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Charity, social control and the white empire: Angela Burdett-Coutts and Charles Dickens’ *Urania Cottage*, reforming prostitutes for the colonial market.

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In the 1850s, newspapers and travel narratives began to report on the fact that the white British colonies of Australia, Canada and The Cape were suffering from a dearth of white women, particularly after the Colonial Office stopped deporting prison inmates (including prostitutes) to Australia. The population equation was easy to solve since Britain suffered from a dearth of young marriageable men while in British Columbia (Canada) the newly appointed Bishop, George Hill, reported to Angela Burdett-Coutts who had endowed his See, that there was “but one woman to every 200 men” in his colony. The streets of London counted numerous unemployed and unmarried white women, redundant working girls as well as unemployed educated governesses, who were seen as “problematic subjects” at home where they were “surplus” hands. Bishop Hill reminded his Anglican friends in London about this unnatural state of things which might lead the colonies to fall into depravation and might cause “the ruin of Religion and morals” there: “Think of the 600,000 more women at home than there are men, and then think what society must be here… I need say no more to induce you to use your efforts to promote the emigration to this Colony of some good respectable young women.”

Hence, for the purpose of controlling the balance of population in Britain and particularly of limiting the growth of the unemployed single female population in the cities, some social Christian reformers like Caroline Chisholm or Ms Burdett-Coutts planned to gently “redirect” these women towards the colonies. In 1853, Caroline Chisholm set up an emigration scheme for unemployed governesses to Australia, while Ms Coutts, with the help of her friend Charles Dickens, thought of “reclaiming” young prostitutes from the streets, with the hope of transforming them into “good respectable young women” before paying for their passage on a boat setting sail for Australia or Canada.

In the course of this paper, I intend to focus on *Urania Cottage*, this Home for destitute women designed by Charles Dickens and financed by Angela Burdett-Coutts in 1846. Dickens the reformer and Ms Burdett-Coutts, the Conservative Anglican, both joined forces

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1 George Hill to Bishop Garrett and Angela Burdett-Coutts, 17 November 1859. (Columbia Mission Papers)
2 *Ibid*
and minds between 1846 and 1861 to create this “Rescue Home for Women” in London, where some “fallen women” could be taught how to redeem themselves through teaching in religion and home economics. Dickens and Coutts’ ultimate plan was to send these girls, metamorphosed into decent marriageable women, to the white colonies, where they would marry some British settlers in Australia or Canada. If the future at stake in the colonies for these “deported” women, remained quite vague for the team of reformers, Dickens’ plans for the working of the Home were very grounded and based on his own observations of the London underworld. In examining the scheme of the private charity, we will take into account the founders’ reforming principles at stake in the “Rescue Home” scheme, as well as the social control that they necessarily exercised on the women they planned to “ship” abroad to unknown destinations. The study of Dickens and Coutts’ private correspondence will lead us to analyse the role of these two very influential social reformers in mid-Victorian Britain, as well as their involvement in private charity, which they conceived as a social mission to make up for the absence of commitment, on the part of the State, to the relief of distress among the working classes.

In a last part, we will examine the fate of a handful of the “surplus” women rescued by Coutts and Dickens and transported to British Columbia thanks to another charity, the Columbia Mission, founded in 1859, which in 1862 set up the first “Brideship” which left England for Victoria in British Columbia (Canada). The connection between the two charities resides in their main patroness, Angela Burdett-Coutts whose involvement in private charities was prominent in the second half of the nineteenth-century. However, her main target remained the improvement of society in England, the Christian nation, whose social order and moral worth had to be protected from deviant subjects or from social disruption at all costs.

1) Angela Burdett-Coutts, the female champion of charities in England.

Angela Burdett-Coutts was probably the most well-known female philanthropist of her times for she spent her life and her wealth in the practice of philanthropy, investing in small projects almost anonymously, as well as in bigger charities of various sorts. Her involvement in charity began with endowments made to the Ragged School system in the 1840s, then she financed the building of Columbia Hall and Columbia Market in London where there had been derelict tenements. She then carried on another rehabilitation scheme with the building of the first “model village” in Bethnal Green. She also opened St Stephen’s Anglican school for boys and built St Stephen’s church in London. Her commitment to Tractarianism at first, then her understanding of the principles of Evangelicalism under Dickens’ influence, led her
to endow the London Bishopric as well as various Colonial Sees and some colonial Anglican missions.

Her nickname among the working-classes, according to one of her biographers, was “The Queen of the Poor”. During the Reform Procession of 1868, she was cheered loudly by the “mob” as the procession walked in front of her house in Piccadilly Circus. Similarly, rumours had it that she was more acclaimed than the Queen, by the people along the streets, during the Diamond Jubilee procession. After her death, she was given a window in the Lady Chapel of Liverpool Cathedral. The stained glass representing her, bore the words “God’s Almoner.”

Ms Coutts, later Baroness Coutts, became involved in charity works in 1837 when she inherited her wealth at age 23. In studying her private papers, I was particularly interested in uncovering the reasons which brought her to become involved in philanthropic works to which, according to F. Prochaska, the author of *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England*, Angela Burdett-Coutts altogether “contributed over one million pounds and probably more”. This was a staggering sum and probably the largest sum invested in charities for her times.

She had two prominent male friends to guide her in her benevolent works, in the 1840s and 1850s. First, the Duke of Wellington became her financial and emotional adviser in her early youth, until his death in November 1852, while her close friendship with Charles Dickens, reflected in long letters exchanged over several decades, also began in the 1840s. Dickens became her adviser in the charitable works to which she dedicated her life and a very large part of her wealth. Their first important collaboration gave birth to *Urania Cottage* in 1846. In 1853, Dickens prompted her to hire a personal secretary, Mr William Henry Mills, former editor of Dickens’ *Household Words*, to supervise her charities, endowments and other private funds. She also employed her own lady-in-waiting, in opening and replying to the numerous letters of solicitation she received every day. This goes to show that in the second half of the nineteenth century, private charity and philanthropy had naturally taken over from the State in the administration of poor relief in Britain. The Poor Law administration was delegated to the parishes or boroughs running workhouses which without the contribution of private charities and private sponsors could not support the cost of relief. To describe the gradual taking over of the relief of poverty or the alleviation of pauperism by private charities, Geoffrey Best describes the combined system of private/public support as the overlapping of “outdoor” and

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“indoor” relief. This point can be clearly illustrated by the case of Baroness Burdett-Coutts who gained the status of national heroine after 1871, when the first peerage ever bestowed upon a woman was granted to her “in recognition of her public achievements” though she had spent most of her wealth in private charities.

On numerous public outings, Ms Coutts was reportedly greeted with enthusiasm by crowds of spectators from all walks of life. Indeed, thanks to that apparent selflessness and charitable life, Victorians and Edwardians (she died shortly after Queen Victoria, in 1906) recognized her contribution to the “welfare of the nation” after her death. The King ranked her second to his own mother, describing her as: “the most remarkable woman in England, except my mother”, in the eulogy he delivered during her public funerals at Westminster Abbey where she is buried.

Angela Burdett-Coutts’ relationship to money and to wealth was quite peculiar and this might explain her disinterested almsgiving or selfless charity, even at times when she lost some of her large inheritance in 1873, after her marriage to an American citizen. Angela Burdett unexpectedly received her immense wealth when she was in her early 20s. She inherited her money from her step-grand mother, a low-life actress who had married Angela’s wealthy Coutts grand-father, - then at the head of the largest bank in Scotland. After the death of Coutts, the lady had remarried the Duke of St Albans. Upon the death of the Duke of St Albans and that of his “new” wife, the actress - Angela’s step grand-mother -, the young girl inherited the combined wealth of the two rich men. Born and raised a strong upper class Conservative Anglican, in a family where money was sometimes tight, Angela Burdett attached Coutts to her name, and began to spend this somehow morally-tainted money on charitable works.

