

# Margaret Oliphant's *fin de siècle* novels.

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One of the hardest tasks involved in choosing the works to appear in the twenty-five-volume *Selected Works of Margaret Oliphant*<sup>1</sup> was deciding which of Margaret Oliphant Wilson Oliphant's (1828-1897) ninety-eight novels would make the final cut. Embarking on such an extensive project carried various responsibilities: to choose work which was representative of a writing career which lasted almost fifty years; to pay some attention to what had previously found favour during the author's own lifetime and beyond; and finally, to observe our publishers' preferences in the shaping of a series over six years. The last two conditions made it fairly inevitable that the *Carlingford Chronicles* (1861-76), *Hester* (1883), and *Kirsteen* (1889), intermittently restored to print in the late twentieth century, would make it through to the final selection. Selecting short stories from her late works proved similarly straightforward, partly because in 1879 Oliphant discovered a bent for composing tales of the 'seen and the unseen', some of which continued to enjoy a certain twentieth-century currency in collections of ghost stories.

Revisiting the initial correspondence my co-general editor, Joanne Shattock, and I had with Pickering and Chatto, I note our proposal for a thirty-volume edition in

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<sup>1</sup> *The Selected Works of Margaret Oliphant: The Pickering Master Series*, eds. E. Jay and J. Shattock, 25 vols., i-xxii (London; Pickering & Chatto, 2011-16); xxii-xxv (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

which *A Country Gentleman and His Family* (1886),<sup>2</sup> *The Railwayman and His Children* (1891), and *The Marriage of Elinor* (1892) were among the later works included.<sup>3</sup> However, given the desire to represent the range of her career, these titles disappeared from the eventual, shorter, twenty-five volume edition where they might have appeared to have weighted the balance unduly toward Oliphant's later, darker fiction. This essay takes the opportunity to explore the distinctive timbre of the fiction of Oliphant's final decade, investigating the changing demands of the literary marketplace as Modernist values and conventions gained sway; Oliphant's response to the subject matter and attitudes of a younger generation of contemporary novelists; and the ways in which the themes and style of her own work expanded to offer a critique of much-discussed 1890s phenomena, such as decadence and the emergence of the New Woman.

Remaining true to the range of Oliphant's immense fictional *oeuvre* was always bound to raise problems, whatever the length of a 'selected' edition. It might have been interesting, for instance, to have included a novel set in the industrial north of England such as *John Drayton* (1851), or an early Scottish-based novel such as *Ailieford* (1853), which would incidentally also have served to reassert her authorship of a novel initially published under her brother's name. The early novels certainly demonstrate the swift emergence of a distinctive voice, but, had her career as a novelist been abruptly terminated in the 1850s, her name would rank only among

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<sup>2</sup> George Levine has recently championed this novel, claiming that in its challenges to moral and aesthetic assumptions it points toward more radical formal changes that

came with modernism. 'Taking Oliphant Seriously: *A Country Gentleman and His Family*', *English Literary History*, 83 (2016), 233-58. (The first half of this fn seems to have disappeared).

<sup>3</sup> Parts 5 and 6 of the *Selected Works* include one novel from the 1870s, *At His Gates* (1872); three novels published in 1883: *The Ladies Lindores*; *The Wizard's Son*, and *Hester: A Story of Contemporary Life*; and two novels from the 1890s: *Kirsteen: the story of a Scotch Family Seventy Years* (1890), and *Old Mr Tredgold* (1896).

those many mid-century women novelists trying their hands at a variety of popular genres, Indeed in later life Oliphant herself was inclined to be dismissive of her own juvenilia.<sup>4</sup>

It might seem reasonable to assume, therefore, that over the years her novels matured aesthetically, establishing a trajectory similar to that of George Eliot, for whom most critics would trace a reasonably steady graph of success from the tyro work of the *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857) to the acclaimed last masterpieces, *Middlemarch* (1871-72) and *Daniel Deronda* (1874-76). In Oliphant's case, however, the problem of selection is exacerbated by the unevenness of her prodigious output. One might have expected to see a falling-off at times when she was by any measure over-committed, as she was in the early 1880s, a time of family crisis which in retrospect she referred to as 'a new life, one of which I cannot speak much. That was the burden and heat of the day: my anxieties were sometimes almost more than I could bear'.<sup>5</sup> Yet 1883 saw the publication of three of her finest novels: *The Ladies Lindores*; *The Wizard's Son* and *Hester*, together with the more humdrum *Sir Tom*, and *It was a Lover and His Lass*.

If financial and domestic stress could prove such a powerful creative irritant, it might seem reasonable to anticipate a commensurate waning in her powers during the 1890s, when her bread-winning responsibilities for a large household sharply declined, and her own health deteriorated.<sup>6</sup> Despite poor health and grief over the death of her remaining adult children, her astonishing productivity continued almost

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<sup>4</sup> *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant. The Complete Text*, ed. E. Jay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 24-25, 30; *Selected Works*, vol. 6, 24 and 27.

<sup>5</sup> *Autobiography*, ed. E. Jay p.151; *Selected Works*, vol. 6, p. 105.

<sup>6</sup> Her two brothers, both of whom she had eventually supported, died in 1875 and 1885 respectively; the eldest son, who had caused her so much grief died in 1890; the distant cousin she had taken in, together with one of the two nieces she had adopted, had both made wealthy marriages (1884 and 1893 respectively). Her last surviving son died in 1894, leaving only one adopted daughter to support.

unabated during those last seven years, though, as always, it was uneven in quality. Excluding items published in 1890 but clearly written at the end of the 1880s, the years 1891 to 1897 were to see the publication, at a rough count, of seven novels,<sup>7</sup> five novellas, eighteen short stories, a one- and a two-volume biography, four historical topographical guides, two of the three volumes in the history of Blackwoods' publishing house, and some ninety contributions to periodicals. Nevertheless, within a decade or so of her death in 1897, her reputation had dwindled and her fiction had all but disappeared from the lending libraries.

