

“To the utmost of
her power...”

THE ENDURING RELEVANCE OF OCTAVIA HILL

Edited by Samuel Jones



COLLECTION 34

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THE ENDURING RELEVANCE OF OCTAVIA HILL

Edited by Samuel Jones

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At the National Trust, Ben Cowell, Mike Collins and Alex Hunt deserve special mention. It was at their request that I embarked on this collection, and they have provided a valuable sounding board for ideas throughout; they have also shared in discovering the many surprises and connections that investigating Octavia Hill's life brings. In researching the collection, I have also been able to speak to people inspired by her example, including Baron Best of Godmanstone, John Bird of *The Big Issue*, and Grahame Hindes of Octavia Housing. Just looking at the range of professions on this list shows the breadth of Octavia Hill's influence.

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Samuel Jones, London
March 2012

The principle of modern life in free countries, that we are not directed from above like mere tools, but have to think out what it is best to do each in his own sphere.

Octavia Hill, *Letter to fellow workers*

Introduction

‘The quick eye to see’: the significance of Octavia Hill and her ideals today

Samuel Jones

In May 2001, Dame Fiona Reynolds addressed the Octavia Hill Society at Peckover House in Wisbech. Five months into her tenure as Director General of the National Trust, she began by noting ‘how extraordinarily enduring are the beliefs of that triad Octavia Hill, Canon Rawnsley and Robert Hunter’, founders of the organisation she had just taken over.¹

Dame Fiona was speaking primarily of Octavia Hill’s legacy in relation to the countryside, heritage and, of course, the National Trust. However, these were just part of Octavia Hill’s work. Today, in the streets of Marylebone and Southwark, her influence can be felt in the housing she managed, just as on Hampstead Heath and in the Lake District, it can be felt in the open spaces she protected.

Octavia Hill’s legacy is also clear in the ideas, concepts and disciplines that she espoused, which have proved as ‘extraordinarily enduring’ as the organisations she founded. Individuals like John Bird, the founder of the *Big Issue*, have been inspired by her—in his case, by her determination to give people the power to raise themselves: a ‘hand up, as opposed to a hand out’.² In the same way, environmentalists can find the roots of their movement in her campaigns for open spaces and smoke abatement.

Octavia Hill fought Victorian problems in Victorian ways, influenced first by FD Maurice and Christian Socialism and the influential critic John Ruskin, and later by the socialist aesthetics of William Morris and others. She was a woman of her time. Some of the positions she took are now untenable,

but others remain strikingly pertinent. Collectively, her work reveals links that hold important lessons: she saw society as a connected set of human conditions. This collection examines those anew.

A hundred years after her death, society, big, broken or otherwise is on the lips of almost every politician or commentator on public issues. After the riots that sprawled across towns and cities in the UK in the late summer of 2011, comment soon focused on underlying social problems. Prime Minister David Cameron condemned ‘some of the worst aspects of human nature tolerated, indulged — sometimes even incentivised — by a state and its agencies that in parts have become literally de-moralised’.³ Later, he spoke of broken families, a decline of respect and a ‘responsibility deficit’.⁴ Labour MP David Lammy published a thoughtful response to the riots, writing of a ‘hyper-individualistic culture, in which we do not treat each other well’.⁵ Similarly, *Reading the Riots*, an analysis of causes and effects, documented ‘a lack of respect’, ‘unemployment’, poverty and ‘social and economic injustice’.⁶ Commenting on the report, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions Iain Duncan Smith called for social housing to ‘break the ghettoisation of the poor’, saying that society has become too consumerist:

*Kids are meant to believe that their stepping-stone to massive money is The X Factor. Luck is great, but most of life is hard work. We do not celebrate people who have made success out of serious hard work.*⁷

Such diagnosis and demands would — *The X Factor* apart — have been familiar to Octavia Hill. Housing, social problems, work, families, morality, childhood, respect, responsibilities and aspiration were all concerns at the centre of her campaigns and worldview. Striking parallels can be drawn between the social problems that she tackled and those faced in the early twenty-first century. Her encouragement of thrift and industry and provision of savings banks for her tenants echoes modern concerns about financial responsibility.⁸ Her warnings that ‘the short-sighted cupidity of one generation

of short-sighted rural commoners may lose a great possession for future times’ anticipates current criticism of banks and consumerism.⁹ Where in 2011 Iain Duncan Smith spoke of the need for role models for youth, she had in 1869 written of the need for ‘a perpetual crusade carried out against small evils’ and of ‘presenting... a somewhat higher standard of right’ to tenants who showed signs of unruliness.¹⁰ Compare the resonance in her impassioned plea for the environment in 1893:

*I cannot think why, especially now that the improvement of rural districts is coming so much before the public, a large number of young and ardent men, politicians and others do not come forward to try and secure for the agricultural labourer in his daily life, for the Londoner in his holiday, the safe and undisturbed possession of the commons, the green-way-side strip, and the thousand footpaths which lead him into pleasant places, and to a sight in this fair land, which was meant to be a joy to its inhabitants.*¹¹

Concern for the poor and the voiceless, upholding moral over material values, connecting the rural with the urban, the preservation of nature and the commons, activism, patriotism — these were constant in Octavia Hill’s work. ‘Decent housing, dependable employment, opportunities for recreation, a protected wider environment, enjoyment of the arts’, wrote her biographer, Gillian Darley, ‘were connected, and reasonable expectations for all.’¹²

Expectations for all were more than just ideals: they were minimum requirements. Interviewed for this essay, John Bird spoke of what drew him to Octavia Hill’s example: her focus on what is and what needs to be done, rather than taking the conventional political tack of following an ideal of what might be. She saw problems around her and set herself to the task of doing something about them.

One historian has remarked that the Victorians ‘are still with us because the world they created is still here, though changed. Theirs was a period of the most radical transformation ever seen by the world.’¹³ When Octavia Hill died in 1912, her world looked very different from the one in

which she had started her career in the 1850s. In no small part, this was down to her and the work of those she inspired. When young, she assisted her grandfather as he worked with Dickens to highlight the ills of crowded and choleric London; by the end of her life, the concept of social housing had been developed and accommodation for the poor was of a healthier and more affordable standard. Arriving in London as a child, she was struck by the lack of open space and clean air that she had enjoyed in the countryside; by the turn of the twentieth century, she had established the National Trust and sown the seeds of the environmental movement, campaigns for rights of way and heritage preservation.

Change now is even quicker than in Octavia Hill's day. Social problems common to both periods have been affected by new conditions that vary from pluriculturalism to the declining strength and authority of official, administrative structures. Norms and values are more contestable, and the scale of operation much greater. Notwithstanding such difference, the qualities that Octavia Hill saw as vital in responding to change — possessing and remaining true to a clear moral compass, living collectively as 'parts of one great human family', and each playing his or her part as best they can — remain salutary.¹⁴

To mark the centenary of her death, the essays in this publication cover these and other issues that were the subjects of Octavia Hill's campaigns and determination. Several biographers have discussed her life and work.¹⁵ These essays complement their work using the celebration of her memory to ask what inspiration might be taken from it today.

Harmonious parts of a consistent whole

In 1912, Octavia Hill's obituarist commented, 'qualities which are commonly supposed to be distinct or incompatible were in her harmonious parts of a consistent whole'.¹⁶ She combined many interests, all part of her work to provide as many as possible with the chance to lead a fulfilled life. In a letter to her sister, Miranda Hill, she reflected:

*When I first began to work, people would say, 'I'll give you money for necessities for the poor, but I don't see what they want with recreation'; then, after a few years, they said: 'I can understand poor people wanting amusement, but what good will open spaces do them?' and now everybody recognises the importance of open space.*¹⁷

The solutions Octavia Hill found to society's ills were built on making links, making them clear to others through campaign and activism. Housing might have been Octavia Hill's main field of activity, but it was one of many patches in a very broad quilt. Each year she wrote a 'Letter to fellow workers'. Half annual reviews and accounts, half almanacs, they reveal much about her attitudes and approaches and the problems she identified. In 1897, she listed a stream of concerns: playgrounds, gardens, colour and music, 'breathing space' — by which she meant the space around housing — companionship, amateur drama, growing flowers, the preservation of paths and meadows and smoke abatement. She concluded:

*In fact whatever we have thought to do has been suggested by the need as we saw it affecting the homes and members of the homes, with which charge of the houses has brought us into contact.*¹⁸

Few now would connect social housing with the preservation of heritage, craft with campaign, or open spaces with occupational therapy. Octavia Hill did. Today, complexity, bureaucracy and specialism combine to conceal and break such links. This collection reanimates some of the connections that Octavia Hill made. The authors have been asked to write — and draw — from different professions and political perspectives about the themes of Octavia Hill's work based on their own experiences and the issues that they see today.

The spirit of Octavia Hill

'The spirit', wrote Octavia Hill, 'seems so much more... than the form of the work, and if one works on a large scale, one often works for a system.'¹⁹ She believed in working on an individual

level; systems deal in anonymity. In scale and efficiency, society and government has gained since her day, but it has also relinquished the responsiveness by which Octavia Hill flourished. A tension is that her principle of the individual and rejection of the state mark her out in a long line of traditional conservatives and, yet, at the same time, she worked tirelessly to protect London's poor from the relentless need for thrift that comes with uninhibited market forces. Octavia Hill cannot be labelled as being of the left or the right, rather she did what she thought best, where, when and how she saw fit.

Acute as her perception was, it was limited by the pre-conceptions of her era. By the time of her death, many of her ideas and ideals seemed outmoded. Most obviously, her views on the role of women ran against the grain of history and historiography. Her distinction between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor feels cruelly simplistic, contradictory to today's concern with social mobility and certainly inapplicable to the stark divisions of wealth faced globally. Likewise, her views on poverty alleviation did not sit well with the growth of welfarism in the half-century after her death.²⁰

As several authors in this collection point out, Octavia Hill's interventions worked on the small scale, but would not—even in her day—have worked on a national scale. Ethics, as well as practicality, prevent the simple transposition of her approach. Octavia Hill's ideal was to provide for all, but her 'all' was limited to the tenants within her management, to the nation and its heritage and to her concept of what that nation and its heritage were and ought to be. Today, such issues are not so clear-cut and governments, businesses and even individuals have to operate on a far larger scale. In his chapter in this collection, Grahame Hindes, chief executive of the housing association that bears Octavia Hill's name, shows that her belief that the manager should get to know and understand the tenant as an individual is barely practicable given the complexity and size of social housing today; nor, for that matter, does it fit modern concepts of privacy. Similarly, Octavia Hill and her workers depended on intuition in ways that would not be possible or acceptable to modern standards

of accountability.²¹ Hindes, like Anne Power in her chapter, argues that new solutions must be found that employ Octavia Hill's holistic approach with the scale of needs faced today.

Similar tensions—even paradoxes—recur throughout examination of Octavia Hill's work. How could her constant refrain of open space and the need for gardens around properties be squared with metropolitan London's burgeoning need for housing stock? Even now, this is a thorny question that splits the housing sector and open spaces movement, two sectors that rightly see her as a forebear. Although such issues present problems for the modern mind seeking to make use of Octavia Hill's example, they also highlight the continuing dilemmas faced in these areas. The very fact that she encountered them is testimony to how progressive she was.

Such foresight and influence notwithstanding, Octavia Hill has never taken the place that might be expected in the firmament of nineteenth century figures with whom she worked and associated. No statues stand to her in either London or Wisbech, nor is knowledge of her work core for schoolchildren studying Victorian history and the very issues on which she campaigned. In her day, however, she was well known and few today could boast so wide-reaching an address book. Her friends and associates spanned professions from medicine to the arts. Florence Nightingale sent trainees to housing run by her, as did the School of Sociology, which in 1912 merged with the London School of Economics.²² Sophia Jex Blake—one of the first female doctors and a pioneer of women's medical education—was her one-time housemate and friend. Bishop Temple of London confessed after debating housing with Octavia Hill that he had 'never had such a beating in all my life', adding that he and the church commissioners 'not only did what she asked us on that estate, but proceeded to carry out similar plans on other estates'.²³

This collection celebrates that spirit and power to inspire. In 1898, a group of donors asked Octavia Hill to sit for the painter John Singer Sargent, a sign of the esteem in which contemporaries held her. The painting now hangs in London's National Portrait Gallery. At its unveiling, she said:

When I am gone, I hope my friends will not try to carry out any special system, or to follow blindly in the track which I have trodden. New circumstances require various efforts, and it is the spirit, not the dead form that should be perpetuated. When the time comes that we slip from our places, and they are called to the front as workers, what should they inherit from us? Not a system, not an association, not dead formulas. We shall leave them a few houses, purified and improved, a few new and better ones built, a certain record of thoughtful and loving management, a few open spaces, some of which will be more beautiful than they would have been, but what we care for most to leave them is not any tangible thing, however great, not any memory, however good, but the quick eye to see, the true soul to measure, the large hope to grasp the mighty issues of the new and better days to come — greater ideals, greater hope and patience to realise them both.²⁴

Octavia Hill linked social, political, economic, environmental and aesthetic concerns. She saw no distinction: they were part of the same cause, driven by the same spirit.

Making a contribution to common life

Octavia Hill's belief in the power of the individual to work for the collective good is echoed in modern conservative and liberal thought. Similar sentiment runs through David Cameron's Big Society and the Open Society espoused by Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, in which 'power is vested in people, not in the state or other institutions' and 'individuals need the capabilities and opportunities to chart their own course through life, and to hold institutions to account'.²⁵ However, as Anne Power puts it below, people need 'more than warm words'. Octavia Hill focused on deeds, providing the institutions and mechanisms that comprise capabilities, and bring opportunity about.

In her 'Letter to fellow workers' of 1872, she wrote that people 'are not directed like mere tools from above, but have to think out what it is best to do, each in his own sphere'. Her first biographer observed Octavia Hill's belief that

every individual has a contribution to make to the common life and is immeasurably poorer if he is not enabled to make it and that therefore the only cure for the ills of society lies in the conversion and education of individual men and women.²⁶

Octavia Hill believed that a sense of duty brings a sense of efficacy, which was part of a happy and fulfilled life. Her tenants were expected to contribute not just as a means of ensuring that rent came in and communal needs were met, but because Octavia Hill believed that to pull one's own weight is also to sense one's own worth. She wrote,

the fulfilment of their duties was the best education for the tenants in every way. It has given them a dignity and glad feeling of honourable behaviour which has much more than compensated for the apparent harshness of the rule.²⁷

A belief in meaningful work was the spirit that inspired John Bird to establish *The Big Issue*, and it was this spirit that Octavia Hill drew from Ruskin, whose relevance today is discussed below by Robert Hewison.

A belief in the moral and edifying nature of work or effective activity led Octavia Hill to place importance on volunteering.²⁸ She saw unfulfilled potential for doing good, writing:

There is beyond all doubt in almost every town a great amount of volunteer work to be had, which, were it organised and concentrated, would achieve infinitely more than its best efforts can now accomplish.²⁹

Nevertheless, she also placed value and significance on the giving of *what* one could, writing 'let each of us not attempt too much, but take some one little bit of work, and, doing it simply, thoroughly, and lovingly, wait patiently for the gradual spread of good'.³⁰ In her essay, Baroness Julia Neuberger, the former government champion for volunteering, stresses, like Octavia Hill, that people cannot be made to

volunteer. It cannot be the solution to all society's ills and is at its most powerful when people 'do just what they want to do'. She connects volunteering with Octavia Hill's insistence that housing cases be approached working from understanding and a relationship with those helped, a theme echoed in Anne Power's discussion of Octavia Hill's approach and its application in Brixton after the riots of 1981.

Octavia Hill wrote that 'charity owes all its graciousness to the sense of its coming from a real friend'.³¹ Much charitable work today is coordinated by organisations, necessarily so given the scale involved. Oxfam, Crisis, Shelter, the Big Issue organisation and similar organisations provide the kind of centralising logic and coordination that Octavia Hill sought to establish through the Charitable Organisation Society. It was through this that she attempted to square the circle of each instance of volunteering 'being free, yet systematised'. To the modern eye, her constant refrain of 'love' for her 'friends', the needy whom she and her ladies helped, seems quaint compared with the social issues faced then and now. But one of Octavia Hill's strengths was to balance the individual, who works at a human level, with the collective, which necessarily works in a less specific way. 'I have always believed', she wrote 'that a life given wholly to the poor was one-sided, that our work among them should be less engrossing, and grow more naturally out of home life.'³² In this way, and as discussed by Kathryn Hughes below, she saw good management of the home not just as a microcosm for society as a whole, but also the wellspring for values that had wider impact.

Illustrations and interpretations of life

Showing Ruskin's influence, Octavia Hill's campaigns had a strong aesthetic element and she attached particular importance to beauty. She was quick to stress that she was 'not among those who have any tendency to exaggerate the importance of beauty' but she also chastised those who 'talk as if music and painting filled so large a part of their horizon and assume that under "wretched circumstance", life is necessarily cheerless'.³³ She saw

the arts and beauty as core to life and not a luxury for the few. Inequality could be aesthetic too, and it mattered:

*Till you stay a little in the colourless, forlorn desolation of the houses in the worst courts, till you have lived among the monotonous dirty tints of the poor districts of London, you little know what the colours of your curtains, carpets and wall-papers are to you.*³⁴

Through her influence on Emma Cons and her niece Lilian Baylis—who respectively trained with her as a housing manager, and performed for tenants—performing arts institutions such as the Old Vic, the Royal Opera House, the English National Opera and Sadler's Wells all find common origin in the slums of Marylebone. Octavia Hill's work reminds us that the societal ambitions of these great institutions, and the National Trust itself, are not as alien to their purpose as some might today think.

Trained by Ruskin, Octavia Hill saw the arts as part of life, not an add-on, not soft, neither lesser nor greater than other aspects, just means and media by which to lead a fulfilled life. The values that they represented—beauty, aspiration, hope, pleasure—for her drive society and give meaning to the work of which it was comprised. Take them away, and take away hope; cut them back, and cut back the inspiration to improve oneself, one's lot and one's society.³⁵

In a letter, Octavia Hill described a drawing she had made of a tree with flowers at its base and creepers on its trunk. She blurs depiction with her view of society and community: 'fancy how all the little flowers clustering around the stem speak of union and support, which could not be known by the separate flowers'.³⁶ True to Ruskin, Octavia Hill saw drawing and the arts as rooted in close observation of the world, and hence scrutiny of its fabric and composition. Creativity is both a means of understanding, and a means of articulation. In 1858 she asked Ruskin how she should 'set down in drawing any of the gloriously wonderful things I see, day after day in the streets, everywhere, but which depend on expression?'³⁷

However, just as Octavia Hill did not see beauty as the solution to all ills, she did not think of artistic production as being purely for pleasure; she was well aware of its communicative power and believed 'that artistic work and human work should go hand in hand'.³⁸ As Gillian Darley explains in her essay below, Octavia Hill was first taught drawing by her father's friend, the artist Margaret Gillies. This had profound influence, setting her on the path to meet Ruskin, and showing her the power of illustration both in the literal sense of an image, but also as a way of bringing a point home. The decision to illustrate this publication reflects the importance of imagery in Octavia Hill's story. Art and creative production was part of her development, and she and her sisters organised free art exhibitions in the East End slums.³⁹ More than that, Octavia Hill's use of art and the image, both as a means of communication and as a practical part of life to be valued in itself, reminds us of the folly of sidelining creative and artistic production and education. Quentin Blake's drawings in this collection bring out the spirit, independence and drive of Octavia Hill and illustrate her work and career. They also emphasise the power of artistic practice alongside the written word. As Octavia Hill told a friend in describing her drawing, 'If these drawings bring you any message about daily life... I shall be glad.'⁴⁰

Robert Hewison's essay explores the lasting relevance of the ideals that Octavia Hill took from Ruskin. These ideals are the link between Octavia Hill's concern for the natural world, and her insistence on something beyond money value. They drove the mechanisms that Octavia Hill developed for housing, as described by Grahame Hindes. They engender the sympathy that motivates the volunteering described by Baroness Neuberger.