Shortly after she received her unexpected inheritance, Miss Coutts moved to Piccadilly in her grand father’s house which for her became a central position from where to observe the streets.
of London at night, with its rounds of prostitutes and drunkards who inspired her in her charitable missions, as we are going to see.\textsuperscript{11}

Her involvement in almsgiving and charity though apparently spontaneous and prompted by Christian benevolence, was supervised at first by the old Duke of Wellington. Under his guidance and tutoring, she began reflecting on the purpose her money could serve, instead of liberally and indiscriminately helping or funding all the requests she received from friends and people in need. In the epistolary exchange, Ms Coutts kept with the Duke of Wellington over a decade, they regularly dwelled on the management of Angela’s wealth, over which the old Duke seemed to keep a close watch. He particularly advised her on how to carefully examine the demands and the opportunities she had, to give to charities or individuals, by whom both were often solicited. Under Wellington’s influence, she began distinguishing the so-called “almsgiving” which simply required instant funding without any lasting plan, from more reasonable “charities” that aimed at reforming a group of people who consequently would be morally rescued or lastingly transformed in becoming less dependent. Wellington advised her to wisely discriminate between the needy:

\begin{quote}
I have heard of the manner in which you dispose of your money, and indeed judging from the excessive demands upon myself, I am astonished that you have any left! You, like me, are supposed to be made of gold! And everybody supposes that it is only necessary to ask you to partake of the prize! I find that the parent of generosity is Economy!\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

In other words, in the 1840s, Angela Burdett-Coutts learnt how to discard the demands from so-called “charitable support”, more often than not letters begging for her financial help written to her by stranded upper-class fellows, from true “charities” and philanthropic schemes which required financial support with the ultimate view of morally reforming those who would benefit from them. Under Wellington’s gentle instructions, Ms Coutt’s almsgiving now turned to social control via religious instruction which, she came to realize, had to accompany any financial aid. Wellington supported Ms Coutts’ purpose: “You are right and

\textsuperscript{11} : One must mention another anecdote which is relevant to Angela’s early life which brought her an early sympathy for the working class. Her father (Francis Burdett) had been a popular hero among the working-classes during the 1820s by campaigning along side the radical leaders to obtain an extension of the suffrage. He was even sent to the tower for supporting the mob. Though a radical before being elected MP, he adopted very Conservative views on universal suffrage during the Great Reform Act campaign in 1831. Nonetheless, Angela Burdett-Coutts cherished the aura of popular radical hero acquired by her father, imprisoned for having taken side with the working-classes after Peterloo. This family reputation stayed with her in the working-class imagination.

\textsuperscript{12} Duke of Wellington to Angela Burdett-Coutts, August 14, 1847, correspondence quoted by Clara Burdett-Patterson, in \textit{Angela Burdett-Coutts and the Victorians}, op.cit.
manifest your good and just sense in your religious notions [...] Christianity was intended to regulate the social life of human creatures!

Reforming a group of rescued fellow men and women by promoting their spiritual and material well-being, in accordance with her Anglican views, soon became her mission. Before engaging herself in any scheme, Wellington advised her to reflect on the results her financial aid would bring to a group of people and to society at large, before sending any money:

It appears to me, (the Duke of Wellington wrote in January 1846), that in administering charities as well as in most other matters, your mind and mine very naturally travel on the same road! You as well as I, like and endeavour to do good effectively! I cannot bear to be called upon and to be used as a Stop Gap! to provide the means for going on in the same vicious course and then to leave the matter. You appear to have the same feelings and you are quite right!

However, arguments clearly occurred between the two friends, over the “appropriate” charities. The Duke of Wellington was a Utilitarian Tory who could not imagine that the lower classes had the potential or the wisdom to transform themselves or to redeem themselves into deserving poor or deserving individuals when exposed to Christian benevolence. While Angela Burdett-Coutts invested sums in the refurbishing of Urania Cottage in Shepherd’s Bush, the Duke of Wellington reproached her with providing these undeserving women with “the means for going on in the same vicious course.”

However, when in the next letter Angela developed her plan for Urania Cottage, i.e. an institution designed to reclaim “fallen women”, before removing them to the colonies, The Duke applauded Angela’s wise spending of her wealth. The charitable scheme had a utilitarian purpose for England. Miss Coutts planned to transform these unwanted and depraved women into deserving emigrants for the English colonies, thanks to domestic training and religious teaching. The reason why the Duke was greatly supportive was because Angela’s charitable work, aimed at removing the burden of prostitution from England through emigration. Oblivious of Coutts and Dickens’ attempts at rescuing the girls from prostitution, the Duke saw that the nation at large would benefit from this charitable project and investment. The Duke did not even seem to think the idea of “reformation” necessary prior to their “removal.”:

The only chance for them (the female residents of Urania Cottage), is that which it is your object if possible to attain: the removal of them, to another scene in which their early derangements will be unknown and in which they may be placed each in a situation in which she (sic) will not know want! And will not be exposed and tempted by her (sic) former practice for relief!

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13 Duke of Wellington to Angela Burdett-Coutts, April, 12, 1847, op.cit.
14 Duke of Wellington to Angela Burdett-Coutts, January 5, 1847, op.cit.
15 Duke of Wellington to Angela Burdett-Coutts, April, 12, 1847, op.cit.
16 Duke of Wellington to Angela Burdett-Coutts, January 5, 1846, op.cit.
In order to reach out to the lower-classes and to pass onto them the teachings of the Anglican church - which both Wellington and Burdett-Coutts trusted would reform the nation -, they chose to invest in the “Ragged Schools” project hoping to transform them in Anglican schools for boys. Angela complained to the Duke about the fact that Parliament voted a financial Bill in 1833 to support public and private schools even when these were run by other Protestant denominations. The State then granted an annual allocation to these non-conformist educational projects on the same terms as the schools run by the Anglican Church. After 1832, State intervention - in education as well as in the relief of poverty - was passed on or left off to private charities and private initiative. In answer to Angela’s complaints about England’s new policy on education, the Duke supported her ideas:

"I am not astonished that you should complain of the state of education in this country, and the deficiency in pressing upon the minds of men the necessity for Truth in all things and the connection between the precepts of religion and the actions of life! I am apprehensive that your observation was well-founded! And that the evil is to be attributed in a great degree to the modern way in which all children are reared and educated in England, and to the explanation of the meaning of the precepts which are given them to read. No politician can remedy these evils!"

At an early stage in her long life devoted to charitable works, Angela Burdett-Coutts came clearly to perceive the principles of her mission in Britain. The influence of one of the richest men of the nation, Wellington, with his national hero aura, seemed to have led her to consider the rules of her own financial engagement in charity works. Concerned by the absence of public policy in the relief of pauperism, confronted to the growing poverty which she could observe from her windows or read in Dickens’ novels, worried by the lack of state involvement in the promotion of the Anglican tenet among the lower classes, she became aware that her wealth could be used rationally to transform the nation, particularly by spreading the right Christian principles among the younger generations and among women who could still be “corrected” by the teaching of the right precepts. While (or since) the State did not wish to intervene, preferring to adopt “laissez-faire” policies, Miss Coutts, often as a silent partner, took over in order to invest in long-term useful projects (by investing in the education of the working classes thanks to the Ragged School system, then by establishing Anglican schools for boys).

Her inclination towards Evangelical works and social reform was directed towards a category of the population whom upper-class society members rarely acknowledged: fallen women, pauper families, flower girls, shoe shine boys, chimney sweepers, i.e. those in whom poverty was seen as ingrained by the wealthy. Dickens greatly influenced her in directing her sympathy and support towards the poorer quarters of London.

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17 Duke of Wellington to Angela Burdett-Coutts, Septembre 7, 1849, op.cit., [The Duke died in Novembre 1852]
2) Charles Dickens and Angela Burdett-Coutts: promoting social reform through charity.

Her deep and lasting friendship with Charles Dickens, in spite of their different political views, also goes to show that their concern and interest in social reforms, and possibly, at least for Dickens, in the reformation of Victorian manners which he believed was too tainted by strong utilitarianism, individualism and Conservatism\(^{18}\), brought them together in setting up charitable projects. Ms Coutts wanted to reform the groups of people she helped by bringing them spiritual comforts through conversion or redemption, while Dickens believed in improving their material conditions in order to enable them to lift themselves to a better stratum of society. Dickens the Reformer used his pen to awaken the minds of well-to-do Victorians who could provide financial relief, where the State now failed to rescue the victims of the new industrial age. Angela Burdett-Coutts initiated the friendship with the novelist after reading the first instalments of *Oliver Twist*. Their correspondence of which we only have Dickens’ letters, betray Angela’s regular questioning and desire to understand the “real” living conditions of the poorer classes and to solve this “Condition of England” issue which the novelist aimed at exposing to his readers.

