. Again its approach was compassionate – it was difficult for women living in houses that lacked hot water or good drying conditions to keep their children clean, and head lice were eradicated only ‘at the cost of unremitting vigilance and toil’.⁷⁷

The *Our towns* report culminated in a series of wide-ranging suggestions that embodied the earlier sections of the book. Some echoed the previous recommendations on education, arguing, for instance, that the expansion of nursery schools would ‘cut off the slum mind at its root’.⁷⁸ The use of this horticultural metaphor was hardly surprising since in the interwar period, nursery schools had been viewed by the voluntary housing sector as a vital part of rehousing schemes. Marjory Allen had been involved in the Nursery Schools Association, and a nursery school had been included in Elizabeth Denby’s Kensal House development. The actual development of nursery schools had been fairly limited – in April 1937, for instance, only eighty-seven were recognized by the board of education, and attended by some 6,735 children. Perhaps because their alleged efficacy had not been tested, nursery schools were regarded by many as an important means of training children and civilizing parents.⁷⁹ But the content of the survey meant that other recommendations had a different emphasis. On the issue of housing, for instance, it argued that many local authorities remained complacent and that ‘Britain’s slums are widespread and a source of shock and scandal to fellow-citizens of the Empire’.⁸⁰ It highlighted the problem of poverty, writing that ‘poverty leads to bad housing without the space, water supply, food storage, cooking facilities and private sanitation essential to good home-making’. The hygiene sub-committee was particularly concerned about poverty in children under five, and advocated not just nursery schools from the age of two, but family allowances and minimum wages. Despite advances in some health and welfare services, it argued that services fell short of what was necessary and ‘great and radical reforms are needed to give humanity its chance’.⁸¹

IV

So much for the background and content of the *Our towns* report. But how was this complicated amalgam of views received at the time, and what impact did the survey have on contemporary debates about social policy? One approach

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 66–74.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁷⁹ See, for example, P. E. Cusden, *The English nursery school* (London, 1938), pp. 28, 55–6, 67, 146–50; Allen and Nicholson, *Memoirs of an uneducated lady*, pp. 116–17.

⁸⁰ Women’s Group on Public Welfare, *Our towns*, p. 102.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 103, 111.

to this question might be to trace the way that the book was reviewed at the time of publication. It did not have sufficient literary merit to appear in the leading periodicals of the period. Moreover, the plans of the Women's Group on Public Welfare for following up the report through a cheap edition, film, and other research projects made little headway.⁸² But it was published at the height of debates about the Beveridge report and post-war reconstruction, and this added to its impact. As far as newspapers were concerned, a lengthy review appeared immediately in *The Times*, where it also generated an important leader article and several letters from readers. Subsequently, it was picked up by a large number of specialist magazines and periodicals. While measuring the impact of a survey through reviews is problematic, it is arguable that a suitably wide range does provide a reasonably accurate guide to public opinion, at least in educated circles. A second approach might be to look for mentions in political debates and in official papers. The report was discussed, for instance, in a House of Lords debate in May 1943, in the White Paper on *Educational reconstruction*, and in numerous articles and surveys about the 'problem family'. Finally, it is also worth asking how far the *Our towns* survey influenced Titmuss himself, and the distinctive interpretation that he advanced in *Problems of social policy*.

In some respects, the report simply confirmed existing views, particularly about the 'social problem group' that had been a minor but important current in intellectual life in the 1930s. This was certainly the way that *Our towns* was interpreted by groups such as the Eugenics Society. In the *Eugenics Review*, for instance, David Caradog Jones argued that despite rising living standards, there still remained a hard core of 'social problem cases', who were 'handicapped by subnormal intelligence if not by actual defect of body or mind'. He used the evidence of the report to recommend an inquiry into the 'social problem group'.⁸³ But the emphasis of other reviews was more traditional, since they chose to focus on the alleged fecklessness of the working class that had always been a feature of urban social surveys. The editorial in *The Economist* noted of the *Our towns* report that 'bad food' was not always the result of poverty, but was more often a reflection of parental ignorance or indifference, and that bedwetting was not linked to poor housing conditions but was 'the product of a low social standard'.⁸⁴ And this was evident across the political spectrum. Even Joan Clarke, secretary of G. D. H. Cole's recently established Social Security League, noted in her review in the *New Statesman* that 'slums breed slum habits of mind'.⁸⁵

Given this evidence, it was natural that education was regarded as a solution

⁸² Fawcett Library, Women's Forum D7, minutes of the follow-up committee on *Our towns*, 30 Sept. 1943.

