

# Mary Gaunt – a biography



Bronwen Hickman, BA (Melb.) 1980, Dip.Ed (Melb.) 1980

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Communication, Language and Cultural Studies Department, Faculty of Arts, Victoria University of Technology.

June 1998

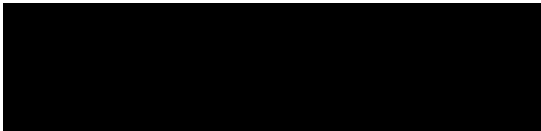
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# Declaration

It is hereby certified that:

1. The work is that of the candidate alone (except where due acknowledgement has been made) and has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, in respect of any other academic award.
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A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of Bronwen Hickman.

(Bronwen Hickman)

*15 December 1997.*

## Abstract

If a nation's story is told by the weaving together of the strands of individual lives, the biographies of its achievers, then the story of Mary Gaunt adds an important thread of colour and interest to the tapestry of Australia's identity. Born on the Victorian goldfields in 1861, she grew up in Colonial Victoria. She was the first woman to study at Melbourne University. She travelled in the forests of West Africa and across China and wrote books and gave lectures on her travels. She was a successful novelist; she pushed against the limitations of women's lives in her own life and in her fiction, and one of her books was banned in England as a result. She lived in Europe for the second half of her life, but remained proudly Australian; many of her books were set in Australia. Her depiction of life on the goldfields, in the bush, in shanty towns in the Colonies, and in particular her depiction of life for women, is a valuable record of a world long gone.

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*This photograph of Mary Gaunt appeared in Alone in West Africa in 1912, when Mary was fifty-one. The date of the photograph is unknown.*

## Acknowledgements

I acknowledge with thanks the award of a postgraduate travelling scholarship by Victoria University which assisted me to travel to Italy, France and England in 1996 to do research for this book.

I was in England for six weeks of research in November-December 1996. I was grateful for the help of staff members in the British Library Manuscripts Section, the Guildhall Library and India Office Library, London, and the William Salt Library in Stafford and the Local History Library in Liverpool. I award gold stars to Jill Crowther, of the Hull Central Library, for getting the Winifred Holtby letters to me just in time before I left England; and to Michael Bott, who found me useful papers in the Methuen and Macmillan archives and saved me a trip to Reading. I record my thanks to Paul Berry, for his permission to get access to the Winifred Holtby letters; to Miss Elsie Gladman, who nursed Mary Gaunt in her last years; to Margaret Ludlow, who I met in the Canterbury Records Office, and to Mr. Howard Rigney, who disregarded the pouring rain to help me find the last resting place of Elsie Lang and her family at Sittingbourne in Kent.

In France I received kindness and help from Pamela and Neville Flower, who took me to the English Hospital and English Cemetery in Cannes; in Bordighera, Italy, I found many kind and courteous people: the staff at the Biblioteca Civica Internazionale (International Library) and the Istituto Internazionale di Studi Liguri (the Bicknell Institute); Signora Igina Bini at the Hotel Windsor Tennis; Avvocato Moreno, who recalled the days of the English in Bordighera; and Sergio Biancheri, who found ways to open many doors, and whose introduction of me as 'our guest' I treasure.

My thanks to the New York Public Library for copies of Mary Gaunt letters in the Century Collection; to the Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina for copies of Gaunt correspondence in the A.P.Watt archive; and to the Lockwood Library, State University of New York, Buffalo, for a Mary Gaunt letter.

In Australia, I have spent many hours in the Public Record Office in Laverton, the Baillieu Library at Melbourne University, and the State Library of Victoria. I am indebted to their staffs for their patience and help. I have also been glad to gain access to Melbourne University Archives, the Burke Museum at Beechworth, the Wyndham City Library, the Mitchell

Library in Sydney, the National Library and the Australian Archives, Canberra. I thank the staff at Deakin University, Warrnambool – Jan Critchett, Jeanette Rhedding-Jones and Jennifer Bantow – for their welcome and their help. People and organisations have made their records available to me: Brian Woodyatt of the Ballarat Club; the Warrnambool Hospital; the Flagstaff Museum Warrnambool; Craig's Hotel, Ballarat, Mary Lugton, of the Baillieu Library, who must have been the first to gather together information about Mary Gaunt. Rex Fuge helped me with Chiltern records; David Perrin knew about Ballarat and the Gaunts; Helen Harris found me a William Gaunt letter, and Dudley Sheppard lent me his goldfields map.

I am grateful to Ian McLaren, whose trail-blazing bibliography of Mary Gaunt has been of inestimable help to me, and who allowed me access to his working papers, which provided many promising leads.

I have been grateful for expert medical advice from Professor Harold Attwood, Dr. Chris Buckley and Dr. Robert Hare, and to Harold Love for the tip-off that led me to the records of Lindsay Miller's death.

I owe a great debt to members of the Gaunt, Palmer and Morrison families, who have been courteous, helpful and hospitable during my long quest. I remember with pleasure my meetings with Yvonne and Dick Fox, Michael Hemery, Jean Bowyer and her daughter Carol, Desmond and Kay Gaunt and Jill Marshall; I am also grateful to Libby Thomson and Geoff Palmer, whom I hope to meet one day, and to Don Webb, Janice Hilton and Alastair Morrison. My thanks also to Wilma Davies and Helen McCallum, who, although not members of these families, have been helpful sources of information on them.

Some people are generous with help in wider spheres, and I remember with gratitude Paddy Morgan's advice and guidance which gave me several fruitful research paths to follow; and Rosaleen Love, whose patience and enthusiasm and interest and expertise have been a great help to me.

It is no small thing to look back over three years of intensive work – over thirty years of interest and compiling – and remember so many kindnesses, so many wonderful people and experiences that I have known in the writing of this thesis.





*The only known picture of Elizabeth Gaunt (nee Palmer), taken before her marriage to William in 1860.*



*William Henry Gaunt in the 1860s.*



*Mary Gaunt, aged twelve, on the right, and her sister Lucy, aged eleven, on the left.*

*Pictures on this page reproduced from Woman's Magazine Annual, 1938, in which they appeared with Mary's part autobiography.*

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# Chronology

- 20 Feb 1861      Mary born to William Henry and Elizabeth (nee Palmer) at Indigo, Chiltern, Vic.
- March 1865      Gaunt family moves to Beechworth.
- January 1869    After several moves, Gaunt family settles in Ballarat.
- 1876              Mary sits Matriculation - passes Latin, French, English, Arithmetic, Algebra, Euclid, History(well), Geography.
- 1881              Studies at Melbourne University.
- 1887              Cassell's *Picturesque Australasia* published.
- 7 Feb 1890      Sails for England. Overseas 1890-91
- March 1894      *Dave's Sweetheart* published by Edward Arnold.
- 8 Aug 1894      Marries Dr. H.L.Miller, widower, at St.George's Church of England, Glenferrie Road, Malvern.
- Sept 1895        *The Moving Finger* (short stories), Methuen & Co.
- August 1897    *Kirkham's Find*: Mary's most autobiographical novel.
- Sept 1898        *Deadman's*, Methuen. Set in goldfields of north-eastern Victoria.
- 30 Oct 1900      Lindsay Miller dies at Kew.
- 15 March 1901   Mary sails for London via South Africa on *Runic*. Moves into Finborough Road.
- October 1904    *The Arm of the Leopard: a West African Story*, with John Ridgwell Essex, published by Grant Richards.
- 1905              Lives for several months in Sheffield.
- Nov 1906        *Fools Rush In - a West African Story*, with Essex, published by Heinemann.
- April 1908       First journey to Africa – down the coast from Sierra Leone to San Paul de Loando; Congo River, etc. Returns September.

January 1909     *The Silent Ones*, with John Ridgewell Essex, published by T.Werner Laurie, London.

**1910**

January             *The Uncounted Cost.*  
August             *The Mummy Moves*  
November         Leaves on second trip to Africa.

28 Nov 1911     Mary lectures to Royal Colonial Institute: 'British and German Influence in West Africa'.

January 1912     *Alone in West Africa*

31 Jan 1913     Leaves for China  
February 1913   *Every Man's Desire* (dedicated to Warrnambool).

Nov 1914         *A Woman in China*

October 1915     *The Ends of the Earth* (short stories).  
Living at Mary Haven, New Eltham, near London.

Feb 1919         *A Broken Journey: Wanderings from the Hoang-Ho to Saghalien*  
April               *A Wind from the Wilderness,*  
September (?)    Travels to Jamaica

February 1920   *The Surrender and other Happenings* (short stories).

March 1921       Leaves Jamaica; returns to England then moves to hill-top village of Sainte Agnes, near Menton, southern France.

October 1921     Living at Hotel de Paris, Bordighera

Nov 1922         *Where the Twain Meet* - published by John Murray.

March 1923       Living at 6, via Sant' Ampeglio, Bordighera, Italy.  
October           *As the Whirlwind Passeth.*

Sept 1926         *The Forbidden Town* published by T.Fisher Unwin Ltd.

January 1927     *Saul's Daughter.*

1929               *George Washington and the Men who made the American Revolution*, A & C Black.  
April 1929         *The Lawless Frontier*, Benn.

April 1930         *Joan of the Pilchard*

March 1932       *Reflection - in Jamaica.*

February 1933   *Harmony: A Tale of the Old Slave Days of Jamaica*

Sept 1934	<i>World's Away.</i>
Sept 1939 22 Sept.	Britain and France declare war on Germany Mary crosses border into France (Menton), returns home to Bordighera two weeks later.
June 1940 10 June	Last British residents in Bordighera flee to France. Mary settles in Vence. Italy enters war on side of Axis powers
June 1941	Enters Sunny Bank, English hospital in Cannes.
19 Jan 1942	Mary dies at Sunnybank Hospital, Cannes.

## Introduction

Mary Gaunt was well-known to her contemporaries as a traveller and writer, an independent woman. She was the first woman to study at Melbourne University when the doors were finally opened to women in 1881. She was a prolific writer but, apart from her publications, the written record of her life is extremely limited.

Writing about her life has not been easy. There was little enough to work on when I started my search in earnest four years ago. In 1979 Mary Lugton, of the Baillieu Library, Melbourne University, compiled four pages of notes about Mary Gaunt. The Melbourne historian Joan Gillison gave a lecture to the Royal Historical Society of Victoria on 'Two Invincible Ladies: Louisa Anne Meredith and Mary Gaunt' which was published in the Society's journal in May 1980. Then, in 1986, a Melbourne bibliographer, Ian McLaren, compiled a detailed list of Mary Gaunt's publications, and included twelve pages about her life. These three works were just about all that was known about Mary Gaunt.

Ellinor Archer, Mary Gaunt's niece, put it on record that her aunt had kept a diary all her life. Where were her diaries? Where was the manuscript of her autobiography that was known to exist? her papers, letters, work in progress? What happened to it all? There have been a number of conjectures, which took colour from the fact that she died in France in 1942, during the Second World War. One interesting theory was that '... much of the property belonging to the [British] refugees was placed in the English Church at Bordighera, but was given away or destroyed when the church was pulled down [in 1985]'.<sup>1</sup> But when I went to Italy I found the English Church, intact and lovingly cared for by the townspeople of Bordighera (although no longer a church – it is an arts centre). Miss Elsie Gladman, a young nurse at the English Hospital in Cannes when Mary Gaunt died, explained how scrupulously the belongings of patients were stored until after the war and then returned to their families. (She was sure this was done, because the old umbrella promised to her by one of the patients arrived by mail to her home in England after the war.)

I believe many of Mary Gaunt's belongings, including her diaries, did reach Australia, and may still exist. I live in hope that one day I will come

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<sup>1</sup> As told to Ian McLaren by an unknown informant; McLaren papers, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.



across a dusty box of papers in the far corner of a library, or in somebody's back room, and the diaries will be there. And the letters and manuscripts, and all the things that would have made writing a biography so much easier!

There are some things that may never be known unless these things are found. Who was her co-writer, John Ridg(e)well Essex? While I was researching in London, I would start out day after day, from my room near the British Museum thinking: I'll find him today. He's in there somewhere – I'll winkle him out, wherever he is. But day followed day of fruitless searching: I combed indexes of likely books, checked lists of civil servants, traders, diplomats, writers – there was nothing. Nobody lives and dies – and writes three books – without leaving any trace; there must be a record somewhere if John Ridg(e)well Essex really existed. But perhaps he never did: perhaps the name is a pen-name to shield the anonymity of someone in an important position in the Colonial Office, for example. We may never know.

One small triumph during my searching was the discovery of part of Mary Gaunt's autobiography. In Australia, and while I was in England, I combed archives and indexes for any mention of letters she wrote, and collected together sixty-four letters, memos and contracts to, by, with or about her. In a letter to the publishers, Macmillan, she mentioned that the *Woman's Magazine* had published part of her autobiography, and I was able to track it down. (There is now a copy in the Baillieu Library, Melbourne University). With the help of colleagues, I have also been able to add two complete book-length works to the list of serial fiction in the Bibliography.

Of the sixty-four letters and papers I located, only twenty-three are letters written by Mary Gaunt herself. The papers mostly relate to publishing her books, and some have been helpful in compiling this biography. Most of the letters are about publishing, too, but some, like the five personal ones to Winifred Holtby, have been a treasure trove of interesting detail about Mary's life.

This book is not a literary biography. I have read Mary Gaunt's books and stories and articles, not judging their literary merits, but searching for clues about Mary herself; looking for hints about her own life and ideas.

I have relied sometimes on an unreliable source – Mary herself. She wrote her autobiography sometime in the 1930s, when she was in her seventies. As it is the only record of her some parts of her childhood I have quoted from it on occasion, but I am well aware that she took liberties with the truth at times, and that looking back over sixty years, from the other side

of the world, can give a rosy glow to the past for even the most objective writer.

I was fortunate to meet people who provided information that may never appear in written records. In Italy, I met Signor Moreno, who had played tennis in the English Tennis Club at Bordighera before the Second World War – one of the few Italians to do so. The golden days came to an end for him when, recruited into the Italian Army, he was sent away to fight . . . against the British! In England I found Miss Elsie Gladman through the book of her experiences as a nurse at Sunny Bank, and heard from her about the difficulties of caring for elderly, sick British expatriates who were trapped by the war in occupied France, Mary Gaunt among them. To both these people, I owe a considerable debt.

I have heard biography compared to the study of crystallography. If we want to know about the structure of a crystal, we beam X-rays at it, and study the way in which the beams are deflected by the various components. We feed the results into a computer, and the computer constructs an image of the structure of the crystal. We cannot say 'This is what the crystal is like', we can only say that this is the best guess we can make about it. From many tiny details fed into a computer I have put together a composite, a biography. I cannot say 'This is what Mary Gaunt is like'. All I can say is: 'This is the best construction I can make; it is my picture of her life'.





# I

## The Goldfields

Young William Gaunt stepped ashore in Melbourne from the immigrant ship, the *Ganges* on 22nd June 1853. Hobson's Bay was crowded with ships from all over the world; close to 100,000 people were to arrive in the Colony of Victoria in that second great year of the gold rushes, and half of that number came from overseas, beyond the Australian colonies.

Since the discovery of the first gold had been made known almost two years before, the Colony of Victoria had grown rapidly, with new goldfields opening up one after another. William was following on the heels of the nearly 96,000 immigrants who had arrived in the previous year, lured by the promise of gold.

After its long-discussed and long-awaited separation from New South Wales in 1851, the infant colony was faced with the challenge of a huge influx of gold-seekers and adventurers – and with providing the administrative machinery to keep order amongst them all.

It was not easy. Many of the passengers who disembarked at Sandridge, Williamstown and the Yarra headed for Melbourne, and the small township began to reach saturation point. Archibald Michie described it in 1852: 'Melbourne is like an inferior English town, unpaved, unlighted, muddy, miserable and dangerous'.<sup>1</sup> As shiploads of gold-seekers arrived, they overflowed into a vast tent city, a kind of holding camp for the goldfields, which grew up south of the town on the banks of the Yarra River to the west of the present St. Kilda Road.

Most of the new arrivals headed north to dig for gold, but some saw the opportunities elsewhere. The files of the Chief Secretary, who administered the Colony, filled with letters from new settlers looking for jobs. Most of them offered testimonials and securities from people of influence and prestige, or from solid citizens in trade or business.

William Gaunt added his letter to the files. He applied to the Chief Commissioner of Police, and then to the Goldfields Commissioner, enclosing testimonials from his previous employment with the North Staffordshire Railway Company, where he was superintendent of a branch

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<sup>1</sup> Archibald Michie: comment recorded in Palmer Family History file, HPC, State Library, Victoria.

line of railway and canal. He had administrative experience, and had held a position of responsibility in England. His letter was dated 2nd July 1853; on the back has written, by an unknown hand: '2nd July 1853. W. Gaunt. Employ.'<sup>2</sup> Two weeks after his arrival, William started work in the Gold Fields Department.

The Gold Fields Department was under pressure to expand rapidly, as new discoveries were reported within weeks of each other. Diggings opened up around Ballarat, Clunes, Creswick, then Beechworth and its satellite fields – Snake Valley, Reid's Creek, the Woolshed, the Three Mile, the Nine Mile, Spring Creek, the Buckland, the Indigo. When a rush was reported, the nearest local Warden to hear the news would ride out to see for himself. The more astute wardens would try to judge the future need for a Government presence by the look of the land – the type of soil, the rock structure, the topography – and some of them judged it very well. Then they would send a report to the Gold Fields Commissioner in Melbourne, warning of the need for staff to come to the area soon. In some cases, if the rush was big, the warden might send men from another part of his area and ask Melbourne for replacements.

To some extent, the policy of the Government developed in response to need; certainly its practice did. The colony was governed by and through one office – that of the Colonial Secretary (the Chief Secretary after 1855) and the administration was strained to breaking point by the sudden inrush of new settlers, the need for wardens and police on the gold fields, and the administrative difficulties of a Colony growing very rapidly.

For a well-connected young man with some education and experience, 1853 was a good year to arrive. William began work in Melbourne as a clerk in the Gold Fields Commissioner's office in July, and by the end of the year had been transferred to Beechworth, 260 km to the north. All around the Beechworth area new diggings were starting with (for the authorities) alarming rapidity, and the Beechworth office took on two other new clerks beside William to cope with the opening of new fields and the influx of miners.

It was fortunate for William that he was going in December. The trip to Beechworth over dry roads took three days; in winter a dray might take three weeks or more.

It would be hard to imagine a greater extreme from the lush green world of Staffordshire that William had left behind. As new recruit, he had begun on a comfortable salary of £300 per year; in December it was increased

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<sup>2</sup> Public Record Office, Victoria: Inwards Correspondence to the Chief Commissioner of Police, VPRS.937, Unit (Box) 5, Bundle 2.

to £350 with rations and quarters provided, as well as forage for a horse, and three candles a week. But 'quarters' for goldfields staff meant a tent in the police camp, through the hot dusty summer and biting cold in winter.

But during 1853, as the Beechworth administrative area expanded, Francis Nixon, the Government Architect, arrived and began work on the series of public buildings needed for local government.<sup>3</sup>

Within a few years the Woolshed goldfield, north-west of Beechworth, had opened up and was producing large finds of gold. A hastily-built settlement grew up, with tents and bark huts, and businesses began in the same rough accommodation as the miners' dwellings. By the end of 1856 there were around five thousand people there,<sup>4</sup> and a warden's office and court house were built.

On the Woolshed, William marked out areas for the diggers, settled disputes over access to water from the creeks and other similar matters, and arbitrated in matters of disputed claims. If diggers were not satisfied, they went to the Court of Mines, and the Warden went along to give his evidence or defend his judgement. William was hard-working and resourceful; although still in his twenties, he handled the responsibilities of his job well, although he was known to lose his temper when roused.

William Gaunt became sub-warden for Yackandandah also, another find 15 km east of Beechworth. He had a great deal of riding to do to cover his large area of responsibility. This included, on occasions, patrolling the Buckland River area, where new finds had attracted about 1500 Chinese miners, and there was unrest among the Europeans. In May 1857 Gaunt rode along the Buckland diggings in response to scuffles which had broken out between European and Chinese miners, organising set camps for the Chinese (which made their protection easier) and exacting the £1 fee they were required to pay. Gaunt assured them of the Government's protection if they followed directions in a notice which he had translated into Chinese, which concluded with the words 'W. H. Gaunt, your Protector: tremble and obey'<sup>5</sup>. But there was no Government presence close by to provide protection when, in July 1857, there was a far more serious disturbance. Chinese miners were beaten and driven out, and their tents burnt. Several died from their wounds and from exposure in the mid-winter cold of the mountains. Gaunt and twelve police were posted to the area to restore order and restore the Chinese camp, but even as they did so diggers in

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<sup>3</sup> Roy C. Harvey, *Background to Beechworth*, Beechworth Progress Association, 1981.

<sup>4</sup> Carole Woods, *Beechworth: A Titan's Field*, Hargreen Publishing, Melbourne, 1985, p.49.

<sup>5</sup> *Ovens and Murray Valley Advertiser*, 21 and 22 May, 1857.

Beechworth and other nearby towns were expressing solidarity for the European culprits.

The attitude of the miners to the Chinese was hardly surprising, since officials often made no secret of their own contempt. A letter from a branch of the service to the Chief Commissioner of Police in 1860 said, in part:

The bearer Ho A How is a good interpreter, of average honesty for a Chinaman, and he writes a good hand. He is the best candidate for the vacant office at Ararat that I have been able to find. C. Nicolson, Supt. <sup>6</sup>

By 1858 the rush to the Woolshed was petering out. The furnishings and fittings of the Woolshed Warden's office were moved up to the Indigo, north-west of Chiltern and about 30 km from Beechworth. The population at the new Indigo find was growing daily and had reached 11,000 people. For some time William ran both places, travelling between the two offices, living in a wooden hut which doubled as Court House.

The year 1858 should – officially at least – have been a good one for William Gaunt. On 4th January he was promoted from sub-warden to Warden of the Goldfields<sup>7</sup>. But a few days earlier, on his way back to Yackandandah after a New Year picnic at Everton, he had a fall and broke his ankle, and was on sick leave until 9th February. He continued with his duties, but walked with crutches for months. In April he reported having to remain on duty in the camp, 'my conveyance having broken'<sup>8</sup>. He was now using a vehicle, because riding a horse was difficult with a bad leg. He went to Melbourne for treatment, and applied for a year's leave on half pay to go to Europe for further treatment, but his application was refused, as civil servants on half pay were not permitted to leave the Colony. His ankle never completely healed, and he walked with a slight limp for the rest of his life.

To make matters worse, it was a year of heavy rains. One of the largest dams on the Woolshed diggings broke, and the entire workings in the Woolshed area had to stop. Hill sluices benefited at times from the rain, but creek claims throughout the area were damaged, and the Wardens, in addition to coping with the problems which arose among the diggers because of the floods, had to cross flooded creeks to get around their areas. In his routine fortnightly report for 25 September 1858, the Resident

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<sup>6</sup> Letter from Detective Office, Melbourne, to Chief Commissioner of Police, Goldfields correspondence, Series 1189, Box 523.

<sup>7</sup> *Victorian Government Gazette*, 5 January 1858

<sup>8</sup> *Diary of Warden Gaunt*, 27 February 1858, Goldfields correspondence, Series 1189, Box 491.



Commissioner at Beechworth reported on the plight of one of Gaunt's colleagues, Warden Wills:

. . . In swimming across the Mitta Mitta River which was much swollen by late rains, and the current being excessively rapid and his horse having become entangled in some fallen trees lying in the river, he was obliged to throw himself off and only escaped by swimming, reaching the bank in a very exhausted state. He only recovered his horse next day, having to walk some 18 miles to the nearest station for help.<sup>9</sup>

In 1860, at the age of thirty, William married Elizabeth Palmer, daughter of Frederick Palmer and his wife Mary Eliza Wood. Frederick Palmer was born in London in 1790; he was a purser on East India Company ships on the China run.<sup>10</sup> But in 1838 he left the service of the Company and he and his wife and their ten children, and Mary Eliza's father, sailed for Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) in the *Barke Madra (Madras)*.<sup>11</sup> Frederick tried several ventures in the Colony without great success. He later returned to England, and died in London in 1849, but Mary Eliza and the children stayed on.

The Palmer family made their mark on Victoria as an extraordinarily energetic, lively and somewhat erratic family. At a time when most colonists were recent arrivals, and few had put down roots in one area, the lure of better pastures, of gold, of the chance to make money with property or stock, would sometimes take them far afield. They had the restless energy of many settlers, an enthusiasm to go in search of better prospects across the colony, across the continent, across the world. They were part of a generation born overseas, a generation without grandparents – young, adventurous and independent.

Elizabeth Palmer moved to Dederang at the age of twenty-one when her brother Alexander took up the run there in 1856. Although brought up with English middle-class values about women's roles and women's accomplishments, she adapted well to life in the Victorian bush.

In the growing township of Chiltern, William became involved in church affairs and local issues – in the setting up of schools, of an Agricultural Association and the Athenaeum. In 1862 he chaired a public meeting of residents to form a municipality. He was energetic and resourceful, and acquitted himself well in a responsible position. His enthusiasm

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<sup>9</sup> Goldfields correspondence, Series 1189, Box 493.

<sup>10</sup> Purser lists of Supplement to Register [of Ships], East India Company records, India Office Library, London.

<sup>11</sup> *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 1851-1890, entry for Thomas McLeod Palmer.

and commitment to his work earned him the respect of the miners and of his colleagues. Having been made a Police Magistrate in 1857, he became interested in the law, and over some years began to read law textbooks.

William was particularly enthusiastic about racing. His daughter Mary was to write many years later, when she saw a racecourse in China: 'I come from a country where every little township considers a race-course as necessary as a cemetery.'<sup>12</sup> There was a rough bush track in Chiltern, and William had not been long there before he was organising a two-day race meeting.

When he left the area in 1865, 'Our own Correspondent' from Chiltern, writing in the *Ovens and Murray Advertiser*, was particularly effusive:

. . . He has contributed his zeal and talents to the general well-being of the community. There is not a single public work or undertaking in which he has not taken an active and prominent part, lending their furtherance the weight of his position and the benefit of his experience and influence [and leaves the area] having had his name connected with every improvement and work of progress. Our public buildings and institutions owe almost everything to him. . .<sup>13</sup>

William had a 'feel' for handling the media. The correspondent who wrote this fulsome praise was a friend; he concluded his article by saying:

No fears of being accused of flattery or fulsomeness – and I am quite aware that such charges will be brought in certain quarters – can deter me. . .

And William's stirring words to the Chinese diggers on the Buckland, the basis of a certain charisma which developed over the years, might have been lost to the world had he not had the forethought to see that the press was there to record them. The reporter for the *Ovens and Murray Advertiser* explained how he got his story:

As we were anxious to see the Buckland and to ascertain in what way the bone of contention [the trouble between the Chinese and the other diggers] would be disposed of, we gladly availed ourselves of an invitation to make the journey [to the Buckland] in company with Mr. Gaunt.

It was a skill that his daughter Mary was later to exercise with equal success.

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<sup>12</sup> *A Woman in China*, p.70

<sup>13</sup> *Ovens and Murray Advertiser*, 11 March 1865.

## II

### Colonial Childhood

Mary Gaunt was born in north-eastern Victoria, in the gold rush settlement of Chiltern, on 20 February 1861. Before the discovery of gold there in 1858, Chiltern had been a small settlement with a mail station, a hotel, stables and some huts.<sup>1</sup> At the height of the gold rush, 20,000 diggers had claims pegged out along the creek beds and around the settlement, and the bush rang to the sound of axes as trees were cut down to shore up water races and digs. By the time of Mary's birth, a raw young township had grown up, with a court house, a police camp and a cemetery, and its own newspaper,

The goldfields were lively, boisterous places. Accommodation was rough: at its best, a portable wooden building or slab hut; at its worst, a tent or lean-to shelter. But while life for the diggers themselves was rough and sometimes brutal, the commissioners could enjoy the company of well-educated and cultivated men, many from aristocratic British families. There was Capt. Matthew Price, respected police inspector and Gold Commissioner, former captain in the Madras army of the East India Company; Frederick Puckle, son of a clergyman; John Kemp Jacomb Hood, later a Melbourne barrister and judge, and friend of the Gaunts for many years (when Mary's younger brother Lance had completed his law studies in 1902, he was articled to Hood.) In the Melbourne office was Capt. Frederick Standish, gambler and charmer, former aide to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, and John Moore, son of a QC and MP, who wielded the power in the Goldfields Commissioner's Melbourne office for many years.<sup>2</sup>

Life for families in Chiltern was by no means deprived. In shanty houses and tents, around candles and lamps, they read books they had bought in Conness Street or borrowed from the circulating libraries; they got Cassells Magazine or the Illustrated London News by subscription and Bibles from the colporteurs of the British and Foreign Bible Society who travelled the goldfields with their wares. They listened to musical groups and went to see the travelling theatre groups at the Star Theatre. The women shopped for laces, fabrics and hats at Horsfall's Bazaar, bought supplies of cheese, bacon,

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<sup>1</sup> Robert W.P. Ashley, *History of the Shire of Chiltern*, Ashley, Ballarat, 1974.

<sup>2</sup> Evidence of William Gaunt's association with some colleagues is assumed from the fact that they were his guests at the Ballarat Club some years later. Details from Paul de Serville, *Pounds and Pedigrees*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1991.



lobster and ham at Rhodes' Store, and got lamps and wall-paper at the Ovens Hardware Co. Residents could buy a horse or rent a buggy, send messages by telegraph to Sydney or Melbourne, and send or receive money to or from anywhere in the world without moving out of the town. There were banks, insurance companies and provident societies, solicitors, estate agents and auctioneers. The men bought wines, spirits or beer to take home with them or gathered in hotels to drink beer on tap and discuss the separation of the planned Murray colony from Sydney, the need for a railway, the progress of the American Civil War, or the help that should be sent to the popular local figure Robert O'Hara Burke, who was lost somewhere in the Centre with Wills.<sup>3</sup>

As Mary and Lucy (born 1862) and the boys grew up, they got to know their Palmer uncles, aunts and cousins. Elizabeth's sisters and brothers moved around the Colonies, trying new ventures and taking up new properties, and the Gaunt children went to stay on holidays with them where they travelled – Tasmania, Geelong/Queenscliff, the Murrumbidgee area. Many of Mary's childhood adventures happened in the company of Palmer cousins.

By the time they left 'Woodlands', their home beside the police camp in Chiltern, William and Elizabeth had three small children – Mary, aged four, Lucy aged two and Cecil, fifteen months – and Elizabeth was due to give birth to her fourth child (Ernest was born a few weeks after the move to Beechworth).

Beechworth was a solid township and a regional centre for the thriving goldfields of north-eastern Victoria. When the Gaunts settled there in 1865, there was a house for the resident warden. A row of impressive stone buildings had been constructed along Ford Street: the gaol, the Telegraph Office, the Court House and the Sub-Treasury Building. Christ Church had been completed in the previous year, the benevolent asylum on the hill was under construction, and there were streets of houses and shops. Bullock wagons arrived regularly from Melbourne, straining through heat and dust, or bogged to the axles in winter mud, hauling foodstuffs and fabrics, glassware and china, bookcases and pianos for the township.

William's position as Chinese Protector, and his work on the goldfields, meant that the children were early brought into contact with people regarded with suspicion and fear by most of the population, and resented by the miners. Beechworth had a well-established Chinese quarter when the Gaunts arrived, with over 6,000 Chinese miners living there. Chinese camps were set up, with a headman in charge, to minimise friction between different national groups.

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<sup>3</sup> Much of this detail appears in the *Chiltern Federal Standard* for 27 February and 13 July 1861.

William was first appointed a Chinese Protector in 1856, and took his responsibility seriously.

Story-telling was important in the Gaunt family. Grandfather Frederick Palmer, who had served with the East India Company, had brought back curios from his travels in the East. Mary never knew her grandfather – he died in London before she was born – but her grandmother Palmer, who had a house in Beechworth, had the souvenirs of his voyages and told the children stories about the Great Wall and other wonders their grandfather had seen. There were stories in plenty on the gold-fields, stories of violence and loss, of gold finds and desperate deaths. Their father fed their imaginations, weaving the past into the present with accounts of his experiences in the early days, and anecdotes of a world where it could happen that ‘the criminal ended a gentleman and the gentleman a criminal’<sup>4</sup> The children developed a love for stories and a capacity for re-telling them. Guy did particularly well; and when later he began his life at sea, he would come home with stories of his adventures, and of life on board ship. The stories fascinated Mary and she later turned them to good account as articles in the *Argus*.

In 1867 William was sent to Talbot (half-way between Clunes and Maryborough) in a temporary posting as Deputy Sheriff; then he was sent to Sale, near Victoria’s south-eastern coast.

The discovery of gold inland, at places like Walhalla, Stratford and Grant had led to the creation of a Goldfields Commissioner position at Sale. From Sale stores for the miners were carried up into the mountains by pack-horses, and the gold they found was carried back down under escort to Sale.

Mary was six when the family moved to Sale, and there she became aware of Australian aborigines for the first time. By now there were three other children – Lucy and Cecil, born in 1862 and 1863 at Chiltern, and Ernest, born in Beechworth in 1865. The children were inquisitive, and although it was forbidden, they found their way to a nearby aboriginal camp:

[The aborigines] jumped up to see the white children, and a tall black man paraded proudly in a white collar and tall grey hat that my father had given him. I am sorry to say he had very little else on him. He might have been comely stark, but the tall hat and collar made him indecent. He leaned on a stick, limping a little in imitation of my father. . .<sup>5</sup>

Elizabeth often travelled with William on his trips to the inland goldfields, leaving the children in the care of an 18-year-old nursemaid. They

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<sup>4</sup> Preface to *The Ends of the Earth*.

<sup>5</sup> ‘My Victorian Youth’, *Woman’s Magazine Annual*, London 1938, p.70

could indulge their enjoyment of freedom and love of adventure at an early age; while Miss Tye was preoccupied with the baby, the three older children could roam around the area. After their visit to the aboriginal camp, they were brought home by a policeman.

In Gippsland Mary heard the legend of the white woman who was believed to have come ashore after a shipwreck and to have been held against her will by the aborigines. The stories about her varied; she was supposed to have traced her initials on the forest trees; she was thought to be Irish, to have red hair. Search parties with blacktrackers went out in search of her but she was never found. Years later, Mary imagined an ending to the story – that she had been found, that it was her husband, in a search party, who finally found her, and that she died in his arms, a 'suitable' ending to the story of a dishonoured woman.<sup>6</sup>

The Police Magistrate position in Sale was abolished in 1868, and William Gaunt was moved to Sandhurst as Police Magistrate and Warden<sup>7</sup>. Then, in January 1869, he was appointed as Returning Officer for the mining district of Ballarat, and Visiting Justice of the gaol there,<sup>8</sup> and the family had its first period of long residence in the one town. Mary was eight years old. The frontier settlement days were over.

William and Elizabeth settled their growing family in a house on the edge of the swamp that was later to be known as Lake Wendouree, in Ballarat. Reeds and wild marsh grasses grew along the edges, and in winter it was deep enough to be dangerous for children, although much of it became dry and sandy in summer. Local legend said there was a bunyip in the swamp; William told the children that was nonsense, but Mary knew that the bunyip was supposed to eat small children, and that the aborigines were afraid of it. She never wanted to venture far around the swamp.

Their house was single storeyed, with a verandah all around it as a protection from summer heat, and tall gum trees at the edge of the cleared ground. The children tended garden beds around the house.

Elizabeth was an active, energetic and capable woman. She handled the household and the children, and painted beautiful miniatures<sup>9</sup>. She believed that a lady should not be too clever, nor too practical, and tried to impose her inherited values on her children, and particularly her daughters. It was important to her that ladies should not do physical work (or should not admit to doing it), a matter which was brought home vividly to Mary one day. In conversation with a visiting clergyman's wife, Mary had said proudly that she

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<sup>6</sup> 'The Lost White Woman', in *The Ends of the Earth*, 1915.

<sup>7</sup> Government Gazette 9th June 1868

<sup>8</sup> G. Serle (ed, with others), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 1851-90.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Sheila Gaunt in possession of Yvonne Fox.

had milked two cows that morning. When the visitor had gone, her mother's wrath descended. How could she shame her so? 'No lady ever milks a cow!' she said.<sup>10</sup>

Like William, Elizabeth was fond of riding (for which she wore a riding habit with a voluminous skirt), and there were ponies for the children to ride.

The children enjoyed a healthy outdoor life. Ernest was born just as they arrived in Ballarat, then Guy was born four years later. Another brother, Vere Arnold, died as a baby in 1871, then came Clive (1872) and Lance (1875). Two other children died in infancy.

The boys grew up collecting insects, chasing animals, shooting, riding ponies, and regularly getting into trouble. In later years Guy recalled one of their many escapades. Ballarat at this time had established a Stock Exchange, but there was no building for it, and the brokers used to conduct their business in a closed-off street on Saturday mornings.

One glorious morning we charged down the street on our twelve-hand ponies yelling like Red Indians and scattering the elderly gentlemen in all directions. Hats and papers flew around us, the owners rushed for the sidewalks, while one old man Sir Henry Cuthbert on all fours crawled into Fawn's Hotel fully convinced no doubt that bushrangers were on the job.<sup>11</sup>

The mischief was not confined to the boys! The Gaunt family worshipped regularly at the Church of England. William was active in Church affairs and often read the lesson in a service; perhaps his preoccupation with such matters made it easier for the children to smuggle the family dog into the Bungaree church one day, an incident Mary still remembered in old age.<sup>12</sup>

Mary grew up loving the bush – the tall gum trees, the fragrance of the eucalypts, the song of the magpies, the vast landscapes and blue skies. The bush was a presence in many of her early stories – not just a backdrop to the action, but a living force: sometimes a tranquil, life-giving presence, sometimes a brooding threat, as people were isolated and lost in it, or bushfire erupted from it. In every Australian story it is described – lush, beautiful, terrifying, and in her later years it became the subject of longing and nostalgia.

It was a love that her father, for all his years in the bush, did not share. He had grown up in the gentle green country of North Staffordshire, and it remained his first love.

Although 20,000 km from Great Britain, the children grew up aware of their place in the British Empire, and of *its* place in the universal scheme of

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<sup>10</sup> 'My Victorian Youth' p.44.

<sup>11</sup> Guy Gaunt, *The Yield of the Years*, Hutchinson & Co., London 1940

<sup>12</sup> *Reflection – in Jamaica* pp.40-41.

things. Winston Churchill, who was growing up in the same Empire at the same time (he was the same age as Mary's younger brother Lance) expressed the feeling of security and of superiority of the position they shared:

I was a child of the Victorian era, when the structures of our country seemed firmly set, when its position in trade and on the seas was unrivalled, and when the realization of the greatness of our Empire and of our duty to preserve it was ever growing stronger. In those days the dominant forces in Great Britain were very sure of themselves and of their doctrines. They thought they could teach the world the art of government, and the science of economics. They were sure they were supreme at sea and consequently safe at home. They rested therefore sedately under the convictions of power and security.<sup>13</sup>

It was accepted that young men who grew up in the Colonies might serve Britain in the armed forces or in the civil service anywhere in her vast Empire, and the Gaunt sons were later to do this. And all of the family, Mary included, believed in the power and security of the Empire, and were confident of its place in the world and of its future.

Mary was a slim child, never very tall, with fine, light curly hair. She had pleasant features, albeit a very determined chin, but as she grew up she considered her sister Lucy, a year younger than herself, to be more attractive than she was. Mary was strong-willed and intelligent, with a well-developed sense of fun, and did well at school.

Mary enjoyed reading from an early age. Books were freely available; the English writer Anthony Trollope, who visited in the 1870's, commented on the number of libraries in the Colony<sup>14</sup>. Archibald Michie went further. Michie, a long-time resident, wrote in 1873 with local pride:

... among no English-speaking community of equal numbers in the world is there nearly so large a consumption of new literature as there is amongst our own.<sup>15</sup>

Most of this 'new literature' was from England (Trollope had noted the popularity of Macaulay, Dickens and Scott particularly), but William Gaunt also enjoyed the stories of Australian bush life by contemporary writers like Rolf Boldrewood (1826-1915). But Elizabeth did not read much herself, and

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<sup>13</sup> Winston Churchill, *My Early Life*, Odhams Press, 1930 (preface).

