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Ethel Carnie Holdsworth: *General Belinda*, Co-operation and the Servant Problem

Abstract: In July 1920, 'Belinda: The Story of a Domestic Servant' first appeared in the co-operative periodical, the *Wheatsheaf*. It was penned by one of its regular short story writers, Lancashire mill-woman Ethel Carnie Holdsworth (1886–1962). Encouraged by Percy Redfern, the *Wheatsheaf*'s editor, Carnie Holdsworth returned to the character of Belinda over the next couple of years, and in 1924, *General Belinda* became her sixth published novel. *General Belinda* is an episodic adventure about the trials and tribulations of domestic service. Belinda is a maid-of-all work who, like P. G. Wodehouse's Jeeves, puts her employers' lives and affairs to right. Comedy is the striking note, but Carnie Holdsworth was adept at putting popular fiction to work for feminist-Marxist politics. This article explores the novel as a radical feminist critique of early twentieth-century domestic service and the devastation of World War One, written from the rare perspective of a working-class woman. *General Belinda* is also an important example of co-operative ideals. Redfern was a key proponent of consumer socialism between the wars, and Belinda shows her employers the power of consumerism as a rational force for good, preaching against debt and fiscal irresponsibility. The article illustrates how Carnie Holdsworth's plot intersects with wider debates in interwar women's print culture on how British women shoppers were encouraged to be good home-making citizens. Belinda shows readers how to practise domestic economy and shop for co-operative good. In doing so, she suggests a new way of conceiving of the labour of domestic service and of positive social relations post-war, based on a co-operative understanding of dignity, mutual association and self-help.

Keywords: servants, working-class writing, women's print culture, periodicals, co-operative movement, WW1 literature

It is doubtful if at this present time any women exist who have not felt on some days that their lives are being wasted (Carnie Holdsworth 1921a: 67)

In September 1920, mill-woman Ethel Carnie Holdsworth (1886–1962) was profiled in *Woman's Outlook* – the co-operative magazine devoted to women's interests – in their series 'Chats with Great Ones'. Carnie, now Mrs Holdsworth, was in her mid-thirties and becoming known as 'Lancashire's premier woman novelist' (Anon 1920a: 295). Starting work as a half-timer in the mill aged eleven, Carnie Holdsworth had gone on to write and publish fiction in a 'chequered career' that included working as a journalist and editor on Robert Blatchford's newspapers in London, teaching creative writing to working-class women, shop-work with her mother, and eking 'out a living by selling ribbons and laces in Blackburn market' (Anon 1920a: 295). Her second novel, *Helen of Four Gates* (1917) was a bestseller, widely compared to the work of the Brontë sisters, especially Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. Mid-1920, Carnie Holdsworth was talking to *Woman's Outlook* to promote several of her books published just after the war: *The Taming of Nan* (1919), *The Marriage of Elizabeth* (1920) and *The House that Jill Built* (1920). She was a regular contributor to the co-operative press and celebrated the movement's work, particularly in education, during her interview. Without the newsroom and facilities for book-lending at Great Harwood Co-operative Society, Carnie Holdsworth declared, she would have been lost and her career as a writer much less likely.

The following month, *Woman's Outlook* interviewed councillor Jessie Stephen, secretary of the Domestic Servants' Union, for their features slot. Stephen and Carnie Holdsworth were contemporaries with much in common. Both had worked their way up from humble origins, both were co-operators and pacifists and part of the women's and Labour movements. Carnie Holdsworth was more radical in her politics than Stephen. She was excited by the formation of the Communist Party of Great Britain that summer and disappointed with the slow progress of the trade union movement that Stephen represented. But Carnie Holdsworth was crafting a new protagonist – 'General' Belinda, maid-of-all-work – and was fascinated by Stephen as the 'Champion of Domestic Servants', a woman trying to address the isolated, often poor working conditions of the million plus women constituting Britain's largest female workforce at the time (Anon 1920b: 228; Schwartz 2015: 30). For despite endless discussions of the so-called 'servant problem' in the press (the perceived lack of reliable servants available to the middle classes in the post-war period), the Depression of the early 1920s and working-class poverty

meant that the number of servants was still increasing into the 1930s (Todd 185).

In Stephen's interview with *Woman's Outlook*, she championed the Domestic Workers' Union of Great Britain and Ireland which had collapsed during the war (they had a membership of 5,000 girl and women servants in 1920, Stephen reported, and planned to open a training school and hostel in Hampstead). The Domestic Workers' Union set minimum wage rates and maximum working hours (12-hour shifts, with two hours off for meals), stipulated leisure time (including half-a-day off per week), and a host of measures aiming to ensure that 'domestic service is not the slavery it used to be' (Anon 1920b: 229). Stephen painted a graphic portrait of the conditions she experienced as a young woman entering domestic service:

I barely had a minute to myself from when I got up at 6–30 to when I went to bed, often at eleven at night. If I hurried through the work to get it forward, so I could read some books [...] in the evening, my mistress would always find me some job—silver or brass cleaning, cleaning out cupboards, and so on—so I shouldn't waste time! I often had most of my meals standing up, and in consequence I got violent indigestion and finally had to give up domestic work (Anon 1920b: 228).