⁸³ D. Caradog Jones, 'A social problem group?', *Eugenics Review*, 35 (1943), pp. 12-13.

⁸⁴ 'Spotlight on poverty', *Economist*, 144 (1 May 1943), pp. 545-6.

⁸⁵ J. S. Clarke, 'Our towns', *New Statesman and Nation*, 25 (1 May 1943), pp. 292-3. See also P. L. Garside, "'Unhealthy areas': town planning, eugenics and the slums, 1890-1945', *Planning Perspectives*, 3 (1988), pp. 24-46.

to the problem. The *Medical Officer*, representing doctors employed by local authorities, observed that the three most serious problems were poverty, the environment, and education, and of these the last was the most important. Similarly a review in *Social Work* noted that there were two outstanding features of the report: 'our failure to educate our girls as *home-makers*, in spite of seventy years of compulsory education, and our failure to provide our people with the raw material for *home-making*'.⁸⁶ Many picked up on the recommendations in *Our towns* about nursery schools, claiming that it was crucial to influence children before they reached school age. A leader article in the *British Medical Journal*, for example, suggested that it was a poverty not caused by lack of means, but by 'lack of personal discipline and social standard'. It suggested that better housing could do little for children whose parents were lazy and incompetent, and it was the nursery school 'which can break the insanitary entail and prevent the sins of the fathers – more often than the sheer fecklessness of the mothers – from being visited upon the children'.⁸⁷

But there was also evidence that the *Our towns* survey popularized the concept of the 'problem family', and strengthened behavioural interpretations of poverty in the immediate post-war years. The deputy MOH for Liverpool, for example, claimed that the war had 'thrown a rather lurid light upon the seamier side of town life', and he later wrote that *Our towns* had shown that standards in many areas were 'horribly low'.⁸⁸ An article in the *New Statesman* noted that the report had directed attention to the 'submerged tenth', while a social survey of Luton mentioned the book and suggested that 'an aspect of the rekindled interest in the social problems of our times has been an increased attention to the problem family'.⁸⁹ The Eugenics Society argued that it was during the evacuation that the concept of the 'social problem group' was replaced by the theme of the 'problem family', and *Our towns* certainly was important in the creation of family service units, voluntary organizations that focused on this form of social work.⁹⁰ The logic and implications of this transition were never clearly formulated.⁹¹ But the 'problem family' did become an important issue in the 1950s, not least because it was mentioned in ministry of health circulars, and included in the work of local authority health departments.

⁸⁶ N. H. Smith, 'Our towns: a close up', *Social Work*, 2 (1943), pp. 326–7.

⁸⁷ 'The town child: a critical survey', *British Medical Journal* (1943), i, p. 571.

⁸⁸ C. O. Stallybrass, 'Social medicine and the comprehensive medical service', *Medical Officer*, 72 (1944), pp. 109–12; idem, 'Problem families', *Medical Officer*, 75 (1946), pp. 89–92.

⁸⁹ N. R. Tillett, 'The derelict family', *New Statesman and Nation*, 27 (28 Apr. 1945), p. 270; C. G. Tomlinson, *Families in trouble: an enquiry into problem families in Luton* (Luton, 1946), p. 3.

⁹⁰ C. P. Blacker, *Problem families: five inquiries* (London, 1952), p. 12. See also T. C. Stephens, 'Sixty-two problem families', *Social Welfare*, 5 (1944), p. 324; A. F. Philp and N. Timms, *The problem of 'the problem family': a critical review of the literature concerning the 'problem family' and its treatment* (London, 1957), p. vii; Barclay, *People need roots*, pp. 105–8.

⁹¹ See, for example, J. Macnicol, 'From "problem family" to "underclass", 1945–95', in R. Lowe and H. Fawcett, eds., *Welfare policy in Britain: the road from 1945* (London, 1999), pp. 69–93.

