

No Home-Like Place: Delusions of Home in *Born in Exile*

Richard Dennis, University College London

Abstract

George Gissing was obsessed with the question of ‘home’, in his own restless mobility as well as that of his characters, whose domestic circumstances he invariably enumerated in detail. Gissing’s *Born in Exile* moves between real and fictional locations in London, Exeter, and the industrial north of England, but also between a variety of lodgings, chambers and houses which accommodate, constrain and only occasionally liberate their occupants. Their contradictory and volatile attitudes to these ‘homes’ parallel Gissing’s unstable reactions to his own lodgings and highlight the relative nature of locations between town and country as well as differences in perception of the same physical surroundings. Descriptions of and debates about ‘home’ in *Born in Exile* provide a prelude to Gissing’s later, more dogmatic pronouncements in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, also penned – in fiction – from the perspective of the country around Exeter.

Keywords: George Gissing, Exeter, home, housing, lodging, literary geography

I

It should come as little surprise that a novel called *Born in Exile* (1892) is so concerned with the problems of finding, and being, at home. More surprising, perhaps, is that these problems apply not only to the central character, Godwin Peak, after whom the novel was originally to have been named, but also to several other characters. George Gissing himself was never able to find a lasting ‘home’. *Born in Exile* was written when its author was attempting one of the more dramatic of his many geographical and domestic upheavals. He had lived in at least thirteen different lodgings in London between 1877 and 1884; he had then, apparently, settled

down, taking a succession of three-year leases on a flat in Cornwall Mansions, near Baker Street station, between 1884 and the close of 1890, although in the second of these three-year periods he was markedly less often at home. In his first three years there, Gissing was away from home for only 51 nights; in the following three years, he was absent more often than he was at home.¹ At the end of the second lease, he had remarried and relocated to Exeter in Devon, then more than four hours by train from London, even farther from his sisters and widowed mother in Wakefield. Even here he could not settle. He moved first to 24, Prospect Park, where *Born in Exile* was written. He took three unfurnished rooms on the top two floors, sharing the kitchen with his landlord, to whom he paid 6/- a week rent, less than half what he had paid for his three-room flat in London. Gissing, like his characters, invariably chose the cheapness and marginality of the top floor. At first, he enthused that ‘The silence is absolute’ and ‘The situation could not be better. It is in the highest part of Exeter [...] not a quarter of an hour’s walk from the heart of the city, yet within sight of absolute rurality’. But by April he was lamenting ‘We make no acquaintances, & seem very unlikely ever to do so’ (Letters 4: 256, 261, 293). There was no prospect of associating with his landlord and *his* new wife, both ‘extremely vulgar & selfish beyond belief’ (302). This almost exactly parallels Gissing’s changing attitude to his flat in Cornwall Mansions, quickly substituting dismay and disgust for his initial enthusiasm. Yet Prospect Park was marketed in the local press as ‘desirable, genteel’ ‘substantially brick-built modern villa residences’. When nos. 23 and 24 were auctioned in 1895 (by order of the mortgagee, which implies that the existing owner had defaulted on their mortgage payments), they were described as ‘excellent and Freehold Residences’, each with four bedrooms, three reception rooms, bathroom, two WCs and kitchen. Gissing also despaired that the people downstairs had acquired a piano ‘and vigorous strumming has begun’ (Diary: 243), an experience he promptly transferred to Peak’s student lodgings in Kingsmill. Another auction advertisement, for the sale of the contents of

4, Prospect Park, in September 1892, listed ‘Cottage Pianoforte’, ‘Eight-Day Vienna Regulating Clock’ and ‘Safety Bicycle’ among the modern accoutrements of the property.²

Unsurprisingly, Gissing soon abandoned Prospect Park, first for a lengthy holiday in Clevedon and Burnham-on-Sea, and then for a house on the other side of Exeter in St Leonard’s Terrace. Here too, despite having the privacy and exclusivity of a whole house to himself, his wife, his baby son and their servant, he lasted less than two years. Gissing’s own contradictory and volatile attitudes to his successive homes are mirrored in the experience of characters in *Born in Exile*. While the novel is in no way autobiographical, it does help us to reconcile the contradictions in Peak’s personality and attitudes to know that his creator could be just as contradictory and quick to change his mind.