For instance, following Angela Burdett-Coutts’s request to read the other instalments of *Oliver Twist*, Dickens took her to Bethnal Green to observe the living conditions of the paupers. Following this visit, she invested her money in the building of the first “model dwellings” in Bethnal Green. Similarly, during the elaboration of *David Copperfield*, Angela Burdett-Coutts became further involved with Dickens in the “Ragged Schools” project. The novelist led her to look beyond the need for religious teachings she believed these schools needed\(^{19}\), to understand the living and working conditions of the families in which the poor pupils were growing. In one of his letters, Dickens convinced Angela Burdett-Coutts that the Church principles did not always bring out the best in lower class students when other needs were not fulfilled. He suggested better ways, outside the Anglican church, to “direct her

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\(^{18}\) Letter to Charles Knight talking about *Hard Times* and the role of his “crusading” journal *Household Words*, December 30, 1854,. “To shake some people in the terrible mistake of these days… those who see figures and averages, nothing else – the representatives of the wickedest and most enormous vice of this time… to stimulate and rouse the public soul to a compassionate feeling that it must not be…” See *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. 7, edited by Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson and Angus Easson, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993.

\(^{19}\) Dickens wrote of her and her participation in some the Ragged Schools, in *Household Words* for October, 8 1853, “The Ragged Schools, the institution of which began by a shoe-maker of Portsmouth, and a chimney sweeper of Windsor, and was carried on by a peer of the realm”, see Clara Burdett-Patterson, *op.cit.*. p. 145.
generosity in providing school buildings or food on the table for young students. With this first piece of advice on how to spend her money wisely and practically, Dickens sealed a partnership which led to the development of many charitable schemes throughout London in which Dickens seemed to be the mastermind and Coutts the financier:

I sent Miss Coutts a sledge-hammer account of the Ragged Schools, and as I saw her name for two hundred pounds on the Clergy Education list, took pains to show her that religious mysteries and difficult creeds wouldn’t do for such pupils. She writes back to know what the rent of some large air premises would be, and what the expense of erecting a regular bathing or purifying place. I have no doubt she will do whatever I ask her in the matter. She is a most excellent creature…

According to Charles Osborne, Lady Coutts’ private secretary (1887-1898) and the editor of the Dickens-Coutts correspondence, it is thanks to Dickens’ letters - which largely referred to his own field trips and enquiries in preparation for his novels -, that Ms Coutts became gradually acquainted with the “reality” of life in the large industrial cities and with the rampant moral and physical diseases that threatened the working-class: “under his (Dickens’) influence, a tendency of narrowness, due to want of knowledge of life of the masses quickly disappeared.

It is clear in their correspondence that Miss Coutts regularly solicited Dickens’s advice before investing in a charitable work from the time their friendship was clearly established, in 1844. Dickens took great pride in this association with the richest single lady of the realm who regularly sought financial and philanthropic advice from a liberal popular novelist, from a “reformer”, as he often described himself. For lack of public policies to support his reforms, Dickens involved Angela Burdett-Coutts and her wealth in establishing and accomplishing a series of small personal reforms. Dickens’ alarming views on “the condition of England”, derived from his numerous observations of the living conditions of the working classes, were regularly passed on to Miss Burdett-Coutts in the form of warnings. Dickens suggested to her the way in which she could spend her wealth to fix the social tensions that threatened England in order to preserve the stability of her country, while the government did nothing to relieve distress and poverty. By resorting to private charity, Dickens made clear to Miss Coutts that she was the nation’s last resort since the State disregarded the social problems plaguing its

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21 Dickens to Burdett-Coutts, January 1846, *op.cit.*
22 *ibid.*
23 Under his influence, she established a Shoe Black Brigade to provide employment for the ex-pupils of the London Ragged Schools. In the 1865, she built another model village in lieu of the Nova Scotia Gardens in London, building over a dump place, renaming it Columbia Square. She also prompted the flower girls of London to form a Union and taught some of them how to stitch artificial flowers as an alternative to fresh flowers in winter. She also established the seamstresses of Spitafields in a new airy building after reading the “Song of the Shirt”, suggesting they should form a Union too.
large cities. For instance, in May 1865, Dickens appealed to her when he felt that the population living in Nova Scotia Gardens, in London, as well as in other neighbouring quarters, were on the brink of street rioting (they lived on a mound of refuse, diseases of various kinds were rampant, there was no fresh food):

Take my knowledge of the state of things in this distracted land [England] for what it may be worth a dozen years hence. The people will not bear for any length of time what they bear now. I see it clearly written in every truthful indication that I am capable of discerning any where. And I want to interpose something between them and their wrath. For this reason solely, I am a Reformer, heart and soul, I have nothing to gain - everything to lose (for public quiet is my bread) – but I am in desperate earnest, because I know it is a desperate case.24

Convinced by Dickens that England was on the brink of anarchy brought by the disruption of social ties in some neglected quarters of London, Ms Coutts used her wealth to build a new model district, Columbia Square, around a covered market which she named Columbia Hall, where poor families could find fresh food (providing they could afford it). To preserve social and moral harmony in this working class quarter, she also provided for the building of a church true to her Anglican views of spiritual and moral support for her fellow men and women. Ms Coutts gave the people of this district the means to improve their everyday life in terms of lodging and sanitation, at least temporarily, but she also led them to accept their working class fate. Calm and order which were necessary for industrial and urban England to sustain its growth, was brought back in this part of London for the next two decades.

3) The scheme of Urania Cottage, Dickens and Coutts’ involvement in “social control”.

If Ms Coutts investment in “model villages” in London did not always seem to her to be a double-binding tool of social control, her investment, financial and moral, in her “Rescue Home” project in 1846, clearly had such an end. It is through Dickens’ influence again, that Ms Coutts directed her sympathies towards the cause of the “fallen women” in the streets of London, whom she had observed from her windows at night in Piccadilly. But considering the sort of population they were dealing with, Dickens and Coutts both devised Urania Cottage as an “institution” designed to “rescue” prostitutes who wished to be “saved” from themselves and their “sinful” occupation, thanks to the administration of some religious principles, as well as moral and domestic teachings. In accordance with her new principles in charity works, Ms Coutts was hoping to resort “to means best calculated to enable those in need to help themselves and to become again self-reliant and independent.”25 The charitable plan went

24 Dickens to Angela Burdett-Coutts, 11 May 1865 (my italics)
25 Duke of Wellington to Angela Burdett-Coutts, January 5, 1846. The Duke quotes one of Miss Coutts’ ideas regarding the scheme she just presented to him.
beyond the mere introduction of material improvement or the refurbishing of a district. Here the plan for this new “charity”, *Urania Cottage*, began to be discussed by the two partners in the spring of 1846 with an outline devised, from the start, to control this unusual female population. The pair aimed to morally rescue them before transforming them in good helpmeets or in eligible wives for the colonial market. The purpose was to convince a large number of these women to submit to this new life by moving in a cottage with its bourgeois domestic rules, away from their old districts, where they would undergo a successful social and moral transformation.

This would in turn lead these young women to integrate, what Dickens and Coutts considered as, a normal life, that of wife and mother. However, these women would not be safe in Britain or was it Britain which was not safe enough in keeping its “problematic subjects” on the island? To this question, Dickens answered by selecting for emigration those who managed to reform themselves after a number of weeks spent in his Home. He considered removal to the colonies as a safer alternative for the female individuals he had “saved.” As for the problematic female inmates, he - or the Committee he constituted -, selected for *Urania Cottage*, those who refused to submit to the social rules of the House, those who misbehaved, were sent back to their family or to the life they came from. Those who were sent abroad had to pass the final muster before the acting director of the Home, Dickens himself. In this letter, Dickens, reacting as any strict patronizing director of the charitable institutions he so often derided in his novels, recalled the basic principles of the Home to Mrs Morson, the governess, in January 1854 after many cases of “misbehaviour” had occurred in the cottage, disrupting the programme and “infecting” the life of many young inmates who were already on the road to “progress”:

> And let it be distinctly known among the rest that the object of the Home is, to save young women who wish to save themselves. That is NOT the place for those who are indifferent to their own misery and degradation and that I WILL NOT, nor will any of the gentlemen who assist Miss Coutts in its management, allow its benevolent purpose to be grossly trifled with for a moment.26

Dickens and Coutts, as well as their team of chaperons, governesses and clergyman on the premises, clearly directed their efforts at social control. Those among the young inmates who wished to be “rescued” and transformed into decent housewives in preparation for their new life abroad, had to conform strictly to the rules of the Home. In “taming and civilizing” these fallen women “in moulds shaped to fit the needs of their bourgeois society,” to quote

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economic historian F.M.L Thompson, Coutts and Dickens confirmed that their so-called selfless benevolent efforts to provide material and moral support to those in need, necessarily went hand in hand with great measures of social control.

