

Censorship and Self-Censorship: Revisiting the Belt Case in the Making of Dora Montefiore (1851–1933)

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In 1899 and 1900 a series of events occurred which can be grouped together as the Belt Case. At their heart were rumours about a middle-class progressive woman, Dora Montefiore (*Fig. 1*), and what was claimed to be her inappropriate relationship with a married, working-class socialist, George Belt,



Fig. 1: Dora Montefiore, 1905, photograph, private collection. With thanks to Graham Broad.

who was fifteen years her junior.¹ The gossip led to Belt losing his job, to Montefiore being relieved of her prestigious position as recording secretary for the forthcoming International Council of Women Congress, and to a court case for slander. The latter involved various well-known figures such as Lady Aberdeen, as well as a future Labour prime minister and many leading socialists of the time. They were swept up in a case that centred on whether socialists should censor the private behaviour of their comrades. This article takes as its focus an episode that was crucial to the making of Dora Montefiore as a socialist woman and considers how the experience of the Belt Case affected her subsequent self-representation.²

Dora Montefiore wove together many identities in her eventful life. Threading these together were her various life writings. These largely consisted of journalism (newspaper columns, letters, and poems), where she drew on her own experiences to develop a distinctive political practice as a socialist, suffragist, and later, a communist. In the 1920s she looked back at her life to construct a narrative that formed her autobiography, *From a Victorian to a Modern* (1927). Over her life she experienced surveillance and even censorship — both formal and informal. For example, the authorities read and archived her mail when she was travelling in Australia in 1923 after the British government had initially denied her a passport because she was a communist.³ She also complained at her misrepresentation within the dominant narrative of suffrage history, which was being constructed by suffragists before the vote was won.⁴ However, the Belt Case involves different kinds of censorship and self-censorship. In revisiting the case, I have focused on letters — stolen and misappropriated ones; lost and saved ones — as a means to censor public and private behaviour.

This article originated from an invitation to speak at a conference on life writing, titled ‘Silence in the Archives’. In the Belt Case it is striking that the archive is actually rather noisy with conflicting accounts and plenty of gossip. Its contents are more than a little slippery as confidential information was shared and letters stolen, passed around, or destroyed without the author’s permission or knowledge. However, there are also silences. Yet in

¹ Montefiore’s life can be narrated in various ways. See Karen Hunt, ‘Journeying Through Suffrage: The Politics of Dora Montefiore’, in *A Suffrage Reader: Charting Directions in British Suffrage History*, ed. by Claire Eustance, Joan Ryan, and Laura Ugolini (London: Leicester University Press, 2000), pp. 162–76; Karen Hunt, ‘Dora Montefiore: A Different Communist’, in *Party People, Communist Lives: Explorations in Biography*, ed. by John McIlroy, Kevin Morgan, and Alan Campbell (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2001), pp. 29–50.

² For a discussion of the term ‘socialist woman’, see June Hannam and Karen Hunt, *Socialist Women: Britain, 1880s to 1920s* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 8–11.

³ Australian Investigation Branch (Sydney) file on Mrs Dora Montefiore, Sydney, NSW, National Archives of Australia, SP 43/2, N 59/21/1100.

⁴ Dora B. Montefiore, *From a Victorian to a Modern* (London: Archer, 1927), pp. 50–51. It was Sylvia Pankhurst’s version of events that disturbed Montefiore.

order to make sense of the silence it is necessary to tease out what is hidden within or beneath the noise. That is why the Belt Case is worth revisiting. The case has attracted some interest in the past, yet few have looked beyond the tantalizing but often misleading correspondence in the archives of both the Independent Labour Party and the Labour Party.⁵ There remain many misunderstandings, not least concerning the principal actors in this tangled tale. For me, the case has been principally a means to explore the peculiar role that gossip had for *fin-de-siècle* radicals in policing the boundary between the public and the private.⁶

Victorian socialists and feminists were vulnerable to gossip and the fear of sexual scandal because, in their different ways, they sought to challenge hegemonic morality. Keen to expose bourgeois moral hypocrisy, socialists clung to a very clear divide between the public and the private.⁷ Anything that unsettled this was thought to be an electoral liability. For their opponents, it was the socialist critique of bourgeois marriage that was their Achilles heel, as it allowed the Left to be represented in a damaging light as advocates of free love and the abolition of the family. This played rather differently in Britain's two main socialist parties. For the Marxist Social Democratic Federation (SDF), the Edith Lanchester Case of 1895 forced some of these issues to the surface. When Lanchester, an SDF executive member, announced that she was going to enter a free-love union with her comrade James Sullivan, her family had her committed to an asylum. Her action, as a middle-class woman proposing to live with a working-class man without benefit of matrimony, was held to be an attempt to commit 'social suicide'.⁸ Protests led to Edith's release. However, her treatment did not change her mind. Her free-love union lasted until Sullivan's death in 1945 and produced two children. In much of the socialist discussion of the case, little support was given to her choice to eschew marriage. Instead, the focus was on civil liberties. Some noted that there was a double standard with no equivalent concern for the reputation or mental health

⁵ Christine Collette, 'Socialism and Scandal: The Sexual Politics of the Early Labour Movement', *History Workshop Journal*, 23 (1987), 102–11; Carolyn Steedman, *Childhood, Culture and Class in Britain: Margaret Macmillan, 1860–1931* (London: Virago, 1990), pp. 127–28.

⁶ Karen Hunt, 'When the "Private" Becomes Public: Gossip, Gender and Socialist Politics', paper presented at the International Federation for Research in Women's History conference, Belfast, August 2003.

⁷ See 'The Politics of the Private Sphere', in Karen Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists: The Social Democratic Federation and the Woman Question, 1884–1911* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 81–117.

⁸ 'Social suicide' was the term used by Dr Blandford when committing Lanchester to Roehampton Asylum. See 'The Lanchester Case: Dr Blandford's Certificate', *British Medical Journal*, 2.1818 (1895), 1127–28 (p. 1127). For the Lanchester Case and its ramifications for socialists, see Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists*, pp. 94–104.

of James Sullivan.⁹ For her party, this was not a sexual scandal. Instead, Edith was seen as responsible for creating a damaging link in the public mind between the SDF and free love. Her refusal to marry was seen by the party as a private matter that had no place in the public world of politics.