Godwin Peak had been born to parents living ‘on the outskirts of Greenwich’, geographically marginal from the beginning; but he was raised in Twybridge and educated in Kingsmill, places inspired by Gissing’s own upbringing and education in Wakefield and Manchester. Taking a holiday from his routine job in Rotherhithe, only a couple of miles from his birthplace, Peak stays the night in Exeter, where he meets the Warricombes, minor gentry whose son, Buckland, had been an acquaintance at Whitelaw College in Kingsmill. Peak is infatuated with this cultured family, their idyllic home and quietly attractive daughter, Sidwell. Seeking an excuse to spend more time in their company, he tells them that he plans to settle in Exeter, a city dominated by its cathedral, while he studies to become a priest in the Church of England, an institution which he has always ridiculed among his progressive friends in London: Christian Moxey and his sister, Marcella; journalist John Earwaker; and Earwaker’s eccentric friend, Malkin.

Ideas of ‘home’ have attracted a substantial critical literature, differentiating between home as a material environment and as a ‘spatial imaginary’, with radical and feminist scholars dismissive of masculinist and bourgeois ideology that portrayed home as a place of

privacy, domesticity, intimacy and comfort, and ignored home's potential as a site of violence or oppression. Blunt and Dowling conclude that '[h]ome is neither the dwelling nor the feeling, but the relation between the two' (2, 22). Home also functions at a variety of scales: are we 'at home' in the metropolis or in the provinces; in an urban or a rural environment; in a house, or a flat, or rooms, or lodgings; with or without any security of tenure? For the Victorians, housing tenure meant not so much the distinction between owning and renting, because so few Victorians were owner-occupiers, even among those who could afford to own property, but between different kinds of rental agreement. Conventionally, 'home' comprised the space, the room or the garden, in which one felt most comfortable, the treasured possessions that furnished whatever dwelling one currently inhabited, and the treasured people with whom one was surrounded, often, for Gissing, the ideal housekeeper. For Gissing, and for many of his characters, the absence of 'home' was associated with or compounded by the uncertainty of their social position: comfortably well-off, thanks to inherited wealth, but radical (e.g. the Moxeys); or intellectually superior but financially insecure, aspiring to move in 'society' but without the requisite social pedigree – 'unclassed' to use the term Gissing had attached to one of his earliest novels and which has subsequently been attached to Gissing. Ralph Pite argues that it is because of 'class exclusion' that Peak exhibits an 'especially intense desire for home' (130). He is an 'internal exile' who fetishises his ideal home; and because he has been 'born in exile' rather than exiled, he has no home to which he 'can look back, with nostalgia and yearning' (131, 135).

Writing at a much earlier stage in the revival of Gissing criticism, Gillian Tindall took Peak's exile less seriously, suggesting that Gissing meant us to interpret Peak's claim to be 'born in exile' as 'romantic rot', an attractive adolescent fantasy (63). If you try too hard to escape your origins, you will end up in exile from everything, and it will be your own fault. Certainly, to apply the term 'exile' to the forms of displacement experienced by characters in

Born in Exile may seem melodramatic, especially given the presence of so many ‘real’ political exiles in Britain in the late nineteenth century – Paris Communards, mid-European anarchists and revolutionaries, East European Jewish refugees. An exile that you have chosen is hardly exile. Yet the characters in *Born in Exile* are culturally as well as geographically out of place. Peak is never comfortable with his siblings’ lack of cultural aspirations, even if he eventually recognises ‘the homespun worth which their lives displayed’ (358).³ Even in Notting Hill, the Moxeys ‘had a very small circle [of friends], consisting chiefly of intellectual inferiors’ (104). And, in time, Peak’s elitist criticism of populist democracy, a foreshadowing of Charles Masterman’s despair of an ‘abyss’ that was not so much poor materially as poor in spirit, rubs off on Sidwell Warricombe, who writes from London to her friend Sylvia Moorhouse: ‘Here is materialism sinking into brutal immorality, and high social rank degrading itself by intimacy with the corrupt vulgar’ (269).

The implication is that ‘home’ is not made up of material goods – pianos, bicycles, clocks (although, in Gissing’s world, books are an exception to this rule) – but of closeness to nature (‘the golden gorse in *our* road’) and ‘everything [...] judged by the brain-standard’ (268, 237). Hence, Marcella Moxey’s disappointment to discover that the artist, Agatha Walworth, whose sculpture of a female head she has admired at the Royal Academy, proves not to be at all bohemian, but lives in a large, very ‘respectable’ house where the conversation is on a par with ‘the regulation tea-cup’ (237).

The book sustains a dialogue between city and country, metropolitan and provincial society, through the migration not only of Peak from London to Exeter, but also, more temporarily, of the Warricombes to London, and of Marcella, briefly to Devon, and then to the countryside near Kingsmill. The fictional Twybridge and Kingsmill and the real St Helens, where Peak eventually finds another dead-end job, are all seats of prosperous but monolithic provincial industrialism (where ‘provincial’ deserves its dismissive connotations).

