



The INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR
**Victorian
 Women Writers**
Newsletter

Director's Cut

CAROLYN OULTON

Extra jersey, sharing favourite books, and other top tips on getting through the winter while watching the pennies. We do try to be helpful, after all what are friends for?

Good question. In this issue Alex Round gets us asking, what makes for an ideal friendship? Similar interests, exchanging poems in each other's honour, or just the occasional jaunt on horseback?

My own memories of the last involve an ill-fitting hat belonging to my older brother, a superannuated carthorse and an unscheduled leap over an apparently irresistible pole. So personally I'd stick to drawing adorable pictures, except that I can't do that either. Barbara Leigh Smith, Bessie Parkes and Anna Mary Howitt – I'm assuming this means I can't be in your gang?

In our guest interview Azelina Flint introduces us to May Alcott Nieriker, who also got stitched up by a sibling – an artist in her own right, she was doomed to be remembered for generations as the unlovable Amy March of Little Women. But what could she possibly have in common with Christina Rossetti?

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We want to hear from you! Get in touch with us:



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Not a trip to Kent, as far as we know. Although that's something that does link Rossetti to another (originally) Christian intellectual, Marian Evans. English student Louise Baser takes us back to this year's Kent Maps Online symposium, where ICVWW PhD student and KMO Co-Lead Michelle Crowther tracked the woman we now know as George Eliot to the Kent coast. Find out how one of the nineteenth century's most famous writers lived on a guinea a week and which town she referred to as "a strip of London come out for a good airing." Michelle also investigated Henrietta Stannard's budget holiday – if you wished you were there, you can always catch up by rewatching the [online recording](#).

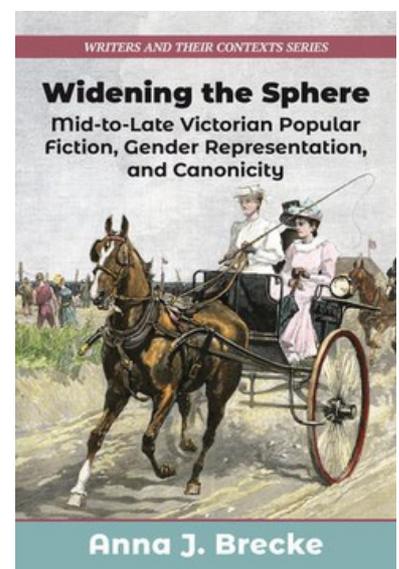
Although we were joking about the second jersey. Thermals every time.

New Release

Widening the Sphere: Mid-to-Late Victorian Popular Fiction, Gender Representation, and Canonicity Anna J. Brecke

This work addresses the erasure of popular women writers in the formation of Victorian studies. Dr. Brecke begins with a genealogy of studies on Victorian novels from the 1880s through to contemporary scholarship. She tracks the range of writers and genres included before and after the mid-century point. She then turns to examples from sensation, New Woman, and speculative fiction to illustrate the way in which female characters and gendered spaces in these genres transgress norms of feminine representation commonly associated with realist fiction.

Novels and short stories by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Marie Corelli, Rhoda Broughton, Florence Marryat, Amy Levy and Eliza Lynn Linton reveal that gender and space interact differently in popular genres where the "separate spheres" of public and private life frequently intertwine. By combining the history of Victorian fiction with readings of representative writers, this new work presents an invaluable and fuller understanding of the scope of Victorian authorship and the representation of female characters.



Out of the Archives: Epistolary Friendships

ALEX ROUND

There has been an explosion of interest surrounding the lives of ostracised women writers of the nineteenth century, as well the urgent need to recover their personal and professional efforts. I have always been fascinated by the true potentialities of female friendship, and how female creators communicate and collaborate on a creative and domestic scale. My current research delves into the foundations of the Pre-Raphaelite women's network, exploring these women and their friendships in depth, as well their creative and political agency.