The “institution”, or the “asylum”, as these words were used before Dickens settled for “Home”\(^{28}\), was meant to break away from the new so-called charitable institutions that sprang after the New Poor Law, which followed Chadwick’s utilitarian principles of “pain and pleasure.” According to the novelist, these so-called asylums imposed very corrective and repressive rules over the inmates who were “trapped” into them. Dickens actually contributed to spread such dark representations of these asylums in his novels or articles, as a strong anti-Poor Law campaigner. By choosing the word “Home”, by naming it *Urania Cottage*, Dickens wished to break away from these harsh prison-like workhouses or private Christian institutions like the Magdalene Institution for instance. He wished to attract around thirty “inmates” to a more welcoming place where under the supervision of selected matrons, one governess, one superintendent and a clergymen, fallen women directed to the House by magistrates, prison directors or himself, would be taught the basics in domestic training, how to read and write, as well as religious practice which they lacked.

These “fallen women”, essentially young women, as they still possessed according to Dickens, “some youthful innocence”, belonged to the 8.000 or so prostitutes\(^{29}\) which Mayhew recorded in his inquiries of London streets in *London Labour and the London Poor*. In volume 4 of Mayhew’s work, prostitutes were listed under the category of “those who will not work”, i.e. the undeserving poor, the “street folks.” In 1861, when volume 4 of *London Labour and the London Poor* was published, Mayhew insisted upon the fact that this last volume was devoted to this underworld of “vice and crime”, which was very often misrepresented by his readers out of “ignorance”. In order to stop the spread of “vice and crime” throughout London, Mayhew suggested that his contemporaries pay attention to those who suffered in this underworld, instead of blaming them for their actual state of misery:

> […] setting more plainly before us some of its latent causes, make us look with more pity and less anger on those who want the fortitude to resist their influence (that of crime and vice) and induce us, or at least the more earnest among us, to apply ourselves steadfastly to the removal or alleviation of those social

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\(^{28}\) Dickens to Coutts, Octobre 8, 1847, “I am in a state of great anxiety to talk to you about your “home” (that is the name I propose to give it), with which I have been busy for some time.”

\(^{29}\) : Such is the basic figure Mayhew provides while announcing that some other censuses had claimed some 80.000 prostitutes in London, Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, volume 4 (1862), Penguin, pp. 473-474.
evils that appear to create so large a proportion of the vice and crime that we seek by punishment to prevent.\textsuperscript{30}

In 1861, when Mayhew was asking the middle-classes and the upper-classes to get involved in the improvement of their diseased society, Dickens and Miss Coutts who had laboured in this direction for a decade, saw their scheme nearing to its end, as the cottage was about to close its doors after the selection of a few inmates to go to British Columbia with the Anglican “Columbia Mission”. Nonetheless, the pair had clearly applied Mayhew’s request to their own plan for \textit{Urania Cottage} as early as 1846. Indeed at a time when prostitution was rampant in London, when women were blamed for their promiscuity and lasciviousness, or shunned for attracting so-called decent gentlemen into pits of inequity, Dickens and Miss Coutts, had held a hand to those who were blamed for spreading crime and vice. Apparently prompted by compassion and “pity for her own sex”, Miss Coutts tried to “remove or alleviate” this “insidious vice\textsuperscript{31}” by looking at what Dickens and her thought were the roots of this social evil, i.e. lack of tenderness, of domestic comfort, or lack of religious roots. They targeted the youngest among the prostitutes who according to Mayhew’s co-author (Bracebridge Hemyng) were often innocent victims of “inhuman designs”, dragged away from parental care, trapped into abodes of infamy and degradation. There they fell into a vicious circle of sex and crime:

\begin{quote}
She is stripped of the apparel with which parental care or friendly solicitude had clothed her, and then, decked with the gaudy trappings of her shame, she is compelled to walk the streets, and in her turn, while producing to her master or mistress the wages of her prostitution, becomes the ensnarer of the youth of the other sex. After this it is useless to attempt to return to the path of virtue or honour, for she is then watched with the greatest vigilance, and should she attempt to escape from the clutches of her seducer she is threatened with instant punishment, and often barbarously treated\textsuperscript{32}.
\end{quote}

While Victorian readers were reading this very first assessment or social study on the reality of prostitution in London, one prominent Victorian, Dickens, whose knowledge of the streets and of “human nature” had already helped him establish his diagnosis, was busy devising a house to reform these women whom he seemed to know well. His fascination for the underworld of prostitution could be morally questioned, particularly when he evokes the way in which the females’ past could be used to coerce them once in the Home. Dickens did not necessarily share Hemyng’s view. Most of these girls were not innocent victims as according to Dickens they came to the house with a past story as well as many flaws and vices.:

\begin{quote}
I have taken some pains to find out the dispositions and natures of any individual we take; and I think I know them pretty well, and may be able to give the Matron some useful foreknowledge of them, and to
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{30} Mayhew, \textit{ibid}, p. 447.

\textsuperscript{31} Bracebridge Hemyng, “Prostitution in London”, in Mayhew, \textit{ibid}, p. 474.

\textsuperscript{32} Bracebridge Hemyng, \textit{ibid}, p. 475.
exercise some personal influence with them in case of need. A most extraordinary and mysterious study it is, but interesting and touching in the extreme\textsuperscript{33}.

The only solution suggested by Dickens to remove these young women from these prostitution rings, was to extract some of these girls from their “milieu” and to place them in the countryside, in one of the suburbs of London, in Shepherd’s Bush\textsuperscript{34}, away from their past life and from “society”:

A woman or a girl coming to the asylum, it is explained to her that she has come there for \textit{useful} repentance and reform, and it means her past way of life has been dreadful in its nature and consequence, and full of affliction, misery and despair to herself. Never mind society while she is at that pass. Society has used her ill and turned away from her and she cannot be expected to take much heed of its rights or wrongs\textsuperscript{35}.

To remedy this social evil, Miss Coutts refurbished and decorated a cosy cottage complete with a garden, into a bourgeois “Home” which she saw as an idyllic domestic environment, representing the domestic comfort which these fallen women had never felt or experienced, let alone pretended to. She also provided them with motherly support, which they lacked according to her, under the care of some matrons. She was easily convinced by Dickens that the simple fact of being exposed to this haven of middle-class domesticity, in the countryside, would necessarily lead these girls to reconsider their lives of loneliness, and would bring them, with proper domestic training - “order, cleanliness, the whole routine of household duties, as washing, mending, cooking” - to seek a decent life of their own as mothers or “virtuous wives” in “happy homes of their own.”\textsuperscript{36} As for Dickens, he believed in “tender firmness” to break these women into a more gentle mould, to “improve them by education and example.”\textsuperscript{37}

4) Dickens’ master plan : compliance, self-reformation and promises of a married life in the colonies.

To promote the \textit{Urania Cottage} scheme, Dickens surprisingly wrote an anonymous letter inviting “fallen women” to come forward. The letter was printed in the form of a four-page quarto and distributed throughout the London quarters where these women would find the pamphlet or hear about it. The letter was also sent to magistrates and prison governors who

\textsuperscript{33} Dickens to Coutts, Octobre 8, 1847.
\textsuperscript{34} Mr Hemying suggested young prostitutes ought to be removed from their depraved quarters: “Thus situated she (“the innocent young prostitute”) becomes reckless, and careless of her future course. It rarely occurs that one so young escapes contamination; and it is a fact that numbers of these youthful victims imbibe disease within a week or two of their seduction.”, “Prostitution in London”, in Mayhew, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 476.
\textsuperscript{35} Dickens to Coutts, 26 May 1846.
\textsuperscript{36} Dickens to Coutts, 26 May 1846.
\textsuperscript{37} Dickens to Coutts, 28 October 1847.
could recommend some inmates to the “Rescue Home for Women”. Dickens made clear that Miss Coutt’s charity was to accompany the work of the legal system, by saving those inmates who could still be rescued from their former lives. Dickens deplored with some governors of prison that no alternative to jail existed in the law for condemned prostitutes or female paupers arrested for selling their body for food who, for some of them, had some good “in the bottom of their hearts.” However, reclaiming these women “having fallen from virtue” from the world of sin, could only be a success if these women were willing to enter the Home and to accept its strict rules and regulations.