<sup>14</sup> Anthony Trollope, *Australia and New Zealand*, London, Chapman & Hall, 1873, vol.2, p.257, quoted in M. Askew and B. Hubber, 'The Colonial Reader Observed: Reading in its Cultural Context', in D.H.Borchardt and W. Kirsop (eds.), *The Book in Australia: Essays towards a Cultural and Social History*, Australian Reference Publications, 1988, Melbourne.

<sup>15</sup> Archibald Michie, *Readings in Melbourne*, pp.198-9, quoted in M. Askew and B. Hubber, *The Book in Australia: Essays towards a Cultural and Social History*, as above.

felt that reading was a waste of time, 'Reading again, darling? Can't you find something useful to do?'<sup>16</sup> More than that, she felt that many novels were unsuitable for young girls to read. It was an opinion shared by Dr. Kellogg, whose *Ladies' Guide* was in many Colonial homes:

The reading of works of fiction is one of the most pernicious habits to which a young lady can become devoted. . . [It] destroys the taste for sober, wholesome reading and imparts an unhealthy stimulus to the mind the effect of which is in the highest degree damaging.

When we add to this the fact that a large share of the popular novels of the day contain more or less matter of a directly depraving character, presented in such gilded form and specious guise that the work of contamination may be completed before suspicion is aroused, it should become apparent to every careful mother that her daughters should be vigilantly guarded against this dangerous source of injury and possible ruin.<sup>17</sup>

Mary had to go to the drawing room for piano practice, and in the drawing room were the bookshelves. On one occasion Elizabeth realised that there was an unsuitable novel in the collection there, and made Mary promise that she would not take it from the shelves and read it. Mary promised, not daring to tell her mother that she had already read it.<sup>18</sup>

She learned to find opportunities for reading and places where she could hide safely with a book. When a friend of the family left a box of books for storage, they were put away in the spare room. Mary would sneak in, choose a book, and hide under the bed and read it. She read *Hiawatha* in this hiding place, and *Evangeline*, and *Ivanhoe*. She waited for something dreadful, improper to appear as she read, but she never found it, and assumed that she was simply too young to understand.<sup>19</sup>

The habit of reading furtively where she would not be discovered, and the sharing of a dimly-lit basement room with Lucy, made Mary aware of a dislike for subdued light which remained with her all her life. She loved bright sunshine; she could not understand why people spoke of 'glare'.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> 'My Victorian Youth' p.428.

<sup>17</sup> J.H.Kellogg, MD, *Ladies' Guide in Health and Disease*, Echo Publishing Company, Melbourne, undated, but probably 1894, pp.207-8.

<sup>18</sup> 'My Victorian Youth' p.429

<sup>19</sup> 'My Victorian Youth' p.428

<sup>20</sup> Mary's description of her condition suggests she may have suffered from a form of retinitis – congenital stationary night-blindness – which was not progressive but which remained a problem all her life. [I am indebted to Dr. Chris Buckley, eye surgeon, for his advice in this matter].

Then one day she was given a library subscription, and could choose whatever books she liked to read – except, of course, novels. This rule was later relaxed; she could read novels if her mother had read them first and judged them to be safe. Since her mother read very little, the arrangement was unworkable, and gradually broke down. Mary would go off to the Library in Ballarat and carry home adventure stories to share with the others – particularly Guy – Kingston, Marryat, Fenimore Cooper, and a range of books for herself – particularly novels!

One of her favourites was *Dove in the Eagle's Nest*, by Charlotte Yonge. It was the story of a shy, well-bred girl of fifteen who is taken to live in the castle stronghold of a robber baron in 15th century Germany. Schloss Adlerstein was built high on a rocky terrace; the narrow path that led up to it was cut into the side of the mountain. In this remote fortress Christina tames and civilises the heir, and is married to him in secret. He and his father are lost in battle before her twin sons are born and she brings them up alone, one of them the heir to his father's lands. Through her firm and gentle ways she brings about the end of the robbery and feuds which have plagued the district for generations.<sup>21</sup>

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At first the Gaunt children had a governess for their lessons. Perhaps because their mother did not value education highly, or perhaps because it was difficult to get trained governesses in the Colony, their learning was fairly haphazard. According to Mary, there was one memorable governess, an elderly, unattractive woman who belonged to a strict religious sect. She was one of the Saved – the Elect. She told the children how she was nightly visited and tempted by the Devil, and how she had to pray hard and say frequently, 'Get thee behind me, Satan!' After an altercation with Ernest, then about six or seven, in which the boy threw his inkpot at her, she left the service of the Gaunt family. William, at least, was relieved to see her go. But Mary remembered the strict, unlovely character; years later, in a story of bush life called 'The Other Man', she modelled a character, indeed a whole family, on the governess. And later still, when she wrote of Africa and China, she had missionaries with the same unattractive qualities: rigid and dogmatic in their beliefs, and cold and unappealing to all but their nearest and dearest.

After a move nearer to town, the children were sent to Mrs. Abbot's school in Ballarat, where Elizabeth tried ineffectively to see that the girls played with the right sort of children.

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<sup>21</sup> Charlotte Yonge, *The Dove in the Eagle's Nest*, J.M.Dent & Sons, London 1936.

My mother, brought up on the very edge of civilisation. . . out-Heroded Herod in her endeavour to live up to her notion of the 'correct thing'. . . No matter how outrageous it was, how uncomfortable it made her, my poor mother always did her best to produce the impression that she was a perfect lady. <sup>22</sup>

Being a 'perfect lady' for Elizabeth Gaunt involved doing no practical work. She did not like the children to mix with the children of tradesmen, and she expected her daughters to learn the polite accomplishments (playing the piano, speaking French, drawing).

Fortunately for Mary, her father intervened in a more positive way in her education by suggesting that Mary (and Lucy) should go to Grenville College, Ballarat, to be taught by John Victor. Victor, a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, gave lectures at the Ballarat School of Mines on mathematics, mechanics and natural philosophy<sup>23</sup> as well as teaching at the College, and in his twenty years as principal established 'a fine tradition of scholarship'<sup>24</sup>. He was an enlightened educator who believed that girls should be taught equally well as, and together with, boys. Mary and Lucy joined the dozen or so girls in the school which had begun fourteen years before with thirty pupils. Mary enjoyed school, and she blossomed under John Victor's tutelage. She worked hard over her weekly compositions, and John Victor saw promise in them. 'My girl, one day we'll see you a novelist!'<sup>25</sup> He recognised that she was an intelligent student, and she relished his praise.

She had a quick mind and a retentive memory, and learned well in the subjects she enjoyed. So she shone at history – she enjoyed geography – and she was passionate about writing English compositions. She did well in Latin and mathematics. But in French and Greek, she did badly. She was stubborn and strong-willed, and if she did not enjoy a subject or could not do it well, she did not make the necessary effort.

In 1876, at the age of fifteen, she sat for the Melbourne University Matriculation examination. There was no set age for the exam; since it was still an unusual thing for women to do, there was no regular pattern; sisters several years apart in age would take the exam together; candidates would sit several times. But it was extremely unusual for a fifteen-year-old to sit the six or more subjects needed for a pass, and to pass them at the first attempt. Mary sat for nine subjects – Greek, Latin, English, French, Arithmetic, Algebra,

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<sup>22</sup> 'My Victorian Youth' p.44.

<sup>23</sup> *Niven's Directory for the City of Ballarat and Ballarat East*, 1875.

<sup>24</sup> Katrine Kelly, 'Grenville College: A Brief History', *Ballarat Historian*, December 1986.

<sup>25</sup> 'My Victorian Youth' p.259.



Euclid, History and Geography. She passed all of them except Greek, and gained honours for History.<sup>26</sup>

The Matriculation examination, previously for male students only, had been opened to female students in 1871, after a considerable battle. But for the steady stream of girls and young women taking the exam, even if they passed the required six subjects, there was nowhere else to go. They were not permitted to study at the University. There were to be five more years of battle before the first women students were admitted to the Arts faculty in 1881.

During 1876 William and Elizabeth decided to move from their town life in Ballarat to a place in the country. They bought 'The Willows', a property of 235 acres (95 hectares) in the Bungaree area near Pootilla, 13 km out from Ballarat. There was a small cottage on the land, not nearly adequate for a family which now had seven children, so they bought a weather-board tavern from a disused goldfield, cut it into four, and hauled it fifteen miles to reassemble it beside the cottage at 'The Willows'. The property had fruit trees – plums, pears, apples, quinces, apricots – and grew gooseberries, raspberries and strawberries; beyond the fruit trees and bushes was virgin bush. William invested in stock – horses, cattle, pigs – but because of his work in Ballarat it was Elizabeth who supervised the work of the farmhands.

In 1876, as Mary was preparing for Matriculation, the two older boys, Cecil and Ernest were sent to Melbourne to Grammar School. The three younger boys – Guy, Clive and Lance – began their education at the State school near 'The Willows'.

Her brothers did not fare as well as Mary. Cecil sat three times for the Matriculation examination; at his third attempt, in October 1882, he sat seven subjects and passed four. Ernest, and later Guy, left school at twelve and went into the Navy. The two younger boys stayed on longer at the Grammar School; Clive studied at home with a tutor before going on to spend six years at Melbourne Grammar, and Lance stayed at Grammar until he was eighteen and then followed in Clive's footsteps and studied law.

With the cost of boarding school education to consider, and all the children to provide for, William warned his daughters that they could not expect to be handsomely provided for in the future.

After Matriculation, Elizabeth decided that Mary should go as a boarder to a school in Melbourne – a 'finishing' school, where she would improve her manners, and learn the accomplishments her mother considered so necessary for a young woman – French, drawing and music.

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<sup>26</sup> Melbourne University Archives, Matriculation applications: Mary's dated 25 October 1876.

Mary disliked the experience. She did not do well in her lessons, and she chafed at the restrictions:

I myself, I remember, held it a hard thing that my letters should be opened and read, that it should be held dangerous that I should walk in the quietest of streets unattended, that I could not be entrusted alone with the middle-aged, married music-master who held me a first class idiot and suffered under my struggles with C major. I still feel a sense of wrong when I think about it.<sup>27</sup>

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After school, there was nowhere for Mary to go. Life was comfortable and pleasant for Mary and Lucy in Ballarat. Their father was Resident Warden of the Goldfields, as well as Police Magistrate and Coroner, which gave them a certain social position. Once the intensive studies for the examination were over for Mary, there were picnic parties, visiting friends, staying with cousins, playing the piano. . . and staying at home.

As for many women at that time, Mary was learning that it was not only academic life that was beyond her reach. Ernest, although four years younger than she was, left school the same year as she did and went to England to join HMS Britannia as a naval cadet. He was embarking on a career, and he was travelling. Mary wanted to travel too; but her desire for travel was 'a most improper desire for a young lady', she was told.<sup>28</sup>

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When Mary was eleven or twelve, her Aunt Eliza – her mother's favourite sister – was living at Mannerim, east of Geelong, near Queenscliff. Her husband, John Kinder Archer, had bought a 1200-acre property there. Mary and Lucy went to stay for Christmas with their aunt and uncle and their numerous Archer cousins, the youngest of whom was five years old. The Archer house had slab walls and a bark roof, and some of the floors were of beaten earth, but years later Mary could remember the flock wall-paper on the sitting-room walls. There were cows and sheep, turkeys, ducks and chickens, and to Mary and Lucy the life of their cousins seemed extremely rich and interesting, although their mother felt that the Archers were quite poor. The older girls rode on horseback to go and pick up the mail; what to Elizabeth seemed unfortunate necessity Mary found delightful. After their mother's

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<sup>27</sup> Mary Gaunt, 'Woman in Australia', *Empire Review*, Vol.11, No.1, 1901.

<sup>28</sup> *Reflection – in Jamaica*, 1932, p.vii.

dislike of housekeeping, holidays at Mannerim, where they lived on home-made bread and scones, butter and eggs, were a special treat.<sup>29</sup> And there were interesting books to read.

This holiday, Mary's first away from home, proved to be a memorable one. For girls who had grown up, as they had, miles inland on the goldfields, the picnics on the great sweeping ocean beaches were exciting, and Mary grew to love the sea. Unlike the bush country around Beechworth and Chiltern, crowded with mining claims and mullock heaps, the bush along the coast was untouched and peaceful. The children rode the stock horses around the station, or went out in the cart, and in the evenings read stories of adventure.

Mary was part-way through a book – an exciting story about a boy wrecked on the coast of West Africa – when, on a day of great heat and heavy clouded skies, fires swept through the area and spread to the calf paddock of the property. All the men on the property went out to fight the fire; Aunt Eliza stayed at the house to arrange food and drink for the fire-fighters, moving to the waterhole and back with a damp towel over her head. Books forgotten, Mary and Lucy carried drinks to the men who were beating at the flames with sacks and with blankets tied to branches, their faces streaked with sweat and blackened from the smoke. The wind was driving the fire towards the house. Around the house were broom bushes; the building itself was highly inflammable. The girls had their instructions; if the fire came close, they were to go to the waterhole. Just when it seemed that the house would be burnt, the wind dropped and it began to rain.<sup>30</sup>

Mary never finished reading her book; she remembered ruefully years later that she never did find out what happened to young Carlo. But it had sown a seed in her mind. She wanted to read more about Africa.

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In the 1870's, when Mary's curiosity was developing, Africa was still a land of mystery for Europeans. Finding the source of the Nile River had been a matter of speculation and discussion in learned societies and in clubs for many years. In 1863 the explorer Speke had published the story of his journey to Lake Victoria, which Mary later read avidly. In fact, she tried propping it up on the music stand and reading it while practising scales on the piano, because it was infinitely more interesting than the scales, and her performance

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<sup>29</sup> 'My Victorian Childhood' p.259.

<sup>30</sup> from 'My Most Memorable Xmas' [by fourteen contributors], *The Home*, December 1st 192.. (date obscured).

suffered as a result. She was not musically inclined, but her mother expected her to acquire at least some musical ability.

She was ten when Stanley had his famous 'Dr.Livingstone-I-presume?' encounter; when the world read with interest about 'the dark continent' (the label popularised by Stanley) and the exploits of missionaries like Livingstone. Explorers whose names became household words headed the scramble for territory in Africa by European nations. In West Africa alone, in a period of five years to 1884, the French had moved inland along the Senegal, Niger and Congo Rivers; Britain had established settlements along the Niger, the Belgians were advancing up the Congo River and Germany was claiming protectorates in Togo and Cameroon.<sup>31</sup> 'Darkest Africa', as Stanley had called it, was gradually being revealed to the outside world. Mary dreamed of the day when she could go there and see Africa for herself.

There were other holidays which added to the wealth of experience Mary was to store up for later writing: with cousins on her mother's side in Tasmania, with friends in the Riverina 'who dwelt in a garden. In the gorgeous winter months it was delightful. . . bedrooms like shacks dotted about the garden.'<sup>32</sup> In her first major writing commission, she wrote about the Riverina.<sup>33</sup>

Faced with the choice of marriage or life at home with her parents, Mary began to consider other possibilities. She was a capable student, and had enjoyed her years at school. She would have been happy to go on to further education, but she had already gone further than most young women, and the University was not open to women. Teaching was a possibility, and one which interested her for a time; she wrote of it years later: 'it seemed to be so easy to be the one that held the book'.

Teaching was barely acceptable to families with the social status of the Gaunts, but it was the only kind of professional work that was open to her without the education offered by a University. But at heart she did not want to be a teacher.

There were now seven children in the family, and all of them had had, or were having, a good private school education. Her father was aware that he had ahead of him the expense of starting five sons in their careers. William had been studying law for many years, and in 1873 was called to the Victorian Bar, but although legally qualified, he remained in his position with the Goldfields Department. Years later, Mary was writing to *The Times* about a subject dear to her – the value of girls being trained for useful work. She

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa*, Random House New York, 1991

<sup>32</sup> *Reflection – in Jamaica*, p.11.

<sup>33</sup> E.E.Morris (ed.), *Picturesque Australasia*, Cassell & Co., London & Melbourne 1887

described a family situation she had known, a family situation so remarkably like her own that she may well have been speaking of the Gaunts:

I remember in my youth a professional man – a well-to-do man whose quiver was full. The home was in the country, and he, who was an excellent lawyer, was a shocking bad farmer in his spare time. His wife, who really was a good judge of stock, used to bemoan the fact. ‘Such a pity I couldn’t buy the cows and the pigs. He is so imposed upon.’ And there was absolutely no reason, save convention, why she should not have run that farm at a profit. But in those days it would not have been the ‘thing’ for a ‘lady’, so she put in a couple of hours every afternoon sleeping peacefully.

The two eldest daughters were discontented. It was dull – so dull – and they did not see why they should do housework to save money in order that their brothers might be trained for comfortable positions. Their discontent was aggravated by a parent who remarked to their mother whenever the cares of life pressed heavily upon him – ‘Your girls will never marry!’ And yet comfort, if not wealth, was within that man’s grasp. If his wife and daughters had worked, had learned to manage that farm, he might have pursued his own profession with a quiet mind, and there would have been money in plenty. As it was, in after years those girls had to find some means of livelihood without any training whatever.<sup>34</sup>

William Gaunt had reason to be very thankful for his added professional qualification. On 9th January 1878 – ‘Black Wednesday’ – a political crisis erupted in the colony. In a dispute between the Legislative Council, the upper house of the Colonial Parliament, which represented the pastoralists and property owners, and the Legislative Assembly which was mainly composed of more recent arrivals in the Colony and of landless working people, the Council ‘blocked supply’; they refused to pass the Appropriation Bill. The Government, led by Graham Berry, reacted angrily by dismissing over two hundred civil servants, especially those in more senior positions who might be sympathetic to the landholders. The shock waves were felt throughout the Colony as County Court judges, police magistrates, architects, inspectors, goldfields wardens lost their positions and their pensions; a few suicides were attributed to the sackings.

William Gaunt, along with many others, simply had to begin a new life. Because he was legally qualified, the transition was not difficult, and William’s new career began when he went into legal practice in Ballarat.

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<sup>34</sup> *The Times*, 31 October 1921. Lucy’s husband died in 1907; she returned from Malaysia with two children to support and no professional training. She became the first Principal of Trinity women’s hostel, later Janet Clarke Hall (see *Janet Clarke Hall, 1886-1986*, Lyndsay Gardiner, Hyland House, Melbourne 1986).

In March 1881, four young women began lectures at Melbourne University. It was the culmination of a battle for the admission of women which had been growing in intensity over the previous ten years. The University, like other academic institutions, was opposed to the admission of women to its all-male domain, and the demand of women students to study at the University had been at first refused, then somewhat grudgingly debated in the Professorial Board and the University Council, and finally in Parliament.

Dr. Hearn, Dean of the Law Faculty of the University and MP, supported the admission of women to the University, but assured his colleagues in Parliament:

To tell the truth, I believe this provision [the Bill to allow the admission of women] is not likely to be taken much advantage of, and I don't know that it is very desirable that it should. Nevertheless, it is right to give an opportunity to any lady who chooses to go through so heavy a course to do so. Hitherto ladies have stopped at matriculation, and no doubt they will continue to remain at that point.<sup>35</sup>

Within weeks of Hearn offering this reassurance to opponents of the legislation, his daughter Henrietta was to join Mary as one of the first four women students to enrol at the University!

When the long battle was over, and the news came that women matriculants would be allowed to enter Melbourne University, Mary begged her father to be allowed to go. William wrote to the University asking about fees and other details, and when she would have to take up residence in Melbourne. He added: 'Would you also be pleased to say if any other ladies are attending the University'.<sup>36</sup> They were soon to learn that three other ladies were enrolled: Lydia Harris, Bella Guerin (the first female graduate) and Henrietta Hearn, daughter of the Dean of Law.<sup>37</sup> At 29, Henrietta was the eldest; Lydia was 24, and Bella was 23; Mary had just turned 20 when she set off for Melbourne and the University. Of the four, only Lydia and Mary attended lectures regularly.

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<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Ernest Scott, *A History of the University of Melbourne*, Melbourne University Press, 1936, p.199.

<sup>36</sup> Letter, William Gaunt to Melbourne University, March 1881

<sup>37</sup> Ailsa Zainu'ddin, 'The Admission of Women to the University of Melbourne, 1869-1903', in *Melbourne Studies in Education*, 1973, Melbourne University Press.

Mary was already aware, from her success at Grenville College, that a reputation for 'cleverness' could be a social disadvantage for her. But life at home since she had finished school four years before was not the kind of life she wanted. She longed for something beyond the picnic parties and balls. Ernest had left four years before to begin as a naval cadet in England, and Guy was keen to do the same. They had the prospect of a life of adventure ahead. And Lucy, although younger seemed to be more successful socially.

She understood that, if she studied at University, the only career that would be open to her would be teaching, and she felt ambivalent about teaching as a career – but she was an optimist. Who could say what opportunities might turn up.

Early in 1881 she went down to Melbourne. She settled into lodgings in St.Kilda, a fashionable beach-side suburb, at a school kept by two middle-aged maiden ladies from England, and began her studies. But there were distractions. In Ballarat, she had enjoyed considerable freedom by the standards of the time – her father had very liberal views on that score. But social life in Melbourne was a whole new world. There were parties where a woman at University was a sought-after attraction, rather than an 'awful female' as her brothers had threatened. There was an admirer, and walks out together, and visits to church, and tea – all of which scandalised the maiden ladies from England at her lodgings. She took the examinations at the end of the year, but she had not done enough study; she passed Latin and History, but failed Greek, Mathematics and Logic.<sup>38</sup>

She went back home to Ballarat at the end of the term, expecting to meet with the anger and disapproval she felt she deserved. But it did not come, and she was relieved and happy that the drama had not eventuated. Before the holidays were over, however, and the question of whether she would return to try again was resolved, another drama had overtaken the family. Their house, 'The Willows', caught fire; the flames raced quickly through the large wooden building, and it was burnt to the ground. The family lost almost everything. Years later Mary's niece, Ellinor Archer, recalled a humorous side to their experience:

The family escaped in coats over their night attire, and clutching a few possessions they had saved, they drove to the township to seek shelter from friends. It was Sunday morning and they drove down the main street just as the Anglican congregation was leaving church. 'Mother [Lucy] told me,' said Miss Archer, 'that there on the front seat of the buggy sat my grandmother in her

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<sup>38</sup> Mary's record card, Melbourn University Archives.



dressing gown; in one hand she held a priceless Chinese vase and in the other a decanter of whisky. All the children were huddled on the back seat, my mother carrying the baby.’<sup>39</sup>

[\*The baby was William Henry, the last of the Gaunt children, who died in infancy.]

Some years later Mary created a heroine who was well-educated and not particularly attractive to men, who was under pressure from her family – particularly her brothers and her mother – to avoid sounding educated and to settle down to the serious business of finding a husband. After a discussion about the kind of wife most men would be looking for, and the unpleasantness of independent women, her brother says:

I only said – and all fellows, decent fellows with any sense, think like me – that all this talk about higher education for women is all bunkum. No fellow likes a learned wife. Let the women stick at home and mind their houses. A nice girl’s pretty sure to get married in the end. What does she want, spoiling herself, earning her own living?<sup>40</sup>

The year that Mary was away studying was not an easy one for her mother. Elizabeth, now 46, gave birth to her tenth child, named William Henry for his father; his birth came twenty years after the birth of Mary, her first. For the birth, she went to stay with her sister Eliza at Mannerim, near Queenscliff. William Henry was her last child, and became the third of her children to die in infancy.

When the examinations were over, Mary went back home to Ballarat. She did not return to University.

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The family moved to Bishops court, between the residence of the Bishop of Ballarat and the Botanic Gardens. It was a pleasant spot overlooking the erstwhile swamp of their childhood years, which was now Lake Wendouree. Among the possessions lost in the fire were Mary’s books, her cap and gown, everything she needed for University. The question seemed for her to be settled; her father had enough expenses now. She never went back to Melbourne to resume her studies.

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<sup>39</sup> Joan Gillison, ‘Two Invincible Ladies: Louisa Anne Meredith and Mary Gaunt’, in *Victorian Historical Journal*, Vol.51, No.2, May 1980.

<sup>40</sup> *Kirkham’s Find*, Penguin, Melbourne, p.10



At the end of Mary's University year, 1881, Cecil finished at the Grammar School and starting on a career with the Union Bank. Ernest was back in Australia on HMS *Nelson*; the adventure was beginning. Ernest would come home with tales of shipboard life, and Mary and Lucy, and the younger boys (their baby sister Alice had died in infancy) would listen. It was to be the pattern of things to come. The boys had professions and travelled; the girls stayed at home.

Mary was now 21, and the social life of Ballarat beckoned: picnic parties, balls, etc. It was a life to be enjoyed – the life for which the French lessons and the piano practice had been intended to fit her. Mary had a well-developed sense of fun, and a healthy enjoyment of life, but she began to grow restless; she did not suffer fools gladly, and some of the people she mixed with – especially eligible young men – could be remarkably foolish.

Her heroine in *Kirkham's Find*, written some years later, gave her opinion on a situation remarkably like Mary's own. Phoebe is growing restless and resentful at the prospect of waiting patiently for a man to propose. Her younger brother interrupts her conversation to assure her that she's in no danger of marrying, because she simply does not fit the image of what a man looks for. He describes the kind of girl he and his friends would like:

Well, a girl ought to stick at home. She oughtn't to bother her head about Latin and Greek. Who wants his wife to know anything about mathematics? My wife's going to dance beautifully, and she must play and sing, she might paint a bit – just enough to decorate the drawing room. And then, if she can cook a bit and sew a little, that's all I want . . . She'll have to be pretty, of course – ugly women ought to be shut up or smothered or something. Blest if I see what use they are.<sup>41</sup>

Mary's father was cautious about the family fortune; he had in fact been earning a good salary for many years, but he was bringing up and educating seven children, and the family lived well. He had to think of money for a commission for Ernest, and a legal education for Guy. In fact, Guy pleaded to be allowed to leave school at 14 and join the Navy; Mary later claimed that she 'worked upon [him]'<sup>42</sup> with her urge for adventure and love of travel. William agreed with some reluctance, but Guy did his officer training with the Merchant Navy because it was less expensive; it was years later that he transferred to the Royal Navy. There was also the matter of financing legal education for Clive and Lance. There would be no

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<sup>41</sup> *Kirkham's Find*, p.10

<sup>42</sup> *The Strand Magazine*, New York, August 1915

handsome dowry settlements for marriageable daughters. Mary began increasingly to think of earning an income for herself, and of writing, something which she had enjoyed from an early age. She loved stories and story-telling. Perhaps this could provide her with an income. But she had no idea how to get started.

### III

## A Writing Career

In April 1875, Edward Ellis Morris arrived in the Colony of Victoria to replace the renowned Dr. Bromby as head of Melbourne Church of England Grammar School. Morris was Head of the Grammar School when Mary Gaunt's brothers were there. A linguist and Classics and Law scholar, he later became Professor of Modern Languages and Literature at Melbourne University, but this was in 1884, after Mary's time at the University was over. It was Morris, on a visit to the Gaunt home in Ballarat, who saw something of what Mary had written, and put the idea of a writing career to her. He marked a passage for her to read – 'The Literary Calling and its Future' – in a collection called *Private Views* by James Payne.<sup>1</sup> And he sent her a book to review. She disagreed with the book – it annoyed her, and she said so plainly in her review. Morris was impressed by her writing style, and encouraged her to try for publication. She sent her piece to the *Argus*, but the *Argus* was not impressed. The *Age* was though, and they accepted it, published it and paid her for it.

At that time Morris was preparing to put together, for Cassell's Publishers, a large descriptive volume about Australia and New Zealand. He had enough confidence in Mary's writing to invite her to try writing a piece for it, and he liked what she did. By the time *Picturesque Australasia* was published (the four volumes came out in 1887-88), Mary had contributed nine articles to it, an impressive 12% of the text. Some, like the sections on gold, Ballarat and Eureka she was well placed to write because of her early years on the goldfields and her father's experience; for some, like the Riverina section, she drew on the holidays she and Lucy had spent there with family friends; for other sections – New Guinea, for example – she had her brother's stories. For the sections on explorers, inland towns – for all her writing – she relied on research: her love of history was proving to be of value.

She was a young and unknown writer in distinguished company in the project; apart from Morris himself, R.E.N. Twopeny and Joshua Lake, the art scholar and lexicographer, were among her co-writers.

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<sup>1</sup> E.M.F., 'An Australian Authoress at Home', *Sydney Mail* 26 February 1898, quoted in McLaren.

Mary's success encouraged her to try again, with another piece of writing about New Guinea. The Australian colonies had shown a considerable interest in New Guinea for some time, and had been putting pressure on the British Government to move in there. Germany's colonial ambitions there had urged their case with the British Government, and Britain had somewhat reluctantly agreed, but had made it understood that when a British Protectorate was proclaimed, it would be the job of the Australian Colonies to administer it.

But there was more to the interest in New Guinea than political ambitions. In a world where the vast areas of wilderness were gradually being conquered, New Guinea was huge, exotic and unknown, and it was close to Australia. In their first century of settlement, the white populations of the colonies had struggled with the centre of the continent, pushing further into the interior, blazing pathways across mountains and deserts, until unknown, mysterious areas had largely disappeared. In New Guinea, one of the last great wildernesses of the world lay waiting.

The imagination and interest of the colonists had been thoroughly caught when, in 1883, the *Melbourne Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* sent the young George Morrison to explore New Guinea and write about it. Morrison had achieved some considerable fame for his lone walk down the east of Australia from north to south six months before, and for his reports on 'blackbirding', the trade in Kanaka labour in North Queensland, both of which he had reported on for *The Age* in the previous year. Morrison and his party set off from Port Moresby and pushed through the jungle to the peak of the ranges; but in the highlands Morrison and a companion, Lyons, were attacked by natives and Morrison was badly wounded. With extraordinary tenacity (Morrison had lost a lot of blood, Lyons was already suffering with fever, and they had no food for eight days), they limped back to Port Moresby and home, Morrison still carrying part of a spearhead in an abdominal wound.<sup>2</sup> His reports to the newspapers made headline news.

In 1884 both Germany and Britain moved into New Guinea. Germany proclaimed a protectorate over the north-eastern part, and Britain claimed the south-east.

Mary's brother Ernest, a sub-lieutenant on H.M.S. 'Nelson', was present at the ceremony when the British protectorate was proclaimed; in fact it was Ernest who hoisted the British flag. He came home on leave from his ship after the tour of duty with fascinating stories to tell of New Guinea, and of his life on board ship. Mary set to work to turn Ernest's

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<sup>2</sup> Based on Morrison's account, in Harry Gordon (ed.), *An Eyewitness History of Australia*, Currey O'Neil, Melbourne 1982.

account of his experiences in New Guinea into a newspaper article and sent it to *The Age*. It was accepted, and she was paid five guineas for it, more money than she had ever had at once before.

By 1885 Guy was bringing home stories of life on a training ship. He had gone to England as a twelve-year-old to join H.M.S. *Worcester*, the training ship for officers of the Merchant Marine. With Guy's help, Mary drafted an article about life on a training ship, and sent it to the *Argus*. She took care about its construction. In the opening paragraph she touched on a subject of wide appeal to readers:

Here in the colonies. . . it seems rather a difficult matter to send a lad to sea. Either he must go as apprentice when he is little better than a ship's boy, or, which is far preferable, he must be sent to one of the training ships in England, in which case he is completely lost to his own colony, as by education and training he becomes practically alienated from it.<sup>3</sup>

Having got her readers involved, she went on to describe life on the *Worcester* – not as a journalist, but as one of the trainees. Wary of the acceptance of such an article with a woman's name on it, she wrote it in the first person and signed it: 'The Captain of the Maintop Starboard.'

It was a good choice. Lads on the *Worcester* were put into divisions or 'tops' – there was a foc's'le top, a main top, a foretop, and mizzen and after-mizzen tops. Each top was divided into two watches – starboard and port. From among the boys a captain of each group was chosen. So Mary became (as Guy probably was) the captain of the maintop starboard.

The article was careful and thorough, yet also written in a lively and entertaining style. A week after its publication *The Argus* printed a letter from an old sea captain who had been a trainee on the *Worcester* and who had been 'most interested in the graphic account given of her'. He himself had been captain of the foretop starboard; he heartily endorsed Mary's comments about a training ship for the colony.

After such a success, Mary wrote two more articles, and the *Argus* published them also.

She called the third and final article 'Shakings'. Shakings were odds and end of rope and canvas that were stored on deck, an appropriate name for the bits and pieces of information and anecdote which she included in her piece. She related the story of the first mate on a clipper whose captain refused to change course even when the mate reported breakers ahead. A

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<sup>3</sup> *Argus*, 19 May, 1888, 'Life on Board the Training Ship *Worcester*'.

few warnings, growing more desperate, did nothing but annoy the captain, who sent the mate back for'ard growling:

'Mr. Jones, you look after your end of the ship and I'll take charge of mine.'

A moment later the skipper head the anchors being let rip, and the ship was brought to with such force as to shake the life out of her. Up came the skipper, mad with rage.

'What the \_\_\_\_\_ do you mean by this, Mr. Jones?'

'Well, Sir,' said the mate calmly, 'I don't know what you intend to do about your end of the ship, but mine's anchored!'<sup>4</sup>

Mary next tried her hand at fiction. She sent a story, 'Lost in the Bush', to the *Sydney Mail*, and it was accepted. Then she wrote a story of life on the goldfields, with a Commissioner very like her father, on a goldfield very like the Woolshed at Chiltern, and a plot very like the story that an old colleague of her father's had told her years before. She gave the Commissioner the name of Jocelyn Ruthven, and called the goldfield Deadman's. Long after her short story, 'Dilemma' was published by *The Bulletin*, Ruthven and Deadman's lived on in a novel which Mary called *Deadman's* when she sent it to her publisher, but which finally appeared in the world as *Dave's Sweetheart*.

She then tried a longer work of fiction. 'A Man's Sacrifice' was, at 16,000 words, a longer-than-average short story. It was set in Ballarat, in the heat of summer; the young hero had a buggy accident after a New Year picnic which left him lame for life, and love blossomed between him and the heroine Mary. Much of it is William Gaunt's story – the drive home from the New Year picnic, the accident, the ankle injury, the lameness. Perhaps the other details (of love blossoming between patient and 'nurse') are also the real experience of her father and mother. Mary wrote a number of stories involving a heroine with a younger, prettier, more socially successful sister; 'A Man's Sacrifice' was the first of them.

After this came more stories of about the same length. The next to appear was 'Bingley's Gap', published in *The Leader* from September to November 1888. The homestead in the story is a fictionalised version of the Palmer family's Dederang Station, where Mary's mother and two brothers lived prior to Elizabeth's marriage to William. The heroine, Polly, is courted by the new Goldfields Commissioner, as Elizabeth was by William. The horror story that haunts the station – of an attack by blacks while the

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<sup>4</sup> *Argus*, 28 July, 1888.

men are away, in which the wife, child and servants are butchered, Mary used again in a later story ('The Peril of Lucy Capel'), although the second time around there is a last-minute rescue.

There were two more longer stories. 'Miles Dunlop's Mistake' tells the story of an older man, his one-handsome face partly disfigured by a gunshot wound, who falls in love with a pretty young nineteen-year-old. It was set in Portsea, even then a holiday resort on Port Phillip Bay about 80 km south of Melbourne. It was a very different Portsea from the sophisticated resort it was later to become. Chapter 3 of the story begins:

Portsea, as everybody knows, is a very quiet, rustic-looking little place, given over during the greater part of the year to lime-burners and fishermen. It boasts no shops, and but two hotels. As there are no streets, it is difficult to say of what the township consists. Houses there are, of course, pretty rustic-looking cottages, built of the white limestone common all along the eastern coast of Port Phillip; but they are set each in their own grounds, at long distances apart – some down in the gullies, some high on the cliffs, overlooking the sea, but, all alike, half hidden among the close-growing scrub. All Portsea, more or less, seems to consist of this heavy scrub – close, dark and thick – it fills the sandy gullies, climbs to the top of the hills, and crowns the steep cliffs that line the coast almost down to the forts at Port Nepean.<sup>5</sup>

Mary sent her story to *The Australasian*, and they accepted it; she was paid £50 for it.

Since few writers had novels published in Australia at this time, weekly newspapers provided an important opportunity for writers and a source of Australian stories for readers. Popular with country readers, weeklies like *The Australasian* provided a summary of the week's news, information on mining, farming and rural affairs, women's pages and literary sections which often had serial fiction.

Acceptance of her story gave Mary her introduction to David Watterston, the distinguished Scots journalist who edited the paper from 1885 to 1903 and then moved on to *The Argus*, and later to the Board of both papers: the doyen of Melbourne journalists.<sup>6</sup> Writing to W. P. Hurst, editor of *The Australasian* over forty years later, Mary recalled the meeting:

... trembling and speechless with shyness and nervousness [I] climbed up those rickety wooden stairs in Collins Street to interview Mr. Waterston [sic]. I had the greatest respect for him but he always managed to keep me in a chastened condition. Because of the awe inspired by the Editor of the Australasian I'm

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<sup>5</sup> *The Australasian Supplement*, 21 December 1889.

<sup>6</sup> 'People we know', *Punch*, 6 August 1914, p.224; and *Newspaper News*, 1 August 1931, p.12.

even a little afraid of you though I have even dined with English editors without turning a hair.<sup>7</sup>

'Miles Dunlop's Mistake' was published complete in the Christmas supplement of the paper in December 1889; a further novella, 'The Riot at the Packhorse', was printed week by week in serial form. The first instalment appeared in January 1890, and subsequent instalments continued until 22nd March. Again Mary was paid £50.

Mary's nervousness notwithstanding, *The Australasian* was to become one of her steady supporters, particularly in the first years of her widowhood, when writing success came slowly; between 1900 and 1904 it published twelve of her short stories and articles.

Mary had been writing for three or four years, and she had earned over £100 with her last two book-length stories. A writing career became a real possibility. She had dreamed for years about travel: a visit to England now might be the way to improve her chances, make contacts, establish herself securely as a writer.

The decision was made. In February 1890, while the weekly instalments of 'The Riot at the Packhorse' were still appearing in the *Australasian*, Mary boarded the 'Ballaarat' and sailed for England.

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She was just 29, and like a considerable number of young women in the Colony, unmarried. The census for the following year – 1891 – showed only 61.7% of Victorian women aged 25 to 29 were married or had been married: considerably less than two-thirds.<sup>8</sup>

In the early years of the Colonies, when men arrived in large numbers to take up land and to search for gold, or to work in the developing industries and administration, their numbers exceeded those of women. But as the Colonies grew, as women joined their menfolk on farms and selections, as the urban population grew, and as immigration programmes addressed the gender difference, the situation changed.

By 1881, the year Mary started at University, another important population change had occurred. The balance between Australian-born and immigrant had changed, and of the 2,323,000 colonists, just over 60% had

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<sup>7</sup> Letter to *The Australasian*, 24 July 1932, State Library of Victoria Manuscript Collection, MS6107.

<sup>8</sup> Figures quoted in Patricia Grimshaw, Chris McConville, and Ellen McEwan (eds.), *Families in Colonial Australia*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985.



been born in Australia. By the 1901 census, the figure had increased to 77%. Australia was no longer a predominantly immigrant country.<sup>9</sup>

As well, the emerging consciousness of women who had gained the right to study at University and were striving for the vote, who were working outside the home – some women from absolute necessity, some like Mary pushing against the boundaries of ‘respectable’ opinion to do it – meant that living as a single woman was becoming a reasonable option, rather than a consolation prize.

