Paper 1

In *Testament of Youth*, Vera Brittain remarks that the outbreak of World War I seemed to her "an infuriating personal interruption rather than a world-wide catastrophe."[i] Brittain lived a "provincial young-ladyhood" during a period that Sir Osbert Sitwell calls a "brief golden halt... (when) everything was calm and still and kind." Indeed, Britain between 1901 and 1914 appeared a settled society in many ways. Wealth and power remained unevenly distributed—in the hands of a male, largely aristocratic minority—as it had in previous centuries. Even after the death of Queen Victoria in 1901, "Victorian" ideals about morality, class and women's roles pervaded the nation's thinking, as evidenced throughout the works of Brittain, Robert Roberts, and E.M. Forster. However, kernels of change—expansion of political activity, education and the role of government—had arisen in the late nineteenth century.[ii] Though the onset of war shocked the placid consciousness of observers like Brittain, the lead-up to crisis between 1901 and 1914 actually represented an acceleration of nineteenth-century societal reform. Moreover, in the early twentieth century, this transformation took on a new dimension—a direct challenge to the established order.

The clash between stability and reform was perhaps most evident among the working classes between 1901 and 1914. Although "the bulk of the unskilled laborers… went on accepting their lot unchanged," according to Roberts, "…outbursts against a system in which the poor get poorer and the employers wealthier" grew increasingly vocal in the pre-war era.[iii] Working class political action appeared in two linked forms: large, increasingly militant trade unions and the rise of the Labour Party. [iv]

Union membership grew dramatically after 1900, reaching 23 percent of workers by 1913. Beginning in the late 1880s, "general" unions emphasized political solidarity among workers

across different trades and improvement for the working class as a whole, rather than within individual workplaces.[v] Roberts, growing up in the *Classic Slum*, describes firsthand "the battle for social justice" that occurred through trade unions in June 1911. Amid fanfare celebrating the coronation of King George V, 65,000 seamen, fireman, and dockers struck for living wages. After protracted violence between police and strikers and the involvement of local merchants, clergy and others, the workers' demands were met. The dockers' success "gave heart to unorganized groups of workers who before had never dared to strike," and the event, as well as other violent strikes in the period, demonstrated trade unions' facilitation of an assault on the settled economic system.[vi]

Support for reform spread beyond workers' unions in the pre-war period. Founded in 1901, the Labour Party rested on a background of socialist thought—emphasizing change through government intervention. The new party represented a dual threat to the established order: as a challenge to the traditional two-party system and as the first "mass" party representing the interests of the working classes.[vii] Although Labour remained a minority party in the pre-war years, it did make significant gains in Parliament. In the 1906 election, according to George Dangerfield, "with the election of fifty-three Labour representatives, the death of Liberalism was pronounced."[viii] Dangerfield uses "Liberalism" in this case to refer to an established belief in progress through gradual change—a belief that was now under attack.[ix] Labour MPs held a strategic balance of power in the years leading up to war, allowing them to cooperate with Liberals in passing measures to improve the lives of workers, such as the first eight hour day for men. [x] These measures furthered the then-revolutionary principle that "the community as a whole had some responsibility for its unfortunates," according to Roberts.[xi] Labour support also enabled the Liberals to strip power from the House of Lords

in the 1909 "People's Budget" conflict. As Dangerfield contends, the People's Budget represented "a struggle between two doomed powers:… the middle-class philosophy which was Liberalism and the…aristocracy (which) found its living symbol in the House of Lords."[xii] With the fall of the House of Lords, the pre-war attack on tradition seemed clear.

Britain's social and political establishment came under additional fire from the pre-war women's movement. According to Martha Vicinus, women had made "little progress against political and economic inequalities," by the early twentieth century, despite nearly 50 years of agitation for equal rights. However, the years leading up to war became a period of a "most passionate and concerted feminist attack upon male privilege," with women seeking radical change in their relationship with men and society.[xiii] Between 1906 and 1914, thousands of women joined the suffrage movement, especially young, single middle-class women. This new wave of activism included militant groups such as the Women's Social and Political Union. The WSPU "insisted upon attacking government directly," using the military and spiritualistic rhetoric of "an army at war with society" [xiv]