Dickens tried to personalize his letter so that every woman who came across his “pamphlet” might feel singled out among the masses:

> You will see on beginning to read this letter, that it is not addressed to you by name, but I address it to a woman – a very young woman still – who was born to be happy and has lived miserably; who has no prospect before her but sorrow […] You are such a person, or this letter would not be put into your hands.

Then promises of a better life were made by somebody who signed “Your friend”, providing that the moral contract which came with the promises be respected:

> If you have ever wished (I know you must have done so, sometimes) for a chance of rising out of your sad life, and having friends, a quiet home, means of being useful to others, peace of mind, self-respect, everything you have lost, pray read it attentively, and reflect upon it afterwards. I am going to offer you, not the chance but the certainty of all those blessings, if you will exert yourself to deserve them.

In order to differentiate his scheme from other religious asylums or institutions, where women would go to receive relief only to find admonition and punishment, Dickens indicated that he was not placing himself “above” her, that he meant “nothing but kindness” to her, insisting he was writing to her “as a sister.” As for Miss Coutts, she was presented as “a great lady” but here again, Dickens warned his female reader that she was not judgmental like other “upper-class ladies”:

> There is a lady in this town, who, form the windows of her house, has seen such as you going past at night, and has felt her heart bleed at the sight. She is what is called a great lady, but she has looked after you with compassion, as being of her own sex and nature, and the thought of such fallen women has troubled her in her bed.
> She has resolved to open, at her own expense, a place of refuge very near London, for a small number of females, who without such help, are lost for ever, and to make it a Home for them.

In spite of Dickens’ intentions to stay away from the use of old “tarnished images of God” promoted by Tractarians, Ms Coutts’ friends, his letter nonetheless evoked punishing images meant to scare prostitutes into redemption:

38 Dickens to Burdett-Coutts, May 26, 1846, “It would be necessary to limit the number of inmates, but I would make the reception of them as easy as possible to themselves. I would put it in the power of any governor of a London Prison to send an unhappy creature of this kind (by her own choice of course) straight from his prison, when her term expired, to the asylum.”
Imagine for yourself the bed on which you, then an object terrible to look at, will lie down and die. Imagine all the long, long years of shame, want, crime, and rain that will rise before you. And by that dreadful day, and by the Judgment that will follow it, and by the recollection that you are certain to have then, when it is too late, of the offer that is made to you, when it is NOT too late, I implore you to think of it, and weigh it well!  

Images of a brighter future were necessarily included after the dark prospects which Dickens envisaged for the poor girl reading his letter. In the case of this new project, Dickens indicated that women would be returned to society after a while, thereby suggesting they would be locked up for some time, even though this was not clearly mentioned here. In order for them to acquire a “new name and a new character”, Dickens mentioned emigration which he described as a domestic haven for the most deserving of these redeemed girls. Here, Dickens clearly dissociated deportation to the Australian colonies, a sentence dreaded by prostitutes in the 1840s, from emigration which he describes as the beginning of a new life for them:

And because it is not the lady’s wish that these young women should be shut out from the world, after they have repented and have learned how to do their duty there, and because it is her wish and object that they may be restored to society […] they will be supplied with every means, when some time shall have elapsed, and their conduct shall have fully proved their earnestness and reformation, to go abroad, where, in a distant country, they may become the faithful wives of honest men, and live and die in peace.

In this venture, Dickens and Coutts’ abundant correspondence clearly shows that Miss Coutts had truly no idea of what to expect from her future inmates. Since no public inquiry had been released in 1846, Miss Coutts knew nothing about the underworld in which those girls lived before they came to the “asylum”. Miss Coutts did not actually plan to get involved in the cottage which she apparently rarely visited. Dickens was to keep her informed. While discussing the original plan for the home, the novelist described at length the “character” of these “fallen women” to his upper-class friend. Based on his close and thorough knowledge of the streets of London, and following Miss Coutts’s requests, Dickens prepared theoretical plans for the “Home” in collaboration with some magistrates and prison officers, some of them being his friends, prompted like him by what he described as “humanitarian principles” and compassion. Miss Coutts turned to Dickens for advice and assistance in the manner in which the first women should be selected or recruited, as well as on the “domestic curriculum” he believed they should be taught, to save them from their depraved street life. Dickens drew the initial principles for this charity of a new type which combined relief and redemption. In spite of the humanitarian mission he assigned to the Home, the reformative principles thus developed by him, were very strict and clearly repressive, since the “inmates”

39: Pamphlet for the “Rescue Home for Women”, four-page quarto. (emphasis Dickens’)

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or “penitents” had to measure up to his own standards of “virtue” before being admitted into the programme:

I would put it in the power of any penitent creature to knock at the door, and say for God’s sake, take me in. But I would divide the interior (of the asylum) into two portions, and into the first portion I would put all new-comers without exception, as a place of probation, whence they should pass, by their own good conduct and self-denial alone, into what I may call the Society of the Home.\(^{40}\)

Miss Coutts and Dickens both agreed at first on the fact that they should rely on Captain Maconnochie’s “Mark System”, considered by Dickens as “a plan grounded in a knowledge of human nature.” The plan consisted, during the more or less long probation period, in rewarding the inmates for their good behaviour or their efforts, while taking some points off their goodwill card when they misbehaved. Those (minus) points were higher than the rewarding (bonus) marks. In the words of Dickens, “for so much work, she has so many marks; for a day’s good conduct, so many more, for every instance of ill-temper, disrespect, bad language, any outbreak of any sort, so many – a very large number in proportion to her receipts, are deducted.” However, after some reflection and some observations of places where the system was in use, particularly in prisoners’ camps in Australia, Dickens eventually believed it might not be adapted to the Home as it was originally largely based on “punishment” instead of improvement.

Nonetheless the probation phase was maintained, during which it was:

expressly pointed out to her (the female inmate), that before she can be considered qualified to return to any kind of society – even to the society of the asylum – she must give proofs of her power of self-restraint and her sincerity and her determination to try to show that she deserves the confidence it is proposed to place in her.

The initial plan aimed at reforming the manners and “character” of groups of thirty young women at a time, for several weeks. These women had to be young, some might have spent some time in prison for prostitution or minor offences. Dickens saw them as victims of their milieu, having suffered a life “full of affliction”, “dreadful in its nature and consequences”, Many of them adapted to this life by developing some cunning traits. “Re-socialization” was necessary through “useful repentance and reform.” Reformation, in fact self-reformation according to Dickens, could only been achieved if these women were willing to change and were ready to accept the benevolence of Miss Coutts which came to them in the shape of this Home away from their infected quarters, and in the form of classes in home economics and religion. “It is explained to her that she is degraded and fallen, but not lost, having this shelter,

\(^{40}\): Dickens to Burdett-Coutts, May 26, 1846.
\(^{41}\): Cpt Macconochie had just published a narrative on his life in the Australian colonies where he had supervised transported convicts for many years: his plan had devised to control and correct.
and that the means of Return to Happiness are now about to be put into her hands, and trusted to her own keeping.” Central to the reformation process was the taming of the “character” of these street women, by appealing to their lost moral values and Christian virtues: “pride, emulation, sense of shame, her heart, her reason, her interest…her own self-respect.”

If Dickens believed that these women had “fallen from virtue” out of circumstances, he also indicated to Miss Coutts, that their character was flawed either from the start or by exposure to vice and crime. Some of these girls “of evil nature” were even gone beyond the point of rescue. In the following comments, Dickens, the social novelist and so-called “reformer”, adopts a “traditional” bourgeois discourse to qualify these street women:

There is no doubt that many of them would go on well for some time, and would then be seized with a violent fit of the most extraordinary passion, apparently quite motiveless and insist on going away! There seems to be something inherent in their course of life, which engenders and awakens a sudden restlessness and recklessness which may be suppressed, but breaks out like madness, and which all people who have opportunities of observation in Penitentiaries and elsewhere, must have contemplated with astonishment and pity.

For Dickens the only source of stability for these “characters”, for their bouts of “madness”, for their “disease” would come through marriage, and particularly through emigration and marriage in the colonies. These bouts of passion, which turned these young women into hysterics, would be assuaged by domestic life in some “distant parts of the world”, where these “women could be sent for marriage with the greatest hope for their future families, and with the greatest service to the existing male population whether expatriated from England or born there.”

