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ABBREVIATIONS

BWEA	British Women's Emigration Association
CIL	Colonial Intelligence League
CORB	Children's Overseas Reception Board
CRO	Commonwealth Relations Office
GFS	Girls' Friendly Society
IODE	Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire
NAL	National Association of Landswomen
NFWI	National Federation of Women's Institutes
OSC	Oversea Settlement Committee
OSD	Oversea Settlement Department
SACS	South African Colonisation Society
SOSBW	Society for the Oversea Settlement of British Women
TSA	Travellers' Aid Society
VAD	Voluntary Aid Detachment
WFGA	Women's Farm and Garden Association
WFGU	Women's Farm and Garden Union
WLA	Women's Land Army
WMOAS	Women's Migration and Oversea Appointments Society
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In 1917, the *Daily Mirror* proclaimed that Britain was facing an ostensible new crisis: one million surplus women.¹ Following the First World War, the British government expressed concerns that Britain's reduced male population would leave too many women single, making them a burden on the state. While letters to the editor advocated polygamy or the importation of men as solutions for these would-be spinsters, the British government decided on a policy of government-controlled overseas migration.² This book examines the work of the Society for the Oversea Settlement of British Women (SOSBW) and its efforts to migrate Britain's 'redundant' female population to the dominions between 1919 and 1964. The SOSBW was comprised of three migration societies: the South African Colonisation Society (SACS), the British Women's Emigration Association (BWEA), and the Colonial Intelligence League (CIL), volunteer societies that counselled, nominated, and facilitated the movement of women from Britain to various overseas locations. Their amalgamation was envisioned by government as an important step in bringing female emigration under government control, thus reducing the role of philanthropic societies in migration work after the First World War.

The role of the SOSBW has often been overlooked in migration history due to the seemingly minor role the Society played in moving women from Britain to the empire following the end of hostilities in 1918.³ The creation of the SOSBW was part of a broader effort by

government to ease the transition from a wartime to a peacetime economy, but with the specific task of offering valuable advice about the nature of and logistical means for the transportation of women to the former white settler colonies to meet the dominions' growing demand for domestic servants.⁴ The creation of the SOSBW, first conceptualised in 1917, was part of an imperial strategy to strengthen the bonds of empire through the exploitation of women's labour, but also through imperial marriages. While there was a surplus of women in Britain, the disproportionate number of men in Australia and Canada offered a ready market for imperial connections that would not only reduce Britain's gender imbalance and the potential drain on financial resources necessary to support so many unwed women, but would also supply the dominions with the *best* British women to help stabilise populations, particularly in rural areas that were suffering from outmigration resultant from industrialisation and urbanisation.⁵

While the SOSBW initially sought to follow its government mandate, it quickly realised that the plans for population redistribution were both undesirable and unsustainable. This study argues that although the migration of women to the empire was an imperative imperialist act wherein women were valued for their labour and their service to the empire, organisers like Gladys Pott (Chairman of the Executive Committee), Meriel Talbot (Publicity Officer), Edith Thompson (Chairman of the Executive), and Countess Bessborough (President) envisioned a pro-women, pro-imperialist scheme that would assist middle-class women in finding employment overseas. The SOSBW was formed as a migration society, but over the years of its operations it transformed itself into a labour exchange service that connected women with professional employment opportunities that simultaneously served imperial needs and promoted women's economic advancement. This organisational history of the SOSBW contextualises the work carried out by the Society by examining the domestic and imperial relationships that were essential to the Society's work from 1919 until it concluded its operations in 1964. Moreover, understanding the varied backgrounds and interests that its members brought to the SOSBW and the continuing importance of women's relationships in migration work, even for a semi-governmental organisation, will help contextualise why the SOSBW survived for so long.

The SOSBW was reliant on a number of foreign and domestic networks, without which it would not have been able to succeed.

