This is the submitted version of the review, slightly longer than the one published.

The Match Girl and the Heiress, by Seth Koven; pp. xvi + 445. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014

At heart, Seth Koven's The Match Girl and the Heiress is a study of love and friendship between two women: 'I cannot say with certainty how and when they met,' he tells us in an arresting opening line, 'but I do know that Muriel Lester and Nellie Dowell loved one another.' That Muriel, daughter of a wealthy shipbuilder and Nellie, a half-orphaned Cockney working in the match industry from the age of twelve, should even meet—sometime between 1903 and 1909—never mind love each other, 'seems improbable', acknowledges Koven, 'more the stuff of moralizing fiction than history' (1). But if this—to us—remarkable love story is the focus of the book, it's a different kind of history—not fiction—that Koven is after: 'I [] have written this book because Muriel and Nellie's friendship—its tensions and tenderness, their failures and foibles—moved me' (9). History, in Koven's hands, is a labour of love.

Through the two women's relationship, Koven explores 'the worlds of wealth and want' that shaped them and the 'all-but-forgotten project of radical Christian idealism' they strove to realize in poverty-ridden Bow, where the match girl lived and labored and the heiress established a 'People's House' at Kingsley Hall in 1915. There, activists embraced radical Christianity, pacifism and internationalism alongside practical charity for the laboring poor of Bow: 'The local and global, the

everyday and the utopian, the private and the public existed in fruitful tension as distinct but connected realms of thought, action and feeling' (2). Friendships, Koven reminds us, underpin activism and community-building, and are grounded in everyday personal relationships as much as political doctrine and organization. Through the lives of Nellie and Muriel, the ways they intersected and diverged, and the dynamics of their friendship, Koven seeks to open up that larger history: the shift from the poor laws and Victorian philanthropy to the rights-based, social welfare of the twentieth century, forged in the volatile landscapes of global capitalism and world war.

Intimacy is therefore the means by which Koven seeks to combine 'micro- and macro-histories'. Published the same year David Armitage and Jo Guldi threw down the gauntlet in The History Manifesto (Cambridge University Press, 2014) by challenging historians to return to the macro, big data, and longue duree, Koven's study provides a timely and exemplary model of how the 'small', the 'particular', and immersive attention to intersecting lives can illuminate and complicate large-scale social processes and historical narratives. 'I've written this book with the intention of dissolving the boundary between "lives" and "histories"', Koven explains; 'Lives made history; history made lives' (9). Nellie, for instance, 'had a remarkable life as a proletarian match factory worker and Cockney cosmopolitan' (2), long before she encountered Muriel's internationalism. To his own surprise, and probably many readers, Nellie did not join the famous Match Girls' Strike that, Koven reminds us, was provoked and undermined by the 'global traffic' in matches and workers, employed—like Nellie—as economic migrants in New Zealand and Sweden. Nellie

'put job security before worker solidarity' and, in this way, Koven points out—busting radical history's preoccupation with resistance—'she resembled the vast majority of women workers in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Britain, who were neither trade unionists nor members of labor and socialist parties' (17).

'About such women,' Koven adds, 'we know far too little' (17) and, above all, it is Nellie's story that drives his book. He set out 'looking for Muriel Lester', one of the many middle-class, do-gooders from his first book Slumming, but instead, he tells us, in a disarmingly simple sentence, 'I found Nellie Dowell' (6). The chance discovery among Muriel's voluminous uncatalogued papers, of a bundle of her letters, addressed to 'Miss Lester'—the only papers to be 'self-archived' by Muriel with the simple, hand-written label 'Nell'—sparked Koven's curiosity: 'Nellie's letters baffled, delighted, and intrigued me. Who was Nellie? Why did she write these letters, what did they signify, and why did Muriel save them?' (6). Piecing them together, with two short biographical narratives, written by the grieving Muriel after Nellie's death in 1923, Koven seeks to reconstruct and interrogate what eluded him in Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London (Princeton University Press, 2006) and many scholars of Victorian and Edwardian philanthropy: 'cross-class benevolence and social welfare in and as a dynamic relationship between individuals' (9).

In the chapter openings, Koven deftly intrigues readers about the women's partnership, with pithy teasers, such as the one-sentence paragraph beginning his study of their Victorian childhoods: 'Here is one of many ways to tell their story:

Muriel had a childhood and Nellie Dowell didn't' (20). Trawling through census and poor law records, and reading these in tangent with the stories Muriel reconstructed from Nellie and her mother's memories, Koven tracks Nellie's lost girlhood, spent in poor law institutions following her father's death and the disintegration of a once comfortable working-class home. Analysis of these records fills out not only Nellie's backstory but the grim conditions that led philanthropists like Muriel to the East End and shaped their alternative social visions.