Potential scandal was a greater challenge for Britain's other leading socialist organization, the Independent Labour Party (ILP), since the party's ethical socialism placed a high premium on respectability. The case of Tom Mann reveals the potency that the Belt Case would have for the ILP.¹⁰ In the late 1890s Mann was eased out of his post as secretary of the ILP, ostensibly on the grounds of the potential scandal that he represented. Rumours were spread about excessive drinking and womanizing: his private life was felt by senior party members to be inappropriate for a leading ILPer. He was encouraged to devote himself to international trade union work and he eventually left for Australia. However, as ILP leaders listened to hearsay about Mann's private life, they knew nothing of circumstances which would have shocked them far more. Mann had left his long-standing wife and four daughters and had begun a relationship with Elsie Harker, who was also to be known as 'Mrs Mann', and with whom he had a further four children. It was no accident that this happened at the time when the ILP began to devote most of its energies to electoral politics. This meant that gossip about private lives had a much greater purchase. As Stephen Yeo concluded from his study of ethical socialism in the 1880s and 1890s, 'the exigencies of electoral politics in a recalcitrant climate led to a large and cautious machine being constructed, careful not to offend for fear of losing the stake it was painfully acquiring in machine politics.'¹¹ The increasing focus of socialists on the demands of electoral politics, marked in February 1900 by the formation of what was to become the Labour Party, was crucial to the anxieties that prompted the Belt Case.

This sensitivity, particularly around free-love unions, was also shared by feminists. Over two decades before the Belt Case, the suffragist Elizabeth Wolstenholme was pressurized by her close colleagues in the women's movement to regularize her free-love union with Ben Elmy. She was six months pregnant when they reluctantly wed in 1874. Although her out-of-wedlock pregnancy and free-love union were successfully hushed up, there remained anxiety among some feminists about the public consequences of the couple's private actions. Millicent Fawcett wrote to Elizabeth: 'the circumstances connected with your marriage and what took place previous to it [...] has been and is a great injury to the cause of women.'¹² Wolstenholme

⁹ Lily Bell, 'Matrons and Maidens', *Labour Leader*, 2 November 1895, p. 4.

¹⁰ See Chūshichi Tsuzuki, *Tom Mann, 1856–1941: The Challenges of Labour* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 102–08.

¹¹ Stephen Yeo, 'A New Life: The Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883–1896', *History Workshop Journal*, 4 (1977), 5–56 (p. 43).

¹² Millicent Fawcett to Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, 9 December 1875, quoted

Elmy continued her activism but distanced herself from the social purity strand of Victorian feminism that was advocated by Fawcett, among others. Twenty years later, Dora Montefiore became part of Wolstenholme Elmy's correspondence network, but she does not seem to have known about this episode in her friend's earlier life.¹³ The Elmys' case showed that a moral issue could cause damage to a progressive movement not because of the hypocritical behaviour of the central actors, but through the fear that exposure would damage the wider cause. Rumour and gossip thrived where the appearance of respectability was paramount.

As we will see, socialists and feminists were not averse to using gossip themselves. Gossipers recognized where the boundary lay between the public and the private, but claimed that they were revealing private matters for the good of the cause or the individual. Both men and women gossiped, and the content and outcome of this gossip was often gendered, even among those who were most sympathetic to feminism. It is therefore not surprising that gossip, particularly relating to what became the Belt Case, was a catalyst in Montefiore's representation by others as a 'difficult woman'.¹⁴ How significant it was to her self-representation, both at the time and subsequently, is the focus of what follows. The period covered by the Belt Case was a key stage in Montefiore's journey as a political woman, as she explored where she wanted to focus her energies within the evolving socialist and women's movements. It was a pivotal moment in her making as a socialist woman. So, to begin, let me tell you a story.

The Belt Case

In July 1898 Dora Montefiore, a 46-year-old middle-class widow, joined the van of the socialist newspaper, the *Clarion*, for a fortnight as it toured the Midlands, bringing socialist propaganda to rural villages.¹⁵ She was a cultured woman: indeed, the *Clarion* commented that 'her knowledge of the world and books made her a very entertaining Vanner'.¹⁶ She was well travelled, having spent her married life in Australia, and was already

in Sandra Stanley Holton, 'Free Love and Victorian Feminism: The Divers Matrimonials of Elizabeth Wolstenholme and Ben Elmy', *Victorian Studies*, 37 (1994), 199–222 (p. 214).

¹³ Montefiore's sympathetic portrait of Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy does not refer to her free-love union. See Montefiore, *From a Victorian*, pp. 42–43.

¹⁴ Karen Hunt, 'Constructing a "Difficult Woman": Dora Montefiore and the Belt Case of 1899', paper given at Manchester Metropolitan University, January 2001.

¹⁵ The details of the Belt Case have been reconstructed from conflicting accounts in the correspondence collected in the Francis Johnson Papers (part of the ILP archive), together with documents prepared by the MacDonalds' legal team in relation to the slander case, *Belt v. MacDonald*.

¹⁶ 'Bacon's Report', *Clarion*, 9 July 1898, p. 224.

a committed suffragist through her activism in the Womanhood League of New South Wales, and in England, the Union of Practical Suffragists and the Women's Local Government Society. It was her desire to find out more about socialism that had led her to volunteer to work on the *Clarion* van. One of Montefiore's co-vanners was George Belt, a married, working-class man in his early thirties. He was an experienced socialist, the paid organizer for the ILP in Hull, and had been elected to the local school board and city council. He was a building labourer by trade and had long been a trade union activist, having been a defendant in a celebrated trade union legal case in 1893.¹⁷

After meeting on the van, Belt and Montefiore began to correspond, mostly on literary matters, and when he came to London on school board business he stayed at her home. He was there just before Christmas 1898 when he was taken ill, suffering some kind of breakdown. When out with Montefiore and her son, 'he behaved in a most eccentric way in the street, speaking to people he did not know, and constantly stopping and laughing out loud.' The next morning, when Belt did not appear, they had to break into his room where he was 'quite naked, in a crouched up position, on a sheet on the floor'.¹⁸ Eventually, he was taken to the local infirmary where he was kept in a padded room for a time. However, he recovered sufficiently to be discharged within a fortnight.

During his convalescence, Belt continued to correspond with Montefiore against the advice of doctors and political colleagues. It was now suggested that the character of this correspondence had changed. Robert Davison, secretary of Hull ILP, came to London to accompany Belt home when he was discharged from Kensington infirmary. He said that he had been shown a letter that Belt had written from the hospital to Montefiore. Davison was to say later, when he had made clear that he wanted to distance himself from his former comrade, that 'it was a love letter, such as a lad of eighteen would have written saying he had loved her from the first time that he had seen her'. It was also reported that in his 'mad passion', Belt had shouted out for 'Dora', the use of her forename suggesting intimacy between the two.¹⁹ Private letters ceasing to be 'private' were to be crucial in what was about to become the Belt Case.