In what was clearly a preoccupation with the plight of the unmarried elder sister in *Kirkham’s Find*, Mary was part not just of a social trend but also of a family pattern. At 28, Lucy married youngest of all the family; Mary and the five boys were in their thirties and forties when they married.<sup>10</sup>

Mary arrived in England early in April 1890, after a two-day stop-over in Colonbo *en route*, where she enjoyed her first taste of the tropics.<sup>11</sup> She joined the Society of Authors, an influential organisation which represented many well-known authors, such as Bernard Shaw, Rudyard Kipling and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Over the years a considerable number of writers from the Colonies joined the Society, among them Walter de la Mare, Ada Cambridge, Winifred James, and Ethel M. Dell. While the Society protected the interests of writers generally, it was of particular help to writers living overseas who wanted to deal with British publishers, redress grievances, and sort out problems involving their rights and incomes. Ada Cambridge, for example, was glad to have their help when, in 1889, her publisher was taken over and her royalties were under threat. The Society had a solicitor sort out the rights of the case for her<sup>12</sup>.

Being in London gave Mary the opportunity to make contact with magazine editors and publishers. She was advised by the secretary of the Society of Authors to begin modestly, and she sent articles to lesser English magazines, but had no success. She decided to aim higher<sup>13</sup>. In flagrant disregard of the advice received, she tried the *English Illustrated Magazine*, using the system which had helped her to break into print in Australia – she wrote about her brothers’ experiences. Guy had recently arrived back in England from North America, with stories of his adventure in crossing

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<sup>9</sup> Gordon Greenwood (ed.), *Australia – A Social and Political History*, Angus & Robertson, 1977, p.145.

<sup>10</sup> Lucy married in 1890 at 28; Lance married at 30; Mary was 33 when she married, Ernest 34, Guy 35, Cecil 41 and Clive 43.

<sup>11</sup> *Reflection in Jamaica*, p.1.

<sup>12</sup> Society of Authors archive, BL MS 56991 - letter exchange beginning 4 October 1889.

<sup>13</sup> E.M.F., ‘An Australian Authoress at Home – Mary Gaunt of Warrnambool, Victoria’, *Sydney Mail*, 26.2.1898, quoted in McLaren.

the Atlantic in an old torpedo boat. It was a dangerous journey – two small boats in heavy seas, and threatened by icebergs – but they succeeded, and Guy was commended by the Admiralty for his efforts, and offered a commission in the Victorian Navy. Mary wrote up the story as if she were the person who had made the crossing, with a first-hand immediacy about it. 'Of all the craft that ever I sailed in, the torpedo boat is the worst. . .'. After a graphic description of days of sailing in heavy weather, she described the dangers of their approach to the Newfoundland coast:

On the evening of the second day the fog lifted, and right ahead, far away in the distance, we saw the land faintly marked on the horizon, while close around us were icebergs of all sizes. How near we had been in the fog we could never tell, but they towered up over us looking like great mountains from the deck of our little ship. . . . They were very beautiful, those icebergs, and took all sorts of fantastic forms; some were spotlessly white with a great deep blue ravine down the centre, some had tunnels through them big enough for a far larger ship than ours to pass through, others had sheer precipices down into the water, and others were worked into minarets and towers, spires and mullioned windows, which caught the feeble sunshine till it dazzled our eyes to look at them.<sup>14</sup>

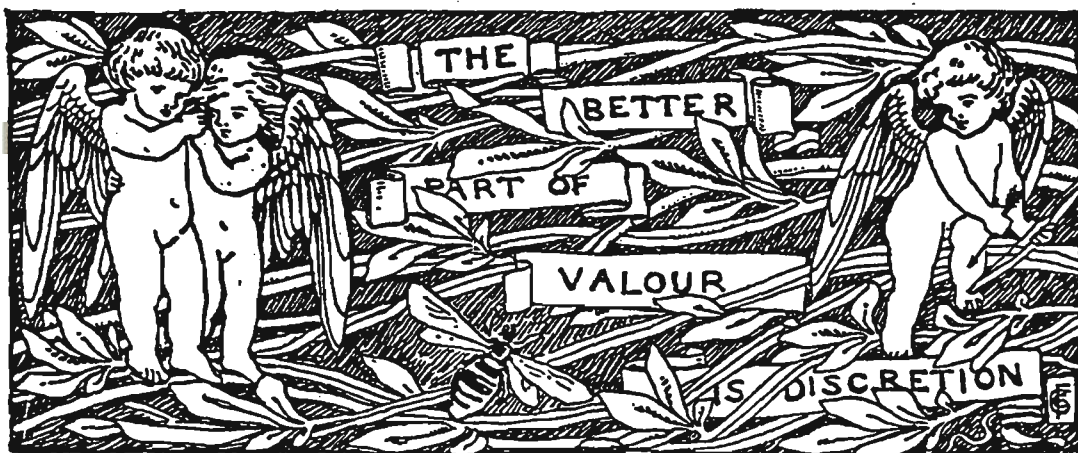
The editor of the *English Illustrated Magazine*, Kinloch Cooke, accepted the article, and wrote asking her to call in and see him about some minor changes he wanted to make. It was quite a surprise for him when a woman arrived in response to his letter.

Cooke wanted to see more of her writing; Mary gave him 'Christmas Eve at Warwingie' and 'Gentleman Jim – a Story'. The first of these appeared in the January 1891 issue, and it was followed in the February edition by the North Atlantic piece, graphically illustrated. The second story came out in August.

The meeting with Kinloch Cooke was fortuitous for Mary. Cooke was a brilliant mathematics and law scholar from Cambridge, who went on to the editorship of many influential journals and magazines after the *English Illustrated Magazine*. He also had a particular interest in the Colonies, having spent some years as secretary to the Earl of Dunraven, Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, and he had travelled widely throughout the Empire. Later, as founder and first editor of *The Empire Review*, he invited Mary to contribute to its opening issue. He also offered helpful advice. She would do well, he said, to get an agent to look after her

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<sup>14</sup> 'Across the North Atlantic in a Torpedo Boat' by An Officer on Board, *English Illustrated Magazine*, Vol. 8, February 1891, pp.391-396.



## "LOST."

A STORY OF THE AUSTRALIAN BUSH.

By MARY GAUNT.

With Illustrations by E. F. BREWTHALL, R.W.S.



HELM, old man, we've lost the track!"

"Don't be a howling idiot, man. Lost!"

Why, there's the track right ahead, and

But Anderson flung himself off

grass and covered his face with

"I tell you," reiterated

and shading his eyes

might have been

"They were made yesterday,"  
my dear fellow, we made

"What!"

Helm raised his head  
stooped over  
again cried

" "



"ANDERSON FLUNG HIMSELF OFF HIS HORSE ON TO THE DRY CRISP GRASS."

'Lost', illustrations of the story from *English Illustrated Magazine*, 1892.

affairs in England when she was back in Australia, and recommended A.P. Watt to her. Mary took his advice.

The connection with the *English Illustrated Magazine* was well established; in all, eight of her stories appeared in it over five years, the later ones after she had returned to Australia.

In the Australian colonies during the 1880s and 1890s, egalitarian ideals were emerging, particularly on the goldfields, where a man could become rich quickly, and where distinction could be achieved by good fortune or hard work rather than depending on hereditary titles or long-established ownership of land and property. These ideals became part of the tradition that grew up in the bush – the oral tradition of camp-fire songs and bush ballads. Until the 1890s these bush stories and songs were regarded as second-rate, inferior to English literature and not accepted by educated colonists. But times were changing; the voice of the working man was heard in the strikes of the early 1890s, the generation born in the colonies had grown up and was making a claim to its own literature and ideas, the image of the larrikin Aussie with the egalitarian ideals was moving into the cities and gaining acceptance as the authentic voice of a great many Australians.

Mary had begun her career at an auspicious time in Australian writing. Although the number of books being published in the colonies at this time was fairly small, she was part of a wave of writers and artists who were beginning to express the idiom, the ideas, the aspirations, of the generation born in Australia. Ten years either side of her birth had come writers like Rosa Praed (1851), Barbara Baynton (1857), Victor Daley (1858), Mary Gilmore (1864) 'Banjo' Paterson (1864), Henry Lawson (1867) and Ethel Turner and Henry Handel Richardson (1870). At the same time, and with the same new ideas, came the artists Julian Ashton (1851), Frederick McCubbin (1855), Tom Roberts (1856), John Longstaff (1862), Rupert Bunny (1864), Emanuel Phillips Fox (1865), Arthur Streeton (1867), Charles Conder (1868) and Ethel Carrick (1872).

The Sydney *Bulletin*, under the editorship of Archibald and later A.G. Stephens, was the single most influential force in the acceptance of the novel, egalitarian voice in Australian writing. Stephens in particular had an ability to pick original talent; Vance Palmer later called him 'the godfather of nearly every significant book issued during the period [of the 1890s]'.<sup>15</sup>

The *Bulletin* became, in the 1890s, the voice of bush people. Stories which in the past had featured Englishmen wooing squatters' daughters

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<sup>15</sup> Vance Palmer, *The Legend of the Nineties*, Currey O'Neil, Melbourne, 1954.

gave way to the writings of Barcroft Boake, Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson, and from these emerged the developing images of the bush – the idea of mateship, of the easy-going Colonial cutting through social barriers, the man or woman battling and beating the vastness of the bush and coping with its dangers of heat, bushfires, flood and isolation. It was often a romantic image, and it had a distinctly Australian flavour when many papers and magazines were still printing stories modelled on English lines. The *Bulletin* was irreverent and racist, and encouraged the larrikin writers. The one (and only) story Mary published in the *Bulletin*, 'A Dilemma', was set on the goldfields, where friendship triumphs when two men find themselves on opposite sides of the law: it was mateship on a pedestal.

The artist Norman Lindsay went to Sydney to work for the *Bulletin* in 1901. Years later he reflected on his arrival there:

It is hard at this date to convey the almost esoteric reverence with which Archie [the editor, J.F. Archibald] and *The Bulletin* were regarded in those days. *The Bulletin* was the only cultural centre this country possessed. It dominated opinion wherever people were looking for an intelligent outlook on life and art. It had startled into being a genuine urge of nationalism.<sup>16</sup>

Mary's stories of the bush, of life on the diggings, of bushfire and mateship, fitted well with the growing image of the heroic settlers and diggers who survived in tough conditions and kept the old values of loyalty and integrity alive. But some of the values Mary espoused were a long way from those promoted by the *Bulletin*. When she began writing of the upper-class Englishman as a symbol of old positive values such as loyalty and courage, of the right of women to be independent, and to carve out careers for themselves, etc., she found herself in opposition to the *Bulletin*. Its editors saw this brave new world of Colonial literature as the domain of male writers. As Mary was to discover later, its reviewers could treat women writers with withering scorn.

Mary returned to Australia in 1891. She had established herself in a writing career during her time in England; now she took up her pen back in Melbourne.

The Colony of Victoria to which she returned was feeling the first grim tremors of depression. A period of unprecedented unemployment began in 1891, and affected all the Australian colonies, although gold discoveries in Western Australia helped to boost the economy there. A

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<sup>16</sup> Norman Lindsay, *Bohemians of the Bulletin*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1965.

protracted drought in 1895 delayed recovery; it was 1896 before the economic situation began to markedly improve.

Mary began her writing again. Her first published work was a review of Ada Cambridge's novel, *The Three Miss Kings*. The story had appeared in serial form in *The Australasian* in 1883<sup>17</sup>; in book form it was published by Heinemann in London and Melville, Mullen and Slade in Melbourne. Mary's review appeared in *The Australasian Critic*, a magazine also published by Melville, Mullen and Slade to support and promote their publishing venture and circulating library.<sup>18</sup> No doubt Ada Cambridge appreciated Mary's warm recommendation of her book:

Cambridge's documented fame as an Australian author is readily traced from 1890, beginning with favourable reviews of *A Marked Man* and, soon after, *The Three Miss Kings* (1891). . .<sup>19</sup>

Before her trip overseas, Mary had begun writing about the goldfields, the world she had known as a child. Her *Bulletin* story 'Dilemma' dealt with life on the goldfields, in the bush, and she found that this was the world people wanted to read about. She started work on a novel set in the same world – the world of miners, troopers and shanty-keepers, the gold mines, the hill country and the bush. It was the Beechworth area, where she had spent much of her childhood.

Years before, as a child, she had sat listening to the stories of 'an old gentleman who had been a gay young dog in Paris in the fifties'<sup>20</sup>, one of the many colorful and often cultivated characters who peopled the cosmopolitan world of the goldfields. The story as she heard it was set in a chateau in France, and concerned a young French nobleman and the beautiful girl he had left behind him. Mary took the bare bones of the story, and wrote it into the Colony; she put her characters onto the goldfields; her heroine became the daughter of a shanty keeper, in love with Black Dave, a miner, and the 'other man' was a police trooper, standing by in the hope of making an honest woman of her. When the book was published, she gave a copy of it to the old gentleman who had supplied her with the plot; 'he read it with interest [but] failed to find in it any trace of the tale of love and sorrow he had told. . .'<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Morrison, 'Retrieving Colonial Literary Culture: the case for an Index to Serial Fiction in Australian (or Australasian?) Newspapers', in *Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand Bulletin*, 1989, Vol.13, 1, p.31.

<sup>18</sup> *The Australasian Critic*, Vol.1, No.12, 1 September 1891.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Morrison (ed.), *A Woman's Friendship*, p.xix, quoted in Margaret Bradstock and Louise Wakeling, *Rattling the Orthodoxies: A Life of Ada Cambridge*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1991.

<sup>20</sup> 'How they broke into print', *The Strand Magazine*, New York, August 1915, p.94. The 'old gentleman' may have been Frederick Standish, later Police Commissioner in Melbourne.

<sup>21</sup> *Strand Magazine*, Aug.1915, p.94.

While she was working on the book, she began writing a series of short, researched articles on Melbourne institutions for the *Argus*. They were institutions which cared for the homeless, the sick, the destitute, and particularly for women and children. In later years, in her travels in Africa and China, it was the condition of women and children that would concern and interest her most.

One of her visits was to the Convent of the Nuns of the Good Shepherd at Abbotsford, where close to 800 women and children were living: 100 in the religious order, 340 'waifs and strays' and 325 'penitents' – a euphemism for 'wayward girls', unmarried mothers, alcoholics, the destitute and the old. At the convent she gathered her material, making notes about the buildings, the gardens, the work being done, etc. Impatient about small details, she recorded 340 for the waifs and strays at first, then 280; both figures appeared in the article.

She mused over the qualities of the 'waifs and strays':

The children of the streets are these, the children of the slums without a doubt, and many of them have not good faces, and the reverend mother acknowledges with a sigh that many of them are very hard to manage.

'It is in the blood, I think,' she says, 'the children of such mothers – and such fathers.'<sup>22</sup>

She pondered briefly the reasons for the children being 'hard to manage', but spent little time on the question; heredity was enough explanation, even after a long description of the restricted lifestyle of the children.

The restriction was even more severe for the 'penitents':

All the penitents wear a dress provided by the community. It seems, as a rule, to be grey, with a little white linen cap tied under the chin, and, of course, a big apron . . .

They are all hard at work, the penitents, and over every group is a watchful nun. It would not do that they should get talking together – that they should discuss the life they had led outside these walls. Some of them may have met, probably they have, but they must not speak of it; everything must be forgotten here.<sup>23</sup>

The young women had broken society's rules; it seemed reasonable that they should live like this, and be grateful. There is only the slightest suggestion of irony in the voice of the reporter.

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<sup>22</sup> "The Nuns of the Good Shepherd", *Argus*, 27.1.1894.

<sup>23</sup> as above.



This was late 1893. Melbourne was two years into depression. The land boom years, the years of 'Marvellous Melbourne' had come to a dramatic end. Two banks had failed in December 1891, and other banks and building societies followed, closing their doors without warning and disappearing, taking the savings of small investors with them. Land prices dropped rapidly; people and businesses with money invested in land were going bankrupt, and workers were losing their jobs, and sometimes their homes as well. A few weeks before the article appeared the Education Department closed its Teachers Training College, the institution which had opened only two years before to such acclaim, because there were no jobs for newly trained teachers.<sup>24</sup> Homeless and jobless people were beginning to be seen in the streets, and charitable organisations were arranging food handouts.

In November 1893, Mary wrote about the Warrnambool district, an area she knew and loved. She wrote about a butter factory near her uncle Thomas Palmer's farm at Tooram, on the Hopkins River. She wrote for the town-dwelling *Argus* readers, and neither she nor the paper's editors seemed to mind that she didn't understand how butter was made:

Of the internal mechanism of those [cream separators] I must frankly admit I know nothing. . . I did not catch all the explanation, and that was why I did not understand what happened to the milk when it ran down through a pipe from the receivers into the separators to come out again through two different pipes skim-milk and cream.<sup>25</sup>

or that she went to do her research on a day when the cheese-making section of the factory was not operating, and therefore could not report on it. She relied on, and the paper accepted, the idea that a woman wouldn't be expected to concern herself with technical details.

During 1893 Mary sent off the manuscript of her goldfields novel to the publishers, Edward Arnold, in London. They liked the book, and wrote offering to buy the manuscript for £50. She was disappointed. Arnolds wrote again offering a royalty arrangement. She was unsure of how well the book would go; finally she chose the first option and sold the rights of the book for £50, a fairly generous payment for a relatively unknown writer. She hoped that, if the book did well, Edward Arnold would then be keen to take the next one, which she was already writing.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> L.J. Blake (gen. ed.), *Vision and Realisation*, Education Department of Victoria, 1973, p.843.

<sup>25</sup> *The Argus*, 3 February 1894.

<sup>26</sup> Letter, Mary Gaunt to Edward Arnold, 29 December 1893, McLaren Papers, Baillieu Library, Melbourne.

There was some discussion about the title. Mary had called it *Deadman's*; Arnolds did not like the name. On the goldfields, 'Deadman's' was a place name with an interesting past, a lingering reminder of hardship and heartbreak from the early days of the gold rush. But for the English market the name had harsh, Wild West connotations. Edward Arnold suggested *Black Dave's Girl* at first. Mary had no objection. But, in the end, this was felt to be misleading too; the 'black' of the title was not about race, it was about morality, so the title was changed again. When the two black-bound volumes with the gilt front covers finally arrived from Edward Arnold ('publishers to the India Office'), and Mary hugged her first book to her at last, it was called *Dave's Sweetheart*.

*Dave's Sweetheart* sold extremely well. It first appeared in March 1894 in an attractive edition which cost 21 shillings; a second edition came out the same month. By the time the year was out, two Library of Australian authors editions (a quality and a cheap edition) had come out. Later, in 1905, when the book was out of print, Mary had the good sense to write to Arnolds asking if she could buy back the copyright.<sup>27</sup> Arnolds returned the rights to her without charge. They reprinted the book in an English popular edition in 1915, possibly with Australian soldiers serving overseas in mind.

The critics were impressed. The *Daily Telegraph* called it 'one of the most powerful and impressive novels of the year'<sup>28</sup>. Closer to home, Mary found that her family were now inclined to take her writing career seriously.

Setting a plot in a place she knew was clearly, in her eyes at least, a good idea. When Edward Arnold encouraged her to send something else, and perhaps something English, she wrote to explain that the new book she was working on was not English: 'I can't write English stories'<sup>29</sup>. She had already decided on the setting: it was to be the Ballarat district. She began a novel about a pious squatter's family— 'very pious, I drew them from life'<sup>30</sup> — and the two very different young women who go to stay with them and become part of their household. But when she finished the story and it appeared in print, it was not as a novel in Edward Arnold binding, but as Saturday's serial story in *The Argus* beginning in October 1894 and going through to January 1895. The story was called 'The Other Man'.

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<sup>27</sup> Letter to Edward Arnold, 12 November 1905, McLaren Papers, Baillieu Library, Melbourne University.

<sup>28</sup> Cited in McLaren, I, Bibliography, p.2.

<sup>29</sup> Letter to Edward Arnold, 29.12.1893

<sup>30</sup> as above.

## IV

### Marriage and Tragedy

Some time in the early 1890s Mary Gaunt met Lindsay Miller, a widower in his thirties who was a doctor in Warrnambool.

Mary's acquaintance with the Warrnambool area began with her Palmer uncles, who first settled and took up land there before she was born. William Henry, who was the eldest (after the early death of Frederick), became Manager of the Bank of Australia in Warrnambool in 1857.<sup>1</sup> Thomas took up land in the area at about the same time, and in 1863 bought Grassmere station. In the following year he married. He and his wife settled at 'Tooram' on the Hopkins River in 1872, and built it up to be a large and successful dairy farm. Thomas became a well-known and well-respected citizen, 'the lord of Tooram'<sup>2</sup> involved in local government in the Warrnambool area, Justice of the Peace<sup>3</sup> and a Life Governor of the Hospital. A third brother, Octavius was prominent in the local sporting events – cricket, polo and racing.<sup>4</sup>

Disaster struck 'Tooram' in 1883. Thomas Palmer had brought twenty-eight labourers into the country to work as milkers on the farm. They did not speak English; they were described variously as Afghan, Indian, Persian and Hindostanee; the men, of different racial and religious groups, were housed in a bunkhouse together, and cut off from contact with others. It was a course of action that Palmer apparently grew uneasy about, as he was said to keep a loaded revolver within reach day and night. When a fight broke out between the men, Palmer panicked and fired at them; several were wounded, and one later died, and Palmer was arraigned for manslaughter.

Mary's father William, by now a successful barrister in Ballarat, defended Thomas at his trial. His colleague Hickman Molesworth, later to

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Osburne, *The History of Warrnambool 1847-1886*, Warrnambool Examiner.

<sup>2</sup> Joshua Lake's epithet for him in *Picturesque Australasia*, Cassells, London, 1887, Warrnambool section, p.86.

<sup>3</sup> *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 1851-1890, entry for Thomas McLeod Palmer, p.398-5.

<sup>4</sup> Osburne, Richard, *The History of Warrnambool*. The Warrnambool polo club was formed in 1874, and Octavius Palmer played on the winning side in the first season. The newspaper commented that the local club had won victories far and wide, even crossing the seas and going into other colonies, 'a practice more calculated to extend the principle of Federation than all the legislative enactments evolved from the brains of our statesmen'.

become, like William Gaunt, a County Court judge, assisted in the defence. Interpreters and a copy of the Koran were requested from Melbourne.<sup>5</sup> The Koran arrived, but no interpreters. When none could be found locally, one of the witnesses in the case was pressed into service.

The trial of Thomas Palmer turned to a large extent on whether he shot wildly and unnecessarily at the rioting workers, or whether he was actually threatened with attack by one of them, and fired in self-defence. Palmer claimed that Sirdar Khan, the man he shot, advanced towards him with a raised pitchfork. The Police sergeant felt that Palmer's statement was not consistent with the medical evidence.<sup>6</sup> The Warrnambool doctor who conducted the post mortem was called to give evidence. When questioned by Molesworth, he stated that the bullet wound in the Afghan worker's arm was consistent with the wounded man having had his arm raised in a striking position at the time the shot was fired. Palmer was acquitted of the charge.

The citizens of the Western District welcomed the news that 'an honoured and worthy citizen had escaped from a deadly peril' when he was acquitted.<sup>7</sup>

The doctor who was called from Warrnambool to assist the injured Afghan worker, and who conducted the post mortem, was Lindsay Miller.

Lindsay Miller, who had been a medical practitioner in Warrnambool since 1884,<sup>8</sup> was by the time of the trial, Medical Superintendent of the Hospital. It was Miller who rode the eight miles out from Warrnambool on the night of 17th March to treat the wounded Afghan labourer, Sirdar Khan, and it was Miller who issued the death certificate on the following day and gave the medical evidence which assisted Palmer's case.

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Lindsay Miller was a tall, slim, quietly-spoken and rather reticent man. He was born in Tasmania. After study and work in Edinburgh, he qualified in 1878 (Licentiate of the Royal College of Surgeons, and of the Royal College of Physicians), and went to Brussels for post-graduate study, gaining MD there in the following year. He then worked as house surgeon at Oldham Infirmary and house physician at Glasgow Royal Infirmary. Miller and his parents settled in Victoria and Lindsay and his father, who

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<sup>5</sup> Trial papers, Public Record Office Series 641, Box 30.

<sup>6</sup> Telegram, Sgt. Hamilton to Chief Commissioner of Police, 20 March 1883, Public Record Office, Melbourne, Series 641, Box 30.

<sup>7</sup> Australian Dictionary of Biography, 1851-1890, p.394.

<sup>8</sup> Horace Holmes, *History of Medical Practices in Victoria* (unpublished), Warrnambool & District Base Hospital.

was also a doctor, were registered as medical practitioners in Victoria in early 1881. Miller senior took rooms in Collins Street. and in July Lindsay was appointed, from a list of nine applicants, as the first Resident Medical Superintendent of the Melbourne Hospital.<sup>9</sup>

It was an important appointment at a crucial time in the Hospital's history. For years the City Coroner had condemned the practices of the hospital; twenty years earlier he had told the newspapers that there would hardly be any difference in the death rate at the Hospital if all the doctors stayed away.<sup>10</sup> Within months of Miller's arrival, yet another death occurred which was the subject of an inquest, as yet again, a patient who should have recovered had died: a 23-year-old man with a knife wound. Miller presented his evidence to the inquest: there were still wounds being treated, and operations being carried on, without antiseptic precautions; the hospital was overcrowded and, in the outpatient area at least, there was no way of separating patients with contagious diseases from the others. The Coroner, Dr. Youl, was inclined to go further: he said that the Melbourne 'was a contagious diseases hospital distributing diseases all over Melbourne'.<sup>11</sup>

The work at the Hospital was undoubtedly demanding. Many older doctors did not accept Lister's antiseptic theories, and a large expenditure was clearly necessary to improve conditions. But less than two years after his appointment, Miller resigned; his resignation was accepted with regret by the Hospital Board. There was talk of ill-health as his reason, but if there was, Miller did not say so in his resignation. He asked only to be relieved of his position as soon as possible.

The next issue of the *Australian Medical Journal* carried the news of the marriage of Hubert Lindsay Miller and Annie Isabella, daughter of Sir Francis Murphy, squatter and politician, and a former surgeon. Miller and his new wife moved to Warrnambool, where he took up a private practice. He became an honorary medical officer of the Hospital there, becoming Paid Medical Officer in 1889, with a salary of £120 per annum.<sup>12</sup> This was in marked contrast to his salary of £450 at the Melbourne Hospital. But in July 1892 his wife Annie died at the age of 38 years. Two years later, Miller married Mary Gaunt. Miller was 37, Mary was 33.

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<sup>9</sup> The Royal Melbourne Hospital Committee of Management Minutes No.10, p.262, quoted in letter from Gabriele Haveaux, Archivist.

<sup>10</sup> K.S.Inglis, *Hospital and Community: A History of the Royal Melbourne Hospital*. Melbourne University Press, 1958.

<sup>11</sup> *Australian Medical Journal*, 15 February 1882.

<sup>12</sup> Horace Holmes, (unpublished MS.)

Mary and Lindsay Miller were married in a quiet ceremony at St. George's Church, Malvern, on 8 August 1894. Mary's father gave her away. The newly-weds spent their honeymoon in Bright, Victoria, and returned to live in Warrnambool.<sup>13</sup> Their house, with Miller's surgery, was on the corner of Koroit and Henna Streets.

Mary settled down happily to her new life in Warrnambool. Her desire for travel was pushed into the background, but not forgotten. She and Lindsay had both travelled already – Mary on her trip to England in 1890-91, and Lindsay for study and work in England, Scotland and Belgium. One day, when they could afford it, they would travel again.

Although she continued writing, there were now other activities to distract her. She acted as receptionist for her husband, and became very interested in domestic life – the garden, keeping fowls and bees. She felt the need to manage her husband's salary carefully.

Lindsay seems to have been supportive of Mary's writing; the income it produced undoubtedly helped. Her first book, *Dave's Sweetheart*, had been published by Edward Arnold the year of her marriage, and within the year a second English edition had come out and two editions in Australia. The £50 she had received for the copyright to *Dave's Sweetheart* was almost half of her husband's basic annual salary.

Mary continued to write short stories. There was no shortage of material. In the hills behind Warrnambool there was a flourishing industry in distilling, which was against the law. One local gentleman who ran an illicit still made a friendly offer to Lindsay one day: 'Sure, Doctor dear, leave the bit gayrden gate open wan night an' it's jist a keg I'll be lavin' yez on the verandy. It'll warm yer heart these could nights, an' not a sowl the wiser at all, at all.'<sup>14</sup> When the still was later discovered, and the man charged, it was Mary's father who tried the case! Mary took the Irish character and his still and made him the hero of a short story, 'The Humbling of Sergeant Mahone'; in her story, the Irishman and his family and the illegal still come out as winners. The story was published in the London *Sphere* some years later.

Another story of the Australian bush appeared in the *English Illustrated Magazine* in August 1895. It was 'A Brave Little Lass'. The 'little lass' who looks after younger children when they are all lost in the bush at night, lives near a swamp, where the children are afraid of a bunyip. It is

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<sup>13</sup> *Punch*, 9 August 1894, p.93.

<sup>14</sup> *The Ends of the Earth* (Introduction)

the setting of her childhood home in Ballarat, and there are echoes of an incident when she herself was lost as a baby with her nurse.<sup>15</sup>

The next month Mary's next book appeared, this time with the Methuen imprint. *The Moving Finger* was a collection of her stories of Australian bush life. At least four of them had been published in *The English Illustrated Magazine*, beginning with 'Christmas Eve at Warwingie' in the January issue of 1891; Mary had arranged this while she was in England in 1890-91. There was an English and a Colonial edition.

When the bicycle became popular (they began to be imported in 1894), Mary bought one. Bicycling became very quickly an extremely popular sport for people with the money to pay for it and the leisure to enjoy it; clubs were formed; people took riding lessons, including well-known figures like Alfred Deakin. Mary found her 'wheel' a great way to move independently around the town, and explored the area on it, although it was still considered by some to be a rather risqué amusement for ladies.

She resumed her articles for *The Argus*, signing her first as a married woman 'Mary Gaunt (Mrs. H. Lindsay Miller)'. 'The Tribulations of a Charitable Society' pointed out how the poor often failed to be thrifty and hardworking and expected far too much. Again it was based on her own experiences. She told of going to the house of a woman who had been to the Society for assistance (every case had to be investigated and the Society had guidelines for giving help). The case didn't meet the guidelines – the husband with the bandaged leg was felt to be malingering. Mary asked why he hadn't gone to the hospital for treatment; the wife said, 'He's that tender-hearted, he don't like to leave me and the children.' Mary added a wry comment: 'Report said he hammered her periodically, but we all know what a rumour is worth.' Mary was not, on the whole, in favour of individuals being approached for charity; societies could better judge who was worthy and arrange help for them.

The difficult economic conditions of the Colonies were only slowly improving. Although she was sceptical about individual cases, Mary could see that women often felt the brunt of the economic burden. If their husbands were ill, unemployed or dead, they and their children suffered, and if the women went to work they could not expect to earn at the same rate as a man:

The recent census shows that of the 89,502 female 'breadwinners' in NSW, 66,144 are working in feminine occupations such as needlework, domestic service, boarding-house keeping and shop-

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<sup>15</sup> 'My Victorian Childhood', pp.42-44.



keeping. Their wages are about half that of men in similar categories of work.<sup>16</sup>

Mary decided on a series of articles on ways in which women could increase their income. She chose as her subjects areas within the capabilities of women, but which women might not have thought of: beekeeping, growing asparagus and mushrooms, raising silk worms, scent-farming, keeping hens. She had in mind women who were in a situation similar to hers in single life:

I speak to the girls whose yearly allowance is between £20 and £30, who pay for everything out of it – travelling, amusements and postage stamps included – and who know that in giving them that their father has done the very utmost he can for them.<sup>17</sup>

She based her articles to some extent on her own practical knowledge and experience – certainly this was true where growing asparagus and keeping fowls were concerned. But she made sure she had good, practical information: she talked to farmers and growers and got pamphlets from the Department of Agriculture, the Silk Culture Association; she gave Melbourne market prices for eggs, and explained the preferred shipping dates for poultry for the English market.

The series began (in October 1897) with the most obvious of the occupations – keeping poultry. It was simple, direct and practical, at least for those who could find the necessary basics, which were half an acre of land and £10 capital. There were instructions on how to build a chicken-house ('they should be made of palings, and roofed with bark, or whatever is cheapest'), and there was a no-nonsense approach: women who wanted the best results should be up to feed the hens at sunrise with a warm meal! A woman who followed the advice could expect to earn twelve shillings and six pence per week for 36 weeks out of 52 by selling locally, and might consider sending eggs, and poultry by refrigerated ship to the English market also.

The next in the series, keeping silk-worms, was a little less practical, except for the far-sighted. 'Any woman thinking of sericulture must get her land ready, and have it planted with trees at least three years before she begins operations with the silkworm'. But there was an interesting long-term plan to consider:

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<sup>16</sup> 23 April 1894, quoted in *Chronicle of Australia*, pub. Chronicle, Ringwood Vic. 1993.

<sup>17</sup> *The Argus*, 2 October 1897.

There are, I am sure, in this colony of Victoria many girls now growing up whose father has land, and who might easily persuade him to set apart an acre to be planted with the white mulberry, which will be ready for them to start work by the time they have finished their education, and have learnt what they need to learn about housekeeping.<sup>18</sup>

Again there was practical advice (a leaflet with wall-chart was available free from the Victorian Silk Culture Association; the Colonial Government would give up to one hundred cuttings of white mulberry free of charge). She recommended selling the cocoons (after drying) with the thread on them rather than trying to reel the silk.

In the next month (November) it was growing asparagus, and in the following year the series went on with mushrooms (February) and scent-farming (March). Scent-farming was new in the colony, but Mary was not disheartened by that. A grower at Caramut, north of Warrnambool, was producing good samples of perfume from tuberose; Mary's philosophy was: '... what has been done once can most certainly be done again' and she proceeded with the directions. Perfume could be gathered by the *enfleurage* method (where blossoms are laid on a sheet of glass covered with fat, which absorbs the perfume), or by distillation, and she explained both.

Perhaps inspired by Mary's success with the articles, her younger brother Clive tried his hand at writing. Clive, still struggling through his law degree at Melbourne University, had gone on a visit to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and wrote an article on tea plantations there for the *Argus* which appeared in April 1898.

Later that year Mary's poultry-farming article appeared again, this time in a rather unlikely magazine, *The Tatler*. *The Tatler* provided theatre and literary news to a readership concerned with the nicer things of life – ladies' colleges, studio photographers, elocution lessons. (One teacher advertised her services with the cachet of the Governor's wife: 'Lady Brassey recommends Fraulein Litten as a German teacher from whose readings she derived great pleasure and benefit'.<sup>19</sup>) The poultry farming articles appeared on 30 July and 6 August; beekeeping followed on 20 and 27 August. The bee-keeping article concluded:

The girl who is the owner of a large and thriving apiary, who has thoroughly mastered its management, has in her own hands the means of earning her livelihood in the most delightful and interesting fashion, and need envy no one.

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<sup>18</sup> *The Argus*, 23 October 1897.

<sup>19</sup> *The Tatler*, 30 July 1896.

By now the Colony was reading *Kirkham's Find* – the Colonial edition had come out at the end of 1897 – in which Phoebe, the heroine, achieves financial independence by keeping bees!

There was little opportunity for further articles to follow. After its commencement in 1897 by the book publishing company George Robertson, *The Tatler* changed hands a few weeks after Mary's articles appeared, but it lasted only a few issues more. It closed with the 8 October issue.<sup>20</sup>

Soon after her 'Little Industries for Women' series began, Mary reviewed a book on West Africa: the place she loved to read about, and to which she longed to travel. It was the story of a secret embassy twelve years before by a British explorer, Joseph Thomson, to the tribes who lived along the Niger River. His task was to try to persuade the tribes to continue trading with the National African Company and not to change their allegiance to Germany, which was colonising the area. The book was compiled from fragments left after the explorer's death by his brother, Rev. J. B. Thomson.

Mary's piece was not so much a review as an article about the book. There was a lengthy summary of the route Thomson took, and what happened on the way, and details of the treaties with the Sultans of Sokoto and Gandu which crowned his journey with success. It was a strange and different world to readers, and there were long quotations describing its customs and features.

Meanwhile Edward Morris, her friend and mentor from Ballarat days, was involved in another book for Cassell's, this time *Picturesque New Zealand*, which was published in August 1895. Some of the writers from *Picturesque Australasia* eight years before put entries into the new collection of articles – Morris himself, Professor T.G. Tucker, and R. E. N. Twopeny among others. Tucker and Twopeny had written on New Zealand for the earlier volume. Mary's contribution was on 'Captain Cook in New Zealand', a natural follow-on to her article 'Explorers by Sea' for the earlier book.

Another association from the *Picturesque Australasia* volume was with Joshua Lake, art publisher and lexicographer. Lake had come to Victoria as a young man for the sake of his health, and had joined the staff of the Church of England Grammar School under Edward Morris. He and Morris shared an interest in language, and particularly in the English

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<sup>20</sup> Lurline Stuart, *Nineteenth Century Australian Periodicals: an Annotated Bibliography*, Hale & Ironmonger, Sydney, 1979, p.156.

language as used in Australia; the two men published volumes on the subject in the same year (1888): Morris's *Austral English* and Lake's Australasian supplement to *Webster's International Dictionary*. Lake left the Grammar School to become Principal of Hamilton College in Western Victoria, and he wrote about the Western district in the *Picturesque Australasia* volume. By the time of writing, he had left the work of schoolmastering behind him, and had returned to Melbourne to musical and artistic work.<sup>21</sup> Mary was later to contribute to a special volume which was edited by Lake.

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Mary was having articles accepted by magazines and newspapers (*The Age*, *The Antipodean*, *The Argus*, *The Australasian*, *The Tatler*, all published in Melbourne), but her success with fiction was coming from publishers in England. After her success with *Dave's Sweetheart* and the story collection, *The Moving Finger*, she began to think about another novel set in the world she knew.

Over the next few years, a story of an independent Colonial woman took shape. Its central character, Phoebe Marsden, was a young woman so much like her creator that the story reflected Mary's world in close detail and came very close to autobiography. Phoebe Marsden is the eldest in a big family, with a sister a little younger regarded as the prettier of the two. Stanley, the eldest of her brothers, is not as academically successful as the women students at 'The Shop', as Melbourne University was being called even then, but he excels at sport. Their family is moderately comfortable; their father is a professional man in Ballarat, and their small farm is ill-managed ('I wish to goodness father would let me manage just for a year. . . I know I could make it pay', Phoebe says). The girls are aware of limited finances, and Phoebe is keen to earn money of her own. She envies her brothers' educational opportunities, and their chance to earn their own money and make their way in the world. And she admires a young man called Morrison.

As the story develops, Phoebe determines to earn an independent living by keeping bees, and through many difficulties succeeds in her ambition. Morrison, who lived on the neighbouring property in Ballarat, is

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<sup>21</sup> Obituary, *The Australasian*, 27 June 1908, p.1596.

spearred by aboriginals and struggles bravely back to civilisation with the tip of a spear embedded in his leg.

Mary took some time to finish the story. When it was published in August 1897, the author was shown as Mary Gaunt (Mrs. H. Lindsay Miller). The book carried the dedication: 'To my husband, in loving acknowledgement of the tenderness and sympathy which makes these first days of our married life so happy, I dedicate this book.'

*Kirkham's Find* did very well; it was her most successful so far. Two printings of the hardback Colonial Library Edition and a paperback version, as well as the English edition, all came out in 1897 as well as a School Presentation Copy.

The *Argus* reviewer was complimentary, but felt that Mary had overdone the plain older sister's plight: 'Most of us will search in vain for a memory of any family in which the homely face of the eldest born, a girl of sterling worth, was the subject of such constant irritating and unnatural comment in the domestic circle.' Her use of George Morrison's escapade in New Guinea four years before gained the reviewer's approval. In a novel where there was considerable emphasis on the domestic: 'The flight from the treacherous blacks of Queensland proves that the authoress can describe hair-breadth escapes as well as the placid household life. It is an excellently handled piece of sensationalism.'<sup>22</sup>

The London *Bookman* said it showed 'an increase in strength and vitality [over her earlier books]'.<sup>23</sup> 'A really charming novel' said the London *Standard*.<sup>24</sup> Overseas it went well. In Melbourne it went well. But in Sydney, there was *The Bulletin* . . .