Despite many fruitless trips to archives country-wide, I recently found a series of unpublished letters between three of the key women my research concerns. Barbara Leigh Smith, Bessie Parkes and Anna Mary Howitt, were all esteemed artists, writers and activists of the mid-nineteenth century, but have until recent times been forgotten. Their friendship was cemented by their growing frustrations concerning the status of women at the time, and much of their early correspondences talk of acquiring their own income and becoming professional writers and artists.



In their letters, it is clear that they condemned the exclusion of women from the working world. One of Parkes earlier letters includes an unpublished poem addressed to Leigh Smith in 1847, when she was just eighteen. In this letter, she parodies Pope's *Rape of the Lock* (1712), claiming that he 'maligned all womankind', and in turn tributes women's true creative genius. [1]

BESSIE RAYNER PARKES
COURTESY OF WIKICOMMONS

It is evident that the woman question dominated their epistolary discussions:

**Dear Barbara,
In discussing various questions,
The truth of morals, or the fate of nations,
A subject co-important with the state,
Our sex, has held due place in our debate. [2]**

Leigh Smith's surviving correspondence to Parkes is no different. A letter of hers written in 1847 contains a short poem dedicated to Parkes, with an accompanying illustration in pen of two women cantering on horseback. It is likely that the sketch is a depiction of the two during their travels together. Leigh Smith's poem references Parkes's aspirations to be a published poet, whilst directly challenging misogynistic attitudes that certain male authors upheld:

To Bessie xxxxxx

**[...] Oh! I remember very well,
You a hundred times did tell,
How you wish you could excel,
In poesy - of heaven and hell
We prated.
We have dealt heavy blows at Moses
And at this theory Lock supposes. [3]**

It is likely that Leigh Smith's poem is a reply to Parkes's earlier letter, due to the corresponding date of the letter and reference to Pope's *Rape of the Lock*. These letters show their growing interest in women's rights. The letters also prove how they played a crucial role in ensuring the success of their political alliance during their later years.



A 19TH PRINT OF ARABELLA FERMOR,
MADE FAMOUS BY ALEXANDER POPE'S
THE RAPE OF THE LOCK
COURTESY OF WIKICOMMONS

They also discussed a broad range of art, literature, politics and philosophy. Howitt's mother lent them copies of Chaucer, and they were encouraged to read Shakespeare's plays, as well as the works of Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill which they admired. Another delightful example of their correspondence is their discussions of Tennyson's *The Princess* (1847). The poem focuses on the heroine Princess Ida, who establishes a women's university where men are forbidden to enrol. Unsurprisingly, the poem's ideas and its subversion of gender norms chimes with the preoccupations of Parkes, Leigh Smith and Howitt. Howitt described the poem to the girls in a letter as a 'poem on women's education, women's rights, women's true being'. [4] Howitt also felt that the heroine of the poem, Ida, resembled Leigh Smith in her strong will and determination. Parkes was also fascinated with Ida, and wrote of her as the 'very ideal of womanhood'. [5] Parkes penned that she agreed with Howitt's interpretation of Ida, but disagreed with Howitt's comparison to their friend, as she felt the heroine's outcome did not match with Leigh Smith's stubborn nature. Leigh Smith's replies are not currently traceable, but Parkes stated that she agreed with Leigh Smith's thoughts that Ida was 'the cure of our great social evils', which implies that Leigh Smith agreed with the girl's interpretations. [6]

It is clear that Howitt, Parkes and Leigh Smith's discussions concerning literature, politics and philosophy were spurs to their eventual social and political efforts. Their correspondence also serves as evidence of their passion for the visual and literary arts and chiefly, their budding friendship.

[1] BRP, letter to BLS, 1847, GCPP Parkes 5/1

[2] Ibid.

[3] BLS, letter to BRP, 1847, GCPP Parkes 5/161

[4] AMH, letter to BLS, n.d., quoted in Pam Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, pp. 34-35.

[5] BRP, letter to BLS, 1848, GCPP Parkes 5/19 and 5/20

[6] Ibid.



