Writing the East End
Advanced Liberalism, Realism and Social Reform

In *The Condition of England* (1909), Charles Masterman presents an analysis of the various layers of English society. To the present-day reader, his chapters on ‘the conquerers’, ‘the suburbans’, ‘the multitude’ (the working classes) and ‘the prisoners’ (the extreme poor, the slum dwellers) are, at first glance, redolent of Matthew Arnold’s categories of ‘barbarians’ (the aristocracy), ‘philistines’ (the middle classes) and ‘populace’ (the ‘vast residuum’) in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). Masterman, however, offers a much more detailed analysis than Arnold, who is concerned primarily with showing how the different English classes all fail in their different ways to affirm his ideal of ‘culture’, the developing of ‘the best self’ through getting to know ‘the best which has been thought and said in the world’.¹ In the intervening 40 years, not only had the shape and geography of the English class system changed, but also a body of social analysis had been created in an effort to make sense of that system. This literature was particularly concerned with the working classes, the fragility of the circumstances that separated those in work from those out of work, and the consequent problem of poverty – ‘the social problem’, as I noted in Chapter 2.

The ‘poverty populations’ of London’s East End, as Masterman calls them, together with Bermondsey and Lambeth on the south side of the Thames, came in for special investigation in the 1880s and 1890s.² Such works included Andrew Mearns’ *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London: An Enquiry into the Condition of the Abject Poor* (1883), George Sims’s, *How the Poor Live and Horrible London* (1889), Charles Booth’s 17-volume *Life and Labour of the People of London* (1889–1903), William Booth’s *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890) and the Revd. A. Osborne Jay’s *Life in Darkest London* (1891) and *The Social Problem: Its Possible Solution* (1893). By the Edwardian years, similar investigations were undertaken
not only in provincial cities (such as Seebohm Rowntree’s *Poverty: A Study of Town Life* [1901], which presented a comprehensive survey of the poor in York using the methods developed by Charles Booth in *Life and Labour of the People of London*, and Dame Florence Bell’s study of working class life in Middlesbrough, published in 1911 as *At the Works*); there were also inquiries into the rural poor (such as Stephen Reynolds’s *A Poor Man’s House* [1909], an account of the year he spent with a fishing family in Sidmouth). In addition, the common theme of ‘the Abyss’, into which the extreme poor had fallen, found its way into titles such as Masterman’s own *From the Abyss* (1902), Jack London’s *The People of the Abyss* (1903) and Mary Higgs’s *Glimpses into the Abyss* (1907).

Towards the end of the Edwardian years, Masterman had at his disposal not only this body of social analysis but also the annual Reports of the Factory Inspectors and the various Royal Commissions into the working classes and the poor that had been undertaken over the same period. It is in this context, when he is writing of ‘the multitude’, that Masterman suggests that ‘those who would attempt a diagnosis of the present must find themselves more and more turning their attention from the individual to the aggregation; upon the individuals which act in an aggregation in a manner different from their action as isolated units of humanity’.

Masterman is speaking here of the crowd and crowd behaviour, a common concern that first developed in the 1890s, but his interest in the ‘aggregation’ reflects a broad shift in late Victorian social reform that Beatrice Webb first noted in her autobiography. As she recalls the preoccupation with poverty ‘among men of intellect and men of property’, she traces a slow but sure shift from what she identifies as a ‘philanthropic and practical’ interest through a ‘literary and artistic’ interest to finally an ‘analytic, historical and explanatory’ interest. Webb’s account has been replicated in one form or another in much of the scholarship dealing with late Victorian and Edwardian social reform. As Peter Keating puts it:

The wandering Arabs, distant tribes, and rain forests have been replaced by ‘poverty cycles’ and ‘subsistence levels’; the graphic vignette makes way for a statistical table; the individual becomes part of the mass; and the explorer studies not the poor (an appropriate label for the objects of Victorian paternalism) but poverty (the disease itself). ... The desired pose ceases to be one of passionate involvement and arduous physical exertion, and is replaced by calm, studied, ‘scientific’ objectivity, without which help cannot be given and the problems of society solved.