In 1896 A.G. Stephens became editor of the Red Page of the *Bulletin*, where many Australian writers were first published. He was called 'the first important Australian literary critic'<sup>25</sup>. In November 1897 the Red Page reviewed three new books by Australian women: Mary's *Kirkham's Find*, Louise Mack's *Teens*, and *Miss Bobbie*, by Ethel Turner. For *Miss Bobbie* there was kindly enthusiasm: 'Ethel Turner's *Miss Bobbie* completes her round half-dozen volumes: she will soon need a whole shelf to herself . . . *Miss Bobbie* quite maintains the author's excellent level . . .'

For Louise Mack, for whom a bright future was predicted, there was a

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<sup>22</sup> *The Argus*, 20 November 1897, p.13.

<sup>23</sup> *The Bookman*, Vol.9, October 1895, pp.18.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in McLaren bibliography; no other detail.

<sup>25</sup> Geoffrey Serle, *From Deserts the Prophets Come: the Creative Spirit in Australia, 1788-1972*, Heinemann, Melbourne 1973

short and rather dismissive paragraph about her output, and how one had to 'admire the lady's industry'. Then came the review, perhaps by a different writer, and although it lost out in comparison to *Little Women*, 'that permanent standard of girls'-book all-but-perfection', her book received considerable praise. Then the reviewer turned to Mary:

About 'Kirkham's Find' there is little to say. The author dribbles commonplaces over a vast number of pages through which lacklustre characters walk slowly and gossip about nothing in particular. In 'Dave's Sweetheart' Mary Gaunt left room for hope that she might become something more than the average fluent female penster. There is dramatic power in that book, and, so far as the women are concerned, a good deal of dramatic insight. But 'Dave's Sweetheart' for the most part lacks intensity. The incidents are lost in a flux of flabby words. The author attenuates in ten sentences an impression which a vigorous writer would paint vividly in two. The collection of short stories called 'The Moving Finger' exhibited the same fault without compensating virtue. And "Kirkham's Find" touches the nadir of feeble flatulency. Scenes and people are indeed photographed minutely, with feminine precision; but, as the author's mind has no depth or scope or originality wherewith to glorify them, the whole is only a sorry small-beer chronicle. And the average woman's pre-eminence as a small-beer chronicler was already well established.<sup>26</sup>

It was a damning criticism from an influential paper.

Through her articles in newspapers and magazines, and through her three published books, Mary was becoming well-known. She was invited to contribute to a collaborative effort with other writers and artists in Warrnambool as a gift for the wife of the Victorian Governor.

The pleasure-loving Governor, Lord Brassey and his wife visited Warrnambool on the Governor's yacht 'Sunbeam' in 1896, and a local artist, Miss B. Duncan, designed a tri-fold screen to commemorate the occasion.<sup>27</sup> The screen, made of wood with turned decorative panels top and bottom, was decorated on its six panels (front and back) with the work of local artists and writers.

The contributions were not necessarily about Warrnambool. Miss Duncan herself contributed a picture of Apia, Samoa, where Robert Louis Stevenson had died a few years before, and a eulogy for him by a local writer, Frank Smith, was displayed beneath the picture. Mary chose a local

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<sup>26</sup> Bulletin Red Page, 20.11.1897.

<sup>27</sup> Warrnambool Standard, 7 April 1984.

scene, a water-colour painting of the mouth of the Hopkins River, one of the beauty spots of Warrnambool, an area that she knew and loved.

In an excess of enthusiasm for her subject, and a distinct lack of careful research, she wrote: ‘. . . when the snow waters melt among the distant hills where the Hopkins has its source, the river gains the mastery. . .’<sup>28</sup> She had overlooked the fact that the waters of a river that rose in the Wimmera, unlike those of the high country rivers she had known as a child, were not snow waters. The artist had painted a variety of grasses and shrubs in the picture, but had not put in any marram grass, the tough, tussocky grass common along foreshores. Mary knew that the estuary was a place of marram grass. She included an imaginary conversation between the plants, in which the wheat (which did not appear in the picture either) complained that the marram grass was ugly and useless. ‘Where would you be but for me?’ the marram grass asks. ‘I am binding down the sand with strong hands so that you may live and thrive.’

Ada Cambridge contributed a small verse to the screen. Ada was older than Mary, and well established as a writer. She hardly qualified as local, but her husband Rev. George Cross had been the vicar at Coleraine in the Western District of Victoria, and they had lived at the Wannon parsonage, near Coleraine, from 1877 to 1883.<sup>29</sup> In fact, the paths of the two women had crossed in the past, as the men on whom they depended moved around with their jobs: Mary’s father as Goldfields Warden and Ada’s husband as an Anglican Vicar. Ada’s first home in Australia was Wangaratta, not far from Chiltern, where Mary was born; she spent a few years in Sandhurst (Bendigo), as Mary did, and nine years in Beechworth, where Mary spent several years of her childhood. The two women also had common interests as writers. When Mary wrote her story, ‘The Yanyilla Steeplechase’, about the perils for women of remaining single, she was repeating a theme that Ada Cambridge had used in her story *The Eternal Feminine*.<sup>30</sup>

The screen was never presented to Lady Brassey as intended. The planners had overlooked the fact that Governors and their wives were not allowed to accept gifts. It remained in Warrnambool<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> Transcription of Mary Gaunt’s piece, ‘The Mouth of the Hopkins River’, by courtesy of Sue- Ellen Goldstraw, Flagstaff Hill Maritime Museum, Warrnambool.

<sup>29</sup> Bradstock, M. and Wakeling, L., *Rattling the Orthodoxies: a Life of Ada Cambridge*, Penguin, Victoria, 1991.

<sup>30</sup> Margaret Bradstock and Louise Wakeling, *Rattling the Orthodoxies: A Life of Ada Cambridge*, p.110.

<sup>31</sup> *Warrnambool Standard*, 22 September 1977.



Encouraged by the success of *Kirkham's Find*, Mary sent off a further goldfields story to her London agent. Years before, her father William had ridden up to the Buckland after anti-Chinese riots there. She wrote about the Buckland riots for Cassells, in her article called 'Gold' in *Picturesque Australasia*. She used the material a second time in 'The Riot at the Packhorse' (for Packhorse, read 'the Buckland River'), which had been published as a serial in *The Australasian* in January to March 1890. Now the same material formed a chapter of her novel, with Commissioner Ruthven (based on her father) putting down a riot at the Buckland firmly. It was a romanticised account, but it had the ring of authenticity about it and, as an interesting touch, the book had a minor character in it called Buckland. Her first publishers, Edward Arnold, had objected to *Deadman's* as a title. This time the publishers, Methuen, had no objection to the name, and the book was published as *Deadman's* in September 1898. Two Colonial Library editions came out the same year, and there was an American Edition in 1899. It was the last book of Mary's to appear for five years.

During 1898 Mary's agent in London, A.P. Watt, was working hard on her behalf. The bushranger story 'Quits' appeared in the *Windsor* magazine. He also submitted a collection of four of her stories to the prestigious Cornhill Magazine, published by Smith, Elder & Co. Cornhill accepted only one of the stories ('The Dire Peril of Sergeant Sells', which appeared in January 1900) but its editor was clearly impressed:

In returning the remaining stories to your hands I beg to say that Messrs. Smith, Elder & Co. would be glad [to] consider a book from Miss Gaunt's pen if she should think of publishing one.<sup>32</sup>

Mary does not appear to have taken advantage of the invitation, but was no doubt very much encouraged by it.

Watt continued to be active on her behalf, and placed a story with *Pearson's Magazine* in September 1900 (five were submitted, one was accepted). 'When the Cattle Broke' appeared in 1901.

Meanwhile, in Victoria, Mary was invited to contribute to a prestigious limited-edition volume to be published as a fund-raiser for the Children's Hospital in Melbourne. The collection was being edited by Joshua Lake, her fellow-contributor to *Picturesque Australasia*. 'The Art and Literature of Melbourne'<sup>33</sup> were invited to donate their services for the

<sup>32</sup> Letter, Cornhill Magazine to A.P.Watt, 22 December 1898; A.P.Watt Records #11036, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, USA.

<sup>33</sup> Lake, Joshua, in *Childhood in Bud and Blossom*,

project. There were pictures, autographs and notes from leading figures. Lord Tennyson, Governor of South Australia, contributed a verse by his father, the famous poet laureate; the Governor of New South Wales sent a few words; Queen Victoria sent her picture and her good wishes. Mary contributed a story, 'The Light on Goat Island'.

Mary had been to Tasmania to visit her Palmer cousins, the children of her Aunt Eliza and John Kinder Archer. She set the story on a small island, which has a lighthouse and a few sheep and very little else, ten miles off the coast of Tasmania. As befitted the volume, the central characters of the story are children. Left to their own devices on the island when their parents are prevented from returning from the mainland by a storm, they struggle to keep the light going. Only when the light goes out do people on the mainland realise something is wrong, and come to rescue them.

Her story was in impressive company. She was not paid for it, but had the satisfaction of seeing it published in an attractive volume, and beautifully illustrated by Walter Withers, and by Arthur Boyd, Douglas Richardson and Mrs. E.M.Boyd. Ada Cambridge contributed a delightful story of a nurse soothing a feverish child with a gentle description of the water and trees and birds of her beloved Norfolk Broads. Banjo Patterson wrote a poem; E.E.Morris and Alexander Sutherland contributed.

She began work on another book – a semi-historical romance, set in the colony of New South Wales in the time of Governor Hunter. But progress was slow, and slower, and then impossible.

The first happy days of marriage, the days she was thinking of in the dedication in *Kirkham's Find*, were suddenly and dramatically behind her. Early in August 1899, Lindsay began to change. Almost overnight her quiet, reserved husband became excitable and sleepless, given to sudden bursts of laughter, talking about private matters openly with others, unable to sleep. He began spending wildly. He bought an overcoat he did not need, a bicycle he would never ride, expensive horses they could not afford. He moved about restlessly, did inexplicable things, and Mary was afraid of violence.

In the small town of Warrnambool the only people who could give Mary medical advice and help were Lindsay's colleagues and friends. Mary arranged to get him to Melbourne. It was not difficult. One of Lindsay's delusions was that a prominent Melbourne physician, Sir Thomas Fitzgerald, who had rooms in Lonsdale Street, wanted to take him into partnership. They made a hurried trip to Melbourne, and booked in to the Grand Hotel in Spring Street. Mary's brother Lance, who had just completed his law studies at Melbourne University and was serving articles

with Mr. Justice Hood<sup>34</sup>, a colleague of his father, came to her assistance. Two Collins Street doctors were summoned to the hotel, and separately examined Lindsay. Lindsay paced the room, talking excitedly and erratically, boasting and high-spirited, bursting into sudden peals of laughter. During one consultation, he rushed out of the room, insisting that he needed to change his clothes. The two doctors signed committal forms, and the next day Mary and Lance took Lindsay to Kew Lunatic Asylum, where he was admitted, suffering from 'delusional insanity'<sup>35</sup>.

The book Mary was working on was put aside. Not until 1923, when she was settled at last in the sunshine in Bordighera, did she take it up again and finish it. When *As the Whirlwind Passeth* finally appeared, she noted in the front: 'Begun Warrnambool, Australia, 1898; finished Bordighera, Italy, 1923.'

For a while, Lindsay was physically well, and continued in the same excitable vein in the asylum. He told the warders that he was in the pink of condition, that he could jump, run miles, sing and play the piano, though a month before he could not.<sup>36</sup> A week after admission, he confided to them that he had just won £150,000, and began making plans about giving it away. He settled gradually into life in the asylum, and after some months seemed improved enough for the Superintendent to release him on a trial leave.

Mary booked passage for them on a ship, and they went to Tasmania, where Lindsay was born. He seemed well. They went on to New Zealand, but he began to be depressed. At Dunedin the steamer was quarantined, and they were unable to land. They returned to Melbourne, and Lindsay, in deep depression, was readmitted to the asylum. His symptoms grew worse; he spoke very little, said he felt ill and weak. He became languid and unaware of his surroundings, mumbled snatches of songs and began to lose control of bodily functions. He developed redness and swellings which broke out into weeping sores which were dressed by the wardens, which was all that could be done for him. Mary sat with him daily, watching the ghastly downhill slide towards dribbling incoherence and physical decay. And then, on October 30th, the nightmare was over. In the big casebook, the warden wrote: Cause of death: disease of the brain.

A faithful few had visited him in the Asylum, but the painful details of his death were not advertised. The medical journals which had noted his registration, his promotions, his marriages, were silent. There were brief advertisements in the Melbourne *Argus* and the weekly *Australasian* of his

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<sup>34</sup> *Liber Melburniensis* 1914, quoted in McLaren, I, Bibliography.

<sup>35</sup> Admission Papers, Kew Lunatic Asylum, VPRS 7456/1, Box 45, Public Record Office, Melbourne.

<sup>36</sup> Patient Casebook, VPRS P.1, Unit 15, Public Record Office, Melbourne.

death. Next day, at its regular meeting, the board of the Hospital in Warrnambool moved that a letter of condolence be sent to Mrs. Miller; it was supported by colleagues 'who spoke highly of the attention the late Dr. Miller bestowed on his patients'.<sup>37</sup> We now know what his colleagues did not – that his symptoms were those of tertiary syphilis.<sup>38</sup>

Mary was devastated. 'I thought that I had lived my life, that no sorrow or gladness could ever touch me keenly again. . .', she wrote.<sup>39</sup> She found herself with no husband, no home and no income – at least, not enough income to live on independently. There was, of course, her parents' home in Moorhouse Street, Malvern, but 'can any woman go back and take a subordinate position when she has ruled?'<sup>40</sup> Mary thought not! She was beginning to earn royalties from her books and she could go on earning money from articles and stories. She had a modest income of about £30 a year from invested family money, and she knew she could count on some modest provision when her parents died.<sup>41</sup> For now, the most sensible move economically was for her to go back home to her parents. When her younger sister Lucy had married in 1890, Mary, as the remaining daughter, might have been destined to stay at home and care for her parents in their old age; but four years later she had married and moved away. Now, with Lindsay's illness and death, the prospect was again before her – a return to the restrictions of middle-class life at home; quiet seclusion with elderly parents. When they died, she would be in the position she was in now, but older and less resilient.

Whatever the long-term choice, in the immediate future she needed to write. Kinloch Cooke, whom she had met in England almost ten years before, was preparing for the first issue of a new magazine, to be called *The Empire Review*. Mary chose one of the biggest issues facing the Empire at that time, the war in South Africa, and wrote an article for Cooke about it.

With their eldest son Cecil in the Dragoon Guards, and two other sons in the British Navy, the Gaunt family could not fail to be concerned about any conflict in which Britain was involved. The Australian colonists, most of whom were born in Britain or of British parents, felt strong ties with Britain. Their feelings were captured in the poem by William Watson:

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<sup>37</sup> Report in Warrnambool Standard, 1st November 1900

<sup>38</sup> I am indebted to the pathologist Prof. Harold Attwood for his diagnosis, based on the medical reports. 'Disease of the brain' was shown as the cause of death in official documents.

<sup>39</sup> *Alone in West Africa*, p.5

<sup>40</sup> *Alone in West Africa*, p.4.

<sup>41</sup> *Alone in West Africa*, p.5.

O ye by wandering tempest sown  
'Neath every alien star  
Forget not whence the breath was blown  
That wafted you afar!

For ye are still her ancient seed  
On yonder soil let fall –  
Children of Britain's island breed  
To whom the mother in her need  
Perchance one day may call. <sup>42</sup>

Over 16,000 men went from the Australian colonies<sup>43</sup>, and women volunteered their services as nurses. When a contingent of troops arrived back in Melbourne on 4 December 1900 Mary was in the crowd watching the excitement and the fervour of the welcome home, and wrote about it for the new magazine. The enthusiasm, she concluded, was not just because soldiers had come safely home; it was 'because, for the first time in history, Australia has sent forth her sons, citizen soldiers who are not a class apart but come from the very heart of the people to fight and die for the honour of the Motherland.'<sup>44</sup> She added to this an article on 'Woman in Australia', and a lively descriptive piece about Melbourne, and these appeared early in the inaugural issue of the *Empire Review* in January 1901.

One option for any writer in Australia at this time was to consider going overseas.

At the time when Mary was beginning to find some success with newspaper articles, her contemporary in Sydney, Ethel Turner, began a magazine, *The Parthenon*, with her sister Lilian. The two women sold advertising space, solicited articles and ran a children's page. Their magazine ran for three years and was taken seriously enough for writers such as Rolf Boldrewood to contribute to it. Turner's *Seven Little Australians* was published in 1894. Before that, only a few years after Mary, Ethel Turner also had a story in the *Bulletin*. For many this was a sure sign of progress, but not for Ethel's publisher, William Steele, who urged her to travel to England.

If you are to make money as a writer to any extent, it must be by having many readers among the English millions . . . A little English experience would help to (excuse me so putting it) correct the free and easy, somewhat rowdy associations, due to

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<sup>42</sup> Quoted in the *British Australasian*, January 1901.

<sup>43</sup> Harry Gordon, *An Eyewitness History of Australia*, Lloyd O'Neill, Melbourne, 1982, p.153.

<sup>44</sup> *The Empire Review*, Vol.1, 1901, p.49.

But the very influences that worried Mr. Steele favoured the work of other writers. Henry Lawson's *Stories in Prose and Verse*, published by his mother Louisa, came out in 1894, and Paterson's *The Man from Snowy River* appeared in the following year. Lawson's *In the Days when the World was Wide* appeared soon after. 'I think we have struck a lucky time,' Paterson wrote to Ethel Turner, 'when. . . the feeling in favour of Austalia is growing'.<sup>46</sup> Even so, getting work published in Australia was not easy. The market was limited; the readership was small; and even the publishing companies with agents in Australia, like Ward Lock, who had published *Seven Little Australians*, made their publishing decisions in U.K. It was easy to become disillusioned, as Henry Lawson was. In 1900, the year both he and Mary left Australia to try for writing careers in England, Henry Lawson wrote:

My advice to any young Australian writer whose talents have been recognized would be to go steerage, stow away, swim and seek London, Yankeeland, or Timbuctoo – rather than stay in Australia till his genius turned to gall or beer. Or, failing this. . . to study elementary anatomy. . . and then shoot himself carefully.<sup>47</sup>

When the opportunity came, Mary followed the first part of Lawson's advice. She drew £100 from her capital and, five months after Lindsay's death, she sailed for England.

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<sup>45</sup> Steele to Turner ML MSS 667/5, p.81, Mitchell Library, quoted in Yarwood, A.T. *From a Chair in the Sun* (biography of Ethel Turner), Viking, Aust. 1994.

<sup>46</sup> Paterson to Turner 7.12.1895, ML MSS 667/12, pp.29-32, quoted in Yarwood above.

<sup>47</sup> Henry Lawson, 'Pursuing Literature in Australia', quoted by Denton Prout, *Henry Lawson. The Grey Dreamer*, Adelaide 1963, p.175, quoted in Geoffrey Serle, *From Deserts the Prophets Come*, p.56.





*Finborough Road, 1996. At the bottom right, the chimney of Lots Road Power Station, which supplies the London Underground.*



*Mary's house, No. 17 Finborough Road.*



*2 Brompton Square. Mary stayed here briefly in 1912.*

## V

### London – 'A Dull and Stony Street'

London at the turn of the century was talking about Australia. By late 1899 the Australian colonies had agreed on the terms of Federation, and a delegation was sent from Australia to see the necessary legislation through the British Parliament. Alfred Deakin, a veteran of Federation Conferences in Australia, left by steamship with his family in January 1900, and joined his colleagues Barton, Kingston and Dickson for meetings and negotiations in London. For the three months that the delegation were in London, the colonies and their future were in the newspapers constantly, and were the topic of discussion at dinner parties and in pubs. Deakin and his family were on the *Ormuz* steaming back to Australia in July when Queen Victoria gave her royal assent to the legislation which created the legal entity of the Australian Commonwealth. In May of the following year, the Duke and Duchess of York opened the new Federal Parliament.

London was the place to visit for Australians travelling overseas. It was the centre of the social world in 'the old country'. People who were born in Australia, people whose parents had been born in Australia, still spoke of a trip to Britain as 'going home'.

In London artists could find galleries, musicians could find audiences, writers could find publishers. And young Australian artists, singers, musicians, actors, writers went to 'the hub of the Empire' to pursue their careers and seek their fortunes. The artists Arthur Streeton, John Longstaff, Hugh Ramsay, George Coates, Rupert Bunney, George Lambert and E. Phillips Fox and Charles Conder were all in Britain – or in Britain and France – in 1901. Tom Roberts, having painted the Australian faces for his giant canvas of the opening of the Federal Parliament, went to England and finished the painting there in 1903. Percy Grainger gave concerts, as did Nellie Melba and Ada Crossley; Florence Young, having concluded her studies with the famous Madame Marchesi in Paris, had signed a contract with J.C. Williamson and was heading back to Australia on tour<sup>1</sup>.

Writers from the colonies were drawn to London too. After all, most were already sending their books to London publishers. Ethel Turner (*Seven Little Australians*, *The Story of a Baby*, 1895; *The Family at Misrule*,

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<sup>1</sup> Anglo-Australian columns of *The British Australasian*, May-June 1901.



1895, *Miss Bobbie* 1897 etc.) and Mary had published this way. Mary's three novels had appeared first in England, with Colonial editions which came on sale later in Australia.

Before Mary could leave Australia, Lindsay's affairs had to be settled. As he had left no will, Mary was appointed administratrix of his estate, sworn to account for the disposal of it to the Courts. He had a life insurance policy worth £1,480; as this was in Mary's name, it was exempt from scrutiny. There was furniture from the practice in Warrnambool, his microscope and medical books, his gold watch and chain, and other personal effects. Lindsay owned shares in banks and utilities, some of which he had inherited from his father,<sup>2</sup> but they were not fully paid up; Mary paid the outstanding amounts out of the estate. When the estate was finalised, there remained £900; she gave the whole of it to Lindsay's widowed mother.<sup>3</sup>

She was not free to leave Australia until everything was settled. This would take months, and she did not want to wait. She entered into a bond for the estimated value of the estate, with her father and Walter Manifold, a Warrnambool grazier, standing guarantors for her.

Mary left at last on the *Ballaarat* in March 1901. Lindsay's death had been a terrible ordeal, but in its aftermath she was free to travel, free to pursue the adventures she had dreamed of as a child, free to move about the world as her brothers were doing. She did not have the security of a salary on which to do it, as they did, but she had enough money to start, and the prospect of earning more with her pen.

*Table Talk*, the fashionable Melbourne magazine, carried an elegant portrait of her by Vandyck Studio, with the caption: 'Mrs. Lindsay Miller ('Mary Gaunt'), well-known Victorian novelist, wife of Dr. Lindsay Miller of Warrnambool, who is leaving Australia this month to settle in London, where she will devote herself to literary pursuits.' (The magazine seems not to have registered the fact that Lindsay had recently died.)

Her picture was among those of Miss Rose Boote, the 'Gaiety Girl' whose engagement to the Marquis of Hertford created a sensation in London, and the Empress Frederick, eldest child of the late Queen Victoria and mother of the Emperor of Germany, and numerous politicians.

She travelled via Cape Town, where Australian colonists were still disembarking to join the British forces in the Boer War, and where her brother Cecil was serving. The ship turned north and up the west coast of

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<sup>2</sup> Statement of Assets and Liabilities, Supreme Court 27 December 1900, VPRS 28/PS, Box 570, 77/968, Public Record Office, Melbourne.

<sup>3</sup> Mary's account of administration of the estate, VPRS 28, Box 992, 77/968, Public Record Office, Melbourne.

Africa, although too far out for her to see the land which had fascinated her since childhood. They steamed past the mouth of the Congo River and Old Calabar and the places about which Mary Kingsley had written so wittily and warmly in her *Travels in West Africa* of 1897.<sup>4</sup>

A London newspaper, *The British Australian*, provided news of what Australians were doing in London in its 'Anglo Australian' column, while the 'T'Othersiders' column gave England, and the Australians living there, news of what prominent people were doing back home. The paper described itself in its own columns a few years later:

*The British Australasian* is a weekly newspaper which contains the latest information by cable and mail from Australasia. It also chronicles the movements of well-known Australians who are visiting or residing in this country and its intelligence concerning political, social, financial and mining matters is accurate and up to date, and no expense or trouble is spared in making it so. To put it briefly, *The British Australasian* is a paper which no Australian in Europe can afford to be without. . .<sup>5</sup>

Mary knew the importance of publicity, and lost no time in giving *The British Australasian* details of her plans. Her arrival in England was reported in its columns on 25th April:

[Mary Gaunt] will supervise the forthcoming publication of a novel from her pen now in the hands of Messrs. Methuen, and it is expected she will remain at literary work.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, she was a little premature. The book with Methuen never materialised; nothing of Mary's appeared with Methuen again.

There was a veritable family gathering of Gaunts in London in the spring of 1901. The parents, William and Elizabeth, were the first to arrive. William, who was a judge in the County Court, had a year's leave from his courtroom duties in Melbourne. He had left his home in Staffordshire as a young man of 22, and now had the opportunity to return and visit his sister Mary in Staffordshire and others in his family. There were Gaunt cousins in Edgbaston, Birmingham also.

William and Elizabeth were involved in a drama on their rail trip across America en route to England. Their train was involved in a collision near Detroit, and the carriage caught fire. With other passengers, William

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<sup>4</sup> Mary might well have sought out Mary Kingsley when, after a few years in England, she began to search for material about Africa. Unfortunately Mary Kingsley died in June 1900 while nursing Boer War casualties in South Africa.

<sup>5</sup> *The British Australasian*, 17 September 1908

<sup>6</sup> *The British Australasian*, 25 April 1901

and Elizabeth jumped out into the snow and watched the blaze from a safe distance.<sup>7</sup> Later that year, a colleague reported meeting William in the south of France in December.<sup>8</sup> Clearly William and Elizabeth travelled in Europe during their visit, and it is quite likely that Mary did some travelling with them.

A few weeks later, in announcing the arrival in London of Judge and Mrs. Gaunt, of 'Koonda', Melbourne, *The British Australasian* advised its readers that their daughter, Mrs. Lindsay Miller, the popular Australian *vocalist*, had also just arrived by the *Runic*.<sup>9</sup> (As Mary had left Australia on the *Ballaarat*, they may have got the ship wrong, as well as the profession, but it is possible Mary stopped off somewhere *en route*.) The next month the paper made amends by reporting: 'Mrs. Lindsay Miller has taken a flat in Kensington and has already commenced literary work'.<sup>10</sup>

Her 'flat in Kensington' was only just in Kensington. Most of the stylish visitors from Australia who spent the winter in London were in SW1; Finborough Road, a fair way to the west, was in SW10: too near the river to be Earl's Court, too far out of London to be Chelsea. But it was in a convenient location, near the Imperial Institute and not too far from the Royal Colonial Institute in Northumberland Avenue. It was not what she might have wished; looking back years later she described it as 'two rooms in a dull and stony street'.<sup>11</sup> But there she stayed; she had periods away from London, but 17 Finborough Road was to be her home base almost until she left England for China eleven years later.

While Mary was settling in, her brother Guy arrived. Guy was now a lieutenant in the Royal Navy. When his ship, the *Porpoise* arrived in England in June, Guy was awarded the DSO for his exploits in Samoa, among them his defence of the British Consulate during an attack. Soon afterwards Ernest, who had been on duty in China during the Boxer Rebellion and had been created CMG in recognition of his service there, arrived in the *Savoye*, of which he was Commander. Ernest had married in 1899, his wife Louise was known affectionately in the family as 'Louie'.

There were many Australian visitors to London. Mary's old friend and mentor, Professor Morris, now widowed, arrived with his daughters in November on six months' leave.<sup>12</sup> Mr. Justice Hood, William's colleague in the court, with whom Lance had served his articles, was in England with

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<sup>7</sup> *The British Australasian*, Anglo-Australian column, 13 June 1901.

<sup>8</sup> *The British Australasian*, T'Othersiders column, 5 December 1901.

<sup>9</sup> *The British Australasian*, 16 May 1901

<sup>10</sup> *The British Australasian*, 13 June 1901.

<sup>11</sup> *Alone in West Africa*, p.5

<sup>12</sup> Morris may already have been ill; he died in London on 1 January 1902.

his daughter for Christmas. And even Mr. Watterston, editor of the Melbourne *Australasian* was escaping the Australian summer in England 'in search of health'. In May, there was a glittering farewell for Sir George Sydenham Clarke, the new Governor of Victoria. A farewell dinner was followed by a 10 p.m. reception at Sir Andrew's residence in Portland Place, at which London society, and particularly the Australian Colonial sector of London society, was well represented. The nineteen-year-old Percy Grainger, already making a name for himself in the musical world, was there with his mother. William and Elizabeth Gaunt attended, along with Ernest and his wife, and Mary.

All this made an interesting contrast to Mary's comment some years later: 'Oh the dreariness and the weariness of life for a woman poor and unknown in London'.<sup>13</sup>

On her previous visit to England in 1890-91 Mary had established herself to some extent. At that time, and in the ten years since, she had published articles and stories in English magazines, and corresponded with editors and publishers. She had published four novels, the first with Edward Arnold, the other three with Methuen, and she had had an agent, A.P.Watt, representing her in the United Kingdom. But she found that building up a writing career in England was not easy. It was one thing to create an image of success for the limited world of the *British Australasian* readership; it was quite another to get the publishers to make it happen. Louise Mack, a young Australian writer who was living in London at this time (she wrote *An Australian Girl in London* among other books) wrote back to the *Sydney Bulletin* about the matter:

Australians . . . come here to get on. They feel Australia eagerly waiting to hear that they have got on. . . they rush to *The British Australasian* with pars about themselves. . . It must be an astounding thing to some Australians to read in the *British Australasian* of their fame, and to find that London continues not to know them, and that their bank accounts continue to decrease.<sup>14</sup>

She tried to estimate the actual success rate:

What Australians, then, are undeniable successes in London? . . . Their names, alas! are sadly few. . . . No artists, no writers, no musicians, no poets, have lifted themselves above the middle rank of unnumerable English men or women of like professions . . . [Mack listed six successes, including Nellie Melba; the others

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<sup>13</sup> *Alone in West Africa*, p.5.

<sup>14</sup> 'Gouli-Gouli' (Louise Mack), *Bulletin*, 28 June 1902, p.36.

were singers, a dramatist and an actor. Henry Lawson, who published three books in London in 1901-2, was not included]. To succeed in London you need genius – genius in the voice or the brain – or infinite patience.<sup>15</sup>

Mary was not gifted with infinite patience. As the summer passed and the winter came on, she began to feel depressed. In Finborough Road, where she lived, long rows of joined houses faced each other across the street. She felt closed in. London was cold and dreary in winter, and she was asthmatic. Years later, explaining how she came to be travelling in Africa, she spoke of her gloomy surroundings, and of how the grey skies and drizzling rain depressed her.<sup>16</sup> She had to live fairly modestly. She was relying on money earned from writing to supplement her modest income. Now that she had struck out on her own, financial independence was vital. If she could not make a living as a writer, she faced the alternative of going back to Australia to live with her parents. It would be an admission of defeat.

Organisations like the London Lyceum Club, recognised the difficulty for women in Mary's situation. A notice in the Club Journal in 1905 said:

. . . The channels through which Colonial writers can find their way into print in England are difficult of access. Only those who are fully acquainted with the methods of English publishers, and the conditions under which work is accepted by them, stand any chance of reaching their goal. Notwithstanding the want of support from the mother country, strong and individual literatures are growing up in the separate Colonies, and the lack of interest at home [i.e. in England] in these works is due to the unfamiliarity of English readers with them.<sup>17</sup>

A scheme was formulated which would give direct support to Colonial writers; it did not eventually go ahead, but the Club remained supportive of Colonial members and their problems.

Mary had long since decided that she could not write stories about England<sup>18</sup>. The books and stories she had written in Australia had been firmly anchored in the world she knew: on the goldfields, in the bush, in and around Warrnambool. She had used actual physical places for her locations. Now these were far away, and she had no confidence that she could place stories in an English landscape.

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<sup>15</sup> as above

<sup>16</sup> *Alone in West Africa*, p.6

<sup>17</sup> Constance Smedley, *Crusaders – the Reminiscences of Constance Smedley*, Duckworth, London, 1929.

<sup>18</sup> Letter to Edward Arnold, Publishers, 29 December 1893, McLaren papers, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.

She had brought with her from Australia the partly-completed draft of *As the Whirlwind Passeth* which she had begun in Warrnambool three years before, but could not finish. She sent stories out, and they came back again. After a year, she had earned just £15.<sup>19</sup>

Progress came, but it was slow. She had written three articles for the new *Empire Review* before she left Australia, and these appeared early in the year. The prestige of a story in *Pearson's Magazine* lifted the spirits; *Pearson's* was a quality magazine, and paid two guineas per thousand words for 'A Dilemma'. For her story 'When the Cattle Broke', they asked for serial rights as well, and paid two-and-a-half guineas, a very encouraging rate.

She sent stories back to *The Australasian* in Melbourne, and six of these were published in the first half of 1902. The last, 'Gentle Dan', had a grim twist at the end. Gentle Dan is a bushranger, beloved of Gwenny, a simple country girl. She begs to be taken with him when Gentle Dan is escaping from the troopers, and he grudgingly complies, but the river is in flood and his horse – Gwenny's horse – is struggling to cross with two of them in the saddle.

He tightened the arm round her waist, and then as the mare was sinking he pushed her into the foaming waters. He caught a glimpse of her white face in the moonlight as she swept past to her death . . . Then the mare, lightened of her load, sprang forward. The report of a carbine rang out, but the bullet flew wide, and Gentle Dan was free.<sup>20</sup>

At the end of 1901, in the London winter, Mary received an invitation from the Horsfall family, friends of her brother Guy, to spend Christmas with them in Liverpool. Guy had met one of the family on a voyage from Australia to England, and had got to know the family well. The Horsfalls were an old Liverpool shipping family:

She and her daughters were rich people, and the husband and father had been an African trader. So here it was again presented to me, the land to which I had resolved to go when I was a little child, and everything in the house spoke to me of it. In the garden under a cedar tree was the great figure-head of an old sailing ship; in the corridor upstairs was the model of a factory, trees, boats, people, houses, all complete; in the rooms were pictures of the rivers and swamps and the hulks where trade was carried on. To their owners these possessions were familiar as

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with Alice Grant Rosnan, *Everylady's Journal*, 6 June 1912.

<sup>20</sup> *The Australasian*, 21 June 1902.

household words that meant nothing; to me they reopened a new world of desire or rather an old desire in a new setting. . .<sup>21</sup>

It was the world of Carlo, the African boy whose story she had read about long ago, but never finished; it was the world of explorers and traders and missionaries and the vast unknown. It was the world she wanted to go to, and to write about!

It was probably in the Horsfalls' house that she found the old slave book which made a deep impression on her. She wrote an article about it which was published a few years later; her first publication about Africa.<sup>22</sup> The old book was a record of the slaves kept on a Jamaican estate: their names, the note of their baptism *en masse*, their parentage. Births were recorded under 'increase'; deaths under 'decrease'; a sudden and unusually high 'decrease', she surmised, may have represented an epidemic illness. The book did not say. It was a stunning record of pedigree lines, kept in the way people kept records of their animals. 'So, by its own record, is the institution of slavery condemned', Mary wrote.

She had been despairing of finding topics to write about which would interest English readers; this was promising. English people were interested in the slave trade in Africa – she wanted to write about it, and English people wanted to read about it. It was a good omen for travelling and writing about Africa.

Back in London, she began in earnest to read books about Africa. She read about physical features and climate, about the religions and superstitions of the people, and about colonisation and trade. She learned a great deal about Africa, but it was not enough. The books she read dealt with events of major significance; Mary wanted to know about the details of daily life. She wanted to talk to the people who had been there.

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In June 1902 she heard of a syndicate run by Cassell's which accepted short stories and placed them in magazines, and went to see them with a story of the early days in Australia. She was still a little unsure as to how she should sign herself, but she had begun to make a name for herself as a writer in her single days, when she was Mary Gaunt, so she was still signing herself that way. The publisher had not really liked her story, but, he said, his wife wouldn't go to sleep until she had finished it, so he offered her £40 for it. She was hesitant. He put the price up to £45, and she accepted.

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<sup>21</sup> *Alone in West Africa*, p.6.

<sup>22</sup> *The Independent Review*, Vol. 3, No.2, 1904, p.448.

Some time later, she went back to him with another story.

Take a story of yours, never! Never! I've got that beastly thing on my hands still. You needn't ever come near me again. And such a name as you've got. Mary Gaunt! I ought to have known better than to take a story by a woman with such a name. I couldn't get a single solitary editor to look at the thing!<sup>23</sup>

Mary began her publishing career as 'Mary Gaunt'. After her marriage, she continued to use this name, although for her novels she added 'Mrs. Lindsay Miller' in brackets. Her book contracts, as legal documents, were drawn up 'between Mrs. H. Lindsay Miller (Miss Mary Gaunt) of the one part . . .', and her royalty statements were sent to Mrs. Lindsay Miller. For years she continued to sign her letters 'Mary Miller', and in 1907 her agent, A.S. Watt, was still sending her letters to 'Mrs. Lindsay Miller' although he sometimes referred to her in his correspondence with publishers as 'Mary Gaunt'. Gradually she became known as 'Mrs. Mary Gaunt'.

In July 1902 a sixth edition of *Kirkham's Find* came out, the book which had been first published when she was in Warrnambool in 1897. It was her most successful book to date.

The idea was growing in her mind that she would write about Africa. In fact, the idea was growing that she would go to Africa, but as yet she could not afford the trip. She continued to send articles back to Australia, but in England there was less success. One article, 'Peace Night in London', appeared in the *Empire Review*. It did not have the proud and loyal tone of her article about the return of the Boer War troops to Melbourne which she had written for the same magazine in October 1900. 'Why a hideous nose, a concertina hat of the national colours, and a most unmusical horn, should express joy for which the tongue has no words, I don't know.'<sup>24</sup> She followed up her previous acceptance by *Pearson's Magazine* with another story in 1902 'When the Colt Jammed', and another in 1903 'For old Sake's Sake'. For all her hard work, it was not a great success.

From the appearance of *Dave's Sweetheart* in 1894 she had begun to establish herself as a novelist. Her first four books had appeared in less than five years. But since 1898 she had not completed a book. She carried the uncompleted manuscript from Warrnambool about with her for the next twenty years. The horrific circumstances of Lindsay's death had taken their toll.

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<sup>23</sup> Letter to Winifred Holtby, 18.5.1934, Hull Central Library, U.K.

<sup>24</sup> *Empire Review*, Vol.III, 1902, p.643.



The idea of writing about Africa was still with her. But there were problems:

Even after I had carefully read every book of travel I could lay my hands on, I was still in deepest ignorance, because every traveller left so much undescribed and told nothing of the thousand and one little trifles that make ignorant eyes see the life that is so different from that in a civilised land. But if you will only look for a thing it is astonishing how you will find it, often in the most unlikely places; if you set your heart on something it is astonishing how often you will get your heart's desire. I sought for information about West Africa and I found it, not easily; every story I wrote cost me a world of trouble and research and anxiety, and I fear me the friends I was beginning to make a world of trouble too. But they were kind and long-suffering; this man gave me a little information here, that one there, and I can laugh now when I think of the scenes that had to be written and rewritten before a hammock could be taken a couple of miles, before a man could sit down to his early-morning tea in the bush.<sup>25</sup>

One of the 'friends' who helped her with his knowledge of Africa was her co-writer, John Ridgwell Essex. There is no record of a writer at that time named Essex; there are no books published by him apart from the three he wrote with Mary; he does not appear to have been a colonial official, a diplomat or a trader. It is possible that 'John Ridgwell Essex' was a pen-name for someone, perhaps a senior Government official who preferred anonymity.