I have discussed elsewhere the many and various reasons for her swift fall into obscurity,<sup>8</sup> but it is worth remarking ~~that this is one~~ an aspect of her career that she shared with her exact contemporary George Meredith, whose reputation was also to plummet rapidly after his death. (Comment: The particular aspect to which I am referring is outlined in the next sentence) Both had enjoyed a degree of influence on the work of their fellow novelists in the second half of the nineteenth-century. Meredith was manuscript reader for the publisher Chapman and Hall from 1860 to 1895, while Oliphant had her say on the offerings of fellow novelists, mainly but not exclusively in the pages of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, from 1854 until her death in 1897. Although the great majority of these reviews were anonymous, the passage of time combined with her distinctive style to ensure that her authorship became an open secret. The enthusiasm with which succeeding generations tear up their predecessors' critical rules was particularly marked at the turn of the twentieth

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<sup>7</sup> The content of *Janet* (1891), serialized from January to June 1890, and of *The Heir Presumptive* and *the Heir Apparent* (1892) are thus excluded from the subsequent discussion. In her Preface to the latter, Oliphant mentions it had been written 'some years ago before the days of American copyright', introduced in 1891. *The Heir Presumptive and the Heir Apparent*, 3 vols. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1892), i.vi.

<sup>8</sup> Elisabeth Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: 'A Fiction to Herself': A Literary Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 289-91.

century, when the triumph of the new seemed to receive additional encouragement from Britain's then longest-reigning monarch dying at the birth of a fresh epoch.

In 1913, when G. K. Chesterton set about summing up his immediate literary predecessors in *The Victorian Age in Literature*, he cited the novels of George Meredith and Thomas Hardy as definitive markers both of the polarities and the demise of Victorianism. To Chesterton, their opposed philosophies of 'open optimism' and 'open pessimism' signified the end of 'orthodox compromise' which had characterised the Victorian attitude to the religious debate. Operating upon such critical principles, it is perhaps not surprising that Chesterton deemed Oliphant 'a much mellow and more Christian George Eliot', nor that he felt *A Beleaguered City* (1879), her longest foray into the territory of the 'seen and the unseen', a piece of 'literature in its highest sense', as contrasted implicitly with the rest of her fiction by which she had 'forced [herself] well within the frontier of fine literature'.<sup>9</sup> Leaving aside the multiple slurs contained in the notion of a female writer 'forcing' herself upon the literary world, and agreeing that Oliphant, though unorthodox, was undoubtedly 'more Christian', theologically speaking, than Eliot, it seems unlikely from his choice of the adjective 'mellow' that Chesterton had consulted the novels of Oliphant's last decade, which could on occasion make for anything but comfortable reading.

Chesterton was not alone in his partial and dismissive reading. At the time of Oliphant's death, even those reviewers who had been her most faithful readers felt entitled to adopt a patronising tone. The Reverend W. Robertson Nicoll, for instance, who claimed to have read all her work, selecting earlier fiction such as her 'Carlingford' novel, *Phoebe Junior* (1876), for his greatest praise, prophesied that

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<sup>9</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 60-63; 50.

none of her work would survive because her over-prolific production prevented her from devoting the necessary intensity of artistic labour to her writing.<sup>10</sup> Was there perhaps a touch of *schadenfreude* provoked by the fact that she had achieved her slightly premature summary of *The Victorian Age of English Literature* (1892), while his own plans for a 'A History of Victorian Literature in five large volumes' was never to see the light of day?<sup>11</sup>

The advent of modernism was to eclipse for a time those mid-nineteenth-century literary work-horses, who had turned their hands to multiple forms of writing and had not thought to spurn popular outlets in their pursuit of a living. By the 1890s these literary generalists were confronted by a changing print culture in which publishing in a 'little magazine', likely as not to survive for only a year or two, carried the supreme aesthetic cachet. The emphasis on form to be found repeatedly in the posthumous verdicts upon Oliphant's career signifies the rise of a set of new critical values by which Oliphant's output, long associated with the capacious three-decker, was almost bound to be dismissed as outdated.

The days of the three-volume novel were already on the wane by 1890, only to die abruptly in 1894 when Mudie's Circulating Library and the retailer W. H. Smith refused to spend more than four shillings a volume, thus undercutting the profit publishers had previously enjoyed from this format. Indeed, as early as 1882 the publisher Longmans had used one of Oliphant's own novels – *In Trust* – in an attempt to lower the price of the three-decker from 31s.6d to 12s. Whether the increased frequency with which she published one- or two-volume tales in the 1890s was prompted by her consciousness of the imminent demise of the three-decker or by

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<sup>10</sup> 'The Literary Lounger' *The Sketch*, 30 June 1897, p. 408.

<sup>11</sup> T. H. Darlow, *William Robertson Nicoll* (London: Hodder&Stoughton, 1925), p. 232.

waning energy is hard to tell. In any case, her name, as both frequent practitioner and remaining representative of an earlier generation, had already become indelibly associated with a format which had suddenly become obsolete.<sup>12</sup> Henry James can be found ruminating on the artistic implications of this change in a prefatory essay of 1908, to his novel *The Tragic Muse* (1890), ‘which appeared in “The Atlantic Monthly” [...] beginning January 1889 and running on, inordinately, several months beyond its proper twelve’ before being published as a three-decker:

Of course the affair would be simple enough if composition could be kept out of the question. [...] There may in its absence be life, incontestably, as ‘The Newcomes’ has life, as ‘Les Trois Mousquetaires’, as Tolstoi’s ‘Peace and War’, have it; but what do such large, loose, baggy monsters, with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary, artistically *mean*?

True art, the James of 1908 concluded, lay in ‘concision’, in ‘compactness’ and in ‘economic representation’.<sup>13</sup> ‘Life’, however, was precisely the quality for which Oliphant’s fiction continued to be recognised and prolixity the besetting sin for which she was increasingly criticised.

The falling demand for the three-decker novels and the proliferation of short-lived periodicals and magazines carried further consequences. For much of Oliphant’s publishing life she had been able to assume that selling a novel for serialisation to a magazine owned by a major publishing house such as Blackwood or Macmillan was reasonably likely to secure the tale’s subsequent appearance in volume form under the same imprint. There had always been exceptions to this rule, such as the firm of Hurst & Blackett, who had never sported an associated magazine. This firm may well have

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<sup>12</sup> Oliphant’s final novel, *Old Mr. Tredgold*, when it appeared in book form, was published as one volume priced at 6 shillings, a format which was to become standard for the next fifty years.