BARBARA LEIGH SMITH
COURTESY OF WIKICOMMONS

If you are working on an archival project featuring Victorian(ish) women writers, we'd love to hear from you! Drop us an email at ICVWW@canterbury.ac.uk or get in touch via Twitter or Facebook @ICVWW.

Interview with a Guest

**THIS ISSUE WE SPOKE WITH AZELINA FLINT,
LECTURER IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY
LITERATURE AT LANCASTER UNIVERSITY**



What are you currently working on?

My current project, “Devotional Criticism: Women’s Iconography and Reading as Pilgrimage”, reflects on how the understudied field of women's iconography can influence the ways in which we study nineteenth-century women's devotional writing. Contemporary women's iconography is an especially appropriate medium to explore the subversive potential of women's spirituality because it reflects the creative ways in which women respond to the challenges of working within ancient religious traditions. As part of my research, I've interviewed a number of female iconographers about their experiences. One of these iconographers, Rev Dr Angela Yarber – a leading LGBT+ theologian – led an exhibition and workshop on queering the icon at the Lancaster Priory last summer. More recently, I gave a presentation on how we might create an icon of Louisa May Alcott at the Annual Thoreau Society Gathering in July. Some of the delegates even had a go at making their own icons!

What would your dream research project be?

To complete the first biography of May Alcott Nieriker – the subject of *The Forgotten Alcott!* I'll be exploring her archives as a Harvard Houghton Library Fellow in July. Some of my students recently launched a digital archive of her unpublished short story, “My Owl”: My Owl (lancaster.ac.uk).



IMAGE OF MAY ALCOTT NIERIKER
COURTESY OF WIKICOMMONS

Can you tell us a little about your two recent books, *The Matrilineal Heritage of Louisa May Alcott and Christina Rossetti* (2021) and *The Forgotten Alcott: Essays on the Artistic Legacy and Literary Life of May Alcott Nieriker* (2021)?

The Forgotten Alcott is the first academic study of May Alcott Nieriker – Louisa May Alcott's youngest sister and the inspiration of Amy March in *Little Women*. Amy is everyone's least favourite March sister and May didn't like very her much, either! She thought that *Little Women* was a very biased portrayal of her childhood. After all, who wants their sibling to write a novel about them? May's life was far more interesting than Amy's – she volunteered at school for freed people, established Concord's first art museum, created copies of Turner that were commended by Ruskin, authored the first manual for female artists studying art abroad, worked as an art critic, and created two remarkable portraits of Black people. We think she's been forgotten because she was a "Renaissance woman" whose achievements can't be neatly categorized. And, her life doesn't conform to the "repression narrative". She travelled across Europe before marrying a man who respected her artistic accomplishments. It's unfortunate that she died so young at the age of thirty-nine. If she'd lived longer, her fame might have rivalled her sister's!

The Matrilineal Heritage of Louisa May Alcott and Christina Rossetti recovers the influence of the devotional practices of the authors' mothers and sisters on their visions of female creativity. In contradiction to much of the feminist scholarship on Alcott and Rossetti, I show that the authors' spiritualities enriched, rather than limited, their feminism. Drawing upon unpublished life writing and juvenilia, I reveal that the matrilineal communities' shared experiences in prayer and meditation informed Alcott's and Rossetti's portrayals of female artists. In doing so, I uncover an unexpected connection with the medieval mystics whose writings were shaped by embodied experiences that challenged the Church's institutional authority. Ultimately, I discover that Alcott and Rossetti had much more in common than readers might expect. Even though their religious beliefs were vastly different, their experience in their matrilineal communities was remarkably similar. They participated in a spiritual heritage that transforms our understanding of transnational communities and continues to inspire many women of faith across the world today.

What drew you towards these projects in the first place?

