

Alice Elaine Hodson married Arthur Pidgeon (s/o Thomas Edward, gs/o Henry Lee) in 1925.

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**A COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT ON WORKING-CLASS  
AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

**ALICE PIDGEON (B.1898):**

by Alyson Mulvaney

## **AN INTRODUCTION**

### **'Looking Over My Shoulder to Childhood Days and Later' – Alice Pidgeon (born c.1898)**

Alice Pidgeon's memoir tells a story of sadness and loss, and readers cannot fail to sympathise with her and feel a strong liking for her character. The many terrible events that occurred in her younger years could have led to a bitter and troubled young woman, but the good standard of care she received in the orphanage after her parents died, created a hard-working and spirited young woman.

With good humour and naivety Alice Pidgeon merrily describes her experiences of childhood and young adult life. Born in Bradford, she spent her early years here, before moving to Streatham in London at around the age of four when her father got a job as a newspaper reporter for the Daily Chronicle.

Despite the many hardships encountered, her wit and light-hearted style make it less of a dismal read and more of an enjoyable and eye-opening read.

Alice's personality intrigues me and encourages me to read on through her memoir. Death, illness and tough times are themes present throughout her writing, interlinked with happiness, friendship and ambition. This combination creates a very authentic piece of writing, which can be visualised and experienced as the story unfolds.

At the age of six, Alice's suffered the loss of both of her parents, who died within weeks of each other. A happy family life preceded this unfortunate turn of events, and Alice lovingly describes memories of her hard-working and very caring mother and father; her father a newspaper reporter, her mother a high-class dress maker.

The family appear to have been quite sickly. Alice's younger sister, Doris, was struck with a terrible illness in infancy that meant that at the age of two she was temporarily left unable to walk and talk, and not until the age of three and a half was she able to learn to do so again. Their father also had 'combustion' problems, of which Alice mentions quite a lot. This was a problem to his work, as he would plough on through illness, after only a few days rest, so as to hold down his job, sacrificing his health. Her mother died only weeks after the horrific miscarriage of her third baby; a result of an accident in which she fell down a flight of stairs in their home during pregnancy. Her father died shortly after her mother from a 'broken heart' as the doctor diagnosed it. As a result of this ill-fate, the girls suffered a dramatic change of lifestyle and went from living in a family home of comfort and security, to being taken to live in a girls orphanage.

Alice resided in St. John Groom's Home for Little Girls, in London, until the age of seventeen. Her experience, as she describes it, is one of happiness and care, punctured, however, by the sad truth of her past and the longing to see her parents again. She created good friendships within the orphanage and speaks highly of the girls she lived with. Not overly strict, the orphanage, where they were



The Daily Chronicle from the early 1900's, when Alice's father was a reporter

mercifully not required to wear a uniform but wore normal clothes so as to blend in with other local girls, proved a good home for Alice and her sister.

Many people come and go in Alice's life. In her younger years, before her parents' death, Alice recalls her grannie being an important presence in her life. Her grannie, although blind, was a friendly figure and spent her time knitting and offering sweets and other confectionaries to Alice and Doris. Alice cared greatly for her, and was saddened to leave her when the time came for her to go to the orphanage.

Alice's nurturing disposition is something she would carry over into her career as a nanny, caring for children, as well as eventually her own children in later life. She recalls looking after her younger sister once she had recovered from her strenuous illness and this gentle character was a trait she kept through her time in the orphanage and in later years. Her desire was to look after young children and babies, and she travelled great distances around the country to find her ideal position. She encountered the horrid bullying figure of the nurse in one of her jobs, and for the first time we read of meanness and cruelty. She risks her health, too, to find herself a good position as nanny. Already flu-ridden, she traipses across Manchester and neighbouring places to go for her interview.

Alice mentions her naivety frequently in her writing, and this helps highlight another frequent class distinction. Many of the employers offering work as a nanny in their home, take her lack of knowledge light-heartedly, while some show definite signs of snobbery towards the young, innocent woman.

Readers of Alice's memoir will never lose interest, as her story twists and turns so much that it creates a highly stimulating read. Those with interest in early 20<sup>th</sup> century England, particularly Bolton, Streatham or indeed those with knowledge of John Groom, would find this a highly useful insight, as it covers many areas of the country, not just specifically on one. Those who are interested in learning about the orphanages and the different lifestyles and class systems of the era will also learn much from reading Alice Pidgeon's memoir.