Ruskin's ideals also informed the socialist aesthetic of William Morris and others in the Arts and Crafts movement, a group with which Octavia Hill was also associated. For Octavia Hill, arts and craft and manufacture were forms of expression, a way not just of improving one's environment, but also a way of reacting to and imprinting something of

one's personality on it. Moreover, they were another way of contributing, of realising and bringing to fruition a sense of efficacy in the world. In her chapter, Rosy Greenlees writes of craft not as a discipline or end in itself, but as a means of achieving something. Modern glassmakers, for instance, have solved medical problems that have proved beyond physicians and surgeons. In so doing, they have applied craft and industry in the same way that Octavia Hill hoped, in her concern for smoke abatement, that

*the invention of such a grate as is wanted for domestic use in sitting-rooms will not long be found beyond the reach of British skill and science... for when many Englishmen really want to do a practical thing, they usually find a way to do it, and I cannot help thinking that the effort to abate smoke will steadily grow, bringing with it a gradual success.*⁴¹

The importance that Octavia Hill placed on craft and making has further significance amid social technologies like YouTube. She saw expression in such creativity:

*It seems to me that it is an often forgotten truth and not a superstition that outward objects and events are all connected with inward life, that they are meant to be illustrations and even interpretations of it.*⁴²

Life is a 'language of symbols to be interpreted by a knowledge of events'. Making is the means by which these symbols come about and part of a contribution to a wider whole. Society needs outlets for these expressions; individuals need the power to be seen and be heard, and that means not just education and skills, but also new concepts of institutions.

This world of technology and the creative consumption of interactive media is a long way from the ragged school in which Octavia Hill worked and the craft classes she set up. However, its democratic potential is born of the same origin as the view that Octavia Hill, Ruskin and others had of work being how we relate to the world, and art and beauty

being the means by which we express our visions, ideals and hopes. It follows that the physical manufacture of the past is important: what we choose to keep, to preserve and conserve is a statement of intent and value.

Octavia Hill's first acquisitions for the National Trust were landscapes or 'bit[s] of England as the common playground, study, resting place, vantage ground for seeing the lovely things of nature, open to all, and for long years'.⁴³ The first buildings were not grand stately homes — which were to come later in the organisation's history — but small, vernacular properties, expressive of nationhood, meaningful industry and community. These were 'our small houses, steep in roof and gable, mellowed with the colour of ages, picturesque in outline, rich in memories of England as our ancestors knew it'.⁴⁴

Patriotism as embodied in architecture and nature was at the heart of Octavia Hill's vision for the National Trust, 'which has been founded to keep for her people for ever, in their beauty and accessible to all, some of England's fairest and most memorable places'.⁴⁵ This was a patriotism born of a sense of collectiveness and pride in community and heritage, not differentiation and contradistinction. It was a patriotism that, as Max Wind-Cowie describes below, is a starting point for communitarian activity and not an end in itself. Again, it was part of a fulfilled life.

An ordinary inheritance

Octavia Hill also wrote of 'natural beauty as a national asset'. The value of landscape and nature drove her vision for the National Trust. From an early age, she was profoundly influenced by the contrast between country and city, nature and squalor, space and constriction, freedom and control. She wrote:

*In pleading for beauty for the inhabitants of our towns we are asking for no aristocratic luxury or exceptional superfluity, but for the restoration of some faint reflex of what our modern civilisation has taken away from the ordinary inheritance to which, as citizens of the fair earth, they were born.*⁴⁶

Believing that 'the poor of London need joy and beauty in their lives', she organised outings to the countryside for her tenants and brought flowers for their windowsills.⁴⁷ It would be easy to dismiss these as flights of Victorian bucolicism, overly idealistic in the modern world, but they were part of her vision of human life. Lord Chris Smith, chairman of the Environment Agency, describes how threats to the countryside have since multiplied. Climate change would have been an issue completely alien to Octavia Hill, but surely one on which she would have seized. Her belief that we need to value fast-diminishing assets, that natural beauty and access to the wild are vital to our lives, is something that applies in equal if not even more pressing measure.

Lord Smith addresses another aspect of Octavia Hill's thinking, highly pertinent today: that 'we are all so accustomed to treat money values as if they were the only real values':

*Can we wonder if the eyes of poor men are often fixed rather on the immediate money value to themselves rather than on the effects of changes for their descendants?*⁴⁸

This question has stern relevance as governments look beyond gross value added in judging performance and critics rue the pecuniary focus of modern, consumerist society.⁴⁹ Reacting to the riots of 2011, David Lammy commented that 'consumption should supplement our relationships, not become a substitute for them', and Iain Duncan Smith called for 'a broader set of statistical indicators of progress than relative income, such as the nature of family life, proper rewards for work and other "pro-social norms"'.⁵⁰

A significant thought to draw from Octavia Hill is that beauty can be one such 'pro-social norm'. She saw it as something nourishing, and it was right and elevating to aspire to experiencing beauty, natural, artistic or otherwise:

Beauty is for all; outward beauty is the single glimpse of green, in sunlight however dimmed, in clouds however darkened, in

*faces however worn; inward beauty, unspeakable in gentleness, sacrifice, energy, generosity, humility, strength, reverence, and all nobleness in great deeds, public and private.*⁵¹

Elsewhere, she added that ‘once one has an eye of the right kind, ‘you are enabled to see beauty in every place’.⁵² The columnist and chairman of the National Trust Sir Simon Jenkins has asked ‘we all care about beauty—why don’t politicians?’⁵³ Octavia Hill’s view of what was beautiful leaves room for subjectivity and a more democratic understanding. Beauty is a quality, and there is value in the sensibility to see it. It makes life worth living. The ability to recognise it is a fulfilling part of life. In his essay John Holden links Octavia Hill’s valuation of beauty with her concern for the commons, presenting

the appreciation, indeed the definition, of the beautiful as a democratic endeavour where a multitude of voices—expert witnesses, urbanists and ruralists, artists, Everyman and Everywoman—have a stake and a voice in a continuous conversation that develops the idea of the beautiful.

Beauty was a principle that Octavia Hill applied in equal measure to issues great, and creatures small.

A fulfilled life

This collection examines Octavia Hill’s work as a starting point for thinking afresh about how to address challenges of society today. It is doubtful that experts on heritage would have expected to write alongside specialists in housing, or that readers will expect an essay on patriotism to sit alongside drawings about the everyday beauty of snails. Octavia Hill’s lasting lesson is to think afresh, to have the ‘quick eye to see’ links that exist, but are buried and connections that have never been made.

One of the starkest problems we face today is the need to develop solutions collectively in a world in which difference is ever-present and, moreover, constantly sought.

Values to which society and its governments have long been in thrall, from the consumerist bent of markets, to the foundations of culture are changing. What spirit is needed to rise to this challenge? How can individuals find their place in a world that is ever-changing? Octavia Hill’s life and work does not necessarily offer the answers, but it offers an approach. As she wrote,

*It is essential to remember that each man has his own view of his life and must be free to fulfil it; that in many ways he is a far better judge of it than we as he has lived through and felt what we have only seen. Our work is rather to bring him to the point of considering, and the spirit of judging rightly than to consider or judge him.*⁵⁴

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Notes

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- 2 The author is indebted to a personal interview with John Bird in preparing this essay. Quotes and references hereafter are sourced from this. For further details of Bird’s motivation and philosophy in founding *The Big Issue*, see www.bigissue.org.uk (accessed 19 Jan 2012).
- 3 A Stratton, ‘David Cameron on riots: broken society is top of my political agenda’, *Guardian*, 15 Aug 2011, www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/15/david-cameron-riots-broken-society (accessed 21 Feb 2012).
- 4 P Wintour, ‘Cameron puts £400m into helping families out of ‘responsibility deficit’, *Guardian*, 15 Dec 2011, www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/dec/15/cameron-400m-chaotic-families (accessed 19 Dec 2011).

- 5 D Matthews, 'Out of the Ashes by David Lammy: review', *Guardian*, 9 Dec 2011, www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/dec/09/out-ashes-riots-david-lammy-review-matthews (accessed 21 Feb 2012).
- 6 'Reading the Riots: Investigating England's summer of disorder—full report: the Guardian and London School of Economics's 40-page report into the summer riots', *Guardian*, 14 Dec 2011, www.guardian.co.uk/uk/interactive/2011/dec/14/reading-the-riots-investigating-england-s-summer-of-disorder-full-report (accessed 28 Mar 2012).
- 7 P Wintour and P Lewis, 'X Factor culture fuelled the UK riots, says Iain Duncan Smith', *Guardian*, 9 Dec 2011, www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/dec/09/x-factor-culture-fuelled-riots (accessed 21 Feb 2012).
- 8 For discussion, see R Whelan (ed), *Octavia Hill and the Social Housing Debate: Essays and letters by Octavia Hill*, London, Civitas, 1988, p 6.
- 9 O Hill, *Our Common Land, and Other Short Essays*, London: Macmillan, 1877, p 13.
- 10 O Hill, 'Four years' management of a London court', *Macmillan's Magazine*, Jul 1869, reprinted in *The Homes of the London Poor*, facsimile, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- 11 O Hill, 'Letter to fellow workers', 1892, in R Whelan (ed), *Octavia Hill's Letters to Fellow Workers*, 1872–1911, London: Kyrle Books, 2005, p 325.
- 12 G Darley, *Octavia Hill: Social reformer and founder of the National Trust*, London: Francis Boutle, 2010, p 8.
- 13 AN Wilson, *The Victorians*, London: Arrow Books, 2003, p 1.
- 14 O Hill, 'Colour, space and music for the people', reprinted from *The Nineteenth Century*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1884, p 12.
- 15 The main biographies, in chronological order, are EM Bell, *Octavia Hill*, London: Constable, 1942; N Boyd, *Josephine Butler, Octavia Hill, Florence Nightingale: Three Victorian women who changed their world*, London: MacMillan, 1982; Darley, *Octavia Hill*; and P Clayton, *Octavia Hill: Social reformer and co-founder of the National Trust*, Andover: Pitkin Publishing, 2012. Key discussions of her work in the housing sector include R Whelan, *Octavia Hill and the Social Housing Debate: Essays and letters by Octavia Hill*, London: Civitas, 2000, and R Best, 'Octavia Hill and housing today', The Octavia Hill Society inaugural lecture, Wisbech: The Octavia Hill Society, 1993.
- 16 A correspondent writer responding to Octavia's obituary in *The Times*, 15 Aug 1912, p 7.
- 17 Quoted in EM Bell, *Octavia Hill*, London: Constable, 1942, p 220.
- 18 R Whelan (ed), *Octavia Hill's Letters to Fellow Workers*, 1872–1911, London: Kyrle Books, 2005, p 385.
- 19 O Hill, 'Letter to fellow workers', 1882, in R Whelan (ed), *Octavia Hill's Letters to Fellow Workers*, 1872–1911, London: Kyrle Books, 2005, p 156.
- 20 For discussion, see Whelan, *Octavia Hill and the Social Housing Debate*, p 18.
- 21 This point is raised in Whelan, *Octavia Hill and the Social Housing Debate*, p 34.
- 22 Darley, *Octavia Hill*, p 131.
- 23 Quoted in Bell, *Octavia Hill*, p 185.

- 24 *Ibid*, pp 242–3.
- 25 N Clegg, speech to Demos and the Open Society Foundation, 19 Dec 2011, www.libdems.org.uk/latest_news_detail.aspx?title=Deputy_Prime_Minister_speech_to_Demos_and_the_Open_Society_Foundation&pPK=787e3f14-2b05-4a06-9469-1c9306da08e6 (accessed 19 Dec 2011).
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- 30 *Ibid*, pp 141–2.
- 31 Hill, 'The work of volunteers', p 111.
- 32 O Hill, 'Letter to fellow workers', 1880, in R Whelan, *Octavia Hill's Letters to Fellow Workers*, 1872–1911, p 135.
- 33 O Hill, 'Colour, space and music for the people', reprinted from *The Nineteenth Century*, London: Keegan Paul and Co, 1884, p 1.
- 34 *Ibid*, p 3.
- 35 ES Maurice (ed), *Octavia Hill: Early ideals, from letters*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1928, p 216.
- 36 *Ibid*, pp 51.
- 37 *Ibid*, p 129.
- 38 Quoted in Bell, *Octavia Hill*, p 38.
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- 40 Maurice, *Octavia Hill*, p 52.
- 41 O Hill, 'Letter to fellow workers', 1881, in R Whelan (ed), *Octavia Hill's Letters to Fellow Workers*, 1872–1911, London: Kyrle Books, 2005, p 145.
- 42 Maurice, *Octavia Hill*, pp 215–16.
- 43 O Hill, 'Letter to fellow workers', 1896, in R Whelan (ed), *Octavia Hill's Letters to Fellow Workers*, 1872–1911, London: Kyrle Books, 2005, p 393.
- 44 Quoted in Darley, *Octavia Hill*, p 285.
- 45 Hill, 'Letter to fellow workers', 1896, in R Whelan (ed), *Octavia Hill's Letters to Fellow Workers*, 1872–1911, London: Kyrle Books, 2005, p 393.
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- 48 O Hill, *Our Common Land, and Other Short Essays*, London: Macmillan, 1877, p 13.
- 49 R Wilkinson and K Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why more equal societies almost always do better*, London, Allen Lane, 2009.

- 50 Wintour and Lewis, '*X Factor culture fuelled the UK riots, says Iain Duncan Smith*'.
- 51 Maurice, *Octavia Hill*, p 30.
- 52 *Ibid*, p 82.
- 53 S Jenkins, 'We all care about beauty — why don't politicians?', *Guardian*, 8 Apr 2010, www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/apr/08/beauty-politicians-election (accessed 15 Dec 2011).
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*We too readily sit down, under imperfect or bad conditions
instead of setting ourselves to think over what may or may not
be done to alter them.*

Octavia Hill, *Letter to fellow workers*



Beware of well meant failures.

Octavia Hill, *Letter to fellow workers*

1 Octavia Hill

Gillian Darley

Octavia Hill was the eighth daughter of James Hill, a Wisbech corn merchant, banker and brewer, but also an eager adherent of Robert Owen's utopian socialism — a heady brew of radicalism and communal activism that flourished in the 1820s and 1830s. Octavia Hill's mother, his third wife, was Caroline Southwood Smith Hill, a teacher and published writer on the ideas of the Swiss pedagogue Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi. Her evident independence of mind, in promoting an education that relied on the child's activity, powers of observation and self-motivation, had been the quality that caught Hill's attention. Caroline's own father was Dr Thomas Southwood Smith, the eminent public health reformer.¹

The activities and aspirations of the three key adults in Octavia Hill's earliest years might suggest that Caroline Southwood Hill's middle daughter was unlikely to follow a quietly conventional life within the provincial Victorian middle classes. Despite the comfortable setting of her birth, in August 1838, in a handsome Georgian town house overlooking the canal in the still thriving east coast port, all was not as it seemed.

Already, her father's revolutionary social and political views, at a time of wide economic downturn, were proving catastrophic for the family's fortunes. James Hill was one of a wide diaspora of Owenite followers. He promoted his ideas both by practical action and in print. He built the Hall of the People in Wisbech the year before Octavia Hill's birth, in which Caroline helped him run an infant school cum adult institute — with the example of Owen's New Lanark in mind. Out on the Fens, Hill helped set up a putative cooperative land colony, Manea Colony, on some 200 acres. It boasted its own newsletter, *The Working Bee*, and a motto, 'Each for All'.² Meanwhile Hill was also the editor of a fiery local newspaper,

The Star in the East. Such endeavours did not come cheap, nor without making him enemies; by 1840, Hill and his brother were bankrupt.

After months spent moving from one part of the country to another, in 1843 they arrived in Leeds, where Caroline's fifth daughter (Florence) was born. At that moment James Hill had a severe breakdown and his wife, though reluctant to do so, was advised to separate from him. When Octavia Hill was only five years old, James Hill disappeared almost entirely from her life and his family. The shadow of this tragedy (her father lived another 30 years) gave Octavia Hill the first of the several cast iron rules by which she lived and worked: idealism without pragmatic underpinning was little use. Practical help and charitable endeavours must be carefully targeted, hence her support, later, for the Charity Organisation Society.

Yet, as if to set the record straight, throughout her childhood Octavia Hill had two inspiring exemplars. Caroline Hill, though now a lone mother with small children, retained her extraordinary resilience and independence, while Dr Southwood Smith, brought up short by the horror of the living conditions of the urban poor he encountered as a doctor in East London, became a tireless reformer. From him, Octavia Hill saw what could be learned by close observation and how effective was the well-used, focused report, whether delivered in print or from a public platform.

The experience of being fatherless from early childhood gave Octavia Hill an exalted regard for the importance of the family. In the home the standards for society were set, examples given and morality developed. A microcosm of the wider world, it provided a template for the satisfactory conduct of life and a domestic ideal became the central tenet of Octavia Hill's housing reform. In Octavia Hill's case, home was also a place entirely governed by women. Her maternal grandfather was the only significant male in her childhood. She saw for herself that it was possible for women to make lives, and a living, for themselves, gaining self-respect in doing so.

When she found herself adrift with five small girls, Caroline Southwood Hill had to find a means of financial support once again. James Hill had originally invited her to Wisbech on the strength of her progressive writings on education, to be his younger children's governess. Now she returned to teaching. Her father provided as much practical help as he could and unstinting emotional backup. Dr Southwood Smith adopted Caroline's second daughter, Gertrude (who married George Eliot's stepson, Charles Lewes), and was an adored grandfather. His home, Hillside, was in a village still well to the north of London, surrounded by hayfields and woods and the magical setting of Octavia Hill's happiest childhood days. It was, somehow, fitting that she met the Danish fairy-story writer Hans Christian Andersen, while haymaking in Highgate.

Southwood Smith, doctor, social reformer, Unitarian and utilitarian radical and a married man, lived in an irregular household with the unmarried Margaret Gillies and her sister Mary. They moved in a social circle of mostly nonconformists and feminists, independently minded intellectuals such as the Leigh Smiths, the Howitts, RH Horne, WJ Fox and Charles Dickens. Late in his career Southwood Smith became one of the three members of the Board of Health, but he had long been active in public health reform, seeing the succession of cholera epidemics to be intimately linked to dire living conditions, the reality of urban poverty being very familiar to him, a physician in London's East End.

No doubt at his instigation, Margaret Gillies, a well-regarded painter, helped to illustrate the first bluebook report for the Royal Commission on Children in the Mines (1842). The sketches (marked as drawn on the spot and probably executed by various hands) showed small girls and boys being used much as pit ponies were, dragging, pulling and lifting sacks of coal down the tunnels.³ No such government report had ever been illustrated and Southwood Smith's introduction of graphics into such a document gave the pages an impact that closely-set columns of type alone could not begin to achieve. The doctor supplied Dickens with material for several

of his novels, in particular on the working conditions of children in the mines. (Caroline Hill also wrote for Dickens' periodical *Household Words*.)

Southwood Smith's example as a practical and effective campaigner, on the page as in person, was an inspiration to Octavia Hill and to Miranda, her eldest sister, who in the mid-1870s founded the Kyrle Society, with the stated mission of 'bringing beauty home to the people'. The doctor's many and varied practical initiatives proved how firsthand knowledge and careful strategy could advance social reform.

