**A Woman’s Place in the Male Sphere:**

Gender in the Late Victorian and Edwardian Labor Movement

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The British labor movement in the nineteenth and early twentieth century was created and

conducted by and for men, who opposed sharing the benefits they sought for themselves with

women. Most men of the Victorian and Edwardian eras believed that men should be the ones out

in the world working, while a woman’s place was in the home, subordinate to male relatives and

especially to her husband. They disliked the possibility of this arrangement being altered by

female advancement in the workplace. Even when male workers supported the advancement of

women, they primarily did so out of self-interest rather than out of solidarity with female

workers. Male trade unionists resisted the advancement of female workers in order to reinforce

traditional gender roles at home, to preserve their own gender identity, and to prevent women

from becoming their economic rivals. The gains made by British working women between the

1850s and 1910s were largely achieved by female efforts, and in spite of male labor movement

leadership and trade union activism rather than because of it.

In nineteenth-century Britain, men and women were expected to keep to their own

near-exclusionary “spheres.” Men were to fill the public sphere of politics, commerce, and the

military, while women were to fill the private sphere of home and family matters.[[1]](#footnote-1) Male

preachers and teachers told women that they were religiously required to be quietly submissive

to the men in their lives, claiming that women were created with a different nature than men and

were intended to stay home serving their husbands and rearing children. Charles Darwin’s

*Descent of Man* also discussed these ostensible gendered differences in human nature, believing

them to be biological in nature. Woman, Darwin said,was inherently different from man,

“chiefly in her greater tenderness and less selfishness,” and “owing to her maternal instincts

[she] displays these qualities towards her infants in an eminent degree.” Women were therefore

intended by nature to be the caretakers of children at home. Man, on the other hand, “is the rival

of other men; he delights in competition,” proving himself the proper person to undertake such

competitive public activities as business and politics. An additional difference, Darwin claimed,

was that “man attain[s] to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than woman can attain—

whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and

hands.” Therefore, he posited, choosing evidently to disregard both the actual accomplishments

of many women throughout history and any possible effects of nurture rather than nature, “the

average standard of mental power in man must be above that of woman.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This “scientific”

assumption of male superiority in intellect was another excuse to keep women at home.

There was a great deal of talk in Victorian Britain about the sexes having been inflexibly

ordained by nature to their separate roles. The men who made the laws and supervised public

society expended a great deal of effort in helping nature along by doing their best to forcibly

confine women, especially married women, to the domestic arena. The strongest aid to the

clearly entirely natural distinction between the social roles of the sexes was the legal doctrine of

coverture. The effect of the same was that, as William Blackstone summarized in his famous

*Commentaries on the Laws of England,* “the very being or legal existence of the woman is

suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the

husband: under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs everything.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Wing, protection,

and cover in practice meant control. As John Stuart Mill described it, British wives of the mid-

nineteenth century had no rights in their children, no right to wages earned by their own labor, no

right to leave even an abusive husband (who could lawfully physically drag her home again or

have her arrested and brought back by the police), no right to refuse their husbands sexual use of

their body even against their will, and no rights in most property.[[4]](#footnote-4) Mill considered the legal

position of the wife under coverture to be “worse than that of slaves in the law of many

countries.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Actual slaves might have contested that idea, but there was no denying that married

women under coverture were not considered or treated as full and equal human beings before the

law.

By the later decades of the nineteenth century, the laws of coverture had relaxed

considerably to allow for such things as the Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 and

1882, allowing married women to retain control over their own property rather than mandating

that it all become the property of their husbands upon marriage. Nonetheless, the attitude that

women were accessories and servants for men, rather than partners or equals, remained

essentially intact. A woman was legally and socially defined by her relationship to her male

relatives or guardians.[[6]](#footnote-6) The wife’s role in her domestic sphere was to manage the home, ideally

with a servant or two to do the heavier chores so that the lady of the house could serve as part of

its decoration rather than dirtying herself with the kind of messy work the less respectable orders

had to do. Middle and upper class women, of course, found it easier to fill the sentimental

housewife role than women of the working class. The latter could not remain home all day caring

for the children (theoretically, at least; nannies were a standard fixture in many upper middle and

upper class homes), prettifying their living space, and otherwise playing the angel in the house,

but were driven by economic necessity to work outside the home. This was not a situation that

most working class men much cared for.

