

Henry Ryecroft meets Henry Maitland: George Gissing in and on Bloomsbury

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Introduction

George Gissing is not normally associated with Bloomsbury. He is a man of the slums, or on the margins, or maybe a cynical observer of the nouveau riche, but never a Bloomsbury academic or intellectual. And yet Bloomsbury featured prominently in both his own life and his work. In this paper I want to focus on (1) Gissing's relationship with the British Museum; (2) his use of the streets and squares of Bloomsbury; (3) his own residence in various lodgings in Bloomsbury and how this translated into his novels; and (4) to reflect on his overall personification of Bloomsbury, including scenes from his novels that were apparently NOT based on his own particular experiences.

The British Museum

Gissing obtained his reader's ticket for the British Museum Reading Room in November 1877, the day after his 20th birthday.¹ In *New Grub Street* Edwin Reardon applies for his reader's ticket on his 21st birthday, for which he needed "the signature of some respectable householder".² Gissing himself seems not to have had any difficulty getting his ticket, notwithstanding both his youth (he must have misrepresented his age and claimed to be 21) and his recently obtained criminal record.³

The British Museum was central to Gissing's life in London, both as an impoverished writer, as a source of heat, light and running water as well as a site for research, and as a classical scholar. In *New Grub Street*, as Reardon's efforts at story-writing are rejected by magazine editors:

What a blessed refuge it was, there under the great dome, when he must else have sat in his windy garret with the mere pretence of a fire! The reading-room was his true home: its warmth enwrapped him kindly; the peculiar odour of its atmosphere – at first a cause of headache – grew dear and delightful to him.⁴

And in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, Gissing's supposedly fictional but mostly autobiographical 'reminiscences':

Once, on going down into the lavatory to wash my hands, I became aware of a notice newly set up above the row of basins: "Readers are requested to bear in mind that these basins are to be used only for casual ablutions." Oh, the significance of that inscription! Had I not myself, more than once, been glad to use this soap and water more largely than the sense of the authorities contemplated?⁵

The distinctiveness of the Reading Room's environment also features in *New Grub Street*, in the person of Mr Quarmby, one of the many characters in the novel who labour, in Jasper Milvain's phrase, as "dwellers in the valley of the shadow of books".⁶

Mr Quarmby laughed in a peculiar way, which was the result of long years of mirth-subdual in the Reading-room. ... His suppressed laugh ended in a fit of coughing – the Reading-room cough.⁷

Gissing's letters and diaries are full of visits to the Reading Room. In March 1878, for example, he was using the Museum as a base for writing magazine articles; in 1879-80, he was there reading about apoplexy and paralysis, mainly in connection with his wife's chronic illness. In December 1890, while reading the first volume of Charles Booth's 'Life and Labour' in the BM, Gissing was delighted to discover a reference to his own work, *Demos*, commended as a reliable picture of how the working classes lived by a positivist social scientist otherwise sceptical of the value of literature, and thereby hinting

at the parallels between Booth's systematic social survey and Gissing's topographic realism.⁸

From 1891 to 1893 Gissing was absent from the museum, retreating to live in Exeter following his second marriage.⁹ But he soon found the absence of both London, as a stimulus to story-writing, and the British Museum, as a source of factual information, impossible to bear. By August 1893 he was back in the museum researching advertising for *In The Year of Jubilee*.¹⁰ In his fictionalised – and not always accurate – biography of Gissing, *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, his friend Morley Roberts commented:

... what a strange passion was his for London [especially for] the British Museum and its great library. He wrote once to his doctor friend [Henry Hick]: "I dare not settle far from London, as it means ill-health to me to be out of reach of the literary 'world'". [In Devon] he found the lack of the British Museum and his literary world too much for him ...¹¹

In *New Grub Street*, Reardon works in the Museum on "a mass of notes he had made in a reading of Diogenes Laertius" in the vain hope that they will make an article in a popular literary magazine, a story that also features in *Ryecroft*; while the earnest realist Biffen goes to the Reading-room to consult "the shelves of medical literature" before visiting several chemists' shops to acquire the necessary ingredients for his suicide on Putney Heath.¹²

In an earlier novel, *Thyrza*, Walter Egremont moves to rooms in Great Russell Street:

He chose them on account of their proximity to the British Museum; at that time he believed himself destined to produce some monumental work of erudition. Characteristically, he must establish himself at the very doors of the great Library. His Oriental researches ... were speedily abandoned, but the rooms in Great Russell Street still kept their tenant. He was indifferent as to where or how he

lived; all he asked was the possibility of privacy. This was a mere *pied à terre*; it housed his body and left his mind free.¹³

