CONSTRUCTING A SUBURBAN IDENTITY: YOUTH, FEMININITY AND MODERNITY IN LATE-VICTORIAN MERSEYSIDE

Colin G Pooley (corresponding author)
Lancaster Environment Centre
Lancaster University
Lancaster
LA1 4YQ

01524 510241
c.pooley@lancaster.ac.uk

and

Siân Pooley
Pembroke College
Cambridge
CB2 1RF

01223 338133
skp30@cam.ac.uk

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Biographical notes

Colin Pooley's research focuses on the social geography of Britain and continental Europe since the eighteenth century, especially aspects of migration, mobility, housing, health and urban change.

Siân Pooley researches the social and cultural history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain, especially family, gender, childhood and welfare.

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Abstract

Suburban growth was one of the main characteristics of late-nineteenth-century British towns, and a suburban life style rapidly became the aspiration of a high proportion of urban dwellers. This paper explores the experience of one young woman growing up in a late-Victorian suburb, and assesses the ways in which she negotiated the structures of this emerging 'modern' environment, so as to construct her own identity and behaviour. Evidence is drawn from one very detailed diary covering the period 1884 to 1892, and attention is focused on three aspects of everyday life: public and social space; domestic routine; and friendships and relationships. The conventional view of middle-class suburban domesticity is challenged by evidence from this diary, which suggests that it was the public and social life of the suburb that was of particular importance to young women. While older married women's experiences were centred upon maintaining a respectable home, the provincial suburban environment offered to young single women considerable opportunities for independent mobility and action, which were restricted by relatively few familial constraints. The diarist did not fundamentally challenge the culture of middle-class suburbia, but instead was able to manipulate many social expectations to her own advantage. As a site of on-going development and malleable norms, late-nineteenth-century suburbia offered its young elite residents opportunities for a certain degree of social, cultural and spatial autonomy that was understood to be essential to the life of the nascent community.

Key words: suburb, diary, youth, gender, modernity, Merseyside

Running Head: Constructing a suburban identity

Suburban growth was one of the main characteristics of late-nineteenth-century British towns and cities.[1] Although the precise definition of what constitutes a suburb can be debated, by the second half of the nineteenth century all urban areas were experiencing such growth.[2] A suburban lifestyle rapidly became the aspiration of a high proportion of urban dwellers and the suburb was recognised by contemporaries as a desirable spatial form. Those concerned with Victorian housing and health reforms were quick to extol the advantages of suburban life, which was perceived to provide space, fresh air and a healthy environment.[3]

The physical form of Victorian suburbia was highly varied, ranging from relatively high-density developments of terraced housing for skilled working-class and lower middle-class families, to low-density villa developments in semi-rural environments for the more affluent.[4] However, what united such diverse suburbs as a distinctive urban form was less their physical features than the cultural attributes that their residents were believed to share. Middle-class suburban lifestyles in particular were classically characterised as providing a combination of financial and psychological security, social respectability, and domestic privacy. Not only did suburban development allow physical separation from the urban poor, but also it provided a set of cultural signifiers that enabled the establishment of a middle-class identity.[5] The quasi-proper name ‘Suburbia’ was coined to define such spaces in the 1890s, and this distinctively late-Victorian social milieu allowed the creation of a stable home and family life, the consumption of the expanding material culture of respectability, and the pursuit of everyday activities in the company of others with a similar background and mindset.[6]

Although the ambivalent literary representations of suburbia have been studied, the ways in which suburban values and experiences were understood by their inhabitants have been rarely considered.[7] 'The paucity of sources' has left middle-class experiences of suburban life as 'missing voices' in the existing historiography.[8] This paper adopts the prism of one young woman's diary to explore the ways in which she used, interpreted and appropriated a late-nineteenth-century provincial suburb so as to construct her own lifestyle and identity.

It has been argued that the suburb and the cult of domesticity, which it fostered, was a space of particular importance for women and one in which men were increasingly uncomfortable.[9] Studies have focused on the responsibilities of married women for whom a suburban lifestyle placed expectations of high standards of domestic cleanliness, 'scientific' child-rearing and a public display of respectability.[10] The experiences of younger, single suburban women were potentially quite different, but have rarely been considered.

This absence is surprising given that the figure of the 'New Woman' emerged concurrently with the ideal of the suburb. The 'New Woman' was primarily a literary creation who flouted conventions, asserted her independence, demanded educational, sexual and occupational equality and adopted youthful, irreverent and shocking codes of behaviour. Both the image of the suburb and the 'New Woman' were interpreted as signs of fin-de-siècle modernity and were widely satirised. However, while mockery of the

aspiring conformist suburbanite was understood to have light-hearted and comic potential, the 'New Woman' was interpreted by many as a profound political and social threat.[11] Likewise, the apparent safety of the space of the suburb contrasted with anxieties that were expressed about women's increasing cultural prominence as shoppers, journalists and professional workers in London.[12] It is therefore revealing to explore the interaction between these two images, so as to consider both the gendering of the suburb and the suburbanising of young women.