Essex knew West Africa well – Accra, the Congo delta, the hinterland. He was able to describe the terrain, the customs, the atmosphere so convincingly that Mary could co-write three novels set in Africa without having ever been there. But while there is little doubt that Essex existed, his (or even her!) identity remains a mystery.

With Essex's help, Mary began work on *The Arm of the Leopard*. Essex expressed the dominant philosophy of the time, that white races were superior to black, and that the difference was God-ordained, in a poem which appeared, with his initials only, at the front of *The Arm of the Leopard*:

### The Making of Man

He took for His task, did the Maker of Man  
A place where the world was grey;  
And winnowed the earth with a magic fan,  
Till he winnowed the black away.

And out of the white, with finger deft  
He modelled the Sons of Light;  
And out of the waste that the winnowing left,  
He fashioned the Broods of night.

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<sup>25</sup> *Alone in West Africa*, p.7.

The Maker of Man took white from grey,  
And the white and the waste made twain;  
Who taketh the mark of the maker away  
Makes the craft of the Master vain.

J.R.E.

Two other poems by Essex appeared in the book. Apart from verses in their books, there are no other publications of verse in Essex's name known.

*The Arm of the Leopard* was a love story set against the backdrop of Africa. In her first book after her husband's death, the hero has his name: David Lindsay. Lindsay falls in love with Margaret Rivers, who is going out to Africa to marry an educated black African, Dr. Craven. Lindsay persuades Margaret to break her engagement, and Craven, in a fury, invokes the vengeance of the ju-ju. Black magic pursues Lindsay while he is in Africa until, in an exciting climax, Craven himself intervenes to prevent disaster. In the final scene, Craven, having rescued Margaret, yields to Lindsay, who holds out his hand to him. 'Dr. Craven,' he said, 'I've wronged you. You're a white man, after all.'<sup>26</sup>

The book was published by Grant Richards in October 1904. The vivid local colour was clearly Essex's contribution to the book, and probably the Boys-Own adventure scenes in which Lindsay and his friend narrowly escape disaster several times. The book had only one edition and was not widely reviewed. The basic plot was good, but there was a long, fairly unexciting section between the interesting set-up at the beginning and the exciting conclusion which would have benefited from good editing. The book had only one English edition.

In January 1903 Mary had another story in the *Empire Review*, and in February a serial story, 'Susan Pennicuick' began, and continued in monthly episodes until January 1904. Another three articles appeared in *The Australasian* during 1904, but the small pieces were coming to an end. Mary's attention was now being focused on the novels.

Mary and Essex produced two more books together. Although the next to appear was *Fools Rush In*, which was published in 1906, the actual sequel to *The Arm of the Leopard* is the third book, *The Silent Ones*, which did not appear until 1909.

*The Arm of the Leopard* opens with Lindsay and his friend Durand on a ship going out to Africa, where they meet the Cambridge-educated Dr. Craven. In the third book, *The Silent Ones*, Craven is pursued by the very power that he had invoked against Lindsay, that of the ju-ju, and Lindsay and Durand meet James Brooke for the first time. But in the second book, *Fools Rush In*, James Brooke is one of the group, and well-known to them. There is no

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<sup>26</sup> *The Arm of the Leopard*, p.306.

mention of Craven or the ju-ju in this second book. In the second book Lindsay falls in love with a missionary widow and they presumably remain together for evermore. As he had fallen in love with, rescued, and sworn devotion to another woman in the first book, loyal readers of all three books must have found all this very confusing.

It seems very likely that *The Silent Ones* was started as the second in the sequence, and perhaps set aside for some reason. The three books had three different publishers, which suggests the possibility of a certain disruption to expected patterns.

Dr. Craven was a very successful character – a dignified and compassionate man who was never completely accepted by Cambridge and Heidelberg, and was by his education and Western ideas alienated from his own people. The two creators were undoubtedly urged to use him again.

The second book was *Fools Rush In*. The plot centres around a missionary, Horace Webley, and his long-suffering wife. While the stupidity and pompous short-sightedness of Webley are enough in themselves to make Mary's opinion of the pointlessness of Christian missions clear, other characters emphasise it further; the trader Addie says 'There's more misery in Stepney [London] than there is in the whole of Africa'. Webley puts his wife and another woman missionary at risk by his ignorance and stubbornness, and eventually is killed, releasing his wife to find happiness in the arms of Lindsay, the Commissioner.

Unlike the first book, *Fools Rush In*, which was published by Heinemann, had a Colonial edition (as did *The Silent Ones*), which made it better known to her readers and friends in Australia.

'Mary Gaunt (Mrs. Lindsay Miller) seems to have deserted Australia for West Africa as the scene of her stories', said *The Australasian*. Its review was mostly a describing of the plot, but there are accolades for good bits: 'There are some exciting scenes, especially at Rogo, where through the folly of the missionary he and the two women fall into the hands of a native, the worst ruffian in the district.'<sup>27</sup>

By an interesting coincidence, two columns away in the same newspaper appeared a review of the first book by a new English writer, Elsie Lang! Elsie and Mary were to become acquainted not long afterwards, and to remain friends for many years.

Then came *The Silent Ones*, with a missionary even more obtuse than Webley. This one is Gabriel Wilkinson, who has had no training, learned no languages. He speaks to the native Africans in English: 'It is the word of God, and somehow it will filter through into the darkened minds if

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<sup>27</sup> *The Australasian*, 29 December 1906, p.1556.

the messenger be only earnest enough.’<sup>28</sup> The power of the ju-ju threat is brought home to Wilkinson when Craven explains:

Do you see that [leaf]? he said. I used to burn them at first, or kick them out of the way, but I’m getting quite a collection now. That leaf is plucked from a branch that is carried by the party that shadows me. Every time I find one, it is to remind me that I am not forgotten.<sup>29</sup>

In the same month that *The Silent Ones* came out, Mary and Essex had a short story in *Pearson’s Magazine* which was more or less a re-write of one section of the book. Gabriel Wilkinson is as stubborn as ever; he is equally unsuccessful as a missionary: ‘Oh, Africa! Africa! If I were but permitted to do but one small thing before I die!’ he says. Lindsay and Durand are equally impatient with him. It is Lindsay, the white man, and not Craven who find the leaves of the knife-tree near their camp and explains the ju-ju threat. In a dramatic turn of events quite different from those of the book, Wilkinson deliberately sacrifices himself and dies saving his companions.<sup>30</sup> It was a much more sympathetic picture of a missionary: misguided, but dedicated and well-intentioned.

*The Silent Ones* was published by T. Werner Laurie, and was well publicised and widely reviewed. Mary, who had ten different publishers during her long career, was impressed with their performance, and put her next eight books into Werner Laurie’s hands.

But with *The Silent Ones*, her partnership with Essex came to an end. Mary sent home copies of the three African novels to Lucy. In the first, the inscription read: ‘. . . with love from one author [in Mary’s handwriting, and then, in a different hand] and kind regards from the other’. The inscription in the second book had much the same wording, but was entirely in Mary’s handwriting. In the third book, Mary wrote ‘Lucy, with love from her sister, one of the authors.’ There was no mention of Essex.

Essex had contributed much-needed support and encouragement that had enabled Mary to get another book written after difficult times; he had been part of the long love affair with Africa which continued throughout her writing career. But by the time *The Silent Ones* appeared, in January 1909, Mary had achieved her ‘heart’s desire’ and had gone to Africa herself.

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<sup>28</sup> *The Silent Ones*, p.105.

<sup>29</sup> *The Silent Ones*, p.117-8.

<sup>30</sup> ‘One Small Thing: the story of a Sacrifice’, *Pearson’s Magazine*, No.157, Vol.27,1, pp.148-154.

In 1905 Mary moved to Sheffield, where she spent three months. In summer time she could go for walks on the moors, but she did not want to be there in the winter. She loved the moors . . . 'but Sheffield itself! And the poorer people! . . . [comparing with Australia] I thought I had never seen any folks so degraded.'<sup>31</sup> She moved back to Finborough Road.

Perhaps the 'degraded folks' of Sheffield depressed her. Or perhaps she was being carefully pessimistic about her career when she wrote from Sheffield to Edward Arnold wanting to buy back the copyright of her first book. 'As an unsuccessful writer – alas that I should have to write it – I am exceedingly sorry to say that I can't afford much but I hope you won't be hard on me.'<sup>32</sup> Edward Arnold gave her back the copyright without charge.

By contrast, Mary's letter to Alfred Deakin in April 1907, seventeen months later, had a very different tone. She hoped Deakin would like her book; presumably this was *Fools Rush In*, which had come out in November 1906. She had just written a descriptive article about Australia for a newspaper. 'I want to write for Australia', she wrote, perhaps hinting that she wanted some paid commission that would take her back to Australia. 'Not that I cannot get heaps of work to do now. I can, work that pays me better than descriptive work, and naturally I love my native land and dearly should I like to write about her and glorify her.'<sup>33</sup>

Deakin was a family friend. Both Guy and Ernest wrote to him in the same year: Ernest with suggestions for Australian policy in the Pacific area and wishing him a speedy recovery of health; Guy to thank him for 'the interest that you took in my affairs' which resulted in his (Guy's) promotion.<sup>34</sup> Mary clearly felt that an influential family friend could help her career also, and did not mind writing a rather cloying letter. It is not clear what she meant by the 'heaps of work'. She had had very little published in England apart from her two joint novels. The optimistic tone was rather misleading.

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Late in 1905 came the news of her father's death. He had caught a chill while conducting court sessions at Port Fairy, in Victoria, but had continued working. He became gravely ill, and finally died of a heart attack.

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<sup>31</sup> Mary's letter to Winifred Holtby, 6th May 1934.

<sup>32</sup> Letter to Edward Arnold, 12 November 1905; McLaren papers, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne. (*The Arm of the Leopard* had been published just a year earlier, but it may not have been selling well and it had only one edition.)

<sup>33</sup> Letter to Deakin, 14 April 1907, National Library Manuscript Collection 1/16577-8

<sup>34</sup> Letter, Ernest Gaunt to Deakin, 6 September 1907, 1540/15/2227; letter, Guy Gaunt to Deakin, 1 July 1907, National Library Manuscript Collection 1540/15/1211.

His will left his property in trust for his children; his wife Elizabeth was to live on the income from his estate, and after her death it was to be divided among his surviving children. Mary received £10 'with which to buy some article of personal adornment which she can wear in remembrance of me'.<sup>35</sup> Her mother packed up the house and set off to travel the world. If there were any remaining temptation for Mary to admit defeat and go back home, this would have put an end to it. Home was not there any more!

The house was let to General Booth, of the Salvation Army,<sup>36</sup> who visited Melbourne in 1905 to promote the emigration of poor labourers and orphan children from England, a scheme which was dear to his heart.<sup>37</sup>

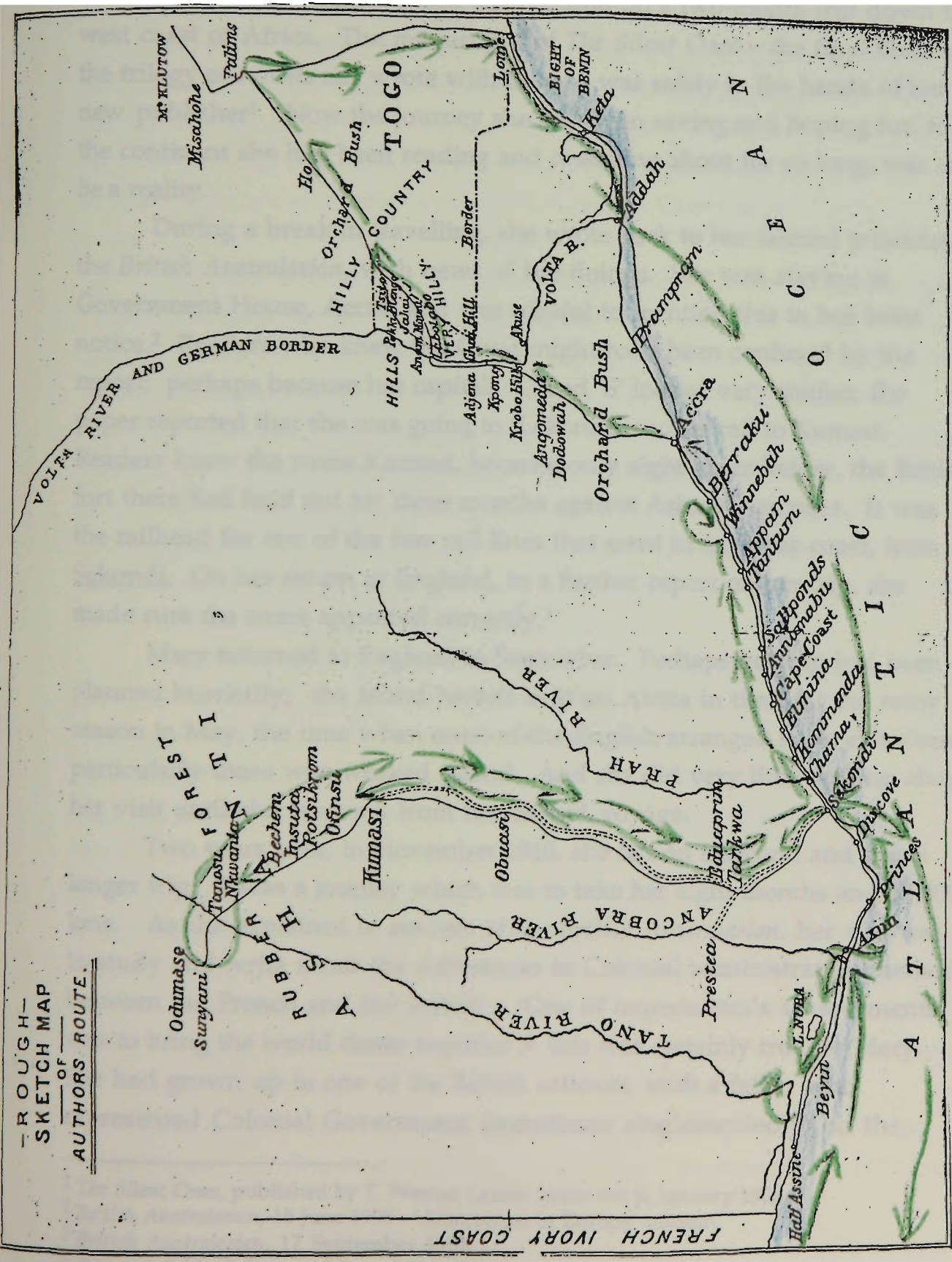
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<sup>35</sup> William Gaunt's will, Series 7591/P2, Box 383, Public Record Office, Melbourne.

<sup>36</sup> Report of trustees, VPRS Series 28, Box 1256, Public Record Office, Melbourne.

<sup>37</sup> It does not seem to have been dear to all hearts in the antipodes. An *Age* reporter some years earlier commented: 'The Wellington Trades Council has passed a resolution approving of "General" Booth's efforts on behalf of the English poor, but urging that they shall be placed in the deer parks of the aristocracy instead of in the Colonies.' *The Age*, 28 November 1891.





The fold-out map from *Alone in West Africa*, showing places Mary visited in present-day Ghana and Togo. Note descriptive detail: 'hilly country', 'very hilly'. Arrows showing direction of travel have been added to the original map.

## VI

### Africa at Last

In April 1908 Mary Gaunt left England on a two-month trip down the west coast of Africa. The manuscript of *The Silent Ones* – the final book in the trilogy of novels she wrote with Essex – was safely in the hands of her new publisher<sup>1</sup>. Now the journey she had been saving and hoping for, to the continent she had been reading and dreaming about for so long, was to be a reality.

During a break in travelling, she wrote back to her faithful publicist, the *British Australasian*, with news of her doings. She was staying at Government House, Accra, and was careful to mention this in her brief notice.<sup>2</sup> Readers who knew the Coast might have been confused by the report; perhaps because her capitals 'L' and 'S' looked very similar, the paper reported that she was going to 'Lekonde' and by rail to Kumasi. Readers knew the name Kumasi, because only eight years before, the British fort there had held out for three months against Ashanti warriors. It was the railhead for one of the few rail lines that went in from the coast, from Sekondi. On her return to England, in a further report on her trip, she made sure the name appeared correctly.<sup>3</sup>

Mary returned to England in September. Perhaps her trip had been planned hurriedly; she found herself in West Africa in time for the rainy season in May, the time when most of the English arranged to be elsewhere, particularly those who worked inland. And she did very little writing about her visit until she returned from her second voyage.

Two years later, in November 1910, she left on a second and much longer trip. It was a journey which was to take her eight months and 15,000 kms. As she explained to readers of the *British Australasian*, her aim was to study and write about the differences in Colonial administration methods between the French and the British. 'One of imperialism's achievements was to bring the world closer together':<sup>4</sup> this was certainly true for Mary. She had grown up in one of the British colonies, with a father who represented Colonial Government (sometimes singlehandedly) on the

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<sup>1</sup> *The Silent Ones*, published by T. Werner Laurie, came out in January 1909.

<sup>2</sup> *British Australasian*, 18 June 1908 - 'Australians in Europe' column.

<sup>3</sup> *British Australasian*, 17 September 1908

<sup>4</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage, London, 1993, p.xxi.



goldfields of country Victoria, and had studied and written about their history. She had brothers who were on active service in various parts of the Empire. She was going to yet another place within the British sphere of influence. Colonial government was a subject that interested her, and clearly one she felt competent to judge. She had certainly persuaded T. Werner Laurie that this was the case, since the report of her proposed journey ended on the triumphant note: 'the sum of her experiences will be furnished forth in a book to be published by Mr. Werner Laurie'.<sup>5</sup>

She had a curious ambivalence about the purpose of her trip. Having told the world of her plan to compare colonial administrations, she wrote in the first chapter of her book that she had gone there 'to seek material for the only sort of book I can write, and to tell of the . . . men who had gone before and left their traces in great stone forts all along three hundred miles of coast . . .'

The stone forts were a legacy of European exploration and conquest. From the time of the great Prince Henry the Navigator, the Portuguese had explored along the West African coast, edging their small ships further and further south into unknown waters. Other Europeans followed – the British, the Spanish, the Dutch – exploring and mapping, setting up trading stations, and claiming territory, which they defended with stone forts.

As the slave trade began to dominate, the coastal forts became holding places for captives brought to the coast by raiding parties. Some of the forts were still occupied, some in ruins, but each had its stories of misery and suffering and its ghosts of the past.

In spite of the reference in the first chapter, in *Alone in West Africa* Mary carefully avoided any description of the old forts along the coast. She mentioned passing them; she spoke of stopping to photograph one; but there is nothing of the 'the men who had gone before' and the old forts! Perhaps her manuscript was too long, the subject matter too broad, and Werner Laurie excised material about the forts for another publication. Perhaps Mary had hoped to write another book on them for Laurie or another publisher. Certainly they provided useful backdrops for the scenes of her novels, and the main setting for one of them.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the plan, all the factual writing that appeared about the forts was a 1500-word article in the *Morning Post* in 1911. It was little enough to show for the stated aim of her 15,000km voyage.

(Years later, after her trip to Jamaica, Mary used some of her West African material. She wrote of Koromantyn and Annamabu, two of the old

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<sup>5</sup> *British Australasian*, 17 November, 1910

<sup>6</sup> *Every Man's Desire*, published 1913.

old forts near Cape Coast, and of the British slave trade. The book, *Where the Twain Meet*, was published in 1922.)

Mary's lively account of her travels, *Alone in West Africa*, published by Werner Laurie in January 1912, became a very successful book.<sup>7</sup> She based the book mainly on her second voyage, but used details and experiences from the first, rolling them together as if she were speaking of a single voyage.

She explained in the book her good fortune about the ticket for the ship. She had been saving up. She had confided her dream of going to Africa to her old friend, Charles Lucas (he became Sir Charles in 1907) who was also a writer. Lucas had been over twenty years in the Colonial Office and had recently been made Head of the Dominions Department. Lucas talked to Elder, Dempster & Co., and Elder, Dempster & Co. offered Mary a free passage on one of their ships to West Africa.

The choice of Elder Dempster was significant. Elder Dempster had long been trading on the routes opened up by the slave trade. By the late 19th century it had a monopoly of the shipping between Antwerp, in Belgium, and the Congo. Not long before Mary's trip, a young clerk in the company, George Morel, had been comparing shipping figures and had discovered huge discrepancies in the figures for the import of rubber into Europe. For some years ugly reports had been reaching England that native workers in the Congo were being forced into conditions of slavery on the rubber plantations. King Leopold of the Belgians claimed that he was taking the blessings of civilisation to the Congo; Morel was able to prove that the import/export figures were being doctored to cover up the vast amount of rubber that was being exported from the country and the miserable return being given to the people of the Congo.

When Morel made his discovery, he went to the head of Elder Dempster to present the appalling facts to him, and was told that this could not be right, that the Belgian king would never tolerate such abuse. Morel went public. A few missionaries and explorers had raised isolated voices about atrocities and had not been heard; Morel had stumbled upon the proof which they desperately needed. They rallied with him, and in spite of the entrenched interest of big commercial concerns, in 1903 they persuaded the British House of Commons to move against the abuses in the Congo.<sup>8</sup>

In the years that followed, as Britain and other European colonial powers dealt with the scandal, Elder Dempster would no doubt have been

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<sup>7</sup> *Alone in West Africa* had two English editions and a Colonial edition in 1912, and a third English edition as well as a USA edition in the following year.

<sup>8</sup> Pakenham, Thomas, *The Scramble for Africa*, Random House, New York 1991, pp.589-594.

willing to make a gesture of goodwill, particularly one which might lead to a 'safe' piece of writing about Africa and a better image for the line.

Mary probably made use of the free passage on her first trip in 1908.

She was business-like in her approach. In July 1910, some months before she left on her second trip, she wrote to Century Publishing in New York. She wanted to sell the serial rights of her book; it was still to be about the forts along the coast, and to be published by Werner Laurie. Since it was likely that Century might not have read any of her books (although she expected they would know her name), she sent them a copy of her novel, *The Uncounted Cost*, which was doing very well, as a 'specimen of [her] powers of composition and description'.<sup>9</sup> She was planning her book about West Africa as a series of articles, which would lend itself easily to serialisation. When Century demurred (they had never heard of her), she countered with a less ambitious proposal. She would send them an illustrated article from Liberia, the nation set up on the West African coast for America's freed slaves, and they could buy her piece if they liked it, with a decision in a fortnight and payment on acceptance. Century later commissioned some articles on her proposed trip to China, so it is likely that they accepted her Africa material.

Mary's account of her leave-taking was based on her second trip. She left from London on a cold, foggy day, and travelled by train to Liverpool. Her formidable pile of luggage included the camping kit she had borrowed from her soldier brother Cecil. Her 'sailor brother' was at Euston Station to farewell her. She had two sailor brothers based in England at the time, so it is not clear if it was Ernest or Guy she meant. 'Have you any directions for the disposal of your remains?' he asked.<sup>10</sup> It was a joke they both enjoyed. Everyone in the family loved adventure; 'I cannot remember when any one of us would not have gone anywhere in the world at a moment's notice', she wrote.<sup>11</sup>

She described her voyage with an almost self-deprecating enthusiasm. Her fellow-passengers were people going out to work on the coast, and going there because it paid well. She discovered with surprise that the majority of them didn't really want to go, while Mary herself could hardly wait to get there.

Her plan was to land first at Dakar, in Senegal, 'to see how the French did things'. But she changed her mind *en route*. The next port of call would have been Gambia, 160 km further south; she was carrying a letter of

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<sup>9</sup> Letter - Mary Gaunt to Century, 15 July 1910, New York Public Library.

<sup>10</sup> *Alone in West Africa*, p.9

<sup>11</sup> *Alone in West Africa*, p.2

introduction to Sir George Denton, the Governor. But she found that Sir George was a fellow passenger, returning to Gambia after leave in England. He persuaded Mary to continue on to Gambia, and offered his help in getting passage up the Gambia river on the Government steamer. It was too good an opportunity to miss. She stayed on the ship, and disembarked with Denton at Bathurst, and stepped ashore at last on the continent she had so long wanted to see, to share in the returning governor's official welcome.

She discovered soon after arrival that she would need a servant. 'In Africa your servant takes charge of your room, gets your bath, and brings you your early-morning tea': clearly she needed a servant. She hired Ansumanah, who had been educated on a Wesleyan mission, and dressed him in a white shirt, khaki knicker-bockers and a red cummerbund. Ansumanah remained with her through the whole of her African journey. Once they left the towns, and were on trek, he had added responsibilities: he saw to the setting up of the necessities for her overnight stay – the camp-bed, the portable bath, the table and chair for her evening meal.

She stayed in Gambia till New Year, enjoying the hospitality of the Governor in Bathurst. She strolled around the town, visited the house of a boatman, looked around the market. Her education about Africa had begun. With Denton's help, she noted the difference between racial groups; Yorubas from Lagos, Gas from Accra, Creoles from Sierra Leone, Senegalese from the north, the Hausas from away further east, the Mohammedan Jolloff, the Mandingo and the heathen Jolah. She noticed that the natives were handsome people, but accepted without question that intermarriage between them and white people was impossible: 'even the missionaries who preach that the black man is a brother decline emphatically to receive him as a brother-in-law'.<sup>12</sup>

She travelled by steamer up the mighty Gambia. On either side she saw mangroves, and crocodiles basking on the mud banks, white egrets and brown jolah birds among the trees. The British possession was a strip 20km. wide by 670km long, on either side of the river, and on the small island of St. James, which they passed *en route*, Mary saw the crumbling ruin of the fort built by the English to defend their sovereignty against the French on one side and the Portuguese on the other. Up-river, beyond the thick fringe of mangroves, beyond McCarthy Island, was ground-nut (peanut) territory, and Mary was fascinated to learn about the planting and cultivation of the nuts. The presence, or absence, of white women concerned her; the British left their wives at home, but one French trader at least did not approve of this. 'What is the good of having a wife if she is

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<sup>12</sup> *Alone in West Africa*, p. 16.

always in France?', he asked her. Mary was inclined to agree with him, not just for the husband and wife, but for the future of the colony. 'To the one who dares most is the more chance of victory. Tropical Africa is for the civilised nation that can take its women along with it.'<sup>13</sup>

From Bathurst, Mary took another ship further down the coast to Sierra Leone, 'the most beautiful spot on all the west coast of Africa'. For all her reading, there were patches in her practical research, and she was willing to say so in a casual tone that belied what she considered as a serious endeavour. '... I really know very little about Sierra Leone. . . I speak of all the West Coast as a passer-by speaks of it and all I can speak about with authority is its exceeding beauty'. The 'passer-by' was to return to England to give lectures and publish a book and articles on the West Coast.

Her Liberian experience did not begin well. She was lowered over the side of the ship in a mammy-chair, into a small surf-boat half-full of water. She arrived on land with her skirts dripping wet, and, after climbing a narrow stone causeway, stepped ashore into yellow mud. She looked up to find the British Consul, in neat white uniform, waiting to meet her.

The Consul was happy for her to stay at the Consulate, but explained that he had no wife; he offered the alternative of a boarding house in the town which was not too comfortable. Mary did not hesitate. She chose the Consulate. 'There are but few conventions and no Mrs. Grundy in out-of-the-way spots', she reasoned. She was far enough away, in Africa, to avoid gossip that might have plagued her back in Britain:

They eat and drink and scheme and plod  
And go to church on Sunday,  
And many are afraid of God  
And more of Mrs. Grundy.<sup>14</sup>

But there was much about Liberia she did not enjoy. Her unquestioned British superiority was under attack. It was the land of freed slaves. She could not find bearers to carry her. The members of the church congregation, whose singing she had so much enjoyed during the service, made it clear that they did not want to be photographed afterwards, but 'they need not have reviled me in the blatant, coarse manner of the negro who has just seen enough of civilisation to think he rules the universe'.<sup>15</sup>

Four days was enough in Liberia. She headed on down the coast, by ship, to Axim in Ghana, and began the first of many overland stretches of

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<sup>13</sup> Article in the *Morning Post*, Thursday 16 March 1911

<sup>14</sup> Frederick Lampson (1821-95), quoted by a writer to *The Times* 10 June 1926.

<sup>15</sup> *Alone in West Africa*, p.76.

her journey. In the major cities on the coast, her letters of introduction usually ensured a place to stay in an official British residence; otherwise, she stayed in whatever accommodation she could get. On this section of her journey, she was travelling in the company of the Forestry Officer, and they stopped the first night in a native village on the beach. But this was no reason to be slack. 'My bed was put up, my bath and toilet things set out, and I managed to dress and come outside for dinner, which we had in the open.'

For all this, she could smile at herself, and those travelling with her, and at the way they travelled:

There is a family resemblance among all travellers on the Gold Coast. They all try to reduce their loads to a minimum and they all find that there are certain necessities of life which they must have and certain other things which may be luxuries but which they cannot do without, and certain other little things which it would be a sin not to take, as it makes all the difference between comfort and savagery. So the procession comes along: a roll of bedding, a chop box, a kitchen box with pots and pans, a bath, a chair, a table, servant's box, a load of water, a certain amount of drink, whisky, gin, and, if the traveller is very luxurious (I wasn't) some claret, a uniform case with clothes, a smaller one containing the heavier things such as boots and the various goods that pertain to the European's presence there. Before the Commissioner goes his orderly carrying his silver-topped stick, the insignia of his rank. I had a camera and a lot of heavy plates, but I don't think the Forestry Officer had anything special except a tent which took three men to carry, and which we could never set up because we found on the first night that the ridge poles had been left behind. It is not supposed to be well to sleep in native houses, but it did us no harm. <sup>16</sup>

After a short stretch by boat (from Axim to Sekondi), Mary travelled on overland, following a route close to the coast. She took photographs along the way, and tried developing the plates as she went, but had trouble with the heat. She brought back pictures of a man dying of sleeping sickness, his ribs showing through wasted flesh; of women in the Keta market place, their brightly-patterned cloths hung up, their pots spread on the ground in dappled sunlight; of tall Ashanti warriors with long rifles, of a game of draughts in the street, the onlookers caught in a moment of time. some watching the game, some the camera; of cheeky children, dancing eyes in shiny black faces. She took longer shots too: the hut on the edge of the Tano River that was the British Consulate; the pathway through the giant trees of the Ashanti forest; the lighthouse at Cape Sierra Leone. These

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<sup>16</sup> *Alone in West Africa*, p.87.

were less immediate, less lively, but they captured for the reader the strange and different world of Africa.

In one of the earliest British settlements, Cape Coast, she found the grave of an earlier governor, Captain McLean, who was something of a hero of hers. She had read the history; that England, in the 19th century, 'in one of her periodic fits of thriftless economy, would have abandoned the Gold Coast', and how the merchants there had taken matters into their own hands and elected McLean as their Governor. Beside his grave was that of his wife Letitia Landon, whose poems Mary had read and enjoyed in her 'uncritical youth'.<sup>17</sup> The mystery of her death intrigued Mary; she wove the details of it into the plot of the novel which was set on the coast – *Every Man's Desire* (1913).

Mary continued overland to the east. Her bearers were wily; they pleaded weariness, and sickness, and wanted extra money. She got tough. She offered to let all those who were sick go home, but if they went there would be no pay. Payday was at journey's end. The sick miraculously recovered, and the journey went on. She felt sure that the trouble was at least in part because she was a woman, and a newcomer. It was also growing increasingly hot; she felt it herself, but omitted to notice that the bearers undoubtedly were feeling it too.

Within a day's march of Accra, she could not get bearers for the final stage, and had to get the coastal steamer again. In Accra she enjoyed one of her more interesting places of rest. Christiansborg Castle, with its forlorn Danish graveyard, had been bought by Britain from the Danes in the previous century, and was now the residence of the British Governor. When a previous Governor had not wanted to live there, it had been turned into a lunatic asylum, and was said to be haunted. Although he seemed to regard a travelling woman as 'a pernicious nuisance', the Acting Governor found a bed for her and invited her to dinner. Mary dined there in full evening dress, which had been sent on ahead by steamer.

From Accra she went north by lorry and met the Volta River, stopping to visit a British experimental farm for cotton growing and Swiss and German mission stations. She went up-river by boat, then struck east towards the German territory of Togo, making comparisons between German and British administration which the British found unflattering.

From Lome, the Togo seaport, she turned towards the west, back towards Britain. She had another overland trek and then went by steamer to Sekondi, 500 km west. At Sekondi the recently completed railway line

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<sup>17</sup> Letter to *The Times*, 21 October 1938, p.10.

into Ashanti territory began.<sup>18</sup> Mary took the train, and stopped off to visit mining settlements on the way. Tarkwa, a gold-mining area, reminded her of her childhood on the goldfields of Victoria. Everywhere she was struck by the possibility of ruining a beautiful place by narrow-minded attitudes.

It is necessary to keep the remembrance of the amazing fertility of the land in your thoughts when one looks at the native town of Tarkwa, for anything more hot and dreary and ugly it would be difficult to find . . . I never shall forget being taken by the doctor who was superintending its buildings to see the new village that was going up for the miners . . . It was clean, that is all I can say for it . . . The streets were absolutely bare of shade trees . . . This, I was told, was done in the interests of health, because trees brought the mosquito . . . In the European settlement he had converted, in his war against mosquitoes, a beautiful hill into one great raw red scar, where not even a blade of grass grew, and he had crowned it with corrugated iron-roofed buildings.<sup>19</sup>

Kumasi, the northern-most point of the railway, was two hundred kilometres in from the coast. It was the Ashanti capital.

Mary had read about the great Ashanti forests, and the proud people who had ruled a vast area of the Gold Coast hinterland for two centuries. By the late 19th century the need of the Colonial powers to extend their coastal foothold into the interior of Africa had grown pressing. With economic interests to consider, and the need to get there before the French, Britain sent a punitive expedition against the Ashanti in 1895. Kumasi was taken and its king exiled. The British had gone back to the coast – it was, after all, the rainy season – leaving a newly-constructed fort with a British Resident in charge. Five years later the Ashanti attacked the fort. The holding of the fort for three months and the eventual victory by the British had captured the imagination of the British public.

There was another reason for Mary's visit. She wanted to go into the forests – the vast forests of rubber and mahogany that began at Kumasi and stretched for miles, blocking out even the African midday sun. It was an experience she would not easily forget. After leaving the railway she trekked for five days through the forest where no white woman had been before, and at night when she lay down to sleep she felt the vast, oppressive presence of the forest all around her.

Before she left England she had planned to go as far south as the Congo delta, and go up-river at least as far as Matadi, where Stanley had said

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<sup>18</sup> The line was completed in 1903.

<sup>19</sup> "A New View of West Africa", *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, Vol. XXIX, March 1913, p.116.



farewell to Livingstone.<sup>20</sup> But she did not even reach the Niger area, where two of the books she had written with Essex had been set; it was the part of Africa Essex knew well, and no doubt she was curious to see the country which had provided the setting for her novels. And there were the old castles to visit, which were, in the main, along the Gold Coast. The Congo was almost 2,000 km. further south. When the rainy season began, she was in the forest at Sunyani, inland from the Gold Coast. Time had run out. It was time to go home.

In the book of her travels she had much advice to offer: about British colonial administration, about trees and mosquitoes, about competitive examinations for the Civil Service in West Africa; about the way the Germans cared for their territories better; about the need to bring white women out to West Africa. She questioned the belief that the climate was unhealthy; it if could produce strong, healthy natives, prized once, by Britain and other European countries as slaves, why should it not provide the environment for strong, healthy English men and women? Her views were not universally welcomed, but they certainly aroused interest.

The voyage to Africa had established her reputation as a writer and traveller. She was invited to lecture to the Royal Colonial Institute late in 1911<sup>21</sup>. Mary had been nominated as an Associate of the Institute in 1909, after her first African trip.

The Institute, in Northumberland Avenue, was not far away from her home in Finborough Road. It held a comprehensive collection of newspapers from all over the Empire; she could read the dailies for the regional towns where she had lived in Victoria – Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong – as well as the newspapers of the major Colonial cities.

The Institute existed:

for the purpose of stimulating the loyalty of all Britons towards the Empire . . . To foster the love of Overseas Britons for the Motherland, and to cultivate in the breasts of residents of the Self-Governing Dominions, Colonies and India the feeling that neither the accident of birth overseas, nor the fact that a wider sphere has been chosen by a Briton born in the United Kingdom, can in any way affect his British citizenship so long as his home is still under the British Flag . . .<sup>22</sup>

Mary was not a fellow of the Institute, but it was not the accident of her birth overseas that debarred her. It was that she was a woman.

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<sup>20</sup> *British Australasian*, 17.9.1908

<sup>21</sup> Her lecture, 'British and German Influence in West Africa', was delivered on 28 November 1911.

<sup>22</sup> Royal Colonial Institute Year Book, 1913.

Ironically, she could be invited to *lecture* to the Institute, but she could not be a full member of it.

Mary had her photographs made into lantern slides by a London photographic firm to be used to illustrate her lectures.

Perhaps it was the concern about the slides, or about the subject matter of her proposed talk, which caused a certain preoccupation about another invitation. This time it was the Scottish Geographical Society in Aberdeen. Her enthusiasm for German colonial administration in Africa may well have been attracting attention in a time of British unease about the growing German empire. Whatever the reason, her young niece Ellinor, over from Australia to stay with 'Aunt Minnie' in London, expressed a certain impatience with it in her diary. 'We had a deadly afternoon tea . . . of course she held forth at length on the virtues of her lecture.'<sup>23</sup>

Mary took the lecture seriously. She had returned with considered opinions of Africa. These were opinions formed in her conversations with Colonial officials, planters and settlers, and mostly concerned how best the land might be exploited and governed by Europeans.

If carriers would not work or could not be found, she judged them to be lazy and difficult. She never saw their behaviour, as Edward Said would have done, in any larger category of resistance:

Never was it the case that the imperial encounter pitted an active Western intruder against a supine or inert non-Western native; there was *always* some form of active resistance. . . <sup>24</sup>

But she cared about the trees. She had trekked overland for five days after leaving the railhead at Kumasi so that she could experience the magnificent Ashanti forests she had heard and read about. As she travelled, she saw at first hand what British colonial policy was doing to the trees. She was saddened that the British, who went to pains to preserve their beautiful oak trees, cared so little for the forests of the Gold Coast. 'A mahogany-tree is just as well worth preserving as an oak, and though it takes two hundred and fifty years to its full growth it is often rudely cut down and destroyed in a single day.' She put the case eloquently to her listeners:

Roads must be made, of course, and the forests must be cleared, but to you Geographical Societies who have any influence I appeal for some discretion in the clearing. Do not let Britain make a sun-scorched wilderness of Ashanti and think she has

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<sup>23</sup> Diary of Ellinor Archer, entry for 2 November 1912, in possession of Jill Marshall.

<sup>24</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage, London, 1994, p.xii.

done her duty . . . I would have every man who goes into the forest remember that [these trees] cannot be replaced in our time or our children's time or our children's children's time. The faith that nothing matters in an outland will not do for Britain now . . .<sup>25</sup>

It was not only the learned societies who took an interest in Mary's remarkable journeys. After her first trip to Africa she had been interviewed by *The Girl's Own Paper*, who were publishing in serial form a book-length Australian story of Mary's called *The Love that was better than Gold*. She was interviewed again about her African exploits for *Everylady's Journal* by Alice Grant Rosman, an Australian writer like herself.<sup>26</sup> And she was being noticed by *The Times Literary Supplement* (TLS).

Her early books had received no attention from the TLS. *Fools Rush In*, the second of the trilogy written with Essex, received a very cursory mention – 'a well-told tale of missionary and resident life and native trouble'.<sup>27</sup>

The third and final volume, *The Silent Ones*, June 1909, got more space:

A tale of West Africa, strenuous and vivid, in which the search for a fetish, 'The phantom book of the Sudan', supplies the *motif*. It is peopled with more than one well-realized character – particularly a puritanic missionary, and a highly-educated native who is the chief figure of the narrative.<sup>28</sup>

It was a curious, left-handed sort of compliment, ('more than one well-realized character . . .'), but it was welcome notice. From then on, she could rely on at least a short review by the TLS when her books came out. Now, with *Alone in West Africa*, the TLS excelled itself. The reviewer, who was not named, set to work on her book in earnest. There was faint praise from a clearly masculine pen for her exploits:

If one were to select the two qualities which have accomplished most in the world of adventure, they would almost certainly be courage and self-assurance. They are qualities which would most naturally be called masculine and when therefore they are found possessed in full measure by a woman, something out of the way may reasonably be expected. These expectations Mrs. Gaunt has only partially fulfilled . . .