A Victorian dressmaker, much like Alice's mother

## EDUCATION & SCHOOLING

Having been orphaned at only six years of age, Alice and her sister Doris took position in St. John Groom's Home for little girls. Their parents, whom Alice spoke very highly of, left a good impression on the girls.

Being a working class family, Alice witnessed her parents working long hours, sometimes late into the night when the girls had gone to bed. Her father, a reporter for the Daily Chronicle and her mother a high-class dress maker, both worked tirelessly to feed and clothe their two daughters.



A girl's school in the early 20th century

This attitude instilled into Alice and Doris the importance of hard work and dedication. In this sense, the girls were educated about having a good work ethic and earning a good living - a nice legacy for their parents to have left. Indeed, Alice proves in her later years to be a hard worker, as described in my blog 'Life & Labour'.

Alice and her sister did not attend an orphanage school, instead they were sent to schools outside of the orphanage in order to blend in with the other children. She proudly tells how the girls from the home were commonly known to be neat and clean girls and never naughty.

Alice writes very little about her actual schooling, and much of the education years are skimmed over. She briefly mentions her experiences in school and the silly tricks her and her friends would

do to pass the time and have fun, like stealing hot potatoes from the kitchens in the orphanage some mornings, smuggling them to school in their clothes and sharing them out with butter and salt.

Once girls turned fourteen and left school, some would return to their mothers in London and take up jobs there, whilst others were taken on by the orphanage themselves and called 'house girls'. The matter-of-fact tone in which she states that girls left school at fourteen, shows that this was unremarkable at the time.

Alice scarcely mentions anything she learnt at school, and seems to put more pride and emphasis on other things she has learnt i.e. life skills she has gained from caring for others, and being a good friend and sister. It appears the people she encounters through her story are of more significance than the things she was taught in school. Her challenging experiences in her younger years seem to have shaped the young woman she turned into rather more than those who educated her. As mentioned, she took pride in looking neat and presentable for school but also found fun and friendship; a more exciting topic for the memoir than the content of actual lessons.

Books have some significance in Alice's education and leisure. She states that one of her most enjoyable times were after Sunday services, where she and the other girls of the orphanage would spend time in their Mother's room and she would read to them such as Charles Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop* and similar titles. These tales would have been both leisurely pastimes but also a form of education to the young girls.

It is clear, however, that education was important to Alice, from the pride with which she describes how her own daughter, Noreen, won a scholarship to a good school. She mentions her French book and her pen and ink, and it seems very much to be a romanticised scene, in which their younger daughter wistfully watches her big sister go to school and proclaims how one day, she too will go to Whalley Range High School and wear a white overall. It is obvious that this is a memory Alice fondly looks back on.

I think Alice understood the importance of a good education, especially in regards to the education of her own children, but for herself she seems to have placed more emphasis on the building of character and having a good work ethic.



The plaque that marks the place where John Groom, owner of Alice's Orphanage, had lived

## READING & WRITING

For many, reading can be seen as one of the most enjoyable pastimes there is. It is also a common view that reading books and involving oneself in literature is imperative to the development of our culture and education.

However, in comparison to current times, literature was not so easy to come by for the working-class people at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Alice Pidgeon spent her youth in an orphanage, along with younger sister Doris. From the age of seven and her sister from the age of three and a half, the girls were sent to live in John Grooms orphanage in the South of England.



Charles Dickens,  
1812 – 1870

The fact that the girls no longer belonged to a family home and lacked guidance from their own parents, could quite easily have meant that the girls missed out on stories and children's books, literature and novels. But Alice, Doris and the other girls of John Groom's Home were exposed to literature and books possibly more so than other, more fortunate children of the time.

Alice and the girls called the lady who cared for them in the orphanage, 'Mother'. On Sunday evenings, the girls would gather in a circle in Mother's sitting room after service and listen to her read. Mother would read Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop* and other titles such as *A Peep Behind the Scenes*. This seems like a very homely and comforting scene. Perhaps this is what the owner

of the orphanage, John Groom, was attempting to do. Or maybe it was that Mother liked the educational and cultural benefits literature had for the girls. But either way, this reading experience must have been one of comfort and bonding for the young girls who sat circled together on those evenings.

The importance of exposing the girls to literature during their time in the orphanage is further impressed when Alice reminisces about Christmas time.

Alice remembers Christmas as a happy experience in the orphanage, a day packed full of singing, dancing, eating and drinking. She notes how they each received presents on Christmas morning;

‘I have a doll, picture book or storybook, a trumpet and various other things.’ (Memoir. P8)

As a way to encourage their own reading, the girls would receive books as presents.