<sup>13</sup> *The Tragic Muse*, 2 vols. (Fairfield, New Jersey: A. M. Kelley, 1976), ii, p. x.

inherited her as an author when they took over Henry Colburn's list and had in any case been publishing her novels intermittently since 1853, frequently bringing out in book form novels first serialised elsewhere, as they did with *Janet* (1891). None of the novels of the last decade was serialised by her old standbys, *Blackwood's Magazine* or *Macmillan's Magazine*, although four of them still came to book form under Macmillan's imprint, and *The Marriage of Elinor* (1892) and *Old Mr. Tredgold* (1896) found homes in magazines with whom Oliphant had had some previous dealings.<sup>14</sup> Only one enjoyed the same publisher, Longman, for its serial and book version. Instead Oliphant increasingly had to turn to periodicals appealing to a more popular readership and to the ever-expanding market of daily and weekly papers for her novels' first appearance in serial form. Five—*Janet* (1891), *Lady William* (1891), *The Cuckoo in the Nest* (1892), *The Sorceress* (1893), and *A House in Bloomsbury* (1894)—were serialised in magazines specifically targeted at female readers.<sup>15</sup> *The Railwayman and his Children*, as was appropriate to its setting, appeared in *The Sun*, a magazine published in both Paisley and London, but enjoying its major circulation north of the border.<sup>16</sup> When *The Heir Presumptive and the Heir Apparent* (1892) was sold to the Tillotson Fiction Bureau to be published in their six syndicated provincial weekly newspapers, Oliphant, aware that she had several publications appearing simultaneously, wrote a Preface to the three-decker edition, expressing her fear that she would once again be praised for 'the equivocal virtue of industry'.<sup>17</sup>

Prodigious correspondent as she was—inclined to dash off missives at all hours to her publishers, sometimes from station waiting-rooms—even Oliphant could

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<sup>14</sup> *Good Words* and *Longman's Magazine* respectively.

<sup>15</sup> The first two novels appeared in *Lady's Pictorial*, and the last three in *The Victorian Magazine*; *The Gentlewoman*; and *The Young Woman* respectively.

<sup>16</sup> *Spectator*, 11 October 1890, p.503.

<sup>17</sup> *Heir Presumptive*, i, p. vii.



not hope to keep up her speed of production as well as ferret out for herself the new openings, in increasingly niche publications, that the 1890s demanded. By this decade, Oliphant was employing England's first commercial literary agency, founded by a fellow Scot, A. P. Watt, to help place her fiction. Watt had spotted a demand created by authors' need to find outlets in the increasingly diversified press that had arisen in the wake of the 1870 Education Act and its successors; these new periodicals began to create a swiftly expanding and socially-varied readership. Watt's continuation of the scatter-gun approach to product placement that Oliphant herself had adopted *in extremis*, probably combined with the sheer quantity of her output to ensure that a collected edition of her fiction, which Oliphant had long hoped for, never came about either in her own lifetime or subsequently.

Oliphant was all too conscious of these various publishing developments, alluding pejoratively to them under the recently-coined generic term 'the New Journalism'.<sup>18</sup> In particular, she saw this phenomenon as responsible for the explosion of the short story (a form she had long used, but which she was now inclined to lament as a waste of a theme which could have made a three-decker novel);<sup>19</sup> for the current generation's desultory habit of dipping into magazines and newspapers rather than sustained reading;<sup>20</sup> for the advent of the usually female, 'gossip columnist';<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> 'A Commentary from an Easy Chair,' *Spectator*, 14 December 1889, pp. 804-55; *Selected Works*, vol. 5, pp. 275-76. *Selected Works*, vol. 5, pp. 275-76. Matthew Arnold had coined the term in 'Up to Easter,' *Nineteenth Century*, 21 (May 1887), pp. 638-9.

<sup>19</sup> 'The Old Saloon,' *Blackwood's Magazine*, 145 (June 1889), pp. 809-34; *Selected Works*, vol. 5, pp. 103-13 (112).

<sup>20</sup> 'The Old Saloon,' *Blackwood's Magazine*, 147 (January 1890), pp. 131-51; *Selected Works* vol. 5, pp. 151-168 (165).

<sup>21</sup> 'A Commentary from an Easy Chair,' *Spectator*, 14 December 1889, pp. 804-55; *Selected Works*, vol. 5, pp. 275-76; 'Things in General', *Atalanta* (August 1894), pp. 732-4; *Selected Works*, vol. 5, pp. 385-8 (387).

for the neglect of romantic tales, the preferred fare of the older woman reader;<sup>22</sup> and for the ubiquity of the ‘Woman Question’ as a topic (*passim*). Above all she had begun to feel the concept of the common reader, whom she had always felt she addressed both in her reviews and her fiction, had now been transformed into a hydra-headed monster too multifarious to identify.<sup>23</sup> The passing enthusiasms of this new generation of readers were, she felt, inexplicable and unfathomable: how, for instance, could Du Maurier’s wildly improbable *Trilby* (1895) become a best-seller with a public who also apparently valued the ‘almost pedantic’ philosophical reflections of Mrs Humphry Ward’s fiction, whilst lapping up Marie Corelli’s sacrilegious fantasy, *Barabbas* (1893)?<sup>24</sup>

It is all too easy to see her observations of these signs of the times as the grumbling of an elderly writer, left, as she herself put it, ‘on the ebb-tide’ of literary fashion,<sup>25</sup> and the posthumous publication of her later and more embittered autobiographical reflections helped to confirm this impression. It is, however, worth remembering that her decision to leave a publishable autobiographical record was prompted by the deaths of George Eliot (1819-1880) and Anthony Trollope (1815-1882), whom she had long regarded as her major rivals.<sup>26</sup> Despite being a decade or so their junior, Oliphant regarded herself as belonging to their generation of writers: she had, after all, already published more than a dozen novels when Eliot’s first work

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<sup>22</sup> ‘A Commentary from an Easy Chair,’ *Spectator*, 11 October 1890, pp. 473-4; *Selected Works*, vol. 5, 329-31.