The countryside around Kingsmill proves just as degraded as the town, not only the ‘sordid pasture, degenerate village’ (36) through which Peak has to walk before he can find refreshing rural scenery, but also its denizens, personified by the drunken carter who beats his horse, abuses Marcella, and leaves her by the roadside, fatally injured.

London contains the extremes of fashion, intellect and vulgarity, and seemingly has no natural environment: none of the principal characters venture into the country on walks from their homes in Peckham, Staple Inn (Holborn), or Notting Hill (although Peak first discovers Peckham when he walks one day from his current lodgings ‘in the more open part of Bermondsey’ [101], an excursion from an inner London suburb into what, in 1880, was still ‘outer suburban’ but definitely no longer countryside).⁴ Yet London is also internally compartmentalised. Peak’s daily routine lies to the south-east, in Peckham and Rotherhithe, while the Moxeys are ensconced in Notting Hill with excursions to Sussex Square (Bayswater) and Chiswick (Figure 1).⁵ East London north of the Thames merits only two passing references: Peak’s intolerably common uncle, Andrew, has a coffee-shop in Dalston, and the ludicrous Malkin has once engaged in debate with a parson on Mile-end Waste in front of a crowd of East End costermongers. More importantly, nobody visits anywhere close to the heart of the City. Peak defends the West End over the City, challenging Sidwell’s reading of Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853), where Lucy Snowe ‘love[s] the city far better. The city seems so much more in earnest: its business, its rush, its roar, are such serious things, sight, and sounds. [...] At the West End you may be amused, but in the city you are deeply excited’ (57-8). For Peak, the West End ‘includes much that is despicable, but it means also the best results of civilisation. The City is hateful to me. [...] With myriad voices the City bellows its brutal scorn of everything but material advantage’ (217). Where does Peak’s unforgiving hatred of the City originate, especially given his apparent willingness to condone the materialism that polices entry to West End salons and soirées? He seems to have

been treated benignly by the captains of industry he encounters outside London – Sir Job Whitelaw (and his widow) and Mr Moxey (Christian’s uncle). He has a deep-rooted antipathy to petty business, in the shape of Andrew Peak’s café and his siblings’ shopkeeping, but he has no contact with the City of London. His closest friend, Earwaker, occupies that ‘third London’ (Moretti 115–18) of Inns of Court that lies between West End and City. His only knowledge of the West End is through the Moxeys. By comparison, Gissing himself, for all his whinging about his social isolation in London, had acquired numerous acquaintances in the West End, such as the Harrisons, the Lushingtons, the Fennessys, and Edith Sichel, and was a frequent attender at art galleries and concerts. He does not send Peak to any of these gatherings, but Peak is nevertheless aware of them.

There are, however, numerous passing references to West End institutions: the Moxeys visit the Royal Academy (Piccadilly); Buckland Warricombe suggests that his younger sister might enrol at Bedford College (then in York Place, Baker Street); Janet Moxey (Christian’s cousin) receives her medical training at the Women’s Medical School (only recently established on Hunter Street, Bloomsbury); there is a meeting of almost all the more affluent characters at a matinee in the Vaudeville Theatre (Strand); Peak and Buckland meet in the British Museum; Buckland works in the Houses of Parliament; and both Christian Moxey and Godwin Peak study at the School of Mines (South Kensington). Malkin, the most migratory of characters, credited with trips to France, America and New Zealand, and with lodgings in Fulham and Kilburn, also stays at two of London’s grandest hotels: the Inns of Court Hotel, between Holborn and Lincoln’s Inn Fields, and the Charing Cross Hotel.

London’s railway connections constitute an essential thread through the novel. Euston, Paddington, Victoria and Holborn Viaduct are all mentioned by name as origin or destination for journeys to or from Twybridge, Bristol, Dieppe and Wrotham. Waterloo is not mentioned by name, but can be inferred from Christian Moxey’s visit to Bournemouth and

from Peak meeting Buckland at the ‘South-Western station’ in Exeter [Queen Street, now Exeter Central]. Earwaker and Peak return by train from Notting Hill to Farringdon Street, presumably by Metropolitan Railway [today’s Circle Line] and Peak continues on from Farringdon to Peckham Rye [London, Chatham & Dover Railway]. Both this journey and Peak’s daily commute from Peckham Rye to Rotherhithe by East London Railway were easy to make in the 1880s, but impossible for most of the twentieth century, prior to recent re-openings of closed stretches of line.

From Exeter, Peak uses the railway to access Budleigh Salterton by way of Exmouth; but compared to London, Exeter is drenched in countryside. Peak takes numerous and lengthy walks into rural Devon, which, much as in Gissing’s own letters and diary entries, and, a decade later, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903), is an idyllic landscape where working people are strangely absent.