Teaching, whether in a school or as a governess, was the most respectable work available for women and girls in reduced circumstances. Queen's College, Harley Street, founded (in 1848) by the Christian Socialist theologian Frederick Denison Maurice, offered certification to women teachers while university education still remained behind closed doors. Maurice influenced Octavia Hill and her family greatly and he became Emily Hill's father-in-law. He insisted that teaching was a great vocation that gave women self-respect, while allowing them a preview and stake in the formation of morals in the very young. More important, at least in retrospect for Octavia Hill's work, was Maurice's emphasis on a fundamental flexibility of approach as opposed to a 'system'.⁴

One of the many cooperative ventures that the Christian Socialists set up in central London was the Ladies Guild near Fitzroy Square, where women painted items in consolidated glass. Caroline became their manager and bookkeeper when it opened in 1852. Octavia Hill took charge of their children, who made exquisite toy furniture for the dolls' houses of the wealthy. Supporters of the novel cooperative venture came to see the work in progress and one day John Ruskin himself appeared at the Guild. Ruskin was by then a famous art critic, widely read ever since the publication of the first volume of *Modern Painters* in 1843, and his arrival caused a great stir in the workshop. In 1855 he offered Octavia Hill a paid job, considering she would make 'a thoroughly good copyist', and asking her to make watercolour copies after Venetian paintings

in public collections. Examples of her work appeared in the final volume of *Modern Painters*. The ten years over which Ruskin employed Octavia Hill gave him a growing respect for her determination and aptitude for social reform.

Now the family was settled back in London, the various strands of Octavia Hill's life, and the influences on her, came together. She wrote of people for whom 'the room is always full' and asked her readers to 'think of the ceaseless echo, the shout, the scream, the bustle in the narrow court', evoking the experience of the poorest Londoners, trapped in foul, rancorous 'rookeries'.⁵ Her own crowded, peripatetic childhood provided memories of the stolen luxury of space. Her idea for securing 'outdoor sitting-rooms' in the disused burial grounds of central London was only one of her efforts to achieve it in the city, together with children's playgrounds and an aspiration towards a continuous 'green belt' of parkland.

When Octavia Hill began to visit absentee children from the Ladies Guild she saw for herself the shocking conditions in which they lived—often only yards from the houses of affluent professionals. Octavia Hill recognised that decent living conditions, education and work, with access to open space and beauty, were essentials, bringing self-esteem to any and every life. The fundamental links between these requirements, each one contributing to the wellbeing of her tenants, be they children or adults, came to be at the heart of Octavia Hill's work.

Octavia Hill's grandfather had been instrumental in setting up the Metropolitan Association for Improving the Dwellings of the Industrious Classes. While she was never persuaded that industrial dwelling blocks were ideal, she could see the health benefits that they brought. Her emphasis was, emphatically, on rehabilitation of existing housing, which lay in the hands of the equally rehabilitated tenants. Her main objective was to lift the curse of avaricious landlords, who collected rents while letting houses deteriorate. And the first of her new breed of landlord (still taking a modest return on investment) was her longstanding patron, and by now friend, John Ruskin. With his financial support, Octavia Hill took on, first, Paradise (now Garbutt) Place in 1865 and the following

year Freshwater Place, both in Marylebone. Whitewash, access to clean water, unbroken windows and prompt payment of rent were the first requirements in good housing management. When the tenants paid her, or explained why they could not, they told their stories and (unless incorrigible) got help.

Octavia Hill came into contact with many like-minded young women, including Emma Cons (a fellow pupil of Ruskin, who went on to found the Old Vic) and Henrietta Rowland (Barnett), who were, like her, to make social reform, according to their own principles, their life's work. As word spread, so the network of volunteers grew exponentially, pointing the direction towards housing management, social work and occupational therapy—only some of the professions that opened up as the result of Octavia Hill's efforts.

In the early years, she showed signs of being a carefree person, someone who enjoyed dressing up, dancing and enjoying herself. Later, fustily clad and often in the midst of a bevy of similar small determined women (often her sisters and always her mother, who lived into her 90s), Octavia Hill could seem admirable but somewhat joyless. The Sargent portrait was overly flattering, and yet the painter had caught the acuteness of her gaze while softening her features. Octavia Hill was remarkably self-aware and self-deprecating. She wrote, in old age, to thank one of her senior housing workers for a Christmas gift: 'I often feel as if I must seem to you all a sort of inhuman machine. So when you step out of the rank and greet me thus it is a real kindness.'

The drive to make Octavia Hill's campaigns bear fruit came at huge personal cost. In 1875 a heroic attempt to secure Swiss Cottage Fields from imminent development, in order to extend Hampstead Heath, failed when the landowner raised the price and shortened the timetable without warning.

It was the measure of her authority, and spreading influence, that she was offered a government post, to investigate the plight of pauper children within workhouses. She turned it down and personally nominated her friend Jane (Jeanie) Nassau Senior, who thus became the first woman civil servant.⁶ The pressure of Octavia Hill's work, exacerbated by

a cruel rift with Ruskin who denounced her in the columns of his *Fors Clavigera*, 1877, for daring to criticise his planned land colony as part of St George's Guild, then led to a major nervous breakdown. Had Ruskin's impractical plan opened up the memories, and the old wounds, of her father's utopian disaster? When she returned after a long interval, she had learned to delegate and to do what she did best, campaign.

Octavia Hill was a past mistress of networking and drew around herself skeins of interconnected and influential people. As early as the mid-1860s, the diarist William Allingham noted 'Miss Hill and another lady' joining the company at the young Burne Jones's Great Russell Street house; over dinner the conversation ranged over Christianity, Dante, Tennyson and Browning.⁷ Thirty years later Virginia Woolf, aged 15, listened as Octavia Hill and her half-sister, Stella Duckworth, 'learnedly argued over them [the new cottages Stella was funding] for half an hour, I sitting on a stool by the fire and surveying Miss Hill's legs'. As the prime activist and publicist for her cause, Octavia Hill dined with the right people, wrote letters to the press and gave evidence to royal commissions. She could persuade almost anybody of her case, including on one occasion, the ecclesiastical (later church) commissioners. After one debate with her, Bishop (later Archbishop) Temple remarked, 'I never had such a beating in my life!' Octavia Hill's essays appeared regularly in leading periodicals and she gave public lectures helped, apparently, by a fine speaking voice. Her Christian faith was implicit but her views surprisingly ecumenical.

In time, the threads meshed. The Commons and Open Spaces Society (founded in 1866) and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (founded in 1877) were two bodies whose concerns (and many individuals, too) met within the National Trust (founded in 1895). One of Octavia Hill's most valued housing workers was an American, Ellen Chase, who had struggled with the unyielding problems in Deptford and later wrote a book about her experiences. Home in Boston, she alerted a relative to Robert Hunter's 1884 paper about the preservation of public open space.⁸ It prompted the establishment of the

US body the Trustees for Public Reservations (1890), which in turn suggested a legal framework for the National Trust. With a strategist, Robert Hunter, a campaigner, Octavia Hill, and an activist, the Lake District based Rev Hardwicke Rawnsley, the founders played to one another's strengths, and prepared the ground for what the National Trust now aspires to be, 'for ever, for everyone.'

The main source for this essay is my biography of Octavia Hill, first published in 1990 and then revised and reissued under the title Octavia Hill: Social reformer and founder of the National Trust (Francis Boute Publishers, 2010).

Gillian Darley is the nomination of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings to the Council of the National Trust.

Notes

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- 3 See 'The (Manea) Colony', www.welney.org.uk/Manea_Colony/Manea_colony.htm (accessed 18 Apr 2012).
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- 8 F MacCarthy, *The Last Pre-Raphaelite: Edward Burne-Jones and the Victorian imagination*, London: Faber, 2011.
- 9 R Hunter, 'A suggestion for the better preservation of open space', paper read at the Annual Congress of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science, Birmingham, Sep 1884. Published by the Commons Preservation Society, 1884.

I determined to ask him [Ruskin] about whether and how I should try to set down in drawing any of the gloriously wonderful things I see, day after day, in the streets and everywhere, but which depend on expression.

Octavia Hill, *Letter to Miranda Hill*



That penetrating sympathy, that marvellous imagination, that noble generosity, that grasp of all that is beautiful, that wonderful power of expression, that high ideal of life, have not only blessed his friends, but have left their mark on England.

Octavia Hill's tribute to Ruskin after his death

2 ‘You are doing some of the work that I ought to do’: Octavia Hill and Ruskinian values

Robert Hewison

In 1896, when the National Trust bought its first building, the fourteenth-century Clergy House in Alfriston in Sussex, for a nominal £10, it was that cheap because it needed £320 worth of repairs, more than the Trust’s annual income at the time. Octavia Hill, who was collaborating with the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings over the purchase, wrote: ‘We should very naturally be asked to “restore” it, in so far as that odious word means preservation from decay’.¹ She was recalling the words of her friend and patron, John Ruskin, in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849):

*Do not let us talk then of restoration. The thing is a Lie from beginning to end. You may make a model of a building as you may of a corpse, and your model may have the shell of the old walls within it, as your cast might have the skeleton, but with what advantage I neither see nor care: but the old building is destroyed, and that more totally and mercilessly than if it had sunk into a heap of dust, or melted into a mass of clay.*²

The repairs to the house in Alfriston, involving considerable structural intervention, nonetheless went ahead.

There is a heritage of objects, and a heritage of ideas, and in neither case is it possible to accept Ruskin’s absolutist resistance to change: objects decay, their context alters, their meaning shifts. The same happens with institutions. In the 1930s, when the National Trust decided that it would acquire country houses, it moved a long way from Octavia Hill’s principles. She wanted to preserve land, not the properties of

the privileged. But her values remain central to the Trust, and they are Ruskinian in origin.

* * *

In addition to the influence of her immediate family, the shaping cultural and political influences on Octavia Hill were Ruskin, whom she called a poet, and the Christian Socialist FD Maurice, whom she called a prophet. It was through Maurice that she was first introduced to Ruskin, just before her fifteenth birthday in 1853. She had already absorbed everything Ruskin had written since the publication of the first volume of *Modern Painters* a decade before. In 1855 he took her up, and for the next ten and a half years he was both her employer, paying her for her art work, and her teacher. This was an aesthetic education, for Octavia Hill wanted to be a painter, and by making copies of old masters for Ruskin, she received a rigorous training of the hand and eye that qualified her in turn to teach others.

'He taught me a great deal in a few words,' she wrote of one lesson.³ Their shared aesthetic rested on a romantic and religious faith, informed by natural theology, which interpreted nature as symbolic of God's creation: 'I think to arrange beautiful colour, to show what I believe God's works are the symbols of,' she told Ruskin.⁴ God's work was to be found in the countryside, not man-made towns, but Octavia Hill was already also engaged with her true vocation:

*Colour and form (certainly in landscape) are so delicious to me that I should be quite happy to spend my working life in copying, though I believe I should always require some social work.*⁵

An aesthetic impulse combined with a moral imperative lay behind the Hill sisters' formation of the Kyrle Society in 1875, a 'Society for the Diffusion of Beauty', where beauty would ameliorate the lives of the poor. Its four branches — Decorative, promoting what might now be called public art; Music, in the shape of choirs and concerts;

Literature, to provide sound reading matter; and Open Spaces, seeking to turn London burial grounds into public gardens — all signalled a holistic attempt to improve the quality of the public realm, and incorporated what were to be some of the values of the National Trust.

Ruskin recognised, however, that Octavia Hill's 'infinite sympathy and power of teaching and helping people'⁶ was greater than her artistic talent, and in 1865 and 1866 he put up the money to buy the leases of slum housing in Paradise Place and Freshwater Place, telling her: 'you are doing some of the work that I ought to do'.⁷ Ruskin wanted a 5 per cent return on the property, which might seem unphilanthropic, but he explained:

*I furnished you with the means in order to prove and practise one of the first principles of my political economy: that proper use of money would give proper interest, and that no one could otherwise than criminally take more.*⁸

Any surplus above 5 per cent was at Octavia Hill's disposal to help the tenants, and her career as a social worker truly began.

Both Ruskin and Hill's political economy was profoundly conservative. It was not the aggressive individualism associated with market-driven modern conservatism, but harked back to the romantic anti-capitalism of the ultra-Tories of the 1830s, where power and privilege were balanced by responsibilities. The word 'feudal' has been applied to both Ruskin and Hill. Both were members of the Charity Organization Society, which believed in what would now be called 'tough love', aimed at 'raising the poor without gifts'.⁹ This made a firm distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor, and tried to provide work, rather than income support through alms-giving. Octavia Hill's system depended on the close relationship between their tenants and the middle-class female rent collectors on the properties they managed; it was care, but it was also control.

In spite of Octavia Hill's success and pervasive influence, this labour-intensive social work, seeking to reform each individual, rather than to change the social and economic environment in which they lived, could only have a limited impact on the enormous housing problems that the industrialisation of Britain had generated. She was hostile to the municipal authorities that began to tackle the problem, and like Ruskin did not believe in state intervention. Her faith in charitable organisations, and distrust of locally elected authorities, chimes with the rhetoric of David Cameron's Big Society, a form of localism that appears to disempower democratically elected institutions in favour of individuals, special interest organisations and market forces.

* * *

In 1877 Ruskin and Hill had an appalling falling out. By this time he had decided that London was 'as utterly doomed as Gomorrah', implying that Octavia Hill's work was merely palliative, whereas he had 'to labour wholly to fence round fresh fields beyond the smoke of [London's] torment'.¹⁰ He was trying to establish his own rural utopia, the Guild of St George, and hoped somehow to absorb the properties that Octavia Hill managed on his behalf into the scheme. Unwisely, she criticised Ruskin's organisational skills (which, together with fund raising ability, she had in abundance), remarking: 'Do not look to Mr Ruskin for definite direction about practical things: he is not the best judge of them.'¹¹

Although the Guild of St George lives on as part of Ruskin's legacy, Hill was quite right about Ruskin's administrative inadequacies, but Ruskin, who was about to succumb to mania for the first time, was furious, publishing their correspondence in his monthly newsletter *Fors Clavigera*. Octavia Hill had strong feelings for Ruskin, and his rejection helped to drive her to her own breakdown. In 1881 he sold the leases on Paradise and Freshwater Place to her. There was an attempted reconciliation in 1887, and Ruskin indirectly

apologised, but Octavia Hill, while still admiring Ruskin, thought it better to let matters rest.

One reason was Ruskin's mental illness. More or less incapacitated, and living at Brantwood in the Lake District, Ruskin was off the scene by 1895 when the National Trust came into being, but his influence was strong, emblematised by the Trust's first acquisition, land at Barmouth given by Ruskin's close friend Fanny Talbot, and the fact that the Trust's Lake District champion, Hardwicke Rawnsley, had been an undergraduate digger on Ruskin's Hinksey road building project. Everything Ruskin had said about the need to establish a right relationship between man and nature stood behind the values of the Trust.

The difference between the Trust and the Commons Preservation Society and the Open Spaces Committee of the Kyrle Society, which had prepared the way, was that the Trust was not merely seeking to create public gardens from disused burial grounds, or protect existing common land and rights of way: the Trust was ready to take private land into public ownership. Here, Octavia Hill would be firmly on the opposite side of the fence to modern conservatism. Writing in 1877, long before the Trust came into being, she pointed out that one-quarter of the land in England was owned by only 710 individuals:

*The more that fields and woods are closed, the more does every atom of Common land, everywhere, all over England, become of importance to the people of every class, except that which owns its own parks and woods.*¹²

Hill, like Ruskin, wanted access to nature above all for those trapped by poverty in towns, and expressed a belief in collectivism that would be anathema to neo-liberals:

In our common-land we are meant to learn an even deeper lesson: — something of the value of those possessions in which each of a large community has a distinct share, yet which each enjoys only by virtue of the share the many have in it; in which separate

*right is subordinated to the good of all; each tiny bit of which would have no value if the surface were divided amongst the hundreds that use it, yet which when owned together and stretching away into loveliest space of heather or forest becomes the common possession of the neighbourhood, or even the County and Nation. It will give a sense of common possession to succeeding generations.*¹³

* * *

The National Trust has achieved just that, and now it has to protect both town and country from a neo-liberal conservative government whose change to planning law promoting 'sustainable development', in the words of the Trust's Director, Fiona Reynolds, is 'so clearly driven by economic concerns rather than sustainability'.¹⁴ The presumption in favour of development threatens the value of precisely those possessions in which each of a large community has a distinct share. As Octavia Hill observed in *Our Common Land*: 'we are all so accustomed to treat money value as if it were the only true value!'¹⁵

The Trust has changed beyond recognition since the days of its founders: it has itself become the largest non-government land owner in the country; it manages a portfolio of historic houses that would have been unimaginable when Alfriston was acquired in 1896; and its membership is larger than that of all the political parties combined. But when it argues that the built and natural environment represents a higher common good that should be protected from market forces, it demonstrates that its values remain those of Octavia Hill and her mentor. As she declared in 1889, 'New circumstances require various efforts, and it is the spirit, not the dead form that should be perpetuated.'¹⁶ Ruskin's values live on in those of the National Trust.

Robert Hewison is a Demos associate and a trustee of the Ruskin Foundation. His Ruskin on Venice: 'The paradise of cities' is published by Yale University Press.

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*I would rather work in the unsought-after, out of sight places,
side by side with my fellow workers, face to face with tenants,
than in the conspicuous forefront of any great movement.*

Octavia Hill, *Letter to fellow workers*

3 Inner city turbulence and the spirit of Octavia Hill

Anne Power

London's troubled council estates — learning from the 1980s

In 1980 Brixton was a troubled place. Demolition had blighted vast swathes of the inner city for 50 years. The post-war obsession with clearance and estate building across all of Britain's inner cities created no-man's-lands of demolition sites, ejected communities and large estates, some of which quickly became deeply unpopular. Today, some of them are still so unpopular they provoke hostility and also trouble.

Many pre-war estates were 'difficult to let': people simply didn't want to live there.¹ I worked for the Priority Estates Project in 1980, and Tulse Hill, Brixton, typified the problems. Each year, one-third of tenants moved, creating massive community turbulence. Stairwells constantly lost their window-panes and light bulbs. Rubbish chutes were frequently blocked and council refuse collectors refused to pull out the broken rubbish containers so they could be emptied. There was no local office for the dense balcony block estate of 1,000 flats and only two of the eight caretaking posts were filled. Estate officers would only visit tenants in pairs. Rent arrears were out of control.

Empty flats were advertised in the *Evening Standard* under the 'Ready-Let' scheme. All-comers were welcome as long as they moved in immediately and signed up to £20 a week rent. These new tenants rarely lasted more than a few weeks because conditions were chaotic and there were many reports of muggings, squatting, illegal tapping of electricity supplies, violence and intimidation in the local community centre. I refused to consult tenants on what could be done until the Greater London Council (GLC), the landlord of the estate, agreed to provide a basic housing management, repair

and cleaning service based directly on the estate. I argued that until the GLC landlord fulfilled its most minimal obligations, it was unfair to ask tenants to play their part.

Victorian slums and Octavia Hill's practical vision

At this point my colleagues and I came across the Church Commissioners' biography of Octavia Hill in Brixton Library.² Its accounts of inner London's chaotic slum communities, landlord irresponsibility, filth, squalor and distress caught our eye: how close conditions in Brixton in 1980 seemed to the Victorian conditions Octavia Hill had battled with a century earlier in nearby Walworth. This practical social reformer, with her own roots in poverty, saw family, community and educational problems through the lens of slum housing, but unlike most housing reformers, did not believe in wiping out appalling properties and building afresh if it could possibly be avoided. Rather, she argued for incremental, on-the-spot improvements in tandem with the existing 'slum' tenants, within the limits of low rents and borrowed money that had to be paid back.

Octavia Hill's work showed how much could be done following basic principles of care, applied skill, patience, clarity, firmness and order. These ideas flowed through her 'Letters to fellow workers'.³ On the ground, her principles worked in intensely practical ways to reverse grotesque landlord abuses, regain control and re-humanise almost bestial conditions. Lord Salisbury, the aristocratic housing reformer and contemporary of Octavia Hill, had asked with genuine concern, 'Was it the pig that created the sty or the sty that created the pig?'⁴ Octavia Hill was in no doubt that the one fuelled the other and that both property and people had to be tackled and 'reformed' together.