Even so, while some reviews of *Our towns* chose to highlight these sections of the survey, others emphasized its recommendations. Almost all agreed that the evacuation had raised issues concerning poverty and health care that had been ignored in the 1930s, and about which people living in the countryside knew little. The famous editorial in *The Economist*, for example, had the headline 'Spotlight on poverty', and it argued that evacuation had revealed to the general population 'the black spots in its social life'.⁹² Similarly the review in *Social Work* found that 'poverty and squalor have been so carefully hidden behind Nottingham lace curtains that their existence has been largely forgotten', and it thought that later social historians would regard this as the most important result of the evacuation.⁹³ *The Lancet* believed the evacuation 'not only provided a large-scale social experiment, but lifted the lid off the less exposed corners of our towns'.⁹⁴ The *New Statesman* noted that major criticisms of the social and economic structure were implicit throughout the book, as were radical proposals for change, and it concluded that 'this is definitely not a bookshelf book but a social document, which, being read, should be used for political action'. It recommended the survey to social workers, administrators, and trade unionists, claiming that 'a revolution in education and a rapid housing programme must underpin anything of value in the post-war world'.⁹⁵

Although some reviews emphasized behavioural interpretations of poverty, others stressed the part played by environmental factors. While the *Medical Officer* thought that education was necessary, it argued that 'education is not possible in an unfavourable environment so to improve education we must also improve environment and the expenses of both must fall largely on the community'.⁹⁶ The journal *Public Administration* was similarly perplexed, asking whether the 'slum dweller' made the slum or if he was a victim of his environment. However, it went on to argue that while human nature was one factor, 'economic and social conditions make it extraordinarily difficult for people to live at a reasonable standard and train their children'.⁹⁷ Moreover, eugenics had moved rapidly in the 1930s to embrace environmentalism. David Caradog Jones, for instance, argued that 'there is everything to be said for a continued and even more energetic crusade to improve the environment and to help people to make the most of such good qualities as they possess'.⁹⁸ Thus there is a danger of drawing too strong a dichotomy between the supposedly 'radical' and 'reactionary' aspects of the survey.

The impact of the report may be clarified if one looks at particular professional groups. Its focus on the performance of local authority health services in the 1930s made *Our towns* of particular interest to the journals that represented public health doctors. In its public health section, *The Lancet*

⁹² 'Spotlight on poverty', *Economist*, pp. 545-6.

⁹³ Smith, 'Our towns', pp. 326-7.

⁹⁴ 'An urban close-up', *Lancet* (1943), i, p. 631.

⁹⁵ Clarke, 'Our towns', pp. 292-3.

⁹⁶ 'Our social evils', *Medical Officer*, 69 (1943), p. 106.

⁹⁷ 'Our towns: a close-up', *Public Administration*, 21 (1943), pp. 102-3.

⁹⁸ Caradog Jones, 'A social problem group?', pp. 12-13.

argued that although the book confirmed many accusations against the evacuees, 'it is the community that stands indicted', and it concluded of the report that 'every page underlines the urgent need for increased social security to safeguard the community as a whole'.⁹⁹ In other journals, it was possible to chart changes in outlook that occurred between the spring and autumn of 1943 in the aftermath of the Beveridge report. In its original review, for instance, published in April, the *Medical Officer* had stressed the importance of education, claiming that 'if we can solve our educational problem we can remedy our social evils'.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, by the time that a fourth impression appeared in October, the journal was taking a different stance. It argued that previous reports on health services for mothers and infants, and for schoolchildren, had not revealed the reality of social conditions – official reports should be more thorough, and local doctors should make more accurate surveys of the areas they supervised. The *Medical Officer* now concluded 'that the root cause is poverty is not to be questioned and the felling of Beveridge's five giants will be found imperative if any real advance is to be made'.¹⁰¹

It was natural that medical journals would look particularly at the survey's comments on health services and that education journals would be more concerned with schools. A review in the *Times Educational Supplement*, headed 'Life in the urban slum', argued that the 'submerged tenth' still existed in towns. Yet the reviewer warmly recommended the survey to readers, stating that this was 'an honest and courageous book, which all those concerned with the shaping of post-war social and educational policy will neglect at their peril'.¹⁰² Apart from the review, the journal also referred to the book in an editorial. It argued that the condition of the evacuees was not the fault of the children or of their parents, but reflected the environment they lived in, and agreed the book was a 'social document of the first importance'. It welcomed the proposals that included more nursery schools, smaller classes, and improved recruitment and training of teachers. But it noted that the book's recommendations coincided with plans for post-war reconstruction, and agreed that changes should also embrace full employment, family allowances, a national health service, and price controls, arguing that 'poverty and ignorance must be attacked from many angles; side by side with the campaign for better education must go one for better material conditions'.¹⁰³

Perhaps newspapers rather than journals provide a better guide to the impact and influence of the *Our towns* report. The review in *The Times*, for example, was published on 29 March 1943, while most of the reviews in journals came later, in April and May. In some respects, the paper did stress the poor condition and behaviour of the evacuees, it focused on the 'submerged

⁹⁹ 'An urban close-up', *Lancet*, p. 631. ¹⁰⁰ 'Our social evils', *Medical Officer*, p. 106.