It was in the final decades of the nineteenth century that many have suggested that 'adolescence' began to be understood as a universally experienced and distinct life-cycle stage, which required specialised treatment. It has been suggested that the adoption of secondary, especially boarding, school education for the sons and latterly the daughters of the middle class was critical in establishing a separate age-defined period between childhood and adulthood.[13] The rising mean age of marriage combined with a national concern about the perceived 'fitness' of the young further contributed to the construction of independent cultures of boyhood and girlhood for which novels, periodicals, advice manuals, sporting associations and voluntary youth groups increasingly also catered.[14]

While historians have demonstrated the importance of shifting psychological, physiological and pedagogical understandings of youth, there is an extensive contemporary geographical literature that maintains the centrality of young people in forming conceptions of childhood and youth. Instead of merely being subject to changing constructions of themselves by adults, these studies argue for the importance of

identifying child agency and of listening to children's voices.[15] For the late-nineteenth century generational cultures have been identified primarily through gang cultures whose agency was demonstrated through rebellions led by working-class lads.[16] This article suggests that late-Victorian suburban society also produced constraints to which middle-class young women responded. However, the relatively insubstantial and malleable structures of nascent suburbia in the 1880s and 1890s meant that the younger generation were able to construct their own versions of suburban identity that were formative in shaping, rather than rejecting, late-Victorian middle-class society.

This paper explores these themes through the analysis of the writings of one young woman, Elizabeth Lee, who kept a daily diary from the age of sixteen in 1884 until 1892. Elizabeth was the eldest child and only daughter of a draper and gentleman's outfitter. Throughout the period of the diary she was unmarried and living in her parents' home in Prenton, a suburb of Birkenhead, on Merseyside in north-west England. The surviving manuscript fills one large folio of 120 pages, often written in a cramped and untidy hand, and the typed transcript of the text runs to over 150,000 words.[17]

By examining the everyday experiences of suburban life through the eyes of one individual, it is possible to assess the extent to which contemporary suburban ideals were attained, the degree to which this writer perceived some of the structures of suburban society to be constraining, and the ways in which she rebelled against or reconfigured them to construct her own identity. Interpretation is set within the context of structuration theory, in which it is argued that individual agency interacted with deeper structures

through everyday social practices, and in doing so produced particular social and spatial outcomes.[18] Thus it can be suggested that the actions of middle-class youth interacted with the structures of suburban society, and through their social practices adolescents had the opportunity to produce structural change. Because identity is such an elusive and personal concept, it is never possible to know exactly how identities were formed and changed, though there is a large geographical literature that explores the relationships between identity and place.[19] However, a detailed personal diary, which records the minutiae of everyday life, allows us to get closer to concepts of individual identity than most sources. By analysing this account within the context of an emerging suburb, and by relating it to the values and ideals of suburban living, it is possible to begin to explore the interaction of structure and agency within a particular setting.

The difficulties associated with the historical analysis of self writing are well known. Most attention has been focused on the interpretation of autobiographies and life histories, which were usually written late in life, with an audience in mind and often structured to a particular format.[20] Diaries can share some of these problems – for instance diaries kept by politicians and other prominent people in order to record their version of events – though all diaries do have the advantage of immediacy. Diaries also, necessarily, project a particular and selective image of the writer.[21] In this sense, all self writing has a story to tell that must be taken into account in interpretation.

Elizabeth Lee did not come from a well-educated or literary family. Apart from letters to friends and family, there is no evidence that she engaged in any other literary activities.

In the first sentence of the extant diary, Elizabeth merely notes that the previous year 'I took it into my head to write a 'Diary'' and on being given a diary for 1884 by her father, she began the surviving volume. There is no apparent motive, other than the desire to record what she did, and she mentions no intended readership. The diary was mostly written up daily. There are few crossings out or evidence of censorship, apart from during the final months of the diary when she was going through a particularly turbulent period in her love life. Spelling and grammar are often inconsistent and the diary records not only events but also her thoughts, hopes and fears. This paper explores the ways in which these were constituted by – and in turn shaped – the emerging suburban community in which Elizabeth was growing up by focusing on three themes: her experiences of the public and social spaces of the suburb; her home life and private domesticity; and friendships and relationships that cut across the divide between public and private sites within suburbia.

PUBLIC AND SOCIAL SPACE

In 1905 the Liberal politician and writer C.F.G. Masterman expressed his horror at the growth of London: 'North, East, South, and West the aggregation is silently pushing outwards like some gigantic plasmodium: spreading slimy arms over the surrounding fields, heavily dragging after them the ruin of its desolation'.[22] It was in a very different, but also rapidly changing, landscape of encroaching development that Elizabeth Lee grew up. How did she interact with this suburban environment?