II

Peak’s ‘exile’ is a consequence of his aspirations. His elder sister and younger brother are happy to settle down in Twybridge close to their widowed mother. His sister marries a draper’s assistant and, in the fullness of time, is ‘happy in her husband, her children, and a flourishing business’ (358). His brother uses his newly purchased bicycle as ‘a source of distinction’ and ‘a means of displaying himself before shopkeepers’ daughters’, and devotes his intellectual abilities to ‘deciphering cryptograms’ in ‘several weekly papers of unpromising title’ (49). But he, too, is soon ‘making money’ as a seedsman, and ‘enjoyed distinction among the shopkeeping community’ (358). Peak himself finds companionship with Mr Gunnery, a radical auto-didact whose cabinets of scientific instruments and specimens Peak inherits. Even the much more wealthy, semi-outsider, Christian Moxey, finds that his uncle’s ‘large, plain house, uncomfortably like an “institution” of some kind’, situated next door to ‘ill-scented, but lucrative’ works with ‘reeking chimneys’, offers ‘the

atmosphere of a comfortable home' (30–1, 68). He eventually abandons London for domestic life with his cousin, Janet, in a house in Kingsmill. Peak's mother keeps house herself – she has no servant – in 'a very small house in a monotonous little street' where he has to share a garret-bedroom with his brother and 'loathed the penurious simplicity to which his life was condemned' (31, 40). The only occasion on which Peak 'felt that it was good to have a home, however simple' is when his mother 'tended him with all motherly care' after he had walked the last twenty-five miles home from Kingsmill (47). When her children leave home Mrs Peak moves to live with her sister in a house (with 'a sitting-room which smelt of lavender') adjoining the latter's millinery shop (243). There is plenty of scope to be at home among provincial industrialism, but Peak spurns the opportunity. His mother blames his restlessness on his father, always wanting something more, but not knowing what it was he wanted (358).

Peak's time at Whitelaw College marks the beginning of his 'homelessness'.

Ostracised by most of his fellow-students, partly on account of his arrogance but mostly because of his relative poverty – he is the brainy but poor scholarship student surrounded by the sons of successful businessmen and minor gentry – he found himself deprived of 'the comforts of home':

His lodgings were in a very ugly street in the ugliest outskirts of the town; he had to take a long walk through desolate districts (brick-yard, sordid pasture, degenerate village) before he could refresh his eyes with the rural scenery which was so great a joy to him as almost to be a necessity. The immediate vicinage offered nothing but monotone of grimy, lower middle-class dwellings, occasionally relieved by a public house. He occupied two rooms, not unreasonably clean, and was seldom disturbed by the attentions of his landlady. (36)

Yet, as he sat in his 'murky sitting-room' (42), he *was* disturbed by his landlady's son, 'a lank youth of the clerk species' who spent the evenings at the piano, practising 'two or three

hymnal melodies popularised by American evangelists' (38). This is the provincial equivalent of Charles Masterman's 'abyss' – not a slum, but a product of urban degeneration, content in its lack of culture or any aspiration to a higher life, sordid, grimy, dull. Geographically, it manages to be remotely suburban, 'in the ugliest outskirts', yet still far from real countryside, neither urban nor rural. It contrasts with his later lodgings in Exeter (and with Gissing's own initial assessment of his rooms in Prospect Park), which manage to be both urban and rural at the same time.

Socially, Peak's time at Whitelaw had alienated him from his home: 'he was no longer fit for Twybridge' (40). Geographically, Kingsmill prepared him for his first six years in London, where he occupied a succession of squalid lodgings, shifting:

from quarter to quarter, from house to house, driven away each time by the hateful contact of vulgarity in every form, – by foulness and dishonesty, by lying, slandering, quarrelling, by drunkenness, by brutal vice, – by all abominations that distinguish the lodging-letter of the metropolis. Obligated to practise extreme economy, he could not take refuge among self-respecting people, or at all events had no luck in endeavouring to find such among the poorer working-class. To a man of Godwin's idiosyncrasy the London poor were of necessity abominable, and it anguished him to be forced to live among them. (101)

This narrative reflects Gissing's own experience as a lodger during his first five years in London in the late 1870s and early 1880s, where each new lodging, in Colville Place, Gower Place, Huntley Street, Edward Street, Hanover Street, Wornington Road, Dorchester Place, Oakley Crescent, Milton Street and Rutland Street, variously chosen for their cheapness but also their centrality, their suburban respectability or their accessibility to Gissing's pupils, soon attracted his vitriolic condemnation. Some of these addresses had already found their way into his fiction, for example, in *Workers in the Dawn* (1880), the Pettindunds' lodging

house in Gower Place, occupied by Arthur Golding and his colleague Mark Challenger, and from which the pregnant Carrie Mitchell is first expelled and then, with her baby, denied entry.