¹⁰¹ 'Our towns', *Medical Officer*, 70 (1943), pp. 115–16.

¹⁰² 'Life in the urban slum: a grave social indictment', *Times Educational Supplement*, 1457 (3 Apr. 1943), p. 158.

¹⁰³ 'Social failure', *Times Educational Supplement*, 1457 (3 Apr. 1943), p. 163.

tenth', and it thought the problem was as much one of education as of environment. However, it did argue that the report should be read by all social reformers, and also devoted a leader article to this subject.¹⁰⁴ This linked the report to the charter for child welfare that had been advocated by Herbert Morrison in the Beveridge debate, and mentioned in Churchill's recent radio broadcast on post-war reconstruction. Headed 'A charter for childhood', the leader suggested that the wartime milk scheme, expansion of school meals, wartime nurseries, and the Beveridge Report offered a platform for long-term reform. In the meantime, the immediate priorities were to abolish poverty in large families through family allowances and other welfare benefits, to provide medical services to children from birth to school-leaving age, and to eliminate the 'slum mind' through the provision of nursery classes. Like *Our towns*, it was a curious mixture, noting that 'unsatisfactory material circumstances – poverty, out-of-date, insanitary and overcrowded housing, inadequate water supply, dirt, and noise – make up the background which produces the problem mother and the problem child'.¹⁰⁵

The question remains of how far, and in what ways, the *Our towns* survey influenced political debate. Some hints were provided in the course of a House of Lords debate on 'positive health' in May 1943, when the report was mentioned by several participants. As with the reviews, the comments of some indicated that the report, and evacuation in general, had simply served to confirm a particular interpretation of poverty. Lord Geddes, a former president of the local government board and minister of reconstruction, claimed that while he had been impressed by the physical condition of the evacuees, the most striking feature was their 'listlessness'. He thought that around 10 per cent fell into this category – the mothers were 'cultural orphans' who could not do anything for themselves, while the children were like 'untrained puppies or untrained kittens'.¹⁰⁶ Other participants in the debate agreed with this interpretation. Cosmo Lang, archbishop of Canterbury 1928–42, argued that the children were not in a bad condition because of low living standards, but owing to 'the heedlessness, the shiftlessness, the carelessness and the ignorance of their mothers'. Thus the solutions were better homes and the training of girls in motherhood: 'while there is urgent need of the rebuilding of better houses, there is almost equal need of rebuilding the broken family life of the country'.¹⁰⁷

But as with the journals, other participants voiced different concerns, both in their assessment of the *Our towns* report, and of evacuation in general. Lord Latham, leader of the LCC, noted that before the evacuation many people had been unaware of urban poverty, and that the survey had revealed 'the terrible and indeed terrifying conditions which exist in towns'. While he accepted that the condition of the evacuees was poor, he claimed that these problems could

¹⁰⁴ 'Slum life in cities', *Times*, 29 Mar. 1943, p. 5.

¹⁰⁵ 'A charter for childhood', *Times*, 29 Mar. 1943, p. 5.

¹⁰⁶ House of Lords debates 1942–3, 5th series, cxxvii, cols. 365–77.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, cols. 383–6.

not be solved by education alone. On the issue of nutrition, for instance, he argued that 'the dictatorship of the tin-opener' was inevitable while families lived in poor housing where facilities for the cooking and storage of food were inadequate.¹⁰⁸ In some respects, the comments of Cyril Garbett, archbishop of York, indicated that he agreed with the report's emphasis on nursery schools. Yet on the other hand, he argued that *Our towns* was a 'most valuable social document of the very first importance', and noted that efforts to improve health should also tackle environmental and housing conditions.¹⁰⁹ And although Lord Snell, Labour MP for East Woolwich 1922-31 and deputy leader of the Lords, argued that health services had improved, he admitted they were 'piece-meal and restricted in scope'. Medical insurance extended only to the insured and not to their families, the co-ordination of services was poor, and voluntary and municipal hospitals had evolved in a haphazard manner. Snell concluded that an opportunity existed for fundamental social change, and the aim should be 'to establish a foundation on which a healthier and happier Britain may be built'.¹¹⁰