Little work has been done on the organisational history of the SOSBW, and most studies fail to fully examine its leaders' adaptability and ingenuity when faced with potential dismissal. With few exceptions, most studies of the SOSBW focus on what it failed to accomplish, notably its failure to precipitate the large-scale migration of women from Britain in the years after the First World War. Lisa Chilton provides an excellent overview of the SOSBW's work in Canada and Australia, but dedicates only a few pages to the Society's operations, and while Rebecca Mancuso's work fits the Society's work into the broader framework of Canadian immigration policies, her focus is on the role of Canadian women who worked with Canada's immigration bureaucracy during the interwar years.⁶ Paula Hamilton and B. W. Higman argue that the British government was most interested in female migration as part of the imperial project—a way to maintain its 'preferred' export arrangements with the dominions, while the SOSBW used training programmes and propaganda for self-promotion.⁷ Although the Society did engage in self-promotion, its policies and practices evolved continually and the SOSBW adopted policies it believed would assist women workers without affecting imperial relations in ways that were ruinous to the empire.

The most concentrated work on the SOSBW comes from a few studies that have broadened our understanding of the women organisers, but which stop short of investigating the organisation as a whole. G. F. Plant offers a short account of the formation of the SOSBW, paying specific attention to the voluntary migration societies that came before it, and that amalgamated in 1919 to create the new Society.⁸ Brian Blakely focuses on the Society's limited success, which he blames on the control exerted by the dominions coupled with the Society's inability to ingratiate itself with domestic volunteer migration organisations. Ultimately, Blakely argues that the SOSBW had little control over migration and that its failure was all but complete by the Great Depression.⁹ Jean P. Smith's recent study of the Women's Branch of the Commonwealth Relations Office refutes Blakely's earlier claim and argues that the SOSBW's successes are best understood when studied holistically. Smith accentuates the remarkable consistency in the Society's leadership and work over its forty-five-year history, but her primary focus is on the years after the Second World War, filling a notable gap in the historiography.¹⁰ My study offers a re-evaluation of the Society's activities from 1919 to 1964 to demonstrate that not only did its migration work continue after 1939, but its move towards a labour exchange system occurred earlier than

historians have suggested, and the Society was more successful over the course of its tenure than has been previously acknowledged.

By all statistical accounts, the scheme was largely considered a failure by 1925 and the British government wondered what, if anything, the SOSBW contributed to alleviating the serious economic challenges facing the nation. The successes and failures of the SOSBW, however, cannot simply be evaluated based on the number of women migrated, which admittedly remained quite small after 1925. I argue that the Society's greatest success was its leaders' ability to create an international network of women, divided by organisations and differing priorities, and its aptitude for appropriating the services of these often conflicting and competing groups in the pursuit of professional work opportunities for women overseas. Even in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges, including the Great Depression and the Second World War, the SOSBW was able to continually reinvent itself in an effort to respond to the challenges of the day. Its leadership not only navigated the difficult politics of oscillating policies that came with changes in government both at home and abroad, but was also able to manage the key domestic groups that were often at odds with an SOSBW Executive that was accused of manipulating, isolating, and intimidating the very groups it relied on.

This study focuses on the women who directed and carried out the various mandates handed down to the SOSBW by the British government. It seeks to understand how organisers envisioned the Society, what they hoped to accomplish, and the extent to which the Society was responding to conditions beyond their control or directing policy through specific actions and decisions. The SOSBW was certainly responsive to post-war unemployment, specifically the problem of women's post-war employment, and aimed to reduce the number of unemployed, single, middle-class women in Britain through emigration.¹¹ Yet, its initial focus was not to move women into domestic service, although it accepted that that was where many women were likely to end up; rather, it pursued the employment of women in agriculture as part of a broader effort to revitalise rural areas, but also as a means by which to create new work opportunities that would meet dominion labour needs without relegating women to the domestic sphere.¹² The dominions were initially receptive to the employment of women in agriculture, if only because of lingering uncertainty about the return of male labourers and the pressing need to stabilise the agricultural sector. Once demobilisation was underway, however, the dominions insisted on the gendered

division of labour: men for work in agriculture and women for work in domestic service.¹³ Accepting these conditions and working within the parameters set by the dominions would have been the easiest path forward, but the three societies who made up the SOSBW decided to push for the employment of female agricultural workers, a position that it maintained throughout its existence. The three groups did not share a common vision for what women's role in agriculture should be, but they understood the need to draft a plan that would distinguish the SOSBW from other migration groups and that was sustainable in the long term. In spite of remonstrations from dominion officials, the SOSBW Executive and Council operated on the assumption that it knew best how to meet the labour needs of the dominions and could do so in a way that was simultaneously supportive of women's work and helpful in alleviating unemployment at home.¹⁴