Yet Peak had first imagined that lodging would denote freedom. He ‘found it difficult to understand Moxey’s yearning for domesticity, all his own impulses leading towards quite a contrary ideal. To him, life in London lodgings made rich promise; that indeed would be freedom, and full of all manner of high possibilities!’ (68). This is the fantasy that Gissing imagines in his short story, ‘The Prize Lodger’ (1896) – the comfortably-off bachelor who moves from lodging to lodging, from ideal landlady to ideal landlady. It is also the fantasy that Ryecroft enjoys in his country cottage just outside Exeter, where his every need is satisfied by his silent but ever-attentive housekeeper, and it is the fantasy that Peak himself enjoys, first in his lodgings in Peckham Rye and then in Longbrook Street, Exeter.

Peak had found his Peckham lodgings by chance, attracted by a herbalist’s shop window, and discovering that the herbalist was ‘a middle-aged man of bright intelligence and more reading than could be expected’ (101), who mentioned he had ‘two superfluous chambers’ to rent. Peak moves into a ‘comfortable sitting room’, which he makes into a home by the addition of his personal belongings: ‘though there were no pictures, sundry ornaments here and there made strong denial of lodging-house affinity. It was at once laboratory, study, and dwelling-room. Two large cabinets [the cabinets inherited from Mr Gunnery], something the worse for transportation, alone formed a link between this abode and the old home at Twybridge. [...] On door-pegs hung a knapsack, a botanist’s vasculum, and a geologist’s wallet’ (100).

He has ‘no common landlady’: the herbalist’s wife turned out to be ‘a Frenchwoman of very pleasing appearance; she spoke fluent French-English, anything but disagreeable to an ear constantly tormented by the London vernacular’, and her virtues included ‘cleanliness,

neatness, good taste'; 'her cooking seemed to the lodger of incredible perfection, and the infinite goodwill with which he was tended made strange contrast with the base usage he had commonly experienced' (101). When Peak arrives home late one evening he finds supper waiting for him on a round table:

The cloth was spotless, the utensils tasteful and carefully disposed. In a bowl lay an appetising salad, ready for mingling; a fragment of Camembert cheese was relieved upon a setting of green leafage; a bottle of ale, with adjacent corkscrew, stood beside the plate; the very loaf seemed to come from no ordinary baker's, or was made to look better than its kin by the fringed white cloth in which it nestled. (100)

These are lodgings that are not lodgings, in London but not of London. In fact, they are not 'of' anywhere in the real world. This is a 'home' that can never have existed outside its author's wishful thinking.

When Peak abandons these ideal lodgings after more than four years, and moves to Exeter, he finds another accommodating landlady, now combined with an idyllic situation – a real location that Gissing was obviously familiar with from his own walks around the town:

In a by-way which declines from the main thoroughfare of Exeter, and bears the name of Longbrook Street, is a row of small houses placed above long strips of sloping garden. [...] The little terrace may be regarded as urban or rural, according to the tastes and occasions of those who dwell there. In one direction, a walk of five minutes will conduct to the middle of High Street, and in the other it takes scarcely longer to reach the open country. (167)

Peak takes advantage of this location to walk 'in every direction', 'rambling' to 'sleepy little towns', to the coast or to the margins of Dartmoor (168). Where his lodgings in Kingsmill had been neither urban nor rural, and remote from the attractions of either, these lodgings combine the best of both worlds. In fact, the natural world inhabits the lodgings. Even

without leaving his sitting-room, he could enjoy the view ‘over the opposite houses to Northernhay, the hill where once stood Rougemont Castle, its wooded declivities now fashioned into a public garden’ (181).

As to his rooms on the upper floor of what Gissing labels as a ‘cottage’ (167), another indicator of author’s and character’s attachment to what is really a terraced house:

Sitting-room and bedchamber, furnished with homely comfort, answered to his bachelor needs, and would allow of his receiving without embarrassment any visitor whom fortune might send him. Of quietness he was assured, for a widow and her son, alike remarkable for sobriety of demeanour, were the only persons who shared the house with him. (167)