Inspired by Octavia Hill, we persuaded Harry Simpson, the highly respected Director of Housing at the GLC, to come and see for himself what 'criminal neglect' he was responsible for.⁵ We argued that half the rent from 1,000 flats in a dedicated estate budget would fund all the caretaking,

estate maintenance, repairs, tenancy relations, and the local office with a full-time manager and locally based staff. The Council, desperate to sort out its 'expensive nightmare', agreed to experiment. Simpson publicly committed to backing our hands-on approach.⁶

Public bureaucracy makes quick wins on the ground

It was music to our ears to uncover this early evidence of a practical, low cost way of tackling the worst conditions and to secure a carte blanche to apply it. We were up against a huge, remote bureaucracy, developed with benign intentions, but so far from the people it was set up to serve that it had obviously reached the point of collapse. Public bureaucracies are poor fixers of drainpipes and refuse services. The GLC's elaborately constructed but remote housing systems simply did not deliver as happened in other big cities.⁷

Our unconventional approach to inner city estates, on the other hand, worked quickly to restore order. The estate office opened immediately and all eight caretaking posts were filled. Uniforms were reinstated at the request of caretakers, so that they became clearly recognisable to tenants and they could more easily tackle 'dirty jobs' while protecting their own clothing. Within six months the estate was fully let; unbreakable glass was intact in the stairwells; lights were on at night; refuse was cleared twice a week to keep the chutes clear; open spaces were gradually reclaimed. The local police agreed to increase their presence to daily foot and bike patrols.⁸

Chaotic or caring communities?

The really exciting story is what happened to the tenants whom government officials in early visits to the estate had blamed for the conditions. We started the consultation, knocking door by door, and personally invited every occupier to small block meetings. We held 25 meetings on the estate over three months. We needed to understand

tenants' priorities and secure their support for the local effort now under way. Tenants wanted three simple things: repairs, cleaning, security. They thought the local office and local caretakers were critical to achieve this. Without direct, immediate access, tenants would be powerless to help and staff would not have their 'finger on the pulse'.

The tenants' priorities were uncannily close to Octavia Hill's. They wanted open spaces to be cared for and shared so the crowded, inner-city, multi-racial community could get together, enjoy and use them. Tenants' steering groups were formed and included key GLC housing officers and two caretakers. In late autumn 1980, a group of tenants determined to collect for a large Christmas tree and coloured lights to stand on the open grass area in front of the largest block. The Council and police were deeply sceptical but the tenants persisted, put the tree up with help from the estate officers and held a children's party-cum-celebration. The tree with its lights told its own story. In the New Year of 1981 the tenants and their children planted hundreds of daffodils in the grass in front of the same block. By Easter, the estate was blooming. The community had reclaimed control, but they did not do it alone. Without a willing on-site landlord the estate would not work. It had to be property *and* people.

Property and people

Tenant cooperatives and tenant management organisations experimented with tenant control and local management of problem estates and older street properties long before we began our work on Tulse Hill.⁹ In the 1980s, many tenants in large inner city estates developed local management organisations that drew on Octavia Hill's ideas of careful, hands-on, local management.¹⁰ These have a strong track record of success, but compared with the riots that erupted in the spring of 1981, starting in Brixton over Easter, such small housing experiments drop out of the headlines. However, the experience of Tulse Hill proves their value. The area was spared the massive disorder and violence that engulfed Brixton. Several of the

tenant representatives from Tulse Hill helped restore the peace. Lord Scarman drew many lessons from his visit to the estate in 1981 following the riots.¹¹ Today, these lessons are invaluable as local and national authorities seek to address the problems that erupted in the riots of summer 2011, when the wide gap between communities and authorities was played out.

In Brixton, we demonstrated that small-scale, relatively low cost, incremental community-based action on problems was the life blood of social peace, even on big and difficult estates. Heavy-handed systems and remotely controlled interventions invariably create unintended and highly disruptive consequences from which communities cannot shield themselves. Such large-scale systems do not respond readily to direct community needs and prove blunt instruments of change in the face of unseen pressures at the bottom of society. The serious dislocation between high level decisions and low level experience was a major factor in the riots of summer 2011, again as in the 1980s heavily concentrated in inner cities and linked to large estates. People close to the ground saw trouble brewing as youth services, job access, training funds and other front-line services started to shrink.¹²

The absurd reality is that current government cuts are undoing the very services that help communities survive, thereby escalating the costs of remedial intervention.¹³ The lessons from both Tulse Hill and Octavia Hill are consistent. Neglect of the front line leads to chaos while care at ground level prevents problems escalating. Inner cities, always turbulent places, only survive with strong custodial care. In this, landlords of low income housing face special responsibilities. Octavia Hill was above all a housing reformer for this reason. Today's big city landlords should take heed.

Five core principles embedded in Octavia Hill's work

Octavia Hill developed five main principles that give us real insight into today's housing, community and environmental challenges.

Landlords have responsibility for people as well as property

First, as the Brixton experience shows, landlords have responsibility for people as well as property and have to work with both if they are to maintain their properties and their viability as landlords. Octavia Hill saw urban crowding as inevitable in growing cities and argued fiercely against knocking down the homes of the poor as simply causing displacement and worse problems of crowding of the poor elsewhere. This is exactly the problem we face today in the wake of over-scaled regeneration programmes in all our poorest inner cities.¹⁴ The answer lies in much greater care of property, immediate reuse of empty buildings and bare sites, constant conversion, upgrading, remodelling and infill building. This offers the potential for millions of additional dwellings country-wide. On the people side, education, community relations and regular face-to-face contact shape the way tenants and landlords behave and react to problems. Training and know-how are vital to both sides and Octavia Hill knew that her daily rounds of visits were the key to her trust with her tenants and her finely tuned responses. Nothing less will work today.

Operate on a manageable, local scale

The second principle flows from the first: operating on a manageable, local scale creates confidence and re-instates control; it reduces waste by targeting action directly on problems; it establishes personal rapport, making it hard for tenants or landlords to damage each other's or neighbours' interests; it helps build a common set of ground rules. The converse is true: large-scale systems and structures are by definition clumsy, insensitive and damaging to a sense of community. This does not mean that all large systems are wrong or irrelevant; for many wider services such as public transport, health or education, they are essential. It simply means that landlords, like schools and doctors and the police, need to operate close to the ground to know the problems and succeed in tackling them.¹⁵

Conservationist approach

Octavia Hill's third principle derives from her conservationist approach. Buildings have to be preserved for as long as possible because of their high initial cost. They can be made to last with ongoing repair, maintenance, cleaning and gradual improvement. These are vital and affordable tools, since they will always be cheaper than the alternative of demolition and new build.¹⁶ She knew that this way it would be possible to save space, materials and environmental damage. We are far too hasty to condemn estates and far too careless and uncaring to run them properly. Developer profits from building luxury flats in the place of demolished council blocks only make our affordable housing problems worse.¹⁷

Protect open spaces

Octavia Hill's fourth principle is critical to modern cities all over the world: protect open spaces, no matter how small. Tiny back yards are as crucial to the health of the poor, just as the countryside is to society as a whole. Octavia Hill used to go out into the countryside to collect flowers for her tenants. She created communal gardens in the new developments she was responsible for with the Church Commissioners. She argued against big blocks as she said they would place families too far from the ground and the open air and would require too much policing. She fought to protect both inner city spaces and the surrounding countryside, arguing that crowded cities needed lungs within and without. Through her efforts Bunhill Fields, Parliament Hill and Box Hill were protected from rapacious developers. Such practice offers many lessons for urban communities today. Octavia Hill could not bear to see unused, uncared for scraps of land around the houses she managed, arguing that 'the unused is always abused'.¹⁸ This happens today when park keepers and street policemen are withdrawn and spending cuts hit the front line hardest.¹⁹ There are literally hundreds of thousands of small, unused sites across inner London alone.²⁰

Work with tenants and communities

The fifth and most crucial principle is to work with tenants and communities in a relationship of mutual respect, responsibility and binding obligations. This requires strict enforcement. If this sounds harsh, compare it with the alternative: abandonment by the landlord, a free-for-all, frequent evictions and community chaos. Octavia Hill proved that if you are fair, open and clear about rents, repairs, cleaning and control of conditions, tenants will not only cooperate but be able to help. They gain at least as much as the landlord. The number of repairs needed, the amount of arrears, the empty properties, the transience of tenants all decline remarkably under close supervision, so much so that the money saved can be ploughed back into improvements and social benefits. Octavia Hill argued that tenants should have a say in how any money saved should be reinvested—a truly cooperative principle. Current tenant management evidence proves how cost-effective this principle is.²¹

Working with disadvantaged, low-skilled tenants brings other benefits. Under Octavia Hill's system, they were able to do many of the small jobs that arose, thus helping with rent payments in hard times, but also developing skills and an aptitude for essential work. Through close relations with the residents she developed women's groups and classes. She organised boys' clubs, channelling their energy away from damage and into informal learning. All these ways of working within communities with the 'small army of women' she had trained to do similar work have an impact far beyond the narrow housing remit. This multi-faceted approach to struggling communities is badly needed in today's troubled neighbourhoods.²²

Today's unequal cities

Today, our polarised and unequal communities need more than warm words about the Big Society. As David Lammy argues persuasively, our individualised, choice- and market-based approach to goods and services does not take sufficient account of community needs.²³

Octavia Hill's work is directly relevant to the urban problems we face, although it is nowhere near the whole solution. What I learnt from residents and staff in Brixton 30 years ago and through my chance discovery of Octavia Hill's work is confirmed by what I have seen in thousands of communities around the country through the work of the National Communities Resource Centre at Trafford Hall. The training centre for tenants and community activists, set up on the back of the Priority Estates Project in the late 1980s and early 1990s, has helped over 100,000 low income volunteers and front-line workers to build the hands-on practical skills and confidence to tackle community problems in some of the harshest conditions. With small pump-priming grants they are able to instigate micro change in local communities throughout Britain.²⁴ It builds on the work of avant-garde community and cooperative groups in inner London, Liverpool, Glasgow and other cities since the 1970s.²⁵ There are five simple lessons for today.

Five urgent lessons

Lesson 1 is that 'small beginnings lead to undiscovered ends'; small steps encourage people whose confidence has been crushed by the race for growth; small local systems are essential for the proper management of community conditions. So, yes, 'small is beautiful': that is now the insight of one person—evidence abounds today that it is true and it works.²⁶

Lesson 2 is that shortage of space, materials and money dictate that we should never waste anything. If we apply this lesson rigorously, as we now must with so many shortages in the offing, we will have to make things last and reuse all our urban space, buildings and infrastructure while we figure out how to change the way we do things.

Lesson 3 is that 'buildings learn', in other words they adapt to what we need them to be and do, as long as we work with the grain of what is there. The scandal of over a million empty, useable buildings in a time of shortage, the crime

of leaking energy through every crack and crevice of our existing stock, and the scandal of knocking down currently affordable homes in all our inner cities in order to move to 'market' unaffordable rents for the poor and thus push them out show how urgent this lesson is. If buildings can 'learn', so can we.²⁷

Lesson 4 is vital. People can do things for themselves. They want to do so, but need the confidence, know-how and support to make it possible. People become powerless in chaotic communities and therefore we need more carefully planned, more community-oriented local management.²⁸ People are at the heart of what happens and striking the balance between essential, over-arching public support and local action requires both front-line people tuned to the ground and responsive decision-makers higher up. Bridge-building in this way is essential to our survival and Octavia Hill's work as a bridge-builder became the driving force behind her belief in the power of self-help. This way inequalities shrink and riots become less likely.

The fifth and final lesson relates to the role of work. Linking relatively low skilled local jobs with people who need work and skills saves money, builds community, maintains commitment and involves people in ways that protect local investment. Young people must be involved and share in these opportunities if they are to channel their positive energy into hope for the future. For they are our future.²⁹ This is why the Tulse Hill Christmas tree lights survived, why the daffodils bloomed and why human beings thrive in cities in spite of all the problems that crowd us in.

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*I wish we could get the tenants more often into the country.
Does it not seem that the quiet influence of nature is more
restful to Londoners than anything else?*

Octavia Hill



The natural complement of the house is the garden.

Octavia Hill, *Natural beauty as a national asset*

4 Octavia Hill and the importance of nature

Lord Chris Smith

Forty years before Octavia Hill was born, Wordsworth wrote in his poem conceived by the banks of the River Wye above Tintern Abbey:

*Though absent long,
These forms of beauty have not been to me,
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart,
And passing even into my purer mind,
With tranquil restoration¹*

Wordsworth's poetry is shot through with a sense of the power of natural landscape to interact with, and influence, the human mind and soul. And this sense of the power and importance of nature lights up the life and work of Octavia Hill, too. In everything she did — whether it was in the provision of housing, the relief of poverty, the preservation of open space — she believed passionately that everyone, no matter what their economic circumstances, deserved to have access to the life-enhancing, soul-enabling things of life. And this meant having access to recreation, the arts, heritage and above all to the open world of nature.

She believed that this was especially true for those whose daily lives were lived almost entirely in confined urban places. In 1877, she wrote in her essay 'Our common land':

*Cooped up for many weeks in close rooms, in narrow streets,
compelled on their holiday to travel for miles in a crowded stream,*

first between homes and then between dusty high hedges, suddenly they expand into free, uncrowded spaces under spreading trees or on to the wide commons for which blue distance is visible; the eye, long unrefreshed with sight of growing grass, or star-like flowers, is rejoiced by them again.²

It was this determination to make the wide open spaces of nature available and accessible to the poorest that led her to campaign for the preservation of Parliament Hill Fields and Hampstead Heath. It is what led her — along with Canon Rawnsley and others — to argue for the foundation of a National Trust, not just for the conservation of history but for the conservation of nature and landscape too. It is what led her to campaign against the destruction of her deeply loved Lake District. And it was all of a piece with her broader social vision, of meeting the need that all humans have for a life of true fulfilment, not just economically, but aesthetically and emotionally as well. Aspiration for fulfilment — that was what she wanted to bring into people's lives, whether it was through well-managed housing or the ability to have ready access to grass, trees, flowers and an open sky.

She did have some views that sit oddly with today's norms. She was (wrongly) distrustful of the power of government, and she was (even more wrongly) opposed to women's suffrage. But in her central vision of the need to help everyone to strive for true, rounded, holistic fulfilment, she was way ahead of her time. And indeed, we still struggle to keep up with the strength and urgency of her vision. We still tend to consign things like enjoyment of the arts and access to open country to the fringes of political debate, whereas for Octavia Hill they were central to any vision of a civilised and inclusive society. We need to continue to raise the importance of these things, here and now.

It was not only access to fresh air and open space and the beauties of nature that mattered to her, or that should matter to us. It was also the need to ensure that the freshness, the openness, and the beauty are there in the first place. If we look at what has happened in the hundred years since Octavia

Hill's death, we can't be terribly proud of the record. England has lost more than half its hedgerows since the Second World War — and we should never forget that more than 80 per cent of our farmland birds rely on hedges for protection and food. The grey partridge has declined by 90 per cent in Britain, and the linnet by 57 per cent.³ Hedgerows also store large amounts of carbon, an increasingly important protection against greenhouse gas emissions. And hedgerows just happen to be one of the visual glories of the English countryside.

The news is not all bad. The quality of water in our rivers has generally improved over the last 20 years — though there is still a long way to go. In 1965 just two salmon were caught on the then-polluted River Wear. In 2010, 1,531 were caught.⁴ Otters — having been in catastrophic decline for several decades — are now back in every county in England. Other species that were in decline, like the bittern, the woodlark, the sand lizard and the pipistrelle bat, are now on the increase. It has taken strenuous efforts, of habitat conservation, pollution control and regulation, to secure this progress — a combination of voluntary effort and government action — and we mustn't let the constrained financial circumstances of the times set us back.

Nowadays we give the value of nature some rather fancier names, and in the past summer the Government published the results of the first ever National Ecosystem Assessment, which seeks to give an economic value to the natural world that we all depend on.⁵ It's an immensely valuable exercise, and will have an impact on those for whom the cost-tag and price-tag are the only things that matter. I suspect Octavia Hill would have been horrified, pointing out that the spiritual value is something that cannot possibly be weighed in the counting-house, and is infinitely more important. She would have been right, of course, but (showing that glimpse of steel of which she was certainly capable) she would also have acknowledged that if the nature-as-economy argument helped to preserve some more countryside, helped to save some important habitats, and helped to balance the drive for destructive development, it was worth mounting.

She would still have asserted, however, as she did in her essay 'Our common land', that the danger of destruction of open space 'is imminent because we are all so accustomed to treat money value as if it were the only real value'.⁶ And she sounded a trumpet-call for the need to consider the real value — spiritual, intellectual, emotional, fulfilment value — for future generations, not just for our own. If valuable open space was built over, it was lost forever, not just for the next year or two. The 'forever' bit was of vital importance to her, and remains fundamental of course to the National Trust. And if we look at the Octavia Hill legacy through the succeeding century, she would I think have been quietly proud of what her pioneering work had brought about: the National Trust itself, of course, and urban parks in towns and cities up and down the country, national parks, country parks, the Forestry Commission, conservation and wildlife movements, species and habitat protection, regulation of pollution and development, green belts — a term that Octavia Hill herself is credited with coining⁷ — and most recently the Right to Roam — legislation that I was proud to help bring onto the statute book in government.

Octavia Hill would also, I think, have recognised that her work needed to be redoubled in the face of what we now know as the challenge of climate change. We are already experiencing a changing climate, with increasingly erratic weather patterns around the world, retreating glaciers, warming waters, and some species moving northwards. And this process is likely to intensify over the coming decades, as we experience here in Britain more floods and droughts, competing demands for water from our rivers, and changes to important habitats. Applying the Octavia Hill principles — of preserving the best of what is there, and enabling people from every background to enjoy it — will become ever more important.

At the heart of her vision was a powerful wish to bring the glories of wild nature into the confined lives of ordinary people. This was why she organised summer expeditions for her tenants, why she went door-to-door with flowers she had

brought up from the country, why she insisted on planting trees in the heart of the city. A hundred years or more on, we still need to rediscover the importance of wildness and nature for our own lives. Wild nature can exist all around us, in a flash of sunlight through the leaves or a bird flying to the sea, or the rustle of grass in the park. It can also exist in the great wide open spaces, further away, that we reach out to from time to time. And on each occasion the wildness that we sense in nature can bring nourishment to us that nothing else can give. In part, we have Octavia Hill to thank for that.

At about the same time as Octavia Hill was at the height of her campaigning zeal for the importance of open space and nature, Gerard Manley Hopkins was writing his wonderful poem 'Inversnaid'. It wasn't published until six years after her death (and indeed 19 years after his), but it stands as a resonant testament to what she stood for:

*What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.*⁸

Lord Chris Smith is the Chairman of the Environment Agency.

Notes

- 1 W Wordsworth, *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, vol 2: Poems founded on the Affections; Poems founded on the Naming of Places; Poems of the Fancy; Poems of the Imagination, edited by E de Selincourt, 2nd edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952, p 260.
- 2 O Hill, *Our Common Land, and Other Short Essays*, London: MacMillan, 1877, p 4.
- 3 F Harvey, 'Europe's farmland birds in decline', *Guardian*, 24 Aug 2011, www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/aug/24/europe-farmland-birds-on-decline (accessed 17 Jan 2012).

- 4 Environment Agency, 'River Wear highlighted for its improvements', 30 Aug 2011, www.environment-agency.gov.uk/news/132756.aspx (accessed 17 Jan 2012).
- 5 For further details, see the National Ecosystem Assessment, <http://uknea.unep-wcmc.org/> (accessed 17 Jan 2012).
- 6 O Hill, *Our Common Land, and Other Short Essays*, p 4.
- 7 See the website of the Octavia Hill Birthplace Trust, <http://octaviahill.org/conservation.html> (accessed 17 Jan 2012).
- 8 G Manley Hopkins, *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, WH Gardiner and NH Mackenzie (eds), 4th edn, London: Oxford University Press, 1967, p 89.