To this end, the SOSBW established working relationships with domestic women's groups in Britain that would help ensure the feasibility of the scheme. These relationships were not always fruitful or cooperative, but they demonstrate the interconnectivity of women's work in the early years of the twentieth century.¹⁵ On agricultural matters, the SOSBW sought the assistance of various groups, including the Women's Land Army (WLA), National Association of Landswomen (NAL), and Women's Farm and Garden Union (WFGU), as well as various farmers' unions and associations, but most notably it worked through the National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI), a relationship that the Society worked diligently to develop and maintain. With the assistance of the NFWI, the SOSBW initiated new training and education programmes, called attention to the deficiencies in women's agricultural education, and worked to elevate women's roles in the agricultural industry and farming communities. These initiatives helped to raise the status of women farmers in Britain by supporting new employment initiatives for women who wanted to pursue farming as a career in the dominions. Even when the British government pushed back against the migration of agriculturalists, male and female, after the Second World War, the SOSBW used labour exchange training programmes to help train women in Canada for work on the land.

Those who comprised the Executive and Council of the SOSBW were dedicated women striving to make an impact on women's employment and place in the imperial structure. They wanted access to power and to maintain whatever power they had secured through their

previous positions and in light of their new relationship with various government departments, most importantly the Oversea Settlement Committee (OSC). The SOSBW described its work as ‘serving two masters,’ referring to the British government and the SOSBW itself. The Society accepted its role as a quasi-governmental organisation, but this acceptance came from a desire for recognition, affiliation, funding, and access to the structures of power that would otherwise be beyond their reach. This is not to suggest that the relationship between the SOSBW and OSC was disingenuous; rather, it was a practical and necessary arrangement by which the Society could carry out its work. Over its years of operation, the SOSBW worked closely with the OSC, and with G.F. Plant in particular, and came to rely on his support for significant changes in the Society’s activities. This included support for training and education programmes, gender equality in migration policy, and the move away from emigrating domestic servants and towards the professionalisation of employment services through a system of labour exchange. Through Plant and the OSC, the Society also increasingly gained support in dealing with the dominions who wanted to exert greater control over immigration. Older priorities voiced by key imperialists like Leo Amery and Lord Milner, specifically regarding the migration of women to the empire to serve as domestic servants and wives and mothers, gave way to a more modern scheme that took into account the desires of women to secure employment on their own terms.¹⁶ As the dominions pulled away from British control, the relationship between the OSC and the SOSBW strengthened and the two became more equal in terms of their capacity to shape emigration strategies after the Second World War.

Despite its close relationship with the OSC, the Society always saw itself as grounded in its volunteer roots and worked to maintain its link to the volunteer movement. The Society gradually moved away from its position as the Women’s Branch of the OSC, if not officially then in spirit, preferring to describe itself as a volunteer society. The distinction may seem somewhat pedantic but is key to understanding the Society’s work and relationship with other organisations, as encapsulated in a broader understanding of ‘serving two masters.’ The two masters also refer to the divisions within the women’s movement and what responsibilities a women’s migration society had in furthering the economic advancement of women workers, while also serving patriarchal structures that sought to exploit women for the purpose of empire building.¹⁷

Immediately after its creation, the SOSBW came into conflict with women's groups who objected to the language of 'superfluous' or 'redundant' populations. Such criticisms were not confined to the Women's Branch of the Labour Party, but they were particularly vocal in their disparagements and refused to cooperate with the Society on labour matters. It was the Great Depression that brought a change in policy and the chance for the Society to reinvent itself. The move away from the rhetoric of surplus women was already underway by 1926, but it was the Depression that temporarily suspended overseas transports forcing the SOSBW to reconsider its partnerships and the viability of its work under the pressure of criticism at home. The Executive and Council unanimously decided on a change in policy, insisting on gender parity among migrants and rejecting the continued focus on domestic service work for women. This was in part a desire to avoid criticism at home, but was also due to the fact that the migration of women for domestic service did not produce the desired results. Employers in the dominions complained about the quality of untrained British domestic girls, and the number of women returning to Britain was on the rise by the mid-1930s.

