

**“A ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY FOR LADIES’: THE LYCEUM CLUB AND
WOMEN’S GEOGRAPHICAL FRONTIERS IN EDWARDIAN LONDON”**

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Abstract

This paper reconstructs the history, organization, and campaigning function of the Geographical Circle of the Lyceum Club—a membership group that, under the leadership of Bessie Pullen-Burry (1858–1937), sought to promote and legitimize women’s geographical work in early twentieth-century Britain. Through an examination of archival material and contemporary press coverage, I document the Geographical Circle’s efforts to establish itself as a professional body for women geographers and to lobby for their admission to the Royal Geographical Society. Although considerable scholarly attention has been paid to women geographers’ individual contributions to the discipline, their cooperative, professionalizing endeavors have been comparatively neglected. In tracing the parallel history of the Circle as an example of women’s self-organization, and of Pullen-Burry as an independent campaigner, I argue that a nuanced account of women’s professionalization in geography demands attention to *both* individual and collective endeavors.

Key Words: history of geography, women, gender, Lyceum Club, Bessie Pullen-Burry, Royal Geographical Society, London

In 2013, British geography commemorated a noteworthy milestone in its professional and disciplinary history: The centenary anniversary of the permanent admission of women to the fellowship of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) (Bell and McEwan 1996; Evans, Keighren, and Maddrell 2013). That anniversary, although remembered rightly as a significant watershed in the professional position and recognition of British women geographers, also afforded an opportunity to reflect upon the longer history of women's geographical work. Under the thematic banner of "100+", the Women and Geography Study Group (now the Gender and Feminist Geographies Research Group) of the RGS (with the Institute of British Geographers) organized a series of events designed to celebrate the contribution of women to the discipline, both before and since 1913. The "100+" events can be understood as part of a longer-standing project—evident most particularly in the scholarship of Janice Monk and Avril Maddrell—to "repopulate the historiography of geography with women's work" (Maddrell 2009, xi; Monk 1998, 2003, 2004).

Although much has been done to make visible the previously obscured contributions of individual women to the discipline and practice of geography in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, somewhat less attention has been paid to women's cooperative professionalization (see, for example, Blunt 1995; Kearns 1997; Maddrell 1997, 2005). In tracing the formation and organization, membership and campaigning function of one such professional society of women geographers in Edwardian London—the Geographical Circle of the Lyceum Club—this paper provides an account of women's cooperative efforts to demonstrate their professional aptitude, to communicate their geographical work, and to lobby for equality of access to the RGS. By examining the Geographical Circle as a women-only counterpoint to the men-only RGS—and the Lyceum Club as a unique female outpost in the otherwise male preserve of London's

clubland—the paper draws attention to the institutional and spatial frontiers of gendered sociability that were negotiated in securing recognition of women’s status as legitimate contributors to geographical scholarship. The history of British women as geographers is, this paper will show, one inescapably bound up with events of perceived transgression: First, the subversion of carefully policed urban spatial boundaries, and second, the social infiltration of a jealously guarded male institution.

The Geographical Circle of the Lyceum Club—“the first union of women with geographical interests”—has left little trace in either the archive or the secondary historical record (contemporary press reporting notwithstanding): There is no cache of correspondence, no comprehensive register of members, no meticulous inventory of speakers (*The Times* 1937, 14). This archival lacuna might most obviously be attributed to the Club’s financial decline during the Great Depression that led to compulsory liquidation in 1933 and a consequently haphazard distribution of its assets (*The Yorkshire Post* 1933, 6). That historians of geography work with fragments and slivers, more often than they do with satisfying wholes, is a fact of historical research widely acknowledged (Barnes 2014; Lorimer 2010; McGeachan, Forsyth, and Hasty 2012). This fragmentation is particularly acute, however, in respect to the role of women (and that of other marginalized groups) in geography and goes some way to explaining why the significance of the Geographical Circle, its membership, and its campaigning activities have heretofore been poorly documented (McEwan 1998). In much the same way that the historical contributions of singular women to geography have often been obscured (either passively or actively), so too have their cooperative activities; the hidden history of geography conceals within it both individuals and institutions. In our efforts at “feminising and democratising the

history of geography”, it is vital, as I argue here, that we pay proper attention to both the private and associational activities and achievements of women (Maddrell 2008, 142).