A year later, Jessie Stephen appeared in *Woman's Outlook* again, berating those mistresses who still 'live in a fool's paradise' and regard 'the worst as good enough for the maid' (326). 'It is doubtful if even in the trenches conditions were worse than they are in certain boarding-houses, where, even now, the servants' bedrooms are homes of rest for blackbeetles and other vermin', Stephen continued (326). It's a long way from *Downton Abbey*. To Carnie Holdsworth, Stephen's words struck home.

These interviews with Carnie Holdsworth and Stephen frame my concerns in this essay. *General Belinda* (1924), Carnie Holdsworth's sixth published novel, is a radical feminist and working-class critique of Edwardian domestic service. Here, I explore the novel's circulation of contemporary reformist ideas, derived from discourse around domestic service, women's drudgery, and the co-operative movement in the press. I have argued elsewhere that Carnie Holdsworth was adept at transforming genre codes and expectations (Wilson 2017: 324). In this she had a long feminist heritage to draw on (Riley 113–4). In *General Belinda*, Carnie Holdsworth mines a rich vein of domestic service humour, social concern about the 'servant problem', and anti-World War One feeling to make a feminist and co-operative case. The article explores how *General Belinda* works on multiple fronts, firstly exploring the book's

views of domestic service and the First World War, and secondly its depiction of the Co-operative movement's ideas on consumer socialism. I argue that Carnie Holdsworth uses the novel to suggest a new way of conceiving of the labour and dignity of domestic service post-war (and by extension, of human relationships) which is partly inspired by Stephen's unionist example and partly by the co-operative's model of association and self-help. General Belinda teaches her readers and betters how domestic service, household consumption, and society more broadly might be improved for everyone's good after the devastation of the First World War. Roger Smalley argues in his Introduction to the reissue of *General Belinda* that Carnie Holdsworth was constantly putting popular fiction to use 'as a vehicle for her revolutionary political vision' (2019: ix). This article explores how *General Belinda* contributes to this vision.

'There surely never was a domestic servant like Belinda' (Carnie Holdsworth 1924: 2)

General Belinda was the first of Carnie Holdsworth's novels to deal with domestic service in any detail. She had written fiction previously about shop girls and rural housewives, factory girls and hard-working mothers, but servants were marginalized in both the labour and contemporary women's movements, and Carnie Holdsworth – as a Marxist by training – had to figure this problem out. For Marx, servants were not part of the working class (Schwartz 2020: 48). In *Master and Servant: Love and Labour in the English Industrial Age*, Carolyn Steedman has shown how servants' involvement with domestic reproduction rather than commodity production meant they were historically excluded from the founding theories of labour and class relations. The personal, affective nature of their work and working conditions – often operating in tiny workforces of ones or twos in private households – further complicated views of servants' class position (Todd). Servants also had an ambiguous position in early twentieth-century feminism. Historian Laura Schwartz, who has studied domestic servant militancy in relation to first-wave feminism and the suffrage movement, has uncovered the mixed response within the feminist public sphere to the formation of the Domestic Workers' Union. This was partly to do with divisions between employers and employees and the 'social divisions within feminism', Schwartz argues, but also related to 'a much wider discussion about the nature of work and women's relationship to it' (2015: 36). There was an awkward continuum between waged and unwaged forms of domestic labour. Much of the feminist press denigrated the drudgery of housework – domestic work was portrayed as something women needed liberation from – and the Domestic Workers'

Union struggled to reframe the value and productivity of their members' work *as* labour (Schwartz 2015: 38–40).

