

Oxford DNB: May 2023

Welcome to the ninety-eighth update of the *Oxford DNB*, which adds ten new articles, comprising eleven new lives, accompanied by five portrait likenesses, with a special focus on women authors of popular fiction active in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

From May 2023, the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (*Oxford DNB*) offers biographies of 64,831 men and women who have shaped the British past, contained in 62,418 articles. 11,988 biographies include a portrait image of the subject – researched in partnership with the National Portrait Gallery, London.

Most public libraries across the UK subscribe to the *Oxford DNB*, which means that you can access the complete dictionary for free via your local library. Libraries offer 'remote access' that enables you to log in at any time at home (or anywhere you have internet access). Elsewhere, the *Oxford DNB* is available online in schools, colleges, universities, and other institutions worldwide. Full

details of participating British public libraries, and how to gain access to the complete dictionary, are available [here](#).

May 2023: introduction to the update by Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton

Since the late twentieth century a number of prolific but once 'forgotten' women writers have benefited from increased critical interest in challenging the canon. It is hard to believe that Mary Braddon was once tolerated on university reading lists only as a kind of literary pudding for students who had demonstrably finished their *Middlemarch*. The International Centre for Victorian Women Writers now proudly curates the Braddon archive, alongside material relating to New Woman Sarah Grand and other women authors of the long nineteenth century. Conferences and edited collections have directed attention to an ever-wider spectrum of writing, while publishers such as Victorian Secrets have recovered, reconsidered, and republished scholarly paperback editions, making them available to new audiences.

As a result the gothic and sensational modes have become increasingly mainstream, and female-authored crime fiction is

more in demand than ever. New Woman authors are no longer deemed too political to be literary, or anti-feminist polemicists simply too embarrassing to reprint. Meanwhile the resurgence of interest in religious writing has had unexpected effects, galvanizing a reevaluation of generic boundaries. One of the founders of the sensation genre, Ellen Wood was not only an evangelical author before *East Lynne*: her scandalous bestseller is itself an overtly Christian novel.

Among the younger generation women authors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries would respond to these trends by becoming accomplished boundary crossers, adapting strategies from both new and popular forms and reworking them to their own ends. But criticism still has some catching up to do. Late Victorian authors, one might be forgiven for thinking, simply put themselves into cold storage in the early part of 1901.

Meanwhile research by the Middlebrow Network counteracts a bias through which twentieth century domestic and romantic novels are still largely ignored. A related problem is that some writers remain out of print not because they were necessarily writing in the 'wrong' genre, but because they cannot be made to fit a publisher's list. But as contemporary complaints about the

'flooding' of the literary marketplace should convince us, more lives and works are still waiting to be recovered.

The eleven women authors included here show something of the richness of this untapped resource. The majority of them were prolific, whether driven by ambition, curiosity, or just financial necessity. Several were associated with the stage, others were the wives and daughters of clergymen. They variously advised and applied to the Royal Literary Fund, incorporated crime into books of religious exhortation, learned Icelandic and studied Egyptology, penned detective stories, created male characters in love with older women, and campaigned against vivisection. Like their male counterparts they participated in the discourse of Empire; indeed for one imperialist, children's stories provided a way of giving boys' roles to the girls. Living and writing through the end of the Victorian period into the shocks of a post-war world, these authors offer us a view of the past that feels sometimes prescient, often uncomfortable, and never simple.

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From London: Seaside Reading in the Railway Age, and editor of (with SueAnn Schatz) of *Mary Cholmondeley Reconsidered* and (with Adrienne E. Gavin) *Writing Women of the Fin de Siècle: Authors of Change*, and the series *British Women's Writing from Brontë to Bloomsbury*.

May 2023: summary of new articles

Although born into a Scottish landed family, and presented at court, **Jean Middlemass** (1833-1919) became a writer in the wake of her father's financial difficulties. Nearly forty when her first novel was published (1872), she went on to produce at least a novel every year for nearly forty years, mostly romantic fiction of a slightly daring type more popular with readers than critics. The daughter of a London stockbroker, **Catherine Louisa Pirkis** (1839-1910), married a naval officer, and generally published as C. L. Pirkis. Her first novel (1877) appeared shortly after the birth of her second child. She was particularly associated with her series of crime stories involving a female detective, Loveday Brooke, published from 1893. She and her husband, who lived for some time in Nutfield, Surrey, were campaigners against animal cruelty, and were joint founders (1891) of the National Canine Defence League. **Mary Charlotte Gordon [Mrs Disney Leith]** (1840-1926), generally known by her army colonel husband's name under

which she published, was born into a landed family with estates in Aberdeenshire and the Isle of Wight, where she became a close friend of A. C. Swinburne. As a country gentlewoman, she wrote some fifteen novels, many addressing the moral dilemmas facing young people, offering guidance from an Anglo-Catholic perspective. She became best remembered for her recollections of Swinburne, published in 1917. **Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett** (1846-1930), the daughter of an iron forge worker and married to a steam engine fitter, took up writing in her thirties to support the family when her husband's earnings were irregular. A strong suffragist in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, she wrote *New Amazonia* (1889), which envisioned a future Utopian matriarchy. After moving to London, she turned to detective fiction, and much serialized writing for periodicals, but in the new century demand for her writing reduced, and she was partly sustained by grants from the Royal Literary Fund. The daughter of an Isle of Wight surgeon, **Mary Gleed Tuttiett [pseud. Maxwell Gray]** (1846-1923), lived on the island with her parents. During a period of poor health, she wrote *The Silence of Dean Maitland* (1886), a novel centred on the scandalous past of a clergyman who rose to high position in the Church. Its enormous success was never equalled by her later work, and in later life her income was

considerably reduced. **Florence Price** (1857-1929) and her sister **Gertrude Price** (1859-1925), who published as **Florence Warden** and **Gertrude Warden** respectively, were daughters of a London stockbroker whose business failed. Obligated to find employment as governesses, they next took to the stage before becoming writers. Florence's *The House on the Marsh* (1884) was the first of a string of successful sensation novels which proved lucrative. Settling in Ramsgate, Kent, she was a prolific writer, but like others in this release, she found a less receptive readership in the early twentieth century. Her sister Gertrude produced thirty romance and mystery novels before settling in Monaco. Married to a prosperous Staffordshire solicitor, **Henrietta Everett** (1851-1923) wrote mystery and ghost stories under the pseudonym **Theo Douglas**. Her *Iras* (1896) the story of an awakened Egyptian mummy, enjoyed considerable popularity. **Bessie Marchant** (1862-1941), born into a nonconformist farming family in Kent, married a Baptist minister and settled in Oxfordshire, where she went on to write over 150 adventure stories for children, mainly in imperial settings, featuring girls performing heroic and daring roles more often filled by boys in that genre. **Florence Barclay** (1862-1921), the wife of a Hertfordshire vicar, spent much of her life in parish work. Like Mary Tuttiett she wrote her most famous

work when confined to home by ill-health. Her romantic novel *The Rosary* (1909), which was taken up by an American publisher, was a best-seller on both sides of the Atlantic, and went on to sell a million copies. **Ella Lindow** (1880-1933), the daughter of an Odessa-born diamond merchant, had a musical talent, performed in variety, and gained a reputation as a songwriter in the early twentieth century. This led to her novel writing, notably *Maggie of Margate* (1912), written under the pseudonym **Gabrielle Wodnil**, which satisfied the growing market for holiday fiction, often in a seaside resort setting.