If the *Our towns* report was mentioned in the course of political debates, it was also quoted in some of the major policy documents produced in this crucial period of the Second World War. The White Paper on educational reconstruction, for instance, published in July 1943, claimed that its main finding was the need for nursery schools in the poorest parts of large cities. There was no doubt, it said, of the importance of training children in good habits at the most impressionable age, and of the nursery school's value in influencing parents. At the same time, the White Paper suggested that schoolchildren should be treated through the new National Health Service, legislation on school meals and milk should be compulsory rather than permissive, local authorities should provide boots and clothing, and provision for 'handicapped' children would have to be substantially improved.¹¹¹ The hygiene sub-committee certainly felt that the survey had had an important influence on civil servants in the key central departments. In September 1947, for instance, it claimed from interviews with civil servants that 'in the Government Departments the copies were much thumbed and blue-pencilled and were obviously in fairly frequent use'.¹¹²

What impact, if any, did *Our towns* have on the NCSS? It attempted to continue the work of the NECC with its plans to encourage the building of community centres on new housing estates. Interestingly, some of these pamphlets both reflected the emphasis that was still placed on education, but also the new stress on the dangers of 'problem families'.¹¹³ Hilda Jennings, author of the famous social survey of Brynmawr (1934), wrote that *Our towns*,

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, cols. 377-83.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, cols. 386-9.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, cols. 389-95. See also Lord Snell, *Men, movements, and myself* (London, 1936; new edn, 1938).

¹¹¹ PP 1942-43, xi (Cmd. 6458), Board of Education, *Educational reconstruction*, paras. 25, 93-7.

¹¹² Fawcett Library, Women's Forum Dg, 'Report on follow-up of *Our towns*', 19 Sept. 1947.

¹¹³ L. E. White, *Tenement town* (London, 1946), pp. 15-16, 76-7.

along with other surveys, had showed 'how much still remained to be done in making social service effective and relating it to individual needs and standards of living'.¹¹⁴ The report of the Women's Group on Public Welfare on child neglect (1948) clearly had its origins in the earlier survey. This anticipated the creation of local authority children's departments following the 1948 Children Act. At the same time, it echoed the issue of the 'problem family' raised in *Our towns*, arguing that the defining characteristic of these families was 'not so much the poorness and drabness of their surroundings but their apathy and indifference to their squalor and filth'.¹¹⁵ The report recommended that advice on birth control should be particularly targeted at 'problem families' as part of public health services. Overall, it was not surprising that in the 1950s, much of the work of both the NCSS and the Women's Group on Public Welfare focused on homemaking groups.

Some of these events preceded *Problems of social policy*, since publication of the official history was delayed until 1950. Here Titmuss drew directly on *Our towns* in his exploration of such issues as footwear and clothing, bedwetting, the incidence of head lice, and the cultural life of mothers of the evacuated children. In what ways, therefore, was Titmuss influenced by the survey, and to what extent did he share the ideas of its authors? Of course, Titmuss's book was written partly to consolidate support for the emerging welfare state, and *Our towns* was only one of many sources. But he did use its findings to confirm that parents could be neglectful, as in the allegations that children were 'sewn up' for the winter, and that swearing began at an early age.¹¹⁶ He argued that in broken homes, children became 'unstable, aggressive, lazy, cynical and untrustworthy', and noted of bedwetting that 'slum mores are consistent with a slum home'.¹¹⁷ Writing of the mothers of the evacuees, Titmuss claimed that 'corrupt manners naturally provoke censure, but they are usually the product of a corrupting environment'.¹¹⁸ And Titmuss did use the phrases 'social problem group' and 'problem families', claiming that perhaps 2 to 5 per cent of the evacuees fell into these categories. Given this background, the famous sentence 'the louse is not a political creature; it cannot distinguish between the salt of the earth and the scum of the earth' can be read in several different ways.¹¹⁹ In many respects, Titmuss shared the ambivalent approach taken by the authors of *Our towns* – undoubtedly passionately committed to the welfare state, he also remained interested in behavioural interpretations of poverty into the 1960s.