As part of Belt's convalescence he went rather unwillingly on a brief holiday to Hastings with his wife, who was eight months pregnant. On 8

¹⁷ As president of the Hull branch of the Builders Labourers' Society, Belt was one of eight trade unionists sued by a Hull builder for damages after a building workers' strike in the city. See 'The Hull Trades Union Case', *Hull Daily Mail*, 15 August 1893, p. 4.

¹⁸ Dora Montefiore to Keir Hardie, 27 April 1899, London School of Economics, Francis Johnson Papers (FJP), 1899/28.

¹⁹ *Belt v. MacDonald*, 1899, Brief for the Defendant, The National Archives (TNA), PRO 30/69/1370, pp. 4, 3.

February 1899 she discovered a letter from Montefiore to her husband. She sent this letter to Dr Webster, lately of Hull ILP and now living in Leeds, with whom Belt had been convalescing. Webster then made a copy of the letter and sent the original to Davison. These two men were to be central actors in the Belt Case. In turn, the letter was copied by other people, and it was to prompt Belt's dismissal, as well as forming a crucial part of the slander case. The letter does not survive, although one of those who saw it said, 'It is a remarkable letter to say the least for a lady of good social position to write to a bricklayer's labourer.' The letter apparently included arrangements to meet at nearby Battle as well as in London. At this stage, Webster commented to Davison that Belt should be asked to resign or 'else better dismiss him he seems to become a cur'. Meanwhile, Belt returned to Hull on 21 February and the next day attended a Hull ILP meeting where, it was claimed, he was 'cut' by all his friends. At a meeting soon after, according to Davison, Belt was at first abusive and then admitted that in three months he would probably be living with Mrs Montefiore. He was asked to resign.²⁰

Gossip about Belt grew in Hull, at least according to Davison, and subscriptions to the Wages Fund for the Organiser dried up. At a branch meeting in March, the twenty members present agreed that Belt should be given notice. The supposedly incriminating letter was passed around at this meeting.²¹ While all this was happening, a major building dispute broke out in Hull and Belt was busy addressing mass meetings.²² He was still a councillor and a school board member. Despite the ILP's anxieties and behaviour, in all the local press coverage of Belt as a prominent local activist there was no suggestion of any scandal, although his ill health was mentioned and treated sympathetically.²³

At the beginning of April, the ILP Annual Conference was held in Leeds, and although Belt usually attended on behalf of Hull ILP he was removed from this role and replaced by Davison. It was while attending this conference as a visitor that Dora Montefiore had a conversation with Keir Hardie, leader of the ILP. This was now becoming more than a little local difficulty. The next day Montefiore wrote a letter to Hardie, which began an extensive correspondence with the many parties to this dispute. She offered to pay one pound a week for three months into the wages fund, provided that her anonymity was protected. She said:

²⁰ *Belt v. MacDonald* Brief, pp. 8, 9, 10.

²¹ *Belt v. MacDonald* Brief, p. 10.

²² 'The Building Dispute and the Tramways', *Hull Daily Mail*, 9 May 1899, p. 4.

²³ It was reported that Belt had been absent thirty-two times from the council because of illness. He did not stand again (*Hull News*, 21 October 1899). His good work on the council was noted in 'The November Elections', *Hull Daily News*, 25 October 1899, p. 6.

George Belt's self-respect will not suffer if it is done in this way, and it will be a great pleasure to me to feel that I am helping not only the movement but also the man I care for, at a time when he is far from well and requires help and sympathy instead of harsh and unfair treatment.²⁴

Three days later, Margaret MacDonald, member of the ILP and wife of future Labour prime minister Ramsay MacDonald, wrote to Keir Hardie.²⁵ This was her first intervention. She was anxious that rumours be stopped. She later said it was her husband who had heard that Belt and Montefiore were carrying on a clandestine correspondence, and that as a consequence Belt had been discharged from his office as ILP organizer. It was therefore Ramsay MacDonald who had listened to gossip at the party conference. Ramsay 'cautioned his wife to be careful about Mrs Montefiore'.²⁶ But it did not rest there. Margaret MacDonald decided to see Hardie about the matter. Now the concerns were about Montefiore, rather than Belt, whom MacDonald clearly did not know.

In the correspondence that raced between various parties and Hardie, he seems to have been particularly sensitive to the class differences between the two possible lovers. He advised Montefiore not to tempt Belt 'into a life of indolence'. She replied:

I do not, and could not lead such a life myself, and am bringing up my two children as workers (this separates me much from my own family who look upon me as a crank) and how could I tempt anyone I was interested in to do what would be morally impossible for me to do?²⁷

Margaret MacDonald then decided to visit Montefiore, whom she knew from their work for the International Council of Women's Congress, which was to be held in London in July of that year, and for which Montefiore was the recording secretary. In MacDonald's account she visited Montefiore at home and made it clear that she had received her version of events from Hardie. She said that she did not preach at Montefiore but, as she later explained to Hardie,

I simply felt that I must somehow in the feeblest and cheeriest way try to help her, after what you told me. It was as if I had seen someone near a precipice and instinctively drew near lest perhaps I might put out a helping hand to keep her from falling over.²⁸

²⁴ Montefiore to Hardie, 3 April 1899, FJP, 1899/13.

²⁵ Margaret MacDonald to Hardie, 6 April 1899, FJP, 1899/14.

²⁶ *Belt v. Macdonald* Brief, p. 2.

²⁷ Montefiore to Hardie, 9 April 1899, FJP, 1899/15.

²⁸ Margaret MacDonald to Hardie, 16 April 1899, FJP, 1899/18.