The Lee family were suburban pioneers. At the age of fourteen in 1882 Elizabeth moved with her family from rooms above her father's drapers shop in the town of Birkenhead to the newly expanding semi-rural suburb of Prenton. In the 1880s the suburb of Prenton was in the early stages of development. In 1881 the parish contained just 17 inhabited houses and 111 persons, rising to 30 houses and 267 inhabitants by 1891.[23] At this date her parents were raising five younger brothers in addition to Elizabeth, and four more boys were to be born over the following eight years. Mr Lee was prospering in business and he oversaw the building of a large detached villa in Prenton. He also retained land around the house and in the surrounding rural area, which he used as a hobby smallholding. The Lee's villa was named 'Wharfedale', so as to reflect both Elizabeth parents' origins in this Yorkshire valley and their image of a rural idyll.

By the 1880s the roads leading to Prenton were lined with a mixture of terraced houses (close to Birkenhead) and then larger terraced, semi-detached and detached villas.[24] Elizabeth observed with interest as the suburb was built around the Lee family home:

> I took the children out this afternoon. There are a lot of young fellows measuring the land on the Storeton Rd, and they were throwing kisses to me and whistling and carrying on dreadfully. I was talking to Miss Beale (who was out in the garden) a good bit.[25]

Not only did the young surveyors offer an amusing attraction for seventeen-year-old Elizabeth, but the excitement of the arrival of neighbours was also later commented upon:

'… Mr. Drape came up with Papa this afternoon to look over some houses which have been built opposite us, and he has decided to have one; so we shall have some neighbours.'[26] Mr Drape was a close friend of Elizabeth's family, a business associate of her father's and for a period his employee, so that ties of commerce, friendship and neighbourhood were mutually reinforcing in suburban society.

As more villas were built, Prenton also gained the services that were desirable for a suburban lifestyle. For instance, in 1886 Elizabeth recorded the opening of Prenton Pavilion and a tennis club, which also organised an annual dance. In 1890 the Lees sold some of their land for the construction of a new Congregational Church, and both the Pavilion and the many churches in the neighbourhood hosted a range of social, educational and community events.

Throughout the period of her diary Elizabeth lived a very active life. It was rare for her to spend a day in which she did not walk around the suburb on her own. She went out frequently for personal shopping, to lectures, to church, for entertainments, to visit friends or simply to walk around the surrounding streets and fields. Indeed, one responsibility that she performed for her family was to take the younger children out for walks, using the recently paved streets of the suburb that facilitated the pushing of the perambulator.[27] From the record in the diary, Elizabeth attended public social events in the suburb with far greater regularity than her father, mother or younger brothers. Her parents only very irregularly worshipped at their Anglican church, while she attended up to three times per week when in her teens and most weeks when in her mid-twenties; she

made no record of her family's presence at most of the lectures, concerts and entertainments that were increasingly frequently held; and the organisation of, and attendance at, public music hall dances and balls was dominated by the young. There is no record of Elizabeth's mother taking on an active role in any of the suburb's public social occasions, while her father was largely involved in wider masculine and commercial networks on the Wirral. It was therefore primarily around the participation and interests of the young single suburbanite that the public social life of the elite community developed.

Although the majority of Elizabeth's action space was focused on an area within about three kilometres of her home, particularly the immediate locality around which she walked (Prenton and parts of Birkenhead near to her father's two shops), she also travelled further afield. Elizabeth's father owned a horse and 'dogcart' and (from July 1888) two Shetland ponies and a trap, but she rarely had access to these. Two symbols of the 'New Woman's' fin-de-siècle mobility – the ability to ride a bicycle and to drive – were also ones upon which Elizabeth commented in her diary, perceiving them to be daring and exciting activities.[28] Unlike her brothers, she did not regularly ride a bicycle, but Elizabeth did learn to drive a horse and cart while on holiday with a male friend in the Isle of Man, noting that 'people did look, as it is quite an uncommon thing to see a lady driving'.[29] She later drove her father's dogcart with a different male friend around her home area on the Wirral.[30]

However, new forms of public transport were of far greater importance than these modern private means of travelling in allowing Elizabeth to make journeys that could not be undertaken on foot. Her home was only three kilometres from the Birkenhead ferry terminal that provided access to the city of Liverpool. A horse-drawn tram provided regular transport from an adjacent street to the centre of town. Elizabeth was thus able to be part of the urban area of Birkenhead and had easy access to Liverpool, but at the same time was able to enjoy the advantages of space, seclusion and status afforded by the suburb. She made regular trips to central Liverpool both for shopping and for entertainment, and also travelled elsewhere (for instance to visit relatives in Yorkshire and on holidays).

Although sometimes Elizabeth travelled with friends and occasionally with family, she moved around this area alone at most times of the day and night. Her opportunities were most restricted in terms of times, locations and companions at the start of the diary when she was relatively young and when her parents exerted an obvious influence on her activities. However, by the age of twenty-one there were few apparent restrictions and she seemed to move freely and frequently around the locality. Thus whilst some aspects of her everyday mobility and leisure activities were centred on the suburb in which she lived and involved contact with neighbours and people known to her parents, many activities required her to move outside this environment.