Yet as the book proceeds, there is a curious absence of other working-class women like and unlike Nellie. Before a fascinating account of Nellie's global proletarian journey as a match worker, Koven re-tells the familiar history of Victorian society's fascination with the figure of 'the match girl', via the commentary of the usual suspects, such as Henry Mayhew, W.T. Stead, Annie Besant. The opportunity is missed to compare Nellie's experience of the famous strike and its aftermath, with those of the match workers who instigated the action, as Louise Raw has demonstrated in Striking a Light: The Bryant and May Matchwomen and their Place in History (Continnum, 2009), a study mentioned only in passing. It was not proletarian sisterhood Nellie sought, Koven tells us via Muriel, but the attention and approval of the lady slummers she met at a Factory Girls Club: 'She liked the ladies. Their clothes delighted her; so did their voices and their white hands. Nellie wanted to look as nice as they did' (101). Her radicalisation, Muriel again intimated, came later in Sweden where, in a world away from Bow, she began to question 'the colossal claims of religion' (126). The hard knocks she had survived as a child, and that she witnessed when back in Bow, decided her against marriage and the all-too

high probability of being widowed like her mother and grandmother when ‘you’re left’, as she put it, ‘without nourishments when you need ’em most, a queer sort of world’ (127).

Dissatisfaction with that ‘queer sort of world’ must have fuelled Nellie’s attraction to the radical spaces in the East End where she met Muriel, and an eclectic range of activists practiced ‘a robust, experimental and transnational engagement’ and, what Koven calls, ‘God is Love’ theology between the 1890s and outbreak of World War 1 (137). Koven vividly portrays this cosmopolitan and utopian phase in metropolitan radicalism that included labor activists in envisioning and practicing inclusive and empowering forms of citizenship. But Nellie slips out of view in this chapter, as do working women, though we know from correspondence between Ruth Slate and Eva Slawson that such women were immersed in this culture too (Dear Girl: The Diaries and Letters of Two Working Women 1897-1917, edited by Tierl Thompson, London: The Women's Press, 1987). These oversights matter because they gloss over the many studies of poor women’s lives, networks and expression. ‘Shelves [may] groan from the weight of books about women like Muriel Lester,’ as Koven says, but it is not true that ‘We have none about very poor women like Nellie’ (10) as, in fact, his endnotes show. They matter, also, because of the contexts in which Koven chooses to interpret Nellie’s letters that initially captivated him in the archives of Kingsley Hall.

It is over half way through the book before we are introduced to Nellie’s correspondence in the chapter ‘Body Biographies in War and Peace’. But first we are taken exhaustively through the two women’s apparent breakdowns, starting with

Nellie in 1909-10, when the surviving letters began, and her treatment in a pauper hospital. Koven forensically scrutinizes Nellie's medical file, 'so brazenly invasive … that my exhilaration in finding it was distempered by discomfort in reading it' (189), though this does not stop him lingering over its detail nor including an image of her 'Temperature and Urine chart' (188). The file is grist to Koven's analytic purpose: its 'tensions between abstraction and embodiment, the impersonal and the too-personal animate my attempt to reconstruct Nellie's medical crisis … and explore its historical and methodological significance' (189). This representation of institutionalized allopathic medicine sets up, too, a more speculative suggestion that Muriel's 'breakdown' in 1916, the endpoint of the surviving correspondence, was brought on by the introduction of conscription and the state's persecution of the conscientious objectors she tirelessly supported; 'they surely exacerbated her frayed nerves' (223). Only after forty pages do we begin to explore how the two 'loving mates' enacted in their correspondence an alternative, intimate and therapeutic form of care, in the context of—and protest against—'unprecedented levels of state-sanctioned violence against bodies' (185).

Nellie's letters (Muriel's side of the correspondence have not survived) are a revelation. 'Written in "informal" prose with little regard to rules of grammar and syntax, they burst with conviction and freshness', Koven writes beautifully (226). 'Love and illness are the master tropes of her letters', that he treats generously with photographed examples and ample quotation, as here from 1916:

> are you really better I have
> thought about you, & was so

sorry for I know you won't
give in & rest & look after
every one else I think I
can beat you, now you always
think you are strong, but I
know now & when you come
home & do your Tramping
round Bow, I shall have to
look after you (232-3)

'[W]hen you come home & do your Tramping': the phrase eloquently captures the tensions and dynamics in the women's relationship, at once personal and political, and Koven's analysis of the letters is nuanced and suggestive. In taking care of Muriel, Nellie asserted her role as primary care-giver; the one who knew Muriel best and who she most needed. It was a role Nellie needed, too, now her body could no longer support industrial wage labor. She knew her friend had other claims on her attention—'Nellie's admiration for Muriel's devotion to Bow vies with her faint disapproval of Muriel's "tramping around Bow"' (233)—though surely she was also teasing her partner's slumming antics.