Was this another case of attempted ‘social suicide’? Montefiore did not see it in that way. She in turn wrote to Hardie saying that she was surprised by Margaret MacDonald’s visit, particularly as MacDonald had said she had heard from Hardie that it was Montefiore’s intention to go and live with Belt.²⁹ So the gossip ratcheted up! Montefiore felt she had to remind Hardie of what she had already made clear:

Nothing passed between us, as to any future plans or intentions of mine, I should never have dreamt of discussing the subject with you or with anyone else and I declined to do so with Mrs MacDonald telling her at the same time that I should write and ask you in justice to myself to write a line contradicting the false impression she has received, that between you and me, the subject of any future relations between George Belt and myself was discussed. Of course I was surprised that any point of the conversation between us was reported because I understood it was a confidential one, but I am beginning to learn that the word confidential has not with others the sense that I attach to it.³⁰

When one sees the other letters Hardie was receiving at the time, it seems that few of those concerned had much sense of what ‘in confidence’ meant. Nevertheless, Hardie corrected Margaret MacDonald’s misstatement and Montefiore thanked him for his actions adding,

Such meddling gossip is equally distasteful to me as it is to you, but in the cause of justice and fairness I feel bound to stand by Mr Belt who has been unjustly dismissed from his appointment in the Hull ILP.³¹

Meanwhile, Davison, on behalf of Hull ILP, had turned down Montefiore’s offer to subsidize Belt’s wages and Belt had been dismissed from his post. On 27 April Montefiore wrote a long letter to Hardie setting out her side of the story. She described with astounding frankness the development of a platonic ‘intellectual and soul friendship’.³² During Belt’s visit before Christmas, she said,

His attitude to me was that of respectful friendship, and I had no idea then that his feeling was of any other nature than that of friendship. One evening however two days before he was to leave something was said that made us both feel conscious

²⁹ Margaret MacDonald to Hardie, 19 April 1899, FJP, 1899/22.

³⁰ Montefiore to Hardie, 17 April 1899, FJP, 1899/20.

³¹ Montefiore to Hardie, 20 April 1899, FJP, 1899/23.

³² Montefiore to Hardie, 27 April 1899, FJP, 1899/28. All quotations in this and the following paragraphs are from this letter.

that there was more in the feelings of both of us than we had ever acknowledged to ourselves but that consciousness came through silence and not through any words, and we were both strong enough not to betray ourselves.

She then described in alarming detail Belt's breakdown and the effect it had on her and her household. She mentioned the letters Belt wrote from the infirmary, some were 'disconnected, some quite sane, and it was one of these letters repeating all his feelings for me and stating that he never meant to live with his wife again, that I showed to Webster'. She went on to remind Hardie:

You must remember please that from the time George Belt and I had known our feelings towards each other we had never had an opportunity for further conversation and now that he seemed to be coming back almost from the grave I felt, and he felt I knew from his letters, that there was much to discuss and explain whenever he should be well enough for it.

After he was discharged from hospital, Belt insisted on returning to Montefiore's home before he was taken off by Dr Webster to recuperate in Leeds. When they were able to be alone, Belt told Montefiore that he would not leave until she assured him that her feelings remained the same as before his illness. She reassured him and told him that, if anything, it had brought them closer together. He then wrote to her every day from Leeds and she told Hardie that these letters were different to those before his illness. She said that

It was during this time no doubt, when his mind was still unsettled and his thoughts exaggerated that he said many things which have been put down as foolishness, but which it might have been more fair to [see] as the effects of a very terrible illness [...] he mentally clung to me as a protest against the treatment he was receiving.

For Montefiore, the narrative of these events did not focus on her or Belt's 'improper' behaviour. She denied that propriety was breached in any way. She was more concerned with the behaviour of the socialist men, Webster and Davison: 'The very men whom I had received at my house and treated as friends went away and slandered me and insinuated horrible things against me.' But, she said,

It is true I have always lived a very sheltered life as far as coming across men of their description is concerned, but I have always been a rebel in thought and action, and I am not likely to quail now before a handful of provincial plotters.

Defiantly, she wrote,

My private friendships no-one has a right to control or question; if I see by a certain line of conduct, though it be opposed to the narrow judgement of Mrs Grundy, I can help right a wrong, or raise a suffering soul I shall pursue that line of conduct, and ignore Mrs Grundy.

New as she was to socialism, and to the ILP in particular, she was forthright in her disappointment at the closed minds of her new comrades. She asked why socialists could not bring to bear the same critical views to the Sex Question that they brought to all other political and industrial questions. Socialist writers were critical of marriage in capitalist society yet, she said, ILPers attack a comrade if they put any of these critiques into practice. Montefiore was accusing socialists of being hypocrites.

Yet on the same day as this letter was written, Margaret MacDonald decided that in order 'to avoid scandal' she must tell Lady Aberdeen, president of the International Council of Women, about Montefiore. She showed her a copy of the intercepted letter and when asked by Lady Aberdeen, MacDonald said that the matter was general knowledge and that this letter was the real reason for Belt's dismissal from his post at Hull. Lady Aberdeen then tackled Montefiore on the subject but was given 'her word of honour that all was right regarding her relations with' Belt.³³ But, according to MacDonald, when faced with a copy of the intercepted letter, Montefiore agreed to withdraw from her public role in the forthcoming ICW congress.

Why would Montefiore concede to what amounted to blackmail based on a private letter which had been stolen from its recipient, Belt, had been passed from hand to hand among socialists in Hull and London, and was now in the possession of a leading figure in the women's movement? Although Montefiore made it clear that she felt she had done nothing to endanger her own reputation, she also recognized how fragile such things could be. Moreover, she also now knew the kind of reading that was being made of the letter. Dr Webster, for example, said the letter was 'in the style of lover to lover'. His assessment of the whole business was that Belt had been suffering from 'vanity' from having come top of the poll at the recent school board elections and had become dissatisfied with his material position of twenty-five shillings a week. That had made him vulnerable to the middle-class lifestyle of Montefiore. She had then seduced him with a so-called platonic love. He commented, 'I leave you to judge if that is possible.'³⁴ As a medical doctor he also gave a diagnosis of Belt's condition — satyriasis (a male version of nymphomania) — which meant that Belt had lost all sense of moral right or wrong. Of all the doctors involved, he

³³ Margaret MacDonald to Hardie, 27 April 1899, FJP, 1899/29; *Belt v. MacDonald* Brief, p. 2.

³⁴ Webster to Hardie, 16 April 1899, FJP, 1899/19.

was the only one to make this diagnosis and the only one who tenaciously remained part of the Belt Case. Montefiore may have felt that there were other ways to deal with this matter.