<sup>23</sup> ‘The Anti-Marriage League,’ *Blackwood’s Magazine*, 159 (January 1896), 135-49; *Selected Works*, vol. 5, p.461-76 (463).

<sup>24</sup> ‘The Looker-on’, No. 4, *Blackwood’s Magazine*, 158 (December 1895), pp. 905-27; *Selected Works*, vol. 5, pp. 425-44 (431-32).

<sup>25</sup> See ‘A Preface: On the Ebb Tide,’ in *The Ways of Life* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1897), pp. 1-20; *Selected Works*, vol. 11, pp. 319-24.

<sup>26</sup> *Autobiography*, ed. E. Jay, pp. 14-18; *Selected Works*, vol. 6, p. 16.

of fiction, *Scenes of Clerical Life* appeared, and Trollope's first novel had preceded Oliphant's by only two years.

Oliphant's sense that the deaths of Eliot and Trollope heralded an abrupt disappearance of the old guard's authorial values and practices was sharpened by the simultaneous rise of a new generation of novelists. Robert Louis Stevenson published his first novel, *Treasure Island*, in 1883; Rider Haggard's first novel, *Dawn*, appeared in 1884, and J. M. Barrie's *Better Dead* in 1887. Henry James and Thomas Hardy, it is true, had been publishing novels since the 1870s, but Oliphant was critical of the turn their fiction had latterly taken. The more convoluted style adopted by James's novels in the 1880s seemed to her symptomatic of a contemporary fascination with style to the detriment of characterisation.<sup>27</sup> Her denunciation of the sexual *mores* of Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891)<sup>28</sup> and *Jude the Obscure* (1895),<sup>29</sup> were part and parcel of a more general objection to a new morality, or rather immorality, which she took to be characteristic of the *fin de siècle*. The concerns of the 'New Woman' seemed to her to have become a veritably obsessional interest with male and female novelists alike: 'We know all about and are heartily sick of the woman who would and who wouldn't, who can't, and who did, and all the rest of it.'<sup>30</sup> This witty, one sentence dismissal of the mini-industry to which the publication of Grant Allen's *The*

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<sup>27</sup> 'The Looker-on', No. 6, *Blackwood's Magazine*, 160 (October 1896), pp. 481-506; *Selected Works*, vol. 5, pp. 453-56 (454).

<sup>28</sup> 'The Old Saloon,' *Blackwood's Magazine*, 151 (March 1892), pp. 455-74; *Selected Works*, vol. 5, pp.183-202 (193-202).

<sup>29</sup> 'The Anti-Marriage League', *Selected Works*, vol. 5, pp. 464-69.

<sup>30</sup> 'The Looker-on', No. 4, *Selected Works*, vol. 5, pp. 432. *The Woman who Did* was the title of Grant Allen's 1895 novel dramatizing the social problems and opprobrium faced in Britain by a Girton-educated woman who decides to pursue love without marriage. At least three further novels with titles apparently capitalising on Allen's success appeared that same year: Victoria Crosse (Annie Sophie Cory), *The Woman Who Didn't* (1895); Mrs. Lovett Cameron (Caroline Emily Sharp), *The Man Who Didn't*; and Lucas Cleeve (Adeline Kingscote), *The Woman Who Wouldn't*.

*Woman who Did* (1895) had given rise, suggests that Oliphant, far from retreating to nursing the remnants of the old-fashioned romances of yester-year had her finger as a reviewer very much on the pulse of the fiction of the 1890s. Her voracious reading of her contemporaries, indeed, took in the latest generation of French authors,<sup>31</sup> as well as recent Russian authors such as Turgenev and Dostoevsky, the latter pair probably in French translation.<sup>32</sup>

Her willingness to sample new fiction, both domestic and foreign, was subtly reflected in the novels of her last decade. The objections she voiced as a reviewer to the provincialism, narrow patriotism and sentimental moralising of the new kailyard school of Scottish fiction, were addressed in her final ‘Scottish’ novel, *The Railwayman and His Children*. Building on her boast that the Scots ‘have in so many ways contributed to the greatness of empire’,<sup>33</sup> the novel starts in India and, once back in Britain, ranges between London and Scotland, and within Scotland between the street life of Glasgow and a smaller loch-side community, where the gamekeeper is not, as southern visitors assume, a stock peasant character, but a well-read man who contributes scientific notes to *Notes and Queries*.<sup>34</sup> Her final novel, *Old Mr. Tredgold*, offers an implicit critique of the ‘brave, daring, very reckless fellows’, presented as the heroes of the adventure stories popular at the end of the century: ‘if boys are to be taught that the love of adventure is justification enough for any unreasonable enterprise [...] then nothing could be better adapted than the

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<sup>31</sup> See ‘The Old Saloon: French Contemporary Novelists’, *Blackwood’s Magazine*, 141 (May 1887), pp. 683-710; *Selected Works*, vol. 14, pp. 439-64; ‘The Old Saloon: French Novels’ 144 *Blackwood’s Magazine* (Sept 1888), pp. 419-43; *Selected Works*, vol. 14, pp. 465-90.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Russia and Nihilism in the Novels of M. Tourgenieff’, *Blackwood’s Magazine*, 128 (May 1880), pp. 623-47; *Selected Works*, vol. 14, pp. 357-84.

<sup>33</sup> ‘The Old Saloon’, *Blackwood’s Magazine*, 146 (August 1889), pp. 254-75; *Selected Works*, vol. 5, 115-30 (125).

<sup>34</sup> *The Railwayman and His Children*, 3 vols., (London: Macmillan, 1891), ii, 152.

adventures of Allan Quatermain and his companions.’<sup>35</sup> Boyish heroism, is made to look foolishly reckless in Oliphant’s novel, when two adult men agree to a girl’s whim for adventure and take her sailing in waters they do not know and a squall blows up. Seen through the eyes of those on shore who spend a night fearing that the yacht has gone down and all aboard are lost, their exploit appears not only ‘unreasonable’ but selfish. Their act of ‘derring-do’ ends in serious illness for one of the men and the threat of a compromised reputation for the girl.