He insisted on the fact that emigration would enable them to be removed from English society where their background or former life would always prevent them from being hired as maid or servant. Dickens knew that hardly any “good people would be glad to take them into situations”. However, emigration would give them “the power of beginning life anew, in a world perfectly untried by them.” Emigration, according to Dickens would also place them away from their former associates while giving them “chances of recognition and challenge.” Dickens seemed to have a naïve representation of the colonies as free of crime, though it was difficult to ignore the accounts circulating in English newspapers about the state of depravation of colonial society in Australian cities, where the British government

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42 Dickens to Coutts, May 26, 1846, many-pages’ long letter in which Dickens developed his reflections and philosophy for the Home.
43 Ibid.
44 “This sudden dashing down of all the building up of months upon months, is, to my thinking, so distinctly a disease with the persons under consideration that I would pay particular attention to it, and treat it with particular gentleness and anxiety…”
45 Dickens to Coutts, preparatory phase letter quoted above.
46 Ibid.
continued to deport prisoners - including prostitutes - well into the 1840s. Dickens repeatedly indicated that emigration would render service to their “redeemed” inmates, oblivious of the fate reserved to them once they left the shores of England.

Inmates should be well-armed to return to normal society after being taught domestic habits, in preparation “for the right performance of duty outside, and for the formation of habits of firmness and self-restraint”. The domestic comfort they were offered in the cottage, that had the luxury of a middle-class cottage (with a flower garden, a bathing room, a parlour and sitting room, a piano as well as fresh linen and fresh undergarments) was clearly meant for the girls to “feel the dream” of returning to society. These domestic training and teaching should not be based on menial monotonous tasks, Dickens recalled, but on the idea that what they learnt “under that roof, would end, by God’s blessing, in happy homes of their own.”

Besides, in the so-called “Society of the Home” for those who managed to go through the probation period, Ms Coutts agreed that they would be taught sisterly and family affection where they had none before. She wished to entrust them with some independence though limited at first. Their self-restraint and their progress towards the path of virtue would have to be tested, according to Dickens, who did not trust the “inmates” as easily as Ms Coutts. One of the final tests consisted in giving them the keys to the Home where they were “trapped” in the first weeks, while allowing them to go for walks outside the cottage. Indeed, in order to preserve them from any contamination from their old world, Dickens suggested they should be allowed to leave the cottage but only to take some short walks in the countryside behind it, under the supervision of a matron. For those who disobeyed and returned to their old quarters, the Committee was asked to dismiss them immediately. In most cases, Dickens reports to Ms Coutts having had a good (patronizing) conversation with the “offender” before taking the final decision.

One of the major debates between Miss Coutts and Dickens occurred on the topic of “religious teaching” which should not seem to be used to control the individuals. On the principle that Anglicanism should be the basic tenet of the teaching, they finally both agreed, as long as beside being “steady and firm”, it was also “cheerful and hopeful”. Indeed, according to Dickens, the traditional repressive images and views, spread by Tractarians in

47 See his preparatory phase letter above.
48 See the numerous reports Dickens wrote to Coutts between 1846 and 1861, in The Letters of Charles Dickens, vols 6, 7 and 8, op.cit.
London quarters\textsuperscript{49} should be banned from the Home. Dickens emphasized the need to hire a young clergymen whose openness to the girls’ former lives was essential. However, any reference to their past lives or activities should be banned from the house, since each “inmate” would come as “a new lamb”. Openness should be the basis of religious classes, relying on the New Testament, not on the Old one which was promoting “these tarnished and battered images of God”. While Anglican missionaries in slums, regularly based their admonishing on a God of Wrath and on the idea of final judgment and punishment, in Miss Coutts’s Home, the emphasis should be placed on the image of Jesus Christ as a forgiving saviour, on the principle of atonement, on the idea that past mistakes could be corrected by self-application and self-reformation. While converting his Tractarian friend to Evangelicalism, Dickens also convinced Ms Coutts that these women should not be scared away if they wished them to come to the cottage.

Dickens, by advising Miss Coutts to adopt a more Evangelical approach to Anglicanism, placed the emphasis on “self-reformation”, on the part played by the female individuals in their own salvation: “I would have it impressed upon them from day to day that the success of the experiment rested with them.” Dickens apparently wished to dissociate Miss Coutts’ charitable work from the instruments or tools of social control which he believed missions and the other asylums around London had turned into. According to Dickens, Ms Coutts could not be blamed for seeking to repressively transform their “inmates” into meek lamb, particularly if these women came to the Home voluntarily and accepted the deal that the pair offered them.

5) **Were Ms Coutts and Dickens promoting social reforms?**

Tackling the “social evil” behind prostitution was not Coutts’ or Dickens’ purpose in rescuing these young women from their vitiated quarters. Emigration was the “easy” solution evoked by Dickens to partially solve the prostitution problem. Neither Miss Coutts, nor him, ever mentioned campaigning or lobbying for the end of prostitution, or for the legal and medical protection of these prostitutes.

Pity, compassion for her own sex, as Dickens had mentioned in the pamphlet for *Urania Cottage*, prompted Miss Coutts to act, not social reform or feminism. Feminists in the 1840s and 1850s were campaigning to stop prostitution, blaming men and their sexual weakness for it. The social evil, according to Anna Jameson, one of the campaigners, resided in upper and

\textsuperscript{49} See Mayhew’s report on Anglican Missions to the slums.
middle-class men’s lack of core values and lack of respect for women. Besides, they also brought home venereal diseases which eventually contaminated their innocent and faithful middle-class wives. In a long diatribe found in one of her travel narratives, on the so-called “weaker sex” and its every day sufferings in English society, particularly caused by the hypocrisy of Victorian society towards prostitution, she suggested that for the benefit of many men, some women were sacrificed and sexually exploited while society closed its eyes on the situation. Anna Jameson declared that to reform society, women should unite and stand for their rights against the vileness and hypocrisy of men. Women had the power to improve society morally, and to fight for their political and legal rights if they organized themselves. Here is for instance what Anna Jameson, one of the spiritual "mothers" of the Girton girls, had to say about “prostitution”, in 183850.

We are told openly by moralists and politicians that it is for the general good of society, nay, an absolute necessity, the one-fifth part of our sex should be condemned as the legitimate prey of the other, doomed to die in reprobation, in the streets, in hospitals, that the virtue of the rest may be preserved and the pride and the passions of men gratified [...] The sacrifice of a certain number of one sex to the permitted licence of the other is not general good, but a general curse – a very ulcer in the bosom of society.[...] Unless we women take some courage to look upon the evil, and find some help, some remedy within ourselves, I know not where it is to come from.

Angela Burdett-Coutts, in spite of her wealth and political connections, did not get involved into a political campaign against prostitution. She worked on her own under the direction of Charles Dickens, a man whose connection with the inmates he selected for the Home could at times appear quite murky. In fact, Mrs Jameson - in a public lecture delivered in 1857 - half-criticized the amateurish Home created by Ms Coutts for its lack of organization, lack of involvement of properly trained “Sisters” (in fact “deaconesses” for Mrs Jameson), and for a general misunderstanding of the true values and character of the “fallen women.” In Miss Coutts’ cottage, following Dickens’s Household Words’ article on the Home, the public knew that the scheme was failing due to the so-called “diseased” character of the female prostitutes who were, according to Dickens, unmanageable. This was Mrs Jameson’s criticism against those homes, like Miss Coutts’, whose mission was to reform these young victims by controlling their life and behaviour.

[...] about what has been considered as the particular province of all Sisters of Charity deserving the name, - the management of Penitentiaries and Houses of Refuge for the erring and the fallen of their own sex. I shall merely observe that there is no department of active benevolence requiring more careful preparation and more especial instruction than this. The treatment of women whose habitual existence has been a perpetual outrage of their nature, must be special and exceptional; and I do not think that this is always well understood by the excellent and virtuous ladies who undertake to manage these scarcely manageable creatures. They are thought to be mentally and morally depraved, when in fact it is often the complete derangement of the nervous system brought on by vice and disease, which produces those

changeful moods, those fits of sullenness, excitability, obtuseness, insolence, and desperation by which I have seen the most benevolent filled with disgust and the most hopeful with despondency. [...] No mere impulse of pity, no mere power of will (or money), can enable any one to undertake this most difficult mission, which ought to combine the vocation of charity with some of the qualifications of a physician.\footnote{Anna Jameson, “Sisters of Charity”, in *Sisters of Charity and The Communion of Labour*, London, Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans and Robert, 1859, p. 38-39. (emphasis mine)}

Miss Coutts who seems to be the particular target of Mrs Jameson in this pamphlet, she appears under the following category of “pious ladies”, “tenderly nurtured and brought up amid all the guarded sanctities of home”, - ladies “of birth, position, and refinement”, who could not some years ago have supposed “the existence of outcasts of their own sex, or of vicious excesses on the part of the other, without an imputation on their feminine decorum”. In fact, the number of women totally rescued from their former lives or their former “character” was quite limited and by 1857, when Mrs Jameson criticized some of the schemes developed in London to save “fallen women\footnote{According to Anna Jameson, those that the Victorians called “fallen women” “for the greater number there is no fall; they just, like blind creatures, walk from the darkness of ignorance into the foulness of sin. They are starving and they sell themselves for food.”, *Sisters of Charity*, p. 39.}”, Dickens and Miss Coutts seemed to be disappointed by the difficulty of the task. More often than not, the “inmates” were incontrollable, were insulting towards the matrons, and left the cottage to return to their old quarters. The trust and the confidence that had been placed in each of these women, were betrayed.