Like so many of my students, I took a strong interest in the autobiographical contexts and literary communities of my favourite writers growing up. I noticed similarities between Alcott and Rossetti that no one had really reflected on before. Both women grew up in seminal nineteenth-century artistic movements that were inspired by Romantic models of creativity. Yet, they never really became members of these movements and instead affiliated themselves with their mothers and sisters. Despite this, so many scholars have taken pains to connect Alcott and Rossetti with the Transcendentalists and Pre-Raphaelites, while relatively few have taken a serious interest in their mothers and sisters. I wanted to explore why this was the case and, in doing so, I discovered May Alcott Nieriker. Her diaries and letters convinced me that we should know more about her!

If you could have three Victorians round for tea, who would you choose and why?

1. Top the Wombat. Poor Top – I think Dante Gabriel Rossetti did love him, really, but had no idea how to care for exotic animals. I would introduce DGR to a zoologist, who would teach him to take better care of Top and thereby prevent Top's premature death and subsequent taxidermification.
2. Dante Alighieri – yes, he's not a Victorian, but he might as well be given the Victorian obsession with him. I'd introduce him to some of the Victorian paintings and poems about him and ask him what he thought of them... And, I'd want to know if he was a secret freemason like Gabriele Rossetti said he was.
3. Alf Whitman – the inspiration for Laurie in *Little Women*. Alf was friends with all of the Alcott sisters and he often acted as a 'peace-maker' when they didn't get along. He kept many of the family secrets and I think I'd get more gossip out of him than the sisters themselves. I'd want to know if Louisa identified as non-binary (she famously said, 'I am more than half-persuaded that I am a man's soul, put ... into a woman's body'); the identity of the person who broke Elizabeth's heart (mysteriously referred to as "C." in Louisa's journals); whether May was at all like Amy (she wrote to Alf, "Did you recognise ... that horrid stupid Amy as something like me?"); and if Anna (Meg) spent her entire life trying to escape the Alcotts (her journals mention that she prefers her husband to her family more than once).

Kent Maps Symposium 2022

LOUISE BASER

The 2022 Kent Maps symposium happily coincided with Kent Day, on 26 May, providing us with the perfect reason to celebrate with a trip to the seaside. Our first companion and guide was Michelle Crowther, who accompanied us back to the nineteenth century seaside in the paper “How to Live Cheaply at the Seaside – The Kent Coast as Writers’ Retreat”. Crowther explained how the Kent coastline influenced three Victorian women writers while exploring their motivations for taking the in the Kentish Sea air.



WHITE CLIFFS OF DOVER
COURTESY OF WIKICOMMONS

Crowther first explained how Mary Ann Evans (better known as George Eliot), disillusioned with her monotonous work at the *Westminster Review*, took to the Kent coast in the summer of 1852. Evans retreated to Broadstairs and to Chandos Cottage where she lived rather frugally on just one guinea per week. She avoided the busier Ramsgate, which she described as “a strip of London come out for a good airing.” Evans took a couple of months out of her busy London life to rejuvenate in the sea air and enjoy the peaceful coastal town, and she appeared to benefit from this temporary change of pace and environment, stating “I am thinking whether it would not be wise to retire from the world, and live here for the rest of my days. With some fresh paper on the walls and an easy chair, I think I could resign myself.” Evans returned to Kent once more with a stay at a hotel on Snargate Street in Dover with her married lover George Henry Lewis, yet her writings do not seem to reflect her time at the Kent coast, focusing more on the Midlands rather than on the White Cliffs. Crowther, however, believes that there might be a reflection on Evans’s six-week-stay in Dover in *Middlemarch*, arguing that Joshua Rigg could perhaps have been a secret Doverian.

Next to take to the seaside was Florence Warden, who published *Little Miss Prim* – set in Dover – in 1898. Warden came from a privileged background, but as a child she saw her father end up in debtor’s prison and as an adult was in and out of debt herself. Warden was married with children and the main earner in her family, with her failed actor husband working for her. She was a prolific writer of over 150 books which includes books reflecting on the local area. As Crowther explained, “the Kentish landscape provides a backdrop for romantic liaisons and sensational plot lines”. [1] By 1909 Warden was on the brink of bankruptcy and, with the popularity of her books waning, she was forced to sell her home in Sandgate (Folkestone) and finally leave Kent.