The case of Egremont raises the question of whether it was necessary to *live* in Bloomsbury in order to exploit its principal resources. For the moment, however, I want to conclude my exploration of Gissing's British Museum by considering its *social* function as meeting place. In *New Grub Street*, Marian Yule is regularly propositioned by wannabe authors wanting to ingratiate themselves to her father, the literary editor, and also by Jasper Milvain – in front of the reference shelves.¹⁴ Gilbert Grail woos Thyrsa: "I should like you to see the library at the British Museum. There's a large room where people sit and study any book they like, all day long, and day after day. Think what a life that must be!"¹⁵

But the rest of the museum was more attractive territory for dubious liaison, a place where you could be private in public. When, in *The Nether World*, Bob Hewett, married to Pennyloaf Candy, bumps into Clem Peckover, married to Joseph Snowdon, one day on High Holborn, they adjourn to the museum.

'Ever been in that place?' Clem asked.

'Of course I have,' he replied, with his air of superiority.

'I haven't. Is there anything to pay? Let's go in for half an hour.'

Much Clem cared for antiquities; when she had wearied herself in pretending interest, a seat in an unvisited corner gave her an opportunity for more congenial dialogue.

'Do you come here often?' she asked at length.

'Can't say I do.'

'Thought p'r'aps you brought Mrs. Pennyloaf. When'll you be here again?'

'Don't know,' Bob replied, fidgeting and looking to a distance.

'I shouldn't wonder if I'm here this day next week,' said Clem, after a pause.¹⁶

Before long they are meeting in other out-of-the-way places – on Old Street near Shoreditch Station and on the Thames Embankment between Waterloo Bridge and Temple Pier.¹⁷

Like Gilbert Grail in *Thyrza*, Gissing was anxious to show the museum to others. He took his sisters there in April 1890; and he took his second wife, Edith, there, in July 1893 soon after they had moved back to London from Exeter.¹⁸

Streets and Squares

The Bloomsbury townscape – of terraced streets and garden squares – offered a rhythm for pedestrians that could be matched to the rhythm of their conversations. In Gissing’s first novel, *Workers in the Dawn*, Arthur and Carrie occupy separate lodgings in Huntley Street: “Out of fear lest their regular appointments should be noticed from the house, he arranged that they should always meet at a certain spot in Torrington Square,” and it is there that Arthur fatefully proposes marriage: “At the moment only one or two people were in sight at the farthest end of the square, and the distant roll of vehicles was the only sound which broke the stillness of the dull January afternoon” (Figure 1).¹⁹

When Amy Reardon visits Mudie’s Circulating Library in New Oxford Street, walking there from the nearest Metropolitan station (Gower Street), she encounters Jasper Milvain “at the library counter”. He accompanies her as she walks back up Museum Street. In Bedford Square, Jasper tells Amy that he is “practically” engaged to Marian. “Amy glanced at the trees, now almost bare of foliage; then her eyes met Jasper’s, and she smiled significantly. ‘I should have thought your aim would have been far more ambitious,’ she said, with distinct utterance.” From there, up the length of Gower Street, “they talked of several other things less personal”, but “By degrees the tone of their conversation had become what it was used to be, now and then almost confidential.”²⁰

And two incidents in Gissing's later short novel, *Eve's Ransom*: Eve Madeley, who has been living in London for some time, latterly in Gower Place, is at first more sensitive to the London environment than her suitor, Maurice Hilliard, who comes "face to face with Miss Madeley in Gower Street" one afternoon:

"Will you let me walk a little way with you?" he asked.

"Certainly. I'm just going to change a book at Mudie's." She carried a little handbag. "I suppose you have been going about London a great deal? Don't the streets look beautiful at this time of the year?"

"Beautiful? I'm not sure that I see much beauty."

"Oh, don't you? I delight in London. I had dreamt of it all my life before I came here. I always said to myself I should some day live in London."

"You never go into the country?" he said, feeling unable to join in her praise of London, though it was intelligible enough to him.

"I go now and then as far as Hampstead Heath," Eve answered with a smile.²¹

Some time later, after Eve has left her Gower Place lodgings, Hilliard waylays her in Holborn as she is leaving work one evening. After visiting a restaurant, they walk back up Southampton Row "neither speaking until they were within sight of Russell Square". Now it is Hilliard who is sensitive to the Bloomsbury environment:

"I like this part of London," said Hilliard at length, pointing before him. "I often walk about the squares late at night. It's quiet, and the trees make the air taste fresh."

