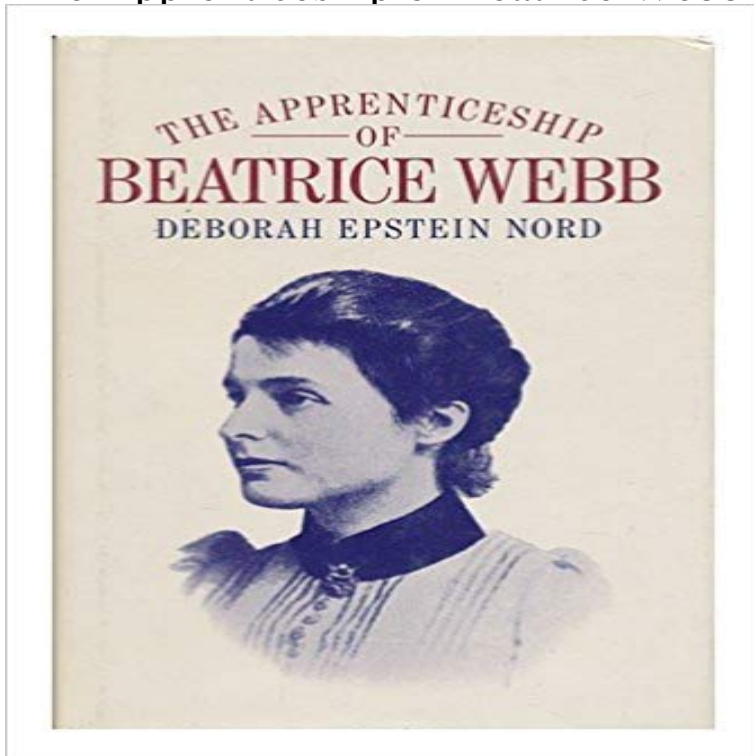


The Apprenticeship of Beatrice Webb



Biographers of Beatrice Webb and historians of Fabianism have neglected certain aspects of Webb's early life and work which, if taken into account, would contribute to a reassessment of her historical and literary importance. Her autobiography, *My Apprenticeship*, written after World War I, and the diary she kept for some seventy years reveal a Beatrice Webb that bears little resemblance to the calculating and confident super-rationalist of caricature and legend. Out of these texts emerges a woman engaged in the search for vocation and for resolution to the convergent crises of spiritual and sexual identity. The themes and structure of *My Apprenticeship* mark it as the first British woman's memoir to be written in the mode of the Victorian autobiography of crisis and conversion. *The Apprenticeship of Beatrice Webb* examines the social and intellectual movements of the 1880s and 1890s that enabled Webb to live a productive and celebrated life. Her professional evolution, from social service to social investigation and from Spencerian Individualism to Collectivism unfolded within the context of various historical changes in these last Victorian decades: the entry of large numbers of middle class women into areas of social service; the discovery of poverty in London East End; the beginnings of empirical sociology and the socialist revival of the 1880s. Webb turned to the writing of autobiography in the aftermath of a crisis of confidence and faith wrought by the events of World War I. The war, which she regarded as a movement back into barbarism, made a mockery of her belief in the inevitability of gradualness, challenged the Fabians' ability to account for the irrationality of human behavior with a rationalist calculus, and called into question the real usefulness of all that Webb and her husband, Sidney, had accomplished. Despairing at the lack of progress in the evolution of society, Webb

sought the evidence of private, personal progress in the events of her own life. Her decision to write an autobiography signaled, however indirectly, crises in her private and public lives, including her dedication to Fabiansim, her career as social scientist, and her marriage.

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