Elizabeth frequently made the journey from Prenton to Birkenhead. In 1884 she noted the first time that she travelled home on the tram alone, after having served in her father's

shop. The close community of the suburb is emphasised by the fact that she shared the tram with at least one other passenger who she knew. [31] Later travelling alone from her father's shop or from friends' homes in Birkenhead became a regular occurrence, as this example of an evening in 1885 suggests:

> I went to Birkenhead tonight and put my white dress and best hat on. Mr. Elliot and the rest of them did stare at me when I got to the shop. It was because I was dressed up so I suppose. I went to Katie Egerton. They are without a servant. Then I went to see Lottie Heathcock. She has had a cousin stopping with her. She is going to Bristol in a fortnight. Pa had gone home when I got to the shop so I had to come home by myself.[32]

When walking at night Elizabeth was mostly in the company of friends, but she also travelled alone. In 1885 she noted that she parted from the male friend with whom she had spent the evening in Birkenhead and that 'Then I had to get into the B'head Park tram, as there was no other, and arrived home at ½ past 11 o'clock.' This indirect tram route was inconvenient and Elizabeth noted that she was 'so tired' on arriving home, but she made no other special comment about the journey and it was not unusual for her to undertake these journeys by public transport alone and without comment.[33] On occasion she recorded coming home alone after all of the trams had stopped running for the night, so she must have walked unaccompanied. Such travel to and from Birkenhead was an everyday occurrence during the night and day. Although Elizabeth often enjoyed the

company of friends and sometimes of family, these were not required for her to travel around the area outside of the immediate suburb of Prenton.

Elizabeth also regularly crossed the Mersey to Liverpool by ferry and, after the rail tunnel opened in 1886, by train. As with her trips to Birkenhead, although she often undertook outings in the company of both male and female friends, she also frequently travelled alone and did not seem in the least perturbed when this occurred. For instance, the day that the railway tunnel opened, Elizabeth deliberately took herself alone to Liverpool to use this new means of transport and recorded her excitement at experiencing the lift, the crush of people and the gentlemen on the station:

> Fine day. The railway under the Tunnel was opened for traffic today and I went to L'pool by it. I went up in the "lift" when I got to L'pool and there was such a frightful crush to get it. Had a good look round L'pool and came back by train. Such a lot of gentleman in the station. It was so jolly but I got nearly squashed to death.[34]

Only on two exceptional occasions did Elizabeth note any fears when travelling.[35] At all other times she moved freely and without apparent concern both within and outside the suburb.

The public environment of the suburb offered a space that facilitated the independence of young middle-class women, such as Elizabeth Lee. It offered a range of suitable public

facilities and entertainments, and many companions with whom they could be shared. The interests and active involvement of the large number of single young men and women were fundamental to the construction of the public social, religious and sporting life of the suburb. Moreover, the perception of safety and propriety within a select small community also allowed such activities to be attended alone. However, the town of Birkenhead and the central parts of the city of Liverpool were also spaces in which Elizabeth felt comfortable. The development of dense urban and suburban public transport networks in the second half of the nineteenth century offered opportunities for independent mobility that would not have been available to young middle-class women a generation earlier, to those growing up in more remote rural areas or to those living in urban environments that were considered dangerous and potentially unsuitable for respectable women. In this way, the late-nineteenth-century suburb was a unique public space in which youthful independence was taken for granted and from which the young could also use their freedoms to explore the attractions of the town and city.

HOME LIFE AND DOMESTICITY

The fictional lower-middle-class suburban diarist of the 1880s, Mr Pooter, wrote of his devotion to domesticity and home improvements:

> After my work in the City, I like to be at home. What's the good of a home, if you are never in it? 'Home, Sweet, Home', that's my motto. I am always in of an evening… There is always something to be done…[36]

Studies of twentieth-century suburbia have suggested that an increasingly intensive and demanding cult of domesticity encapsulated these values, so that it structured the lives of married women.[37] To what extent were the lives of an earlier generation of young suburban women similarly shaped by this cult of the home?

Elizabeth Lee was educated at a middle-class girls' school in Cheshire and then (briefly) at a boarding school in Colwyn Bay in north Wales. However, she left the boarding school two months before her fifteenth birthday due to a bout of rheumatic fever and never continued her formal education. Throughout the period of the diary she was maintained financially by her parents and occasionally served in her father's shops without payment, but her principal work was centred on the home.

Elizabeth was well aware of the significance of the domestic to ideals of femininity and to the education that she was expected to acquire. At New Year 1885 she copied a list of 'What a girl should learn' from an unspecified manual or magazine into her diary. One-third of these qualities related to domestic duties, including the ability to clean, sew, mend, cook, make bread, care for the sick and 'make home happy'.[38] However, qualities of character, morality and religion dominated the list, which were likewise the focus of the six 'celebrated Mrs. Fry's Rules for the guidance of daily life' that Elizabeth had recorded the previous New Year.[39] All of the prescriptive literature to which Elizabeth made reference recommended appropriate codes of femininity that were not centred solely on the domestic.