In this paper, I draw upon archival sources and repositories of digitized twentieth-century newspapers, domestic and foreign (including the British Library’s “British Newspaper Archive”, the National Library of New Zealand’s “Papers Past”, and the National Library of Australia’s “Trove” collections), to reconstruct, from its fragments, the history of the Geographical Circle under the leadership of Bessie Pullen-Burry (1858–1937).¹ That the activities of the Circle were reported on by the newspaper press in Australia and New Zealand reflects not only the commonplace circulation of news between Britain and its settler colonies during this period, but also the particular significance that these activities had in respect to international debate over women’s changing role in society (Potter 2003; Putnis 2010). Although digital newspaper repositories offer researchers a variety of new methodological opportunities, for reasons of copyright, among other practical considerations, such collections have tended to prioritize nineteenth-century (and earlier) material, leaving much of the early twentieth century inadequately documented, at least in digital terms (Bingham 2010; Nicholson 2013). Despite gaps in their temporal and geographical coverage, digital repositories of this kind nevertheless offer much by way of detail and of opinion on the history of British geography in the early twentieth century and, as this paper will show, are an invaluable source in recovering the otherwise unrecorded voices of women geographers.

Clubland

By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, London's private gentlemen's clubs had established themselves as an "indispensable part of elite men's lives" (Milne-Smith 2011, 2). Emerging from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century coffeehouse culture, these clubs—numbering approximately 200 by the turn of the twentieth century—were a locus for privileged socialization, political discussion, and the construction of masculine identities (Black 2012). Clubs and their members lay, Milne-Smith (2011, 2) has argued, "at the heart of late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century ideas about gender, domesticity, power, class, and urban space". Although gentlemen's clubs existed at various locations in London, they were primarily clustered in a small area of the city's West End—so-called clubland—centered on Piccadilly, Pall Mall, and St James's Street. Clubland was positioned, both figuratively and literally, at the center of wealth and political and monarchical power in London: Buckingham Palace, St James's Palace, Downing Street, and the Houses of Parliament, among other sites of symbolic authority, marked its borders. Clubland occupied, and in turn defined, a "male zone of commerce, politics, and leisure" from which late-Victorian and early-Edwardian women were excluded (Black 2012, 19).

While clubland epitomized women's exclusion from certain elements and venues of London's public life, other parts of the city—particularly its parks and museums, its theatres and tearooms, and its department stores and shopping districts—became increasingly central to the social life and geographical experience of bourgeois women. In the West End alone, a clear gender division was evident between the male preserve of clubland and the sites of commercialism and consumption, such as Regent Street, that "welcomed women into metropolitan culture...as natural consumers" (Rappaport 2000, 5). The public life of metropolitan women was, however, also (and increasingly so from the turn of the twentieth century) transacted in women-only clubs that mirrored the social functions of their male-only

counterparts. Middleclass women in Edwardian London could, Rappaport (2000, 74) has noted, choose from among “nearly forty different clubs, most of which were situated in the very heart of the West End shopping district”, where they could dine, read, maintain their correspondence, attend concerts, or participate in debates. The social segregation of the West End’s geography on gendered lines was, however, challenged by the establishment in 1904 of the Lyceum Club—the first women-only organization to infiltrate the “citadel of masculinity” that was clubland (Rappaport 2000, 100).

The Lyceum Club

The Lyceum Club was established by the novelist, suffragist, and internationalist Constance Smedley (1876–1941), in an effort to support young professional women, particularly writers and journalists, in the development of their careers. Smedley had earlier developed a dissatisfaction with the somewhat shabby and down-at-heel Writers’ Club (that had admitted women since its formation in 1895, and of which she was a member), believing that it “did not afford sufficiently impressive hospitality for the girls who wished to give a *quid pro quo* for the [social] invitations they received” and thus put them at “a disadvantage in all their communications with the world, business or social” (Smedley 1929, 55). What was called for, in Smedley’s view, was something rather grander: A “respectable space...in which to meet, conduct business, and have a social life in a club that did not smack of poverty” (Black 2012, 231).