Peak had brought his books, microscope, and a few other scientific implements; but he had sent his cabinets back to his mother’s in Twybridge. His landlady, Mrs Roots, goes about her housework ‘so tranquilly’ that he ‘seldom heard anything except the voice of the cuckoo-clock, a pleasant sound to him’ (167). She is both zealous and respectful in waiting on his every need. Indeed, there were times when the cosiness of Peak’s situation rivalled Ryecroft’s teatime ritual. For Ryecroft, settled in his retirement cottage outside Exeter, teatime is when ‘one is *at home* in quite another than the worldly sense’ and ‘[w]here tea is really a meal [...] it is – again in the true sense – the *homeliest* meal of the day’ (237-8, emphasis in original). Likewise for Peak:

The cuckoo clock in Mrs. Roots’s kitchen had just struck three. [...] Peak was in a mood to enjoy the crackling fire; he settled himself with a book in his easy-chair, and thought with pleasure of two hours’ reading, before the appearance of the homely teapot. (283)⁶

From Buckland Warricombe’s perspective, however, arriving to denounce Peak’s hypocrisy as a charlatan Christian, ‘[s]omething of disdain came into his eyes as he approached the row

of insignificant houses' and he had to remember he was 'in a little house, with thin partitions' (304–5).

Even for Peak, while his immediate physical circumstances could hardly be bettered, Exeter as a town proved anything but home. He had imagined it would be easy to make friends in a provincial town like Exeter, but quickly realises that, despite his friendship with the locally respected Warricombes, he remains isolated 'amid this community of English folk': 'Now, as on the day of his arrival, he was an alien – a lodger' (245). The 'community of English folk' was not only strictly class-conscious – and he belonged 'to no class whatever', as 'unclassed' as the protagonists of *The Unclassed* (1884) or as Gissing himself – but also hypocritical in belief and behaviour, exemplified by the policeman who reprimands children for playing games in the street on a Sunday. Peak discovers the truth that 'communities' (whether of the cultural elite in London's West End or of the comfortably provincial in Exeter) are more often exclusionary and segregationist than welcoming of outsiders. 'Community', as Raymond Williams noted, is always treated positively (1983: 76), yet 'active community' most frequently involves combining to gain economic and political rights, or, less politically radical, 'the mutuality of the oppressed' or 'the mutuality of people living at the edges or in the margins of a generally oppressive system' (1975: 131). Peak's dilemma is that none of his friends share his sense of oppression and marginalisation sufficiently to unite in a community of resistance or self-interested action, nor are they geographically sufficiently close-knit.

Peak seems to attract alienation. He is not so much 'born in exile' as 'a born outsider'. Peak individualises but also geographically universalises his sense of alienation:

What else had he ever been, since boyhood? A lodger in Kingsmill, a lodger in London, a lodger in Exeter. Nay, even as a boy he could scarcely have been said to

'live at home', for from the dawn of conscious intelligence he felt himself out of place among familiar things and people, at issue with prevalent opinions. (245)

Recent discussions of literary lodgings by Emily Cuming and Molly Boggs highlight the roles of scheming and domineering landladies, but also the contingency of social relations among diverse lodgers, and their mobility between lodgings and 'a counter-sphere of cafés, pubs and the sitting rooms of family friends' (Cuming: 74). By contrast, Peak eschews situations where he might be forced to mix with other lodgers. He chooses isolation. Even in the Warricombes' sitting room he is conscious that he is not 'at home'.

III

In conventional wisdom, home is associated with family. Before moving to Exeter, Peak meets Buckland in London. Buckland is working as assistant to an MP and has rooms 'not far from the Houses of Parliament'. Buckland has not bothered to make the rooms his own, 'to surround himself with evidences of taste'. They are simply a dwelling of 'commonplace comfort'. Anticipating Ryecroft's condemnation of 'flat-inhabiting nomads' (260) and Forster's 'civilization of luggage' (128), Buckland thinks of his rooms as:

Nothing but a *pied-a-terre*. I have been here three or four years, but I don't think of it as a home. I suppose I shall settle somewhere before long: yet, on the whole, what does it matter where one lives? There's something in the atmosphere of our time that makes one indisposed to strike roots in the old way. Who knows how long there'll be such a thing as real property? We are getting to think of ourselves as lodgers; it's as well to be indifferent about a notice to quit. (163)

Peak sides with tradition: 'Many people would still make a good fight for the old homes.' Buckland half-agrees: 'Yes; I daresay I should myself, if I were a family man. A wife and children are strong persuasions to conservatism. In those who have anything, that's to say.' At

the end of the novel, having failed to impress the progressive feminist-minded Sylvia Moorhouse, Buckland is precipitously married off by his creator to the ‘second daughter’ of a (now dead) dealer in hides, tallow ‘and that kind of thing’. She is actively engaged in humanitarian work in the East End and the author of a book on social questions, but having ‘nothing to do with creeds and dogmas’. However, her most significant attribute is that she owns property worth £3–4,000 per annum (381–2). So much for the abolition of real property!