*There will remain, at least for many years, a certain number
— I believe a very large number — who must live near their work,
and whose work must be in London.*

Octavia Hill, *Why the Artisans' Living Bill was needed*

5 Octavia Hill's influence on social housing today

Grahame Hindes

To this day, there is housing for low income families in Marylebone close to where Ruskin bought Octavia Hill her first three properties in 1865 for £750. The picture she paints of a 'place that swarmed with vermin, the papers, black with dirt, hung in long strips from the walls, drains stopped and the water supply out of order'¹ has been replaced by an order and a quiet calm that means a two bedroom home in the area will now set you back at least £500,000. In the 150 years since that first experiment the provision of what is now called 'social housing' in the capital has become a more complex but no less important matter.

For Octavia Hill the solution to poor housing and poor social conditions was an approach that was both fiscally astute and caring; it was in this combination, designed both to address the problems and secure the future, that her ideas gained their long term strength.

The first element of her method was to improve the economics. Her reputation for the regular collection of rents—even if it entailed four visits in a week, and the willingness to embrace the necessary expense for evicting those unwilling to pay promptly—is well known. Less familiar is the focus on managing cost: 'Do not insist on a supply of water on every floor or a washhouse for each family with its greatly increased expense of water pipes and drainage' she said of an approach that not only valued but was built around parsimony.² She was willing to undertake the superficial basic works required to ensure a minimum standard of repair, but would then wait before making further changes. As tenant attitudes within a property gradually changed so the process was used to incentivise (in a very twenty-first-century manner) a further reduction in breakages by investing monies unspent

on repairs back into the buildings in the form of improvements selected by tenants. This simple method minimised wastage while simultaneously building capital.

Her model of better management through attention to detail embraced the imperative that John Ruskin identified right at the outset. In the preface to *The Homes of the London Poor* Octavia Hill records him as saying that the work 'would spread' if she 'could make it pay', and spread it surely did.³

She had known from the outset that property management in itself gave opportunities for social change. The skill was to link investment and improvement of homes with social goals. From the start she provided work in the form of maintenance tasks for those temporarily out of employment. Younger tenants were also provided with the opportunity of work:

*The elder girls are employed three times a week in scrubbing the passages in the houses, for the cleaning of which the landlady is responsible. For this work they are paid, and by it they learn habits of cleanliness.*⁴

Octavia Hill connected housing with several of the other concerns that reoccur throughout her career: childhood and learning, the importance of work and the values of the home. In doing so she would both improve the environment and raise aspirations through insisting on the cleanliness of the corridors and common parts at the same time as she would evict the drunk, deal with the rowdy, take care in selecting new residents and, as opportunities presented themselves, reduce the extent of overcrowding.

A sound financial base was a necessary part of her scheme, but it was not sufficient for the achievement of her broader ambitions. To make 'lives noble, homes happy and family life good' required more than careful property management.⁵ This was to be achieved through a mixture of individual interest and what would now be termed community development work built around the tenancy relationship. A playground for the children of tenants was fundamental to the first experiment and over the years the

schemes of support grew to include libraries, community halls, crafts, concerts, country visits with residents, a passionate care for aesthetics and the appearance and context of her housing schemes, and an engagement with young people that led to the enthusiastic and rapid expansion of the Army cadet movement. All were legitimised from the base of a tenancy relationship, which Octavia Hill considered so important that she once described its impact as being ultimately more important to the lives of those housed than that of teachers.⁶

Looking back on Octavia Hill's methods today, the all-embracing holistic approach of the early days, with a single manager dealing with both the property and the people, was always going to have limitations. The simplicity of the early scheme stands in stark contrast to the complexity of current provision, which is both more comprehensive in scope and has more sophisticated standards, but in turn has become atomised and distributed among agencies. No longer can a single individual have the influence that the Octavia Hill method was built on. Now a host of different organisations and services exist in a complex web of provision, regulation and funding combining effectively — at least on a good day — to provide a mix of support and provision that includes social workers, occupational therapists, surveyors, employment advisers and others — all charged with achieving their part of the same broad social progress ambition. Our additions to the system have achieved much progress, but they cast a shadow of complexity that precludes the all-encompassing ambition of the original personal touch.

At the same time as we have evolved a specialisation of services, so too we are now faced with greater financial sophistication. Housing associations, the direct line descendants of Octavia Hill's work, embraced public capital subsidies over 40 years ago as a route to tackling large scale issues. These have brought huge growth to a sector that now manages over two million homes. In addition to this invested public finance, there is private capital that runs to over £43 billion. The sector is now the largest and

arguably the best example of public-private partnership in the world. Indeed the National Trust's use of the acorn as a motif for Octavia Hill's work is appropriate beyond its own extensive growth.

There are, however, dangers in public subsidy, as Octavia Hill warned. Along with specialisation and changing social norms, the century since her death has seen an increase in regulation, greater expectations on the part of both the tenant and society, and a culture of rights and consumer empowerment. Protections designed to safeguard against bad practice now complicate the management of anti-social behaviour, rent arrears and illegal sub-letting. Rights designed to ensure fairness in public policy mean that lettings decisions are now open to scrutiny and challenge, complicating what Octavia Hill regarded as necessary management actions. Minimum building standards relating to size and insulation levels, established to ensure the proper use of public grants, all now combine so Octavia Hill's model of low cost basic standards and the rapid resolution of issues is far from easy and far less practicable.

However, hidden behind the complexity of this more interdependent world there remains, in the work of many housing associations, a strong commitment to the founding principles of the Octavia Hill method. The importance of sound finances in pursuit not of profit but social improvement is what associations still aspire to achieve and is reflected in the tag line that the National Housing Federation adopted some years ago when, after a long consultation exercise, it concluded that associations are 'in business for neighbourhoods'. This slightly leaden expression might jar with the more poetic language of much of Octavia Hill's writing, but she would have recognised the sentiment completely. The work of associations is necessarily founded on the same commercial reality of collecting rents, managing costs and persuading banks and bond holders to invest. But the wider role, the social purpose, remains as strong, if not stronger than ever as almost without exception associations embrace the idea of a wider community function.

The range of projects and examples is extensive. Octavia Housing owns and continues to manage many of Octavia Hill's original properties. The number of homes it manages — 4,000 — is relatively small in comparison with some of the larger latecomers, but it is an example of how community development work is not extra but fundamental. It is also an example of how the spirit of Octavia Hill's approach and many of her practices remain relevant today. Through a supporting foundation we are actively engaged with day centres, parties and holidays for older people. We provide and encourage youth activities including media work, film making, sports coaching and cooking. We have projects designed to support those currently not working back into employment with schemes which are combined with internships, training courses and placements in the association. There are financial and debt management advice services, a credit union, gardening projects and a volunteering project that matches local people with the older, lonely and the vulnerable.

Residents are involved in all levels of our governance structure, service inspections, policy reviews and dispute resolution. What is more, we are far from alone in this engagement. Other local associations are involved in furniture recycling schemes, promoting health and well-being, sharing timebank skills (where volunteers exchange a 'sliver of time'), decorating projects and more. These are local projects designed to meet particular circumstances and in pursuit of what Octavia Hill called 'developing the resources' of her residents.

This range of community work, diverse, independently funded and usually at a local scale is often unseen by the wider public gaze, but it is the true legacy of Octavia Hill's housing work and the manner by which associations continue to honour her spirit.

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Notes

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- 2 O Hill, 'Why the Artisans' Dwelling Bill was wanted', *Macmillan's Magazine*, Jun 1874, reprinted in *The Homes of the London Poor*, facsimile, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p 194.
- 3 O Hill, *The Homes of the London Poor*, facsimile, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1875] 2010, p 10.
- 4 O Hill, 'Four years' management of a London court', *Macmillan's Magazine*, July, 1869, reprinted in *The Homes of the London Poor*, facsimile, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p 40.
- 5 See the website of the Octavia Hill Birthplace Trust, www.octaviiahill.org/ (accessed 2 Feb 2012).
- 6 O Hill, 'Cottage property in London', p 20.

6 Immigration and social housing: the story since Octavia Hill

David Goodhart and Len Gibbs

Looking back on the life and work of Octavia Hill over the century since her death is to be reminded of how many wider political and social issues are played out through housing. This has been especially true of Britain's post-war immigration story. It is where many of the real life clashes over race, displacement, integration and segregation have happened. It is also where the left has faced an acute tension between preserving strong, stable communities for established citizens and fairly accommodating the housing needs of new ones.

Octavia Hill would have been unfamiliar with many of the debates that have arisen with immigration, but in her work she encountered a similar situation in which the big social issues of the day bubbled through in the context of housing. The era in which Octavia Hill worked was one of mass influx from the countryside to cities. The story of housing in the twentieth century was one of similar challenges, but in the radically different context that was brought by immigration.

The period from the end of the First World War to the late 1960s was the golden age of public housing and by the end of the period it housed almost one-third of the population. And for most of that period, unlike today, it was seen as an 'aspirational' tenure for the better off working class. There was a great range in the quality of the housing provided, from leafy suburban estates to seedy inner city blocks. But in almost all cases, there were strict residential qualifications and locally administered waiting lists, usually with an informal assumption on the part of housing officials and councillors that 'sons and daughters' of existing tenants

would receive priority. Such traditions of housing allocation were not *designed* to exclude immigrants, after all they also excluded white people from other boroughs, but that was one of their effects.

For the first few decades after the Second World War, subsidised council housing was regarded as a central feature of the welfare state for many working-class Britons. That ended in the 1970s and 1980s with the rise of owner occupation, the right to buy council properties after 1980 and the priority in public housing given to those in most need. Meanwhile, in the two decades after 1950 Britain had acquired an ethnic minority population of about 1 million people, and they all needed to live somewhere. Most of the people who arrived in that period would today be regarded as natural candidates for social housing. They came from the Caribbean, India and Pakistan, from poor and relatively uneducated backgrounds (with the exception of a substantial group of Indian professionals). They went mainly to the industrial cities of the north and the midlands and to London (where about half settled), living mainly in private rented flats and houses in the centre of town, alongside poorer whites who did not qualify for public housing.

The two main south Asian groups, Indians and Pakistanis, have never been big users of public housing. Many Pakistanis started by renting, and later bought, mainly Victorian terraced houses in the central areas of Birmingham, Bradford, Oldham and so on. The Hindu and Sikh Indian population followed a similar trajectory of renting and buying but generally ended up in the more affluent suburbs, in London and towns like Leicester and Wolverhampton. African Caribbeans, and the smaller number of Black Africans, were concentrated in London in some of the worst housing conditions in the country.

The housing conditions of the immigrant pioneers were usually pretty awful, a problem Octavia Hill would have recognised. Many young male immigrants came on their own, and often assumed they would return home after a few years, so they put up with living together, often five or six in a single

room — even sharing beds between people on different factory shifts. There was no question of them having access to ‘elite’ working-class council housing but they were often excluded from the best, rent-controlled, private rented housing too, either by simply being last in the queue or by racial prejudice. This was the era of the infamous ‘no blacks, no dogs, no Irish’ announcement at the bottom of advertisements for many private flats and houses.

Immigrants often ended up in the slum clearance areas. Slum clearance was one of the biggest housing stories in the post-war period and had a big impact on immigrant housing patterns. Strict rent control since the First World War had left the private rented sector in a poor state, with no incentive for landlords to improve their properties. By the 1950s about 2 million houses in London and other big cities were earmarked for demolition. Access to the new council housing that was springing up everywhere was strictly reserved for those who had lived in the slum clearance areas for many years. It was the properties they vacated that were not demolished that then became the cheapest places to live for those, like recent immigrants, who had little money and no accumulated housing rights.

New immigrants had little or no access to what by this time had become the most desirable public housing: the Peabody-type philanthropic housing associations, the pre-war council estates built on the periphery of many big cities, the new post-war estates, and, indeed, the new *towns* that began to spring up in the 1960s. Lack of capital and discrimination often meant it was hard for immigrants to access mortgages to buy private property, though immigrant families sometimes clubbed together to buy cheap houses in the slum clearance areas (many of the landlords in these areas were recent immigrants themselves).

This began to change in the 1970s, a decade of decisive change for immigrants and public housing. One of the first big breakthroughs came with the increased availability to immigrants of hard to let council properties, especially in areas of London. As more affluent white working-class tenants

began to move out to private housing estates in Essex (from east London) or Kent (from south London), some big estates were left half empty. The GLC advertised for tenants and the applicants were drawn disproportionately from the new minorities, especially African Caribbeans.

With the arrival of significant numbers of Bangladeshis in the early 1970s, there was acute overcrowding in the private rented sector in London's East End. The response of the Greater London Council, which owned the public housing stock in Tower Hamlets, was to earmark for the Bangladeshis eight estates which had become unpopular with whites. By the end of the 1970s public housing had been opened up to new 'outsider' groups. This was partly thanks to the vacating of public housing by upwardly mobile whites but it was also a victory for the leftist and direct action movements that grew out of the radicalisation of the 1960s and 1970s. The radicals had two overlapping networks: the ethnic minority and anti-racism groups on the one hand and the homelessness groups like Shelter on the other. Together they helped to create a movement for change that had profound consequences for housing in general.

Both strands of reform were underpinned by a piece of legislation. The greater opening of council housing to minorities was reinforced by the 1976 Race Relations Act, which outlawed racially based discrimination in housing and introduced the concepts of direct and indirect discrimination. And the 1977 Homeless Persons Act prioritised access to social housing for people who were unintentionally homeless, in priority need and had a 'local connection'. The Act gradually ended housing allocation by inheritance and queuing and made 'need' the main criteria. (Britain was, and still is, the only country in the world to give such entitlements to permanent social housing.)

Before the 1977 Act the homeless had been accommodated in former workhouses and other unsuitable places. Just as with the work of Octavia Hill's grandfather, Dr Southwood Smith, concern for the poor found voice in the cultural sphere. Ken Loach's famous television film

Cathy Come Home in 1966 about the inhumane treatment of homeless families gave emotional impetus to a campaign that led eventually to the 1977 Act. It was both a great social achievement and, in retrospect, a wrong turn, as the Labour MP and housing expert Nick Raynsford implies:

This was a triumph for humane policy and social inclusion, but inevitably it led to an ever-increasing proportion of council lettings going to the most vulnerable. Coupled with the decline over subsequent years in the number of council homes... a greater concentration of the poorest and most vulnerable in the sector was an inevitable recipe for 'residualisation'... Had the trajectory been anticipated and described in advance, it is inconceivable that it would have been chosen by politicians or the public.¹

Both pieces of legislation meant that all councils and housing associations had to completely rewrite their allocations policies. Policies that favoured 'sons and daughters' of existing tenants or used simple date order priority systems were abandoned. Housing allocation decisions were effectively nationalised, and councillor involvement became marginalised. From being a relatively simple task of matching people to properties via waiting time and family size, systems and policies had to grow in complexity to accommodate different need categories and priority groupings. The process was also 'legalised' with the growth of legal challenges to allocation decisions and the associated professionalisation of the allocations role. The dilemma between contributory and needs-based systems was one Octavia Hill herself wrestled with: should allocation be driven by what people have put into a shared system or what they need out of it? She had rejected the Peabody model on the grounds that it was built on the ability to pay, rather than individual need. Her ideals may have worked as philanthropy on a small scale, but proved less transferrable to the large-scale management of public resources.

Following the 1970s Act many working-class people were now not needy enough to qualify for social housing.

However, someone who had a child outside marriage or a poor recent immigrant family with several children living in cramped accommodation would qualify under the new rules. In some authorities more than 70 per cent of allocations were made to homeless people. As the 'non-needy' were systematically excluded from social housing estates those estates attracted high concentrations of the most vulnerable and difficult people, which contributed to the tenure's stigmatisation. In the meantime, owner occupation became easier for those with decent jobs.

And what about minority Britons? The Caribbean population was the first to make the breakthrough into council housing and by 1991 nearly half of Caribbean households were in social housing (this proportion has fallen to about 40 per cent today, with a similar number for black Africans). About half of all Bangladeshis are also in social housing, though only 7 per cent of Indians are. Minorities went from being hugely *underrepresented* in public housing in the 1960s and 1970s to being somewhat *overrepresented*: about 27 per cent of minority Britons live in social housing of one kind or another compared with about 16 per cent of majority Britons.

Race and immigration was bound to be a big issue in public housing. The arrival of a significant and relatively poor minority population inevitably created competition with some existing citizens for the scarce resource of decent public housing. After the initial exclusion a more colour-blind system was gradually established. But many ethnic minority activists felt that minority interests were underrepresented in public housing and lobbied for reform. In 1986 the Housing Corporation encouraged a significant expansion of black and Asian housing associations. More than 40 were created though few have survived. The local connection test for homeless cases was dropped and the 1996 statutory code of guidance on racial equality in housing imposed new legal obligations on providers of social housing to combat direct and indirect discrimination and adopt pro-minority standpoints.

It is not clear how much of a racism problem there was

to combat, especially in the increasingly important housing associations, which were generally run by politically liberal and race-aware white graduates. But this begs two broader questions. Was there significant minority segregation in public housing (and housing more generally)? And if so was it chosen by minorities or was it forced on them by the hostility of white residents or by the 'communalist' assumptions of housing officials?

After the high point of race awareness in the Macpherson report² and the Race Relations Act 2000 — with its requirement on public bodies to promote race equality — these questions about segregation came to dominate political and public policy debate. The northern mill town riots of 2001, and later the 9/11 terror attacks in the USA and the 7/7 attacks in London, created new anxieties about 'parallel lives', especially for Muslim minorities, and the public debate focused increasingly on social cohesion. There was also a growing awareness that poorer whites were starting to feel hard done by in social housing as the effects of the post-1997 immigration opening began to be felt. The problem was that a sharp increase in demand for social housing coincided with an equally sharp contraction in supply. The supply problem was the simple result of building less social housing, exacerbated by the 'right to buy' policy, which took about 1 million homes out of the system.

Extra demand came from long-term factors, such as family break-up and longevity, and two shorter term factors. The first was rocketing house prices and private rents, which sent more people in the direction of social housing. The second was the new wave of post-1997 immigration, especially the peak of asylum seeker arrivals in the early 2000s and then the opening to east Europeans in 2004.

For many long-standing residents, not least people from ethnic minorities, there was a strong perception of new arrivals jumping the queue and taking something that they had not contributed to. This was compounded by the belief that no mainstream political party was listening. This was one reason for the growing support for the BNP, which began

to win councillors in former industrial towns and reached a peak of support of nearly 1 million votes in the 2009 European elections.

Whatever the actual extent of the impact on social housing of the post-1997 immigration it became part of a broader story of disaffection on the part of poorer, white working-class communities, the people who, for whatever reason, did not move up the ladder into owner occupation or out to the suburbs in the 1980s and 1990s. And many of the areas of particularly acute conflict over housing were in decline for other reasons too — Barking and Dagenham (the end of large-scale car production), east London (shrinkage of the docks) and so on.

Politicians did eventually respond. In an article for the *Observer* in 2007 Margaret Hodge, Labour MP for Barking, referred to the need to ‘question and debate whether our rules for deciding who can access social housing are fair and promote tolerance rather than inviting division’.³ She also acknowledged the concerns of long-standing residents arguing:

*We should also look at drawing up different rules based on, for instance, length of residence, citizenship or national insurance contributions which carry more weight in a transparent points system used to decide who is entitled to access social housing.*⁴

This led to a shift away from a pure needs-based housing allocation system back to one that gave at least some priority to local residency. A Labour housing consultation paper Fair and Flexible in November 2009 acknowledged the flaws of an overly prescriptive approach to social housing allocations.⁵ The foreword acknowledged that housing needs and pressures varied between areas, it removed the need to prioritise those with multiple needs, and allowed councils to give priority to people with local connections, people who have been waiting for a long time and people who are in work.