The change in focus won approval from labour advocates, but alienated other groups like the Girls' Friendly Society (GFS), Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (IODE), and the Victoria League. Who to migrate and for what purpose was always a contentious issue, both within the SOSBW and with other groups involved in overseas migration. As noted above, the great success of the SOSBW was its ability to navigate these relationships, but that does not mean that the Society always achieved its preferred results. The GFS and the YWCA both had migration arrangements with the SOSBW at various points, but the move away from domestic servants, as well as the Society's desire to give greater weight on the Council to women's wartime organisations and professional organisations, diminished these relationships.

The deterioration of older relationships resulted in the establishment of new connections, particularly in Africa. These changes were precipitated by the Second World War that gradually slowed emigration from Britain to a trickle, but also brought the SOSBW into contact with agencies that helped it to expand its operational networks. The evacuation of Britons from German-targeted areas brought the SOSBW Executive into contact with the Children's Overseas Reception Board (CORB). Edith Thompson spent much of the war in South Africa with CORB

where she developed important connections with local groups that were fundamental to the growth in British migrations to the region once the war ended. Furthermore, because CORB was hastily put together to meet the immediate need of evacuating British school children, the SOSBW's overseas networks were helpful in the evaluation, transportation, and care of child migrants. While the work with CORB was short-lived due to the dangers of sea travel, the work helped the Society maintain key imperial connections over the course of the war and to establish new ones after the war ended.

The years following the Second World War saw migration efforts resume, but gave way to new trends. On the one hand, in the former white settler colonies the Society reduced its work by co-migrating emigrants through cooperation with local offices. On the other hand, movement between Britain and Africa increased, and although the Society attempted to move away from Victorian approaches to migration work—including gender and racial hierarchies and the segregation of the workforce along nationalist lines—these requirements were in higher demand in Africa and the Society found itself retreading old ground.¹⁸ As political turmoil forced migration work out of South Africa and into Rhodesia and Nyasaland, the Society became reliant on labour conditions in these areas and had to relinquish some of its independence to local authorities. Accountability to local officials and the Society's growing financial dependence on interest groups compromised its ability to self-regulate and self-correct, tying it to a strategy that was unsustainable and to a Federation that was unstable.

Equally important is that in the later years of the Society's operations, the increased involvement of older members of the organisation became paramount to its survival. The SOSBW had always relied on domestic and international partnerships to carry out its work, but after the Second World War women like Ladies Davson and Bessborough were instrumental in petitioning government for the continuation of funding and in navigating new markets that relied on old strategies and partnerships. The organisational structure of the SOSBW was remarkably consistent, while also being malleable, and although the women who guided policy from the position of chairman changed over the decades, the SOSBW's membership achieved a balance between those who wanted the Society to be an engine for reform and women's economic advancement and those who saw women as vital to the empire but who shied away from liberal reformism.

While researchers continue to express interest in the SOSBW, there has been much debate regarding the best parameters through which to evaluate the Society. Part of the problem is that the SOSBW has been looked at either as a government-run organisation or as an attempt by its organisers to exercise agency, either within government circles and with voluntary societies or to exert power over those migrating. This study seeks to bring together the component parts of these debates. Chapter 2 examines the foundational history of the SOSBW and demonstrates that the women who ran the SOSBW saw their efforts as divergent from—yet analogous to—migration schemes run by men, specifically the OSC. Certainly, these women believed that they had the skills and knowledge needed to meet the unique challenges of female migration, but they also recognised that their work was part of a broader network that included both male and female efforts. This chapter also demonstrates the centrality of the agricultural industry to the Society's work and the ways in which discussions about the gendered division of labour during and following the First World War came to shape future policies.