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<sup>25</sup> 'A New View of West Africa', *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, Vol. XXIX, March 1913, pp.130-131.

<sup>26</sup> *Everylady's Journal*, June 6, 1912

<sup>27</sup> *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 November 1906.

<sup>28</sup> *Times Literary Supplement*, 4 February 1909

Having acknowledged a certain achievement, he goes on:

She travelled overland along the coast which few Europeans ever do, and she also struck inland to places where no white woman has ever gone before. Her courage was a thing to wonder at, for she was ignorant of the very elements of African travel; she forgot the most necessary details, could not control her carriers, and suffered in consequence much discomfort and fatigue. But her womanhood, the one fact which makes her journeyings remarkable, is also the fact which made them possible.

With no research other than his reading of the book itself, he goes on to savage her achievement:

Mrs. Gaunt was never out of touch with civilisation and was helped along wherever she went. Her methods were extremely simple: she deposited herself helplessly on the doorsteps of the various Provincial and District Commissioners and awaited developments. The native hotel, her only suggestion, was obviously out of the question for a white woman; she could not be left upon the doorsteps; and so at every place hospitality and shelter were offered to her and all facilities afforded for sending her on in safety to repeat the process elsewhere. The sum total of miscellaneous charity she received is amazing; and though she freely acknowledges it and cheerfully admits that she must have been a nuisance – as to which there can be no two opinions – she was not in any way deterred from paying her next unsolicited visit or from criticising her generous hosts to the world at large. The criticisms are apt, shrewd and often amusing, but they do not come graciously from her.

It is interesting that the reviewer found her comparison of British and German colonial administrations worthwhile, but her suggestion that wholesale cutting down of trees might not solve the malaria problem he found 'unworthy of serious consideration'.

While she deserved credit for her physical endurance and courage, her journeys 'involved no extraordinary danger or difficulty'.

They were not those of a pioneer in an unknown and unsubdued country; she slept in rest houses and, moreover, was rarely without some kind companion who made his journey fit in with hers in order to assure her safety.

And there was a final cut at her photography, over which Mary took considerable pains:

Much prominence is given in the text to the taking of photographs and many are here reproduced, but they are invariably indistinct . . .

The book is dismissed as the work of a 'curious tourist'.

There is no record of Mary's response to the review.

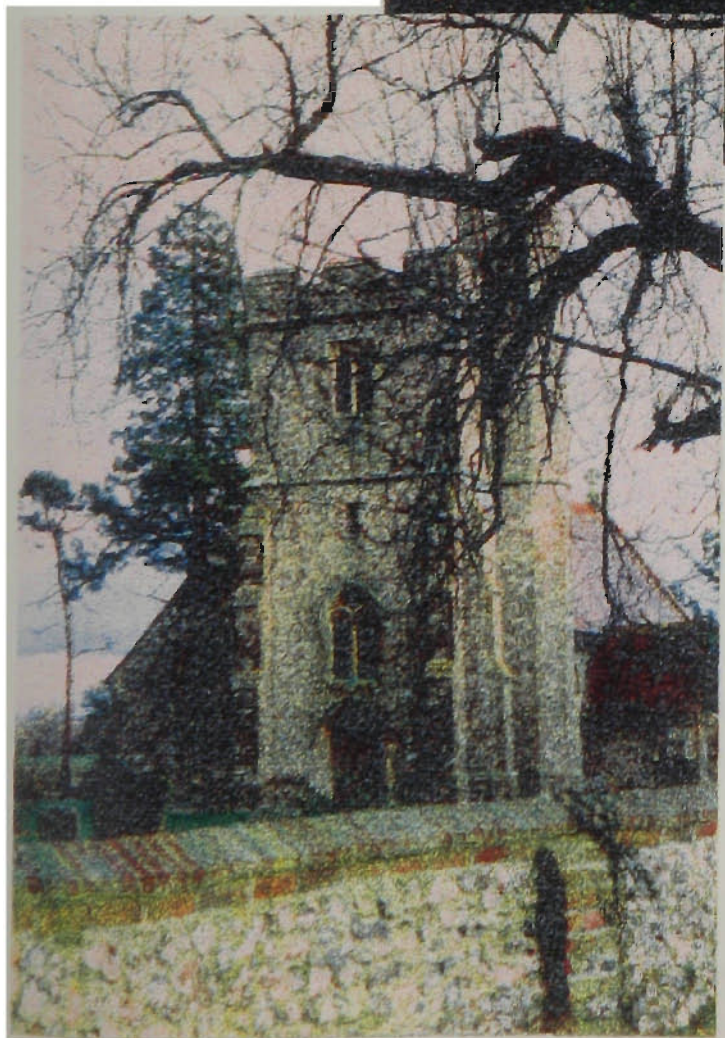




*'Mary Haven', Footscray Road, New Eltham, London, where Mary lived during World War I.*

*Frinsted Rectory (right) and Church (below), in Kent, where Elsie and Lewis Lang spent their last years.*

*Rectory photograph by courtesy of Howard Rigney.*



## VII

### Fruitful Years

The period 1908 to 1913 was a particularly productive one for Mary Gaunt. She produced five books in just over four years, and she made two journeys to West Africa.

During the years since her arrival in England she had travelled in Europe, to Corsica, Sicily, France, Italy and Spain.<sup>1</sup> She may have joined her parents in their travels on the Continent in late 1901; she almost certainly got to know Brittany while her brother Guy was there early in the decade. Guy, always daring, often reckless, had taken up steeplechasing because his naval posting on Malta was boring, and had fallen from a horse during an event. After the accident he was invalided out on half pay for nine months. In need of a pleasant spot for a long convalescence, he settled on a hotel, the *Lion d'Or*, in the picturesque old town of Quimperlé, in Brittany, where, as he explained, 'for five francs a day, I lived on the fat of the land, wine and oysters included'.<sup>2</sup> It was the best hotel in the town, one that possessed its own horse and carriage to carry guests to and from the railway station, which was up the hill in the new section of the town.

Mary arrived back in London from her first African trip in September 1908, and settled back into her house in Finborough Road. In January the following year, the third book of the trilogy with Essex, *The Silent Ones*, came out. It was the best of the three, and was reviewed widely and well. After the silence which had greeted the first two books, it was a welcome change of fortune.

During 1909 she delivered to T. Werner Laurie, now her publisher, the manuscript of her novel, *The Uncounted Cost*. It was the first book she had written on her own since arriving in England, since Lindsay had died. It came out in January 1910. It was full of the flavour of West Africa. She dedicated it 'to those who have helped me', no doubt thinking of the many people who had talked to her and given her accommodation and assistance during her travels.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Interview, *Girls' Own Paper and Women's Magazine*, v.30, 1908, pp.353-4.

<sup>2</sup> Guy Gaunt, *The Yield of the Years*.

<sup>3</sup> Dedication, *The Uncounted Cost*, published January 1910.

She had been away from Australia for nine years, but the Melbourne *Argus* made it clear that she was by no means forgotten:

Mary Gaunt has written a new book; it is a book of which she may well be proud, of which every friend she possesses in Australia will be proud. It is the sort of book that we read from beginning to end with the absorbed interest that forbids us to lay it down.<sup>4</sup>

The *TLS* gave the book a notice of reasonable length which gave details of the plot, but could not resist the eyebrow-raised, damning-with-faint-praise tone she had met before.

... after an interval, all [the] characters somewhat improbably foregather [in Africa] in order to undergo some rather terrible adventures (related with some success), from which Bullen extricates them at the cost of a horrible fate while a partially happy ending is achieved ... Mrs. Gaunt seems to have worked conscientiously at her rather inconsequent story, but perhaps she does not quite realise that correctness in small details will not in itself ensure a faithful representation of life. We learn nothing from any of her characters. They are flat and uninteresting ...<sup>5</sup>

Regardless of the *TLS* review, *The Uncounted Cost* caused a minor sensation. It was a love story: a love story very different from most being written at the time, and not only because of its exotic setting. Anne Lovat, its heroine, is a writer, and an idealist where love is concerned. The story begins in and around London and then moves to West Africa. Unhappy that her lover Dicky Bullen has broken off their engagement, Anne tells her cousin Kitty:

... you know I have always held that if two people lived together first before they bound themselves irrevocably there would be more chance of happiness in married life.

And this was precisely what Anne had been trying. In her case, however, living together was not the precursor to happiness in married life.

Many readers were outraged. The book was calmly recommending that a man and a woman live together without being married. But reviewers were quick to defend it. 'A perfectly clean and sincere attempt to deal with certain fundamental truths from the woman's point of view', said the *Daily Graphic*; 'there is in the work a certain large outlook that is distinctly stimulating', said the *Englishwoman*. The *Manchester Courier*

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<sup>4</sup> Extract from a review of *The Uncounted Cost*, found inside the front cover of a copy of Mary's later book *Every Man's Desire*, published in 1913.

<sup>5</sup> *Times Literary Supplement*, 3 February 1910, p.39.



went further: 'A clever, serious novel, well worked out, conceived in high moral strain, and beyond all question entitled to claim as a work of genuine purpose . . .'<sup>6</sup> But the Circulating Libraries, which relied on the approval of respectable middle-class subscribers for their continued survival, bowed to the criticisms of some of their readers and banned the book.

The publicity occasioned by the banning made the book a great success. By July it had gone into four editions (including Colonial and US) and sold 7,000 copies<sup>7</sup>. As *the Australasian* commented enthusiastically:

The action of the Circulating Libraries' Association, London, in banning Mary Gaunt's (Mrs. Miller's) novel *The Uncounted Cost* (T. Werner Laurie) has had an effect exactly opposite to what was intended. A large number of people have read the book who would not otherwise have done so and the sale has been far greater than it would have been if it had come into the world quietly and without the splendid advertisement given to it by 'The Times Book Club', Mudies and Smith & Sons.

The review went on to comment that if *The Uncounted Cost* was improper, then so were *The Scarlet Letter* and *Adam Bede*. The subject was treated in an entirely unobjectional manner, and the book taught a valuable moral lesson, it said.<sup>8</sup>

Mary agreed. She offered the same suggestion (about couples getting to know each other before marriage) in *Every Man's Desire*, but she was careful to couch it in more innocuous terms. 'Living together' was not mentioned.

*The Uncounted Cost* was a very different story from the thriller style of the three books written with Essex; the violence and bloodshed had largely disappeared, and there was more concern with relationships. Mary had found her voice again, and the unfairness and inequality of sexual relationships, the difficulties of middle-class women's lives, were clearly brought out.

Only eight months later, in August 1910, *The Mummy Moves* was released, and Mary celebrated her entry into the world of crime fiction. Although the story was set in London, Mary made use of the secret society of the leopard which had been featured in the African trilogy. It was so-called because vengeance was wreaked so that death or injury would appear to be from natural causes, and a favourite way was for an attacker to carry

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<sup>6</sup> Review extracts found inside the front cover of *The Uncounted Cost*.

<sup>7</sup> Letter, Mary to Century Company, New York, 15 July 1910. [A second impression was printed in 1912. In 1915 a third impression came out in England, and another Colonial Library edition. A further edition, in Black's Novel Library, came out in 1925.]

<sup>8</sup> *The Australasian*, 7 May 1910, p.1176.

metal tynes shaped like the claws of a leopard. This time the awesome and mysterious power of the society reaches to England, and to Africans living there. But in spite of a gruesome murder (and a second one later), it is decidedly entertaining, having a detective who bores his colleagues by quoting Latin and who seems, for a large part of the book, quite unable to find the criminal.

The *TLS* declined a full review of *The Mummy Moves*; it gave a short and, on the whole, fairly flattering notice in the List of New Books, but the familiar left-handed compliments and the supercilious tone were once again evident, this time implying a worn-out plot idea and careless editing, and a reviewer with a superior knowledge of Latin:

... it is a first-class detective story which contrives to supply thrills even out of the old device of transferring West African customs to London. The detective quotes Latin very freely and as he always translates his quotations the printer's attempts to make him misquote add little to the mystery.<sup>9</sup>

The *Australasian* was kinder, giving it a review of generous length and spirit. '[It] will not cause the sort of sensation that her latest book made in consequence of the foolish way in which it was treated by the London circulating libraries, yet it is far more sensational in the ordinary use of the term than its predecessor.' The reviewer concluded that it was 'in spite of its horrors decidedly entertaining'.<sup>10</sup>

The English and Colonial editions came out late in 1910, and a second impression was out before the end of the year in England.<sup>11</sup> The *Chicago Daily News* offered practical evidence of its enthusiasm for the story by paying \$1,000 for the serial rights.<sup>12</sup>

A few months after the appearance of *The Mummy Moves*, Mary sailed from Liverpool on her second trip to Africa, and some months after her return, in a very short time in publishing terms, *Alone in West Africa* appeared. And within months of this book, *Every Man's Desire* was before the public.

Janey Walters, the heroine of *Every Man's Desire*, bears a close resemblance to Mary herself. When the story begins, Janey is twenty-nine and unmarried (Mary married at thirty-three); she does not consider herself beautiful; she expresses Mary's views on education for women. She believes in fresh air, and in companionate relationships, and resents the

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<sup>9</sup> *Times Literary Supplement*, Thurs. 11 August 1910 p.287.

<sup>10</sup> *The Australasian*, 1 October 1910 p.882.

<sup>11</sup> Years later it was to have three US editions, in 1925 and 1928.

<sup>12</sup> 'A World Wanderer: Mrs. Gaunt', in *Planters' Punch* (Jamaica), December 1920, vI, 1, 29

flirtation of her friend Albertine ('these little soft purry women get everything'). Janey (who marries an African trader) is fascinated with Africa; she goes there willingly, while other wives are reluctant and complain all the time about the heat, and she believes that the climate is healthy, even for white women.

Travelling alone in Africa to meet her husband, Janey has difficulty getting the bearers to obey her instructions, exactly the situation Mary had to deal with, and she expresses the same urge as Mary did in *Alone in West Africa* – she would have liked to beat them. She goes for a walk in the forest, and expresses sentiments like Mary's about the overpowering presence of the trees:

. . . it seemed the village might so easily oversleep itself one morning and wake to find that the trees and greenery had conquered; the forest had resumed its sway and the human beings overwhelmed had gone back to the subordinate place for which they were originally intended, they were of no account.

Janey is rescued from a difficult situation in the forest by Adam Ramsay, whom she had known in England for years and who had earlier rejected her and married Albertine. Janey ponders how much she and Adam enjoy each other's company on the trek back to civilisation, and how satisfying their conversation is. She considers on the system of courtship and engagement, the arranged meetings at balls and parties, and brief and artificial acquaintances, such as that which had led to her accepting and marrying Hugh Gresham, and echoes in a milder form the sentiments that caused so much trouble in *The Uncounted Cost*. 'It might be a good thing if men and women could pass days together alone in the open before binding themselves together for life . . . '.

*Every Man's Desire* was set in an old fort on the West African coast. The fort, which she calls Frederiksborg, is the residence of Adam Ramsey, the District Commissioner and his wife, Janey's fickle friend Albertine. Janey and her new husband go there to stay with them. Frederiksborg is a composite of the forts she visited, but it is mainly Elmina, the most famous fort along the coast. Its physical features, such as the steps and the draw-bridge, are Elmina. The Dutch garden, where Janey's husband has a fateful tryst with Albertine in the moonlight, is at Elmina; the nocturnal sighs and moans, the shrieks for help, were part of the haunting of the Cape Coast castle, but it was at Elmina that Mary, like Adam Ramsay in the novel, lay awake at night, aware of the oppressive presence of those who had lived and suffered in the castle before – the people of the past.

It was at Cape Coast that she saw the graves of Captain Maclean and his wife Letitia and heard the story of how Letitia had died of poisoning in mysterious circumstances soon after her arrival on the coast – the same fate that overtakes Albertine. The castle of Frederiksborg, the composite picture, becomes not just a backdrop to the story, but a powerful force in it, a lively character in the drama.

The book promised to be very successful. 'The reader's report is so wildly enthusiastic that I keep rubbing my eyes to see if I won't wake to a cold and unappreciative world', she wrote to Ernest Morrison. 'Of course that is foolish, because the reviewers will do that for me all in good time.'<sup>13</sup>

In *Every Man's Desire*, Mary acknowledged publicly her appreciation of the help and guidance she received from Elsie Lang. Mary wrote elsewhere that she had met Elsie in 1909. It is very likely that Werner Laurie asked Elsie Lang to use her considerable editing experience on a book by Mary. Her criticism must have been quite severe. Mary recalled it wryly twelve years later, when she dedicated one of her books to Elsie. 'My publisher showed it to me with some hesitation . . . my literary education was begun under your care . . . I have never since let a book go into the world till it has received your approval'<sup>14</sup>

Elsie Lang was a cultivated and talented writer and editor, a historian and a skilled linguist. Her first book, *Literary London*, took the reader on a walk around London, pointing out the houses of authors and their characters in literature. It was published in 1906. She followed it with the texts for illustrated books on old English abbeys and towns, Oxford Colleges, the cathedrals and churches of Italy, Belgium, France. In 1907 she translated *The Book of Fair Women* from the Venetian edition of 1554, and two years later published a translation of Verlaine's poems from the French. She then added to her considerable achievement in literature and languages by collaborating on a translation of German short stories. In the year that she met Mary (1909), she wrote a treatise on bridge. Her books were published by T. Werner Laurie.

Elsie and Mary became friends. Elsie was seven years older than Mary, but began publishing later than Mary had done. In fact, her first book, *Literary London*, was being reviewed at the same time as *Fools Rush In*, Mary's sixth. A few years before meeting Mary, Elsie had married a clergyman ten years her junior, who was also a writer. They lived in vicarages around the southern fringe of London with their growing family (there were three children). In 1914, Lewis Lang became Curate-in-Charge of

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<sup>13</sup> Letter to G.E. Morrison, ML MSS 312/70 pp.109-116, Mitchell Library, Sydney.

<sup>14</sup> Dedication, *Where the Twain Meet*, 1922.

All Saints Church, New Eltham,<sup>15</sup> and he and Elsie and their family moved into the vicarage around the corner from the church. Later Mary moved into a house nearby.

An article in the *British Australasian* in September 1908 which described Mary's doings said: 'her impressions of the West Coast will figure later in a series of articles, etc.'<sup>16</sup> Only two are known to have appeared. The first was an article in the *Morning Post* on 16th March. It was about the 'ground-nut' (peanut) colony on the Gambia River which Mary had visited during her West African travels. She was interested in the three-month growing season, in the surprising scope for navigation on the mighty river, in the history of slavery along its banks which had left much of the area almost deserted. By the time the article appeared, Mary was away in Africa again. She had undoubtedly made her arrangement with the *Morning Post* before she left, and perhaps drafted the article too, and then checked on facts and finalised it while she was in Gambia the second time, and sent it back by mail. The same was probably true of the second African article to appear in the *Morning Post* – 'Along the Gold Coast: a ring of ancient forts: ghost-haunted castles' which was printed on 25th April.<sup>17</sup> This article was full of the rich history of the coast, the Portuguese navigators of old, the castles with their dungeons and guns, the ghastly trade in human lives that went on there. It was the nearest Mary came to her planned book on the forts.

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Mary's life in London was now very different from the life of her early years there. The journalist Alice Rosman, who interviewed her for *Everylady's Journal* in 1912, described her impressions:

[In] her pretty flat . . . everything was cosy and delightful. I found myself in an ideal sanctum; a bright fire (an item indissolubly connected with comfort in England, somehow), plenty of easy chairs, well-filled bookcases, a business-like writing-desk, a table with typewriter and paper, and on the mantelpiece a beautiful grinning blue deity, looted from some Chinese temple or other.<sup>18</sup>

The cosy apartment sounds a long way from the 'two rooms in a dull and stony street' which Mary suffered on arrival in 1901. It is interesting to see

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<sup>15</sup> Crockford's *Clerical Directory*, UK, 1934.

<sup>16</sup> *British Australasian*, 17 September 1908

<sup>17</sup> *Morning Post*, 16 March and 25 April 1911.

<sup>18</sup> *Everylady's Journal*, 6 June 1912.

that she is still living at the same address. But within weeks of this interview Mary moved from Finborough Road, where she had lived since 1901, into an elegant house in Brompton Square, SW2.

The lonely life Mary had written about, the life of her early, difficult years in London, was well behind her now. She belonged to the Lyceum Club, the Women Journalists Society, she attended lectures at the Royal Colonial Institute and musical entertainments at the Lyceum.

She could attend the unique spectacles of pageantry that London offered. She was in the streets to watch the funeral procession of King Edward VII, who died on 6 May 1910.<sup>19</sup> Nine kings followed the coffin to its resting place: the new king George V, the German Emperor, the kings of Greece, Denmark, Norway, Spain, Portugal, the Belgians and Bulgaria. It was the last great gathering of the crowned heads of Europe.<sup>20</sup>

Mary also had her writing friends and acquaintances, among whom she numbered Alfred Deakin. She corresponded with him about newspaper articles, and almost certainly knew his secret about the articles he was writing for the *Morning Post* in London while he was Prime Minister of Australia.<sup>21</sup> Elsie and Lewis Lang were living in Nunhead (1908-11) and then West Norwood (1911-14), neither place very far away. There was Parry Truscott, who, like Elsie and Mary, published with T. Werner Laurie. Parry Truscott was the pen-name of Mrs. Basil Hargraves, a novelist who lived in the village of Ditchling, in Sussex. In 1910 fellow Australian author Ethel Turner visited Mary and gave her a signed copy of one of her books.<sup>22</sup>

There were family members, too. Her brothers Ernest and Guy were rising to senior positions in the British Navy. Both were stationed in Britain, and could visit Mary between voyages. Mary often saw Ernest and his wife Louise ('Louie'), and became very fond of their children. (In 1923 she dedicated a book to Ernest's eldest child Sheila). She was also in regular touch with her brother Guy and his wife Margaret, whom he had married in Hong Kong in 1904.

In 1912 her niece, Lucy's daughter Ellinor, came to London for a year, and stayed for some time with Mary in Finborough Road. Their relationship was sometimes stormy; Ellinor was an intelligent and serious young woman, who spent much of the sea voyage from Australia studying chemistry. She was sometimes gauche, but she had an observant eye, and a

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<sup>19</sup> Mentioned in 'White Men in the Tropics', article in *The Times*, 24 May 1913.

<sup>20</sup> Harold Wheeler (ed.), *The Story of Seventy Momentous Years: the Life and Times of King George V*, Odhams Press, London (undated, ? 1937).

<sup>21</sup> Letter, Mary Gaunt to Alfred Deakin, 14 April 1907, No.1540/1/1657, National Library.

<sup>22</sup> Letter, Mary Gaunt to Ethel Turner, Ethel Turner papers, Letters Received 1888-1941 ML MSS 667/12 M/F CY1240.

sharp wit. On 14 February, her first day in London, she recorded in her diary her impression of London streets:

A London street is worth seeing at night. The beastly little narrow streets seem to be completely built of motor cars and you could almost walk along on their tops. All the streets of London are so disgustingly narrow you feel as if you were in Little Collins or Little Bourke Streets the whole time.<sup>23</sup>

Mary and Ellinor did typical aunt-and-niece things together: went shopping, had tea out, visited family and friends, went to lectures and shows. Ellinor, shy, self-conscious, was sometimes stunned at her aunt's behaviour:

London, March 28, 1912: I will refuse dinner parties with Aunt M. in future. Going there she slipped and fell in the mud, frightening the life out of me, but she only giggled in her usual fashion and proceed[ed] all over mud, hat on one side, etc. but as cheerful as ever.<sup>24</sup>

Sometimes they clashed; they were both determined women, with minds of their own. Ellinor wrote about one clash in her diary:

London, 26 February 1912: Got up for 9 o'clock breakfast, then started off with the Aunt to shop . . . we went to Derry & Toms and tried on hundreds of dresses . . . we then went [and] tried blouses, and as our tastes are entirely different it was hard to agree on one. We finally got one which neither of us liked much, she called my choice 'dowdy' and I thought hers vulgar. I shall wear the one we did get very seldom . . .<sup>25</sup>

In March 1912 Elizabeth Gaunt, Mary's mother, arrived on a visit. Mary booked a room for her at the Norfolk Hotel, and they went out together on occasions. Elizabeth was interesting: sometimes unwell, sometimes demanding; according to Ellinor, she got depressed when left alone. Elizabeth had travelled extensively since William's death in 1905. Ellinor recorded how she had gone to the Norfolk Hotel to find her grandmother, but that she had been out. Later in the day she (Elizabeth) persuaded Ellinor that she was very ill, as a result of a fall on the Underground. Next day:

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<sup>23</sup> Unpublished diary of Ellinor Archer, entry for 14 February, 1912. Property of Jill Marshall.

<sup>24</sup> As above, entry for 28 March, 1912.

<sup>25</sup> As above, entry for 26 February, 1912.



Granny appeared on the scene in the middle of breakfast. Much upset because she had got a letter from Underground Railway Company blaming her for jumping on a train while it was in motion.<sup>26</sup>

Elizabeth was then seventy-seven.

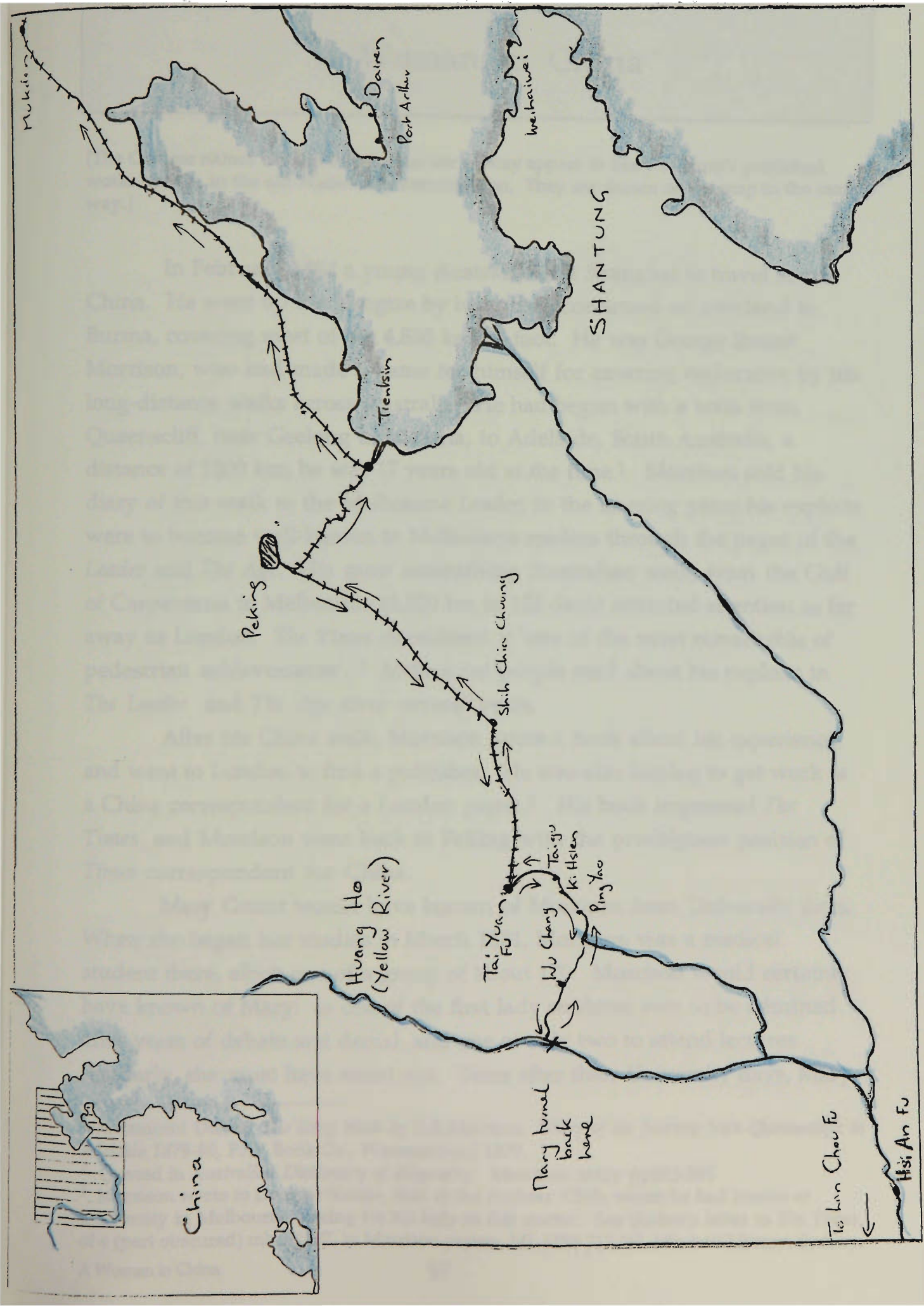
Towards the end of 1912, Lucy came over to join her daughter Ellinor. She was on four months' leave from her work as principal of Trinity women's hostel, Melbourne University. Lucy, Mary and Ellinor explored London together before going north to spent Christmas with the Gaunt family at Gauntswood, Guy's home near Leek, in Staffordshire.

Guy had just arrived home on leave from a disastrous tour of duty on the 'Centurion'. He had built up an impressive record of Naval service, and was given command of the British Navy's new £3 million battleship. He took it out for sea trials in the English Channel, and collided with a small Italian steamer. The steamer sank, and all thirty-six hands were lost with it. Five days before Christmas there was an inquest, but Guy had then to face a court martial by the Navy and, if found negligent, a charge of manslaughter. It was six months before the Naval enquiry cleared him of blame for the accident.

With *Every Man's Desire*, Mary's writing about Africa had come to an end, for the time being at least. She started to look around. She talked to her publishers about other possibilities. By the time she gathered with the Gaunt family at Christmas in 1912, she had made up her mind; she was going to China.

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<sup>26</sup> As above, entry for 19 March 1912.



Map of China, showing Mary's journey west as far as the Huang Ho (Yellow River) and the beginning of her return journey by rail via Mukden.

## VIII

### A Woman in China

[The Chinese names used in this chapter are as they appear in Mary's Gaunt's published works, that is, in the old Wade-Giles romanisation. They are shown on the map in the same way.]

In February 1884 a young Australian left Shanghai to travel across China. He went up the Yangtze by boat, then continued on overland to Burma, covering most of the 4,830 km on foot. He was George Ernest Morrison, who had made a name for himself for amazing endurance by his long-distance walks across Australia. He had begun with a walk from Queenscliff, near Geelong in Victoria, to Adelaide, South Australia, a distance of 1200 km; he was 17 years old at the time.<sup>1</sup> Morrison sold his diary of this walk to the Melbourne *Leader*; in the ensuing years his exploits were to become well-known to Melbourne readers through the pages of the *Leader* and *The Age*. His most astonishing Australian walk, from the Gulf of Carpentaria to Melbourne (3,220 km in 123 days) attracted attention as far away as London. *The Times* considered it 'one of the most remarkable of pedestrian achievements'.<sup>2</sup> Melbourne people read about his exploits in *The Leader* and *The Age* over several years.

After his China walk, Morrison wrote a book about his experience, and went to London to find a publisher. He was also hoping to get work as a China correspondent for a London paper.<sup>3</sup> His book impressed *The Times*, and Morrison went back to Peking with the prestigious position of *Times* correspondent for China.

Mary Gaunt would have known of Morrison from University days. When she began her studies in March 1881, Morrison was a medical student there, albeit one of a group of about 170. Morrison would certainly have known of Mary: as one of the first lady students ever to be admitted after years of debate and denial, and one of only two to attend lectures regularly, she must have stood out. Years after their University days, Mary

<sup>1</sup> Rosamund Duruz, *The Long Walk by G.E. Morrison: Diary of his Journey from Queenscliff to Adelaide 1879-80*, PAP Book Co., Warrnambool 1979.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Morrison entry pp593-595

<sup>3</sup> Morrison wrote to Douglas Sladen, then of the Authors' Club, whom he had known at University in Melbourne, asking for his help in this matter. See Sladen's letter to *The Times* of 4 (part obscured) mber 1937, in Morrison papers, ML MSS 312/69, Mitchell Library, Sydney.

used Morrison's exploits for one of her heroes in *Kirkham's Find* (see chapter III).

The two families were also acquainted. Morrison's sister Mary Alice, and her husband Henry Bournes Higgins, worshipped at the same church as the Gaunts after the Gaunts settled in Melbourne around 1890; Mary was married at this church, St. George's, Malvern, in 1894. Lance Gaunt, Mary's brother, married Morrison's sister Violet in 1906. Mary and her niece Ellinor several times visited (Evelyn) Hilda Morrison and her mother in London when Ellinor was there in 1912; Hilda later married another of Mary's brothers, Clive.

Morrison, who was 48 and still single and very fit, and, according to his biographer, had 'retained his solid good looks into middle age'<sup>4</sup> was in London in 1910. Mary spent an evening in his company. She wrote a light-hearted note to him after the occasion, and invited him to come and dine with her. 'I dreamt about you so vividly,' she wrote, 'hence this letter'.<sup>5</sup> But Morrison was on the move, travelling around Europe, and just ending one passionate love affair to become involved in another.

Two years later, they met again in London. This time Morrison was in England for his marriage, although Mary was not aware of that at first. He married Jennie Robin, a New Zealander who had been his secretary. His appointment as adviser to the Chinese Government had just been announced, and everyone in London wanted to see him. Top Government officials wanted to brief him on England's point of view and quiz him about China, old friends wanted him to dine with them, opportunists wanted jobs in China. Mary wrote to congratulate him on his new appointment, and sent him a copy of her book *Alone in West Africa* as a gift for his marriage.

Mary was invited to the Morrisons the next week, and told them about her plans. She was thinking of going to China. She had suggested the idea of a travel book about China to her publisher, and he was 'wildly excited' about it.<sup>6</sup> If she could use Morrison's name when she contacted newspapers about writing travel articles, she felt sure she would be assured of a good response. Would he help? Could he give her advice, introductions, etc.? Morrison invited her to rough out the sort of letter she wanted to write to the newspapers, and she sent it to him the next day. There was silence. Then, the day before he left for China, he sent her the letter she had asked for, with a hurried note offering to add anything else she wanted if she contacted him in Berlin, on his way back.

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<sup>4</sup> *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

<sup>5</sup> Gaunt to Morrison, 20 August 1910, Morrison Papers Vol.55, p.257-60.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Gaunt's letter to Morrison, 17 October 1912, Morrison papers, Vol.70, pp.109-116.

Mary was delighted. The Morrisons had invited her to stay with them in Peking. She began making plans. She does not seem to have read much about China (certainly Morrison didn't think so!), but she did read Staunton's account of the first British Embassy to China, by Lord Macartney, and, on the list of places she wanted to visit, she put Jehol, the hunting palace where the Emperor Chien-Lung received Macartney in 1793.<sup>7</sup>

She wrote to Morrison with questions: did he think she would be able to cross China into Tibet? Should she send heavy luggage ahead by sea? How could she arrange to get money on the way? There were other questions which he must have found trivial and annoying: where would she meet the railway? how much should she tip the porters? She had to consider transport once she got to China. She did not travel on foot, as Morrison did; she was short, and plump, and asthmatic, and she needed some kind of conveyance. All that had to be arranged. And she did not speak the language: she would need an interpreter to go with her.<sup>8</sup>

Mary's fascination with China had begun long before; earlier even than her fascination with Africa. On the goldfields her father had been Chinese Protector; he was the official designated to concern himself with the affairs of the Chinese diggers, and with collecting the taxes which paid for this service. William Gaunt had been involved in the Buckland Riots – too late to stop the killing and plundering of the Chinese, but just in time for his name to become linked with the incident and his reputation to be made by it.

As a child, Mary remembered Chinese miners coming to the door to claim her father's protection after acts of vandalism and violence. They were patient, hard-working men from southern China, taunted and feared by the white community around them. Neither she nor her family thought of them as individuals, as people with names and families and separate identities; 'John Chinaman' was a common expression for anyone of Chinese nationality; the man who brought the vegetables to the Gaunt house was 'vegetable John'. When the children did not take care of their baby brother properly, the parents would pretend to give the baby to 'vegetable John', a ploy which invariably caused consternation among the older brothers and sisters.<sup>9</sup>

And Mary remembered, too, the things her grandmother would get out to show her when she went to visit her in Beechworth, the curios brought back by her grandfather Palmer from his days as a purser in the East

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<sup>7</sup> Staunton, G., *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China*, printed by W. Bulmer for G. Nicol, London 1797.

<sup>8</sup> Gaunt to Morrison, 17 October 1912, Morrison papers, Vol.70, pp.109-116.

<sup>9</sup> *A Woman in China*, pp.210-211.

India Company. There was the china spoon with which her grandmother measured out the tea, carved ivory chessmen and delicate fans, lacquer boxes and mother-of-pearl trinkets, and the tiny little shoes worn by women with bound feet. She remembered the talk – about wonderful unknown places, like the Great Wall. China was an unknown and exotic world to her, and the desire to go there grew strong.

The planning went on. Her book *Every Man's Desire*, was due out in January (1913) and needed 'her fostering care in the first days of its existence'.<sup>10</sup> But in December she was knocked over by a cyclist, and spent ten days in bed. (Since it was her second brush with London traffic, her brother Ernest told her he thought she might be a whole lot safer in China.) She arranged a contract with the US *Century* magazine for two articles on China (£30 each, with 12/6d. for each photograph used). Then she got an expression of interest from *Harpers*; they wanted to see something on Africa. For a second large US magazine, it was worth delaying a bit to send off something to them.

Finally, on 31 January 1913, she boarded a train at Charing Cross and left London in thick fog to begin her travels in China. Across Europe, via Berlin and Moscow; across Siberia 'beneath its mantle of spotless snow' she travelled, and the maps from her childhood atlas came alive as she whirled from Europe into Asia. She pondered the days ahead; how would she cope in this strange new world, with people she could not understand. A brash young man travelling with her tried to reassure her: 'Oh, the Chinese'll like you because you're fat and o..' breaking off, no doubt, at the look of wrath of her face. It was a sobering comment: she was not quite fifty-two, and had what she liked to think of as a 'pleasing plumpness'.<sup>11</sup>

If travel abroad is about self-definition (as Robin Gerster claims), Mary was beginning the painful process of re-defining herself.<sup>12</sup>

At last the train pulled into Chien Men station in Peking. It was 22 February, the day of the Dowager Empress's death.

She stayed for two weeks with the Morrises. To their house came expatriate Australians and Englishmen, Chinese businessmen and government officials. The death of the Empress Dowager threw Morrison into a welter of political discussions and power struggles, and his days were full. On the surface, he remained courteous and helpful; in his diary he allowed himself the kind of acerbic comments he wrote about many of his guests:

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<sup>10</sup> Letter, Gaunt to Morrison, 17 December 1912, Morrison papers, ML MSS 312/71, pp.311-3.

<sup>11</sup> *A Woman in China*, p.19.

<sup>12</sup> Robin Gerster (ed.), *Hotel Asia*, Penguin, Victoria, 1995, p.2.



25 February: To lunch came . . . . [list of people and their backgrounds, problems, etc.] Mrs. Mary Gaunt makes a very poor impression – very fat, almost hunch-backed, imperfect manners and forever discussing herself, and her mind a blank about China.<sup>13</sup>

After two weeks Mary moved to the Wagons Lits Hotel, in the Legation quarter, the hotel where most reasonably affluent European visitors stayed. She was disappointed with Peking at first, and with disappointment came depression. She had come to write a book here. How could she write about a place that she found ordinary, unexciting? But it was not long before she began to find China interesting. As she moved about, and learned something of Peking's history, and particularly the history of the European legations there, she found it easier and easier to write.