In the letters Dickens regularly wrote to Miss Georgina Morson, the governess of *Urania Cottage*, his control over the inmates he all knew by name and personal story, was at times very patronizing and paternalistic. His own angry feelings read through the lines after the some women refused to be controlled by “tender firmness”. For instance, in a letter dated January 4, 1854 he vented his anger at Rhena Holland, who had complained about the regimen. Similarly, in another letter, he sent instructions to Mrs Morson to send underwear to another girl who was still living at the Home, asking her to pay for a warm bath for her ("or two would be better"). His involvement went beyond that of a mere patron\footnote{Dickens said of Sesina Bollard, that she was, “the most deceitful little minx in this town -- I never saw such a draggled piece of fringe upon the skirts of all that is bad. . . she would corrupt a Nunnery in a fortnight” (Dickens Connection, p.25) Her friend Isabella Gordon had concocted charges against the Matrons and was sent away with half-a-crown and directions to another charity. Another girl, Jemima Hiscock, 'forced open the door of the little beer cellar with knives and got dead drunk....' Jemima used, “the most horrible language.” and it was thought the beer must have been, “laced with spirits from over the wall”, Dickens to Mrs Morson, 4 January 1854, *Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. 12, *op.cit.*, p. 654-655.}.

Dickens was clearly annoyed by the lack of recognition given or granted to Miss Coutts’s benevolence, by these unmanageable and unruly “characters”. Many of these young women
did not understand the generosity of Miss Coutts and refused to be controlled by middle-class rules, refusing the domestic ideal that Miss Coutts and Dickens had imagined for them.

The plans of the Rescue Home gradually foundered, because the female inmates had refused to be controlled morally, physically and socially. Dickens blamed it on their ingrained “fits of madness” which like any other observer of “those women”, including Mrs Jameson, he and Miss Coutts “must contemplate with astonishment and pity.” In an article in *Household Words* in April 1853, Dickens gave a half-hearted picture of the effectiveness of *Urania Cottage*. Six years after the beginning of the experiment, he described the fortunes of the women who had at this point had been “rescued” at *Urania Cottage*:

> Of these fifty-six cases, seven went away by their own desire during their probation; ten were sent away for misconduct in the home; seven ran away; three emigrated and relapsed on the passage out; thirty (of whom seven are now married) on their arrival in Australia or elsewhere, entered into good service, acquired a good character and have done so well ever since as to establish a strong prepossession in favour of others sent out from the same quarter.\(^54\)

30 women out of 56 had now found their way to the colonies, “Australia or elsewhere”, indicated Dickens to his readers, thereby suggesting that Coutts and him did not have a clear idea of where their former inmates had gone to. Their mission stopped once the women had been rescued after several months in the cottage, where they acquired “a good character.” Dickens left the State or other private charities deal with the emigration programme.

Indeed, from the inception of the Home, Dickens had made clear that if the colonies were to be the final destination for some of their inmates, Dickens and Coutts would have to receive the support of the Colonial Office. Miss Coutts’s mission in opening this house should not be isolated, but supported by some government’s help, at least in seeking decent abodes for these women in the colonies. Dickens made clear that she should approach the Colonial Office and beg them to vote regulations to protect the transportation of female emigrants on board ships to Australia, The Cape or Canada. All the more so as Dickens planned to send some of these “rescued women” in groups, “having hopefully formed attachments among themselves” in the Home, which would bring encouragement and support to each other “in a foreign country.” Dickens asked Ms Coutts to use her connections in the Colonial Office so they took charge of the female emigrants: “The main question that arises is, if the cooperation of the Government, beginning at that point when they are supposed to be reclaimed, cannot be secured, how are

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\(^{54}\) “Home for Homeless Women”, *Household Words*, April 1853. (my italics) Shortly after the publication of the article, Dickens wrote to Ms Coutts that his account had elicited numerous positive reactions as he received many letters requesting a visit of the cottage or the sending of subscriptions to support the scheme.
they to be provided for, permanently.\textsuperscript{55} In other words, Dickens clearly criticized the lack of involvement of the State in poor relief or in emigration at that stage. If Ms Coutts was ready to invest large sums into the Home for destitute women for the benefit of Britain, her private action would have to be matched by some governmental support, either in promoting and financing emigration or in developing white colonies into decent settlements. In the same letter, Dickens insisted on the fact that there was “a very great probability of the whole Transportation System being shortly brought under the consideration of the legislature.” Preliminary reports in 1846 indicated that the State would probably “recognise the question of sending out women to the different settlements, as one of very great importance.\textsuperscript{56}” Upon closing this preparatory phase letter, Dickens furthered his criticism on the absence of commitment on the part of the State by praising Ms Coutts private undertaking which he claimed would do “lasting honour to [her] name and country.”

6) Combining the rescue of fallen women with emigration. Reception of the “problematic subjects” from \textit{Urania Cottage} in Canada.

In spite of Dickens’ suggestion to lobby the Colonial Office in order to receive some political or financial support from the government in their emigration scheme, Ms Coutts ended up having to resort to private charities to send her rescued women abroad:

In reference to the Asylum, it seems to me very expedient that you should know, if possible, whether the government would assist you to the extent of informing you from time to time into what distant parts of the world, women could be sent for marriage, with the greatest hope for their future families, and with the greatest service to the existing male population, whether expatriated from England or born there. If these poor women could be sent abroad with the distinct recognition and aid of the government, it would be a service to the effort.\textsuperscript{57}

In emigration, as in the relief of poverty, the government relied on private initiative or on Church missions to solve “the Condition of England” question\textsuperscript{58}. Dickens was clear on the so-called “humanitarian” project the couple was launching at Shepherd’s Bush. Once reformed, women could be sent overseas for the sake of the nation, by bringing with them to the colonies, the domestic values and Christian virtues they had been inculcated in England.

\textsuperscript{55} Dickens to Coutts, May 26, 1846, preparatory phase.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} When the \textit{Urania Cottage} project had been well under way, Dickens suggested the name of his \textit{Household Words} editor, W.H. Wills as a secretary to work with Miss Coutts in order to help her keep a close watch on her various charities, and particularly on \textit{Urania Cottage}. W.H. Wills was much interested in female emigration as his article “Ships: Safety for female emigrants”, published in \textit{Household Words} in 1851 shows\textsuperscript{58}. With this article Wills contributed to the debate on the lack of moral and physical safety of single female emigrants on boats going to Australia or Canada, a topic which had been brought up by Caroline Chisholm in the same magazine.
Regardless of the conditions in which these rehabilitated women were transported or had to settle on the other side of the ocean, they were still considered in terms of valuable marriageable “goods” or “helpmeet” for the colonies. Dickens seemed to imagine the colonial world as some immaterial space, still in its early stage of development socially and politically, a mere product of imperial imagination. While in the 1850s, Australian and Canadian colonies were already well-advanced in self-government, already seeking some independence from the mother-country, Dickens still believed England could use these settlements as receptacles for its excess populations.