In current time books are so easily accessible, and in so many different formats, that it is difficult to understand a time where people may not have had the opportunity to develop their own taste in books.



Victorian children reading together

Looking at John Pateman’s text about libraries and the working classes, we can see the influence public libraries had on society and how this idea developed. The text describes a time period that ranges from the mid nineteenth century, through to the Second World War.

For the upper class society in Great Britain, a large collection of books and journals would have been seen as a mark of money and intelligence, however, for the working class or the ‘deserving poor’, libraries were designed to manage their idle time and develop and control their reading habits. Libraries, for some, were there to progress the working class society into a more developed and established order, as some thought.

But the working-class libraries were incorporated in working-men’s clubs and other certain societies. It served as something both social and educational to the working class.

Religious text would have been an obvious part of many people’s lives during the early twentieth century. Alice makes frequent reference to religion and her Bible throughout her memoir.

‘I had once been sitting in the dining room while they were out, which I often did studying my Bible with the us[e] of the grudens condordance [cruden’s concordance], a thick heavy book’ (Memoir. P10)

The religious text is something Alice frequently pondered, with the aid of the concordance.

The implication is that the religious influence in Alice’s life came from her upbringing in the orphanage. There is no significant mention of her parents being religious, and in general, religious ideas and themes in Alice’s memoir are often alluded to rather than being discussed with a heavy importance.

I thought, before reading Alice’s memoir and researching into the topic more, that reading would have been one of the most accessible hobbies during Alice’s time. After all, books have been written and read over hundreds of years.

It shows great initiative on the behalf of John Grooms orphanage, however, that the little girls enjoyed literature as youngsters.

## HOME & FAMILY

Home and family is a bitter-sweet topic for Alice Pidgeon, whose memoir delves deeply into the heart of her family life and experiences. Her parents, who died when she was only six years of age, play a prominent role in her memoir and her memory of them is fond and loving.

Alice spent her first few years of life in Bradford, where her mother worked as a high-class dress maker and her father a newspaper reporter.

She next remembers going to live, at around the age of three, in Streatham, London. This was during the time when her parents were alive, before tragedy struck the family and Alice and her younger sister, Doris, went to live in St John Groom's Home for Little Girls. This orphanage was to become her new home and the other girls there became sisters to Alice and Doris, until Alice reached the age of seventeen and left to find work.



Having spent a large portion of her childhood and adolescence in St John Groom's orphanage, Alice's written voice is laced with nostalgia as she describes throughout her life the role of her parents, sister, grandmother, the 'Mother' of the orphanage and John Groom and his brother, who plays an uncle-type role during Alice's childhood.

Strong emphasis is placed on family life and the domestic setting. Alice, from a very young age, is incredibly protective of her little sister, and cares for her both in their parent's home and later on in life.

John Groom, although not a parent, plays an important father-like role in Alice's memoir. Helping orphans like Alice and Doris was not the only charitable legacy he left after his death. Concerned with helping those less fortunate, he founded the Watercress and Flower Girls' Christian Mission in 1866. He set up a factory in which poor and disabled women made artificial flowers which, in turn, they could sell on to make money.[2] It is being surrounded by kind-hearted people such as John Groom that meant Alice had a good experience living in the orphanage. Something a lot of orphans of the time did not receive.

Alice reminisces of holidays at the beach with her parents, and specific scenes from home-life, such as helping to clean the kitchen or eating mint cake from her Grandma and even stealing some chocolate and eating so much that she was violently sick. All innocent and seemingly pointless memories, but to Alice they represent a time when she belonged to someone, something she says she and the other girls missed at the orphanage. She admits that they were cared for incredibly well at the orphanage but they missed that sense of belonging to someone or being a part of a family. When researching other examples of orphanages from the late Victorian or Edwardian era, it seems that Alice and Doris had quite a fine experience in their home and suffered none of the cruelty that orphans suffered in others. From reading Alan Hamblin's text, *An Orphanage Diary*, there is evidence of a much colder and more strict life in the orphanage's he describes and evidence of hard cruelty and violence towards the children. Something Alice and the other girls never appear to suffer.

The Mother of the orphanage plays the role of a strict parent, but allows for fun and games and a closeness between the girls. John Groom, the owner of the orphanage, plays role of father in his visits and Alice remembers fondly how sometimes his brother would also visit the girls, and like a cheeky uncle may do with his nieces or nephews, he calls out to the girls and asks 'who needs a sweet?'