These debates about the role of servants within the labour and feminist movement coloured Carnie Holdsworth's views. She believed in the Central Labour College's programme of Independent Working-Class Education and had taught Marxist theory and economics at Bebel House Women's College and Socialist Education Centre in her twenties (Martin 175–7). In earlier novels, such as her influential factory story *This Slavery* (1925), Carnie Holdsworth upholds the traditional Marxist line by labelling servants of the mill-owner's house 'parasites' (2011: 48); non-workers who, like policemen and soldiers serving the interests of state over the international solidarity of the people, function as class-traitors (112).¹ But Carnie Holdsworth consistently sought to give voice to the struggles of her 'ain folk' (Anon 1920a: 294), and by the time she wrote *General Belinda* in her mid-to-late thirties, her views on domestic service had changed. Possibly this was a consequence of her own mobility during the early 1920s and greater appreciation of the variety of socio-economic households, including the working-classes, who employed single servants. As Selina Todd points out: 'households that employed one or two "general" servants had always been more common than those large, upper-class households employing a whole hierarchy of staff' (191). Partly no doubt it reflected Carnie Holdsworth's awareness, following debates led by the Domestic Workers' Union, that the working conditions for single girls employed in private houses were still open to exploitation and abuse. Perhaps the continuing popularity of the comic servant genre interwar (highlighted by P. G. Wodehouse's bestselling Jeeves and Wooster series) led her to believe that the time was right to adapt it to her own ends. So *General Belinda* takes us a long way from the critique of 'parasites' in the big house who fleet across the pages of *This Slavery*, and much closer to an awareness that, as Selina Todd has it: 'domestic service was central to the negotiations over modern social relations that shaped the first half of Britain's twentieth century' (203). In his introduction to the recent reissue of *General Belinda*, Roger Smalley argues that Carnie Holdsworth's purpose in writing the book

is to expose a system which her contemporaries commonly justified by representing the master as a benevolent parent and the servant as a fortunate child in receipt of useful training. Ethel characterises domestic service, rather, as the legalised exploitation of vulnerable girls, often involving sexual harassment. It represents an outmoded and oppressive class structure which she seeks to dismantle. (2019: xv)

¹ *This Slavery* was published one year after *General Belinda* but written beforehand, possibly even before the outbreak of the First World War. On the difficulties Carnie Holdsworth faced in getting this radical novel published and its rejection by Herbert Jenkins see my introduction to the 2011 edition.

General Belinda's protagonist, Belinda Higgins, is an unmarried woman of thirty. Too short-sighted to go into the factories, she has stayed at home as her invalid mother's primary carer. Nicknamed the 'General' by her father 'because of her spirit' (Carnie Holdsworth 2019: 11), Belinda is forced into service at the start of the novel when he dies unexpectedly, and she is compelled to become breadwinner for her mother and herself (her mother is taken in, reluctantly, by Belinda's married brother's family). The often-exploitative nature of domestic service and the class tensions implicit in the asymmetrical relations between employer and employee are powerfully drawn as Belinda moves from one precarious 'slave-hole' (Carnie Holdsworth 2019: 25) to the next. In her first home, a beautiful villa where her employers, the Riddings, 'live beyond their means, so they only have one servant, though there's work for two and a half' (Carnie Holdsworth 2019: 25), Belinda experiences 'the bitter shattering of all her dreams about domestic service' (Carnie Holdsworth 2019: 34). The narrative is unrelenting in its critique of those who deliberately exploit their live-in employees:

From earliest morning until late at night she was having her vitality used up to its fullest possibility. She was not regarded as a human being, nor ever approached on the level [...] In the solitude of that damp room where even light was limited to her, Belinda wept once – wept in burning indignation that one human being should be allowed to buy another for twenty-four pounds a year and subject her to such treatment. (Carnie Holdsworth 2019: 34)

Such descriptions of the all-encompassing, 'always being on-call' nature of domestic work were common in domestics' testimonies (see Schwartz 2015: 41). In one London home where Belinda works towards the end of the novel, she labours seventeen-hour days with only one Sunday evening to herself a month and every other Saturday afternoon off. She worries initially that sharing a bed with another maid will mean she cannot read in bed, but soon finds the work so depleting that all prospect of leisure and personal time is lost: 'she had only strength to crawl up those ninety steps, at the close of the day's work; and often, as she sank on the bed, wondered if death came with such weary satisfaction' (Carnie Holdsworth 2019: 147).

General Belinda shows evidence of the author's engagement with debates in the contemporary press about servants' working conditions and the attempts of unionists like Jessie Stephen to rationalize them. In the Riddings' 'rotten shop' (Carnie Holdsworth 2019: 24), for instance, Belinda notes 'amongst all the lesser indignities that came to hand, [...]

was the fact that she must take her meals alone, in the place where she cooked, pots and pans about her' (Carnie Holdsworth 2019: 35). This recalls Jessie Stephen's complaints about the indignity of poor food and mealtimes in *Woman's Outlook*, and one of Belinda's characteristically bold proposals to reform domestic service is to eat alongside her employers. *General Belinda* also addresses the inequities around character references that were widely seen to blight domestic service. When she goes to work for the Burnhams', Belinda (not one to mince her words) declares calmly in response to Mrs Burnham's request to see her testimonial: "I haven't asked *you* for one, have I?" [...] "For all I know I could lose my character here. But I'm quite prepared to take you on trust" (Carnie Holdsworth 2019: 165). At several points in the novel, Belinda receives unwanted sexual attention from her employers (the popular edition calls attention to this by a sensational illustration on its front boards showing Belinda wielding a carving knife against an advancing male figure). The compulsory character note that servants needed to be hired by a new employer was open to systemic abuse especially, as Jessie Stephen pointed out, when 'no employer will supply such a reference unless the worker has been in their employ at least six months, and some refuse it unless the servant has been with them a year' (326). The status and working conditions of domestic service could be raised, campaigners argued, if both mistress and maid were required to give their opinions of each other privately to labour exchange officials (Martha 110).