Smedley’s prospectus for the Lyceum Club emphasized its luxury—it was to have “all the features of a high-class club”—and its internationalism: It was to serve as a “common

meeting ground for women throughout the world who are workers in literature, art or science” (Lyceum Club 1903, n.p.). As Smedley envisioned it, the Lyceum Club would be a “corporate social home for educated women”, where those “of small or large incomes could feel part of the aristocracy of intellect” (Smedley 1929, 94). Smedley’s vision was not simply elite, it was transnational: This “visionary ideal Club”, as she called the Lyceum, should have “branches in all countries of the world and a chain of Clubhouses” to which all members would have right of access (Smedley 1929, 58). The Lyceum Club was, in short, intended to be “cosmopolitan yet exclusive in character” and an “important influence in the intellectual world” (Lyceum Club 1903, n.p.). Although it was initially hoped that premises would be secured in the vicinity of Charing Cross, “having regard to the locality of the Newspaper and Publishing Offices” with which its members would have professional dealings, accommodation was ultimately secured (with the financial support of Smedley’s father) at 128 Piccadilly, formerly home to the Imperial Service Club—“a bastion of masculine empire” (Stratigakos 2008, 18).

Although the Lyceum Club’s transgression of clubland’s gendered spatiality had not been the primary objective for Smedley, the reaction of contemporary commentators who saw the Club’s existence and location as a “threat to male privilege” doubtless convinced her of its symbolic significance at a moment when the campaign for women’s suffrage in the United Kingdom was becoming militant (Stratigakos 2008, 24). The establishment of the Lyceum Club in 1904 closely followed the formation in Manchester (under the guidance of Emmeline and Sylvia Pankhurst) of the Women’s Social and Political Union—an organization whose efforts to campaign for women’s enfranchisement would become progressively more spectacular and disruptive in the period leading up to the First World War (Crawford 1999). The activities of the Club in respect to women’s suffrage were, by contrast, politically moderate and constitutional—

its members were suffragists, not suffragettes (Woollacott 2001). From its establishment, however, the Club was committed to positioning itself as an important platform for political debate over women's rights (*The Daily News* 1904). That the Club's role in the suffrage movement, and its location in the heart of clubland, was considered worrisome is evidenced by one anonymous journalist's tongue-in-cheek account of the Club's opening: "From the windows of the eleven other clubs on Piccadilly men looked out with shocked faces, and in Pall Mall and St. James' Street there was a shaking of bald heads and a gloomy rustling of *The Times* newspaper. First Dover Street [home of the Empress Club], now Piccadilly. What would the women conquer next?" (quoted in Stratigakos 2008, 24). The establishment of the Lyceum Club has thus been characterized as an "alien invasion" that "disrupted the complacent fraternity of London's clubland" (Brockington 2005, 15).

Women's admission to the Lyceum Club upon its establishment was, at least superficially, meritocratic: Those who had "published any original work in Literature, Journalism, Science, Art, or Music", or who possessed a university-level qualification, could apply for entry; so too, however, could the "wives or daughters of distinguished men" (Lyceum Club 1903, n.p.). As the twentieth century progressed, the routes to women's entry expanded considerably (reflecting their increasingly diverse professional achievements) to include qualifications in medicine, law, architecture, engineering, and accountancy, among many other fields; entry on the basis of birth or marriage was ultimately abolished (Lyceum Club 1934). For a one-guinea (£1 1s) joining fee and an annual subscription of three guineas—a cost that, although precise comparisons are difficult to calculate, is equivalent to at least £300 today—the Club offered its founder members a library and writing room, a choice of *à la carte* and *table d'hôte* dining, spaces in which to receive visitors, a permanent art collection, a billiard room, and

residential bedrooms—facilities equal to its counterparts on Piccadilly. The provision of dressing rooms with “a hairdresser and manicurist...always in attendance”, set the Club apart from its male-only equivalents (*Brisbane Courier* 1905, 14). Perhaps more significantly, however, the Lyceum Club also operated a careers and information bureau designed to support women’s professional work within and beyond the United Kingdom.

To match British women writers’ global ambitions, the Club’s bureau sought to provide its members with a “complete register of the names and addresses of Editors and Publishers throughout the world” together with a listing of “trustworthy literary agents” so that their written work might more effectively be marketed internationally (Lyceum Club 1903, n.p.). At the same time as supporting its members’ international literary endeavors through the provision of practical information, the Club (largely as a consequence of the proselytizing efforts of Constance Smedley) established affiliated clubhouses in five European and two Australian cities during its first decade of operation: Berlin (1905), Paris (1906), Florence (1908), Stockholm (1911), Geneva (1912), Melbourne (1912), and Sydney (1914) (Stratigakos 2008; Woollacott 2001). Much as the establishment of the Lyceum Club allowed women to cross the socio-geographical frontiers of London’s West End, so its cosmopolitan vision served to expand internationally the social and spatial experience of its members (Brockington 2005).