It was thus the practical demands of maintaining large households, more than abstract ideals of femininity, which placed domestic roles at the heart of the duties that middle-class parents expected their daughters to perform. Elizabeth was seven years older than her next surviving brother, and her mother bore a total of twelve children (nine of whom survived to adulthood) between 1867 and 1890. Mrs Lee's frequent confinements, the presence of a tribe of young brothers, the large size of the house, and the frequency of labour-intensive and dirty 'improvements' to the home all consumed a significant amount of time. A total of 57 different servants passed through the Lee household during the course of nine years. The usual complement of domestic help was one non-resident manservant (mainly to look after the horses, animals and land), one co-resident maidservant and one live-in nurse girl to help with the almost permanent baby. The household never specifically employed a cook, but occasionally hired the services of a washerwoman, charwoman or monthly nurse. In the final year of the diary a governess was taken on for the education of some of the sons.

Despite being the only daughter and eldest child, and with no other commitments of any kind, according to her diary entries Elizabeth devoted a surprisingly small amount of time to domestic duties. Her main responsibilities throughout the diary were to child mind when the servants or her mother were busy, and from time to time to help with cooking, cleaning or laundry. There is no evidence to suggest that these activities were performed on a regular basis.[40] Elizabeth expressed enjoyment and pride in undertaking some of these domestic roles. This was most notably the case between April 1885 and March 1889 when, after having been taught to bake by a servant, she frequently recorded

spending time in the kitchen with the servant girl of her own age. She appeared to choose to spend time baking bread, pastry and occasionally cakes, often on a weekly basis. Elizabeth only mildly complained about this role when her cooking did not turn out successfully or when she felt overworked, as in this example from 1887: 'Baked today. Had a very busy day as Ma had to go out to see about a servant and Mary [the other servant] was washing, so had to mind the babies as well as bake.'[41]

Complaints about domestic roles were much more frequent and bitter when the duties that Elizabeth's parents placed on her prevented her from undertaking other activities that were one-off and that she considered more enjoyable. These complaints were usually engendered by the expectation that she should help with cleaning or laundry. This occurred when her mother was unwell or confined by childbirth, or when a young or ill brother required care, as in this example from 1885: 'It is very wet this evening, and I had to stop at home because of that precious baby. Wrote a long letter to Miss Beale [a close friend].'[42] On other occasions additional labour was needed to perform housework either during the annual spring clean or during domestic crises when the Lees were left without a servant, as this entry from 1890 suggests: 'Our nurse-girl had to go out again (to her brother's funeral) so had to stay in all day.'[43] Elizabeth frequently complained of being tired when she had been required to undertake domestic work and the fact that she recorded such events as abnormal and intrusive indicates that for most of the time her commitment to domestic duties was low.

Although Elizabeth undertook a number of domestic duties (often related to her personal needs), and from time to time assisted her mother and the servants with larger tasks, overall her domestic commitments were not onerous. She often expressed approval at the acquisition of modern labour-saving devices, including a sewing machine, washing machine and new oven. Elizabeth considered such investments, as well as the frequent extensions and refurbishments of the house, to be subject to her father's authority, which sometimes led to conflict with his wife.[44] Like Elizabeth, her father was an additional source of labour to be called upon for certain tasks during spring cleaning, house improvements and servant crises. Yet he, even more than his daughter, left the everyday tasks of maintaining the home, in which he took considerable pride, to his wife.

Elizabeth was usually left with plenty of time to pursue other activities. Some of these took place at home, such as reading, writing letters and socialising with visiting friends.[45] However, it is revealing to note how few of her leisure activities were pursued within her parents' house. The home formed an important part of Elizabeth's everyday routines, was the site of most of her interaction with her mother and brothers, and she adopted roles that allowed her to conform to some aspects of idealised femininity. However, she seldom prioritised domestic activities and whenever possible avoided them in favour of other pleasures that took place outside of the domestic sphere. In contrast to the options available to older married women, young single suburban woman were offered both the prescriptive and, most importantly, the practical opportunities to centre their identities on activities and relationships that stretched beyond the domestic.

FAMILY, FRIENDS AND LOVE

In discussing the 'woman question' in *The suburbans* of 1905, T.W.H. Crosland declared:

> It is a singular but nevertheless instructive fact that we owe pretty well the whole of the morbid movements and discussions of the past half-century to the delicate genius of Suburbia. Women's rights were first broached, and bloomers first worn, in Suburbia. "Is marriage a failure?" was an exceedingly bitter cry out of the sick married soul of Suburbia.'[46]

For this writer and commentator, suburbia and demands for greater legal, political and social opportunities for women were part of a single movement. This section explores the ways in which Elizabeth sought to challenge or reinforce the conventions of middle-class suburban society.