The impact of the *Our towns* report was, of course, intimately bound up with the timing of its publication. Previous work has shown that 1943 was a crucial period in terms of wartime social policy. The House of Commons debate on the

¹¹⁴ H. Jennings, 'Voluntary social services in urban areas', in H. A. Mess, *Voluntary social services since 1918* (London, 1947), p. 37.

¹¹⁵ Women's Group on Public Welfare, *The neglected child and his family* (Oxford, 1948), p. 99.

¹¹⁶ Titmuss, *Problems of social policy*, pp. 115, 120, 130, 132, 179. ¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 123–4.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 132. ¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 135–6.

Beveridge report, formation of the Tory Reform Committee, Churchill's radio broadcast on social reconstruction, and establishment of G. D. H. Cole's Social Security League all followed on quickly in February and March.¹²⁰ Important reports were appearing by April, among them the report *National service for health*, published by the Labour party's reconstruction committee on health services. This, then, was the wider context for the appearance of the *Our towns* report – the most fruitful period for social reform in the entire wartime period. What is not in doubt is that, whether accidental or intentional, the report coincided with the turning point in the acceptance of the Beveridge report and the initial moves in the trend that was to become the tide for post-war reconstruction. It was the timing of its publication that explained the reaction to the report, and *Our towns* both reflected and quickened the movement for social reform.

V

It is clear that the *Our towns* report offers important insights into ideas on social questions in this key period of the Second World War. These include the impact of evacuation, the evolution of the 'problem family', the anatomy of reconstruction, and the nature of voluntarism in the 1940s. Certainly, members of the hygiene sub-committee such as Amy Sayle, Irene Barclay, and Elizabeth Denby did bear the imprint of their earlier experiences in other organizations, and the influence of interwar debates about poverty, housing, and citizenship. These included the movement for housing management that had initially been linked with Octavia Hill, the earlier attempts of the NCSS and NECC to civilize the inhabitants of large housing estates through community centres, other housing projects that aimed to cultivate citizenship, and the efforts of such bodies as the Nursery Schools Association. An analysis of social questions grew up that was imbued by the traditional emphasis on the fecklessness of the working class, drew freely on eugenic concepts and language, and was essentially a behavioural interpretation of social problems.

However, it is also the case that, in the peculiar circumstances of the early 1940s, a different kind of approach to social problems was grafted on to this analysis in such bodies as the Women's Group on Public Welfare. Though the members of the hygiene sub-committee had less direct experience of the groups that had campaigned in the 1930s on such matters as child poverty, malnutrition, and housing, this again echoed earlier debates of the interwar years. The experience of the evacuation had served to illustrate that child poverty still existed in cities, and exposed the complacency and inaccuracy of many official reports. Moreover, this interpretation placed greater emphasis on the deficiencies inherent in existing health and welfare services, located poverty in the wider context of other environmental issues, and stressed the

¹²⁰ G. D. H. Cole papers, Nuffield College, Oxford, GDHC/D6/1/1, 'Social Security League'; C. Eade, *The war speeches of the Rt Hon Winston S. Churchill* (London, 1952; 2nd edn, 1965), II, pp. 425–37; Addison, *The road to 1945*, pp. 224–8, 232, 239–40.

responsibilities of the state rather than those of individuals. This more overtly political stance was reflected in the comments and writings of Margaret Bondfield, and meant that the deliberations behind the survey had a particular resonance in the debates about post-war reconstruction.

But perhaps the most useful aspect of the *Our towns* report lies in the way it demonstrates how the binary opposition of 'reactionary' and 'radical' is misplaced and anachronistic, and ultimately an unhelpful way of viewing social policy in the 1940s. There clearly were tensions between individual members of the hygiene sub-committee, and differences of opinion that emerged in the drafting process. But it was also the case that they were able to adopt an analysis of social problems that had both behavioural and environmental components, and produced recommendations that included education alongside other aspects of social reform. Thus the report advocated nursery schools but also family allowances, and recommended an inquiry into 'problem families' at the same time as an expansion of school meals. Here it reflected changes in the eugenics movement in the 1930s, where the appointment of Hogben at the London School of Economics had signalled a greater emphasis on social biology. In the end, it was this Janus-faced character of the report that explains its powerful appeal in the unusual circumstances of the spring of 1943. *Our towns* certainly had a reassuring familiarity in the way that it located social problems in the context of individual behaviour, and looked back to the interwar debates about citizenship. However, the survey also reflected the movement for social reconstruction, and provided a glimpse of the ideas that would shape the welfare state in the post-war years.