Although the Club’s rhetorical vision was one that emphasized international fraternity and the exchange of knowledge, expertise, and hospitality, its prestigious location and physical grandeur were somewhat intimidating to certain visitors. The Welsh-born New Zealand author and social reformer Eveline Cunningham (1849–1916) recorded, for example, her anxiety upon her first visit with a friend to the Club in 1904. In deftly capturing the Club’s emotional and aesthetic impact on this colonial visitor, her account is worth quoting at length:

The desire for afternoon tea now fell upon us two women, and so we threaded our way through the crowded thoroughfare of Piccadilly towards Hyde Park Corner. The Lyceum Club for Women is a handsome, imposing-looking building, a stone's throw from Hyde Park Corner. Hall porters, gorgeous in gilt buttons and lace adornments, tall palms, rich carpets, mirrors, and statues meet the eye as one enters the vestibule. An air of luxury and comfort pervades the whole establishment. A feeling of awe overtakes me...I tremble! We enter a magnificently large room filled with leather armchairs that have a masculine air of solidity about them. It is the Silence Room, and majestic dames of high degree on [*sic*] learning, etc., are lounging about, looking very wise and rather sleepy. In another still more stately apartment we find more ladies, also learned and wise-looking. By this time my colonial stock of courage has melted to the vanishing point, and I remain drooping till the tea arrives and revives (*Otago Daily Times* 1904, 10).

What Cunnington's impression makes clear is that the Lyceum Club—for all its egalitarianism—carried with it the authority (and reproduced the stuffiness) of its male-only predecessors on Piccadilly.

The social and intellectual activities of the Lyceum Club revolved around a number of “circles” that brought members together in areas of shared interest and enthusiasm (whether intellectual or recreational). By 1920, these circles—used by members to organize subject-specific events, lectures, and dinners—included “American, Belgium [*sic*], French, Irish, Italian,

Oriental, Polish, Russian, Scottish, United Empire, Art Lovers...Music, Photographers, Poetry, Billiard [*sic*], Bridge and Psychic” (Gordon and Doughan 2001, 89; Doughan and Gordon 2006). What this inventory demonstrates is that members’ interests were not only diverse but were also, and overwhelmingly so, international; the Lyceum Club represented, in miniature as it were, women’s cosmopolitan concerns in an age of internationalism (Brockington 2005). Matters of geography—always implicit in the Club’s international outlook—became an explicit focus of attention following the establishment in 1912 of a “Geographical Research and Travel Circle” (subsequently, simply, the Geographical Circle) (*The Standard* 1911, 4). More than just a locus for member’s shared interests in travel and geographical knowledge, however, the Circle was a politically motivated campaigning organization; it sought to “teach the Royal Geographical Society [some] manners” by highlighting the geographical proficiencies and accomplishments of women and thereby to campaign for their equal recognition (*The Mercury* 1911, 3).

The Geographical Circle

The chief driving force behind the establishment of the Geographical Circle was the novelist, imperialist explorer, and anthropologist Bessie Pullen-Burry. Widely travelled in “Europe, the Holy Land, Africa, India, Japan, the West Indies, the United States and Canada”, Pullen-Burry was author of a series of well-received travel narratives: *Jamaica as it is, 1903* (1903), *Ethiopia in exile: Jamaica revisited* (1905), *In a German colony; or, Four weeks in New Britain* (1909), and *From Halifax to Vancouver* (1912) (Dagg 2001, 248). Through these books—and papers delivered to learned societies and congresses, including the British Association for the Advancement of Science and the Liverpool Geographical Society—Pullen-Burry earned a

reputation that secured her election (in 1903) to the Fellowship of the Royal Anthropological Institute (Keighren 2010). As a committed suffragist, Pullen-Burry was especially attentive to the status of women in those countries through which she travelled. This concern was particularly evident during her 1911 coast-to-coast journey across Canada when she sought out leading figures in the suffrage movement, including the author and activist Katherine Hughes (1876–1925), and investigated women’s cooperative organizations, such as the Women’s Canadian Club (Dagg 2001; McMaster 2008).