"I did the same, sometimes, when I lived in Gower Place."

...

A long silence followed. They passed out of Russell into Woburn Square. Night was now darkening the latest tints of the sky, and the lamps shone golden against dusty green.²²

Nature in the heart of the city doesn't just impact our emotions; it makes **us** more 'natural' – impulsive and reckless.

Gissing would have been familiar with the night-time environment of Bloomsbury. At various times his closest friends – Eduard Bertz and Morley Roberts – each lived in Bloomsbury. For example, Roberts moved to 35 Tavistock Place (Figure 1) in October 1890 where, for the last couple of months before moving to Exeter, Gissing would regularly spend evenings with his friend: on 8 November 1890, for example, he spent from 8.00pm to 1.30am at Roberts'; likewise on 6 December; while on 11 December, when Gissing "Went to Museum, but could not get books, because of darkness", he and Roberts went on to see 'The Gondoliers' at the Savoy.²³

Living in Bloomsbury

While many of Gissing's trips to the British Museum were made from lodgings in various parts of inner London, and especially from his flat at Cornwall Mansions where he lived for six years, he also occupied lodgings at various times in Colville Place (just across Tottenham Court Road into Fitzrovia), Huntley Street and Gower Place (Figure 2).²⁴ After nearly a year in Colville Place, in September 1878 Gissing moved – with Nell, whom he married in October 1879 – to a single room at 31 Gower Place. The room cost them 6/6 per week. The 1881 census recorded four heads of household and their families (a coppersmith, a hackney-carriage driver, a carpenter, and a widow) and three male lodgers (a bookbinder, a German hotel manager and an annuitant widower), a grand total of 13 persons, resident at no. 31, a pattern of occupancy repeated in most of the houses along the street.²⁵ A few years later, Charles Booth classified Gower Place as "fairly comfortable".²⁶ But whatever the level of physical comfort, Gissing and Nell were forced to move long before the census taker came around, on account of "some unpleasantness". On this occasion it seems the unpleasantness may have been the fault of the landlady, but some subsequent moves were precipitated by Nell's unseemly behaviour – her alcoholism and the company she kept. The experience is to some degree replicated in *Workers in the Dawn*, where Arthur Golding moves to a single room in a Gower Place

lodging-house, where the landlady, Mrs Pettindund, and her entourage of husband, grown-up children and lodgers “could not be called poor”, but squandered their income “in surfeit and vice” and were oblivious to any sense of “their mental and moral debasement”.²⁷

Gissing’s next port of call was 70 Huntley Street, the only one of Gissing’s Bloomsbury homes that still exists, where they again took one “very comfortable” room in another street that Booth labelled “fairly comfortable”. In 1881 70 Huntley Street accommodated six families, headed by a widowed former laundress, a cab driver, a fishmonger’s assistant, a carpet planner, a carman and a smith, 23 persons in all.²⁸ They stayed only six months in the course of which Gissing at last received an inheritance of £300 which had been due on his 21st birthday the previous November. His first response was to move down the street to 35 Huntley Street, taking two rooms for 12/- in the house of Moses Sageman, a tailor’s cutter. Gissing was toying with the idea of using his inheritance to buy a house in the suburbs. Instead, he and Nell moved to two rooms in Edward Street, “much nearer to Regent’s Park” and much cheaper (9/- a week), while his inheritance was blown on persuading Messrs Remington to publish his first novel, *Workers in the Dawn*, in May 1880.²⁹

When Booth’s researchers updated their survey in 1898, they noted of Huntley Street: “no prostitutes. In a working-class street like this the inhabitants won’t let any prostitutes come, if they do, they complain to the agent at once and he turns them out.”³⁰ These sentiments are reflected in *Workers in the Dawn*. When Carrie becomes pregnant (this is before she really knows Arthur; the father is a prospective Anglican clergyman, Augustus Whiffle, whose own rooms, “in the humbler neighbourhood of University Street” conveniently afforded nightly views of “the streams of girls” leaving “the work-rooms in which the neighbourhood abounds”, prompting him to whistle to attract the attention of “the prettiest that passed”), her landlady proposes throwing her out rather than “lose the good name o’ th’ouse an’ all”.³¹