Yet if Carnie Holdsworth was persuaded that there was more complexity to the class position and understanding of the working-class women working in service than orthodox Marxism and social and economic theory gave credit to, the feminist critique of housework as drudgery and the difficulties this gave reformers in presenting domestic service as modern and valuable labour was not something she was inclined to upend. From early journalism, Carnie Holdsworth was vocal on the exploitative drudgery of women's unpaid housework: 'Oh, these houses, with their carpets that are always wanting shaking, and myriad knick-knacks that are for ever wanting dusting and washing – what they are responsible for!' (1909: 342). In the early 1920s, as she was crafting *General Belinda*, she continued to criticise housework as unproductive from a feminist and Marxist perspective. 'Her Day', a short story published in *Woman's Outlook* the month after Carnie Holdsworth's profile interview, depicts the endless, thankless grind of the 'ordinary woman' in her 'common-place house' who can only articulate her dissatisfaction with the present through the vague hope that her daughter 'll have a better time' of it (1920b: 312). Two months later, Carnie Holdsworth engaged directly with wider debates in the feminist press with an article in *Woman's*

Outlook asking, 'Is Housework Drudgery?' It was dishonest to say it was not, she concludes in this essay, and women – 'like the railwaymen fighting for recognition, not wages' (1921a: 67) – deserved the right to be appreciated and recognized for all of the unpaid work they did for others behind closed doors.

So, where unionists like Stephen sought to raise the profile of domestic service by stressing the improvements to domestic labour and the 'modern work-saving appliances' that made housework easier and more dignified post-war (Anon 1920b: 326), Carnie Holdsworth largely avoids the details of Belinda's actual domestic work. We are told that Belinda was 'expected to do all' (Carnie Holdsworth 2019: 34) at the Riddings' but given no further insight into what this entails. Carnie Holdsworth is not unusual in this lack of narrative attention to domestic work and cleaning. Unlike the documentary realism paid to women's domestic labour in some contemporary non-fiction and parts of the feminist and labour press, this reluctance is typical in the twentieth century British working-class novel (see Wilson 2015: 104–9). Perhaps the author was wary of alienating or boring her readers with mundane details they already knew. But more importantly, *General Belinda* side-steps the housework as drudgery debate of the feminist press through comic tradition and the long-running populist convention of sending up your social superiors. Like all morally – and intellectually – superior servants, Belinda's *real* and *valuable* work in the homes of her employers is not cleaning or cooking but fixing social and romantic affairs, family crises and personal debts. Able to 'marshal and control more than armies' (Carnie Holdsworth 1924: 2), as we are told by publisher Herbert Jenkins in the original edition, Belinda is generally about to put the world to rights.

From the high-spirited copy used by Jenkins as advertisement, it is clear *General Belinda* works in the comic tradition of music hall and penny comic farce. 'There surely never was a domestic servant like Belinda' reads the blurb to the two-shilling popular edition: 'Staving off irate butchers when there is no money to pay them, helping elopements, protecting down-trodden wives' (Carnie Holdsworth 1924: 2). Historian Lucy Delap argues that humour was a vital part of the affective economy of domestic service:

Jokes and laughter at the expense of employers and servants were equally prominent and persistent in late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century British society [...] Humour was an ingredient in the highly emotionally charged nature of domestic service [...] that went with the emotional and spatial proximity of employers and servants (140).

Laughing at and with servants was common across early twentieth-century popular culture, and a dominant literary model that Carnie Holdsworth reworks in *General Belinda* is P. G. Wodehouse's bestselling *Jeeves* series. Like Belinda, Jeeves cultivated a popular readership through the periodicals initially.² Herbert Jenkins – Carnie Holdsworth's publisher – brought out three volumes of collected stories in the 1920s and 30s: *The Inimitable Jeeves* (1923), *Carry On, Jeeves* (1925) and *Very Good, Jeeves* (1930). Wodehouse's books had a broad-based appeal and remained in demand across the social spectrum throughout the interwar period (McAleer: 89). The sustained popularity of the *Jeeves* novels, Delap argues, was part of a tendency during and after the First World War 'to find humour in the reversal of social esteem and circumstances that seemed to favour the domestic servant over the employer' (153). Carnie Holdsworth adopts Wodehouse's use of social satire and comic reversal in *General Belinda*, infusing this popular trope with her radical Marxist-feminist perspective.