Alice's parents, before they died, displayed to their daughters the ways of a hard-working family. Both worked hard to offer their daughter's a comfortable life. Things were very rarely easy, however, they certainly came across some difficult patches like all working-class families of that era, such as temporary unemployment, absence from work due to illness and so on. They would work late into the night, Alice recalls. One particularly moment in her memoir comes at the beginning, when Alice describes how she wished to have a beautiful doll which she had seen in a shop near their home. The doll cost one pound which was expensive in her time. She pined for the doll and her father saved and bought her one, though not the one she had wanted. Though disappointed, Alice points out how her parents accumulated an eclectic mix of dolls over her younger years; a Chinese doll, a black doll, a soldier doll... To her, this seems to be a message from her parents, stating that 'all men are equal in



the eyes of God'. These are the kind of messages that Alice gained throughout her short time with her parents, and short though it was they clearly made a positive impression on her.

Alice proved through her time in the orphanage and later life, to be a very open and warm person, never judgemental and always, in her eyes, was everybody equal. She writes how she didn't realise, even in her teens, the difference in classes. 'The first decade of the 20th century saw England divided by strict lines of upper, middle and working classes/On one hand the upper middle class adopted the Edwardian fashion wholeheartedly, on the other the lower middle class clung to the Victorian fashion'[1]. There was a distinct difference between the classes, more so than ever at this stage, but Alice's naivety is shown throughout her memoir, as she relives her late teen years when she started her search for work and her immersion into society without the safety and guidance of the orphanage proved confusing and enlightening all at once.

Her own family life created a caring and loving lady who carried her giving nature to her career as a nanny. She wanted nothing else than to help look after children and bonded incredibly with every family she helped, give or take a small minority of families who displayed snobbery and disdain towards Alice who became a part of another family with each new position. This caring disposition, unsurprisingly, carried into her personal life and she became a mother to two daughters, of whom she was very proud. She and husband Arthur, as a couple, echo the story of her own mother and father; they are both hard working, often coming upon hard times, and caring deeply for their daughters and providing them with everything that they can, leading to a good education for the eldest.

Although she was orphaned, Alice was not entirely deprived of a family life, in fact the orphanage instilled into her even more the importance of love and kindness and support, which she took on through the rest of her life and into her own family.

## LIFE & LABOUR

The depression of the 1930's, has great significance in Alice Pidgeon's memoir.

Orphaned at just six years of age, Alice and her sister Doris went to live in St John Groom's Home for little girls.

Before devastation struck the Pidgeon family, however, Alice recalls a hard-working and devoted family. Her father, a reporter for the *Daily Chronicle*, would work late into the night. Alice remembers hearing his typewriter in action even in the late hours. Her mother was a high-class dressmaker, and would sit up sewing for hours after her daughters had gone to sleep. Her parents worked hard to earn a living. Her father who was frequently bed-ridden due to consumption, would often leave his sick bed early so that he could get back to work, despite the doctor's wishes.

It was this attitude and strong work ethic that Alice herself carried on into her adult life. She worked as a nanny. With a strong compassion for others and a patient, caring nature, she found enjoyment in the care of youngsters. She moved from family to family, the majority of whom embraced her into their family and welcomed her hard work. One particular family gave her a terrible experience, but Alice did not let this stop her from carrying on with her work as a nanny.

She describes how she traipsed across counties in the North of England, looking for work and attending interviews. With very little money, she walked for three days with only tea and hot lemon to drink and not a bite to eat. After collapsing on the pavement whilst walking through the night, she willed herself not to faint.

She made her way from Fallowfield, through Manchester and on to Farnworth where her sister Doris was staying with their aunt. After devouring some steak she slept for fourteen hours, waking up to find her feet swollen and bruised. This was the price she paid for her dedication to finding work. She knew that she either worked tirelessly to find a job, or else she would become unemployed or end up trapped in the job she was in, where she was for the first and only time, treated with cruelty and contempt.