*Lady William* uses the carefully circumscribed setting of the type of village community described in a Jane Austen novel <sup>36</sup> to explore the changed *mores* of the late nineteenth-century. The village pub, frequented by tradesmen and shopkeepers with new democratic tendencies, now presents a temptation to the Rector’s idle son, and the village school is tended by an over-educated, Bohemian schoolmistress, a mysterious poor relation of the discontented widow who has returned after many years to the big house. When the widow is presented reclining on a sofa reading ‘a yellow French novel’, the implications were not hard for a late nineteenth-century reader to discover.<sup>37</sup> Yellow wrappers had begun by this time to be associated with the works of the French Decadent movement (and were soon to be appropriated by Aubrey Beardsley’s illustrated quarterly *The Yellow Book*, 1894-97): the widow, it transpires, had in her youth been caught by her husband *in flagrante* with her lover.

As this last example suggests, ‘the new development of Sex-literature, with its manifold indecencies’<sup>38</sup> undoubtedly had its effect on the matters Oliphant was prepared to mention in her late novels. One of the indications of the village barmaid’s

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<sup>35</sup> ‘The Old Saloon’, *Blackwood’s Magazine*, 142 (August 1887), pp. 235-63; *Selected Works*, vol.5, 75-81 (80).

<sup>36</sup> *Lady William*, 3 vols., (London: Macmillan, 1891) i, 26,

<sup>37</sup> *Lady William*, i, 138 and ii, 161.

<sup>38</sup> ‘The Looker-on’, No, 1, *Blackwood’s Magazine*, 156 (August 1894), pp. 285-308; *Selected Works*, vol.5, 409-415 (413).

cleverness, as well as her vulgarity, in *The Cuckoo in the Nest*, is that she feigns pregnancy—a condition in itself scarcely mentionable in mid-Victorian novels—in an attempt to maintain her claim to an inheritance when her husband unexpectedly dies. Broken rather than merely unsatisfactory marriages now form the basis of Oliphant's plots. In both *Lady William* and *A House in Bloomsbury*, the remaining parent raises a child alone, and incredibly to the modern reader, keeps the child unsullied by any mention of the missing parent.<sup>39</sup> The Bohemian schoolmistress of *Lady William* derives her pleasure from ensnaring gullible young men. The 'sorceress' of the novel of that name, has, like the schoolmistress, 'entertained' a number of young men in Oxford, but also speaks openly of a presumed sexual scandal in a railway carriage to the mother of the man she had hoped to marry. The rakish husband in *The Marriage of Elinor* makes it clear that separation rather than divorce had been convenient for him over the years since his wife had left him: 'I was not much made for a family man, and in both ways of expense – and in other ways, it suited me well enough. Nobody could expect me to marry them, or their daughters, don't you see, when they knew I had a wife alive. So I was allowed my little amusements'.<sup>40</sup>

Oliphant was not relying entirely upon her reading for such knowledge of contemporary life: she had a well-established social circle in Windsor, and continued to make ambitious trips abroad until a couple of months before she died. Her oldest son had apparently been suspended from his undergraduate studies for talking

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<sup>39</sup> Narrative passages in *A House in Bloomsbury* together with her autobiographical recollections of this period suggest that her second son had finally spoken to her about the effect her persistent silence on the subject of his dead father and sister had had on her remaining children's imaginings. *Autobiography*, ed. E. Jay, p.46; *Selected Works*, vol. 6, p. 390, and *A House in Bloomsbury: A Novel*, 2 vols. (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1894), i, 34-35.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>40</sup> *The Marriage of Elinor*, 3vols. ( London: Macmillan, 1892 ), iii, 237.

familiarly with a barmaid in a tavern of ill repute in Oxford.<sup>41</sup> Her household, comprising by the 1890s of adult children who had returned home rather than progressing to the jobs to which she had hoped their education would lead, has often been represented as the source of the emotional burden and financial drain which drove her to over-production and prevented her from achieving artistic masterpieces, and to an extent Oliphant's own autobiographical reflections were responsible for this. It has been less noted, however, that being surrounded on an almost daily basis by a household composed of the next generation kept her in touch with changes in social assumptions, aspirations, and economic expectations, in a way that merely reading the works of her fellow novelists was unlikely to have achieved. Two brief examples will suffice here. Observation of the idle, louche set her eldest son had chosen as his drinking companions, lent her a command of male clubland slang, at first sight surprising from the pen of an upright Scottish widow. As a girl newly introduced to the fast set in *The Marriage of Elinor* says of its young men, 'their slang way of talking is certainly very amusing if it is not at all dignified, and they have such droll ways of looking at things'.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, contemplating the future of the two nieces she had raised from childhood made her very alive to calculating the amount upon which single middle-class women could hope to live: the late novels abound in precise estimates of such an existence in meagre lodgings or rented homes, with and without maidservants.

Awareness of changing *mores*, however, should not be confused with acceptance of them. The second half of this article will examine the novels of the last decade with an eye to identifying a number of ways in which Oliphant's late fiction

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<sup>41</sup> Merryn Williams, 'Mrs. Oliphant's Prodigal son', *Notes & Queries* 42 (June 1995), p. 201.

<sup>42</sup> *Marriage of Elinor*, i, 74.

acknowledged, without necessarily seeing cause for celebration in, the cultural shifts taking place around her. Not all these novels, it should be noted, have a contemporary setting, but in those that do not, a retrospective narrative stance frequently permits the kind of reflective comparisons of which George Eliot had been so fond.