Just over two years later, after moves to Islington and “the West End” (actually the northern fringes of Notting Hill), ostensibly to be nearer the pupils he was teaching, the Gissings returned to Gower Place: Gissing “long[ed] for the neighbourhood of life and bustle and noise”.³² But now they took three rooms in no. 15 on the south side of the street, including a “proper kitchen” and shut off from the rest of the house by glass doors, “just like having a house to oneself”. Gissing enthused about the “*absolute* privacy”; his study looked out, not onto the street, but “onto one side of University College” (though it should be noted that he must have been looking *over* the two-storey cottages of Little Gower Place, which lay between the south side of Gower Place and the college, and which Booth shaded light blue (“Poor. 18s. to 21s. a week for a moderate family”).³³ In fact, when Booth revised his poverty survey in 1898, Little Gower Place was characterised as “costers, casuals, windows dirty, broken, doors open; bread and vegetables lying about, chickens and barrows, very poor, light blue to dark blue, in map light blue”.³⁴ This was a street on the slide, so much so that when in 1910 UCL proposed to take over both Little Gower Place and the south side of Gower Street to erect what is now the Kathleen Lonsdale Building, they could claim that the whole area was a slum and that they would be doing a public service by demolishing it.³⁵ Back in 1882, Gissing expected to be “settled here for some years”.³⁶

Yet again, his anticipation of a permanent home was to prove unfounded. Nell had already been sent away once, in July 1881, to Hastings, on account of her illness; but she returned to Gower Place soon after he moved in. And soon after that, she went shopping, only to collapse in convulsions in a nearby candle-shop. She collapsed again on the way home. Gissing took her to UCH: “There we were inspected by half a dozen very young students (she still in fits) with the usual worse than nullity of result.” The next day he arranged for her to go to live with two ladies in Battersea, at a cost of 15s a week. Whether because of this, or because, as his latest biographer, Paul Delany, suggests, “all the eruptions had made it embarrassing to stay”, Gissing promptly moved again ... and again, first to Marylebone and then to Chelsea.³⁷

He may have left Gower Place in body, but not in imagination. Thirteen years later, in *Eve's Ransom*, Gissing positioned *both* Eve Madeley *and* Maurice Hilliard there. Eve lives in a house with “a clean doorstep and unusually bright windows”. Hilliard finds rooms to let, “comfortless, but would suit his purpose for a time”, “a sitting-room on the ground-floor, and a bedroom above”, on the opposite side of the road to Eve's lodgings, such that “From his parlour window he could very well observe the houses opposite without fear of drawing attention from anyone on that side”. He sees Eve leaving her house, and follows her to Gower Street station and so to the Health Exhibition at Kensington, where he at last gets to talk to her for the first time.³⁸

Not every Bloomsbury setting was derived from his own experience. One of the most striking descriptions in *The Nether World* is of the Snowdons – Joseph and his wife Clem (who we encountered earlier in the British Museum) – who move from Clerkenwell to Burton Crescent (now Cartwright Gardens). Gissing's description of their vulgar aspirations perfectly matched Booth's observation a decade later – “some questionable characters; houses let out in floors”.³⁹ Bloomsbury fraying at the edges.

Shopping and Overnight

By the time he wrote *Eve's Ransom* Gissing had returned to Bloomsbury on several occasions, not to live permanently, and not only to research, but to shop and stay the night. From his flat in Cornwall Mansions, he would walk to Tottenham Court Road to buy tobacco. On the occasion of his second marriage, to Edith Underwood, Gissing returned from Exeter, where he had been sorting out their future family home, to buy their wedding ring at a shop in Tottenham Court Road and stay the night before his wedding – at St Pancras Registry Office – at the Bedford Head on the north-east corner of Tottenham Court Road and Bayley Street; and when he next returned from Exeter to house-hunt in Brixton he paid 3/- per night to stay at the Bedford Hotel on the east side of Museum Street just south of Great Russell Street.⁴⁰ He went shopping at Oetzmann's, Hampstead Road, to buy carpets, curtains and linoleum for their Brixton flat; and when

they eventually rented a whole house in Ewell, he and Edith variously went shopping at Oetzmann's and at Shoolbred's on Tottenham Court Road.⁴¹

