

Curran Fellowship Grant Report

Courteney Smith

Narrative of Grant Activities

Thanks to the generous support of the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals, I was able to travel to London in July 2023 to conduct research for a chapter of my dissertation project, tentatively titled “‘Most earnest in their endeavours to abate this evil’: Newspapers, the Contagious Diseases Acts, and the Creation of Moral Identities in Britain.” This chapter looks at the way place and space shaped people’s engagement with the Contagious Diseases Acts (CD Acts), a series of laws in effect in Britain and Ireland between 1864 and 1886 that sought to curb venereal disease among the armed forces by empowering police forces to arrest, medically examine, and imprison women suspected of prostitution in a number of port and garrison towns. Using the national, regional, and local press, this chapter will assess how discussion of the CD Acts – and the regimes and standards of morality they sought to impose – created, affirmed, and challenged a sense of identity and belonging Britain.

In London, I spent time at both the Women’s Library at the LSE and the British Library, viewing newspapers in hard copy and on microfilm. I was able to view *The Shield*, the official newspaper of the National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, as well as runs of local and regional newspapers not yet digitized by the British Newspaper Archives. These included the *Chatham News*; *Colchester Gazette*; *Cork Examiner*; *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*; *Daily Telegrams*; *Folkestone Chronicle and visitors’ guide to Folkestone*; *Canterbury Journal and Farmers’ Gazette*; *Dover Express*; *Maidstone and Kentish Journal*; *Kent Messenger & Maidstone Telegraph*; *Southampton Observer and Winchester News*; and, *Winchester Herald and County Advertiser*.

In order to create a sampling plan, I constructed an extensive timeline of the repeal campaign and used this to guide my research. The timeline incorporated key dates identified in Susan Kingsley Kent’s *Sex and Suffrage*, Judith Walkowitz’s *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, and *Josephine Butler and the Prostitution Campaigns*, edited by Jane Jordan and Ingrid Sharp. I also searched for “prostitution” and “Contagious Diseases Acts” in the Hansard database of Parliamentary debates and ran a number of keyword searches in the British Newspaper Archive (BNA). In this way, I was able to recreate an approximate timeline of parliamentary debates, elections, public controversies, and protests surrounding the CD Acts. I then used these dates to guide my reading of the microfilm and hard copy newspapers, enabling me to conduct targeted research.

In general, I found that the provincial newspapers tended to report on the CD Acts when they were of direct relevance to the towns on which they are reporting. For example, though Cork was one of the subject towns, there is no sustained editorial commentary in the *Cork Examiner* on the Acts. Instead, the Acts are mentioned only in connection with petitions, notices of meetings, and, in rare instances, in discussion of lock hospitals. In contrast, *The Shield* has full sections about each subject town, in nearly every edition, describing the efforts made to repeal the Acts, generally titled “Intelligence from the Subjected Districts.”

However, though mention of the Act was not as sustained as I expected, my research has demonstrated that elections were hotbeds of debate, both the general elections of 1874 and 1880

and the numerous by-elections between 1869 and 1886, the start and end of the repeal campaign, respectively. I initially proposed a project that would have applied an Andersonian framework to 19th century British society, wherein newspapers were used to create a new, more explicitly moral, sense of national identity. My research demonstrated that newspapers were indeed instrumental in creating a sense of identity, but not a national one. Rather, coverage of the CD Acts and, more specifically, coverage of elections in which candidates incorporated the repeal or the expansion of the Acts into their platform, helped to create and deepen a sense of *local* identities. Using this framing, my dissertation will argue that the way newspapers covered both elections and the CD Acts helped make the Acts into a test question for political candidates – in other words, electors would refuse to vote for candidates who opposed repeal of the Acts, even if they agreed with their platform in all other areas. In doing so, I suggest, there emerged a new way of thinking about morality in Britain, wherein individual locales within the country began to imagine themselves – often in stark contrast to counties just down the road – as places of principle over politics.

Since returning to the United States, I have also renewed my subscription to the BNA. This has allowed me to follow up on this research with newspapers that have been fully or partially digitized on the BNA, including *Essex Standard*; *Cork Daily Herald and Advertising Gazette*; *Portsmouth Times and Naval Gazette*; *Portsmouth Evening News*; *Western Times*; *Shorncliffe & Hythe Advertiser*; and *Woolwich Gazette and Greenwich and Deptford Chronicle*, among many others.

Financial Statement

The Curran Fellowship grant of \$4,752 was used to cover the cost of roundtrip airfare to London; accommodations in London; ground transport; and a year's subscription to the British Newspaper Archive.

Item	Cost
Roundtrip Airfare	\$1,166
Accommodations	\$3,299.62
Ground Transport	\$172.49
British Newspaper Archive Subscription	\$112.58
TOTAL	\$4,750.69