The Victorian concept of what constituted “true” manliness by and large excluded men of

the lower classes from qualifying. The truly manly nineteenth century British man demonstrated

superior intellectual prowess, high scientific ability, great courage and independence, and great

capacity for sustained exertion, physical or mental, all of this in comparison to the female

gender’s supposed inferiority in these categories. This ideal man was a bold innovator who went

forth and conquered or achieved for the Empire, at home or abroad. But much of this was

dependent on access to education and the kind of social and political networking and privileges

reserved for the middle and upper classes.[[7]](#footnote-7) Most men of the working classes would never be in a

position to develop or exhibit many of the necessary traits to qualify as a true manly man by this

definition. To characterize himself as masculine in society and to feel secure in his gender

identity, then, a man of the working class had to fall back not on what made him stand out

among his fellow men but on what distinguished him from women.

John Stuart Mill asserted that women’s “disabilities” in matters outside the home were “only

clung to in order to maintain their subordination in domestic life; because the generality of the

male sex cannot yet tolerate the idea of living with an equal.”[[8]](#footnote-8) The men of the working classes

were in fact by and large resistant to the idea of living with an equal, since their relation to

women, especially their wives, was crucial to their self-images as men in their world. A man

who needed to rely on his female relatives’ earning as well as his own in order to make ends

meet was failing to uphold his position as breadwinner, and therefore as a man, in society’s and

his own eyes. He was also failing to maintain his wife in her domestic sphere, requiring her to

step out from under his personal supervision into the larger world where she would likely have

other male authorities to answer to, rather than answering exclusively to him. However, the late

Victorian man who wanted his wife to stay in her assigned sphere was not necessarily motivated

simply by a desire for status or control. Providing financially for the family was a way for a

husband and father to demonstrate his care and commitment to the family. An author who grew

up in a Welsh coal mining community at the end of the nineteenth century believed that the

miners took more risks at work just prior to Christmas because they wanted to bring home more

money to give their families a better holiday, and another from a similar background described

his miner father as “a great man” for demonstrating his love for his children by the heavy labor

he performed to provide for them.[[9]](#footnote-9)

A working class man’s ability to financially carry the entire family and allow his wife to

stay in her sphere at home could be a very significant factor in his self-image and self-respect. It

could also be a factor in the respect he---and she---got from society at large. A family’s public

respectability in large part hung on how successfully the individual members performed in the

roles allotted them. If a woman had no male relatives to support her, she could find some

respectability earning a living on her own---certainly more so than living in a workhouse or

begging. There were employments which were traditionally allotted to single women of the

lower classes, especially those of domestic servant, governess, or nanny in a respectable

household, which typically took place in a domestic or at least female-dominated environment.

On the other hand, a married woman who had to go out and earn her keep was more likely to

find employment in factory work or the like, since single women were preferred for domestic

labor. This meant spending much of her time near or among men, including her supervisor, to

whom she was not related, without the protection or chaperonage of her husband. Such a

situation represented a diminution both of her own individual respectability and the respectability

of the household. A single woman, whether living independently or with her parents, was less

affected in this regard by factory work, since it could be assumed that she would marry within a

relatively short time and assume a domestic role, but a woman who kept her commercial job

after marriage was upsetting to society.

Henry Broadhurst, a member of the Stonemason’s Union and the secretary of the

Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress, was a fair representative of the general

male position on wives in the workforce. Broadhurst was pleased that as the male unions gained

ground in their demands for improved wages and working conditions, “the competition of

married women” with male workers had declined. He also stated at the Trades Union Congress’

tenth annual meeting that it was the duty of the men of the TUC to make it so that their wives

“should be in their proper sphere at home” attending solely to domestic affairs, rather than

competing for jobs with men.[[10]](#footnote-10) Male legislators sometimes proposed restrictions on female

labor, such as mandating shorter workdays for women, professing a paternalistic interest in

preserving the health and wellbeing of female workers. However, they tended to have personal-

benefit motivations in mind when they made such proposals. In 1874, a group of female factory

workers and women’s rights activists published a pamphlet discussing this tendency. In its pages,

they noted that legislators specified the effect on “the comfort of home” by the absence of the

working mother as one of the reasons to restrict women’s working hours. It seemed clear to the

authors that the intent was to replace the paid labor at the factory with unpaid labor at home, with

an eye more to male domestic comfort than to the health and wellbeing of the female worker.