Reading this section of Alice's memoir I was reminded of a poem by Samuel Bamford, as follows;

*GOD help the poor, who on this wintry morn  
Come forth of alleys dim, and courts obscure!  
God help yon poor pale girl, who droops forlorn,  
And meekly her affliction doth endure!  
God help the outcast lamb! she trembling stands,  
All wan her lips, and frozen red her hands;  
Her mournful eyes are modestly down cast,  
Her night-black hair streams on the fitful blast;  
Her bosom, passing fair, is half reveal'd,  
And, oh! so cold, the snow lies there congeal'd;  
Her feet benumb'd, her shoes all rent and worn:  
God help thee, outcast lamb, who stand'st forlorn!  
God help the poor!*

**Samuel Bamford, 'God Help the Poor'**

**Read by Chartist John Barton in Elizabeth Gaskell's Mary Barton (1848)**

Fortunately she was successful in getting the job as a nanny in Fallowfield and was very happy there. She later moved on to look after the cousin of those children she'd cared for in Fallowfield and she made good friends with a young lady named Nellie.

Alice worked hard and showed dedication to her work, proving resilience and acknowledging the fact that unemployment and poverty were very easily come upon.

After meeting and dating a young chap named Arthur, she married. The first thing Alice describes about Arthur in their early days of marriage is his occupation and his dedication to his job. 'Arthur had worked for a firm conscientiously for ten years on nights, but during the thirties the firm decided to bring in some younger men...' (p15) A good work ethic was something Alice clearly admired in her husband, and she saw the importance of his 'conscientiousness'. This line also leads to the topic of the Great Depression.

The depression was precipitated by the stock market crash in America in 1929, which then took its toll on the rest of the world. In Britain it meant that unemployment rocketed, benefits were cut dramatically, so that people who were only just getting by, had to pay out even more.

It was common for most working class families to earn just enough to survive. After two and a half years of unemployment for Arthur, he had just about given up hope. He, like Alice had done previously, traipsed across the country in search for work, where he encountered hundreds of other men applying for the very same jobs as himself. This was the situation of the thirties. Nobody appeared to be better off than anybody else, chances were slim.

Alice and Arthur grew their own vegetables and did all of their own shoe and sewing repairs to save money through this difficult time. There was a slim line between being frivolous and having no other option but to choose the cheaper option. Instead of taking the bus to town to look for work, Arthur would walk. Through all weathers he would march on in search for employment.

Alice, again, sees the good in her husband. His dedication to his family and to giving them a better life was the most important thing to her and his most endearing feature. She says:

'No one was a more conscientious worker given the chance to work, but after hundreds of disappointments, any man would have lost hope. These were the days of the depression the thirties, thousands carry the scars of those experiences in their hearts to this day.' (p17)

Thankfully, Arthur was soon to find work as a library porter. It broke Alice's heart to see her husband struggle and continually be disappointed, but she admired his bravery and commitment. Working class Britain was united in its anger against the lack of work and in their desperation to feed and clothe their family.



Unemployment was wide-spread

Alice carried on sewing to make extra money through the unemployment phase. She got a job working as a daily nanny to a three week old baby while Arthur was unemployed, but, she says, when Arthur told the Labour exchange about her work, a chunk was deducted from their unemployment pay. So much so, that it was hardly worth while Alice went out to work.

It is interesting to see how some aspects of the society in which Alice lived, actually corresponds to the society we are in now. The extent of the recession in current times is not so grave as the thirties, but spirits are often just as low and benefits are, once again, to be cut.

## POLITICS, PROTEST & CLASS

Alice Pidgeon spent most of her childhood and adolescent years in St John Grooms Home for little girls, an orphanage in the South of England, where she was sent to live with her sister, after their parents died.

There is no definitive mention of politics or protest throughout her memoir, but Alice describes in detail some of the trials she faced when plunged into society after living in the orphanage. She details the problems she encountered, the characters she met and the general ways of society during the early 1900's, which in turn reflect on the politics of the time.

Her life in the orphanage was good; she was well fed, clothed and cared for and she and her sister Doris had many happy memories there. However, Alice states in her description of her adult life, that she has lived a very sheltered life in the orphanage, and that she did not understand the way of the world.

Both her mother and father died of illness. Her father was a long-term sufferer of consumption, and he used to carry on working, in his role as a reporter for the Daily Chronicle, against the doctor's wishes. As Alice states, there was no National Health then, so men would have to keep on 'until they dropped' (p6).

When the girls of the orphanage left school, they would become house-girls, where they would assist in the upkeep of the home and they received 3d per week. At the age of fourteen the girls would leave the orphanage and go to live with relatives. Most girls went into 'good service' which was work in offices and shops. But Alice recalls, with great awe, how one girl went to work as second maid to Winston Churchill before then going to work for one of the King George V doctors.

There is an air of great respect when Alice refers to governmental or royal persons of the time. She reveres those of power, but this comes from an innocence and naivety which she later discusses.