The term '*fin de siècle*' only entered English usage, courtesy of the press, in 1890,<sup>43</sup> but Oliphant was quick to recognise its complex implications, pointing both to a worn-out world of cynical decadence and to the radical developments issuing in a new century. Both are neatly caught in *The Sorceress* (1893), where a somewhat effete young widower reflects that he has been trapped by the machinations of the eponymous designing woman into 'the *fin de siècle*' version of Richardson's *Pamela*.<sup>44</sup> Where his innocence suggests a culpable naiveté, incapable of negotiating the modern world, her scheming, which initially seems of Becky Sharp proportions, is not malicious in origin, but reflects the naked opportunism necessary to survive and make her way in a world where she is without visible means of support. Boasting neither close family nor fortune, she takes advantage of a series of temporary resting places and families, hoping always to use them as a launch-pad to the marriage which, for a woman not inclined to take paid employment, represents her only chance of security. The success of the aptly-named Miss Lance's trajectory is measured by the way in which, once married, she performs the role of wife and step-mother so perfectly that the baby of the family scarcely knows she is not his mother. Coolly calculating self-interest, Oliphant implies, is the characteristic now required to ensure a role as 'mother' to the coming race.

Nowhere in Oliphant's fiction is this trait given more full play than in her last novel, *Old Mr Tredgold* (1897) in which the monstrous egotism of his younger

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<sup>43</sup> *OED*

<sup>44</sup> *The Sorceress*, 3 vols. (London: F.V. White, 1893), i, 69.



daughter, Stella, is more than a match for the cynicism of her father, the moneyed, old man of the title. Stella Tredgold, the narrator tells us, is ‘without soul or heart, ready to do anything for a little excitement and a new sensation, without the least reflection what would come of it’, and is deliberately modelled on the latest fictional fashion for representing ‘wicked girls, girls without soul or heart, as the prevailing type’.<sup>45</sup>

Stella becomes the site for Oliphant’s critique of decadence. At the most obvious level she epitomises a consumer society entirely devoted to material self-indulgence and sensational display, but her complacent sense of entitlement also represents the worst aspects of the cult of the individual determined to assert her own values without regard for father, sister, husband or child. The ultimate triumph of her rampant egoism over the self-sacrificial code of conduct adopted by her older sister, Katherine, pictures in miniature the ways in which Oliphant believed high Victorian ideals were being overthrown in society at large. In Katherine’s passivity, inability to provide an adequate intellectual defence for her position, and eventual marginalisation, we are also led to recognise the implications for fiction of this process. If, as the novel repeatedly claims, ‘a young woman not much in society instinctively takes a good many of her ideas from fiction’, then fiction would appear to be losing the battle in defending its mid-century claim to a morally educative function.

Stella’s victory is attributable on the one hand to the strength of the life force that runs through her, and on the other hand to the feebleness of the upholders of the traditional values who, in a former period, would have restrained her. Her elderly father is always on the verge of the massive stroke which finally kills him; her husband is a baronet and army officer, happier to live a fast life of gambling and

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<sup>45</sup> *Old Mr. Tredgold* (London, New York and Bombay: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1896), p. 65. *Selected Works*, vol. 25., p.42.

womanizing at home than to undertake active service in India. Whereas he is simply unwilling to pursue active soldiering, the comrade in arms to whom he is closest is incapacitated by chronic health problems. The vacuous degeneracy of these brother officers' lives is indicated by their being discovered unable to conjure up any better activity for themselves than betting against the raindrops' progress down a window-pane. The matter of Stella's husband being a minor member of the aristocracy forms part of a discussion throughout the novel as to the function of a class whose ranks have been successfully invaded by the daughters of the *nouveaux riches*, who exercise good manners only when it suits them, and whose latest scions seem to prefer the company of *demi-mondaines*.

Max Nordau's *Degeneration* was not published until 1892, but many of the symptoms his polemical work identified as characteristic of modernity's regression into decadence and decline recur repeatedly in Oliphant's critique of *fin-de-siècle* culture. As a feckless young socialite in *The Railwayman and His Children* insouciantly admits, 'I'm the product of a corrupt generation'. The eponymous Railwayman, by contrast, has succeeded through subscribing to the Victorian work ethic. Working his way up from a humble position in a Glaswegian iron-foundry, via the railways of India, he returns as a nabob to Britain. Yet he is something more than an incarnation of the Carlylean work ethic. Owing much to Oliphant's admiration for Rudyard Kipling's stories of India, *Plain Tales from the Hills* (1888),<sup>46</sup> and their valorisation of 'the romance of the machine',<sup>47</sup> he is both 'the very poet of the iron

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<sup>46</sup> 'The Old Saloon', *Blackwood's Magazine*, 150 (November 1891), pp. 712-35, reprinted in *Selected Works*, vol. 5, 175-81.

<sup>47</sup> 'A Preface: On the Ebb Tide,' *The Ways of Life: Two Stories* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1897), pp.1-20; *Selected Works*, vol. 11, pp. 317-24 (321).

works, whose imagination ran in the ways of iron and steel',<sup>48</sup> and representative of a vigorous critique of Britain voiced from the far-flung outposts of Empire. Returning to Britain after many years abroad, he is disgusted by such 'cumberers of the soil' as the young socialite. In his anger against this gilded youth who has not only stolen from him but allowed suspicion to fall on the nabob's son, he reflects that 'A man like that has no right to live'.<sup>49</sup> Yet ultimately the Railwayman is impotent to contest or reverse the social decline which has occurred in his absence. Instead he is forced to admit that this charming wastrel and his calculating daughter are well-matched. His daughter indeed persuades him that sending her suitor to India or California would be worse than pointless since, wholly unaccustomed to work, he would be sure to fall in with the lowest company. The suitor meanwhile tells the nabob that the daughter is not sufficiently romantic to wait for him to earn a competence and return to marry her, as would have been the expectation in many a mid-century novel. The upshot is that the nabob's hard-earned money goes to provide the income to support the couple's life between a country estate and the season in London – a metaphor for the way in which some late nineteenth-century critics discerned the Empire being exploited to prop up the life of England's degenerate idle rich.

Repeatedly in these late novels, financial crimes are committed less by the genuinely needy than by those who have not been brought up to work and are wholly unwilling to find other ways of supporting their louche life. The plot of *The Marriage of Elinor* is sprung by a man, known to his contemporaries as 'the dis-Honourable Phil Compton', who inveigles his fiancée into agreeing to a lie which will hide his destruction of the records of the part he played in the collapse of a firm of which he has been the nominal Director.

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<sup>48</sup> *The Railwayman*, ii, 38.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, iii, 256.