The pamphlet authors were also concerned that restricting women’s labor on the basis that

married women needed more time to attend to their homes and children might lead to legislation

which prevented married women from working at all. Male politicians did not relieve such

concerns when they made statements about restrictions in women’s labor benefitting men by

allowing them to “have a bit of supper with their wives” or about Parliament potentially

restricting work hours for married women, specifically, so that they could have “an opportunity

to attend to their household duties.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

An early organized effort to promote the advancement of female workers was the formation

in 1856 of the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women. Often known by the

regrettable abbreviation SPEW, the Society was the brainchild of two middle class social

reformers, Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon and Bessie Rayner Parkes.[[12]](#footnote-12) Although it later

expanded its horizons to encourage female participation in a variety of trades[[13]](#footnote-13), at the time of its

founding SPEW was focused primarily on improving female fortunes in the printing business.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Trade unions in Britain at the time SPEW was formed were largely male territory. Women were

employed in various industrialized fields, such as mills and factories, and had been for decades,

but they were mostly excluded from the labor movement. Male printers’ unions, which had never

allowed female membership, disapproved of the new women’s printing shops. They feared that

these non-union printers would drive their own wages down, not only by lowering the rates for

printshops in general but by making it clear that a woman, who would generally be paid less than

a man for the same work, could take the place of a male worker in the particular jobs to which

women were assigned.[[15]](#footnote-15) Despite hostility from the male printers’ unions, the Victoria Press,

SPEW’s printing business, and several associated women’s printshops managed to gain

themselves a foothold in the trade.[[16]](#footnote-16)

In 1874, another women’s labor organization, now primarily known by its eventual name,

the Women’s Trade Union League, was formed. Its aim was to promote trade unionism for

women who were unable, being unorganized, to protest low wages and poor treatment by their

employers, and who even in the “’mixed’ cotton unions” were still kept out of leadership roles

partly owing to their inability to afford full membership dues.[[17]](#footnote-17) The organization initially went

by the name of the Women’s Protective and Provident League, in order to strike a less aggressive

note in the ears of those who associated the word “union” with militancy and radicalism. Its

leadership hoped by the philanthropic tone of the name to come across as reassuringly charitable

in a time when women were supposed to be uncomplainingly self-sacrificing for the benefit of

others, rather than publicly assertive regarding their personal self-interest. “Protective” was later

swapped for “trade union” when the organizers felt the world was more ready to accept it.[[18]](#footnote-18) The

WTUL was less militant than the male unions, functioning primarily as an aid society for its

members rather than an organization for the purpose of collective bargaining or demanding

better wages or conditions. In this it more closely resembled the early stages of the male labor

movement than its contemporary state, possibly because, as reported in 1909, it was never strong

enough in itself to “bring pressure to bear on the trade for the mutual advantage of the good

employer and the woman worker.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

The WTUL decided to create separate unions for each trade rather than collect all its

members together under one umbrella, and in 1876 sent for the first time two delegates to the

Trades’ Union Congress representing three female unions.[[20]](#footnote-20) Relations between the female

representatives and the male majority were friendly that year, but at the 1877 Congress tensions

appeared when the cotton unions proposed a resolution “in favor of extending restrictions on

female labor under the new Factory and Workshops Bill.” The WTUL delegates were indignant

that women were being singled out for labor restrictions, but they were even more dismayed that

some of the male delegates wanted to get up a bill to turn women out of the agriculture and

chain-making trades altogether. Emma Paterson, the WTUL’s founder and one of its delegates to

the TUC, pointed out that “trade union men” had previously indignantly denied wanting to drive