Chapter 3 analyses the marketing campaign developed by the SOSBW in its early years of operation. Resorting to intimidation and fear mongering, the Society under the leadership of Gladys Pott attempted to shame women into migrating, if not for their own good, then for the good of the country. The Society experienced early success, mainly migrating the domestic servants the dominions desperately wanted, but the campaign came under heavy criticism at home and resulted in a change in marketing tactics by 1925. The next chapter examines the impact of the Great Depression on overseas migration and demonstrates that while the Depression years greatly reduced the number of migrants leaving Britain after 1930, it had a positive impact on the SOSBW. The Society not only strengthened and expanded its cooperation with domestic groups through training and education programmes, but it also became more persistent in its aspiration to shape migration policies beyond its advisory role with the OSC.

By the outbreak of the Second World War, the SOSBW had moved away from migrating domestic servants to Canada and Australia, but it was the war itself that suspended migration activities. With migrations in abeyance, the Executive under the leadership of Lady Margot Davson and Edith Thompson worked to cultivate new markets in Southern Rhodesia and Kenya. Chapter 5 looks at the integration of labour markets in Africa that gave the Society new ideas about the interconnectivity

of the global labour market and offered the potential to change the unidirectional nature of its work. Although the war years provided new opportunities, they also revealed the transient nature of migration work. Chapter 6 examines the ways in which the Society tried to adjust to the changing nature of empire after 1945 and reveals a growing acceptance that its work was coming to an end, even as it fought to remain operational for as long as possible. The Society's end came quickly and expectedly, but the closure of its offices had less to do with the fundamentals of its work, and more to do with its inability to obtain the independence it had long sought after.

The SOSBW was comprised of a small group of women who were responsible for migrating a modest number of women over the course of its commission. Given the limited scale and scope of its work, it might seem that the SOSBW was a largely insignificant group, particularly when compared to the number of women who left Britain over this period by other means and with the assistance of competitor volunteer and private organisations. Although intersecting with the various government and dominion agencies responsible for migration from the metropole, this book focuses on the women who oversaw the Society's activities. Examining the experiences and activities of these women reveals the extent of their resolve to not only adapt to changing economic and political conditions in the tempestuous years that defined the first half of the twentieth century, but also their desire to exert greater influence over emigration policies both at home and abroad. Women insisted that they had knowledge and experience that was different from but not inferior to the men, to meaningfully shape emigration practices that would benefit all who had a stake in the imperial project. The SOSBW continued to espouse pro-imperial and pro-British ideals, even as dominion officials began doubting the concept of Anglo-superiority. Its organisers also resigned themselves to migrating domestic servants in order to receive government grants, even after they realised that the domestics they migrated disappointed immigration officials and employers and were ultimately detrimental to the future of migration work. Nevertheless, the women of the SOSBW proved that they possessed the leadership skills and business acumen to straddle the worlds between the needs of British and dominion authorities and between volunteerism and government control.

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CHAPTER 2

From Volunteerism to Government Control: The Formation of the SOSBW

In 1964, the Women's Migration and Overseas Appointments Society (WMOAS) closed its doors, ending more than one hundred years of women's emigration societies. The WMOAS had only been in existence since 1961, but its foundations date back to 1919 when efforts were most explicitly focused on overseas migration efforts under the newly formed Society for the Overseas Settlement of British Women (SOSBW). The creation of the SOSBW was the practical extension of growing government concerns about the eventual change from a wartime to a peacetime economy and fears around the resilience of British markets, high unemployment, and the state of empire once the war ended. The Lloyd George government had consulted with voluntary societies and organisations interested in overseas settlement and hoped for their input and cooperation, but it was decided that a single body would reduce redundancy and delays and would thus be most effective in accelerating post-war migration. Historians have often approached the Society from the perspective that it sought amalgamation as a way to give its female imperialists greater access to power, which is not untrue, but this interpretation tends to overly simplify the actions and motivations of its leaders. The SOSBW was formed by amalgamating the Colonial Intelligence League (CIL), the British Women's Emigration Association (BWEA), and the South African Colonisation Society (SACS) and with the launch of the new Society, the existing societies were dissolved. The formal incorporation of the new society in 1919 was seen as the only way to