By June, Belt had issued a writ against Margaret MacDonald alleging slander: that MacDonald had claimed to Lady Aberdeen that he had been dismissed from his post for ‘immoral conduct’. Efforts were made to persuade Belt to withdraw the case. He agreed, on condition that MacDonald apologized and paid his legal costs.³⁵ Others put pressure on Hardie to intervene to stop the case. Margaret MacMillan, a leading member of the ILP, said that she did not want to be called as a witness and that it would not do the MacDonalds any good if she did appear. She commented, ‘No wonder we lose every election. None of us seem to be able to keep out of the Dirt.’³⁶ At the final hour, Hardie looked through the evidence he was to give and struck out the passage saying he had told Margaret MacDonald that the real reason for Belt’s dismissal was the discovery of Montefiore’s letter to Belt and Belt’s relationship with Montefiore.³⁷ The MacDonalds remained confident that Hardie had told them this. This was clearly not going to play well for the ILP should it come to court.

Montefiore was not mentioned in the writ, although she was much discussed in the brief prepared for MacDonald. In MacDonald’s defence it was decided not to plead ‘justification’; that is, not to argue that Belt had been dismissed for his immoral conduct. This was despite the fact that they had clearly undertaken a great deal of research to build just such a case. Instead, the plea was that the conversation between Margaret MacDonald and Lady Aberdeen ‘was a privileged communication’, making its truth or falsity irrelevant. It is also clear that the MacDonalds viewed this case as neither being instigated by Belt nor actually being about his reputation. Their view was that ‘this action is being used as a means for discovering what other persons have said or written of the Plaintiff [Belt] or Mrs Montefiore and therefore the most limited inspection of documents has been given to the Plaintiff’.³⁸ Later, Ramsay MacDonald was to suggest that the slander action against his wife was withdrawn without Belt’s knowledge ‘by the lady who was behind him in it’.³⁹ Actually, the case was ‘amicably settled’ in favour of MacDonald, but without Belt having to pay her legal costs. The crowd that had gathered at Leeds Assizes to see the famous witnesses who were due to be called — Hardie and Lady Aberdeen, in particular — nearly got the show they were waiting for, as the lawyers almost fell out as the settlement was being agreed. MacDonald’s lawyer refused to agree with the

³⁵ Belt to Hardie, 20 November 1899, FJP, 1899/129.

³⁶ Margaret MacMillan to Hardie, 11 November 1899, FJP, 1899/127.

³⁷ Horne and Birkett to Hardie, 12 March 1900, FJP, 1900/76.

³⁸ *Belt v. MacDonald* Brief, p. 13.

³⁹ Ramsay MacDonald to C. Greengross, 13 December 1905, Manchester, Labour History Study and Archive Centre, Labour Party Archives, LP/LRC 31/130.

statement that the words used ‘did not and were not intended to impute immorality to the plaintiff’.⁴⁰ Margaret MacDonald denied having ever made the statement that Belt took to be slanderous. The issue of privilege meant that the case did not have to be resolved. No one really won, but public embarrassment, particularly for the socialists, was at the very last minute averted. Although the *Hull News* gave a subheading to its report on this ‘Hull Slander Case’ of ‘Mr Belt and the Ladies’, there is nothing in the report that spelled out what particular ‘immorality’ was being imputed. This was not a salacious piece of reporting, and it is more likely that the headline actually referred to the involvement of the Countess of Aberdeen in the case and, to a lesser extent, Margaret MacDonald herself.

Two columns away was another report of a legal case involving ‘ex-Councillor Belt’ with the same legal team defending him. Indeed, looking back through the Hull press there are a number of other court cases involving Belt, usually as the defendant accused of, for example, assault, and always as part of a trade union dispute.⁴¹ Late-Victorian industrial conflicts often ended up in the courts. This explains why Belt, despite his class background, was probably much more familiar with the legal system than either Margaret MacDonald or indeed Montefiore. It is therefore not as surprising as it was made to seem by the MacDonalds that Belt resorted to the law. In addition, it is also clear that libel and slander cases between local political candidates, including labour ones, were not that unusual.⁴² Indeed, Ramsay MacDonald was later to face a slander case arising from comments he made during the general election in January 1910.⁴³ The difference between these cases and the earlier Belt Case was that private behaviour sat at its heart.

The outcomes of the Belt Case

George Belt separated from his wife and came to live in London. He did not give up his activism as a trade unionist and socialist.⁴⁴ Despite assumptions

⁴⁰ ‘A Hull Slander Case’, *Hull News*, 24 March 1900. See also, ‘West Riding Assizes’, *Yorkshire Post*, 22 March 1900, p. 7.

⁴¹ For example, Belt was charged with obstruction for holding an ILP meeting in Nelson Street, Hull (‘Hull Councillor Summoned’, *Hull Daily Mail*, 8 September 1897, p. 4); Belt sued for slander as part of a strike of builders’ labourers in York (‘Ex-Councillor Belt Sues for Slander’, *Hull Daily Mail*, 21 March 1900, p. 3).

⁴² These varied between libel cases between local candidates in municipal contests such as for Sale District Council in 1895 (‘Sale District Council Election’, *Manchester Evening News*, 27 February 1895, p. 2), or as part of parliamentary elections. In 1906 S. G. Hobson, the socialist candidate for Rochdale, sued the secretary of the Rochdale Reform Club, claiming that the libel had cost him one thousand votes (‘An Alleged Criminal Libel’, *Scotsman*, 8 February 1906, p. 6).

⁴³ *Bagley and Foster Fraser v. MacDonald*, TNA, PRO 30/69/1452.

⁴⁴ In London, Belt worked for the Colonial Trading Export Company in Poplar

made in an earlier study of the Belt Case, there is no evidence that Belt and Montefiore ever lived together in a free-love union.⁴⁵ By 1911 Belt was living with a widow, Alice Norris, and two of her four children. He married Alice in 1914, his first wife having died in 1908. Meanwhile, Montefiore lived as a respectable widow for the rest of her life. Never shy at expressing her views, she was not an advocate of free love, although she did not criticize others who had chosen that path. If there was an affair, it is extraordinary that despite all those seeking evidence against both of them, nothing was ever produced. This was despite the fact that in 1904, Belt appeared briefly on the electoral register in Hammersmith as a lodger at 32 Upper Mall, Montefiore's home. He rented two furnished rooms for seven shillings a week. However, rather than brazenly outing themselves, this is much more likely evidence of Belt securing a local address and thus a vote as he campaigned to be adopted as the Labour candidate for Hammersmith. The platonic friendship between Belt and Montefiore seems to have lasted beyond the turbulent years of the Belt Case, although its intensity waned. They were involved in joint political work, such as serving on Hammersmith Distress Committee from 1905, and in 1917 both were speakers at a Trafalgar Square demonstration for adult suffrage. Yet in her autobiography, published in 1927, Montefiore did not mention the Belt Case and barely referred to Belt himself.