Winston Churchill

She remembers a time when she saw King George v in his car with Queen Mary, and her astonishment at seeing someone of such stature is astounding.

But her real sense of the politics and class-systems of the time comes at the age of seventeen, when she finally leaves the orphanage to live with the Jamesons who were some old family friends. She enjoyed her time with them, to begin with. But this was her first experience of being in, what could be deemed, the real world. After living a very sheltered life at the orphanage where she was surrounded by girls of a similar age and stature, she was unaccustomed to the class systems that were in place in society.

Alice was badly bullied by the nurse who lived with the Jamesons, and was not used to such treatment. As she states, 'I was like a glorified under-nurse and I was very naïve for seventeen' (p9)

Alice goes on to further demonstrate her lack of knowledge of the class system when applying for a position as a nanny and suggested that the lady wrote to John Grooms for a reference.

'The reference was evidently satisfactory so she wrote to engage me. I could write a good letter but had no idea how to write a business letter so I just wrote what I felt. I had no idea there was such

thing as class distinction, so, this is how I replied:- Dear Mrs... /... and I finished up with heaps of love from yours affectionately, Alice Hodson.

She wrote back saying she was very sorry but had since made other arrangements' (p9)

Alice writes in her memoir, with the help of hindsight, 'Perhaps she thought I did not know my place' (p9). This was Alice's first insight into class and how the politics of society worked.

'I had no idea there was such thing as class distinction. I had a lot to learn...' (p11)

The unfairness and injustice of the class system in society was a concept that fell heavily on Alice. On applying for a job as a nanny once more, Alice passes over her reference. She requests a reference back from the lady who looked to employ Alice. Alice states her naivety and confusion around the matter, and ponders why she should not be able to see a reference of the person employing her. As she says, 'this seemed a very one sided affair to me'. (p13)

Society was very segregated and there was a strong emphasis was placed on class distinction.

It was not uncommon, however, and society had been fractured since before Alice was born. People had tried for a long time to bridge the gap. Protests took place and one interesting fact is of the Bolton Whitmanites.

Bolton has strong links to Alice's story, being Alice's first home place, and it intrigues me to read the story of the Whitmanites. The group consisted of lower-middle-class men in late-Victorian England who found the American poet, Walt Whitman, an inspiration in their desire to reconcile spirituality, science and socialism. The poet was about to celebrate his sixty-eighth birthday when the men wrote to him, not expecting of a reply. However, Walt did reply and a friendship was developed between the men in Bolton and the American poet, and this friendship was to become an influential part in the political stance in England at the time.



The Bolton Whitmanites

After Walt's death it was evident that his involvement with the Independent Labour Party had helped to establish Whitman as a patron saint of British socialism. All this came from a small group of men, who took the initiative to speak out to someone who influenced them.

Alice saw difficulty and desperation throughout her life, however, as it took a great amount of time before significant changes happened within society regarding class distinctions. Her husband, Arthur, went on to struggle in his quest for work; often resorting to jobs he was unfit for and in spite of his ill health. As I have written in my blog 'Life & Labour'; that was the depression of the 30's, and Alice and Arthur's situation was not uncommon.

## HABITS, CULTURE & BELIEF

Alice Pidgeon, orphaned at the age of six, spent most of her childhood and adolescent years in St. John Groom's Home for little girls.

St. John Groom, whom Alice refers to as 'Uncle', was the founder of the orphanage that Alice and her sister Doris grew up in. A man with a good heart and thoughtful ways, Mr Groom set up the little girl's Home as well as other institutions such as 'John Groom's Crippleage and Flower Girls Mission'.

He believed that the young girl's in his orphanage should not be made to wear a uniform. He thought it best to dress the girls in clothes comparable to the other local children so they were indistinguishable from others. This is something Alice describes with fondness. I feel she really respected the notion that they were treated as any other little girl.

As for John Groom, respect for him not only came from the little girls he housed, but from those who knew of him and his work within society. This fact is shown by the other associations that have been developed in John Grooms name, including housing associations.

Alice and the other girls at Mr Groom's orphanage were treated very well and behaved like sisters. They were dressed neatly, always clean, and were well fed. Meal times were always announced by the girls standing up to say grace;

'Be present at our table Lord,  
Be here and everywhere adored,  
These mercies bless and grant that we,  
May feast in Paradise with thee. Amen.'

Alice's memoir shows that her upbringing had a steady, but not overpowering, influence of Christianity. The repetition of Grace at every meal throughout her time at the orphanage, and her outlook on life and the memories she divulges, indicate someone with a religious influence.