secure much-needed government funding, as well as to maintain close cooperation with dominion authorities. The emigration societies were under pressure from the dominions to protect their interests, which they did by emigrating domestic servants, but they also pursued their own agendas, particularly with regard to the extension of agricultural work for women after the war. While the government was most concerned about the cost-benefit analysis of female migration, putting it at odds with the volunteer movement of the pre-war years, it also put it at odds with the SOSBW that was created with the purpose of generating new areas of employment for female migrants, particularly in agriculture.

At the time of its inauguration, the SOSBW was given a direct mandate by government to reduce Britain's surplus female population by migrating women to the dominions. The government's concern with unproductive elements within the national community was not confined to the nineteenth century and reflected longer-term concerns about national strength.¹ Much attention has been paid to migration efforts in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but there has been little work done on the creation of the SOSBW or how its founding leaders responded to their government mandate.² The volunteer societies, particularly the BWEA and the SACS, had already been considering what could be done to equalise the proportion of the sexes in Britain where there was a female surplus and in the dominions where there were more males than females, but the migration of a large number of women for the purpose of gender stabilisation had not been part of those discussions.

Equally troubling for the Society was that the government would direct migration. During the First World War, the British government did not have an empire settlement policy for the post-war period. What was known at the time was that Britain had a surplus of women that was likely to be exacerbated by military casualties. Yet, there was much concern about the labour supply post-war, especially in rural areas, and particularly related to agriculture.³ The great agricultural depression of 1870 had led to rural depopulation and a weakening of the agricultural industry, and although recovery was well under way by the outbreak of the First World War, the industry still struggled to retain men and women due to low wages, insufficient housing, and a lack of upward mobility.⁴ These concerns were not remedied by the war, and although the agricultural industry did well in wartime, the benefits afforded by a wartime economy were short-lived.⁵

Concerns about the labour supply were not exclusive to agriculture, and while a healthy labour pool was essential for reestablishing a peacetime economy, the immediate problem was reabsorbing demobilised men into the labour force, while facing the possibility of a two-million-man surplus in labour by 1920. The consideration given to empire migration schemes was tied to the post-war labour market and a need to transition mobilised men out of service with the least amount of disruption.⁶ Government handling of demobilisation was increasingly focused on the land, either by rebuilding the industry at home, or the potential to export men to the empire to work in agriculture abroad. A cohesive government policy was slow to emerge. As of 1916, there was no plan for soldier settlement schemes on the land, nor was there any real attempt to determine how many men were interested in agricultural work either at home or overseas.⁷ Lord Selborne, President of the Board of Agriculture, was interested in pursuing an agricultural settlement scheme for soldiers and recommended that a conference be held to draft a plan of action between the British government and the dominions.⁸ With regard to women, Lord Selborne had been credited with devising a scheme to bring more women to the land, following the French model during the war.⁹ Despite his efforts to create a wartime female agricultural labour force, the Women's Land Army (WLA), he was often criticised by its members for not fully understanding or acknowledging women's role in farming, reducing women's contributions to assistance on the land, rather than *real* agricultural work.¹⁰ While the dominions were interested in absorbing ex-servicemen under the right conditions, the Colonial Office was hesitant about the need for or intended benefits of such a scheme.¹¹

The fear was unfocused mass migration to North and South America, rather than targeted agricultural settlements for ex-servicemen. Not wishing to pursue official government inquiries, Rider Haggard, an agricultural reformer, was deployed in 1917 on a private mission to the dominions to determine if colonial administrators would accept a mass migration scheme at the war's end. While Haggard determined that there was suitable support for a land settlement scheme in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, when the Colonial Office took official action to develop the scheme in conjunction with the dominion governments, the response was less committal. The Canadian prairies and Western Australia were open to settlements, but New Zealand was already wavering, due in part to concerns over costs, but also reservations about where central authority for the scheme would lay.¹²