The Belt Case continued to reverberate long after the slander case of 1900. In 1904 Belt succeeded in becoming the Labour candidate for Hammersmith, but the national Labour Representation Committee (LRC) refused to support his candidacy. Ramsay MacDonald said that there were objections to Belt's private life and succeeded in convincing the LRC National Executive that such 'a moral scallywag' was not 'a fit and proper man to represent a constituency in the House of Commons'.⁴⁶ Belt stood anyway but the lack of official endorsement, which was never explained, did not play well and he was not elected. At the time, MacDonald wrote letters to Hull and Hammersmith soliciting evidence against Belt and often

and as a paid propagandist for the SDF. By 1911 he combined public speaking with running an antiquarian bookshop in Holborn. He became secretary for the Daily Herald League, a grassroots organization formed by readers of the radical *Daily Herald* newspaper, and had a regular column in the paper that ran into the 1920s.

⁴⁵ Christine Collette asserts that Belt and Montefiore had 'a relationship' from 1898 to about 1908, which she implies was sexual ('Socialism and Scandal', pp. 102, 109). She has continued to refer to the couple's 'affair' and this has been repeated by others. See Christine Collette, *For Labour and For Woman: The Women's Labour League, 1906–1918* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), p. 64; Ginger S. Frost, *Living in Sin: Cohabiting as Husband and Wife in Nineteenth-Century England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), p. 208.

⁴⁶ MacDonald to Davison, 23 March 1905, quoted in Paul Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals, and Labour: The Struggle for London 1885–1914* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), p. 172.

referred in the correspondence, but not publicly, to the slander case. Yet the case does not seem to have been widely known. For example, in 1905 Mrs Wolstenholme Elmy wrote to a friend: ‘I know nothing of the libel case she speaks of — but I know, love and trust Mrs Montefiore who is a large-hearted, high-minded woman of singular heart and influence.’⁴⁷ The slander case might not have been well known but the antipathy between Margaret MacDonald and Montefiore was readily apparent, particularly at the Socialist Women’s International Congresses in 1907 and 1910, when MacDonald represented the ILP and Montefiore the SDF (her interest in the ILP had been short-lived). MacDonald’s feelings were apparent in her congress report: ‘for the sake of letting things go smoothly, [we] put up quietly with much more of Mrs Montefiore than is justified by her influence or representative character in the British movement.’⁴⁸

Censorship and self-censorship

The Belt Case, as reconstructed here, shows the mechanics of attempted and actual censorship, as practised by a range of *fin-de-siècle* progressives. It also allows us to explore how censorship can operate within the archive. In particular, I want to focus on the role of letters — both those that are present in the archive and those that are absent — as a vehicle for censorship of the self or of others. All the letters in the case were private. Some are explicitly marked ‘private and confidential’. Yet they were passed from hand to hand, copied, read out at meetings, or their contents reported on by third parties. The existence or knowledge of the letters, as distinct from their actual contents, was enough to censor public and private behaviour. The case confirms the peculiar power that private uncensored words can have when they are made public, particularly when they are in stolen letters or being recounted second or third hand. Suppressing them after they had become part of the rumour mill was almost impossible, and their damaging effects were not alleviated by the settling of the *Belt v. MacDonald* slander case in 1900.

The letters themselves had a value not just to their author or the intended recipient. After the Belt Case was formally concluded, Keir Hardie asked for all the letters used in the slander case because he wanted to destroy them. He was advised by solicitors to refrain from this ‘as they may not have heard the last of the matter’. If they were attacked, it was said, the letters might be useful as a form of insurance.⁴⁹ This decision

⁴⁷ Wolstenholme Elmy to Mrs H. McIlquham, 3 December 1905, London, British Library, Correspondence of Mrs Elizabeth C. Wolstenholme Elmy, Add MSS 47454.

⁴⁸ Margaret E. MacDonald, ‘Women at the Copenhagen Congress’, *Labour Leader*, 9 September 1910, p. 571.

⁴⁹ Horne and Birkett to Hardie, 18 April 1900, FJP, 1900/79.

means that some of the letters from the case have survived in the archives of the ILP. In addition, the brief prepared for Margaret MacDonald's defence has survived through the accident of her being the wife of a future prime minister. His personal papers, including those of his deceased wife, necessarily became official papers and are located in the National Archives. Many silences or presences within the archive are, we know, much more to do with serendipity than deliberate acts, such as the burning or weeding of personal papers.

However, the intercepted, stolen, copied, gossiped-about letter has not survived. This letter from Montefiore to Belt was intercepted by his wife Harriet. Soon it was reported to be common news in Hull, as Mrs Belt had told her friends, so 'of course it is now widespread'.⁵⁰ She had shown the letter to Webster and his wife, with whom George had been recuperating in Leeds, while Davison kept a copy of what Webster called the 'incriminating letter'.⁵¹ At Margaret MacDonald's request, Webster sent a copy to her of this letter remarking, 'It is a poor business interfering in other people's affairs but I am sure it ought to be done.'⁵² As for the fate of the original letter, the brief compiled by the MacDonalds' solicitors concluded that Mrs Belt had eventually surrendered it to her husband, who had destroyed it. However, this claim was annotated with a handwritten question mark, which suggests that they were unable to corroborate this. The detail in the brief about the letter, found in a copy of the book *Timothy's Quest*, which was a gift from Montefiore to Belt, suggests that someone had seen it but that at this point no copies existed.⁵³ There were further fishing expeditions after the court case to establish more about the 'incriminating letter', particularly during the period when Ramsay MacDonald intervened to prevent the LRC's endorsement of Belt's candidature for Parliament in 1905. One letter referred to 'more serious rumours, [...] relating to George Belt and a certain lady', which was generally regarded 'as a calumny'.⁵⁴ Here the silence in the archive exacerbated the initial effects of the Belt Case.

Sadly, there is no Dora Montefiore archive. Her many letters only survive if they have surfaced in other archival collections such as Mrs Wolstenholme Elmy's correspondence circle, or the Francis Johnson Papers of the ILP. The other source for Montefiore's letters is the press. However, the character of this public correspondence is necessarily rather different

⁵⁰ Webster to Hardie, 16 April 1899, FJP, 1899/19.

⁵¹ Webster to Hardie, 16 April 1899, FJP, 1899/19. This term was used in *Belt v. MacDonald* Brief, p. 10.

⁵² Webster to Hardie, 9 May 1899, FJP, 1899/38.