Roberts offers an economic explanation for the "enormous new social forces… developing," for women during the twenty years before the war.[xv] By August 1914, the number of women in the workforce had reached nearly half that of men, and logically, "such economic might" must have increased women's sense of significance in the public sphere.[xvi] Accordingly, suffragettes demanded not just the vote, but also a "casting off" of old ways.[xvii] Militant activists sought arrest by committing violent acts of destruction against government and commercial property—symbols of the male-run establishment. These women acted in overt defiance of the law—since they did not vote to shape the law, they reasoned, law did not bind them.[xviii] On a more fundamental level, women asserted

control over their own bodies through hunger strikes. Recognition and fear of these challenges to authority was evident in equally ardent resistance to the suffrage movement. Women were frequently imprisoned, and some were subject to violent and dangerous "force feeding" in prison—reflective of an attempt to retain the "settled order" of female passivity.[xix]

Non-militant women also shared in the suffragette's spirit of unhappiness with settled gender roles. Vera Brittain, for example, expresses discontent with the "leisured" lifestyle of middle class women, lamenting that "a mentally voracious young women cannot live entirely upon scenery."[xx] Brittain details her successful struggle to attain higher education, something uncommon for young women in her circle. Margaret Schlegel, E.M. Forster's conception of a "cultured" young woman, argues that "since men have moved forward so far, (women) may move forward a little now."[xxi] While not explicitly involved in the women's movement, Brittain and Schlegel are certainly illustrative of the general "resisting and questioning" that took place among women and other groups in pre-war Britain.[xxii]

The conflict over Irish Home Rule between 1906 and 1914 reinforced the climate of upheaval. As much as women's struggle for the vote, the "Irish question" represented a battle to define British citizenship. Though the Liberals controlled Parliament after 1906, their power rested on support from the Irish Nationalist Party. The INP used their position to force Liberals to introduce a Home Rule bill giving Ireland autonomy. However, Home Rule met with aggressive resistance from many, notably Conservative politicians. These "Unionists" stirred up anti-Home Rule sentiment in Northern Ireland, encouraging gun-running and creation of the military Ulster Volunteers to use threaten force against

Parliament. Meanwhile, Home Rulers established the Nationalist Volunteers. Animosity between these factions culminated in a violent altercation in July 1914—foreshadowing the violence of the war—in which three people died. With Unionists attacking the authority of Parliament and Home Rulers challenging British rule, the Irish question represented a direct challenge to settled society from both sides.[xxiii] Moreover, implied in the conflict was a debate over imperialism—at that time an entrenched facet of British society. The momentous question, "What is the right to rule people against their will?" came to a head through the Irish crisis.[xxiv]

According to Dangerfield, "the old order, the old bland world, was dying fast…" in pre-war Britain.[xxv] Vicinus concurs that for middle- and upper-class Englishmen, it seemed as if the "world they had known was under siege," from workers, the suffragettes, and the Irish.[xxvi] The discontent of these three groups assured that Britain from 1901-1914 was hardly the "placid…golden" nation that Sitwell recalls. Though the crisis of war pushed change even further, overt challenges to British stability had begun long before August, 1914.

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[i] Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 93.
[ii] Lecture, 9/30/08
[iii] Robert Roberts, *The Classic Slum* (Penguin Books, 1971), 98-101.
[iv] Lecture, 9/16/08
[v] Lecture, 9/16/08
[vi] Roberts, 88-97.
[vii] Lecture, 9/16/08.
[viii] George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England,* 22.
[ix] Lecture, 9/23/08.
[x] Lecture, 9/23/08.
[xi] Roberts, 184.
[xii] Dangerfield, 30.
[xiii] Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women,* 247.
[xiv] Vicinus, 250, 261.
[xv] Roberts, 201.
[xvi] Roberts, 202.

[xvii] Vicinus, 256.
[xviii] Lecture, 9/30/08.
[xix] Lecture, 9/30/08.
[xx] Brittain, 54.
[xxi] E.M. Forster, *Howard's End* (Spark Educational Publishing), 74.
[xxii] Lecture, 9/30/08.
[xxiii] Lecture, 10/7/08.
[xxiv] Lecture, 10/7/08.
[xxv] Dangerfield, 67.
[xxvi] Vicinus, 254.