She had not been long in Peking when the funeral ceremonies for the Dowager Empress took place, and here was material for one of the magazine articles she was to write. The gates of the Forbidden City were opened for three days, and Mary went in to pay her respects; she bowed three times to the portrait of the Empress, listened to the music of gongs and bells, and ate oranges and ginger brought by Manchu servants in mourning white. She watched as the funeral procession passed through the streets of Peking, and sent back her reports.

The illustrations were a problem. The prints she got in China were not good; in the end she sent the films to Century, and asked them to get prints made themselves, and send the originals back to Werner Laurie in London for her. She was planning lectures when she got back, and would want to use the films to make slides.<sup>14</sup> She had an agent in New York, Francis Jones, who would take care of the articles and photographs.

Her first trip out of Peking itself was to the Great Wall. She went by train as far as the Nan Kou Pass and then was carried in a chair. She builds up skilfully the anticipation of that first glimpse of the Wall:

Up and up we went, up the valley, past the great archway where is the Customs barrier even today, and on, higher and higher, deeper into the hills, till ahead, crowning them, climbing their steepest points, bridging their most inaccessible declivities, clear-cut against the blue sky, I saw what I had come out to see, one of the wonders of the world, the Great Wall of China. <sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Morrison's diary entry for 25 February 1913, ML/MSS 312/20-21 CYPOS 174 (microfilm), Mitchell Library, Sydney.

<sup>14</sup> Letter to Century Publishing Co., 25 March 1913, New York Public Library.

<sup>15</sup> *A Woman in China*, p.116.



She mused romantically for a while about the guards who had paced the walls, and the sights they had seen, and noticed sadly the fallen masonry and the grass growing up between the stones: 'the wonder of the world is a mighty ruin'.

She made another day trip out of Peking to see the Ming tombs. On the way, a companion asked if she was alright:

All right? If the country round was desolate, the sunshine was glorious, the air, the clear dry air of Northern China was as invigorating as champagne, and I knew that I could go on forever and feel myself much blessed. The Ming tombs were but an excuse. It was well and more than well to be here in the open spaces of the earth, to draw deep breaths, to feel that neither past nor future mattered; here beneath the open sky in the golden sunshine, swinging along, somewhere, anywhere, I had all I could ask of life.<sup>16</sup>

The grey and cold of London, the closed-in feel of the big city, were far behind her. This was travel for the sheer exuberance of it.

She was sceptical of the work of missionaries. She believed very strongly that the poor and neglected at home should be cared for before those of China, and that the materialistic Chinese valued the missions for what they could get from them, which was mainly medical help and education. Morrison was equally scathing about the value of missionary endeavour:

Expressed succinctly, their harvest may be described as amounting to a fraction more than two Chinamen per missionary per annum.<sup>17</sup>

But for all their scepticism, both relied heavily on the missionaries. When his mother landed in Shanghai and was travelling through China to visit him, Morrison wrote to her sending letters of introduction to people who would help her along the way. Then he added:

I have not given you any letters to missionaries but you will be welcome in any missionary home in China. Just go there and say you are my mother and they will kill the fatted calf. . .<sup>18</sup>

Mary was also glad to rely on the help of missionaries. Any European traveller was welcomed and cared for at a mission. She doubted the value

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<sup>16</sup> *A Woman in China*, pp.121-2.

<sup>17</sup> G.E.Morrison, *An Australian in China*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1972, p.5.

<sup>18</sup> Letter, Morrison to Rebecca Morrison, Morrison papers, ML MSS 312/70, pp.545-9.

of the 'faith' missions, which were usually not well backed financially, but in time, she developed a grudging admiration for the work that all missionaries did, and particularly the medical missionaries.

She had a chance to see their work at close hand at Pao Ting Fu, where she stayed on the mission compound. She also had an opportunity to study the railway system, and the position of women in China, when, on her arrival at Pao Ting Fu, she went to claim her luggage at the station:

Nobody could speak a word of English. In the course of five minutes I should say, the entire station staff of Pao Ting Fu stood around me, and vociferously gave me their views – on the weather and the latest political developments for all I know. If it was about the luggage I was no wiser. . . . At last a lane opened and . . . [t]here came along a little man in dark cloth who stood before me and in the politest manner laid a dirty, admonitory finger upon my breast. He had a rudimentary knowledge of English but it was very rudimentary . . .

'Your luggage is here,' said he very slowly, emphasising every word by a tap.

'Thank Heaven,' I sighed, 'take me to it,' but he paid no heed.

'You' – and he tapped on solemnly – 'must – send – your – husband.'

This was a puzzler. 'My husband,' I said meekly, 'is dead.'

It looked like a deadlock. It was apparently impossible to deliver up her luggage to a woman whose husband was dead. Everybody on the platform, including the idlers, made some suggestion . . . [T]he man who knew English returned to the charge.

'Where – do – you – stay?' and he tapped his way through the sentence.

'At Dr. Lewis's.' I felt like doing it singsong fashion myself.

'You – must – tell – Lu Tai Fu – to – come.'

'But,' I remonstrated, 'Dr. Lewis is busy, and he does not know the luggage.'

There was another long confabulation, then a brilliant idea flashed like a meteor across the crowd.

'You – must – go – back – and – write – a – letter,' and with a decisive tap my linguist friend stood back, and the whole crowd looked at me as much as to say that settled it most satisfactorily.

I argued the matter. I wanted to see the luggage.

'The – luggage – is – here' – tapped my friend, reproachfully, as if regretting I should be so foolish. 'You – must – go – back – write – one – piecey – letter.'

'I'll write it here,' said I, and after about a quarter of an hour taken up in tapping, I was conducted round to the back of the station, an elderly inkpot and a very, very elderly pen with a point like a very rusty pin were produced, but there was no paper. Everyone looked about, under the benches, up at the ceiling, and at last one really resourceful person produced a luggage label of a violent yellow hue, and on the back of that, with some difficulty,

for as well as the bad pen, there was a suspicion of gum on the paper, I wrote a letter to 'Dear Sir' requesting that responsible individual to hand over my luggage to my servant. I signed my name with as big a flourish as the size of the label would allow, and then I stood back and awaited developments. Everybody in the room looked at that valuable document. They tried it sideways, they tried it upside down, but no light came. At last the linguist remarked with his usual tap: 'No – can – read.'

Well, I could read English, so with great *empressement* and as if I were conferring a great favour, I read that erudite document aloud to the admiring crowd, even to my own name, and such was the magic of the written word, that in about two minutes the lost luggage appeared, and was handed over to my waiting coolie! Only when I was gone doubt fell once more upon the company. Could a woman, a masterless woman, be trusted? they questioned. And the stationmaster sent word to Lu Tai Fu that he must have his card to show that it was all right!<sup>19</sup>

Her understanding of the position of women in China was not always so light-hearted. As she passed through the countryside, she saw at first hand the custom of footbinding:

As I went through the villages, in the morning and evening, I could hear the crying of children. . . [the missionaries and other Westerners in China] told me that, morning and evening, the little girls cried because the bandages on their feet were being drawn more tightly. Always it is a gnawing pain, and the only relief the little girl can get is by pressing the calf of her leg tightly against the edge of the k'ang. The pressure stops the flow of blood and numbs the feet as long as it is kept up, but it cannot be kept up long, and with the rush of blood comes the increase of pain – a pain that the tightening of the bandages deepens. . . If the missionaries do but one good work, they do it in prevailing on the women to unbind their feet, in preventing unlucky little girls from going through years of agony.<sup>20</sup>

Mary was keen to get to Jehol, which was 470 km away, to see the hunting lodge of the Manchu emperors. She hired Tuan, who could speak some English, and Tuan in his turn hired servants to carry things, and a Peking cart in which Mary was to ride. The cart was a covered, two-wheeled affair with shafts at the front. In the cart she carried her camera, her typewriter, personal gear and bedding. It was not a comfortable form of travel, and she described it ruefully:

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<sup>19</sup> *A Woman in China*, pp.175-178.

<sup>20</sup> *A Woman in China*, pp.168-9.

... in spite of its long and aristocratic record, if there is any mode of progression more wearying and uncomfortable I have not met it. It is simply a springless board set on a couple of wheels with a wagon tilt [covering] of blue cotton, if you are not imperial, over it, and a place for heavy luggage behind. The Chinaman sits on the floor and does not seem to mind, but the ordinary Westerner, such as I am, packs his bedding and all the cushions he can raise around him, and then resigns himself to his fate. . . . as it tosses you from side to side, you yourself are one sore, bruised mass. No, I cannot recommend a Peking cart, even on the smoothest road. And the roads in China are not smooth. . .<sup>21</sup>

By the time she reached Ch'eng-te (Jehol), after four-and-a-half days in the cart, she was glad to pay off both Tuan and the cart.

One day, on the way to Jehol, a small girl came running after her cart, with a baby in her arms, while a mother and grandmother watched smiling from a doorway. A younger child was running behind her big sister, shrieking in protest. Mary realised with a shock that she was taking the part of the 'vegetable John' of her childhood; she was the foreigner who might carry off the baby if the little girl was not good to it.<sup>22</sup>

At the Summer Palace she watched the cranes and the wild deer, and strolled around the lakes, with pavilions and pagodas at their edges, where, over a hundred years earlier, Macartney, the first British ambassador, had watched the dragon-boats racing and water games, and presented his gifts to the great Emperor. She saw the temples that Ch'ien Lung had built in honour of his mother, where some of the lavish gifts from King George III had been displayed. She saw the palace and grounds from which Macartney had been brusquely dismissed when he had solemnly knelt on one knee and bowed his head to the Emperor, while the crowd of dignitaries and visitors had prostrated themselves and knocked their foreheads on the ground.<sup>23</sup> The Summer Palace was an enchanting and enchanted world and Mary was conscious that she was one of only a few visitors who were allowed to see it.

For the return journey, she took a long, roundabout but more comfortable route; she sailed down the Lan Ho to the coast, and went by train back to Peking.

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<sup>21</sup> *A Woman in China*, p.154.

<sup>22</sup> *A Woman in China*, p.210-11.

<sup>23</sup> J.L. Cranmer-Byng, 'Lord Macartney's Embassy to Peking in 1793 from official Chinese documents', *Journal of Oriental Studies*, Vol.IV, Nos.1-2, 1957-58, Hong Kong University Press, 1960.

It was a relief to be back among complacent Europeans. The atmosphere of the missions, the self-sacrifice, had made her feel uncomfortable:

I was . . . glad to come back to my ordinary associates who were ordinarily worldly and selfish . . . The majority of us cannot live in the rarefied atmosphere that demands constant sacrifice and abnegation for the sake of those we do not and cannot love.<sup>24</sup>

In the capital there were rumours of fighting in the countryside, and Mary was advised to stay in Peking for a while.

It was now midsummer, and Peking was stiflingly hot. Mary went to stay with friends in Tongshan, a railway centre. The Europeans there were uneasy; in times of unrest it was easy to envisage another outbreak of anti-foreigner feeling. They all remembered the Boxer Rebellion.

As the summer wore on, and the waiting continued, Mary revised her plans. She could not leave now and go overland; the choice was to wait, or to give up and go home by train. She was enjoying China. The air was good, she felt well; living was cheap, and she had a book to write. Why not find a place to stay near the capital and write her book?

She asked around. People spoke about small, abandoned temples in the Western Hills which were available for rent. They were only twelve miles or so away – within sight of Peking. Mary found one – San Shan An – in a leafy valley. She engaged a cook and a servant, and took the train to San Shan An. There she settled, the only Westerner in the valley, sleeping on her camp bed and working on her book. A friend gave her a companion, a small black-and-white k'ang dog which she named James Buchanan. Friends came to visit at weekends, but during the week she was alone. But the air was bracing, and apart from an occasional reflection on the Boxer Rebellion, she was glad to be left alone to work.

She wrote straight onto her typewriter, consulting her diaries and notes as she went. When she needed advice, she wrote to Elsie Lang, whose letters providing the continuing help and support she had come to rely on so much in the past.

As she groped for ways to describe the very different world she saw, Biblical images came to her mind. Knowledge of the Bible was for her a cultural given, an essential component of education, and she knew the Bible very well. She quoted it, she wove its images into her text. Peking was like the ancient city of Babylon; the position of the neglected dowager

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<sup>24</sup> *A Woman in China*, p. 349.

Empress reminded her of the fate of the Biblical Vashti in the hands of Ahaserus.

Travelling in China, where she was confronted by differing beliefs, gave her occasion to think about her own religious faith. She believed in Providence, in God as creator, as the One who ordered the universe and put the British in charge. It was a comfortable religion, manageable, undemanding, a very different faith from that of the missionaries she had visited. She remembered with chagrin the incident at Chêng Teh Fu, just outside Jehol:

My hostess bowed her head and thanked God openly that I had come through the dangers of the way and been brought safely to their compound. For a moment it took my breath away, and so self-conscious was I that I did not know which way to look. My father was a pillar of the Church of England, Chancellor of the Diocese in which we lived, and I had been brought up straitly in the fold among a people who possibly felt deeply on occasion but who never, never would have dreamt of applying religion personally and openly to each other.<sup>25</sup>

Morrison had called the story of his travels *An Australian in China*. Mary called hers *A Woman in China*. Morrison's book was researched, full of factual information and detail; Mary's was slight, an eyewitness account providing light reading for the armchair traveller. But Morrison had been scathing about the Chinese people in general; he could be witty, but he was often cynical and sarcastic. Mary, while never forgetting her position as one of a superior race, was absorbed by the customs and attitudes of the people she saw, sympathetic to their sufferings, curious about their lives.

The title she chose had significance for her because she was struck, in her travels, by the unenviable position of most women in China. She contrasted the strong, independent women of West Africa, women who walked with ease, earned their own living, with the crippled, hot-house flowers of China, and was reminded how fortunate was her own situation.

Her publishers, T. Werner Laurie, had early on suggested to Mary the desirability of Morrison writing an introduction to her book. She did not like to ask him point-blank to do it; she merely expressed the hope to him that he might find it worthy.<sup>26</sup> But by the time her book was finished, and Mary planned a farewell call on Morrison before she left Peking, he wrote to say that he would be away from Peking when she arrived. The book came out without an introduction.

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<sup>25</sup> *A Woman in China*, p.253.

<sup>26</sup> Letter, Gaunt to Morrison, 17 December 1912, ML MSS 312/71 p.311-3

Before she left London Mary had thought about travelling overland across China, returning to Europe by the route that traders had used for centuries – the Silk Road. It was a daring plan for a woman on her own to contemplate, but she felt that it would impress the Royal Geographical Society. Isobella Bird had become the first woman member in 1892, after her travels in the Far East. Perhaps after a trip like this the Society would make Mary a member. She said as much in a letter to Morrison. His reply was typically succinct: 'I will make you a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society whenever you care to invest £5 entrance fee and £4 per annum subscription . . .'<sup>27</sup> Of course that was an option; apart from needing someone to nominate her (and someone had already offered), 'a bus ticket from London Bridge to Putney is qualification enough, isn't it?' she replied.<sup>28</sup> She did not want just nomination as a Fellow; she wanted to be welcomed into the Royal Geographic because of her achievements.

She had another reason for wanting to make the overland trip. She had been away from Australia for twelve years, and wanted to go back. In an interview before she left England, she talked about how much she wanted to go back home, but her work was keeping her in England.<sup>29</sup> She wanted to find a writing assignment to take her back. She was daydreaming about a journey across tropical Australia, and would need sponsorship, assistance from the Government, and so on. A trip alone across Asia, accolades from the Geographical Society, would clearly be very useful in such a scheme.<sup>30</sup>

When consulted on the subject back in England in the previous year, Morrison had thought that an overland trip across China was quite feasible. But now that she was in China, conditions had changed considerably, and Morrison urged her to reconsider. China was becoming very unsettled.

The crumbling power of the Manchu dynasty, the pressure of the Western nations, the crippling indemnities demanded by the Western powers and Japan after the Sino-Japanese War (1894-5) and the Boxer Rebellion, had all led to the Canton Revolution of 1911. Sun Yat Sen was appointed provisional president on 1 January 1912, and the man with

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<sup>27</sup> Letter, Morrison to Gaunt, 5 January 1914, ML MSS 312/78, p.27.

<sup>28</sup> Letter, Gaunt to Morrison, 11 January 1914, ML MSS 312/78, pp.101-3.

<sup>29</sup> *Everylady's Journal*, 6 June 1912

<sup>30</sup> By the time Mary's China trip was over, the Great War had begun, and regular passenger travel on ships to Australia was out of the question. The Australia trip never eventuated.



military power, Yuan Shih-k'ai, was made premier. Yuan, a wily politician, forced the abdication of the last Manchu emperor, the Emperor P'u-yi. Elections held in December 1912 were won by a confederation of Nationalists, Yuan's opponents, and Yuan's attempts to enforce his control brought about the 'second revolution' in the summer of 1913, put down by Yuan's well-equipped army.

Morrison was Yuan's adviser, and understood the situation as well as anyone, and better than most. He wrote to Mary advising her not to travel across China. However, since he had earlier agreed to the plan, and knowing how enthusiastic she was about the trip, he added a rider. 'There are however lady missionaries as far as Lanchow, and where they could go there is no reason why you should not be able to go, except that they can speak the language . . .'<sup>31</sup>

But Mary was determined to make the trip. The cost was going to be a problem; it would be far more expensive to go with carts and carriers and servants than to buy a ticket on the Trans-Siberian Railway. But she refused to let a lack of finance stop her. She signed a contract with her publishers for a book about her journey, to be called *Across Asia*, and they agreed to pay her an advance. She arranged to send articles to the *Daily Chronicle* in London, and they promised payment in advance.

The very risk was exhilarating. She was relying on giving lectures on her travels when she got back to England, and brushes with danger would provide great advertising for them. She told her publishers in her letter about the dangers involved, and suggested it would be great publicity for them too. It could not but help the sales of *A Woman in China* if she were killed while getting material for the sequel!

While discussions went on and letters went back and forth, Mary stayed at the Presbyterian mission at Pao Ting Fu, with her friend Dr. Lewis. While there, she occupied herself by learning to count in Chinese. She also suffered a bout of influenza along with many others in the mission compound.

At last, in February 1914, she wrote triumphantly to Morrison: 'I have the money for that trip I consulted you about, and that you don't recommend'.<sup>32</sup> A few weeks later the British Legation provided her with the necessary travel documents. She wrote to missions all along her route announcing her coming. She packed up the medical supplies recommended by the doctor at the Mission hospital, some emergency food

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<sup>31</sup> Morrison to Gaunt, 5 January 1914, ML MSS 312/78, p.27

<sup>32</sup> Letter, Gaunt to Morrison, 19 February 1914, ML MSS 312/78, pp.423-5.

rations, and a small pistol. She hired a head man and an interpreter, and with letters of recommendation from Morrison, she started on her way.

She boarded a train for the first stage of the journey, and stayed overnight with missionaries before continuing the rail journey to T'ai Yuan Fu. She had written to the English Baptist mission there, and ladies from the mission came to meet her at the station.

From the mission she started out by mule, but after two days on the back of a mule, with no reigns or stirrups, she was desperately tired and uncomfortable and was having an asthma attack. Unable to face another 1700 km like that, she turned back to the mission which had given her shelter the previous night. With the help of the missionaries, she started off afresh the next day in a litter, a kind of hammock between two poles; the poles were strapped to the harnesses of a mule at the front and another behind. She lay back on the cushions with James Buchanan beside her, swaying and lurching along the primitive roads, following the ancient caravan route which itself followed a tributary of the Yellow River.

But the rumours were getting worse. At missions where she stopped, she got word of the activities of P'ai Lang (White Wolf), who was terrorising the area around Hsi An and was said to be planning to attack Lan Chou Fu – both places on Mary's route. P'ai Lang, taking advantage of the unsettled conditions and weakened government in the provinces, was a law unto himself, and walled cities shut their gates and refused to allow anyone in and out while he was in the area. The missionaries suggested turning back. Then one day Mary and her party passed a headless body lying by the edge of the road; no-one knew the reason for it; everyone was uneasy.

Mary was now hesitant. After all, the road itself looked 'as peaceful as [a] road in Kent'. Now that she was so close, she wanted at least to see the Yellow River. To the chagrin of her muleteers, she insisted on pushing ahead that far. The mountain scenery on the way to the river was magnificent, but the river was something else:

[at the foot of the mountains] rolled a muddy flood that looked neither decent water nor good sound earth, the mighty Huang Ho, the Yellow River, China's sorrow. China's sorrow indeed; for though here it was hemmed in by mountains, and might not shift its bed, it looked as if it were carrying the soul of the mountains away to the sea.<sup>33</sup>

Reluctantly, Mary turned back from the river and began to retrace her steps. She chose a different route for the return, staying at rough Chinese

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<sup>33</sup> *A Broken Journey*, p.123.

inns on the way back. Then, dismissing her litter team, she caught the train, and went back to stay with Dr. Lewis and her friends at the mission at Pao T'ing Fu, near Peking, and made her preparations for an alternative journey back to England.

She had been fascinated by China, but travelling there left much to be desired. 'Everything that I particularly dislike in life have I met travelling in China.' It was dirty and noisy and confused, and the Government was in chaos. She had seen the areas controlled by other nations, the French and British concessions, the efficient Japanese railway, and the solution seemed clear:

I cannot help thinking that it would be a great day for China, for the welfare of her toiling millions, millions toiling without hope, if she were partitioned up among the stable nations of the earth – that is to say, Japan, Britain and France.<sup>34</sup>

Some of the missionaries were leaving to go on their summer holidays, and were planning to sail down the Ching River to Tientsin. Mary joined them, glad of the pleasant travel and the company. From Tientsin she went north by train, skirting the top of Korea through Mukden, Chang Ch'un and Kharbin, where she called on the British Consul. Her brother Ernest had been the first British Commissioner at Weihaiwei, and he and the British Consul knew each other; the Consul invited her to dinner. She stocked up with food and supplies at the market in Kharbin, and boarded the train again for the twenty-seven hour stretch to Vladivostock.

Anchored in the busy, cosmopolitan port of Vladivostock were old wooden ships of the sort in which her grandfather had sailed in the East India Company; from there her brother Guy had sailed on a British ship guarding the seal rookeries north of 53<sup>0</sup>. Someone in Vladivostock mentioned that he knew one of her brothers; she commented drily: 'I sometimes wonder if I could get to such a remote corner of the earth that I should not meet someone who knew one of these ubiquitous brothers of mine'.<sup>35</sup>

From the coast she turned back inland, heading for Mongolia across green, wooded country and open spaces which were a relief after the teeming crowds of China. By the time she reached Kharbarovsk, a straggling frontier town like many in Australia, she noted that she had travelled about 3,300 km. Now she had reached the Amur River, and she transferred to a boat and travelled luxuriously, dining on sturgeon and red caviar, and continued northward to the coastal town of Nikolayevsk. It was July, and

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<sup>34</sup> *A Broken Journey*, p.146.

<sup>35</sup> *A Broken Journey*, p.180.

the days were sunny and warm. At the other side of the continent, an Austrian archduke had been slain in Serbia, but she knew nothing of it.

Off the coast to the east from Nikolayevsk lies the long, low island of Saghalien. No-one thought she should bother to go there, or that she would be able to get there, but Mary found a Russian steamer which would take her there and pick her up again a few days later, and off she went. It was as far east as she could possibly go. On Saghalien she enjoyed the hospitality of the Russian police residence, and found her hosts charming.

After a few days, on 25 July 1914, she left Saghalien and turned her face toward home. She had been travelling for eighteen months. As she headed west, she discovered that the obscure conflict in Serbia had spread, that Germany was involved, and Russia. And then, as she passed through Blagoveschensk, she learned that England, too, had joined the war. She joined Danish and Russian friends in a celebration dinner, in a restaurant in a park, and the band played national anthems and stirring songs. Someone asked for the British national anthem. The band-leader refused to play it. The crowd would know the tune only as a German hymn, and would tear him to pieces, he said. Mary began to hum 'Rule Britannia' and a Russian friend beside her took it up, until all their small party were singing it and the band joined in. Presently the whole crowd in the restaurant were singing 'Rule Britannia'.<sup>36</sup>

There was no question of going back the way she had come, through Berlin. Now she took a roundabout route to the north through Finland and crossed by ship to Sweden. On the same ship were twenty-five English merchant seamen who had been caught up by the war and had left their ships in Finland to go back to England. Their ship was stopped by a German patrol boat and the twenty-five Englishmen were forcibly removed and became prisoners of war. It was a sobering introduction to hostilities.

There was a very practical difficulty ahead of Mary; the Swedish authorities would not allow a dog to travel. Mary consulted a vet, and got a dose of sulphonol, and James Buchanan passed through Customs sleeping soundly in a covered basket amongst the luggage. After a sea crossing from Norway to Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Mary and James Buchanan were safely back on English soil.

Mary was tired of travel, and longing to be back in a home of her own. 'I wanted a house of my own; I wanted a seat in a garden; I wanted to see flowers grow, to listen to the birds singing in the trees.'<sup>37</sup> She found just the sort of place she wanted in Kent.

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<sup>36</sup> Letter to *The Times*, 25 August 1938.

<sup>37</sup> *A Broken Journey*, p.294.

## IX

### War... and Peace

Mary Gaunt returned to England to find a nation at war. She had left her rooms in Finborough Road, where she had lived for eleven years, and moved into the more fashionable Brompton Square for a short stay in 1912. From there, she had left for China, and had been away from England for nearly two years. Now she had to find somewhere to live.

Her friends Elsie and Lewis Lang were living in New Eltham, a pleasant area on the southern fringe of London which was ringed by green fields. Their house, 'Thorndene', was the vicarage for All Saints Mission Church, New Eltham, where Lewis was Curate-in-Charge. It was in Foot's Cray Road, the last house in the City of London.<sup>1</sup> From there on the road entered Kent. Mary rented a house a few doors down from the Langs, in Foot's Cray Road, Kent.<sup>2</sup> It was in a quiet area, but the recently opened railway provided easy access to London, and the house, which she called 'Mary Haven', was only a few minutes' walk from the station.

Unfortunately the area was not to remain quiet for long. As the war progressed, the demand for ammunition grew rapidly, and workers flooded to the nearby Woolwich Arsenal to work on war production. At its height, it employed 80,000 men and women.

Mary went to see John Buchan, the novelist, who was later to become head of the Intelligence Service, and offered her services to write propaganda material to help the war effort. She was sent to see the relevant official, but she made him uneasy by informing him grandly that she could get lots of information about the war from her brothers.<sup>3</sup> (Ernest was a rear-admiral in the British Navy. Just prior to the outbreak of war, Guy had been appointed naval attaché in Washington, and Lance was a Naval Liaison Officer there.)<sup>4</sup> No invitations to write propaganda material came

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<sup>1</sup> *London Post Office Directory, County Suburbs, 1915.*

<sup>2</sup> The road is now the A211, Footscray Road,

<sup>3</sup> Letter, Mary Gaunt to Winifred Holtby, 18 May 1934, Local Studies Library, Hull.

<sup>4</sup> *Australian Dictionary of Biography, 1891-1939*, entries for Ernest and Guy Gaunt; also Guy Gaunt, *The Yield of the Years*, Hutchinson & Co, London 1940 and letter, Michael Hemery to Ian McLaren, McLaren papers.

her way, which Mary attributed to the 'silly old Colonel' not wanting to have women working under him.<sup>5</sup>

Mary had begun giving lectures after her trips to Africa, illustrating them with lantern slides made from the photographs she took. On her return from China, she continued lecturing, not only on her travels, but also in support of the war effort. This involved some travelling around England. During one of her lecture tours, while she was in Blundell Sands, on the Lancashire coast, she suffered a bad attack of asthma and was treated by a local doctor. She told the story in a letter to Winifred Holtby:

The brute doctored me with iodid of potassium. The asthma was bad enough but with the drug added I was done and have never been able to speak since, though before that I could easily keep 1,000 people listening.<sup>6</sup>

Since iodide of potassium is a harmless ingredient of anti-congestants and cough mixtures still used today, it is hard to see how it could have caused such a problem. She may simply have had a temporary allergic reaction.<sup>7</sup>

Mary settled down to work. *A Woman in China* came out in November 1914; it had an English and a Colonial edition, and a US edition, all in 1914. It ended with her stay at San Shan An, where she did much of the writing. She started work on the second book, the continuation of her travels in China. When she had signed the contract for it in Peking, its title was *Across Asia*. It was changed, appropriately, to *A Broken Journey*.

She planned a novel about China too – about the missionaries she had met, and about the war. She called it *The Awakening of Pleasant Conant* when she signed the contract for it in October 1915. It appeared only months after *A Broken Journey*, also with a name change; it was published as *A Wind from the Wilderness*. In this she used the interesting device of having one character's story in one chapter, then another's in the following chapter. The story is about Rosalie Grahame, an American doctor who is working at a medical clinic in Kansu after two unsuccessful romances (one with a man called *Miller*). The clinic is run by the type of faith mission Mary disapproved of, with a God who did not allow smoking or drinking. Rosalie is in an area threatened by Pai Lang, the White Wolf, as Mary had been. She has a small dog called McTavish: 'he loves me as no-one in the

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<sup>5</sup> Letter, Mary Gaunt to Winifred Holtby, 18 May 1934.

<sup>6</sup> Letter, Mary Gaunt to Winifred Holtby, 18 May 1934.

<sup>7</sup> It is not clear whether she stopped lecturing because of damage to her vocal chords or because of a lack of breath. It would not be surprising for an asthma sufferer to find herself in the latter situation. [I am indebted to Dr. Robert Hare, FANZCA, for his help in this matter.]

world loves me, or ever has loved me', she says, sounding remarkably like Mary speaking of James Buchanan, the k'ang dog that was her constant companion in China.<sup>8</sup> Unusually for Mary, the book does not have a happy ending; war dominates the lives of the central characters, and finally destroys their happiness.

Her publishers, Werner Laurie, planned a collection of her short stories, which she felt was a courageous thing for them to do in wartime. It was called *The Ends of the Earth* – so named because the stories came from all over the world. Some were from the Australian bush, like the story of a doctor's drive through bushfire to reach a pregnant mother, only to find that the baby has been safely born while he was on the way; two stories concerned police troopers and bushrangers around Beechworth and the Buckland. From her Warrnambool days, and the stories of illicit stills hidden upcountry came 'The Humbling of Sergeant Mahone'. There was 'The Lost White Woman' in which she supplied her own ending to the story of the woman taken by aborigines which had become folklore in Gippsland, where she lived as a child. There were stories from the places to which she had travelled; 'Peter Addie and the Ju-ju' using a character and plot ideas from her West Africa novels; 'The Woman who did not Care' from China; and stories from her brothers' adventures, like 'When the Colt Jammed', 'North of 53<sup>0</sup>' and 'The Mate's Salvage', for which last Guy added the seamanship details and did corrections for her. It was a reliving of her experiences; she says, in the foreword to the book, '... in collecting together this book I seem to be going step by step once again through my own life'.<sup>9</sup> Many of the stories had already been published in magazines like *Pearson's* and *The Graphic*. Elsie Lang helped her to select and prepare the stories. The 'courageous move' paid off; the collection had two English editions, as well as a Colonial one.

During 1915, her nephew came to stay with her. Atherstone – known to the family as Pat – was Lucy's son, a young man in his early twenties. He had been in hospital for six months after suffering severe head wounds at Gallipoli. Pat's casual, almost brutal references to death and dying brought the horror of the fighting home to Mary.<sup>10</sup>

By the time *The Ends of the Earth* came out in October 1915, Mary was at work on her second book about her China travels. With Elsie, her editor, mentor and friend close by, she could discuss it and get advice very easily.

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<sup>8</sup> *A Wind from the Wilderness*, p.11.

<sup>9</sup> *The Ends of the Earth*, p.v

<sup>10</sup> *A Broken Journey*, p.44.



Unfortunately Lewis Lang left All Saints in December 1916; however he and Elsie moved only to Plumstead, not far away.

In 1916 Mary wrote to Edward Arnold to ask if they had work available as a reader. Arnolds did not employ a reader, as they did not have sufficient volume of work, and often had manuscripts in specialist areas, but they were happy to take her as a freelance to read manuscripts of novels at 15/- a time, with postage paid.<sup>11</sup> Mary was happy to accept, particularly when she reflected on the young, hopeful writer who sent her first manuscript to Arnolds twenty-three years before.<sup>12</sup>

Conditions in England were depressing. Commodities like clothing, shoes and furniture became scarce, there were sporadic shortages of coal, no street lighting in some areas, and the trains were fewer and slower. Towards the end of the war food rationing was introduced.

The fear of bad news, of injury and death, hung over families whose menfolk were fighting. The men of the Gaunt family were very much involved in the conflict, and Mary felt this anxiety as did families throughout the world. Her eldest brother Cecil was an army officer who had already served in South Africa and India. He was fifty when war broke out, and on the Reserve of Officers, but he joined up again and was serving in Mesopotamia and was gazetted DSO in 1917.<sup>13</sup> Ernest was at sea, and fought in the Battle of Jutland. Guy was Naval Attache in Washington, and saw convoy service across the Atlantic; Clive, who had a legal practice in Burma, had come to England in November 1914 to enlist, but failed to pass the medical test for active service, and served in the Volunteers in Burma. Lance, after seeing service in Singapore went to England early in 1915 and went to sea as a Lieutenant in the Royal Navy Victorian Reserve, then to the USA as Assistant Liaison Officer in 1917. When the Armistice was finally announced, and the nightmare was over, all five brothers were alive and well.

As the horrors of the war drew to a close, and while the Allies argued about the terms of armistice, a new and terrible threat began to spread across Europe. An epidemic of influenza which began somewhere in the East moved inexorably across India and Central Europe, and by October 1918 arrived in England. The effects were devastating. In India alone sixteen million people died, and overall the epidemic claimed more victims than four years of terrible warfare had done.

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<sup>11</sup> Letter, Edward Arnold to Mary, 2 October 1916.

<sup>12</sup> Letter, Mary to Edward Arnold, 4 October 1916.

<sup>13</sup> Obituary, *Hants Gazette*, ? [about 11] May, 1938.

The arrival of this new and unseen enemy in England caused widespread alarm. In a nation already drained by the war, the virus took its toll: three quarters of the population were affected by it. The Prime Minister, Lloyd George, was confined to bed for ten days; the elderly and sick suffered far more seriously. Even healthy young people fell prey to it. The Armistice was signed on 11 November. In the winter that followed, the winter of 1918-19, 150,000 English people died.

Mary had had a mild dose of influenza in China several years before. While she did not suffer seriously this time, she did not enjoy the English climate, and her health was not good. Her thoughts began to turn again towards travel, and to warmer and better climates.

But she still had work to do. Towards the end of 1918 her China manuscript went to the publishers, and *A Broken Journey* appeared in February 1919. Hard on its heels came *A Wind from the Wilderness* in April.

After the success of *The Ends of the Earth*, she prepared another collection of short stories. She was staying with Guy and Margaret at Gaunts' Wood, near Leek, when she signed the contract for it in August 1919. The stories were from West Africa, China, the North Atlantic, but none from Australia. They were published in February 1920 as *The Surrender and Other Happenings*.

Mary's friends the Horsfalls in Liverpool, in whose house she had seen pictures and models of West Africa, also owned land in Jamaica. Years before she had written about an old slave book she had found in Liverpool, the record of the births and deaths of slaves on the plantation. In the one book she had been brought face to face with the beginning and end points in the story of slavery. On the Gold Coast years before, she had seen the forts that held their unwilling prisoners, and seen at first hand the proud Ashanti warriors, the Joliffe, the Mandingo, the many tribes of West Africa. She had heard the stories of how men were shipped against their will to work on the plantations of the West Indies, and she was curious to see the end place of the story that had its beginning in so much suffering and so far away.

Immediately after the war, it was not easy to travel freely, but one of the first shipping routes to be restored was that to Jamaica. She had not been in good health in England during the war years. The climate in Jamaica would be warm; it was what she felt she needed. She boarded a ship for Jamaica.

By now her little k'ang dog, James Buchanan, which had travelled all the way from China with her, had died, and was buried in the garden at

Mary Haven. She had another dog, Bubbles, to which she was also attached. She made arrangement for Bubbles to be cared for when she left England, and on arrival applied for permission for him to be sent over to her in Jamaica. After consideration at the highest level, her request was refused; but by then she had been for some time there, and was enjoying Jamaica so much she decided to remain, and advertise for another dog to keep her company there. She acquired Buffer, a big white dog, part bull terrier, which guarded her house and property jealously, and upset passing strangers.

On the ship going over Mary met Clarence Lopez. Lopez lived at New Yarmouth, on an estate once given by the sovereign to the Earl of Dudley. Mary went to visit him there.

She spent some time in Kingston, staying at the Myrtle Bank Hotel, one of the biggest and grandest on the island. For two months she stayed with a friend in a bungalow by the shore of Montego Bay, sleeping outside on the broad verandahs of the house. She looked around for a house to rent. She found 'The Hyde' at Trelawny, in the hills 150 km from Kingston, and hired a woman to cook for her in the cavernous kitchen, and a laundry woman.

Another fellow passenger on the trip over was Herbert de Lisser, Jamaican-born and an established writer. He wrote novels, and books on the geography and history of Jamaica. De Lisser was planning to start a literary magazine, and he published an article on Mary in his first issue, which came out in December 1920. The magazine, *Planter's Punch*, was a modest one. He commissioned her to write her impressions of Jamaica for his second issue (they came out annually): he introduced the article with the tongue-in-cheek explanation:

When Mrs. Gaunt was in Kingston in January of this year, she was commissioned by the Directorate and Editorial Staff of *Planters Punch* (myself) to write an article . . . recording her impressions of Jamaica. <sup>14</sup>

Mary's article appeared in Volume 1, No.2, in December 1921.

Her writing was impressionistic, describing the world as she saw it. She used comments like: 'It seems to me – I am open to correction – that these huts often belong to the women . . .'<sup>15</sup> A little research, questioning, might have resolved the doubt; Mary does not seem to have wanted to do it. In more complex issues the response is the same:

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<sup>14</sup> 'Impressions of Jamaica', *Planters' Punch*, Vol. 1, No.2, December 1921.

<sup>15</sup> as above

I cannot grasp the economic conditions here. Wages are low compared to other lands, but in a country where there is so much waste land which is most wonderfully fertile, where off ten acres a man with a discreet knowledge of the growing power of a soil could keep a large family comfortably, I do not know why there should be any poor. <sup>16</sup>

But she began to chafe at the difficulties. She was a long way from the centre of things, from her publishers, from the family, from English life. The mails from England took a long time: although a ship did the voyage in fourteen days, some of her mail took seven weeks arrive. She wanted mail, and *The Times*, and she felt let down by the postal service.<sup>17</sup> She believed in the Post Office, she said. Her friend de Lisser commented on her grumblings:

The Post Office is not so bad as to be the very worst, but a little unqualified abuse will do it good. <sup>18</sup>

Mary stayed in Jamaica for 18 months. During that time, even in the warm climate, she had a spell of ill-health. Jamaica was not to be her final place to settle. But she turned sixty in 1921, and needed a place where she could be comfortable and secure. Ultimately, the solution seemed to be to find a place closer to England in which to settle, a place with a warm dry climate.

While she was in Jamaica, she worked on her book, a travel book-cum-history called *Where the Twain Meet*. It was an impressionistic view of Jamaica from the point of view of a tourist, and appeared in November 1922.

The book was published by John Murray, who had taken over Smith, Elder in 1917. Mary had published with T. Werner Laurie since 1909, her longest time with any one publisher. Her last two books had not done particularly well, having only one edition each, and perhaps Mary was disenchanted, or perhaps Werner Laurie were. Whatever the reason, her publisher was now John Murray.

She returned from Jamaica, and began to look around for a place to live. She did not need another winter in England to convince her that she needed a warmer climate. Before long, she was headed for the south of France, to the little village of Sainte Agnes.

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<sup>16</sup>as above.

<sup>17</sup> Letter to *The Times*, 26 January 1920, p.8 .

<sup>18</sup> 'Impressions of Jamaica', *Planters' Punch*, Vol.1, No.2, December 1921.