women out of employment, and asked that they instead work with the women to raise wages for

female workers, which would help shore up protections against male fears of having their own

wages driven down. It was at this point that Henry Broadhurst responded with his speech about

male union workers’ duty to make it so their wives were kept home where they belonged, rather

than competing for jobs with men. The resolution to restrict women’s labor passed by an

overwhelming majority.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Male delegates continued periodically to demonstrate disrespect to women workers at TUC

meetings. In 1883, a female delegate, frustrated by restrictions on women’s labor, demanded to

know what women were supposed to do if they “were not allowed to earn a livelihood”; several

male delegates shouted “Get married!” and laughed at her. Despite such incivility, the WTUL

continued to do what it could to make sure the female worker’s voice was heard. For twelve

years they repeatedly attempted to get female as well as male factory inspectors appointed by

moving to amend “practical persons,” as those to be appointed, to “practical men and women.”

Male delegates ridiculed the proposal every year, mocking the “strange ambitions” of the women

in proposing female factory inspectors; even the president of the TUC complained publicly about

the WTUL delegates’ “feminine unreasonableness and obstinacy.” The motion finally carried in

1892 and the first female factory inspector was appointed the following year.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Women continued to enter the workforce in increasing numbers as the twentieth century

arrived. In 1906, women made up more than a third of all wage-earners in Britain---an estimated

1,600,000 out of 6,200,000 total.[[23]](#footnote-23) However, the growth of female union membership during the

later 1890s and early 1900s was slow. The WTUL surveyed union leaders to see what they

thought about it. One union spokeswoman, I. O. Ford of the Leeds Society of Workwomen, saw

religious teachings about the importance of feminine submissiveness as a factor in the reluctance

of women to take part in union activity. [[24]](#footnote-24) Another, Margaret Bondfield of the National Union of

Shop Assistants, Warehousemen, and Clerks, opined that since many young single women still

felt that “their occupation was temporary before marriage,” they saw less reason to bother

improving what they considered short-term conditions.[[25]](#footnote-25) These young women viewed

themselves as momentarily inconvenienced housewives-to-be rather than as serious members of

the workforce. Rather than a situation calling for personal investment, they saw their jobs merely

as an interim on the way to the establishment of a respectable household with a husband to take

over as breadwinner and where they would live out their lives in the domestic sphere.

The new unions which were formed between 1900 and 1914 were largely white-collar

unions for women of the lower middle classes such as the Association of Women Clerks in the

Post Office and the Civil Service Typists’ Association, rather than working class unions such as

those for textile workers which had been making up the majority of unions. Although the

increased acceptance of women in the workforce could at least in part be attributed to the efforts

of the WTUL, these unions tended to keep their distance from it,[[26]](#footnote-26) possibly out of reluctance to

be associated with the lower classes. Their members made up a considerable amount of the

increase in the female labor force; commercial clerks, for example, were 24.5% female by 1911,

up from 7.2% twenty years earlier.[[27]](#footnote-27)

One new union which did focus primarily on the working class was the National Federation

of Women Workers, created specifically to help women who were excluded from male unions.

The NFWW was formed in 1906 by the WTUL, which had been trying to organize women

workers alongside men but frequently found its efforts frustrated due to the lack of extant unions

in many female-dominated trades and the refusal of many male unions to allow female members.

Under its president Mary MacArthur, also the secretary of the WTUL,[[28]](#footnote-28) the NFWW recruited

members from hitherto non-unionized female-dominated industries such as clothes-making and

food service, as well as women who worked in male industries but had been unable to join a

male union. Within eight years it boasted 76 branches with about 10,000 members between

them.[[29]](#footnote-29) The NFWW granted members who were leaving to get married a special “dowry”

payment, but MacArthur was less interested in promoting marriage and traditional roles for

women than she was in improving the labor market to prevent women feeling forced to marry as

an escape from the misery of bad work conditions.[[30]](#footnote-30) Notably, she herself delayed marriage in

favor of her vocation in labor organization. Despite the fact that suitor William Anderson, a

fellow trade unionist, first proposed to her in 1903, MacArthur refused to marry him until 1911

because her work came first.[[31]](#footnote-31)

The NFWW was one of two new working-class unions involving women which were

formed around the turn of the twentieth century. The other was called simply the Workers’

Union. Founded in 1898, it sought to attract female as well as male members from the beginning.

The WU was a general union for unskilled and low-skilled laborers of all descriptions who did

not happen to have a convenient specialized union to belong to. Its low membership dues gave

lower-paid female workers a better chance at full membership privileges, although it saw only

limited success in recruiting women until the appointment in 1912 of Julia Varley as its first

female organizer.[[32]](#footnote-32) Even after Varley’s appointment, the WU maintained a far greater male than

female membership, and it saw the NFWW as its rival in recruiting female members. Possibly

the WU’s smaller female membership was due to the fact that, despite its claims to promote the

interests of its members regardless of gender, in practice it primarily focused on its male

members. Female members were relegated to the “women’s department” of the union (headed by

Varley), and the WU *Record* often printed semi-paternalistic articles about the terrible conditions

that poor, weak women suffered at work without bothering to get a female perspective on the

matter. The WU also often held branch meetings in pubs, where a respectable woman would

generally never set foot unless escorted by a male protector.[[33]](#footnote-33) Varley, however, believed in the

importance of gender-integrated unions, and expressed confidence in what she called the WU’s

placing of women “on an equal footing with their fathers and brothers.”[[34]](#footnote-34) It was true that in

allowing women full membership from the beginning, and in making at least some efforts at

solidarity with them, the WU was a significant improvement on most male-dominated or –

specific trade unions of its day.

World War I had a profound effect on women workers and female trade unions. Initially, the

onset of the war resulted in high rates of unemployment for women---the “net contraction of

employment” for women workers averaged fourteen percent, nearly double that for men.

However, by the spring of 1915, the trend was rapidly reversing due to the necessary expansion

of various war-effort trades, especially munitions work, and the loss of many male workers to the

military. “Impelled by patriotism, or by economic necessity,” the women of the middle classes

began entering the labor market alongside their working class fellows.[[35]](#footnote-35) Over the four years of

the war, more than a million and a quarter women joined the workforce, many of them taking

over what had previously been male occupations. Besides munitions work, they found

employment in such unfeminine places and occupations as sawmills, cement factories, foundries,

shipbuilding yards, surface mining, and brickmaking. Despite the fact that some of the

“substituted” women who had taken previously male positions would be obligated to give up

those positions when the men returned from the war,[[36]](#footnote-36) they gained a foothold in many industries

which had formerly been male-dominated or –exclusive. The number of female trade union

members tripled during the war, shooting up from 357,956 members in 1914 to 1,086,000

members in 1918.[[37]](#footnote-37) Part of the increase in female union membership during the war was

undoubtedly due to the active encouragement in that direction of the War Emergency Workers’

National Committee (usually shortened to Workers’ National Committee or WNC), which was

formed at the beginning of the war by various workers’ groups, including the WTUL, with the

backing and involvement of the Labour Party.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Male workers, especially those who belonged to engineering unions, were not especially

delighted about the intrusion of women into their domain. Their concerns as expressed on this

point were largely economic: women were typically paid far lower wages than men for the same

work, which put male wage rates in jeopardy.[[39]](#footnote-39) Fears of lowered wages were not unjustified; the

craftily worded Treasury Agreement, negotiated by then-Chancellor of the Exchequer David

Lloyd George, allowed employers enough wiggle room to pay female workers rock-bottom

wages for certain types of munitions jobs, which effectively lowered the male pay rate for those

jobs as well.[[40]](#footnote-40) This angered both male workers, whose wages were sinking, and female workers,

who did not appreciate the fact that they were getting paid at most two thirds the prevailing male

wage even when they equaled or excelled the productivity of their male coworkers. Women, so

some experts claimed, were better than men at jobs which featured fast-paced, monotonous

work, but employers refused to raise female wages on this basis, countering such claims with

statements that if this was so, men should be paid at the rate of women instead.[[41]](#footnote-41)