This comment from Geoff Dench, Kate Gavron and Michael Young, authors of *The New East End*, could well have come from Octavia Hill herself:

*If what one gets out of the state is determined solely by need, rather than what one has put into it, then a little dignity has been taken out of citizenship. Dependency is encouraged, the principle of reciprocity has gone, and welfare has simply become a new form of charity... Preoccupation with the most vulnerable means that parts of all incoming groups, along with the downgraded members of the national majority, will feel that their length of residence in the country does not seem to give them a durable stake in it.*⁶

The tension mentioned at the outset — between preserving strong communities and fairly accommodating the housing needs of newcomers — reflects a broader concern in all of Octavia Hill’s work. Her dilemma was whether our small-scale and necessarily particular loyalties to another can ever translate into bigger, more impersonal systems. The problem with nationalising a decision is not merely the introduction of bureaucracy, it is the distance and the strain that it can create in relationships between citizens.

Writing of volunteering in 1872, Octavia Hill pondered:

*The problem to be solved... is how to collect our volunteers into a harmonious whole — the action of each being free, yet systematised; and how thus to administer relief through the agency of corporate bodies and private individuals; how in fact to secure all the personal intercourse and friendliness, all the real sympathy, all the graciousness of individual effort, without losing the advantage of having relief voted by a central committee, and according to definite principles.*⁷

In housing, just as in her other work, Octavia Hill stumbled across debates that enliven our politics today: a big, systematic state or a more diffuse, disorderly society? Deliberately or not, the solution she often found was to adhere to neither. She sought to combine good relationships with principled systems; she valued both individual thrift and social responsibility; she sought to reward contribution, not just respond to need. In doing so her work achieved what

our politics often does not: it tapped into our willingness to cooperate, so long as the feeling is mutual.

Perhaps the lesson today is not so much that official systems must necessarily divide us, but rather that they must take much greater care not to.

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Notes

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- 2 *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry: Report of an inquiry by Sir William Macpherson of Cluny*, the Macpherson report, Cm 4262, London: Stationery Office, 1999.
- 3 M Hodge, 'A message to my fellow immigrants', *Observer*, 20 May 2007, www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/may/20/comment.politics (accessed 18 Apr 2012).
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 *Fair and Flexible: Draft statutory guidance on social housing allocations for local authorities in England*, consultation document, London: Department for Communities and Local Government, 2009.
- 6 G Dench, K Gavron and M Young, *The New East End: Kinship, race and conflict*, London: Profile, 2006.
- 7 O Hill, 'The work of volunteers', *Macmillan's Magazine*, Oct 1872, reprinted in *The Homes of the London Poor*, facsimile, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp 113–14.

I feel deeply that home life prepares one for other work... I believe it to be in itself full of the deepest blessing. It is for the sake of the homes that we are all working and it is in our own that what we are and do tells most deeply.

Octavia Hill

7 Octavia Hill and the values of the home

Kathryn Hughes

Anyone thinking now about the shape and achievement of Octavia Hill's life is immediately presented with a problem of scale. On the one hand, Octavia Hill is associated with the small, inward-facing courts of Marylebone and Southwark (now, both desirable places to live, but in the 1860s considered slums) and on the other with the wide, open spaces of the National Trust: the rolling Yorkshire Dales, the dramatic Lake District. Large and small, open and closed, these are the contrasts that run through Octavia Hill's practice, a word that, while she would never have used it herself, exactly suits her pragmatic approach to the challenge of raising the living conditions of working-class families in the second half of Queen Victoria's long reign. Importantly, for Octavia Hill these contrasts were not antagonistic, but fell at the opposite ends of a spectrum of people's lives. The home was at one end of this, and it was at once both start and focus of her work.

Octavia Hill was fiercely anti-theoretical in her approach to helping those whom she called 'her friends amongst the poor'. That is not to suggest that she was not ideological. Driving her work was an abiding belief in the moral, social and spiritual values of 'home'. And all her schemes—whether finding employment for her male tenants, supervising their wives' sewing classes, rescuing small green spaces in London or arranging outings to blustery country landscapes—were driven by this need to save and, where that moment had already gone, repair the values of family life. While at certain points in post-war Britain such an initiative might have seemed quaint, and indeed politically and morally suspect, it is interesting to note that Octavia Hill's approach now seems more relevant than ever. In December 2011, four months after the rioting which

tore through areas of London and other British cities, Prime Minister David Cameron announced an initiative to introduce a cohort of 'case workers' whose job it is to intervene in the lives of 'chaotic families'. Those terrifying 48 hours of hand-to-hand fighting and looting had their roots, according to Cameron, in the muddled home lives of the perpetrators.¹

A commitment to 'family values' tends to suggest a conservative cast of mind, and this was certainly the case with Octavia Hill. While her friend Barbara Bodichon, who campaigned so vigorously for the Married Women's Property Act, identified herself as a progressive and a feminist, Octavia Hill remained aloof from such broader allegiances. She was opposed to the idea of female suffrage, an inconvenient fact that makes her a tricky figure for a twenty-first-century citizen to applaud. It also explains why Octavia Hill was not one of those 'hidden from history' heroines recuperated by the boom in feminist scholarship and publishing of the 1970s and 1980s. While Emily Davies and Elizabeth Garrett Anderson could be celebrated for the way in which they sought to liberate middle-class women from the golden cage of bourgeois domesticity by opening up pathways into higher education and the professions, Octavia Hill's insistence that home was where human potential most flourished has struck a regressive note to subsequent generations raised on women's lib.

There were other differences between Octavia Hill and her contemporaries (and, it is important to note, friends) Bodichon and Davies. She was a miniaturist, committed to working on a small scale and a believer, above all, in the power of personal intervention in preference to large-scale bureaucratic arrangements. Her work in improving the homes of the London working class did not involve initiating new building work along the lines adopted by the Peabody or Guinness trusts. Instead, she took over existing dwellings and turned them into something better.

Her first project, Paradise Place in Marylebone, showed how this worked. In 1865 her friend and mentor John Ruskin bought a terrace of artisans' cottages that the

previous landlord had run as a slum. Families had been packed into accommodation that was far too small, and the results had been insanitary and depressing. During her visits to these tenants, Octavia Hill met women who were far beyond being able to help themselves; she embarked on a programme of what we might now call 'mentoring' designed to restore their confidence in their ability to take care of their lives and homes. Under the new regime, each family would be given sufficient room, and the premises as a whole were transformed through a vigorous programme of cleaning, ventilation and repairs.

In return, however, Octavia Hill insisted that her tenants organise their domestic life according to a strict template. Bad tenants—drunk or noisy—were turned out, and rent arrears were not tolerated. Once a week either Octavia Hill or one of her associates, or 'lady volunteers', called to collect the rent and check on the state of the premises and the occupying family. If there appeared to be a problem—an elderly parent, a neglected child—Octavia Hill and her ladies could intervene, much as a professional social worker might do today. Since the tenants were mostly unskilled labourers they were often out of work. In these cases Octavia Hill found them employment in and around the buildings. In time, and as the number of buildings under her care multiplied, Octavia Hill arranged sewing and singing classes and Saturday gatherings. In the summer she organised trips to the countryside. By this simple act, Octavia Hill forged a crucial link between what would become the two main foci of her reforming life: the well-run home and the preserved wilderness.

She also, of course, demonstrated her modern-seeming belief in the power of environment to shape human character. Unlike so many other reformers of the Victorian period, Octavia Hill was not overly concerned with saving souls. God tended not to make much of an appearance in her dealings with the urban poor.

Improving the living conditions of 'our friends amongst the poor' involved shepherding them into a domestic life that was modelled on that of the respectable, and implicitly

Protestant, middle-class home. It did not, however, include asking tenants, many of whom were Irish Roman Catholics, about their beliefs or church attendance. It did, on the other hand, involve making sure that investors such as John Ruskin were able to draw a proper dividend on their investment. A return of 5 per cent was promised to anyone prepared to invest their capital in buying up slum dwellings and turning them over to the management of Miss Hill and her ladies.² Any further profit was reinvested in the tenants' well-being, in the form of meeting rooms, entertainments and outings. This was not charity, but capitalism on a domestic scale. Sound management of her enterprise was oeconomy in its purest sense: the effective stewardship of the home and its resources.

Perhaps Octavia Hill's interest in other people's home life came about because her own had been so imperilled. When she was just two, Octavia Hill's father, James, went bankrupt and the family was forced on a peripatetic existence that took them from Hampstead to Leeds. Some years later James had a nervous breakdown and, in accordance with the therapeutic practice of the time, was permanently removed from his family. Octavia Hill's mother Caroline now took over financial responsibility for her large brood of children, although she was able to rely on the support of her own father, the renowned sanitary reformer Dr Thomas Southwood Smith.

This was a period in which Octavia Hill herself began to take responsibility for the family and its home.³ Thrift became a part of her mindset. Much later, she was to write that 'somehow personal poverty is a help to me. It keeps me more simple and energetic, and somehow low and humble and hardy.'⁴ The next few years were ones of precarious gentility during which Mrs Hill eked out a modest living in a series of respectable but poorly paid jobs including, from 1852, the post of manager and bookkeeper of the Ladies Guild, a cooperative crafts workshop in Holborn. Octavia Hill, still only 14, became her mother's assistant, and the idea of 'the home' again figured prominently as her thinking and worldview underwent a further stage of development. In the course of

supervising the ragged-school girls who worked at the Guild, the young Octavia Hill became appalled by what she saw of their home lives in the squalid rookeries of St Giles, an area that had become a by-word for urban deprivation. She began to develop a concept of the home as the wellspring for both self-improvement, and the techniques that she saw might best be used to help people. Later, in her essay 'Our common land', she would write that 'we should recognise better how the home training and high ideals of home duty [is] our best preparation for work amongst them'.⁵

Octavia Hill is hardly the first campaigner who appears to have been driven by a need to compensate for a particular lack in her own circumstances. What makes her situation particularly interesting, though, is the way that certain ambivalences about domesticity, and women's relationship with it, continued to run through her adult life. For one thing, her all-consuming approach to work — she seldom took a holiday unless forced by ill-health brought on by exhaustion — was hardly conducive to creating the oasis of rest and calm that she advocated for others. As her projects multiplied, her reliance on upper middle-class women taking an active role as both investors and rent collectors was hardly the ideal of high Victorian womanhood, as advocated by her mentor John Ruskin in his famous essay 'Of Queens' Gardens'.⁶ Rather than residing safely in their own drawing rooms, Octavia Hill and her lady helpers were out pounding the streets, entering into the rough and malodorous parts of London where no respectable woman was expected to venture. What's more, Octavia Hill's own life signally failed to conform to the model of family-centred domesticity: she was engaged once, to the Conservative MP and fellow-campaigner Edward Bond, but the relationship was soon broken off. Octavia Hill remained single, although supported by a paid female companion, until her death.

The other focus of Octavia Hill's life, the saving of Britain's green places, was directly related to her interest in the lives of the inner-city poor. For her, the home was not a sanctuary away from the world, but a vital part of the ecology

in which people led their lives. Improving the dwellings of the poor was one thing, but that still left the wider context untouched: the grimy streets, the foul smells, the dying trees. From the 1870s Octavia Hill increasingly argued for the importance of providing ‘places to sit in, places to play in, places to stroll in and places to spend a day in’. In 1876 she became the treasurer of the Kyrle Society, which aimed to ‘bring beauty home to the poor’ by providing art, books, music and open spaces to the urban working class. Although the Kyrle Society dwindled, it provided the template for the founding of the National Trust 20 years later, of which Octavia Hill was one of three founding members. Nor did she see beauty as a necessarily rare quality confined to landscape or old buildings. In fact, it was something that could be very domestic. Her essay ‘Colour, space and music for the people’ implores people to think about the importance of beauty in people’s homes: ‘paint the walls’, she implored her readers in their actions to help the poor, ‘lighten them, brighten them, for the love of colour is a human instinct’.⁷

By the end of her life Octavia Hill’s ideas about how best to help the poor to decent housing were beginning to look out of touch. The new local authorities, including the mighty behemoth that was the London County Council, were taking it on themselves to provide subsidised housing on a large scale. Octavia Hill believed that such a systemic approach was not only inefficient but likely to rob tenants of the will to help themselves. She also braced herself against the tide of modern life by continuing her criticism of parliamentary votes for women, believing that women were unsuited to thinking about the big issues of finance and foreign policy. True to form, though, she was in favour of women involving themselves in politics at a local, domestic level. While we find these attitudes hard to understand today, it is nonetheless the case that some of what Octavia Hill was unfashionably arguing in the 1890s seems to make increasing sense. Large-scale municipal intervention in social housing led ultimately to the soulless and crime-ridden tower blocks of the mid-twentieth century, the legacy of which we are still

dealing with. Octavia Hill’s insistence on smaller projects, involving tenants taking responsibility for their own domestic environment, is now generally seen as the way forward for managing public housing in the twenty-first century.

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Notes

- 1 See P Wintour, ‘Cameron puts £400m into helping families out of “responsibility deficit”’, *Guardian*, 15 Dec 2011, www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/dec/15/cameron-400m-chaotic-families (accessed 2 Feb 2012).
- 2 Darley, *Octavia Hill*, p 89.
- 3 *Ibid*, p 55.
- 4 *Ibid*.
- 5 O Hill, *Our Common Land, and Other Short Essays*, London: Macmillan, 1877, p 25.
- 6 J Ruskin, ‘Of Queens’ Gardens’, 1865, in J Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, London: John Long, 1924.
- 7 O Hill, ‘Colour, space and music for the people’, reprinted from *The Nineteenth Century*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1884, pp 3–4.

I believe that love of one's country to be an instrument for calling men out of their selfishness for themselves and families and filling them with generous thoughts.

Octavia Hill

8 Octavia Hill the patriot

Max Wind-Cowie

Much is written on these pages about Octavia Hill's unique physical legacy to the nation. From the social housing — much of it still standing — that she pioneered to the open spaces — from Hampstead Heath to Parliament Hill Fields — that she defended against development, it is certainly true that Octavia Hill's energy and drive shaped the physical face of this country for generations to come. But it is also true that Octavia Hill's life and work left a different, even more powerful, kind of legacy, one sculpted onto the emotional fabric of Britain rather than onto either its fields or its homes.

Octavia Hill, you see, was a patriot. Not — it has to be said — an enthusiastic flag waver but a different, more holistic kind of nationalist. 'Patriotism', she observed to her friend Mary Harris, in 1858, 'is much misunderstood nowadays; it is thought to mean love of one's country, and so it does, but it does not mean disliking other countries.'¹ She believed in community, in mutual responsibilities and bonds, in the national family — and her anti-statist, anti-dependency approach to issues as varied as social housing and poverty both fed her patriotism and were symptoms of it. Octavia Hill believed that family was a starting point for a wider and deeper love of our neighbours, our communities and eventually our country. She saw patriotism as a journey — one that's product, if properly fulfilled, was both a fuller and more altruistic life:

I believe that one must always work from the known and strong up to the unknown and weak. We must seize as most precious the vague memories of loved ones, the feelings that have bound us in families, and strive to strengthen them, and then work upwards.²

And she was right in her hunch about patriotism. Or, at least, she was articulating then what British people feel now — ahead of her time on the crucial question of national sentiment every bit as much as she was on welfare.

The British aren't as comfortable talking about 'patriotism' as once we were — but, in becoming less jingoistic about our nation we have not begun to love it less. Rather, we have moved closer to Octavia Hill's vision of patriotism: we feel it as love rather than repeating it as story and we act on it by engaging beyond our self-interest. Three-quarters of British people strongly agree that they're 'proud to be a British citizen' and Demos research, carried out throughout 2011, found that those who readily agree they are 'proud of Britain' are 10 per cent more likely to volunteer, more likely to be involved in their community and have higher levels of trust in their fellow citizens and people more generally.³ Thus — even for those who are ambivalent about patriotism as an intrinsic good — there are benefits to the patriotic mindset, which lead from a heightened and developed sense of love and respect for your community and country. Patriotism is a starting point for wider positives — volunteerism, trust and civic engagement. In short, patriotism is associated with the very virtues that Octavia Hill so prized and which she herself saw as symptoms of a love of country.

Our work on patriotism at Demos — published in a recent report, *A Place for Pride*⁴ — highlights too the role that Octavia Hill's passions still have in firing a very British love of country. Not only does patriotic feeling make people more responsive, more engaged and more altruistic but it is these very facets of British society — our charity, our volunteerism and our generosity — that inspire pride among British people. A majority of British people believe that greater pride in your country leads to more positive behaviours, reflecting accurately the evidence that they do. What is more, British people argue articulately — when asked to explain their pride in Britain — that it is our volunteerism and our diverse, effective charitable sector that are what make this country special. We have one of the highest rates of volunteering in

the world and it is this capacity to give of ourselves that most stirs British nationalism — after all, unlike democracy or free speech (often proposed as models of acceptable patriotism by 'progressives'), it is our charity that makes Britain unique in the Western world. As one member of our focus groups explained — to much agreement from others:

*When you ask about what's best about being British I think of all the people that give up their time to help other people, or to do good things in the community. That's what makes me proud of this country.*⁵

The sense that our culture of mutual responsibility and generosity makes Britain great and is the source of our patriotism was borne out in our polling and amplifies the deep and profound resonance that Octavia Hill's beliefs about nation and patriotism have in the present, and the similarities between her beliefs and our modern national character.

We polled over 2,000 representative British people to find out what institutions and symbols make them proud — beating the Queen, the pound, the Union Jack, the NHS and the BBC was the National Trust. Here we see modern British patriotism in its truest form — British people holding up an institution built on volunteerism and charity, our common history being kept alive by communities as one of the most popular and most strongly felt sources of our pride in our country. And, of course, this is Octavia Hill's legacy writ large — not simply in the theoretical sphere of her philosophy but in the practice of her inheritance.

In 1885 it was Octavia Hill, along with her friends and associates Robert Hunter and Hardwicke Rawnsley, who founded the National Trust for the Preservation of Historic Buildings and Natural Beauty, which grew into our modern and much-loved National Trust. Their founding motto 'for ever, for everyone' goes to the heart of what patriotic feeling can be at its best — a sense of responsibility and love beyond family, neighbour or class; a need to act on behalf of others; a universalism born from the particularity of nation. This

embrace of heritage, of instilling knowledge and pride through shared experiences, requires the Trust to continue to be an active presence in communities through the properties and land that it manages for the nation. The urge to serve all—as opposed to particular sections of our society—places a burden of evangelism and outreach on the Trust that, if they are to continue fulfilling Octavia Hill’s mission, they are duty bound to pursue. And the universalism of their founding myth and narrative also holds warnings for the organisation in its engagement in the difficult territory of politics. *A Place for Pride* found that people’s pride in volunteerism had not extended to embracing the Big Society narrative precisely because they recoiled at something so integral to Britishness being sullied with politics. While, of course, the Trust must engage with policy makers to protect its physical legacy, it must also protect its legacy in the hearts and minds of British people—it must avoid any perception of politicking.

It is no coincidence that the institution Octavia Hill founded is so loved and so inspiring of pride. The National Trust was born out of Octavia Hill’s determination that we must see beyond the confines of what we already know and already love. We have an obligation to help one another to learn a love of virtuous things—from God to nature to nation—and it still embodies that generosity.

When the National Trust was founded in 1895, the Duke of Westminster recognised its potential: ‘Mark my words, Miss Hill, this is going to be a very big thing.’⁶ Today, with over four million members, the organisation has come a long way from three friends defending the Lake District from over development. But the mission it pursues—to preserve our heritage but also, concurrently, to share that heritage more widely and to provide the means by which people can become involved in doing so—has not changed. This unshifting message of volunteerism, civil society action and national pride is one that fits with the British imagination and won the Trust a role not simply in preserving symbols of patriotism but in becoming one itself. It is the living embodiment of Octavia Hill’s vision of nation—so often

dismissed as ‘parochial patriotism’ and yet so widely shared still by her compatriots.