Oliphant's most comprehensive fictional account of degeneration is to be found in *The Cuckoo in the Nest*, in which the heir to the aristocratic Pierceys' estate is known variously as 'the Dafty' or 'the Softy'. The current owners of the estate, Sir Giles and his wife, are already invalids when the story starts. It gradually emerges that they married late, after Sir Giles's long dalliance in the village, and that the thirty-five-year-old from his own class he subsequently marries has a first baby who dies before giving birth to the current, mentally-enfeebled heir. An embarrassment to his hereditary social circle, the heir can find solace and a degree of esteem for his station in life only with the tradesmen and agricultural workers who frequent the local pub. The pub itself is introduced as a far cry from the major coaching inn it had been before a new road bypassed it. When 'The Dafty' marries the publican's daughter, the heir-in-waiting to the estate, a Colonel who has proved his worth in India, muses, 'A half-witted rustic youth, taken hold of by a pert barmaid, with numerous progeny to follow, worthy of both sides, was that what the Pierceys were to come to in the next generation?'<sup>50</sup> After the death of 'The Dafty' from an alcoholic jaunt, and that of his own father from old age, the Colonel is in line to inherit, but his autumnal marriage to a widowed relative, who already has a young son by a husband unrelated to the Pierceys, does not promise well for the continuation of this particular aristocratic bloodline.

In *The Railwayman and His Children*, the connection between somatic degeneration and living by an unhealthy moral code is made visible in the image of the wheelchair-bound Mr. Saumarez. Returning home from India as a newly-married, middle-aged woman, the Railwayman's wife encounters this suitor who had jilted her many years before. She now sees this prematurely aged man, still capable of cynically

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<sup>50</sup> *The Cuckoo in the Nest*, 3 vols. (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1892), ii, 32.

manipulating others, being taken out in a wheel-chair for an airing in Hyde Park, and reflects: ‘what must there be in his [life], to whom society was life, and who was cut off from all its pleasures? [...] God help him! What a condition to come to after all the experiences of his life!’.<sup>51</sup> A more worldly friend attempts to scotch her impulse to sympathy by warning her that Saumarez’s warped mind will leap upon this chance encounter to contrive a way of compromising her.

Oliphant’s frequent descriptions of ‘The Dafty’s’ ambling gait, clumsiness, moments of vacancy, and inappropriate laughter, and her use of Saumarez’s wasted body are deeply offensive to modern readers, but they are part and parcel of late nineteenth-century theories which aligned society’s woes with medical diagnoses of bodily deformities, and consequently provided a veneer of scientific authority for such discourses. One of Oliphant’s late novels, *A House in Bloomsbury*, indeed, provides an almost textbook examination of both the social hypotheses and the process through which such theories were entering professional medical discourse. It is no accident that this novel is set in a lodging house in Bloomsbury, ‘very much town indeed, surrounded on all sides by the roar of London; but it has something of the air of an individual place, a town within a town’.<sup>52</sup> Contemporary theories of degeneration ascribed much to rapid nineteenth-century urbanization. The quiet respectability of this particular area of London, and the partitioning of the house floor by floor, so that tenants are only obliged to meet accidentally on the staircase, both attracts and encourages the secretive patterns of behaviour of various lodgers who nurse long-hidden griefs to the ultimate detriment of both health and character. The attic rooms of the poorer shop-working couple are swiftly appropriated when they fall into debt and their accommodation is required for live-in nurses for a wealthier

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<sup>51</sup> *The Railwayman*, i, 48.

<sup>52</sup> *A House in Bloomsbury*, i, ch.1

lodger, but their previous proximity to middle-class standards of living makes them dissatisfied and envious. Poor health, job insecurity, an inherited criminal tendency, and the deviant morality of an underclass, are all suggested as possible reasons for the husband's criminal proclivities.

Among these lodgers also dwells a lonely doctor who is passionate about the use of psycho-physiognomy as a diagnostic procedure. The narrator comments of 'this sort of medical detective': 'Sometimes he was wrong—he had acknowledged as much to himself in one or two instances; but it was very seldom that this occurred. Those who take a pessimistic view either of the body or soul are bound to be right in many, if not in most cases, we are obliged to allow'.<sup>53</sup> Subsequent events prove his holistic diagnoses to be more reliable than those of a more renowned doctor who dismisses the 'moral' element, claiming, 'My dear sir, depend upon it, a bad drain is more to be reckoned with than all the tragedies of the world'.<sup>54</sup> However, the novel also provides a salutary commentary upon theories which attribute all ills to urban living. What use is it for the doctor repeatedly to prescribe country air to those who must live in Bloomsbury to be near their place of work, whether a department store or the British Museum? The novel's positive vision of the future for two young people 'both tall, both fair, two slim figures in their youthful grace, embodiments of all that was hopeful, strong, and lifelike',<sup>55</sup> eventually depends upon a fairy-tale inheritance of a country estate where the hitherto resourceful daughter of the tale will almost certainly busy herself in the roles of wife, mother, and lady bountiful.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., i, ch5.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., i, ch.7

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., ii, ch.25.

For all Oliphant's own long, professional career, her thinking about the nature of women's role remained conflicted. She had taken the precaution of providing her nieces with an artistic training, recognised that not every woman was likely to be fortunate in the marriage lottery, and knew from bitter experience that marriage was no guarantee against early widowhood and sole responsibility for the welfare of children of the marriage. In *The Cuckoo in the Nest*, the Colonel, freshly returned from India and feeling awkward about the plight of a genteel widowed cousin and her young son, expresses the view that Sutte is preferable to her dependent status. For her part, the widow reflects that, not having enjoyed the advantage of a Girton education, she is insufficiently qualified to gain any suitable post these days, though she also admits that men of her status find themselves similarly limited to anything beyond 'going out to an office daily'. The narrator, however, comments that the domestic routines and charitable occupations of 'an English lady' should not be despised: 'To do all these things is to be a not unimportant servant of the commonwealth'.<sup>56</sup> It was this conviction in the worth of the traditional English gentlewoman's life, and Oliphant's belief that marriage, despite the sustained campaign some of her contemporary novelists had launched against it, remained 'superior to everything'<sup>57</sup> that underpinned her attitude to the phenomenon of the New Woman so much discussed in the contemporary press.