'What sort of friendship was Muriel and Nellie's?' Koven answers his question through consideration of feminist and queer scholarship on same-sex companionship, romantic friendships, and erotic desire from 'chaste to fully sexual relationships' (237). He shifts focus, however, 'from sexual identity (was she a lesbian?) to explore the conceptual space between "the sexual" and "the erotic"'

(238) and the 'broad range of nonconforming desires and practices, imaginings and actions' permitted by 'queerness' as 'an analytic category' (243). Class difference, he argues, constituted the erotic terrain of Nellie's and Muriel's attachment. Addressing Muriel as 'Dear Miss Lester', 'Nellie underscored something they knew and cherished: they had found a way to love one another across a vast social and class divide' (251). 'For all their determination to transcend hierarchies and efface boundaries of difference,' Koven concludes, 'Nellie and Muriel kept finding ways to reproduce them. Nellie pushed back against Muriel's egalitarian project by loving Muriel partly *because* Muriel was her social better' (11). Experience as a global proletarian may have opened Nellie to the claims of radical Christianity, implies Koven, but she still 'She liked the ladies' as *ladies*. It was Nellie, he suggests, who resisted equality most insistently and, in her letters, 'she enacted and thematized a grammar of difference that playfully recognized difference itself.' (237)

Would Nellie have tramped around Bow with Muriel had her body been stronger, as did other working women from Bible missionaries to suffragists? It is striking that the literary-textual frames of reference Koven uses to attend to her 'voice' are the writings of three literary writers: Gertrude Stein, Elizabeth Barrett, and Vera Brittain. Nellie's letters 'bear striking resemblance' to Stein's 'daring modernist texts' (226), we are told before we encounter them: 'With remarkable compressed economy, both women convey meaning without needing to fill up the spaces between each clause. … The speech patterns of working-class moderns like Nellie provided the audible archive upon which Stein … drew' (228). How might we read Nellie's 'voice' if we also listened to her speech patterns alongside those of her neighbors, or the

memoirs of working-class women of her generation, such as those in the Burnett Archive (www.writinglives.org), who wrote autobiographies in equal numbers to working-class men?

The position of Nellie's letters in this seventy-page chapter that seeks to connect multiple themes and historiographies has made me think about not only how we frame marginalized voices but also the protocols of scholarly writing and the parameters of the academic monograph. Koven does much to experiment with the form. There are—to borrow a phrase—three people in this relationship and the historian carefully inserts himself into the narrative to guide readers through Muriel's and Nellie's crowded, cosmopolitan world and his interpretation of it. This is most effective in the framing sections of the book where Koven elegantly employs the conversational story-telling style of the best narrative history and creative non-fiction, with startling turns of phrase and captivating titles and headings.

In the research chapters, the style becomes more dense and labored as the historian displays 'the unglamorous methods of social history research (turning thousands of pages of different hospital admissions)' (9) and performs an academic 'grammar of difference' as he mobilizes Nellie's and Muriel's writings to serve his scholarly purposes. In his next book, I'd like to see this bold historian relaxing his style more consistently with shorter chapters that give space for his sources and readers to breathe. Princeton University Press has shown confidence in the potential of the academic monograph to crossover to a wider readership by investing in the book's high production values. The Press should be commended for sharing Koven's labour

of love by including multiple images of people, texts and places that help readers visualize the rich and complex world drawn by the author. A second edition could usefully include a list of illustrations.

In an original and eye-catching cover illustration, in which Muriel and Nellie conjoin and pull away from each other, Francesco Bongiorni has brilliantly embodied the relationship and spirit explored in this inventive book. Bongiorni's fusing of Victorian and modernist styles also captures much of Koven's argument about the connections between these periods. Through the archival traces of Nellie's and Muriel's separate lives and partnership—at once personal and political—Koven illustrates the vitality and persistence of a radical Victorian faith-based project that confronted hierarchy and inequality of all kinds and nurtured the development of 'rights-based social justice ethics and politics' in the twentieth century. This was an 'unfinished work of progress', as all utopian aspirations must be and their 'way of living in the world' embodied its faultlines and challenges (352). As social welfare and citizenship are again at stake in another moment of crisis in global capitalism, there is much we can learn by revisiting these pioneering practitioners of a lived faith and politics.