While asking Miss Coutts to resort to her political connections to publicize their ultimate plans for “rescued women”, Dickens knew that colonial policies regarding emigration to the colonies in 1846, like other regulations, were left up to individual projects under the new supervision of the Emigration and Land Committee. Public funds would not be provided to arm emigrants’ ships since the government promoted laissez-faire over state-control: “I have (with reason) a doubt of all governments in England considering such a question in the light in which men undertaking that immense responsibility, are bound, before God, to consider it.” Nonetheless, Dickens thought Miss Coutts’ project should be presented to the authorities in case it failed due to lack of colonial planning or political support: “I would suggest this appeal to you, merely as something which you owe to yourself and to the experiment, the failure of which, does not at all affect the innumerable goodness and happiness of the project itself.59” In other words, for anything that happened on board the boats to the colonies or in the colonies to their inmates, the public should blame the government not Miss Coutts or Dickens.

While thirty of his inmates emigrated to Australia, according to Dickens’s report in his own magazine in 1853, his readers, including Mrs Jameson and other feminist activists knew that transportation to the colonies was not always safe for women. Urania Cottage came under scrutiny in Mrs Jameson’s public lecture in 1857 partly because of the disposal of “surplus” women by charities like Miss Coutts’ without any further investigation into their actual fate in the colonies where they were “disposed of”. From 1857 onwards, the London Times regularly published disappointed letters written by governesses, returning from Australia. They complained about the sort of conditions that awaited single women in the colonies. Alarming reports on women falling into prostitution for lack of decent jobs in Australia, prompted charities to reflect on more assisted emigration schemes. This had been Miss Coutts’ wish for

59 Ibid, May 26, 1846.
over a decade when Reverend Hill sent her his report from British Columbia where white English women of all sorts and origins were desperately needed.

A copy of the report was also sent to the Columbia Mission, which Reverend George Hill had created in 1859 with the support of Angela Burdett-Coutts, shortly before going to British Columbia to hold the first bishopric, also endowed by Miss Coutts. Bishop Hill gradually came to direct her fund-raising activity destined for British Columbia towards a new sort of charitable programme: the assisted emigration of “surplus” women from England. In one of the public meeting of the Columbia Mission in 1860, Reverend Garrett read some pages of Reverend Hill’s correspondence after his visit to the remote corners of his new colonial diocese. Anglicanism, missionary work and imperialism now worked hand in hand. Creating a so-called charitable programme which would aim at rescuing some unwanted female population from the streets of English cities and at redeeming them through emigration, appealed to the Columbia Mission followers, mostly Evangelical Anglicans. Ms Coutts and Dickens could send a last group of rescued women to British Columbia, the first truly “assisted emigration” scheme for single women.

Transporting a group of thirty to forty white women, essentially from the lower classes, to British Columbia, became a popular affair in London. It was debated in newspapers, particularly in the London Times, in the National Review and the pages of the English Woman’s Journal and referred to in many others. The purpose of the scheme brought about many conflicting discourses on “surplus” population, “surplus” women, undesirable subjects, on desirable colonists, on colonial plans for the Empire.

The colonial promoters in England and in BC, the Columbia Mission (now Columbia Emigration Society), whose patroness was Miss Coutts, and the white Anglican elite of colonial Victoria (BC), envisaged particular roles and functions for this group of thirty English white women from the lower-classes. Their emigration would necessarily solve the imbalance between sexes which led white male, pioneers or miners, to lead a life of debauchery in remote villages, or to live with Native squaws. These female emigrants from the lower-classes could also be employed as domestic servants of whom there was a clear dearth in Victoria. Third of all, according to Bishop Hill, English women’s natural propensity to piety would clearly bring back the miners and settlers who had strayed away from religion, on the right path of moral values and religious teaching. In short, white women from the labouring classes, either recently reclaimed from their life in prostitution by Miss Coutts, or
selected in slums by missionaries for their religious and domestic qualities, were seen as social panacea to bring order and to introduce some control in the remote settlements of the colony.

William R. Greg contributed to the debate in the *National Review* by reporting on the useful works of the *Columbia Emigration Society*, while selections of the first female emigrants were going on under the supervision of Reverend John Garrett. Greg in an article entitled “Why are women redundant?” underlined the necessity of such assisted emigration schemes for “surplus” women, particularly from the lower classes in order to preserve England’s gender balance, i.e. its “virtuous” balance. Greg goes as far as suggesting that prostitution would naturally be eradicated if the number of “loose” women was controlled by emigration:

> When female emigration has done its work, and drained away the excess and the special obviousness of the redundance; when women have thus become far fewer in proportion, men will have to bid higher for the possession of them, and will find it necessary to make them wives instead of mistresses.

Ironically, the women who had been brought back to the right path by religious teaching in Ms Coutt’s Home, the former penitents now aware of their duty, would serve the double purpose of the local charities: being removed from their criminal milieu for good, while bringing stability and foundation to a new English society abroad. They were at the same time the instruments of English society’s social control, while being the victims of the same control.

Still according to W.R. Greg in the *National Review*, British Columbia was an ideal receptacle for surplus women, as “while ten thousand women could leave Britain weekly (!) without effect”, in British Columbia “such an accession would transform an unsettled multitude into an organized community and lay the foundation of a nation’s life.”

On the first boat that left London for British Columbia in May 1862, under the supervision of two chaperons, one lady and one clergyman, at least twenty women out of sixty, came from Dickens and Coutts’s cottage. But this fact was not publicized since no reference to the past life of the “rescued inmates” should be made, as a rule of the Home, but also in order to give them an opportunity to begin life anew without feeling any reprobation. Their past life and activity were never mentioned. Upon their landing, the local press in Victoria had some suspicion about their social origins. Some girls were betrayed by their language, attitude or character. They could not always pass for “ladies.”

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60 *National Review*, April 1862, p. 452.
Finally, and ironically, the hypocrisy of the whole assisted emigration charity was exposed upon the arrival of the first “brideship”, the Tynemouth, in Victoria. The news of the coming of a boat full of English “lassies” caused great excitement among the single men of British Columbia. Some of them travelled for several days from remote mining towns, when they heard the news. They all wanted to see “the lassies” and possibly find one they could take back to their mining quarters: “Sixty single ladies – think of it, ye single, bald-headed, and a-little-on-the-grey order, and build your habitation larger!” read the Victoria Press⁶².

These white female emigrants immediately became objects of fantasy and desire for these single men who each wanted to catch a glimpse of “the rosy-cheeked English beauties.” This became particularly clear upon disembarkation when many of the girls were too impressed by the sexual tension on the dock, to leave the boat. The two chaperons had to hire the local police force to keep these excited men at bay, while whooping and whistling were heard on all sides. They were removed to the Marine Barracks where they had to be kept away from men for a few days, like inmates, while according to one of the local journalists:

The young women were unable to enjoy a walk in the enclosure without being subjected to the gaze of a rabble of some forty persons, who hung about the premises, and leaning on the fence, scanned the inmates in a manner that was disgraceful.⁶³

In fact, they were kept in the military camp for a week, under close guard, during which a Ladies’ Committee who had corresponded with the Columbia Mission, tried to place each woman in a house, where she would be employed as maid or servant. The watchful eye that these ladies kept on their female cargo was justified by the fact that men lurked “outside the wall” all week long, hoping to catch a glimpse of one of them, in order to take her to his house in the mountains. Propriety, prudishness, morality led the Ladies to take such measures. But most importantly their own class interest also prevailed as the human freight had come to them from England to fill up domestic positions. These women had not come as emblems of the English nation, but as a useful cargo of help-meets to work in bourgeois homes in Victoria.

The so-called progressive and humanitarian plan of the Columbia Mission had served the unlofty imperial trade or barter between the mother country and one of its colonies, by removing some of its surplus population from the London streets to place them under the watchful eye and social control of Victorian matrons in Victoria, Canada. The London Times and the English Woman’s Journal followed the progress of this very much publicized assisted emigration scheme to BC, all the more so as it had seen the personal involvement of Miss

⁶² quoted by Adele Perry, On the Edge of Empire, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2001, p. 144.
⁶³ Ibid, p. 157
Angela Burdett-Coutts, as well that of the Anglican Church represented by its popular London Archbishop Samuel Wilberforce. In the pages of the English Woman’s Journal, Isa Craig commented on the success of the British Columbia scheme in those words

Emigration offers a least a dual benefit. It opens a wide door of hope and of escape from crime, while it benefits those who remain behind; relieving the labour market at home and creating fresh markets abroad\textsuperscript{64}.

The reception of the first assisted female emigrants in BC, placed under surveillance, living in barracks before being placed in middle-class homes, did not exactly qualify as a “wide door of hope”. However, Isa Craig clearly underlined England’s, the nation’s benefits in such charitable schemes which were only beginning in 1862.

\textsuperscript{64} Kranidis, p. 39.