There is no evidence in the diary that Elizabeth took any interest in the public and feminist campaigns that Crosland associated with suburbia. She recorded that her father supported the Conservative party during the 1885 election, but she expressed no opinions about political or philanthropic concerns of the 1880s and 1890s.[47] Elizabeth valued the few months' education that she had received at a newly-opened girls' school and some of her female friends gained more substantial experience of pioneering girls' high schools and even at Cambridge, but there is no indication that she viewed these opportunities as the result of wider feminist campaigns. Those few female friends who were forced to

enter paid employment as dressmakers, governesses or shop assistants were regarded with pity, and there is no evidence that she ever considered employment to be a favourable choice for middle-class young women. In these respects, Elizabeth showed no awareness of the legal and political campaigns that were germinating amongst some women growing up in other more elite and educated, often metropolitan, suburban homes.[48]

Instead, it was through her personal relationships with peers that Elizabeth exhibited behaviour that could be interpreted as more fundamentally challenging to middle-class suburban conventions. She sought first and foremost to appear fashionable and modern. These aspirations were clearly influenced by her young male and female friends, whose company she often prioritised over that of her parents.

Elizabeth's relatives are shadowy rather than central figures in the narrative recorded in her diary. She spent a good deal of time with her mother, but this was principally due to their joint domestic duties, rather than through leisure time that they chose to share. An entry from 1886 suggests they way in which Elizabeth on occasion and especially in her late-teenage years missed the company of her mother:

> Went to L'pool today. Wanted Ma to come with me but she would'nt. I wanted her because I was going to by a hat. I got one at Compton House but it was very dear and I'm sure Ma won't like it when it comes home. I never can buy a hat for

myself. I always get it too dear or something and I can't afford it just now. I wish Ma had come with me.[49]

The vast majority of references to Mrs Lee in the diary relate to the working relationship that was formed in the often fraught setting of the negotiation of roles between mother, daughter and the ever-changing cast of servants. This perhaps reflects the extent to which this older married woman's life was consumed by the demands of suburban domesticity and maternity.

Elizabeth's father was also occupied for long hours in his shops and sometimes travelling on business, but evidence in the diary suggests that Elizabeth was emotionally closer to her 'Pa'. Not only did he encourage his only daughter to read, including discussing with her books that they had both read, but he also seemed to welcome Elizabeth's frequent visits to his shops. Sometimes this was to help to serve customers in the gentleman's outfitters, occasionally she used the sewing machines to make her own clothes, but more often Elizabeth just dropped in for tea when she was passing through Birkenhead. The male shop assistants were clearly an attraction, but she also called there to see her father. Visits to this primarily male space became part of her everyday routine and it was arguably a more significant location in shaping her relationship with her father than was the home.

During 1888 one of the shops also became part of Elizabeth's wider social space as Mr Lee allowed her to use an upstairs room to organise dances with friends, and on one typical visit in preparation for these occasions she recorded how:

> Went to L'pool. Had tea at the Shop, and then we had a dance up in our ballroom to show some of the fellows [the shop assistants] how to dance. The 2 Heathcock's [both female friends] came. We had such fun. So tired.[50]

Friendships were hugely significant to Elizabeth in shaping her activities, preferences and identity as a young, single woman. The diary records friendships that were sustained over a period of at least several months with 27 women and 18 men, and the wide circle of male and female companions with whom she socialised was constantly changing during the diary. Her friendships were formed, without exception, with others from broadly middle-class backgrounds. Although some of her companions were close neighbours, family friends and cousins, and latterly the oldest of her brothers sometimes socialised with her, many of her acquaintances came from elsewhere on Merseyside and most were not known to her family.

According to Elizabeth's record in her diary, her father or mother rarely raised serious objections to any of her friends or activities. At the beginning of the diary when Elizabeth was relatively young there were a small number of occasions when she was reprimanded for getting home late or when she noted that her father stopped her going out. For instance, in 1888 her father initially voiced no objection to her attendance at a ball in the

Assembly Rooms in Liverpool but later retracted this permission because 'Somebody has been telling Pa that it is not a fit place for me to go'.[51] Elizabeth was furious on this occasion because many of her friends were going and it is clear from the diary that she frequently circumvented such restrictions by not telling her parents what she was doing.

Elizabeth frequently travelled alone to Liverpool to meet male friends. For instance, at the age of nineteen she was quite prepared to wait on her own, and in fact fruitlessly, for an hour at Central Station in Liverpool for a young man with whom she frequently went out:

> Tonight I went down to the "Central Station to meet (Mr. Duncan) at 7. p.m. but however I waited till nearly 8. and could see no signs of him, so at last had to come home again. I can hardly believe that I have not seen him. There must surely something have prevented him coming. I just feel dreadful and have been nearly crying my eyes out. for I suppose I shall never see him any more now and I had such a lovely card that I was going to give him. I had the greatest bother in the world to get out as Pa came home and we were very busy in the Library, which we are trying to get ready for Xmas.[52]

On this occasion she was upset at being stood up, especially as she had difficulty negotiating her absence from home, but she indicated no sense of fear when travelling and waiting alone in Liverpool on what must have been a dark evening in December. The conflicting demands of family and friendships could lead to such tensions, but for most of

the period of the diary her parents were rarely recorded as interfering with, or in fact being aware of, her social life and friendship networks.