⁵³ *Timothy's Quest* (1890) was a children's novel by Kate Douglas Winn. It is an interesting choice of gift from Montefiore to Belt, as the story concerns a boy who ran away from the slums to the country.

⁵⁴ C. F. Greengross to MacDonald, 26 December 1905, Labour Party Archives, LP/LRC 31/132.

to the private letters found among the personal papers of others. The Belt Case allows us to compare Montefiore's life writing created for different audiences and in different circumstances. Contrasting her private letter to Keir Hardie in 1899, where she set out her side of the story, with her later published autobiography is particularly instructive. The issue is whether in response to being censored, Montefiore self-censored in the way in which she represented the case, and particularly her friendship with Belt. Did she handle her emotional life in a different way to her contemporaries? The Belt Case seems to be absent from her autobiography, *From a Victorian to a Modern*. There are moments when Montefiore could have referred directly to Belt, as in the description she gave of her experience as a *Clarion* vanner. She commented on 'the very fine feeling of intellectual and spiritual comradeship' she found there, and went on to quote a contemporary account of her visit which includes the statement, 'Councillor Belt also left for Hull, to attend some important meeting' (pp. 61, 62), but he never appeared again in her autobiography. Perhaps even more tellingly, another important actor in the case, Margaret MacDonald, was never mentioned — and Montefiore knew and named most of the great and the good in the socialist and women's movement in Britain and beyond. The figure who was harder to erase from the story was the future Labour prime minister, Ramsay MacDonald. He was completely overlooked until Montefiore's account reached 1917, when he spoke at the Leeds Convention greeting the first Russian Revolution (p. 194). Perhaps surprisingly, given their continuing antipathy, the resolution proposed by MacDonald was seconded by Montefiore herself. By the mid-1920s, when the autobiography was written, MacDonald would not have wanted the world to be reminded of his association with the communist Montefiore, or what might be seen as his fleeting pro-Bolshevism. Hence, one suspects that Montefiore's decision to only include him at this point shows that the Belt Case was not forgotten.

The Belt Case, although not named, can also be glimpsed just below the surface of Montefiore's opening remarks in *From a Victorian to a Modern*:

Now, however, that the fight is over and the time for going over the battlefield has come, I, having observed during a long life how facts and events can be misrepresented till they become in history embalmed distortions, desire to put down, during the evening of my life, the truth, not only about myself, but about many of my fellow-workers in the pioneer causes in which we have fought shoulder to shoulder. (p. 5)

However, as an autobiographer, Montefiore did not place her own personal or private needs very far forward in the story she chose to tell. She referred to 'the suffering many of us underwent', making clear that a price was paid for political activism (p. 6). However, she gave little detail of

what we would now term personal relationships. Her marriage was dealt with in a paragraph and nothing was said about the relationship itself. She referred only to ‘the balls, picnics and race meetings which had filled to overflowing my short married life’ (p. 32). Instead, she defined herself as ‘a woman in the nineteenth century, who, because she strove to do her best as sole parent to her children, found herself constantly up against wrong and unsympathetic laws, and without political power to alter or abolish such laws’ (p. 6). She represented herself as a woman, a single parent, and, most of all, as

a suffragist who never used violence though she suffered violence, but who was forced by a sense of duty towards other women who were not so free as she was to act publicly in the cause that was dear to her, in order to help bring before the public the question of the gross disabilities under which women were suffering. (p. 8)

The way in which she framed her own story shows a strong sense of the separate but connected public and private spheres. Women had to fight for public rights to combat private injustices. The spur to her own politicization was the discovery when widowed that she did not have guardianship of her own children. She linked this injustice to what she termed the greatest sex disability of all: the lack of a vote. In the politics she developed she used her own experiences and observations to illustrate the collective experience of groups excluded from power: women, the working class, the colonized. Like most of her contemporaries, dwelling on her personal relationships was not central to her political writing. However, the Belt Case reveals much about how Montefiore was exploring the boundaries between the personal and the political and thus where and when censorship might be acceptable.

The effects of the Belt Case are particularly apparent in the different ways in which Montefiore represented and recounted her own feelings in the autobiography and in the letter to Keir Hardie dated 27 April 1899. In her autobiography she broke off her narrative to talk about her feelings for her son and the effect of her political activism on him (pp. 192, 197–98). However, it is clear that her own emotional life was outside the parameters of the project she set herself in *From a Victorian to a Modern*. In this, her book shared features of the new genre of suffragette autobiography which began to appear in the 1920s. These autobiographies contain self-censorship in terms of how women chose to narrate their lives, and which aspects of these lives they included. Hilda Kean suggests that one characteristic of the suffragette autobiography was the absence of personal life within the carefully constructed narrative, while Laura Mayhall emphasizes the importance of exclusions and silences within the new discursive

identity of the ‘Suffragette Spirit’ created by this genre of life writing.⁵⁵ Montefiore’s memoir is not part of this genre, despite her early membership of the WSPU. For her, suffragette militancy was only an episode in a much more wide-ranging political journey. Yet, like the suffragette autobiographers, Montefiore’s narrative focused on public deeds rather than private emotions. However, before we conclude that she could not and did not want to engage with her own feelings, we should look more closely at her letter recounting her experience of the Belt Case. Here, there is surprisingly little self-censorship.

Montefiore’s account of Belt’s breakdown and the nature of their friendship reveals what a self-declared ‘Victorian’ felt able to write to a man, Keir Hardie, whom she had only recently met and did not know well. At a number of points in this letter, Montefiore wrote about feelings, both hers and Belt’s. And ‘feelings’ is the word used. She described how when Belt talked to her about his feelings immediately before his breakdown, he cried the whole time: ‘I don’t know anything more terrible to see than a strong man in tears.’⁵⁶ When he returned from the infirmary ‘he repeated all his feelings for me’. She also referred to ‘the time that B and I had known our feelings towards each other’. Belt wanted Montefiore’s reassurance at this point: ‘he feared the troubles and the worry I had gone through might have altered my feelings.’ In this closely typed, nine-page letter, Montefiore wrote of her own emotional life. She had had ‘as happy a married life as ever fell to the lot of any woman’ but she was bewildered and angry about how others, who she believed should have known better, had behaved and judged both Belt and herself. She wrote:

I have reason to know that if B had had an ordinary liaison in London such as a man can understand, and had then thrown the woman over and gone back to his ordinary life, all would have been hushed up and only the woman would have been the sufferer. But because he has chosen to idealise a woman, and to announce his intention of continuing to do so and because the ‘man in the street’ cannot understand that sort of thing they announce their intention of ‘hounding him down’.