For instance, she discusses her love of dolls as a child and the collection that she built up. She explains how she had dolls of all kinds; a Japanese doll, a soldier doll, a black doll... She looks back at this memory by stating,

'I sometimes wonder if there was a message in all the different nationalities of dolls,  
that all men are equal in the sight of God.'

Her reminiscence of her home life of a Sunday echo the scene that would have been witnessed in most family homes. Alice's father would take her for a walk in the morning, while her mother cooked the Sunday dinner. It is a bitter-sweet memory, but at least Alice got to experience this closeness and typical family life before it was taken away from her.

The Sunday experience at St. John Grooms orphanage was one of a different kind of closeness. Alice happily remembers how the girls would have a service every Sunday afternoon and in the evening would go to the Mother's sitting room (they named the lady who cared for them 'Mother') to listen to her read. They would have many different stories to listen to such as Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

Christmas was a time of great fun for Alice and the other orphanage girls. Reading through her memoir, it seems John Groom, Mother and all of the other orphanage staff worked very hard to keep the girls busy and entertained on Christmas day in particular, so as to feel part of the family.

The girls would write letters to Father Christmas and receive presents such as dolls, picture books and trumpets. As is typical of any young child's bedroom on Christmas morning, the girls would waken very early and excitable noise would break out.



One of the buildings in John Groom's Orphanage

It was on Christmas that some girls would receive letters from ladies who 'sort of adopted' some girls and would send them gifts on birthdays and Christmas. Alice's memory of Christmas is extremely happy one, even in the orphanage; she concludes her description with 'at the end of a perfect day.../... Christmas was a happy time'.

Every day, the girls would go across to one of the larger buildings for prayers and Uncle John Groom would give a penny to any little girl whose birthday it was.

The girls were included in the strong dancing and entertaining culture of the time. During the winter they would all practice drilling and dancing, along with singing, in preparation for Garden Fete days they performed at during the summer. They would perform national dance in National costume as well as performing plays etc and the crowds would throw money on the stage at the end.

## LIFE WRITING, CLASS & IDENTITY

*With minimal self-consciousness, they preserve memories of a way of life that is changing or has already ceased to be.*

Regenia Gagnier explains how writing that corresponds to the description above, fits into a category of writing known as, **commemorative storytelling** form.

Alice Pidgeon's memoir shows no signs of censorship or 'self-consciousness'. With humility and honesty Alice relays her tales of childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Her method of storytelling is anecdotal; small stories that correlate together to create a full picture. Her writing is somewhat erratic in parts, as she often flits backwards and forwards to random memories, as though she was writing things as they came into her mind. She acknowledges her digressions, however, stating at the beginning of paragraphs, 'Well, to return to Arthur...' (Memoir, 17) or 'but to get back to the orphanage...' (Memoir, 6)

This style relates to Gagnier's description of commemorative storytelling, as she explains 'they present unstructured, thematically arbitrary, disconnected anecdotes' (Gagnier 348-9).

Alice's portrayal of her younger self, speaks of someone incredibly naïve and innocent to the ways of the world. Although she became wise to the manners of society with age and she hardened through her struggles in adulthood, Alice retained her youthful humour and warm-hearted ways. Her writing reflects these aspects of her personality, as she remembers the significant moments in her history, moments that made her laugh and left an impression on her or else times that shocked or contradicted her open and accepting character.



The interesting fact about Alice's writing style is, however, that it also corresponds to another writing form. If we consider the memoir as a whole, we see that it also fits precisely into the **self-examination** form.

As has been discussed through writing about the different themes in Alice's memoir, she came upon many challenges throughout her life. From being orphaned at a young age to living through the depression of the 30's, Alice faced some troublesome times, often without much hope or any sign that things were going to improve. As Gagnier states, the self-examination form is written by 'people with lives of unmitigated misery and hardship'. (Gagnier 357) Alice faced poverty, desperation and death numerous times and her recounting of them in her memoir supports the notion that self-examination writing is produced by people who write 'as a tool of self-understanding.' (Gagnier 357) This kind of writing has a therapeutic edge for the person producing it, a way of self-examining and reflecting on your behaviours.

Looking further at Gagnier's description of self-examination writing, questions that were raised through writing about Alice's memoir can be answered.