Clearly inspired by Wodehouse's Jeeves (though being a valet – employed to serve his master's *person* – Jeeves is of much higher social and professional standing than Belinda as a maid-of-all-work) Belinda is involved in a series of scrapes on her 'long Odyssey of domestic service' (Carnie Holdsworth 1924: 2). She aids the put-upon daughter of an affluent household to elope, helps a struggling poet recover his books, brings together estranged families, and encourages lonely widowers to get wed. Fast-witted, confident and with a strong sense of social justice, Belinda, like Jeeves, can run rings around her often witless employers, and readerly pleasure is to be found in her one-upmanship. But unlike Jeeves, Belinda also works for a wide cross-section of society, reflecting the more common socio-economic variance in domestic service that historians have sought to uncover (Todd 183–5). Some of the most powerful sections of the novel are those where Belinda works alongside struggling working- and lower-middle-class housewives in trying-to-be respectable households, mending and making do. An instinctive feminist sympathy draws Belinda to the aid of put-upon women like Agnes Wells, for instance, married to a tyrannical shop-owner and ravaged by pain and ill-health. Like representations of service in music hall and the popular press, *General Belinda* combines semi-serious content and sympathy to the servant's perspective with attention to the hard life and low pay of domestic servants, placing this in the wider context of the social and economic struggles of the working class.

General Belinda's social questioning and populist critique of those in authority also lends it be read as a feminist precursor to the 'war books boom' of 1926 on, written from the rare vantage point of a working-class woman. The critique of the futility of the Great War and the 'incompetent swine' who led it (Sassoon: line 4) led to a publishing phenomenon in the

² Jeeves first appeared in a short story 'Extricating young Gussie', published in *The Saturday Evening Post* in September 1915.

late 1920s and early '30s known as the 'war books boom'. This was typified by books written by ex-combatants including Edmund Blunden's *Under-tones of War* (1928), R. C. Sheriff's drama *Journey's End* (1928) and Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928) (see Trott 97–9). Carnie Holdsworth was a well-known pacifist and campaigned against the introduction of conscription with the British Citizen Party in Lancashire through 1915 and 1916 (see Smalley 65–6). Once war began, she grounded her critique of the international political situation through recourse to working-class women's emotional and material lives. Asked to write an article on 'Women and the War' in 1917 for instance, Carnie Holdsworth penned a powerful feminist rebuke, by turns both down-to-earth and sentimental:

I stand too near the horror of it all. My husband is a soldier. My only brother will soon be meshed in the spider's web. I do not like uniforms of any description – nor anything that makes people all look alike. [...] Some of my friends read much, some scarcely any. Some of them can't pronounce the names of the Dardanelles and Mesopotamia. Some can. What does it matter, anyhow? We all feel about these places when we've got anybody there.

The real war maps are women's hearts (Carnie Holdsworth 1917: 12).

The final chapters of *General Belinda* are fuelled by critique of the devastating loss of life in World War One and the policy of conscription introduced by the Military Service Act of January 1916. Belinda's nephew, Reggie (eldest son of Belinda's brother Jonathan) comes of age during the course of the novel and by its end has been called up.³ Belinda objects to the draft and rails against the sight of 'laddish figures, khaki-clad' (Carnie Holdsworth 2019: 187) on their way out: 'The men, to her, looked like a lot of corpses, stamping their feet' (Carnie Holdsworth 2019: 186). Desperate in her anger, Belinda makes a feminist-pacifist case for why women aren't sent out to put a stop to it all:

"I can't think," began Belinda, "that in all this country, and those other countries, there are not folk with brains enough to settle this, without all this butchery. Johnnie Parks has gone up, up this street–him that can't see, hardly, with his 'specks' and his soft look. [...] And they've sent him out killing folk."

"If the women of all countries followed the men and took the kids with 'em, they'd soon dish wars," she said (Carnie Holdsworth 2019: 184–5).

As with the novel's title and its wry concentration of the military and the maid-of-all-work in the popular figure of the 'general', the domestic metaphor

3 The biographical reference to Carnie Holdsworth's brother soon-to-be called up in her 'Women and the War' article of 1917 resonates with Reggie's story, as does Alfred Holdsworth's experiences in WW1 as a PoW (Smalley 67).

here – ‘they’d soon dish wars’ – roots the novel’s politics in a common-sense appeal to the domestic realities of working women’s lives. In her profile interview for the Women’s Co-operative Guild, Jessie Stephen had dared to compare conditions in the trenches to the worst of boarding-houses, and Carnie Holdsworth appeals to her reading audience in similar terms. While Reggie suffers at the Front, Belinda slaves away in a wash house, helping a woman wash shirts for soldiers. Belinda is brought low by the work – ‘mentally and physically’ (Carnie Holdsworth 2019: 208) – but suffers equally from the mean-spirited nature of her employers. The ‘House of Shirts, in her own language, took the cake’ (Carnie Holdsworth 2019: 208) the narrator tells us, and Belinda leaves before the war’s end.