As politicians look to make this country less dependent on the state and more active still in finding and delivering solutions through philanthropy and charitable endeavour they must find new means to motivate. As Baroness Neuberger remarks elsewhere in this collection, ‘you cannot “make” people volunteer’. Rather, we must create the atmosphere in which we all feel challenged to do our bit and proud of the difference that we can make.

Call it the Big Society or the Good Society; this is the challenge of the new politics. And, as Octavia Hill would have understood all too well, patriotism has its part to play in meeting it. Looking beyond the confines of self-interest involves learning to love those who are different but the same, our fellow citizens, and asking ourselves what we can do for them. It means strengthening the bonds between us and rearticulating our mutual responsibility, shared history and common expectations. Octavia Hill thought ‘that national life is but an extension of family life, that each nation, like each individual family, has an individual character fitted for its spiritual work in the world’.⁷ Understood in this way, patriotism is a motivator for good and the binding fabric of a healthy and generous society. She was right and she was utterly in tune with what, as British people, we feel ourselves. It is time our politicians learned her lesson.

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Notes

- 1 Octavia Hill, quoted in ES Maurice (ed), *Octavia Hill: Early ideals, from letters*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1928, p 145.
- 2 Quoted in N Boyd, *Josephine Butler, Octavia Hill, Florence Nightingale: Three Victorian women who changed their world*, London: Macmillan, 1982, p 143.

- 3 M Wind-Cowie and T Gregory, *A Place for Pride*, London: Demos, 2011.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Quoted in P Clayton, *Octavia Hill: Social reformer and co-founder of the National Trust*, Andover: Pitkin Publishing, 2012, p 20.
- 7 Quoted in Maurice (ed), *Octavia Hill*, pp 225–6.

*It has come to the point when two peers and a cabinet minister call
and consult her in one week.*

Miranda Hill, 1884



There is beyond all doubt in almost every town a great amount of volunteer work to be had, which, were it organised and concentrated, would achieve infinitely more than its best efforts can now accomplish.

Octavia Hill, *The work of volunteers*

9 Octavia Hill and volunteering

Baroness Julia Neuberger

Just as I was about to write this essay, I went to a meeting in 1 Millbank, the former home of the Church Commissioners. There, staring me in the face on the wall, was a blue LCC plaque taken from Octavia Hill's former home and offices at 8 Fitzroy Street, now destroyed. That area is now becoming remarkably desirable, and the square itself is magnificent. But in the 1850s it was an area of great deprivation, just like neighbouring Marylebone, another desirable area these days, and it was in these two areas that Octavia Hill started her great works in improving the housing of the poor of London, and set the example for others that led to the housing association movement nearly a hundred years later.

Although there is much in Octavia Hill's turn of mind with which I feel less than wholly sympathetic—for instance, she was no feminist, and she also often had somewhat worrying attitudes about the 'deserving' versus the 'undeserving' poor, typical of her time though they were—I am nevertheless completely awestruck by how much she achieved and how she combined being a social housing entrepreneur, an inventor of social work and indeed a champion for volunteering.

Between 2007 and 2009, I was Prime Minister Gordon Brown's champion for volunteering, while remaining on the Liberal Democrat benches. Much of Octavia Hill's work had, indirectly, led up to that appointment and, indeed, to the thinking that has made government after government, of whatever political hue, interested in harnessing the extraordinary might and energy of volunteers.

There is of course a catch in all this. You cannot 'make' people volunteer, although politicians often think that volunteering is the answer to all society's ills. It is not, and

indeed volunteers will always do just what they want to do, and not what they do not want to do, and through it all they need to be inspired, led, thanked, trained, evaluated, appraised and loved. Indeed, the only thing that is free about volunteers is that they do not get paid a salary. In all other ways, we should treat them — particularly those who volunteer regularly — as if they were staff. They are simply voluntary as opposed to paid staff, and they need acknowledging for that. Octavia Hill understood that only too well.

But she also thought that the better off, and the retired, the people who were not working to earn an honest crust, had a duty to help. I am totally in agreement with her on that. She wrote to her fellow workers in 1875:

*Do you mean to tell me that among the hundreds who have no professional work, young men of rank or fortune, older men who have retired from active work, there are not [some] in all this vast, rich city who care enough for their poor neighbours to feel it a privilege to give a few hours twice or thrice weekly or even daily to serve them?*¹

I could have been saying the same in a sermon in 2011. One of the reasons the Commission on the Future of Volunteering, which I chaired from 2008 to 2010, argued that we wanted to get volunteering into the DNA of our society is that we believed that everyone who had any spare capacity should volunteer at some point in their lives, and that everyone should also expect, at some point in their lives, for whatever reason, to receive help from a volunteer. You don't have to be poor to need help. Perhaps Octavia Hill would have been less familiar with that idea, although she did argue that 'we are all parts of one great human family'.² You might be old and isolated, you might just have come out of hospital and need help with shopping, you might need someone just to go to the shops with, you might need a ride to the GP. We all have times in our lives when we could do with a helping hand. Octavia Hill's huge sense of duty, her moral imperative, may seem unfashionable to our ears, but it is in fact absolutely right:

*Every individual has a contribution to make to the common life and is immeasurably poorer if he is not enabled to make it and that therefore the only cure for the ills of society lies in the conversion and education of individual men and women.*³

Of course, that contribution goes deeper than the education and conversion — as a Jew I hate the idea of proselytising! — of individuals, but it is that in conjunction with a wider societal education and inspiration programme. It is for this we need inspirational community leaders, youth leaders, wise civic leaders, inspirational teachers and so on. These are the people who can teach individuals and capture communities. It is for this that the now, in my view wrongly, much derided capacity building in communities was designed, and it was for this, as Octavia Hill would surely have understood, that it is essential to enable the most disadvantaged of people to play a role in leading and inspiring their communities too.

But how do we encourage volunteering now, in a society where the numbers volunteering seem to have flat-lined if not reduced? Making it 'compulsory' to do some form of community service may not always be a bad thing in itself, but if it gets confused with volunteering, it will put the genuine volunteers off. Youth leadership programmes, such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Awards, which have a high component of voluntary activity in them, are in my view more likely really to inspire young people than programmes which are only about volunteering with no other content, especially if they have been set up to fulfil a political aim rather than a much broader based societal need. I think we need to be much more honest about the human motivation to get involved, recognising that, for many people, exhortation simply will not work. Providing an opportunity for someone to do something they enjoy while giving service will be much more effective. Most of us need to feel needed, and volunteering to help others is one sure-fire way to feel needed, wanted and useful. This is something all of us appreciate, but it is something which, more than ever, older people say they miss if they are forced to retire from paid work or even from a voluntary role.

Octavia Hill realised something profound. To be effective as a volunteer (and, I would argue, as a social worker as well) you need to care about the people you are helping in a profound way. You cannot do these things simply to make the world a tidier, better organised, clean, less deprived place. There needs to be a relationship:

You cannot learn how to help a man, nor even get him to tell you what ails him till you care for him. For these reasons volunteers must rally round the Charity Organisation Society, and prevent it from becoming a dry, and because dry, an ineffectual machinery for enquiring about the people; volunteers must themselves take up the cases from the Committees, must win the co-operation of local clergy, and support them in the reform of their charities, must themselves superintend the agents, and conduct the correspondence, and for all this work we want gentlemen, specially for the poorer districts.⁴

The Charity Organisation Society about which Octavia Hill was talking was originally a German idea, very efficient, but one for which she had considerable criticism because the workers did not truly care for the people, and were simply determined to be as efficient as possible in the dispensation of top-down imposed help. Octavia Hill understood — atypically for her time — that you had to know what the people you were working with really wanted, a lesson social workers and volunteers have still not always grasped, partly because they believe they could do it all so much better. She rated human sympathy, the essential ingredient in providing support, and the one thing that individual people who are helped by volunteers always cite as what makes them trust the people who come to help. Working on individual cases demonstrates ‘the gracious human sympathy which is so sadly lost in much of the large charity which comes from afar and occupies itself with masses of people’.⁵

Octavia Hill encapsulated themes that should be just as relevant for modern volunteers as for those who helped her a century ago — a sense of sympathy and love, a real desire to help, a longing to understand, a desire to get organised. She also

thought everyone should volunteer — as I do — but I doubt she would have agreed with the concept of everyone also being recipients of volunteers’ efforts as well. Nevertheless, her commitment, her inventiveness, her sheer energy, her desire to keep so much of the green spaces public, her realisation of what could be done to improve housing, and her understanding of the social effects of real deprivation are all just as admirable today as they were in her day. It is because of her we have housing associations, the National Trust with its huge army of volunteers, and a view of volunteering that makes us able to encourage the oldest and the youngest to join efforts to make the world a better place. And that is the legacy she has left us with — one we would do well to build on, and cherish and value.

Baroness Julia Neuberger is Senior Rabbi, West London Synagogue, and between 2007 and 2009 was HM Government’s Champion for Volunteering.

Notes

- 1 O Hill, ‘Letter to fellow workers’, 1875, in R Whelan, *Octavia Hill’s Letters to Fellow Workers*, 1872–1911, pp 52–3.
- 2 O Hill, ‘Colour, space and music for the people’, reprinted from *The Nineteenth Century*, London: Keegan Paul and Co, 1884.
- 3 Quoted in Bell, *Octavia Hill*.
- 4 Quoted in R Whelan (ed), *Octavia Hill and the Social Housing Debate: Essays and letters by Octavia Hill*, London, Civitas, 1988.
- 5 O Hill, ‘Letter to fellow workers’, 1880, in R Whelan, *Octavia Hill’s Letters to Fellow Workers*, 1872–1911, p 129.

I have usually some flowers; for the ladies are very kind in bringing me them. I have a few poor little plants that I am fond of. Then I have eleven dear little snails. They are such darlings.

Octavia Hill, *Letter to Gertrude*



In pleading for beauty for the inhabitants of our towns, we are asking for no aristocratic luxury or exceptional superfluity, but for the restoration of some faint reflex of what our modern civilisation has taken away from the ordinary inheritance, to which as citizens of the fair earth, they were born.

Octavia Hill, *Natural beauty as a national asset*

10 Beauty and aspiration

John Holden

Acres and acres of beech woods, valleys and hills clothed and covered with them, and there are rounded hills with most beautiful slopes.¹

Octavia Hill was not an aesthetician. She was clearly moved by experiences of those things she considered to be beautiful, but her attitude to the concept of beauty was practical rather than theoretical, and she would have dismissed arguments about whether beauty is timeless and universal, or subjective and contingent, as a waste of her very valuable time. For Octavia Hill, beauty was important because it was emotionally, even spiritually, potent, but more so because it influenced human health and human morals — in other words it had effects as well as affects.

The order of priority between practicality and transcendence is clear in her writings:

When all material wants have been duly recognised and attended to, there does remain in England enough wealth for her to set aside a few areas where man may contemplate the beauty of nature, may rest, may find quiet, may commune with his God in the mighty presence of mountain, sky and water, and may find that peace, so difficult to realise in the throng of populous cities.²

Her no-nonsense approach was based on a number of assumptions, which can be traced through the past century and that still hold true for many people today.

The first was that beauty was primarily located in nature, and therefore in the countryside — in fruits and flowers, in landscape and in those vernacular English buildings, constructed from local materials, that seem to grow from the soil. The Octavia Hill rose, a gentle, pink

blossom created for the centenary of the National Trust, captures this spirit of natural beauty well.³

Alongside nature, there was art, but art could not be divorced from the more fundamental beauty of nature. Octavia Hill would have agreed with William Morris that ‘it is idle to talk about popularizing art, if you are not prepared to popularize reverence for nature also, both among the poor and the rich’.⁴

The marriage of natural and man-made beauty as the goal of politics can be seen in two frescoes that Ambrogio Lorenzetti painted on the walls of the town hall of Siena in 1338. In his depiction of ‘good government’, he shows us a town of striking architectural beauty, but it is also a green town, set about with fields and gardens, and in addition a town animated by singing, dancing and the arts. It is a reminder that government needs to provide a rich artistic life as well as a clean and fruitful natural environment, and that the Good Life concerns itself with beauty and pleasure in all its manifestations.

Beauty should be all-pervasive, but Octavia Hill’s second assumption — again, widely held today — was that, in an industrial and urbanised age, beauty was fast disappearing and had, to a large degree, disappeared from everyday life.

Such a belief is found in the architect Clough Williams-Ellis’ book about the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the National Trust, *On Trust for the Nation*, which begins with the sentence: ‘I dedicate this book to all the beauty of my country, natural or other, in gratitude and grief.’⁵ His gratitude is for what remains; his grief, for what has been, and continues to be, lost.

Those sentiments of gratitude and grief are still keenly felt: England stirs the soul, yet the land and the views are eaten away by wind farms, high-speed rail, roads, supermarkets and the like. The fight to conserve and enhance continues but, unlike in Octavia’s day, we now have in place relatively robust planning laws (even if they can be overridden by secretaries of state), and a host of organisations dedicated

to the conservation and preservation of everything from beautiful butterflies to beautiful Modernist buildings.

An intelligent and democratic approach to balancing reverence for the past, the needs of the present, and the interests of future generations must always be struck, and that means taking decisions in the face of irreconcilable interests. Octavia Hill herself came up against this issue when she chose to rank the ‘natural’ (but in fact thoroughly man-made) beauty of the Lake District above the need for clean drinking water for the workers of south Lancashire. When the Manchester Bill, which put in place a scheme to convert Thirlmere into a reservoir, was passed by Parliament in 1877, she inveighed:

*We ought not as a nation, to bow to the greed of Manchester, and her dense incapacity for seeing or caring for beauty, but before we trust one of our loveliest lakes and three valleys to her keeping, should know whether or not there are wells and collecting grounds in which she may build reservoirs without using one of the few peaceful and unspoiled spots in England, and monopolising water to sell for profit to a whole county, without restrictions as to the way in which she mars the scenery.*⁶

When weighing up such choices between beauty and ‘selling for a profit’, a lesson should be taken from the environmental movement’s Precautionary Principle, which tells us that those things that are rare and endangered should be specially valued and cared for.

Yet there is a danger lurking within the idea of conserving and preserving the beautiful. It is all too easy to slip into a habit of mind that separates the beautiful from the everyday, and places it outside normal life. Thus located, beauty becomes something to be defended; conservation becomes the management of shrinkage, and a slow battle against the inevitability of degradation.

Another consequence of divorcing beauty from normal life is that beauty becomes an escape and compensation; and the existence of the escape makes the dominance of brutality and ugliness acceptable. Building an idyllic

country cottage (as Octavia Hill did at Crockham Hill in Kent) allows people to abandon the fight for beauty in towns and cities, to give up demanding beauty everywhere, always. But it is better to adopt the attitude of William Morris, who in *The Earthly Paradise* encourages us to ‘forget six counties overhung with smoke’, and to imagine a world where the ubiquitous beauty of the physical world is an inevitable consequence of good work and right relationships between one human being and another. Imagined Utopias help us to make things happen.⁷

When we see beauty as something that should be all around us all the time the consequences are startling. For one thing, we discover that Octavia Hill was indeed right in seeing beauty as a practical matter. In her view, beauty was closely associated with cleanliness, health and orderliness. In turn these virtues had practical ramifications: people lead better lives when they are clean, healthy and orderly. This is why London’s parks and open spaces could be written about in the same sentence both as ‘remnants of rural beauty’ and as ‘air-holes for labouring lungs’ (the words are those of Edward Bond, Octavia Hill’s close lieutenant and one-time fiancé).⁸

As she believed in the beneficial effects of beauty on everyone, beauty figured centrally in Olivia’s social reform. She was keen to promote universal access to beauty. In an address to Manchester Art Museum in 1897 she said:

*We cannot all go to Barmouth or Tintagel... We want some beautiful things for our daily enjoyment, and near us. Now these are what your museum is providing, not on rare holidays, not for those who have money, but day by day as their surroundings for the poorest of your Manchester children, the most toil-worn of your Manchester men.*⁹

The phrase ‘access to beauty’ of course begs many questions: what is beautiful? Is beauty an objective fact, or is the appreciation of beauty subjective? Should we accept that ‘*de gustibus non disputandum est*’ (in matters of taste there is no dispute)?

At the heart of such questions lies a political issue. Who gets to decide what is beautiful matters, because the ability to take the decision both reflects and confers power. As Octavia Hill’s near contemporary Oscar Wilde put it:

*Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For them there is hope. They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty.*¹⁰

It is all too easy to get caught in a logical merry-go-round where an elite defines beauty, and reinforces its elitism through the act of definition. To quote the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman:

*The chosen ones are chosen not by virtue of their insight into what is beautiful, but rather by the fact that [the] statement ‘this is beautiful’ is binding precisely because it was uttered by them and confirmed by their actions.*¹¹

Yet here again, Octavia Hill acts as a guide. By championing the Commons, she stressed the importance of beauty not as a private or individual concern, but as a shared and public matter. And she wanted to extend the Commons not only in the sense of physical space but also as an intellectual and emotional endeavour because she believed that everyone could develop the ability to judge beauty: ‘Once get an eye of the right kind and you are enabled to see beauty in every place.’¹² Octavia Hill was certainly confident in her own judgement and able to see beauty behind the surface, and described this in a letter to her friend, Mary Harris:

*Beauty is for all, outward beauty in the single glimpses of green, in sunlight, however dimmed, in clouds, however darkened, in faces, however worn; inward beauty, unspeakable in gentleness, sacrifice, energy, generosity, humility, strength, reverence, in all nobleness, in all deeds, public and private.*¹³

If beauty is indeed ‘for all’, and if everyone is capable of judgement, then not just the appreciation but the very

definition of the beautiful becomes a democratic endeavour where a multitude of voices — expert witnesses, urbanists and ruralists, artists, everyman and everywoman — have a stake and a voice in a continuous conversation that develops the idea of the beautiful.

By engaging in such a conversation, however disputatious, public policy could put beauty back into the equation when choices need to be made. By reconnecting with the possibility of ubiquitous beauty, and increasing the capacity of everyone to understand and enjoy beauty, civil society could take account of non-monetary values when making decisions, and then six counties, and more, could be cleansed of smoke.

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Notes

- 1 Quoted in G Darley, *Octavia Hill: Social reformer and founder of the National Trust*, London: Francis Boutle, 2010, p 164.
- 2 O Hill, 'Letter to fellow workers', 1904, in Whelan (ed), *Octavia Hill's Letters to Fellow Workers*, 1872–1911, p 527.
- 3 For further details see *World of Interiors*, Jan 1995, p 56.
- 4 Darley, Octavia Hill, p 217.
- 5 C Williams-Ellis, *On Trust for the Nation*, London: Paul Elek, nd, p 7.
- 6 O Hill, 'Letter to fellow workers', 1877, in Whelan (ed), *Octavia Hill's Letters to Fellow Workers*, 1872–1911, p 92.
- 7 W Morris, *The Earthly Paradise*, London: Longmans Green & Co, 1916.

8 Darley, *Octavia Hill*, p 166.

9 *Ibid*, p 303.

10 Oscar Wilde, preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

11 Z Bauman, *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*, Cambridge: Polity, 2011, p 4.

12 ES Maurice (ed), *Octavia Hill: Early ideals, from letters*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1928, p 82.

13 *Ibid*, p 30.

It seemed to me that it is an often forgotten truth, and not a superstition, that outward objects and events are all connected with inward life, that they are meant to be illustrations and even interpretations of it.