There is no record of when she first saw the village. One comes upon it, high in the hills behind Menton, a mediaeval stone village, remote and beautiful. It is approached by a steep and dangerous winding road from the valley below. In her childhood, Mary had read Charlotte Yonge's *Dove in the Eagle's Nest*, the story of a gently-bred young girl taken by a father she barely knew to live in the castle stronghold of Adlerstein, home of robber barons in mediaeval Germany. Adlerstein, 'the eagle's nest', was perched high on an almost inaccessible rocky hill.<sup>19</sup> Sainte Agnes was Adlerstein materialised.

Mary settled there and finished *Where the Twain Meet*, which she dedicated to Elsie Lang as a token of her thanks for years of helpful criticism and advice, and for her friendship. From Sainte Agnes she wrote another letter to the *Times* (which was published on 20 September) on a theme she had pursued over many years: the right of middle-class women to a career and independence.

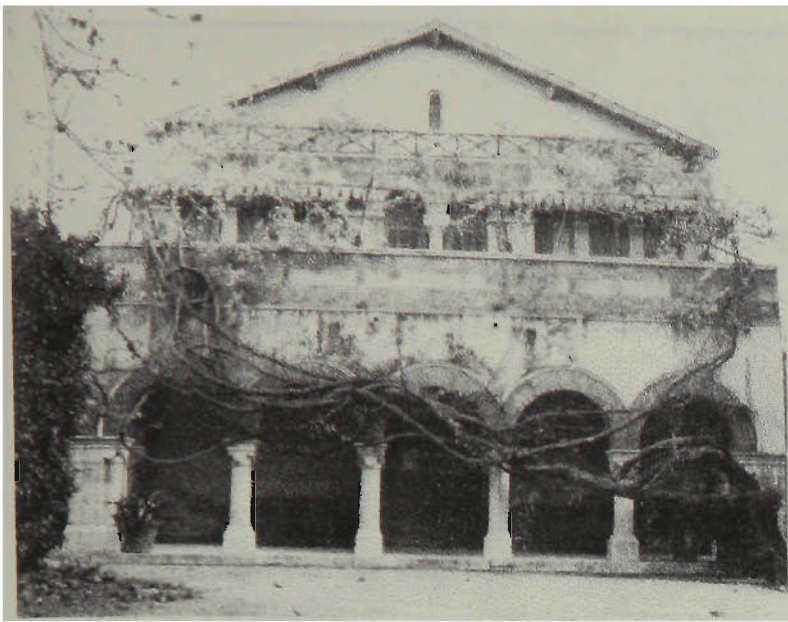
The woman who has learned to earn her own living, who is independent and actually earns it, who knows thoroughly the value of money, is not obliged to cheapen things [bargain to get things as cheaply as possible] as is the non-worker. She has more money to spend; she has no time for petty bargaining; she is more likely to have a sane and just outlook on life. She is, in fact, married or unmarried, an asset in the community.<sup>20</sup>

Soon after *Where the Twain Meet* was finalised, Mary left Sainte Agnes. When she wrote to *The Times* again, on 1st October, her address was Hotel de Paris, Bordighera. She had crossed the French border and moved into Italy.

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<sup>19</sup> Charlotte Yonge, *The Dove in the Eagle's Nest*, J.M.Dent & Sons, London 1936.

<sup>20</sup> *The Times*, 20 September 1921.



*The Bicknell Institute (top), the Library (centre) and the English Church, Bordighera.  
(Photographs reproduced from Cento Anni di Tennis in Italia, Bordighera, 1978.)*

## X

### The Bordighera Years

In 1855 an Italian writer, a political exile in England, wrote a novel about a young English girl who falls in love with a romantic and charming Italian doctor. The writer, Giovanni Ruffini, set his romance in Bordighera, a small town on the Ligurian coast not far from the border with France. Lucy, the heroine, is rescued from the overturned carriage in which she has been travelling with her father, Sir John Davenne, by the young Doctor Antonio, an exile from his native Sicily. Her ankle is broken; she and her father are forced to remain in Bordighera.

Sir John's resentment of the humble accommodation and the democratic views of the doctor and the local people are gradually overcome. The gentle climate and the magnificent scenery work their magic on father and daughter alike until love triumphs and Sir John is won over. The book was a best-seller, and remained so for years.

Ruffini was not the first to bring Bordighera to the English reader's attention. In 1822 the intrepid Countess of Blessington, *en route* for Florence, rode a mule side-saddle along the Cornice, the coastal route from Menton. Travellers in France could go along the coast as far as Menton: there Napoleon's broad new road came to an end – and so, perforce, did travel by coach. This was a deterrent to many travellers, but not to Lady Blessington. She published an account of her travels as *The Idler in Italy*:

Until I saw the Mediterranean I had no notion . . . its blue and placid loveliness might encourage the first mariner who ever launched his fragile bark, to trust its tempting surface.<sup>1</sup>

Later in the century, Anne Thackeray's imaginative recreation of the life of Angelica Kauffmann has 'Miss Angel', the artist, stopping in Bordighera on her way to England.

A sort of dimmed brightness was everywhere. It lay on the sea, on the village, in a little smiling grove beyond a wall . . . Miss Angel went up a little way along an avenue of lemon and of olives, and breathed the sweet morning pastoral silence.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Countess of Blessington, *The Idler in Italy*, A. & W. Galignani & Co., Paris, 1839, p.153.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Thackeray, who wrote as 'Miss Thackeray', was the daughter of the novelist William Makepeace Thackeray. Her novel, *Miss Angel*, was published by Smith, Elder & Co., London, in 1884.



The tranquil blue sea, the mild and fragrant atmosphere, had already recommended the town to a few visitors. But Ruffini's novel, with its romantic picture of a humble and hospitable people, and an idyllic landscape, came at a time when British travellers were able to get to the warm Mediterranean coast more easily than ever before. The railway, which reached Cannes in 1863 and extended along the French Riviera soon afterwards, made a visit to the Mediterranean a much easier prospect for English travellers.

Railways have all but annihilated space, and the facilities they afford to rapid travelling are so great that a traveller may leave the London Bridge station at 7.40 on Monday morning, by mail train for Paris, and be at Nice or Mentone for supper the following day.<sup>3</sup>

Menton was only 15 km from Bordighera. When, in 1871, the railway line reached Bordighera itself, travellers were promised that they could reach Bordighera from Paris in only twenty-four hours.<sup>4</sup>

Before Ruffini's novel, Bordighera had been a small fishing town which was famous for its palms and its olive groves and lemon trees. Even before the railway, in 1860 there was a 'Locanda d'Inghilterra' (English Inn). English doctors began recommending the climate, and the sea-bathing, for their patients, and the population of 1600 in the mid-nineteenth century had risen to almost 4,000 by 1901, a growth due in no small measure to the arrival of the English.

The Hotel d'Angleterre opened in 1863. The proprietor's wife was English, and she later encouraged an English clergyman, wintering in Nice for his health, to make the cumbersome coach journey of 50 km to conduct services in Bordighera for the little English colony.

The first recorded British resident was Mrs. Louisa Boyce, who arrived in 1866, and had a villa built which she called *Bella Vista*. Louisa Boyce later endowed a Protestant children's home for Italian orphans.

The number of visitors dwindled during the Franco-Prussian war, since travel by land across Europe was dangerous or impossible, and for some invalids the sea voyage of eight or ten days was taxing. But with the end of hostilities in 1871 the numbers of visitors increased steadily. When the congregation at church services grew too large for the salon of the Hotel

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<sup>3</sup> James Henry Bennett, *Winter and Spring on the Shores of the Mediterranean*, 1875, J. & A. Churchill, 3rd edition, 1875, quoted in *When the Riviera was Ours*, Patrick Howarth, Century, London 1977, p.33.

<sup>4</sup> Emma Funelli, *Tesi di Laurea: Gli Inglesi a Bordighera*, Università degli Studi di Genova, Facoltà di Magistero, 1989, p.42.

d'Angleterre, the services were moved to a chapel in the grounds. But in 1873 a new and larger chapel, which could accommodate 70 to 80 people, was built in the grounds of the Villa Rosa, home of Clarence Bicknell. It was enlarged in 1883 and vested in trustees 'for the benefit of the English colony in perpetuity'.<sup>5</sup>

The growth of the English community as a whole was reflected in the growing congregation of the English church. On Christmas Day in 1892 there were 223 in the congregation; there were 260 in 1896 and the figure moved steadily upward. In 1921, Mary Gaunt's first Christmas there, 297 attended the Christmas service. The number peaked at 369 in 1924.<sup>6</sup> Through the 1920s and 1930s, when Mary was there, the English community was the largest it had ever been.

Many of these people were settling in Bordighera; many others came for the season – that is, the winter season. Because of its sheltered situation on the coast, with cliffs rising behind a coastal plain, the climate was mild and pleasant for most of the northern winter.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the English community of Bordighera was 3,000-strong. Although many came just for the season, many were making a permanent home there. Of seventy villas built in the town in 1899, sixty were for English families.<sup>7</sup>

Many of the British who settled there had served in the Empire overseas. The tombstones in the English cemetery bear witness to their service in warmer climates: Lt.-Col. J.F.C. Thatcher, Indian Staff Corps; David Gorton Davies, MA, Canon of Malta; Hervey Ekins Ryves, 13th Bengal Lancers; W. Howard Campbell, MA, DB, of Londonderry, Ireland, 25 years missionary in India<sup>8</sup>. The mild climate of Bordighera, and an English-speaking community with all the comforts of home, provided a pleasant alternative to the bleak English winters.

By the time of Mary's arrival, it was a veritable independent English colony. English doctors provided care for their patients; the English pharmacy dispensed the medications they prescribed. New arrivals rented or bought their villas through an English estate agent, and did their banking and arranged their insurance with Edward Berry and Banca Berry in the via Vittorio Emanuele.<sup>9</sup> From 1898 they had a British Vice-Consul in the town to act on their behalf; he was Henry de Burgh Daly. Since tennis was an

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<sup>5</sup> All Saints Bordighera Register of Services, MS 22,397 Vol.2, Guildhall Library, London. Extract from the Journal de Bordighera, 13 December 1900, giving a history of the church.

<sup>6</sup> All Saints Bordighera, Register of Services, MS 22,397 Vol.2, Guildhall Library, London.

<sup>7</sup> Emma Funelli, 1989.

<sup>8</sup> Transcribed from tombstones, English Cemetery, Bordighera.

<sup>9</sup> Dino Taggiasco, *Guida di Bordighera*, Municipio di Bordighera, 1933.

essential part of English life, a group of residents formed a lawn tennis club and purchased land behind the English church for courts; when it began in 1878 it was the first tennis club in Italy. There were tournaments and trophies, and an honour board with the names of the president, and of the trophy winners.

The English Tea-rooms were beside the tennis club: 'morning coffee or afternoon tea in pretty rooms or garden'. Musical evenings were held at the Victoria Hall. There were chess, bridge and debating clubs; there was a stamp and coin collecting circle, and a branch of the British and Foreign Bible Society. There were lectures, such as Miss Barclay's talk on her visit to Heligoland to study migratory birds, illustrated with slides.

The library on which Mary relied for her research and reading was started by the English community in 1886. Members of the community later built a library building themselves, and stocked it with a good selection of books.

The English-language *Giornale di Bordighera* provided details of coming events, and reported on important occasions, giving the names of those who were present. It announced acquisitions to the Library; it published lists of English residents and where they were staying, along with news of their arrivals and departures. 'Mr and Lady Catherine Hardy will not be out this year, as they are going to Brazil after Christmas.'<sup>10</sup>

The English community established relations of considerable goodwill with the local Italian community. They supported local charities, and set up their own charitable institutions to help the local community. During the first World War they opened Victoria Hall as a hospital for the wounded.

The villas and gardens of the wealthier English settlers were later to become valued legacies of the period of 'English occupation'. The most famous villa of them all, that of Charles Hanbury, with its magnificent gardens<sup>11</sup>, was to become a tourist attraction as well as a venue for the study of botany by students of Genoa University. The English Church was sold at a very modest price to the Bordighera community for use as a venue for concerts and exhibitions; Bicknell's collection of rocks and geological specimens, books, etc. was later to form the nucleus of the International Institute of Ligurian Studies, and the unique collection of English books in the library later became the Biblioteca Civica Internazionale.

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<sup>10</sup> *Giornale di Bordighera*, 16 November 1933.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Hanbury, who, by the age of 35, had acquired a fortune in China, and continued to accumulate wealth from real estate in England and Bordighera, imported plants from all over the world to establish botanical gardens on the sloping grounds around his villa at La Mortola, just outside Bordighera.

Mary Gaunt came to Bordighera, like many others, to escape the English winter and to live there 'as long as the income tax commissioners will allow a poor author to stay out of England without unduly penalising her'.<sup>12</sup> She arrived in October 1921, and booked into the Hotel de Paris, the most impressive of the hotels built right on the *passeggiata* along the seafront.

On 5 August 1922 her mother Elizabeth died in Folkestone, England. Under the terms of her father's will, his property was kept intact to be divided among his children after Elizabeth's death. During her lifetime, Elizabeth received an annuity from the estate, as did William's unmarried sister Mary, who died in 1912. Now that her mother was dead, Mary, along with Lucy and their brothers, received a substantial legacy from William's will, and she had the opportunity to settle herself more comfortably.

Beside the Hotel de Paris but set back a little from the *passeggiata*, was a modest villa in its own garden which, like the hotel, overlooked the sea. Within a few months of her mother's death, Mary took a lease on the villa. Not long afterwards, Anselma, her Italian servant, came to work for her and to live in the house which Mary called 'La Villa Camilla'.<sup>13</sup>

The English community had grown. Now close to 3,000 visitors came for the winter season, when the snow and cold of winters in England, North Germany, Russia, made the mild climate of Bordighera highly desirable. The golf course had been enlarged in 1913 to become a full eighteen-hole course – a facility enjoyed by Mary's brother Ernest.<sup>14</sup> The villas with their beautiful gardens, built by the English and the other *stranieri*, were scattered throughout Bordighera, and many were built on the sheltering slopes that rose above the town, in the Via dei Colli and the Via degli Inglesi.

Mary's name did not appear among those on fund-raising and social committees in the pages of the *Giornale di Bordighera*. In the Villa Camilla she was hard at work. The book which she had begun more than twenty years ago in Warrnambool, and which had been set aside during the difficult days of Lindsay's illness and death, was still with her, and now, settled in her new home by the sea, she set to work. *As the Whirlwind Passeth*, a romance set in the colony of New South Wales during the days of Governor John Hunter, was published in October 1923. Its dedication, to her

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<sup>12</sup> *Reflection - in Jamaica*, p.28.

<sup>13</sup> *Camilla* was the name of the novel written by Fanny Burney, the profits from whose sales were to enable her to get a house of her own!

<sup>14</sup> A picture of Ernest, with Dr. Bogle, on the Bordighera Golf Course, appeared in *Bogle's Meanderings of a Medico*. printed for private circulation 1928.

niece, Ernest's daughter Sheila, read: 'To a brave little lady, my niece Sheila Mary Gaunt, I dedicate this tale of a brave little lady of an older day.'<sup>15</sup> Her brother Ernest had settled in Bordighera, where it was hoped the mild climate would be good for Louie, who had indifferent health. Mary had a chance to become well acquainted with her niece Sheila, born in 1909, and with John, a few years older, and Yvonne, the youngest, born in 1917.

For her next book Mary returned to the world of West Africa, and to the theme of women achieving an independent livelihood. *The Forbidden Town* was the story of Fabia Vrooman, who inherits a plantation, and insists, to the disbelief of all around her, in going out to West Africa to run it herself.

*The Forbidden Town* was put into the hands of yet another publisher, T. Fisher Unwin Ltd. Again it was dedicated to Elsie Lang, whose help Mary relied on a great deal. The critics were positive: even *The Times Literary Supplement* said: 'An exciting story of West Africa by the writer of several other tales of African adventure'. The *Daily Chronicle* said: 'The author of this stirring tale of love and adventure in West Africa handles her material with a practised hand . . . and the whole story is freshly and vigorously drawn'. 'A tale of breathless excitement', said *Woman's Pictorial*.

The book was very successful. The first English edition came out in 1926; a second impression came out the same year. There were two US editions, and a popular edition for England in 1927.

It was not only the English who visited Bordighera to enjoy its pleasures. One of its more famous visitors was the well-loved Queen Margharita of Italy, who generally visited for several months in the winter, living in her villa on the hillside. When she died in Bordighera on 4 January 1926 her funeral Mass was celebrated in the open air in great state; her body lay in state at the royal villa, and crowds filed past to pay their respects. Mussolini was among the dignitaries at the funeral.<sup>16</sup>

In the English colony there was a saying that the glamour spots along the Mediterranean coast – Cannes, Nice and Monte Carlo – represented the World, the Flesh and the Devil.<sup>17</sup> Bordighera was seen as a pleasant, peaceful alternative.

In Bordighera Mary met many creative people. Bordighera's English community had attracted writers and artists from its inception; in fact, they had been a dominant presence, and part of its attraction to newcomers and prospective settlers. One of the most influential of the early arrivals,

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<sup>15</sup> Dedication, *As the Whirlwind Passeth*, 1923.

<sup>16</sup> James Linton Bogle, *Meanderings of a Medico*, p.235.

<sup>17</sup> James Linton Bogle, *Meanderings of a Medico*. p.143.

Clarence Bicknell, was a writer and a talented water-colourist and botanical illustrator. An Anglican clergyman, he arrived in 1878 to minister to the small English-speaking congregation. He began to study the fauna of the area, and in 1885 published his drawings and descriptions of them. During his excursions into the Maritime Alps he discovered prehistoric rock carvings, and for years worked to record and collect them. He left the ministry and concentrated on his many interests – exploring, studying and publishing on the area, travelling the world on voyages of botanical discovery, and working for the promotion of Esperanto. Bicknell was one of the prime movers in the establishment of the public library, and when he died in 1918, left his collection to the town.

In 1887 the writer, poet and pastor George Macdonald settled in Bordighera. Macdonald was a mystic and a man of great personal magnetism. Dr. James Linton Bogle, a later writer and medical practitioner who spent many years in Bordighera and was a friend of Ernest Gaunt, said of Macdonald: ‘. . . it was he that made Bordighera such an attractive place to so many English visitors’. Among those who settled for long periods in Bordighera were Frederick Fitzroy Hamilton, who published a scholarly history and guide to the area in 1883.<sup>18</sup> Edward and Margaret Berry continued the tradition; they were living in Bordighera in Mary’s time; their book *At the Western Gate of Italy*, was published in 1931. Edward was the nephew of Clarence Bicknell, and British Vice-Consul after Daly’s death. Other contemporary writers included Henry de Vere Stacpoole; Edward Carpenter, political theorist, philosopher and social reformer; Charles Doughty, who wrote about his Arabian expeditions; Alice Meynell, poet; and William Sharpe, philosopher.<sup>19</sup>

One writer of particular interest to Mary was Colonel Harald Swayne, who retired from the Royal Engineers and settled at the Villa Cristina. Swayne, almost the same age as Mary, was an enthusiastic explorer, as well as a writer. He had carried out the first explorations of British Somaliland in 1884-87, and had also explored the highlands of Siberia, and he had written books about his expeditions. He had served in the British forces in India and Burma, and in many parts of Africa, and was a member of the Royal Geographical Society.

Mary enlisted Swayne’s help with a book, the book which was to become *Saul’s Daughter*. It was set in the British residency at Aden and in

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<sup>18</sup> Frederick Fitzroy Hamilton, *Bordighera and the Western Riviera*, Edward Stanford, London 1883.

<sup>19</sup> Dino Taggiasco, *Guida di Bordighera*, 1930.

the desert of Abyssinia (Ethiopia). Mary acknowledged Swayne's help with a remarkable dedication:

My dear Col. Swayne – I am dedicating *Saul's Daughter* to you with my sincerest thanks. But for the public's dislike of two names on a title-page, yours should have been alongside mine as part author. If I wrote the story and thought out the characters, the local colour is certainly yours. I only know Aden as a P & O passenger: you have lived there. I don't know one end of a gun from another; you are known as an expert hunter; the original official explorer of British Somaliland and its Abyssinian border, and the author of a book on Somaliland which has been declared 'a most illuminating description of the Somali tribes'. It was my great good luck to find you ready and willing to help me write a novel.

I trust our combined efforts may find favour with the reading public.<sup>20</sup>

The reading public contented themselves with one edition of the book.

Both writers seem to have enjoyed the collaboration, however, because within two years they had brought out a second book, *The Lawless Frontier*. Their publisher for the first book, T. Fisher Unwin, may have been less than enthusiastic, however, because their second book was brought out by a different company, this time Ernest Benn Limited. Again Abyssinia was the setting, and again Mary acknowledged Swayne's help, although somewhat less effusively this time, and in the third person. 'Most certainly had it not been for his presence at an Abyssinian Royal feast, his wanderings in Abyssinia and Somaliland, it would never have been written', she said.<sup>21</sup> In all, there were four editions of the book.

While the two jointly-authored books with Harald Swayne were taking shape, Mary was also researching a book for a series called 'Peeps at great men' for a London publisher, A & C Black. The series had so far featured Charles Dickens, Sir Walter Scott and William Shakespeare; Mary's contribution was *George Washington and the Men who Made the American Revolution*.

One of Mary's friends in Bordighera was Muriel Daly, who wrote a column for the *Giornale*. The Daly family were long-time residents of Bordighera. Henry de Burgh Daly, who was British Vice-Consul until his death in 1897, wrote articles for English magazines; a tablet in the English Church recorded Dora Mary's death in 1937. The two Misses Daly ran the English Tea Rooms in the 1930s. Another friend was 'that handsome old man' Sir Robert Roden, once Chief Justice of British Honduras. (He was a

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<sup>20</sup> Dedication, *Saul's Daughter*, July 1927.

<sup>21</sup> Dedication, *The Lawless Frontier*, March 1929.



year older than Mary.) She invited Roden for bridge parties with Dr. Colquhoun, another good friend. George Raymond, K.C., of New Zealand, came to visit her; they had been students together at Grenville College in Ballarat, at the other end of the world, many years before. Raymond had carried Mary's books to school for her.<sup>22</sup>

In 1928 the English tennis club celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, and Prince Umberto of Savoy was invited to join in the festivities. By now tennis was well established in Italy, and the English tennis club which had started it all was suitably acknowledged. Until the collapse of the community in 1939, the Bordighera Club remained English, and only a favoured few Italians were invited to join it.

Mary looked at the world around her with a business-like eye. She wrote a number of letters to *The Times* about the British Empire, and in one of them she contemplated the British expenditure on tourism in Europe which could go into the coffers of the Empire:

The Englishman does not go abroad to mingle – or even to meet – with the people of the land he visits. He lives in a colony of Britons. He looks for his own newspaper, his own tennis, bridge, golf and social clubs; he dances only with his own compatriots . . . In this little town of Bordighera alone last year there were over 3,000 visitors from Britain.<sup>23</sup>

Money spent on the French Riviera and in Italy, she argued, could be spent within the Empire, in Jamaica for example, if there were cheaper and swifter communication, and perhaps subsidised travel ('If I could get there myself for the same price as I can get from England here, I should be tempted to start tonight.')

Early in his career, Mary's brother Guy had sailed across the Pacific and called at Pitcairn Island, and he had sailed the *Bounty's* boat from Tahiti to the Great Barrier Reef. As with so many of his adventures, he had come home and told the family all about it, and, as with all his other stories, Mary had enjoyed and remembered it. Now, almost seventy, Mary thought about it again, and about a visit she and Guy had paid to the tiny Cornish village of Polperro, and she drew the two ideas together for her next book. She had press gangs in Cornwall finding men for the 'Bounty', the ship on which the crew mutinied, and from which their Captain, Bligh, was set adrift in the Pacific. *Joan of the Pilchard* came out in April 1930.

Her friend Roden gave her legal advice in the writing of the book, and again Elsie Lang helped her with editing and shaping.

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<sup>22</sup> 'My Victorian Childhood', p. 238.

<sup>23</sup> *The Times*, 26 May 1926, p.10.

Elsie, who had pursued a busy career herself for over twenty years, gave Mary some help of a different kind in the same year. She prepared a survey of modern women for T. Werner Laurie, and in the section on writers (which included Rose Macauley, Storm Jameson and Virginia Woolf among other long-forgotten names), she wrote:

A novelist who has not received the recognition her work deserves is Mary Gaunt; although some people, men especially, are enthusiastic about her. Her travel books are faithful, true and entertaining records; her novels can scarcely be beaten for graphic local colour. The best is *Every Man's Desire*, the scene of which is set on the coast of West Africa, in one of the old Portuguese castles which was once a stronghold of the slave trade.<sup>24</sup>

Elsie was continuing to produce a steady output of books. This was the sixteenth book; she produced the last one, a retelling of *Ivanhoe*, three years later. Her husband Lewis went back to study in 1931, and completed an MA (he had been ordained in 1906), and published three theological works in later years.

In 1929 Mary was invited back to Jamaica. Her passage was provided by the shipping company Elders Fyffe; she stayed at Government House and was given accommodation at the best hotels; cars were provided by the Touring Society so that she could travel around the island. It was understood that she would write a book about the island, and she did – but it was not the book they had expected. The book, *Reflection – in Jamaica* was published in March 1932; when it reached Jamaica there was trouble.

The Kingston *Daily Gleaner* review began with a strangely ambivalent attitude to her book:

Those of us in Jamaica who read the extracts from Mary Gaunt's new book on Jamaica which were published in our Saturday's Magazine Section, will get a hearty laugh out of them – for we know our Mary – but, unfortunately, this book will probably be read elsewhere than in this Island; and by people who know nothing of what conditions here really are like.

Since it was de Lisser, the editor, who suggested the visit and made arrangements for it, the uncomfortable tone was not surprising. But as the article went on, the writer warmed to his subject. He spoke of 'drivelling misrepresentations' and 'gross inaccuracy', particularly where comments about the price of meals and the standard of the hotels affected the sensitive area of tourism. 'I have never known Kingston when it was not hot', Mary

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<sup>24</sup> Elsie Lang, *British Women in the 20th Century*, T.Werner Laurie, 1929.

had written. 'Certainly it isn't cold,' the *Gleaner* retorted; 'nobody but a fool would expect it to be, for this is a semi-tropical country. [But] 'For five months at least of the year [Kingston] has a pleasantly cool, if sunny climate.'<sup>25</sup> The *Gleaner* also quoted the Port-of-Spain *Guardian* which contented itself with listing all the more outrageous comments: there was not a comfortable chair in Jamaica; it took all day to buy a dozen halfpenny postcards at a country post office; country bread tasted like plaster scraped off the wall. . . etc.<sup>26</sup>

Mary had never been a disciplined researcher, and was too impatient to check things carefully once she had written them. She was quite willing to quote an isolated example and allow it to give the impression of being typical. Perhaps, as she grew older (she was seventy-one when the book came out), her patience grew less. Certainly her book did not endear her to the Jamaicans, who were quick to remind her that she had been invited there to write her book.

The book did not find a publisher easily. Mary asked a friend in England, Sir Frank Fox, to send the manuscript to Macmillan for her, and suggested interest in it by the West India Committee as an inducement to the publishers. Mary wrote to Macmillan also; she reported that she had approached the Atlantic shipping companies about the reading matter available for passengers on their ships, and offered her own book, which of course she hoped Macmillan would publish.<sup>27</sup> Macmillan declined.

The visit to Jamaica produced a second book, which Jamaicans seem to have liked better, and which sold better. *Harmony*, published in 1933, was a novel, a story of the slaves in Jamaica at the end of the eighteenth century. There were two editions.

Speaking of the Jamaican people, Mary wrote in a letter in 1934:

It is curious to find you are interested in coloured people. I have always felt keenly their disadvantages but it is very hard indeed to keep on friendly terms with them. They all seem to me to suffer from an inferiority complex and to think you are patronizing them.<sup>28</sup>

The human potential for self-deception at its most remarkable!

It was growing harder to produce good books, harder to find publishers, and harder for publishers to make money on the books they

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<sup>25</sup> *Daily Gleaner*, Kingston, 27 September 1932.

<sup>26</sup> *Daily Gleaner*, Kingston, 24 September 1932, quoting the Port of Spain *Guardian* of 17 September.

<sup>27</sup> Letter, Mary Gaunt to Macmillan, 27 February 1931, Macmillan Archive, University of Reading.

<sup>28</sup> Letter to Winifred Holtby, 6 May 1934, Hull Local Library.

printed. As the 1930s advanced and Britain and Europe moved inexorably into Depression, Mary's income suffered. She began to economise; when she wrote to her agent in London, she got him to post other English mail for her, to save on postage. She hesitated about travel, even the modest distance to England, because of the cost. It was probably at about this time that her brother Ernest, and perhaps her other brothers, began to help her with financial support.

She still pursued creatively, sometimes aggressively, the business of being published. She wrote to the *Australasian* in Melbourne, to see if they would consider taking *Harmony* as a serial. She continued writing letters to *The Times* and to plan articles for newspapers and magazines to the end.

Her last published book was *World's Away*, which came out in 1934. For this book, which was originally entitled *Died Abner*, she turned again to her beloved West Africa. But publishing it was not easy. Her agent had trouble getting her work placed; she agreed to accept an offer from Hutchinson for *World's Away* which was less than she had hoped. She grumbled to her agents:

I am truly humble that I am worth so little. I think of course it is Benn's fault. I have seen their authors drop off one by one during the last seven years and was an utter fool not to have gone before. Still I must admit they have been bad years for every one.<sup>29</sup>

Watt suggested, as tactfully as possible, that she should accept Hutchinson's offer. This was the fourth publisher he had approached.

Mary hoped to go to England in the summer of 1934. She had been very ill ('I rather thought *Died Abner* was going to be my swansong'), and was waiting until the weather warmed up, although she expressed doubts about whether she could survive there even in the summer.<sup>30</sup> There is no evidence that she ever made the trip.

In 1934 Mary began writing to Winifred Holtby, an up-and-coming young novelist. *Manoa! Manoa!*, a political comedy set in South Africa, had come out the year before, and Mary had read about it and gone in search of it in the English Library at Bordighera, but had found only Winifred's earlier book *Poor Caroline*, which she thoroughly enjoyed. She wrote to Winifred to say so. She mused in her letter:

What makes the public rush to buy books? I'm afraid I've turned a deaf ear to praise of late. Dr. Cronin, Vera Britain, Louis Golding, etc. I tried *Magnolia Street* [by Golding] inside, out and upside down. Which ever way I looked at it I struck a fresh lot of

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<sup>29</sup> Letter, Mary Gaunt to A.P.Watt, 19 March 1934.

<sup>30</sup> Letter, Mary Gaunt to A.P.Watt, 19 March 1934.

deadly uninteresting people and I could not understand the praise the critics gave it for I never met any one who could read it. Then I read he was dramatizing it. I felt he might just as well try and dramatize a Railway Guide book.<sup>31</sup>

That the two women began a regular correspondence was due in no small measure to Winifred's generosity of spirit, as Vera Britain, one of the writers Mary found uninspiring, was Winifred's close friend and working partner.

Mary had been writing her autobiography, and had sent some of it to Winifred, who expressed her admiration. Unfortunately, publishers were not enthusiastic. Winifred suggested some other publishers, and Mary passed the names on to Watt, her agent. Winifred also offered to recommend it to the reader at Gollancz. Gollancz had turned down Mary's *Reflection - in Jamaica*, but they seemed to publicise their writers well, and Mary would have been pleased and relieved to be accepted by them. She thanked Winifred for her offer.<sup>32</sup>

But the recommendation never came. What Winifred had not told Mary, or any of her friends, what Winifred did not quite believe herself, was that she was dying of Bright's Disease. In the spring of 1932 a specialist had given her two years to live, and she was already living on borrowed time.<sup>33</sup> In September 1935 she lost her battle with the illness. The promised letter was never written.

By 1938 Mary still had not found a publisher for the autobiography. She entered it in a competition for an autobiography run by Hodder and Stoughton, but it was not successful. She sold the first part of it to the *English Woman's Magazine*, who, for the sake of the sensibilities of their young readers, cut parts of it out, leaving noticeable, awkward gaps. '...[they took out] any references to religion or sex which, considering it was the life of a young girl, seemed to me a little like the play of Hamlet without Hamlet'.<sup>34</sup>

She sent the manuscript to *The Age*, in Melbourne. Her letters began to take on a hint of irresponsibility: 'Gollancz I hope will publish either in the late autumn or early spring' she wrote.<sup>35</sup>

The heady days of generous advances, of publishers being 'wildly excited' about projected works, were over. She grumbled that Ernest Benn

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<sup>31</sup> Letter, Mary Gaunt to Winifred Holtby, 12 April 1934.

<sup>32</sup> Letter, Mary Gaunt to Winifred Holtby, 11 January 1935.

<sup>33</sup> Jean E.Kennard, *Vera Britain and Winifred Holtby: a working partnership*, University Press of New England, US, 1989, p.112.

<sup>34</sup> Letter, Mary Gaunt to Macmillan, 21 September 1938.

<sup>35</sup> Unidentified letter signed by Mary offering her autobiography as a serial; the letter was probably written to *The Age* in 1934 or 1935.

did nothing to promote her books, that she was making nothing from them, and certainly her earnings dropped. She was borrowing books from the English Library instead of buying them. She rejected the idea of a trip to England in the summer of 1935 because even modest travel was becoming expensive for her.

She sent off another novel, called *The Grey Wolf*, to Watt early in 1938. The manuscript was sent to Hutchinson under the terms of her contract for *World's Away* (that Hutchinson would have first refusal of her next book). It was never published.

Her little dog, Daniel, a faithful companion for ten years, whom she had written into *Worlds Away*, died at the end of April 1934. 'I am more lonely without him than you would have thought possible', she wrote to Winifred Holtby.<sup>36</sup>

Although she was a long way from her birthplace, Mary was by no means cut off from her family in Bordighera. Ernest, awarded the Military Medal for Valor by the Italians for saving an Italian landing party in Somaliland in 1903, had been based in Britain throughout his naval career. His wife Louise (Louie) did not enjoy good health, and for several years Ernest and his young family lived in Bordighera. He retired from the British Navy in March 1925. Guy, also an admiral in the British Navy, had also been based in Britain for most of his career, and had been a Member of Parliament for Yorkshire for four years. Guy had settled in a cliff-top house in Tangier, which looked across the Mediterranean to Gibraltar, where he, too, lived surrounded by a colony of English emigrés. To the old sailor, who had only a few years before owned his own four-masted schooner, getting across to the fishing port of Bordighera would not have been difficult.<sup>37</sup> Lance, who had practised law in Singapore for many years, was in England during the 1920s (he stood for Parliament for the seat of Central Hull in 1926). Cecil was living at Andover in Hampshire after his retirement from the Army in 1920. Of the five sons and two daughters of the Gaunt family, only Clive and Lucy were based in Australia.

After her mother Lucy's long illness and death in January 1936, Ellinor took a year's leave from her position as Librarian with the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research in Melbourne and spent three or four weeks with her Aunt Minnie in Bordighera. While Ellinor was there, they did some travelling about together, and Ellinor also went across to Tangier to visit her Uncle Guy.

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<sup>36</sup> Letter, Mary Gaunt to Winifred Holtby, 6 May 1934.

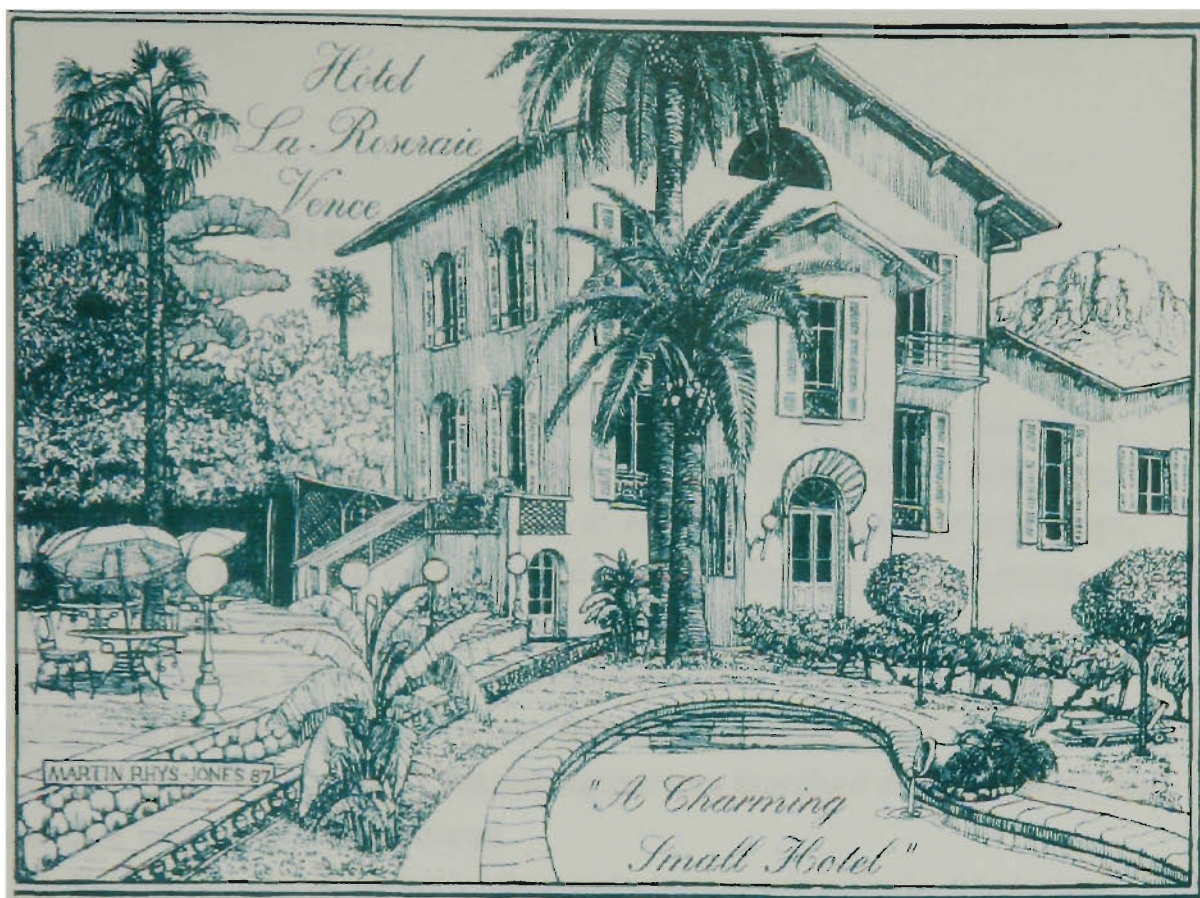
<sup>37</sup> Guy Gaunt, *The Yield of the Years*, pp.290-296.

In 1938 Clive and Hilda sailed from Melbourne on a voyage to see all the remaining members of the family.<sup>38</sup> With Lucy's death in Melbourne in 1936, Clive was the only other member of Mary's immediate family left in Australia. He did not reach England in time to see Cecil, who died after a fall in May 1938.

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<sup>38</sup> Unidentified newspaper clipping dated ? March 1938, McLaren Papers, Baillieu Library.





*La Roseaie, Vence, where Mary Gaunt lived after escaping from Italy in 1940. The modest wartime pension is still in business and is now a smart hotel.*



*Sunny Bank Hospital, Cannes. It is now a nursing home.*

## XI

### The Storm and the Silence

On 17 October 1922 three men, accompanied by a young secretary, moved into some rooms at the Albergo Parco in Bordighera. The men, de Vecchi, de Bono and Balbo, remained at work in the rooms for two days, writing letters, preparing circulars and draft orders. On the afternoon of the 18th they were received for two hours at the Villa Margherita by Her Majesty the Queen Mother. On the following day they left by train for Naples, and at the famous congress there, helped plan the March on Rome.<sup>1</sup> On 28 October, thousands of Fascist supporters marched on the capital, and Mussolini was swept into power.

With the help of secret police and clever propaganda, