General Introduction

One way to approach the study of nineteenth-century English literature and culture is to explore the diversity of attitudes toward work which characterized the period. As did earnestness, work—the distinctive expression of earnestness—came to define the era. Concern with work was pervasive, so much so that it seemed imperative to address the subject and to address it with passion and conviction. Indeed, the topic of work became a polemical filter through which various social and political controversies were screened and refined.

The social activism of prominent upper-class individuals found its most characteristic expression in enterprises associated with work. Protecting workers from exploitation, ensuring improved working conditions for oppressed groups and adequate living conditions for laborers, establishing new educational and vocational opportunities for the underprivileged or marginalized—these were the causes to which idealists such as Angela Burdett-Coutts, Anthony Ashley Cooper, Emily Davies, and William Morris committed their impressive energies as well as substantial financial resources. The ventures undertaken by such people were calculated not to devalue national industry but rather to increase possibilities for a general enhanced productivity through the cultivation of expert trades craftsmanship, practical skills, and professional talents. While the debilitating aspects of repetitive and onerous work were to be eliminated, work itself was conceived of as both necessary and good, a conception vividly realized in the exertions of these philanthropists themselves, who, in their own devotion to various projects, rejected the lives of casual leisure that their wealth would have made possible.

Idealization of and nearly obsessive devotion to work also distinguished the dominant middle-class moral tone of the period, an attitude made abundantly clear in the novels and poems to which the literate public turned as much for instruction as for enjoyment. That work is essential rather than inappropriate to true gentlemanliness is the lesson William Makepeace Thackeray, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot were at pains to inculcate in their readers through the experiences of characters as varied as Dobbins, Pip, and Fred Vincy. Once distinguished by his not needing to work, the gentleman came to be defined by his commitment to labor responsibly undertaken both to fulfill duties to others and to sustain himself and those dependent upon him. Fitzwilliam Darcy as a social figure stimulates little beyond contempt in Elizabeth Bennett, the heroine of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice,* but, when Elizabeth comes to learn of the industrious and punctilious care with which he manages his estate, she begins to admire him as an

example of genuine manliness. In Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh,* mid-century readers encountered the heroine's wealthy cousin Romney, who, in his passionate resolution to work for and with unemployed laborers, destitute slum dwellers, and only partially reclaimed criminals, offered a reflection of a number of Victorian individuals devoted to unceasing work to serve others, whether in settlement houses, mechanics' institutes, reformatories, or cooperative societies. And at the latter end of the century, Mary Augusta Ward advanced as the hero of her best-selling novel *Robert Elsmere* a priest who, having left the church because of his honest doubt, finds his true mission serving in the slums of London's East End, where he quite literally works himself to a happy death.

Indeed, no longer to be construed as demeaning, work was configured, throughout the century, as spiritually uplifting, an attitude made clear in the assertion by Carlyle that "there is a perennial nobleness, and even sacredness, in Work." If such a view of work as ennobling was stressed most when labor was understood as involving a commitment to the good of others, Cardinal Newman summarized the dominant ideal by posing work and mission as veritable synonyms: everyone, he asserted, "has a mission, has a work." And behind the endorsement of earnest work that both of these Victorian sages offered lay the authority of Evangelicalism and John Wesley. For Wesley, whose influence upon the nineteenth century was enormous, had, in his famous exhortation concerning wealth, linked both a traditional work ethic and frugality to the enlightened service of others: "Make all you can. . . . Save all you can. . . . Give all you can." The expatriate philanthropist Andrew Carnegie boasted that he had followed Wesley's entire admonition, especially the third injunction, and Carnegie's working-class origins suggest that it was not just among middle- and upper-class individuals that work had assumed an elevated spiritual dignity. Yet for most in the lower class as well as for many in the middle class, work provided the means for material advancement and psychological fulfillment as well as religiously based self-satisfaction.

For if one aspiration was to establish, through work, the self-respect that derives from committing oneself to the service of higher social and moral causes, there was also a more practical concern to achieve, through work, a measure of personal independence and security. Work of widely varying sorts came to be regarded not as a curse to be avoided but instead as an opportunity to be embraced. Work was seen as promoting the worker's health, as enabling an individual to escape intellectual despair, emotional disorder, and spiritual anomie. Here again, Carlyle's unhesitating rhetoric encapsulates the idea: "Older than all preached Gospels was this unpreached, inarticulate, but ineradicable, forever-enduring Gospel: Work, and therein have well-being." More sedately yet no less seriously articulated is an anonymous commendation of work that appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette,* an endorsement of labor as the means of developing moral character:

> There can be no question nowadays, that application to work, absorption in affairs, contact with men, and all the stress which business imposes on us, gives a noble training to the intellect, and splendid opportunity for discipline of character. It is an

utterly low view of business which regards it as only a means of getting a living. A man's business is his part of the world's work, his share of the great activities which render society possible. . . . [T]he perpetual call on a man's readiness, self-control, and vigor which business makes, the constant appeal to the intellect, the stress upon the will, the necessity for rapid and responsible exercise of judgment—all these things constitute a high culture.

Work effected not simply spiritual well-being but the social recognition that was most prized: respectability. Moreover, in a period that encompassed major redefinitions of class, success in different forms of work often led to the improving and actual redefining of one's social as well as economic status. The industrial revolution and the development of new professions, while destabilizing in many of their effects, presented new possibilities for individuals to become economically self-sufficient. The sense that the age was one not just of transition but of improvement ensured that people could construe their self-interested pragmatism within an exalted ideal of participation in cultural progress ("the great activities which render society possible"), making work seem all the more honorable and commendable.

Among those for whom labor signified personal security and much needed material advancement, this concern with the "world's work" remained telling. Books emphasizing the connections between hard work and success were immensely popular throughout the century, none more so than those written by Samuel Smiles, who became known as "Self-Help Smiles" after the title of his most popular book. Smiles wrote in *Thrift* that "Without work, life is worthless; it becomes a mere state of moral coma." Yet he went on to insist that, for everyone, truly significant labor must transcend the physical toil that leads to material gain: "There is a great deal of higher work—the work of action and endurance, of trial and patience, of enterprise and philanthropy, of spreading truth and civilization, of diminishing suffering and relieving the poor, of helping the weak, and enabling them to help themselves." During the last third of the century, Smiles's books sold in the hundreds of thousands, and the evidence suggests that most purchasers were lower-middle-class workers. But if such popularity is a register of their identification with Smiles's principles, their aspirations to personal improvement were never divorced from a complementary sense of social duty.

This sense of social duty also involved individuals from all segments of society in a rather different conversation concerning work. Satisfaction with what work could do for individuals had its counterbalance in the anger and dismay expressed at the conditions of those whom Robert Owen, in 1817, first called the "working class." What working-class people confronted both at the work site and in their lodgings was recognized as oppressive, and the misery of their lives became the subject of sentimental poetry, government report, popular fiction, and journalistic exposé. Conditions in factories, small home-shops and sweatshops, mines, farms, and the workhouse—the "poor man's Bastille"—were bitterly deplored and also blamed for the absence of genuine culture and compassionate morality in workers. Much of the discourse concerning work in the nineteenth century was distin-

guished by calls for reformation of attitudes toward workers and relationships be-tween classes. Paintings, engravings, and cartoons, readily reproduced and widely available, reinforced consciousness of workers' often desperate situations, while photography added a documentary realism to considerations of what Engels called "the condition of the working class."

Although conditions for farm laborers were quite bad, especially during the middle third of the century, more sustained attention was given to the plight of urban workers. Indeed, often rural work was falsely idealized in order to point the newer distresses that distinguished mill workers or miners. Engels's register of the general situation in the mines in 1844 was horrifying, but the English reading public did not find *The Condition of the Working Class* in translation until the end of the century; the official government reports ("blue books") that informed Engels's writing were sensational enough in themselves, revealing terrible abuses of young children and appalling readers with descriptions of the dangers and oppressive circumstances faced by adult workers, especially women. The so-called industrial novel of the 1840s and 1850s, however, gave greatest prominence to the exploitation of workers in small handwork shops ("manufactories") and in the larger mills and factories powered by water and steam. Writers such as Dickens, Charles Kingsley, and Elizabeth Gaskell emphasized the deadening effect that mechanized work had upon such laborers, the tensions generated between owners and operatives by obsessive adherence to *laissez-faire* practice, the abuses that seemed inevitable when one group exerted almost total control over a laboring class so numerous as to become faceless, and the pernicious living conditions of intensely concentrated populations of urban workers.

Perhaps as heated as the discussion about the conditions of lower-class workers was the conversation about separate spheres of work for men and women. The contentious issues comprising what nineteenth-century writers called "the Woman Question" found their natural expression in the debate over possibilities for wom-en's work and the way those possibilities served to define familial, social, and political roles for both men and women. Of course, however many prescriptive definitions of women's work were advanced, they pertained only to the reasonably well-off: those millions of women who labored in domestic service, farms, and factories were not the focus of this controversy, which related to men and women of the middle and upper classes. For those women who did enjoy some measure of financial security, however, efforts to redefine political and economic status neces-sarily involved consideration of what work women might do—for there was no question in this society that idleness was wrong and that even moderate leisure represented a temptation. Whether women should function at all in the workplace or instead remain moral guardians of the home was the key issue, but the discus-sion radiated outward to include education for women, distinctive talents that women should cultivate, and efforts for those described as "redundant women": women uneducated to work who found themselves, as widows or spinsters, with-out financial support.

The selections in this anthology have been arranged to reflect four prominent

ways in which the subject of work was addressed in the nineteenth century: Work as Mission, Work as Opportunity, Work as Oppression, and (Separate) Spheres of Work. Notes throughout will help direct readers to instructive interrelations with selections included in other sections, while introductions to each selection offer brief biographical notes concerning authors. The selections are intended to be suggestive rather than exhaustive: the effort has been to provide readings that will provoke thought and discussion about one of the most recurrent and controversial topics of nineteenth-century discourse.