In 1915 the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, a male union, realized that, although they

did not want female members in their union, their own wage rates would be better protected by

shrinking the pay gap between men and women working in their field in general. The ASE

joined forces with the National Federation of Women Workers to try and establish wage rates for

women at a point everyone could agree on. They called for a pound a week for women in the

engineering and shipbuilding industries, and received a favorable reply from the government, but

private firms showed very little interest in raising wages for women, justifying their resistance on

the grounds that the cost of modern machinery made it impossible to raise women’s wages and

that women had always been paid less than men anyway. Fortunately at least for female

munitions workers, by 1917 the government had control of wages and conditions in more than

four thousand factories over and above the four it ran and over a hundred more it owned.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Equal pay for equal work had been one of the goals of the WNC; it had made a proposal in

1915 that this should happen.[[43]](#footnote-43) However, as an official in the Ministry of Munitions noted in

1918, for the government, the point of allowing women in skilled trades comparable pay to men

had been to keep the pay rates up for men, not to establish equal pay for women doing equal

work.[[44]](#footnote-44) Ironically, one of the arguments against equal pay for equal work was that it was unfair-

to men. Postmaster-General Herbert Samuel had stated early in the war that he opposed paying

women the same wages for the same work as men because a single woman would be able to

establish a higher standard of living than a married man on the same wages, and he considered

“equal standard of comfort for equal work” preferable.[[45]](#footnote-45) Samuel elected not to add any further

explanations, such as why a single man was apparently deserving of a higher “standard of

comfort” than a single woman.

The all-female union of the Society of Women Welders began agitating in 1917\* to be

classed as skilled workers in order to get a better rate of pay after being asked to work for half

the pay rate of male welders. They appealed to arbitration, and “after a delay of six months”

those few who were classified as fully skilled welders received a pay raise which would place

them on par with male welders, but most women were relegated to semi-skilled status and

assigned lower wages.[[46]](#footnote-46) The SOWW made a second appeal to arbitration in May 1918, at which

time they were given a specific description of what now officially constituted fully skilled

welding, carefully selected such that employers could very easily prevent their female welders

from qualifying even when they were fully capable of doing so. The SOWW picked up on this

immediately and were in the midst of negotiations with the government to secure a national

minimum pay rate when “negotiations were cut short by the armistice”[[47]](#footnote-47) and the SOWW lost its

leverage as male workers were expected to return shortly to take up their employment once

again. They had, however, secured the recognition of at least some of their members as fully

skilled – and paid – welders.

From the time working women in Britain first began trying to improve their lot, opposition

to equal treatment for them had been fierce. Nonetheless, at the end of the Great War British

working women stood in a better position than ever before. Women were present in the

workforce in greater numbers than they ever had been, and in a greater variety of jobs. Female

pay in many fields was still lower than that of men, but the rise in female wages in “substituted”

and/or skilled labor jobs had led to a general increase in female wages.[[48]](#footnote-48) Decade after decade,

the work of promoting jobs for women, organizing female workers into trade unions, and

persuading or pressuring male unions to work with them had been done almost exclusively by

female leaders and organizers. Male leaders and organizers had largely opposed the advancement

of the female worker for ideological and economic reasons, but even so the female labor

movement as it stood at the beginning of 1919 had achieved a level of progress that it could only

have dreamed of in 1856. The women workers of Britain had by their own efforts set themselves

on the path to success and workplace equality.

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35. Jordan*,* 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Tusan, 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
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38. Ibid., 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
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44. Drake, 82-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
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    \*Drake gives “after a delay of six months…February 1919” as the time of the *first* award granted during arbitration, but then goes on to give May 1918 as the time of the SOWW’s *second* appeal to arbitration due to dissatisfaction with this first award. She also notes that the SOWW’s negotiations with the government following the second arbitration appeal were cut short by the Armistice, which occurred in November 1918. I cannot find any other sources giving dates on this particular matter, but as it seems unlikely that the SOWW were engaging in time travel, I have to assume that 1919 is an error and February *1918* was the time of the first award granted. This would mean that the SOWW had first appealed to arbitration in the late summer or fall of 1917. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Drake, 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)