Octavia Hill

11 The power of making

Rosy Greenlees

Octavia Hill recognised the value of craft early on in her life. It became a constant in a lifetime of combating social problems, from the toy factory she managed for the Ladies Guild in 1852, aged just 14, to the craft classes that she later offered to Southwark tenants. In craft she saw the power to connect, to empower, to improve the social and physical environment and to contribute to both individual and collective well-being.

Despite what would become a widely held perception of craft following the Industrial Revolution—as being nostalgic, rural and outdated—craft still has this power. To make with our hands is a strong inherent human impulse that has lasted millennia. However it is viewing craft not just as a means of production but as a way of thinking that will ensure it continues to be relevant and significant in the twenty-first century.

Connecting and empowering

People talk about the absurdity of teaching crochet before dressmaking. Oh the worse absurdity of teaching needlework or any theory else till you have warmed the heart and unfrozen tongues.¹

This extract from a letter from Octavia Hill to Mary Harris in 1857 speaks succinctly about the ability of craft to connect people, and the value holds true today. Melanie Tomlinson is a metalworker who runs workshops with women newly arrived in Birmingham from conflict

zones around the world, to promote social interaction and inclusion. Tomlinson says, ‘Over time, they open up — it doesn’t happen straight away but it just comes through in the work. Putting something out there and sharing it — making it real and permanent — has an almost spiritual element.’

Likewise the Craft Café was set up in Glasgow’s Castlemilk housing estate to combat social isolation, in this case with the elderly. The project, set up by Impact Arts, has proved so effective that local GP practices routinely refer older patients to the café, demonstrating how craft can transcend barriers and connect with hard-to-reach communities and individuals.

Octavia Hill recognised that craft provided such personal sense of efficacy, enabling individuals to find a place in the world. Turner Prize winning potter Grayson Perry takes this further, stating, ‘One of the great things about learning craft is that it is almost a physical manifestation of “I can change the world”’.²

A report from the Ruskin Mill Educational Trust written by Dr Aric Sigman, *Practically Minded*, showed that hands-on play and hands-on learning allowed young people ‘to experience how the world works in practice, to gain an understanding of materials and processes and to make informed judgments about abstract concepts’.³ Learning with the hands in 3D develops what are called ‘haptic skills’. These are skills relating to or based on the sense of touch, which in turn aid cognitive development. The development of such haptic skills not only fosters a range of transferable skills but can engender important cross-curricular learning benefits. It also contributes to well-being that, with sustained engagement, can last a lifetime.

This sense of personal agency was reflected in Professor Matthew Crawford’s book *The Case for Working with Your Hands* (2010) and Richard Sennett’s book *The Craftsman* (2008), and explored in the recent Crafts Council and V&A partnership exhibition *Power of Making*.⁴ Crawford’s book, an unexpected hit with political analysts and economists, explored our reliance on financial services and infantilisation at the hands of manufacturers. Meanwhile, Sennett reflected on the characteristics of craft makers as having ‘the capacities

to become better at, and more involved in, what they do — the abilities to localise, question and open up problems that can result, eventually, in good work’.⁵ Alone, the argument for well-being and sense of personal agency is compelling enough a case for craft-making; the argument for craft-making as a way of thinking, as made here by Sennett, is where the case for craft is at its most powerful.

Making value

The 2010 Crafts Council report *Making Value* revealed the extent of the contribution of the 17,000 contemporary craft makers in the UK to industry, education, community and innovation.⁶ Most makers operate a portfolio practice — over three-quarters work in other industry sectors, over half in community contexts, and just over a third in education settings; nearly a third work across at least two of these three areas. These makers are highly motivated in applying their practice to make a difference and we can see them at work in a range of settings. From fashion to film, hospitals to heritage, manufacturing to mental health projects and retailing to residential courses, makers bring their specialist skills and knowledge of materials into a wealth of contexts.

A further Crafts Council report, *Crafting Capital*, explored how makers collaborate with scientists, engineers and technologists and how these collaborations are driving innovation.⁷ In the words of Andrew Witty, Chief Executive Officer at GlaxoSmithKline, ‘As science has evolved it’s becoming much more multi-disciplinary and actually the discoveries all occur on the interface of disciplines.’⁸ Craft contributes to this process in three ways:

- It encourages a different style of thinking — the creative generation of ideas and risk-taking; flexible thinking complements a more linear scientific approach.
- It includes a human element — makers are able to make the connection between abstract, scientific and technological developments with the needs of the real world in mind.

- It represents skills—makers have high level skills in visualising, recognising and modelling patterns and systems in ways that can advance scientific thinking.

Collaboration accelerates innovation: by working together, people with different but complementary expertise can challenge conventional thinking.

The future

So what of the future for craft? The exhibition *Power of Making* received over 300,000 visitors making it the most popular free exhibition the museum has ever staged. This goes a little way in demonstrating that craft is part of the zeitgeist.

In his essay for the catalogue to the exhibition, Professor Sir Christopher Frayling, former Chairman of Arts Council England and Rector of the Royal College of Art, quoted Walter Gropius from the first Bauhaus manifesto in 1919: 'let's turn to the crafts'.⁹ It has long been believed that Gropius said 'let's return to the crafts', but in fact that was a mistranslation. Craft was not viewed as a historic destination but a valid means of expression. Professor Frayling makes the link between the current 'maker movement' use of tinker schools, tech-shop environments, incubators for making prototypes and rapid-prototyping centres to Gropius's famous aspiration to re-position crafts as 'research work for industrial production, speculative experiments in laboratory-workshops where the preparatory work of evolving and perfecting new type-forms will be done'.¹⁰

The 'maker movement' is growing rapidly, especially in the USA. It is being propelled by new tools and electronic components but perhaps more crucially by a willingness to share digital blueprints. This open-source approach being adopted by active and passionate online communities is driving innovation. It forms the basis of what Bruce Nussbaum, Professor of Innovation and Design at Parsons, the New School of Design, calls 'indie capitalism'.¹¹ Nussbaum believes that the future of capitalism is home-grown, small-scale and independent and crucially based on a

community of makers. An emerging 'indie' capitalism is local not global, and is socially not transactionally based. It is a maker system of economics based on creating new value, not trading old value. Ultimately brands are out and communities surrounding the creation of a product or service are in.

This resonates with Octavia Hill's holistic approach to social reform. Octavia Hill knew the importance of the domestic scale within a community, she worked on a 'hyper-local' level herself and she served a community by nurturing a spirit of individual empowerment and collective responsibility. She would have approved of an open-source culture that worked towards advancement where individuals do not lose out to corporations.

Like many of Octavia Hill's values, making is far from an anachronism in a modern world. Its strength lies in its ability to change and adapt, allowing it to create real impact. The constructive and collaborative nature of what making things entails has fed into the fabric of our society for centuries and evidence suggests that it will continue to do so.

Rosy Greenlees is Executive Director of the Crafts Council.

Notes

- 1 ES Maurice (ed), *Octavia Hill: Early ideals, from letters*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1928, p 43.
- 2 See Crafts Council, 'What our crafts champions have to say', Grayson Perry, www.craftmatters.org.uk/champions (accessed 12 Feb 2012).
- 3 A Sigman, *Practically Minded: The benefits and mechanisms associated with a craft-based curriculum*, Ruskin Mill Educational Trust, 2008, <http://tinyurl.com/bvobfex> (accessed 12 Feb 2012).
- 4 See M Crawford, *The Case for Working with Your Hands*, London: Penguin, 2010; R Sennett, *The Craftsman*, London:

Allen Lane, 2008; and D Charny (ed), *The Power of Making*, London: V&A Publishing and Crafts Council, exh cat, 2011.

- 5 Sennett, *The Craftsman*.
- 6 M Schwarz and K Yair, *Making Value: Craft and the economic and social contribution of makers*, London: Crafts Council, 2010, <http://tinyurl.com/d43ntt5> (accessed 29 Mar 2012).
- 7 Crafts Council, *Crafting Capital: New technologies, new economies*, London: Crafts Council, nd, <http://tinyurl.com/cjkkvdt> (accessed 29 Mar 2012).
- 8 The Andrew Witty quote was from BBC2 series *Made in Britain*, Jun 2011.
- 9 C Frayling, C, 'We must all turn to the crafts', in Charny, *The Power of Making*, p 29.
- 10 *Ibid*.
- 11 Co.Design, '4 reasons why the future of capitalism is homegrown, small scale, and independent', nd, www.fastcodesign.com/1665567/4-reasons-why-the-future-of-capitalism-is-homegrown-small-scale-and-independent (accessed 12 Feb 2012).

There are indeed many good things in life which may be unequally apportioned and no such serious loss arise; but the need of quiet, the need of air, and I believe the sight of sky and of things growing, seem human needs, common to all men.

Octavia Hill, *More air for London*



12 Octavia Hill and the National Trust

Dame Fiona Reynolds

There's a wonderful quote about the young Octavia Hill, which seems to sum up all she cared about:

She walked in, a little figure in a long skirt, seeming much older than her seventeen years, and followed by a troupe of poor and ragged children. They came from back streets and crowded hovels.

On that occasion she'd walked the children to Romford and back to visit her friends, the Marshals, giving them their first taste of fresh air and green spaces.

The episode captures what is special about Octavia Hill. The children came from her Ladies Guild, providing work and education for the poor. Epping Forest (another destination for the children) was one of the 'outdoor living rooms' she was to save for the nation. The walk itself—a long distance by today's standards—reflects both her emphasis on self-reliance, and her belief in the power of the outdoors and nature to refresh, inspire and transform. And the whole enterprise was an act of a focused, determined and passionate woman.

Octavia Hill was extraordinary. She was a visionary, ahead of her time in the links she made between access to fresh air and physical and spiritual wellbeing. This is a philosophy with which we are only now getting to grips. One hundred years after her death we are only beginning to develop ways of measuring national happiness as well as gross domestic product. In the age of capitalism's birth, her views were truly revolutionary.

But she was also a pragmatist. She devoted her whole life to doing something about the social inequality she saw all around her. As a woman in a man's world, the difference she made was incredible. In other ways, her approach limited her impact. She shied away from influencing government policy, believing instead in direct, personal intervention. For much of her life, her achievements were at the scale of the individual, or of small communities. It was a model dependent on direct influence and personal effort. That personal effort was so great that she frequently exhausted herself—this contributed to her traumatic break with Ruskin, who had inspired her from a young age.

Her relationship with Ruskin completes the picture of Octavia Hill. Her commitment to social equality and devotion to helping those less fortunate than herself fits into the social milieu of the late 1800s. But throughout her life we also see the strong influence of the Romantic movement with its love of natural beauty and landscape—especially the influence of Ruskin and Morris, fathers of the conservation movement as we know it today. Her legacy bears that of a dual influence: social concerns combined with a love of natural beauty. The National Trust and the Garden City movement both trace their ancestry to Octavia Hill.

Octavia Hill was one of three founders of the National Trust in 1895. The organisation bears her imprint from the first. You hear her voice in our far-sighted goal—to protect special places forever. The legal means didn't exist to do that, a conclusion that was inescapable following her failure to protect Swiss Cottage Fields from development. It was the 1907 National Trust Act that created the powers to hold land and buildings in perpetuity. This is the concept of inalienability and it is central to what makes the Trust so unique and successful today. And again we see Octavia Hill's hand in the wording of that Act:

The National Trust... shall be established for the purposes ... of promoting the permanent preservation for the benefit of the nation of lands and tenements (including buildings) of beauty

or historic interest and as regards lands for the preservation (so far as practicable) of their natural aspect, features and animal and plant life.

That emphasis on both conservation of places in perpetuity and on benefit for the nation combined her twin passions. It has shaped the National Trust ever since.

Throughout my time as Director-General of the National Trust, and particularly during 2012 as we mark the centenary of her death, I have felt the spirit of Octavia Hill sitting on my shoulder. The Trust is now a very different organisation from the tiny though ambitious body that existed on Octavia Hill's death, when it had 58 properties: 15 buildings and 43 areas of land totalling just over 5,000 acres. What would she think of how it has evolved and what we are doing now? How are we meeting her uncompromising standards and measuring up against her ambitious, exacting vision?

The first gift of land to the new National Trust was a tiny 4.5 acre plot at Dinas Oleu, overlooking Barmouth on the Welsh coast. 'We have got our first property,' wrote Octavia Hill at the time, 'I wonder if it will be our last.' It wasn't. We now care for over 630,000 acres of countryside. Some of the earliest were Octavia Hill's 'open air sitting rooms', many of which she or her family bought and gave to the Trust: Ides Hill, Toys Hill and Crockham Hill, where she is buried.

In keeping with that original vision, our land holdings also include smaller, local green spaces like the Bath Skyline, a ridge which provides both a green lung for that city and ensures development does not sprawl over its historic landscape, and historic parks on the edge of major cities, such as Clumber Park near Nottingham or Osterley Park in London. But it also includes vast tracts of land in Britain's greatest, wildest landscapes—iconic upland like Great Gable in the Lake District or Kinder Scout in the Peak District; exquisite designed landscapes such as Stourhead, Studley Royal and Stowe; and more than 700 miles of the most stunning coastline in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, since the Enterprise Neptune campaign in the 1960s.

Octavia Hill's first reaction, then, might be delight at the number of outdoor places protected for the nation, and declared inalienable under the National Trust Act she helped Robert Hunter and Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley to author.

Octavia Hill oversaw the acquisition of the Trust's first built property, Alfriston Clergy House, bought for the sum of £10 in 1896. She also approved the acquisition of Barrington Court in Somerset in 1907 — the Trust's first 'stately home', though unfurnished and by today's standards a modest manor house. The costs of looking after Barrington were almost a disaster for the nascent organisation: for years the words 'remember Barrington!' reverberated around committee meetings. The Trust learned from that episode and now requires an endowment sufficient to fund the maintenance costs of each new acquisition.

The founders of the Trust did not, however, foresee the collapse in confidence of the great families of England. Following the combined effects of recession, the loss of a generation to two world wars, and punitive taxes, many reached the conclusion that they could no longer afford to maintain their treasure houses. Faced with the demolition, sale or abandonment of many of these country houses with their rich contents and elaborate architecture, the National Trust stepped in to negotiate its Country House Scheme. That led to the 1936 National Trust Act, by which owners could transfer their property in lieu of inheritance tax to the National Trust. The first to come were very different: Wightwick Manor in Wolverhampton (only recently built by the Mander family), the exquisite Jacobean Blickling in Norfolk from Lord Lothian, Chairman of the Trust, and the imposing Wallington in Northumberland, gifted by the communist Trevelyan family. We now own and manage over 300 great houses and gardens, in many of which descendants of the donor families still, happily, live.

Definitions of relevance and of cultural heritage change with time. Places that would have been considered quite ordinary in Octavia Hill's day are considered historically significant now. And so the Trust has acquired the last

surviving un-modernised workhouse near Southwell and Quarry Bank Mill and its estate, near Manchester, both of which were operating in Octavia Hill's day. Both are fitting. The workhouses were an attempt, misguided in her view, to solve the problems she wrestled with. Its separation of wings into 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, though, echoes Octavia Hill's own beliefs. Quarry Bank Mill near Manchester was the product of a socially conscious family, led by Samuel Greg, who was far ahead of his time in addressing the conditions under which his employees worked.

The Birmingham back-to-backs would hardly have been considered cultural heritage in Octavia Hill's time. Built in the 1820s, by the late 1800s they were already the slums of their day. They are now one of our most popular properties, triggering memories from people who can remember growing up in similar houses. In Liverpool, we own the houses where John Lennon and Paul McCartney grew up, and in London we recently acquired the terraced home of Kenyan-born poet Khadambi Asalache, complete with the extraordinary wood carvings with which he decorated its modest interior. Neither are cultures Octavia Hill would recognise. These more recent acquisitions might surprise and intrigue her — but perhaps she would understand the Trust's need constantly to reassess and expand what the nation considers to be its cultural heritage.

The Trust continues to acquire properties that pass the all-important test of 'significance'. This includes places any connoisseur would recognise — the Victorian Gothic Tyntesfield, near Bristol, for example, or Vanbrugh's last (and some say greatest) work, Seaton Delaval Hall, north of Newcastle. But significance is a broad term, so we also continue to buy or accept as gifts precious coast and countryside and have recently agreed to acquire one of the last remaining unspoiled Arts and Crafts cottages, Stoneywell in Leicestershire, built for the Gimson family and with the furniture made for it. So we hope Octavia Hill would be impressed, if not daunted, by just how much cultural heritage the National Trust now cares for.

More familiar would be some of the challenges we now face. Octavia Hill and her contemporaries feared that

rampant industrialisation was severing the connection between people, history and nature. They saw urbanisation gobbling up the countryside around towns. It was a century concerned with making money, with little concern for the consequences. The movement to check it, or at least to argue that beauty must be safeguarded, inevitably came from civic society.

In the early twenty-first century we are faced with many of the same challenges. The political agenda today is dominated by the drive for economic growth. And so it remains a battle to safeguard the interests of beauty, nature and heritage. Major infrastructure projects threaten landscape and historical places; again, we face the threat of characterless urban sprawl eating up the green space around towns and cities. Once again, a solution outside government is needed. The National Trust plays an active part in protecting and promoting special places, standing up for our cause publicly when needed. It is a role we played in the 1920s and 1930s. We trust Octavia Hill would recognise and support the reprise.

Most familiar to her, of course, would be that connection between people and place. When I joined the Trust as Director-General, I concluded that while being proud of our many achievements, Octavia Hill might have questioned whether we had sufficient focus on ‘benefit for the nation’. We are world-class conservationists — and must always remain so. But we had drifted a little away from the ‘everlasting delight of the people’ that had been Octavia’s watchword. I felt we needed to become more ‘arms open’ if we were to meet her vision.

Now you will find us bringing our places to life, focused both on their care in perpetuity and on enjoyment for people now. We tell the stories of the great families that once lived in our houses and, in a touch that Octavia Hill would surely appreciate, we also tell the ‘below stairs’ stories of their servants. We are concerned, as are many, by what we see as the growing disconnect between children and nature. And while we may stop short of marching children to Epping Forest, we are constantly looking for ways to encourage families to get

outdoors and closer to nature. We are inspired in doing so by Octavia Hill’s own words: ‘the need of quiet, the need of air, the need of exercise... the sight of sky and of things growing seem human needs common to all’. I hope she’d approve.

When Octavia Hill died in 1912, the National Trust had 713 members. We now have 4 million. While she would no doubt be impressed, she would not be surprised, and she would certainly not be complacent. She believed, as we do, that beauty, nature and heritage are fundamental to the human condition. She spoke as she founded us of everlasting delight. No doubt, if she were here now, she would describe the last hundred years of the Trust and what we stand for as one of enduring relevance; a cause from which we must never rest in pursuing.

Dame Fiona Reynolds is the Director-General of the National Trust.

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Octavia Hill died one hundred years ago this year, yet her legacy continues to go from strength to strength. A tireless social reformer and co-founder of the National Trust, her influence can be felt in the streets of Marylebone and Southwark in the housing she managed, just as on Hampstead Heath and in the Lake District it can be felt in the open spaces she protected. Her legacy is also clear in the ideas, concepts and disciplines that she espoused, which have proved as enduring as the organisations she founded.

On the centenary of her death, society—big, broken or otherwise—is on the lips of almost every politician or commentator. After the riots that sprawled across towns and cities last year, the focus quickly shifted to underlying social problems: with members of the cabinet lamenting broken families, declining respect and a lack of responsibility. Such complaints would have been familiar to Octavia Hill. Housing, work, families, morality, childhood, respect, responsibility and aspiration were all concerns at the centre of her campaigns and worldview.

This collection examines Octavia Hill's work as a starting point for thinking afresh about how to address the challenges facing society today. It brings together a diverse range of contributors: experts on heritage sit alongside specialists in housing, and there are essays on patriotism, nature, aesthetics, volunteering, craft and more. The lasting lesson is to think anew: to see the links that exist but are buried and the connections that have never been made.

Samuel Jones is a Demos Associate.

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