Epilogue

Had Gissing first settled elsewhere in London he would still have become familiar with Bloomsbury through his regular visits to the museum; but he might not have acquired the intimacy with the area's distinctive townscape or with its lodging-houses. But he was "a man from the north": he entered London through King's Cross, so the first cheap lodgings he found were south of Euston Road rather than in, say, Lambeth or Pimlico. Yet for all his wanderings through and employment of Bloomsbury streets, houses, shops and pubs, I can only find a couple of uses of the word, *Bloomsbury*, in his writing. On 18 September 1890, he "walked about Bloomsbury with a headache, and got rid of it"⁴² and in one of his last novels, *The Crown of Life* (1899), Piers Otway receives a letter from his brother, Alexander, who "wrote from the neighbourhood of Bloomsbury Square". In fact, Alexander, who had "begun life as a medical student, but never got so far as a diploma" and had drifted into "irregular journalism", occupies "the top floor of a great old house in Theobald's Road". Alexander is likeable, slightly eccentric, bookish in a randomly eclectic way. And he is perpetually short of money.⁴³ The personification of the eternal Bloomsbury.

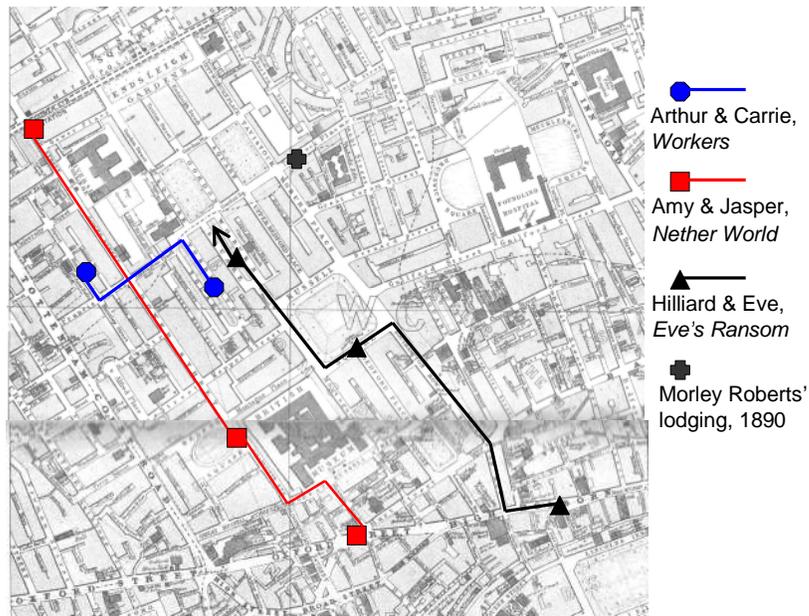
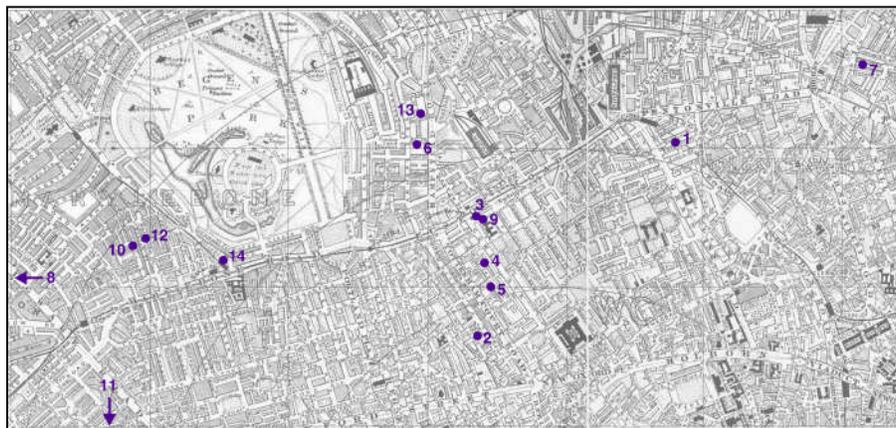


Figure 1: Walks through Bloomsbury



- | | | |
|----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1: 62 Swinton Street | 6: 38 Edward Street | 11: 17 Oakley Crescent |
| 2: 22 Colville Place | 7: 5 Hanover Street | 12: 62 Milton Street |
| 3: 31 Gower Place | 8: 55 Wornington Road | 13: 18 Rutland Street |
| 4: 70 Huntley Street | 9: 15 Gower Place | 14: 7K Cornwall Residences |
| 5: 35 Huntley Street | 10: 29 Dorchester Place | |

Figure 2: Gissing's London Homes, 1877-1890

Notes

¹ Paul Delany, *George Gissing: A Life* (London, 2008), p. 30.

² George Gissing, *New Grub Street* (1891), chapter 5.

³ Delany, pp. 17-19; John Halperin, *Gissing: A Life in Books* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 11-12, 18-19.