There is no mention of *General Belinda*’s anti-war sections in the book’s marketing or publicity and readers may have been surprised to find such passages within a purportedly light-hearted servant romp. Herbert Jenkins, the publisher who Carnie Holdsworth had signed a six-book deal with in 1915, was known as a supplier of ‘light fiction’ to the library market (McAleer 58) and declined to publish her next book, *This Slavery* (1925) due to its polemical content. The last section of *General Belinda*, where Reggie finally returns after the Armistice from the horrors of a Prisoner of War camp, threatens to knock the general timbre of the book off kilter. After some devastating passages on the ‘slaughterhouse’ (Carnie Holdsworth 2019: 184) of World War One and the suffering of PoWs, the book rushes to conclude positively, with Belinda leaving service and setting up home with a not-long introduced fiancée, miraculously returned from The Front. ‘The story ends happily’, as the reviewer for the *Wheatsheaf* noted in 1924, ‘as all well-behaved stories should; and we leave Belinda at the doorway to real peace and happiness at last’ (May 125). Carnie Holdsworth’s tendency towards radical experimentation and willingness to push the bounds of her readers’ expectations almost comes unstuck in these final pages. But the pivot towards a conventionally happy, romantic ending is nuanced by the author’s typical generic playfulness. The experience of war has made a new man out of Belinda’s fiancé, and they are not sailing off quietly into the sunset. Now he is prepared to fight ‘side by side’ with the General for the common good and the hope of peace and progress:

‘Till all the wars is over,’ he told her, out of the silence. ‘Till everybody’s happy, Belinda. Till there isn’t one lot allus trampling t’others down under their heels. Till there’s real peace, Belinda. So-what is it to be?’ (Carnie Holdsworth 2019: 226)

The second part of this article re-considers the original publishing context of *General Belinda* in the co-operative journal the *Wheatsheaf* to argue for

the importance of co-operation and consumer socialism in the novel. If the conditions of domestic service and the widespread suffering of World War One left gaping holes in the structure of society, the philosophy of co-operation modelled a good way forward. This was a positive, redemptive way of living, working, and spending that Carnie Holdsworth was keen to explore with her readers.

The Woman with the Basket

The co-operative movement in Britain goes back to the early nineteenth century with the ideas of Robert Owen and the formation in 1844 of the Rochdale Pioneers' co-operative grocery store (Robertson 13). After the First World War there was growth in membership and expansion in the number of retail outlets (Robertson 20) so that the co-operative store was a 'defining feature of working-class community and neighbourhood life' (Gurney 1996: 62). The co-operative movement then as now was holistic and international, with co-operators aiming to revolutionize housing, entertainment, media and education, and, through control of production and distribution, to eradicate poverty. Co-operators had a lively periodical culture in the early twentieth century and Carnie Holdsworth regularly contributed poetry, short stories and sketches to co-operative magazines. The Women's Co-operative Guild (founded 1883) was a powerful resource for working-class housewives and an important site of working-class feminism (Scott).

'Belinda: The Story of a Domestic Servant' first appeared in the *Wheatsheaf* – the co-operative's monthly journal, distributed free to members by individual societies – in July 1920. Two further Belinda stories appeared in the *Wheatsheaf* over the next twenty months: 'Belinda gets an offer', published in September 1921, and 'Belinda turns Nursemaid', in April 1922.⁴ These were then pasted out from the newspaper cuttings – as was typical of Carnie Holdsworth's writing practice (see Wilson 2011: xx) – and adopted, largely unchanged, into the novel published in 1924 as chapters 14 and 13.⁵ Carnie Holdsworth was what Graham Law terms a 'newspaper novelist' (xi) and relied upon regular, paid short story work as the 'bread-and-butter' of the novel trade (Anon 1915: 999). Throughout 1920–22, as she uprooted from Calderdale in West Yorkshire to live with her husband and two young daughters temporarily in London, Carnie Holdsworth's name appears regularly in both the *Wheatsheaf* and *Woman's Outlook*. But it was unusual for her to come back to the same character in short stories, and Belinda was clearly a source of inspiration. When *General Belinda* was published as a full-length novel two years later, it was

4 In the second story, the reader is told (perhaps for advertisement) that 'since that first introduction to the public Belinda has had further adventures in other periodicals' (Carnie Holdsworth 1921b: 133). It has not yet been possible to identify where these were other stories were placed.