In addition to group activities such as dances and other outings, Elizabeth had a number of close female friends on whom she regularly called and many male friends who she met, often apparently by chance. Walks were a favourite activity, such as on this Sunday in 1886:

> Went to Church this morning. Went to the "woods" for a walk this afternoon. Met Mr. W. there quite accidentally. Such a long time since I have seen him. We went a walk through the woods. Stopped at home tonight. Nice weather.[53]

Although on this occasion Elizabeth was genuinely surprised to see her intermittent boyfriend, she frequently used evening walks in the local neighbourhood as a means to meet male and female friends. Meetings with boyfriends were often pre-arranged or at least hoped for, and two years later she described going to Birkenhead to reprimand the same young architect for his failure to come out to the suburb to see her: 'Had a talk with Mr. W. in his office and gave him a good blowing up for not coming up to see me or anything.'[54]

Marriage was taken for granted by most as an essential part of middle-class femininity.[55] Elizabeth was aware of such social expectations and amongst her New Year aspirations for 1885 were 'To marry a man for his worth' and 'To be a helpmate to a husband'.[56]

There is every indication that Elizabeth expected to marry and she frequently watched local weddings. However, she also expressed reservations about the demands and dangers faced by wives. In 1891 after a friend was 'at death's door' following childbirth she commented 'Catch me getting married'.[57]

Although Elizabeth had many male friends with whom she socialised, there were three long-term relationships during the course of the diary in which she explicitly recorded discussing marriage (at least two other relationships were sufficiently serious to generate love letters but about these she made no mention of possible marriage). One of the potential marriage partners, a family friend and childhood sweetheart, was discouraged as a serious relationship by Elizabeth's parents; one (probably the most intense) was broken off when the man decided to travel overseas; and one – who made frequent visits to the house and seemed the most formally accepted into her family – ended the relationship possibly because his parents objected. Although parental involvement in casual friendships and romances was minimal, parents did have a significant impact once a relationship moved towards formal engagement.

Prior to this, however, Elizabeth was prepared to take the initiative by following young men who she liked, deliberately going where she knew she might meet them or calling on them directly. For instance, in 1888 she recorded how she changed her plans because 'As I was going to Church tonight met J.S.A. We went a walk instead of going to Church. Went in Straw Shed. Had such fun.'[58] She also occasionally accompanied male suitors to their lodgings, as on this occasion after a music hall dance in 1891: 'Came away about ½

past one. a.m. and went home with J.S.A. (went to his lodgings first) went home with him in a cab. I have enjoyed myself.'[59] Even when Elizabeth was apparently going out regularly with a long-term suitor, she would often meet with other male friends and sometimes flirt or 'spoon' with them. Sensual and physical relationships with serious boyfriends appeared to be taken for granted and, according to Elizabeth's record, her friends had equally active love lives.

Elizabeth did not express any feelings of dissatisfaction or unease with the moral and emotional codes that she expected to follow. Although her parents were aware of many of her romantic attachments, only very rarely did male friends come to the Lee's home. More often they hung around in the neighbourhood and then said goodnight on the doorstep, met at an event or place at an appointed hour, or saw each other only at friends' houses or on holidays without parents. It is revealing to note that socialising with female friends also predominantly took place outside of the Lees' home. More than two-thirds of domestic meetings for tea or supper occurred at friends' homes, and much socialising took place at public events, on outings to Liverpool and further afield, or on walks. Whether this was because Elizabeth felt uncomfortable in her home that was crowded with younger brothers or because she expected a degree of disapproval from her parents is hard to tell. Nonetheless, Elizabeth's ability to move relatively freely around rural, suburban and urban landscapes offered crucial space, independence and privacy – all in short supply in a home full of small boys – to develop personal relationships.

Not only was the independence of young single middle-class women facilitated by nascent suburban infrastructure and protected from many of the everyday demands of married domesticity, but they also expected to follow a distinctly youthful code of behaviour. Although far from active or radical in her abstract political or social concerns, Elizabeth's personal conduct and friendships did fit with much of the, frequently condemned, conduct of the 'New Woman'. Her activities, language, dress and relationships were distinctly modern and, in some cases, deliberately pushing at boundaries of conventional acceptability. However, there is rarely any indication in Elizabeth's diary that such behaviour was considered unacceptable by her parents or others within the suburban community. Within this restricted circle of single, middle-class people whose lives were centred on the suburb, young women were expected to enjoy a relatively high degree of autonomy in choosing activities, companions and boyfriends. The presumed safety of the space and respectability of the people thus enabled the creation of distinct codes of young single 'modern' femininity within a suburban community.