Pullen-Burry attentiveness to women’s position in society was, on occasion, so fulsome as to draw criticism; one anonymous reviewer of her book *From Halifax to Vancouver* complained, for example, that although “she is able...to find other subjects than Woman’s Suffrage to discuss”, her “observations have naturally been directed largely from the woman’s point of view” (Anonymous 1912, 705). It is in that work that Pullen-Burry’s opinions on the role of women are most clearly articulated. For her, women were society’s “keystone”—at once “mothers of the race” and “the pivotal point of the social fabric”. “No nation”, she claimed, “ever rises above the character of its women” (Pullen-Burry 1912, 324). Progressive when it came to women’s politics, Pullen-Burry was not, however, a libertarian; while she championed women’s independence, she simultaneously feared the moral corruption that might result from it.

In later life Pullen-Burry became an active member of The Britons—an anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant political organization—and published work under the imprint of its Judaic Publishing Company (Lebzelter 1978; Thurlow 1987; Pullen-Burry 1922). Several members of The Britons had, like Pullen-Burry, “extensive overseas experience” and shared a pejorative view of the relationship between climate, geography, and the moral vigor and rectitude of certain populations (Toczek 2016, 84). Pullen-Burry’s fascist politics are, most probably, the reason that

her contributions to geography and anthropology have been given scant attention by historians of these disciplines. Her objectionable views concerning race and religion do not, however, nullify her significant role in the promotion of women's geographical work in the first quarter of the twentieth century, but they do draw attention to the fact that women geographers are often expected to perform a double duty in respect to the history of the discipline: that of pioneer *and* role model. Efforts made to write women back into geography's history have often been, and rightly so, celebratory in nature; in detailing the ways in which women negotiated and overcame social and professional prejudices, a narrative function is, however, often imposed upon them in which they positioned as both pathbreaker and "beacon to other women in the discipline" (Maddrell 2009, 317). In this context, Pullen-Burry is a somewhat complex and contested figure: one whose championing work was undoubtedly central to the professional recognition of women geographers, but also one whose naive geographical determinism and race prejudice undermine her palatability as a figurehead for that movement. It is precisely for this reason, however, that it is important to discuss her contribution; the history of women's geography depends upon challenging the expectation that its protagonists must be both avant-garde and morally good.

Plans for the Geographical Circle—reported to have been drawn up by Pullen-Burry in discussion with the Canadian writer and traveler Agnes Deans Cameron (1863–1912), who lamented the fact that "there was no society in England to welcome her and other women back from their travels"—were first announced to London's press in the autumn of 1911 (*The Dominion* 1914, 2). Evidently taking their lead from Pullen-Burry, the journalists who reported the news emphasized the fact that the Circle would correct (or at least ameliorate) an outstanding wrong, namely the exclusion of women from the fellowship of the RGS. As one anonymous reporter from *The Standard* (1911, 4) noted, "many women have proved themselves of service to

geographical research, have written acceptable works, have penetrated into some of the most unknown regions of the earth, and proved themselves something more than ordinary ‘globe-trotters’”. Reporting on the announcement from Hobart, Tasmania, *The Mercury* (1911, 3) commented that, in both its scope and entry requirements, the Geographical Circle was “intended to be a Royal Geographical Society for Ladies”—a wake-up call to the “adamant” and unhearing RGS.

The Circle was formally proposed to the Lyceum Club’s annual meeting on 17 January 1912 by the novelist and travel writer Geraldine Mitton (1868–1955), who described the RGS’s exclusion of women as “absurd, considering the work women have done” (*The British Journal of Nursing* 1912, 74). Mitton went on to note that in “forming a section in the club exclusively for Geographical research, we hope that it may become what the [Royal] Geographical Society is to men, the centre to which every traveller returning laden with the fruits of her enterprise will naturally come” (*The British Journal of Nursing* 1912, 74). The desire of Mitton, Pullen-Burry, and others to establish the Lyceum Club as a center of geographical calculation—one whose institutional authority could match that of the RGS—depended, in part, upon a strict criterion for membership: “Original geographical work”.²

Under Pullen-Burry’s direction, the Circle arranged regular lectures (with accompanying luncheons or dinners) that paralleled in their focus and format those of the RGS, and during which both female *and* male geographers and travelers presented their work; those in the latter category included the Egyptologist Flinders Petrie (1853–1942) on the formation of the Nile, the journalist Henry Charles Woods (1881–1939) on the Near East during the First World War, and the president of the Royal Geographical Society, Francis Younghusband (1863–1942), on the 1921 British Mount Everest reconnaissance expedition. Although designed to provide a platform

from which female geographers, particularly, could communicate their work, the Circle was not a grant-awarding body—the support it offered was moral rather than financial.