Through all this restlessness, one character makes an ideal home without resort to family and which, as Figure 1 demonstrates, constitutes the geographical central place in the novel. John Edward Earwaker, who, at Whitelaw College, had restricted Peak to runner-up in the prizes for Poem and Essay, came from just as humble a background as Peak, but achieves success as literary editor of a serious weekly review. Like Peak, he could have found himself ‘unclassed’, wrenched from his modest origins, yet he remains close to, and supportive of his elderly parents in Kingsmill, ensuring that, in their old age, ‘they lacked no comfort’ (409). He also remains, and intends to remain, at the same address from the beginning of ‘Part the Second’ until the end (Part the Seventh) of the novel – a suite of rooms in Staple Inn, Holborn. Staple Inn offered ‘chambers’, initially to members of the legal profession but latterly to all types of ‘professional’ man. It was no stranger to fiction, featuring in at least three of Dickens’ major works. In *Bleak House* (1853), Snagsby loved to walk in Staple Inn, where he ‘observe[d] how countrified the sparrows and the leaves are’ (1996: 145). In an essay on ‘Chambers’ in *The Uncommercial Traveller* (1861), Staple Inn is listed among a ‘shabby crew’ of chambers, assessed for ‘the right kind of loneliness’ and ‘the accommodations of Solitude. Closeness, and Darkness’ (2014: 183–4). And in *Edwin Drood* (1870), Staple Inn accommodates the chambers of both Mr Grewgious and Neville Landless, who occupies ‘some attic rooms in a corner’:

An air of retreat and solitude hung about the rooms, and about their inhabitant. He was much worn, and so were they. [...] Yet the sunlight shone in at the ugly garret-window, which had a penthouse to itself thrust out among the tiles; and on the cracked and smoke-blackened parapet beyond, some of the deluded sparrows of the place rheumatically hopped, like little feathered cripples who had left their crutches in their nests[.] (1972: 152)

Staple Inn offers solitude, convalescence and a uniquely urban form of nature, a combination of attributes that would have appealed to Gissing and should have appealed to Peak if he had not been so antagonistic to the London beyond its walls. When Earwaker moves in, in 1882, ‘he surrounded himself with plain furniture and many books’ (85), much like Landless. But a few years later, following his appointment as literary editor of a weekly review, he decides that he will ‘dwell here for the rest of my life’ and fashions a much more welcoming place:

One must have a homestead, and this shall be mine; here I have set up my penates [household gods]. It's a portion of space, you know; and what more can be said of Longleat or Chatsworth? [...] There's an atmosphere in the old Inns that pleases me. The new flats are insufferable. How can one live sandwiched between a music-hall singer and a female politician? For lodgings of any kind no sane man had ever a word of approval. Reflecting on all these things, I have established myself in perpetuity. (345)

To this end, he had acquired new upholstery, chairs, tables, bookcases, pictures and ornaments, the walls had been ‘pleasantly papered’ and the ceiling painted white. ‘The little vestibule had somehow put off its dinginess’ and there was ‘an unwontedly brilliant light from the sitting-room’. Peak is relieved that Earwaker’s ‘prosperity shows itself in this region of bachelordom’ rather than married and in ‘a comfortable house’ (363).

Earwaker is long-suffering host to repeated visits by Malkin, who usually stays into the early hours of the morning. But his role as host is confined to providing a space for male conversation. Food is rarely consumed in his rooms. He and his friends go out to dinner parties or eat in restaurants, or they return to continue conversation after eating elsewhere. His is an undomesticated home. When women visit, he has to ‘convert’ his study into a drawing-room in order to offer them tea and cake (413). By contrast, Christian Moxey and his sister, Marcella, repeatedly perform the role of hosts inviting friends to dinner parties in their Notting Hill house, but another West End dwelling fails as ‘home’ because of the vulgarity of its occupant and her choice of décor. The first signs that the widowed Constance Palmer does not feel for Christian Moxey as he feels for her are the way in which she has redecorated her home in Sussex Square: ‘There was more display, a richer profusion of ornaments, not in the best taste. The old pictures had given place to showily-framed daubs of the most popular school’ and there was a photograph of a famous jockey displayed on a table (337).