CONCLUSIONS

In *The condition of England* Crosland described suburbia as follows: 'It is a life of Security; a life of Sedentary occupation; a life of Respectability; and these three qualities give the key to its special characteristics.'[60] Elizabeth Lee's diary suggests that these qualities were ones that her family sought and in many ways the Lees were an archetypal late-nineteeenth-century middle-class suburban family. Elizabeth's father was a respected business man, a member of the local Masonic Lodge and politically Conservative. He

owned a large house with adjacent land and, together with his wife, invested time and labour in maintaining and improving their household that included at least three servants. The residents of the emerging suburb of Prenton established public activities and social networks that allowed the creation of a 'community' of suburbanites who considered themselves to be alike.

Elizabeth Lee also valued and contributed to the creation of this social and physical landscape. Detailed examination of her everyday life suggests that she did not openly challenge any of the tenets of Victorian suburban living or of respectable young womanhood but, through her actions, Elizabeth (and her contemporaries on Merseyside) were able to mould these structures to the shapes that suited them. The relationship between young people and the older generation who had chosen to inhabit suburbia was one of neither open rebellion nor total acquiescence. Instead, it was one of negotiated freedoms within boundaries that the young were sometimes themselves able to ignore, shift or remake. Familial and domestic responsibilities were deliberately limited; the perceived safety of the environment and the availability of public transport encouraged independent mobility; the public social life of the suburb flourished through the contributions of the time and money of the young; and friendships were conducted primarily outside of the oversight of parents. The space of late-nineteenth-century suburbia – as a site of on-going development, modernity and malleable norms – thus offered its young elite residents opportunities for a certain degree of social, cultural and material autonomy and authority that was understood to be essential to the life of the nascent suburb.

This paper can offer no more than the account of the life of one individual, with passing references to friends and acquaintances. It is hard to assess the typicality of evidence culled from a single diary and the rarity of such evidence makes systematic comparison difficult. There is no indication that the lives of Elizabeth's friends were in any way different from her own and she was happy to talk about, and share, her activities with them. In this sense her behaviour seemed to be the norm for the community. However, it cannot be suggested that the strategies adopted by Elizabeth and her friends were necessarily the same as those in generations that went before and after her or, indeed, in other localities or more wealthy homes at the same time. The youthful independence of women was partly the result of the restricted means of lower middle-class families such as the Lees, who could not afford paid chaperones, who did not employ enough servants to free Mrs Lee from domestic duties and whose financial survival depended on Mr Lee's intimate involvement in the day-to-day running of his shops. The firmly provincial nature of the Merseyside community in which Elizabeth grew up was also significant. The inhabitants of such suburbs had no direct contact with the national intellectual, political and social elite, whose lives were often centred on London, and whose writings and experiences primarily created what was understood to be the 'national' prescriptive and fictional literature. It is thus not surprising that the experiences of young women living in the suburbs surrounding London and the Home Counties were bounded by a quite different set of geographical, social, cultural and personal expectations to those which influenced the lives of young provincial women.

The relatively small, affluent and flexible nascent suburb of the late-nineteenth century was also a very different entity to the large-scale, mass and embedded suburb of the mid-twentieth century. By this date the ways in which women should inhabit and interpret suburban domesticity were widely espoused in popular magazines, advertisements, films and novels that were seen and read nationally by the majority of women of all ages.[61] Moreover, an increasingly wide range of educational opportunities, professional careers, and respectable domestic labour in homes that sought to reduce their reliance on servants became available to middle-class young women.[62] As a result, the entirely unscheduled and unregulated free time of late-nineteenth-century young women became increasingly rare and indeed widely condemned. Simultaneously, as suburbia grew increasingly expansive, well-established and socially mixed, and as its married residents enjoyed more holidays and 'leisure' time, it would be surprising if a later generation of young women had the same degree of mobility, autonomy and authority in creating the social life of the suburb. The suburban modernity inhabited by Elizabeth Lee was thus the product of a very specific time, place and class.

These suburban pioneers constructed their own social environment, but they also left a legacy for future generations. Many of the churches, sporting associations, music halls, lecture rooms, shops and public transport routes that had been established to meet the demands of the first generation of suburban young women continued to be used by later generations, even as the educational and occupational horizons of some expanded beyond the suburbs. However, the vast suburban homes and gardens to which late-nineteenth-century middle-class married couples aspired were more rapidly rejected by the small,

nuclear servant-less families of the following century. As a result, the Lee family home and those of many of their neighbours were demolished in the 1930s.

Nevertheless, the memory of their villa suburbia was not lost. Within the second-generation – and strikingly different – suburb of semi-detached houses constructed on the Lee's land is a Wharfedale Road. Alongside the surnames of some of Elizabeth's friends and neighbours, the name of the Lee's house lives on as an interwar suburban street that replaced the homes of the pioneer suburbanites of the 1880s.

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[31]. *Diary* 17 May 1884.

[32]. *Diary* 14 August 1884.

[33]. *Diary* 30 September 1885.

[34]. *Diary* 1 January 1886.

[35]. *Diary* 4 November 1886, 5 July 1887.

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[39]. *Diary* 1 January 1884.

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[41]. *Diary* 15 February 1887.

[42]. *Diary* 19 July 1885.

[43]. *Diary* 23 July 1890.

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