The Circle's inaugural address was given on 13 November 1912 by the American geographer Ellen Churchill Semple (1863–1932), then promoting her recently-published *Influences of geographic environment* (1911) (Keighren 2010). In introducing Semple, Pullen-Burry took the opportunity to remind her audience of “how much valuable literary work had been produced by women travellers”, singling out for particular mention Gertrude Bell (1868–1926), Edith Durham (1863–1944), Mary Gaunt (1861–1942), Beatrice Grimshaw (1870–1953), and Annette Meakin (1867–1959), among others (*Brisbane Courier* 1913, 14). Pullen-Burry was, in this respect, echoing comments she had made earlier that year in a written submission to the RGS's secretary, John Scott Keltie (1840–1927).

In June 1912, Pullen-Burry had written to Keltie to alert him to the establishment of the Geographical Circle and, in doing so, to emphasize the significant attainments of its members. She requested that Keltie “find space among your general notices in the *Geographical Journal* to insert the enclosed [note]”:

Among the members who have recently formed a Geographical Circle for the furtherance of their interests in this domain are Lady Bruce now in Central Africa studying bacteriology in connection with sleeping sickness, Mrs Charlotte Cameron a world-wide traveller whose experiences in S[outh] America have been published latterly, Miss Agnes Herbert who wrote “Two Dianas In Somaliland” and Miss Pullen-Burry whose anthropological studies of the savages of New Britain are embodied in her work entitled “In a German Colony”.

Although Pullen-Burry's missive was never published in *The Geographical Journal*, her rhetorical point was made: Women's achievements as travelers and geographical researchers were noteworthy, professional, and transparently on a par with the majority of the male members of the RGS. Whether or not she suspected it, Pullen-Burry was pushing at an increasingly open door: The practical objection to the admission of women to the RGS on the grounds of limited space had been nullified by a planned relocation from cramped Saville Row premises to spacious South Kensington accommodation, while the longstanding intellectual objection, that saw women's geographical work as inferior to that of their male counterparts, had been comprehensively gainsaid, not least by Ellen Churchill Semple and Olive MacLeod (1880–1936), who each had recently delivered accounts of travel and geographical research on the stage of the RGS's lecture theatre that were judged “not inferior in adventurous courage or in scientific results to those achieved by men”.³ Before the close of 1912, the fellowship of the RGS was balloted on, and approved overwhelmingly, the admission of women (Bell and McEwan 1996; Evans, Keighren, and Maddrell 2013).

In February 1913, the Geographical Circle held a dinner to officially mark women's acceptance to the RGS. Among the invited guests were three of the RGS's leading lights: Clements Markham (1830–1916; past president), Thomas Holdich (1843–1929; vice-president), and Everard im Thurn (1852–1932; member of council). Pullen-Burry tabled a resolution expressing the Circle's appreciation that “this first union of women connected with geographical research and interest” was now permitted access to the RGS's “fellowships and privileges” (*The Standard* 1913, 13). In responding to Pullen-Burry's resolution, Holdich sought to flatter his audience: “The spirit of enterprise”, he noted, “and the devotion to high ideals, are as much alive

amongst women as amongst men. Nature made men physically stronger than women, but when we come to endurance, keen power of observation, and especially patience in awaiting results, we must give the palm to women” (*The Press* 1914, 10).

For a number of contemporary commentators, the fact that the inaugural meeting of the Lyceum Club’s Geographical Circle (12 November 1912) and the publication of RGS’s proposal to admit women as fellows (21 November 1912) were events separated by little more than a week was more than simply coincidental: It was evidence of a personal victory for Pullen-Burry. “It might safely be said”, noted one press reporter, “that it was through *her* labours that women were admitted as Fellows” (*The Dominion* 1914, 2). Although the purpose of this paper is self-evidently to draw attention to the central role Pullen-Burry played in securing women’s right of access to the RGS, it is important to recognize that the Society reached its decision on a number of bases, reflecting questions of space and finance as much as Pullen-Burry’s individual campaigning efforts. To single out Pullen-Burry in the way certain press commentators did, was, however, to disguise the fact that women’s cooperation (as much as their separate achievements) had created the conditions in which their collective contribution to geography—in both disciplinary and practical terms—was recognized. Although several members of the Lyceum Club—including Pullen-Burry (10 March 1913), Violet Roy-Batty, vice-president of the Geographical Circle (17 March 1913), and Charlotte Cameron (24 November 1913)—were among the first tranche of women elected to the fellowship of the RGS, the activities of the Geographical Circle did not cease then: It continued to operate (although with somewhat less campaigning zeal) until the Lyceum Club was forced into liquidation in the early 1930s (Doughan and Gordon 2006).