New Women are frequently dismissed in her journalism of this period as unmarried girls whose intransigent demands for their own latchkeys form a trumped-up drama because, in her view, women's problems had been much alleviated over the

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<sup>56</sup> *The Cuckoo*, ii, 221.

<sup>57</sup> *The Railwayman*, I, 264)

last century.<sup>58</sup> They retain something of the stereotypical when they appear as walk-on parts in the late novels; nevertheless, the issues associated with the concept, such as marriage, maternity, and education also receive more thoughtful consideration. In *The Marriage of Elinor*, we hear that the Solicitor General of the day has three daughters, all of whom engage in charitable work in London's East End and visit St. Thomas's Hospital, home to England's first systematic professional training for nurses, while also training as an artist, a musician, and a classicist respectively. However, the narrator also remarks that they engage in these activities not because it was suddenly fashionable to do so, but that the fashion had liberated them 'from being hampered and restrained by parents and friends, who would have upbraided them for making themselves remarkable' in a previous generation.<sup>59</sup> The classicist's education evokes the comment that current advice to spend as much on a girl's as a boy's education is fine for those with adequate means, and even then should preferably be preceded by a signed agreement that the girl agrees not to marry a poor curate.<sup>60</sup> The similar combination of charitable work and attendance at the Slade School of Fine Art of a further modern girl in the novel, ironically named Dolly, is made comprehensible as a complete rejection of her mother's vacuous, self-centred socialite existence.<sup>61</sup> Revulsion at her father and brother's decadent self-indulgence also provides the animating impulse behind Rosamond Saumarez's desire for a profession: her problem is that she has as yet experienced no particular vocational calling. Yet she easily trumps an older woman's argument that her prime duty is to stay at home to nurse her crippled father by retaliating that convention would also dictate that, were she to

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<sup>58</sup> For Oliphant's frequent references to the way in which contemporary press and fiction had created the concept of the New Woman, see *Selected Works*, vol. 5, pp. 119; 379; 409-411; 423; 469-70.

<sup>59</sup> *Marriage of Elinor*, ii, 230.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, iii, 708.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, iii, 19



receive a good offer of marriage, traditionalists would see no objection to her leaving her father; why, therefore, having no intention of marrying, should she put his health before her own plans?<sup>62</sup> A further passage of arms, this time with the Railwayman, interrogates conflicting generationally gendered interpretations of the Victorian doctrine of work. Rosamond envisages ‘WORK’ as ‘the first thing in the world’, an ideal detached from financial considerations or end product, whereas the Railwayman sees it as a means to an end, whether for achieving great things, making a fortune or supporting one’s family.<sup>63</sup>

In the idealization of work which leads Rosamond to distinguish it from ‘mere nobodies, with shops and things, people one would not like to touch’,<sup>64</sup> Oliphant notes the dividing line between the New Woman, a concept popularised by middle and upper-class discourse, and the emergence of a new breed of working-class women. Her novel *Kirsteen* (1890) had arisen partly from her consciousness that the village dressmaker was rapidly giving way to working in a fashionable couturier’s house.<sup>65</sup> A ‘mere nobody’, the working-class wife in *A House in Bloomsbury*, dreams of a position in a department store and is well-informed about the pay and work differentials between the jobs of counter-assistant and model.<sup>66</sup> Patty, the socially aspiring barmaid of *The Cuckoo in the Nest*, is a clever girl who has attained the highest level of education then available in elementary schools, and this, combined with her experience of dealing with unruly drunkards and dissatisfied customers, provides her both with the ability to cope with the ‘Dafty’ and with the self-confidence to handle the challenges of a fresh milieu. Her eventual re-marriage to the

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<sup>62</sup> *The Railwayman*, i, 122-5.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, ###.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, iii, 259-63.

<sup>65</sup> ‘A Commentary in an Easy Chair,’ *Spectator*, 4 October 1890, pp 438-9, reprinted in *Selected Works*, Vol.5, pp 325-28.

<sup>66</sup> *A House in Bloomsbury*, i, pp. 8-9

village butcher offers her a chance of mixing in genteel circles by virtue of his becoming a professional cricketer and thus admitted to the MCC.<sup>67</sup> No wonder that Thomas Hardy, whose bumptious barmaid, Arabella Donn/Fawley/Cartlett/Fawley, is always destined, like Jude, to remain among the working-classes, disapproved of Oliphant.<sup>68</sup>

Patty releases the story of her resignation of her late husband's ancestral home to a newspaper, and in this fictional press release lies Oliphant's recognition that this was the new form to which such tales were best suited. The many obituarists who claimed that Oliphant's fiction had continued to the end to be essentially conservative failed to appreciate that her *fin-de-siècle* novels embodied the realisation that, lament as she might the values of romantic fidelity and female self-sacrifice with which her earlier fiction had been imbued, they were no longer *à la mode*. Girls no longer waited for a lover to return from India, or if they did, found they had married and enjoyed another life there and were no longer the suitors of yore.<sup>69</sup>

Far from being a series of tired rechauffés of former triumphs, or nostalgic revivals of passé sentiments, her late fiction reflected Oliphant's sense of a changed world. The reason why those who recalled the kind of pleasure offered by her Carlingford Chronicles ceased to read her late fiction may well have been that they preferred accounts of a more stable, and on the whole kinder, provincial society to the

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<sup>67</sup> Established in 1787 as a private club where the upper-classes could play cricket the Marylebone Cricket Club became the guardian and arbiter of the game's rules. Could Oliphant's reference here have been prompted by the laying of the foundation stone of a new Pavilion funded by a gin distiller in 1889?

<sup>68</sup> In his 1912 Postscript to *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy denounced Oliphant's caustic review of the novel in 'The Anti-Marriage League' (see above n. 23) as 'the screaming of a poor lady in Blackwood'. T. Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (London: Macmillan, 1912), p. xi.

<sup>69</sup> The fate of Katherine in *Old Mr Tredgold*.

darker vision of the late tales where swifter travel and greater wealth had led to a disintegration of traditional social and moral hierarchies.