⁴ *New Grub Street*, chapter 5.

⁵ George Gissing, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903), Spring, 10.

- ⁶ *New Grub Street*, chapter 2; see also chapters 3 and 14.
- ⁷ *New Grub Street*, chapter 7.
- ⁸ Halperin, p. 26; Jacob Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography* (Brighton, 1980), p. 21; Paul F. Mattheisen et al. (eds), *The Collected Letters of George Gissing* (Athens, OH, 1991), Volume 1, passim; Volume 4, pp. 249, 307; Charles Booth (ed), *Labour and Life of the People Volume I* (1890), p. 157.
- ⁹ Delany, pp. 182-209.
- ¹⁰ Pierre Coustillas (ed), *London and the Life of Literature in Late Victorian England: The Diary of George Gissing, Novelist* (Hassocks, 1978), p. 313 (entry for 24 Aug 1893).
- ¹¹ Morley Roberts, *The Private Life of Henry Maitland* (1912), chapter 8.
- ¹² *New Grub Street*, chapters 12, 35; *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, Spring, 17.
- ¹³ George Gissing, *Thyrza* (1887), chapter 7.
- ¹⁴ *New Grub Street*, chapters 7, 34.
- ¹⁵ *Thyrza*, chapter 6.
- ¹⁶ George Gissing, *The Nether World* (1889), chapter 24.
- ¹⁷ *The Nether World*, chapters 29, 36.
- ¹⁸ *Diary*, p. 214 (17 Apr 1890), p. 310 (25 Jul 1893).
- ¹⁹ George Gissing, *Workers in the Dawn* (1880), Part II, chapters 13 and 14.
- ²⁰ *New Grub Street*, chapter 26.
- ²¹ George Gissing, *Eve's Ransom* (1895), chapter 7.
- ²² *Eve's Ransom*, chapter 10.
- ²³ *Diary*, p. 228 (11 Oct 1890), p. 230 (8 Nov 1890), p. 232 (6 and 11 Dec 1890).
- ²⁴ Pierre Coustillas and Xavier Petremand (eds) 'London Homes and Haunts of George Gissing: An Unpublished Essay by A.C. Gissing', *Gissing Journal* 30 (2) (1994), pp. 1-14; Robin Woolven, 'George Gissing's London residences 1877-1891', *Gissing Journal* 39 (4) (2003), pp. 5-15; Robin Woolven, 'George Gissing's London residences, 1877-1891', *Camden History Review* 28 (2004), pp. 7-11. See also Gissing's own list of his residences in *Letters*, Volume 2, p. 247.
- ²⁵ Census enumerators' books, RG11 188, 75-85.
- ²⁶ David Reeder (ed), *Charles Booth's Descriptive Map of London Poverty 1889* (London, 1987).
- ²⁷ *Letters*, Volume 1, p. 139; *Workers in the Dawn*, Part II, chapter 8.
- ²⁸ Census enumerators' books, RG11 188, 19-20.
- ²⁹ Census enumerators' books, RG11 188, 107; *Letters*, Volume 1, pp. 180-1; Halperin, pp. 27-9, 38; Delany, p. 42.
- ³⁰ Charles Booth Police Notebooks, B355, p. 119.
- ³¹ *Workers in the Dawn*, Part II, chapters 4 and 11.
- ³² *Letters*, Volume 2, p. 54.
- ³³ *Letters*, Volume 2, pp. 54-55.
- ³⁴ Charles Booth Police Notebooks, B355, p. 123.
- ³⁵ 'University College Extension Scheme', *The Times*, 10 Nov 1910, p.4; 'The Endowment of Chemical Research', *The Times*, 7 Jan 1911, p.4.
- ³⁶ *Letters*, Volume 2, p. 54.
- ³⁷ *Letters*, Volume 2, p. 69; Delany, p. 58.
- ³⁸ *Eve's Ransom*, chapters 5 and 6.
- ³⁹ *The Nether World*, chapter 29; Charles Booth Police Notebooks, B354, p. 75.
- ⁴⁰ *Diary*, p. 19 (19 Jan 1888), p. 31 (11 Jun 1888), p. 240 (24 Feb 1891).
- ⁴¹ *Diary*, p. 308 (23 and 26 Jun 1893), p. 347 (17 Sep 1894), p. 390 (10 Oct 1895).
- ⁴² *Diary*, p. 226 (18 Sep 1890).
- ⁴³ George Gissing, *The Crown of Life* (1899), chapter 7.