The autumn of 1912 was a heady and fast-changing period in the history of women in British geography: For a brief moment the masculine dominance of geography's institutional authority in that country was challenged (and diminished) by a transgressive, upstart, women-only antagonist. Although the events of ten days in November of that year—from the inauguration of the Geographical Circle to the balloting of the fellowship of the RGS on women's entry—had far-reaching effects on the subsequent composition of British geography, they were the prelude to a much longer campaign to eradicate the obstacles to women's professional participation in the discipline.

Conclusion

On 13 June 1913, and again on 8 March 1914, the Lyceum Club became the target of a celebrated thief: A former teacher, writer, and artist's model—Mary MacDonald—whom the press dubbed the “female Raffles” after the eponymous gentleman thief in E. W. Hornung's short stories (*The Ottawa Journal* 1925, 13). MacDonald's theft of jewelry from the Lyceum, and from a string of other clubs and hotels in the West End, became a *cause célèbre* (*The Standard* 1914, 8). MacDonald's conviction and incarceration in the women-only Holloway Prison (where militant suffragettes were then being force-fed) did nothing to dampen her kleptomania, and she committed a series of similar crimes in London and Brighton through the 1910s and 1920s. The lurid facts of the case aside, what is noteworthy about MacDonald's transgression is that it serves to confirm the status of the Lyceum Club as self-evidently a site of wealth and privilege: A prize just a glittering for MacDonald as any elite outpost on Piccadilly. Despite a stated intention of being open equally to “women of small or large incomes”, the Club's structure and purpose more

closely served those members of independent means—it was an elite and elitist institution (Smedley 1929, 94). Questions of class, as much as of gender, were, then, central to defining women’s geographical frontiers, both literal and institutional, in Edwardian London.

At the same time as the Lyceum Club perpetuated an inequality (women’s access to public life on the basis of financial means), its Geographical Circle challenged an inequity (women’s exclusion from the RGS). The Circle provided an important—and, by dint of its geographical location, prestigious and authoritative—venue in which the geographical work of women could be recognized, promoted, and celebrated. While the “coolness, pluck, and general physical powers” of women travelers and explorers were increasingly the subject of popular attention in the first decades of the twentieth century, the Circle, under Pullen-Burry’s active leadership, saw to it that women’s geographical work was understood not as an adventuresome novelty but as a serious and legitimate enterprise (*The Press* 1914, 10). Although the eventual admission of women to the fellowship of the RGS occurred for a variety of reasons, it is evident that the Lyceum’s Club status (derived from, and exemplified by, its spatial situation in London’s West End) did much to legitimate the members of its Geographical Circle, and by extension that of contemporary women geographers in Britain.

The Circle was, however, more than merely a lever deployed to gain access to the RGS: It functioned as an important focus for women’s geographical work and was a site for the transmission, reception, and evaluation of new knowledge that continued to function for two decades *after* the admission of women to the RGS. The Circle shows women’s role in the history of British geography—particularly prior to 1913—to be importantly cooperative in nature. More significantly, the Circle’s activities demonstrate the fact that women’s status as geographical authorities was earned and established through a self-organized mechanism and did not depend

alone upon its eventual confirmation by the RGS. What the Geographical Circle of the Lyceum Club shows is that the narrative of women in British geography is defined not simply by their passive inclusion or exclusion from its principal institutional authority, but by their active efforts (individual and collective) to establish a parallel and equivalent organization capable of warranting their standing as legitimate producers of geographical knowledge.

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Notes

¹ The British Newspaper Archive is available online at <http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>; Papers Past at <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/>; and Trove at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/>.

² Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) (hereafter RGS), Additional Papers, AP/93/2ii. Bessie Pullen-Burry to [John Scott Keltie], 29 June [1912].

³ RGS, Additional Papers, AP/93/2ii. *Proposal to admit women as fellows*, 21 November 1912, 2.

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