For example, Gagnier writes, 'unlike the authors of the confessions, they are not trying to sell their work so much as to analyze and alleviate their pain,' (Gagnier 357). In my blog 'Purpose & Audience', I explain how Alice doesn't appear to be writing for any particular audience, and that her writing shows signs that she didn't expect people to read her memoir at all. Whereas in other memoirs, the authors open their writing with some sort of explanation or apology as to why they are writing their life tales, Alice simply begins to write. She does not intend her writing to be sold or admired, she writes predominantly for her own personal closure and self-understanding.

There is a strong focus on parent/child relationships in Alice's memoir, mainly due to the fact that she missed out on a lot of traditional family experiences. Alice and her younger sister Doris were deprived of the parent/child relationship from a young age, and the development of their family life was stumped after their parents died in quick succession of one another.

Toward the concluding parts of Gagnier's essay, she describes how 'in nineteenth century Britain, working class people began to include their occupations in titles of their work' in a bid to 'compete historically with the bourgeoisie' (Gagnier 361). The title of Alice's memoir is 'Looking Over My Shoulder to Childhood Days and Later', which does not identify any particular occupation. Alice does talk a great deal about employment throughout her memoir, but her emphasis, as shown in her chosen title, was on her personal past and marred childhood. This emphasizes further that she did not intend her memoir to be viewed by others, and was not written for any other purpose than her own therapeutic pastime. Had she wanted to create a historically significant memoir, one that marked her out to a particular class or occupation, she would have chosen a more revealing title.

# PURPOSE & AUDIENCE

'You ask me for my earliest memories' is the opening statement to Alice Pidgeon's memoir. By directly addressing the readers of her writing she draws people in and sets a definite tone. Readers are left with no ambiguity as to where her writing begins as she declares that her earliest memory is back when she was three years of age. Instantly, we know exactly where about in Alice's story we are positioned, and at what point in her life we are learning about first.

Unlike some other memoirs, she gives no inclination or reason for why she is writing her own memoir, no apologetic explanation or defensive reasoning as is evidenced in other writing from that period.

Alice's tone is confident and informative but exciting too. She gives no real inclination of who might be reading her autobiography or why, she simply writes. She is seventy-eight at the time she is writing her memoir; she sates so in the early stages of her writing. By saying this we can imagine the older lady who has come from the three year old we are reading about. We know just how long she has lived at the time of writing her memoir, can envisage the amount of time that has elapsed since the beginning of her story to the present day; something that involves readers and makes her story feel immediate.

Alice, from the age of seven to seventeen, lived in an orphanage, meaning her story would be one of great interest to people who have had a similar life. Her and younger sister Doris lived in a range of places across England; born in Bolton, they moved on to Streatham in London with their parents before tragedy struck and the girls were taken off to live in St John Groom's orphanage.

Alice mentions, on numerous occasions, the class differences that were evident during the early 1900's. She explicitly states how she is from a working-class background and all of her experiences are typically working class, as they continue to be throughout her life, and I feel she writes mainly to a working class readership. She tends to show marginal distaste towards the idea of discrimination within society and the snobbery with which she contends from some of the higher class people she meets. When discussing the dollies her parents bought her through her early years, she tells how she had a black one, a Japanese one, a wax lady one and a baby one, before going on to state that she feels the dollies were a message to her that 'all men are equal in the eyes of God'. She displays, throughout her story, the qualities of someone very open and warm, with the obvious set-backs in life that working class families often suffered but she treats these with good humour and explains them in an understanding way. She is appreciative of everything and everyone, bar a small minority of people who made her miserable and caused her pain. This is indicative that her writing is aimed mainly at working class people, those that have lived a life vastly closer to her own than those of higher classes or particularly those people who show signs of snobbery.



Alice's birthplace, Bradford, in the late 1800's

The title of her memoir, 'Looking Over My Shoulder to Childhood Days and Later', indicates what stages of her life readers are going to find themselves informed of, however, it does not tell of the fact that most of her childhood and adolescence was spent in a girl's orphanage. This fact is one of the most interesting points of her memoir and one of the most unusual aspects to it; although I suppose not so unusual for the time in which she grew up. People interested in learning about experience in an orphanage would be drawn to Alice's memoir but she does not directly divulge this information immediately at the beginning of her writing.

Overall, Alice appears to have written her memoir, mainly for the purpose of sharing her experiences and informing others of her lifestyle during the early 1900's and of growing up in an orphanage. She may not directly state any reasoning for her writing I feel she leaves this open to readers to decide and her writing feels less directed and staged to one aspect, more of an open and diverse account.