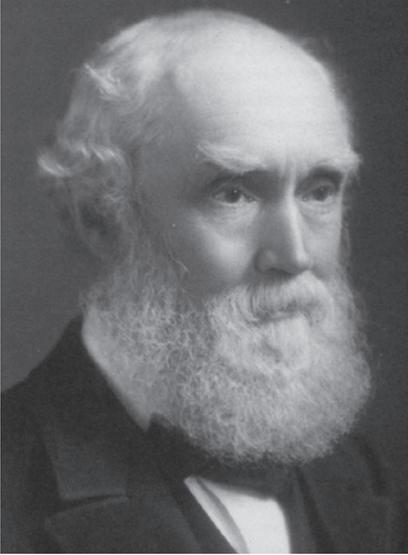


CHAPTER 2

# Growing Pains



John Lewis and his two sons Spedan and Oswald, probably in the mid 1890s.

Like so many others, John Lewis, who had fought for his own rights for so long, overlooked the fact that anyone else had any.

PHILIP HOFFMAN, IN HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY  
*THEY ALSO SERVE*, 1948

For the first ten years of my working life one of the most important of my occupations was an effort to see where my father had been right and where he had been wrong. I came to the conclusion that his ideas were sound. I think so still. But the practice was a very different matter.

SPELAN LEWIS, IN *PARTNERSHIP FOR ALL*, 1948

## Eliza Baker

John Lewis and Eliza Baker seem an ill-assorted couple. Other than coming from retailing families and losing their fathers young, they appear to have had little in common. Eliza's father was a draper from Bristol who had gone bankrupt and died when she was three years old. She was luckier than John: her much older half-brother Mills Baker managed to retrieve the business and make an impressive success of it. He had become Eliza's guardian and was able (and, more to the point, willing) to pay for her education, an advantage that none of John Lewis's sisters had, in an age when educating women for anything other than running a household was decidedly unusual. But she was evidently highly intelligent, and in 1872 when she was eighteen her brother generously decided she should go to the North London Collegiate Girls' School of Frances Mary Buss, a pioneer of women's education, with a view to going on to university. Within a year she had come top of the entrance exam to Bedford College, London. That gained her a scholarship she didn't take up, because she had come second in the entrance exam to Girton College, Cambridge, behind a woman in her thirties. It's said that she danced the normally restrained Miss Buss down the school corridor at the news of her success.

The first Cambridge college for women (though the university refused to award them degrees) had moved to the Cambridge village of Girton from Hitchin in Hertfordshire. It had been set up there by two more of that indomitable band of educated Victorian feminists determined to gain access for women to fields long preserved for men. Emily Davies and Barbara Bodichon had opened the college in 1869, and Eliza Baker was among the first intake when it moved to Girton in 1873. She came top of the roll for the Pass degree in History and Political Economy in 1877. She was clearly remarkably able, and a capable pianist as well. After Cambridge she became a teacher, was then appointed Second Mistress of Bedford High School in 1882, and would perhaps have lived and died a spinster headmistress had she not met John Lewis on that bus. Mills Baker, though no longer her guardian, came up to London to inspect the shop of the man she'd agreed to marry, because he couldn't believe John Lewis was actually taking as much as he claimed from so small a space. Once he saw the stream of customers, though, he was in no doubt.

It was a well educated – if reticent – woman who brought up the two boys Spedan and Oswald. Spedan later described her as a woman with 'a large, strong mind and very little intellectual appetite', a curiously dismissive caveat which suggests that she was not entirely attuned to his ideas. Oswald called her 'one of the sweetest and most unselfish women that ever lived'. The family now lived in a substantial house John Lewis renamed Spedan Tower in a splendid location at the top of Hampstead Hill. Its four acres of grounds lay close to the extensive parkland of Hampstead Heath