5 The third story, 'Belinda turns Nursemaid' is not incorporated into the final text published in book form.

dedicated to Percy Redfern, editor of the *Wheatsheaf*, ‘with sincere appreciation since he first saw in “General Belinda” a character worthy of presenting to the public’ (Carnie Holdsworth 2019: 2). In the dedication, Carnie Holdsworth thanks Redfern for backing Belinda and for having ‘kept faith in her, and the book, through all their fellow-wanderings, vicissitudes, repulsion and indignities—knowing that, at last, they would find their place’ (Carnie Holdsworth 2019: 2). This seems to be a loaded reference to Belinda’s versatility as a short story protagonist, to the vagaries of the publishing industry, and a comment upon the itinerant, precarious labour of the domestic servant as well as the necessarily wandering loyalties of the working-class author writing hand-to-mouth. Correspondence between Redfern and Carnie Holdsworth does not seem to have survived and Carnie Holdsworth fails to appear in Redfern’s political autobiography, *Journey to Understanding*, published in 1946. But Redfern clearly played an important role as editor in the book’s genesis and his well-known ideas permeate its discussion of household finances, purchasing and debt.

Percy Redfern (1875–1958) began work as a desk clerk in the offices of the Co-operative Wholesale Society in Manchester in 1899 and shortly after became sub-editor and then editor of the *Wheatsheaf* (Gurney 2006). As Matthew Hilton describes in his study of twentieth-century British consumerism, Redfern was prominent in the interwar period as a leading advocate of consumer socialism (82–3). In 1920, Redfern published *The Consumers’ Place in Society* and between 1928–9 edited 24 essays by leading left-wingers on ‘social and economic problems from the hitherto neglected point of view of the consumer’.⁶ Redfern believed that divisions between workers and employers under capitalism were premised on sectional interests (Hilton 82) whereas consumers had the power to eradicate poverty, ensure fair systems of production around the world, and even contribute towards world peace. As Hannam and Hunt have shown, a strand of contemporary socialism engaged with the politics of consumption – framing ‘consumer action as a tactic in the class struggle’ (137) – but it was co-operators who made this mainstream. ‘It is the consumer who stands at the gates of a new social order’ Redfern argued in *The Consumers’ Place in Society* (17): ‘As producers we go each unto a particular factory, farm, or mine, but as consumers we are set by nature [...] to give leadership, aim and purpose to the whole economic world’ (12).

Redfern’s ideas on consumer socialism influenced the political ethos of the interwar co-operative movement which, as Hilton argues, attempted to shift co-operation from ‘a politics of the factory [...] [to] a politics of the shop’ (84). They also influenced *General Belinda*. Belinda’s first appearance in the *Wheatsheaf* comes as part of a story written up as chapter 14 in the

6 These were republished in two volumes by Ernest Benn in 1930.

book, entitled 'A Doll's House' (Carnie Holdsworth 2019: 164). This opens with Belinda waiting outside the door of a 'tiny villa' (Carnie Holdsworth 1920a: 101). She has been 'out of a place for two months' in the *Wheatsheaf* version and sets down 'her battered tin box of the many adventures on the gravel path' (Carnie Holdsworth 1920a: 101). As she waits for her new employers to open the door, Belinda overhears an angry row between husband and wife over bills they can't afford to pay. The wife's spending of money on a new cloak she 'simply couldn't resist' (Carnie Holdsworth 1920a: 101) is presented to readers as irresponsible financial mismanagement. Belinda and the text come down hard on the wife whose youth, appearance, and aptonymic name (Doll Burnham) cast her in a poor light:

Belinda stared into a face that was perfectly angelic; but was not deceived. Belinda had ideas on women who ran their husbands into debt. She was of that peculiar type of working-class mentality that would stump up its last farthing in discharge of a debt-even if it didn't know where the next meal would come from. (Carnie Holdsworth 1920a: 101)

The book version published by Herbert Jenkins in general stays close to the language of the short story published in the *Wheatsheaf*. In this example however the adjective 'working-class' is removed so Belinda's honesty becomes less a part of her class background and more essentially part of her character: 'She was of that type that would stump up its last farthing to discharge a debt despite where the next meal was to come from' (Carnie Holdsworth 2019: 164). This is an interesting textual revision where the book version seeks to lessen the class-specificity of Belinda's character and speak to a wider reading audience, broadening the potential for empathy and readerly identification.