Crowther additionally looked at Henrietta Vaughan Stannard (also known as John Strange Winter) during the symposium. Stannard also stayed in Kent, but her time there coincided with a period of financial difficulties. Stannard wrote some successful novels during her career, but the writing of her own journal *The Golden Gates* made a striking loss and pushed the family into serious financial trouble. Importantly, Stannard often claimed that she was in Kent because of a family member’s ill health, rather than admitting to her financial situation.



LEFT TO RIGHT: MARY ANN EVANS (GEORGE ELIOT), FLORENCE WARDEN, HENRIETTA ELIZA VAUGHAN STANNARD (JOHN STRANGE WINTER)
COURTESY OF WIKICOMMONS

After the Kent Seaside excursions, the symposium continued with a variety of speakers including Dr Ralph Norman, who gave an enlightening talk on “Global Canterbury, Victorian Missions on the Map”. This explained Canterbury’s place in the world during the nineteenth century. Norman’s discussion was followed by Dr Diane Heath who delighted everyone with her Lottery funded local project on “Medieval Animals”. In the United States, Ron Snyder from JSTOR Labs spoke remotely about the strong collaboration between JSTOR Labs and CCCU on Kent Maps Online. Concluding this year’s symposium (or perhaps ending with a bang?), Professor Carolyn Oulton launched her new book *Down from London*, which is an all too familiar term used by locals to describe seaside visitors (as well as Marian Evans, apparently) and delighted us with some insights into the research for this book, including those which are currently held in the Library.

For those of us attending the symposium in person, the opportunity to hold some of the texts which Oulton includes in her book transported us back in time and allowed us to feel part of Kent’s heritage. Carolyn announced that these texts are to be donated to the CCCU library as part of a special collection, allowing future students the opportunity to not only explore the stories, but to perhaps pick up the mantle and continue exploring Kent.

{1] Michelle Crowther, 'Florence Warden', *Kent Maps Online*

<<https://kent-maps.online/19c/19c-florence-warden-biography/>>



PHOTOS FROM THE SYMPOSIUM
COURTESY OF DANIEL VINCE

Upcoming Conferences, Events, and Calls for Papers

- CFP: British Women Writers Conference: Liberties. The organisers of the 2023 BWWC invite papers and panel proposals interpreting the theme of 'Liberties' in global and transatlantic British women's writing from the long eighteenth century to the present. For more information go to: <http://bwwc23.com/cfp/>. Abstracts due 15 January 2023.
- CFP: Re-Articulating 'The Third Sex': Victorian and neo-Victorian Engagements with LGBTQIA+, *VPFJ*. Abstracts of 300 words are due by 18 November 2022. Full articles (of 7-8,000 words) are due by September 2023.
- CFP: "Representing Women's Resilience in the 19th Century", NeMLA. This panel seeks explorations of 19th-century women's tools for resilience; how women authors and characters sought to maintain their sense of identity amid extended oppression. Abstracts of 250-300 words should be submitted directly on the NeMLA website by 30 September 2022.
- CFP: Expanding the Canon: Essays on the Minor Books of Louisa May Alcott. Deadline for abstract of no more than 350 words to LHehmeyer@gmail.com and elbertm@montclair.edu. Submission deadline is 1 November 2022.
- CFP: The Latchkey: A Journal of New Woman Studies. *The Latchkey* is devoted to the concept of the New Woman, covering the lives and writings of New Women authors and figures, the representation of the New Woman in literature, culture, art, and society, proto-feminism and early feminist journalism. Submission requirements and style guidelines can be found on the journal's website. Submission deadline: 30 November 2022.
- Exhibition: The Enigmatic Eliza Lynn Linton: Loves, Lies and Literature at the Keswick Museum, open until March 2023. For more information, visit: <https://keswickmuseum.org.uk/whats-on/event/the-enigmatic-eliza-lynn-linton-loves-lies-and-literature/>.

If you have an upcoming event or CfP to share with us, please get in touch!