Earwaker’s situation, including his disdain for ‘the new flats’, reflects Gissing’s own preferences, expressed in a letter to Eduard Bertz, written soon after his move to Prospect Park (and soon after his second marriage), just as he was completing the first of the three volumes of *Born in Exile*:

This matter of a dwelling-place is very troublesome for people in our position; we are for ever at the mercy of ignoble creatures, & are forced to live in their hateful proximity. Surely there ought to be *Colleges* for unmarried intellectual men (or even for married of small means,) where we could dwell much as students do at the University. [...] The life of a Fellow at Oxford or Cambridge is, I should think, almost ideal. He has his man-servant, his meals either in private or at the public table, an

atmosphere of culture & peace. Who will advocate 'Literary Homes'? (Letters 4: 288)

Finally, what of the Warricombe family seat, situated on Old Tiverton Road, just outside Exeter to the north-east? When Peak first sets eyes on it, he sees an ideal home: 'The site was a good one [...] The house itself seemed to be old, but after all was not very large [...] A spot of exquisite retirement: happy who lived here in security from the struggle of life!' (118–19). From the garden there are views over the Exe valley to Haldon and down the estuary to the sea. The interior includes a fernery, Mr Warricombe's study containing an enviable library and 'two elaborate microscopes', a bedroom of 'delicious fragrance', exquisitely decorated with water-colour views of Devon and Cornwall, and an octagonal 'glass-house' on the roof (134–41). Yet even this idyll cannot last for ever. Mr Warricombe explains that 'the view is in a measure spoilt by the growth of the city. A few years ago, none of those ugly little houses stood in the mid-distance. A few years hence, I fear, there will be much more to complain of' (128). This not only anticipates later critiques of urbanisation, such as Forster's in *Howards End* (7, 40, 92, 289–90), but is also a private joke on Gissing's part, since the nearest of 'those ugly little houses' visible from the site of Warricombe's villa would have included Gissing's own residence in Prospect Park, a street laid out between 1878 and 1884, the year in which Peak's visit to Exeter is set. And, in time, the house proves a prison as much as an idyll for Sidwell, who dare not offend her parents. It is probably an accidental irony, appreciated more in hindsight than by readers in 1892, but it is worth noting that Sidwell's declaration to Sylvia – 'I am bound to a certain sphere of life' – is made in the glass-house which she now uses as her 'retreat' (400, 403). 'Glass-house', as well as its obvious meanings as observatory and conservatory, also acquired a secondary and, in time, popular meaning as a place of detention, a military prison. Aldershot prison, also known as the Detention Barracks, erected in 1870, had a glazed roof, thereafter giving its nickname as

the Glasshouse to prisons more generally. Whether or not Gissing had this in mind when he wrote *Born in Exile*, there is no doubting that for Sidwell, Exeter and her family home was indeed a prison.

When Peak leaves Exeter, he goes first to ‘a cheap and obscure lodging’ (357) in Bristol. When he visits London he stays in ‘a small hotel in Paddington’ (359) rather than with any of his friends; and in St Helen’s he is in lodgings which, from the neighbourhood in which they are set, mark a return to his student lodgings in Kingsmill. Blessed with Marcella’s bequest, he declares as a virtue that he will have ‘no fixed abode’, but live in hotels and boarding-houses with ‘cosmopolitan people’ (396) – the moneyed unclassed. This is a strategy of self-imposed exile, deliberate homelessness. Truly he needed the benefit of Ryecroft’s addition to the Litany:

For all inhabitants of great towns, and especially for all such as dwell in lodgings, boarding-houses, flats, or any other sordid substitute for home which need or foolishness may have contrived. (8)

Ultimately, Peak’s delusion of need and denial of foolishness are exorcised by Ryecroft’s retirement home: ‘My house is perfect’ (6). Sound in fabric, exquisitely quiet, beautiful but also comfortable, just large enough, and with the same view as Warricombe’s, ‘across the valley of the Exe to Haldon’ (x). Peak is restless and homeless to the end; Ryecroft enjoys his home at last, but we should also recall that his home outlasts him.

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Notes

¹ Calculated from references in Gissing's letters and, from the end of 1887, entries in his diary. Other biographical details are derived from Coustillas (2011–12) and Delany (2008).

² Newspaper references are from *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post*, online in British Library Newspapers Part I. 1800–1900, and from the *Exeter & Plymouth Gazette*, online in British Newspaper Archive. For further details of Gissing's time in Exeter, see Dennis (2019–20).

³ References to *Born in Exile* are to the Everyman edition (1993), edited by David Grylls.

⁴ Still the best description of suburban south London in this period is Dyos's (1961) pioneering study of the growth of Camberwell.

⁵ I am grateful to Miles Irving of UCL Geography Drawing Office for producing the map.

⁶ Note that even in 'his murky sitting room' in Kingsmill, his 'landlady came in bearing the tea-pot' (42), though we are not told whether his French landlady in Peckham had mastered the British tea ritual!