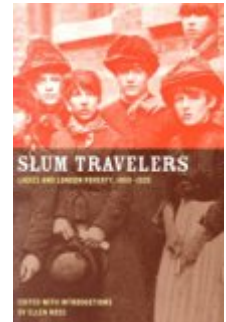


**Ellen Ross, ed..** *Slum Travelers: Ladies and London Poverty, 1860-1920*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. xxi + 319 pp. \$22.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-520-24906-6.



**Reviewed by** Alison Twells

**Published on** H-Albion (November, 2008)

**Commissioned by** Mark Hampton (Lingnan University)

Ellen Ross's *Slum Travelers* brings together a selection of writing by lady philanthropists and "explorers" visiting London slums in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Ross states in her very useful and critical introduction to the volume, these excerpts chronicle London poverty from the perspective of women. They present an alternative to the focus of the male social observer and urban traveler on the working lives of men, crime and the street, prostitution, and the pub, to focus instead on domestic life, mothering, children, the work of factory girls, and issues of health and education. They result less from observations from a distance than from ventures into the homes of the poor, and conversations with their female inhabitants. Each of the excerpts is accompanied by an introduction by Ross, which sets out the details of the author's life, networks and friendships, writing, and various philanthropic and political commitments. The extracts are ideal as a teaching tool; they serve the purpose of rescuing some lesser-known women writers and activists, and so rewrite London histo-

ry.

The evocative and vivid excerpts are, by turns, sharp, perceptive, chiding, critical, educative, humorous, and, very frequently, respectful and moving. Well chosen and wide ranging, they cover fifty years of women's slum visiting, and incorporate a variety of genres, including journalism, social investigation, fiction, poetry, and art. They include the well-known—such as Annie Besant, writing on "White Slavery"; Margaret McMillan's moving account of the obstacles in the path of a mother's very modest dreams for her family; and Beatrice Webb on sweated labor. They also introduce some lesser-known women: Margaret Harkness writes here on the long hours, tiring labor, risks, and insecurities of bar work for women; Edith Hogg educates her readership on the suffocating atmosphere and subsequent health hazards promoted by the job of fur pulling, unelaborated in the Royal Commission report, but which was conducted at home in an airless, smelly, and choking environment; Olive Christian Malvery's contribu-

tion is a journalistic account of the lives of the coster girls she set herself up among; Anna Martin's sympathy for the young working-class mother, criticized by government and local authorities, shows her suffering not from a want of love for and knowledge of how to care for her children, but from a "lack of pence," frequently occasioned by paternal irresponsibility; and Dorothy Tennant's delightful if romanticized "ragamuffin drawings" depict the "merry, reckless, happy-go-lucky urchin; the tom-boy girl; the plump, untidy mother dancing and tossing her ragged baby"--women and children she believed to be neglected in the "deplorably piteous" images of "ragged life" (pp. 152, 143-144). The writings discuss housing and community, cultures of marriage and burial, schooling and infant care, home work and factory labor, domestic interiors, workhouses, and homelessness. A good many emphasize the sheer physicality of working-class women's lives. They also draw out the interiority of such women, who struggled to keep sight of their dreams and desires in the never-ending struggle to make ends meet and keep home and family together. The variety of relationships and exchanges represented here show upper- and middle-class "ladies," while undoubtedly involved in "service and regulation," as less concerned with surveillance (p. 3). We are able, in Ross's words, "to judge these encounters more finely--beyond sentimentalized images of female selflessness, satirical 'lady bountiful' stereotypes, or social-control simplifications" (p. 5).

Ross's introduction, "Adventures among the Poor," provides the context for a full appreciation and interpretation of the writings. She alerts the reader's attention to a range of pertinent issues, including later nineteenth-century discussions about the nature and extent of poverty, stimulated by anxieties over population growth and overcrowding, fears of social disorder, and the enfranchisement of working-class men in 1867 and 1884; and by developments in education and public health, which exposed poor children to greater

public scrutiny. Ross highlights women's changing relationship to the city, as they increasingly negotiated urban space; and the relationship of their ventures into social work to the emergence of early feminism and demands for rights as citizens. She discusses the connection between historical and literary representations of poverty, and the influence on women of the tradition of earlier missionary society reports and of contemporary travel writing. She looks at the deployment of pathos, derived from the earlier antislavery campaign, and emphasizes the significance of the aural, the conversational, in women's representations of their relationships with the poor. We are encouraged to see women's writing and activism in the context of a variety of networks: church, chapel, and parish; local and global philanthropic and missionary practice; housing and neighborhood; and friendship and romantic relationships. Bringing these documents together, Ross allows readers to acquire a more complex understanding of women's sphere, which in the 1860s was still extremely limited in terms of the areas of public life that were closed to them, but which by the 1890s had expanded to include participation in parish vestries, school boards, and poor law boards of guardians. We learn also about the religious motivation of many women, and especially the significance of the priority given to the exemplary life of Jesus Christ. As Ross comments, there is a large number of clergymen's daughters represented here, some of whom would undoubtedly have trained for ministry had it been open to them, but who instead became slum philanthropists. There were other "push" factors: many women were motivated by their boredom with, and in some cases disgust at, the superficiality of their social relationships and the dreary routines of visiting, which characterized their previous, privileged lives.

Ross raises some provoking questions for future work, including the relationship of women's intimate knowledge of slum life to their political

analyses; the impact of pathos and sympathy on the recipients of charity; and the legacies for the twentieth century, in terms of approaches to poverty, interclass communication, and women's leadership. My own interests led me to ask further questions about the women's motivation, and especially the place of their Christian faith within their lives and work. I would also like to know more about the relationship of this new and expanded phase of women's activism to its earlier origins in the activities of the Bible Society and various visiting societies in the early decades of the nineteenth century, in which women were dominant, only to be superseded by men for a brief moment in the 1830s-50s. We might also ask what is specific to London in these extracts. But these are further questions inspired by this volume, rather than criticisms of the book, which makes a unique, rich, and scholarly contribution to our understanding of the domestic and public lives of elite and poor women, and the wider implications for social history of the relationships between them.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

**Citation:** Alison Twells. Review of Ross, Ellen, ed. *Slum Travelers: Ladies and London Poverty, 1860-1920*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. November, 2008.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=15546>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.