This early story in the *Wheatsheaf* chimes with a strong critique of debt that is developed in the longer novel. Belinda and her family are poor with little to show for a lifetime of toil. In the opening scene she and her mother must sell their furniture because they cannot afford to keep on their 'little home' (Carnie Holdsworth 2019: 5) after her father's death. But their poverty is contrasted favourably in the novel to what is presented as the dishonest, credit-laden lives of her social superiors. Only a pound stands between Belinda and disaster, we are told at one point, but Belinda can hold her head high as someone who pays up and deals fairly with those around her. This theme of financial soundness is explored in another early scene in the novel, when Belinda explains to one of her employer's children why his family are in debt. Teaching him a basic co-operative

lesson in the power of the fair consumer and the meaning of the proverb to ‘always cut your coat accordin’ to your cloth’ (Carnie Holdsworth 2019: 48), Belinda explains why the bailiffs are in:

‘Because you owe money for stuff you’ve had,’ she said bluntly.
Jerry could not understand.

‘If you’ve only a ha’penny and want a penny bun,’ went on Belinda, ‘wait till you’ve got the other ha’penny. For if it cost three farthings to make that bun, somebody’s lost a farthing an’ their wages for making it, if they get only a ha’penny’. (Carnie Holdsworth 2019: 48)

In addition to the critique of consumer debt highlighted in *General Belinda*, the protagonist also educates the reader against meanness. In the second short story serialized in the *Wheatsheaf*, ‘Belinda gets an offer’, Belinda goes to work as housekeeper for a wealthy miser, Sam Higgins. Higgins is ‘a man with rows and rows of house property, shares in factories’, the narrator tells us, and yet is ‘too mean to live’ (Carnie Holdsworth 1921b: 133). When she goes to work for him, Belinda is appalled by the uncomfortable way of life she finds in Sam’s household and starts on a programme of subtle, well-managed increased spending (buying meat, throwing more coals on the fire, buying a new rug for the hearthstone) complimented by better recycling and reuse. We learn that Sam Higgins’ means of economy is ‘going without’ but that ‘Belinda’s apparently was one of getting’ (Carnie Holdsworth 1921b: 133). Belinda teaches Sam and her readers ‘a new sort of economy’ where spending within your means is a productive and healthy way of life (Carnie Holdsworth 1921b: 133).⁷

This teaching chimed with contemporary feminist consumer politics that saw the housewife – the woman with the basket, as the Women’s Co-operative Guild had it – as the ultimate controller of trade. Encouraging British women shoppers to be good home-making citizens was a key part of interwar women’s print culture. *Good Housekeeping* (in print from 1885 in America) was launched in Britain in 1922 and, as Alice Wood points out in a recent study, such magazines framed women shoppers as rational citizens and consumers, imagining the home ‘as a crucial site of women’s engagement with and contribution to public life’ (211). The Co-operative Wholesale Society tapped into this wider interwar discourse of women’s thrifty citizenship by re-focussing desire for household requirements and appliances on fair consumption. The Women’s Co-operative Guild championed the power of women as consumers and taught that with effective home management, women had the power to improve living conditions. Other interwar feminists, such as Margaret Bondfield of the

⁷ Interestingly, *General Belinda* neglects to engage with another key aspect of co-operative housekeeping in the period: schemes to collectivise domestic labour. For a recent study of servants and co-operative housekeeping see Schwartz (2019).

National Union of General and Municipal Workers, asserted the duties of shoppers to bring 'joy and beauty into life' (Bondfield 1928: 27) (this formed part of her contribution to Redfern's edited series of essays on co-operation). Again, this is one of Belinda's demonstrable aptitudes as we see in her transformation of Sam Higgins' home and his general attitude to life:

Belinda put the curtains up that night. She pulled them into place, as pleased as a child. The hovel she had come into was changing. She had something of the joy of an artist (Carnie Holdsworth 1921b: 133).

This kind of rhetoric is important to understanding the contemporary currents Carnie Holdsworth was drawing on as she constructed this co-operative feminist novel.

Conclusion

General Belinda is an episodic, unstable narrative that marks a compelling feminist and working-class critique of domestic service, the First World War, and living recklessly beyond your means. This article has shown how Carnie Holdsworth adapted reformist ideas from domestic service trade unionism, international feminist pacifism, and from the co-operative movement, to craft a polemic and working-class take on domestic service popular humour. Belinda is a woman who speaks her mind, who puts the fortunes of others before herself, and is not afraid to speak truth to power. Like many of Carnie Holdsworth's working-class protagonists, she is not a character to be messed with. 'It is good to see her now confronting with her indomitable pluck the world at large' opined the reviewer in the *Wheatsheaf* upon the book's publication in 1924 (May 125). Carnie Holdsworth is a rare and unusual early twentieth-century female working-class novelist. In troubled, socially unjust times, she and her characters deserve a wide audience once more.

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