Directly addressing Hardie, Montefiore explained:

I think you will see after what I have told you that this feeling with both of us is not as you characterise it ‘at best a selfish

⁵⁵ Hilda Kean, ‘Searching for the Past in the Present Defeat: The Construction of Historical and Political Identity in British Feminism in the 1920s and 1930s’, *Women’s History Review*, 3 (1994), 57–80 (pp. 67–68); Laura E. Nym Mayhall, ‘Creating the “Suffragette Spirit”: British Feminism and the Historical Imagination’, *Women’s History Review*, 4 (1995), 319–44 (p. 334).

⁵⁶ All quotations are from Montefiore to Hardie, 27 April 1899, FJP, 1899/28.

whim'. We have both gone through a fiery ordeal, first from the fates and then from fellow men; but every sharp agony has had the effect of bringing us closer together, of testing each other's souls.

She challenged the idea that she had 'brought B into his present position': 'From the time I was swept on along a stream of tragic circumstances from which there was no escape except by selfish and individualistic action — action which I should have despised myself for taking.' These are not the words of someone who was carefully censoring herself. She was self-conscious in the effect her words might have, and asked Hardie not to think that she wrote the letter to him 'defiantly': 'I write it with keen suffering; but I feel that at all risks personal freedom of soul must be upheld.' She was keenly aware that a range of people had sought to censor the behaviour, activism, and even employment of her and Belt, applying, she said, 'sliding scales of morality'.

The letter had clearly been corrected before it was sent and had a short, handwritten addition thanking Hardie for his postcard, which sent best wishes to Montefiore's son who recently had had an operation and was now being nursed at home by his mother. This suggests that the manner in which she represented herself and her story was at the very least considered, and that the way in which emotion was handled in the letter was deliberate. Self-censorship is also, of course, a deliberate act. However, in this case it seems not to be self-censorship.

One could ask, is Montefiore pulling the wool over the eyes of her biographer? Did she have something to hide — from herself, from her contemporaries, or from posterity? This reconstruction of the Belt Case from a range of sources hidden or overlooked in various archives — some of which have been deliberately silenced — suggests that she did not.

Conclusion

Although the Belt Case was a scandal that never really happened, a considerable amount of gossip arising from it damaged individuals. In Hull, Belt lost his post and was not put forward by his party to defend his seat on the council, despite bewilderment expressed in the press at the loss of a respected councillor.⁵⁷ His marriage was also over. The threat of a private matter becoming public therefore had both public and private consequences. For Montefiore there were lessons about trust and what confidentiality might mean in politics. The Belt Case also marks the stage in her political journey when she unequivocally identified as a socialist. Much

⁵⁷ 'The November Elections', *Hull Daily News*, 25 October 1899, p. 6.

later, she recalled that on her return from the *Clarion* van in 1898 she had decided that

Before I joined definitely any party either reformist or revolutionary in its outlook, I must (not being myself a member of the working class) train my imagination and intelligence to see eye to eye with the workers in the class struggle in which they were so severely handicapped. (*From a Victorian*, p. 63)

The experiences that made up the Belt Case were the catalyst in her choice of the revolutionary SDF over the reformist ILP, as she characterized them. She now saw herself not just as a socialist but as a socialist woman, determined to translate the socialist theory of the Woman Question into an enduring and robust practice. The double standards and moral hypocrisies revealed during the case crystallized for her the need to create a woman-focused socialism. Her experience of censorship and the lack of others' self-censorship meant that she saw no place for what she called 'Mrs Grundy' in progressive politics. The case could have stopped her ten-year political journey in its tracks. Instead, it forced her to reflect that if her chosen path was to be a radical outsider who spoke her mind, she would need not only political commitment but also personal resilience.

The Belt Case also has a wider resonance. For some, this was not just about double standards. It also revealed tensions around class as well as gender for progressive movements which involved men and women from across the social spectrum. Class differences between actual or rumoured lovers were often commented on, particularly when the woman was of a higher social class than her partner. This continued to be an area of sensitivity beyond the *fin de siècle*, contributing to the potential for scandal that surrounded other personal relationships within the labour movement. Ironically, one example was the secret affair between the by now widowed Ramsay MacDonald, born the illegitimate son of a farm labourer, and the aristocrat and poet, Margaret Sackville.⁵⁸ As their relationship was never exposed, there was no scandal and no one sought to censor the public behaviour of either lover.

For some, these cross-class relationships were problematic for a different reason. During the Belt Case, Hardie and Webster both suggested that Montefiore was some kind of siren for a middle-class life of indolence. The idea that working-class activists could be corrupted by the attractions of a bourgeois life became even more of an issue as the Labour Party came closer to achieving political power. In the 1920s this anxiety focused on

⁵⁸ MacDonald's love letters to Sackville are now in the National Archives. See Patrick Barkham, 'My Dear Provocation', *Guardian*, 3 November 2006 <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2006/nov/03/past.patrickbarkham>> [accessed 10 September 2018].

the so-called ‘aristocratic embrace’, where it was feared that working-class representatives of labour could be suborned through the privileges they were thought to have gained as MPs and government ministers. Again, it was Ramsay MacDonald who was the focus for much of this criticism from within the labour movement, as a result of his love of court dress and socializing with the aristocracy.⁵⁹ Yet in the earlier Belt Case, MacDonald had been one of the gossipers who had urged forward the defence of the slander case and who continued to appeal to respectability as he campaigned behind the scenes to prevent Belt’s adoption as an official Labour candidate. Maintaining the appearance of respectability, including what was understood to be class-appropriate behaviour, was the lesson learned by many of those swept up into the case. The only people who could not see what was wrong with a so-called lady of good social position conducting an intimate correspondence with a bricklayer’s labourer seemed to be Montefiore and Belt. Although they do not appear to have believed that they had anything to hide, the demands of respectability meant that others felt they were justified in censoring their behaviour and distancing them from any public identification with the ILP. To ensure electability it seemed that conventional morality, or at least its appearance, was essential to a particular version of socialism which was, at the moment of the case, beginning to cohere into what was to become the Labour Party. The experience of the Belt Case did not make Dora Montefiore a socialist woman but it began the process of making that she continued for the rest of her political life.

⁵⁹ Nicholas Owen, ‘MacDonald’s Parties: The Labour Party and the “Aristocratic Embrace”, 1922–31’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 18 (2007), 1–53.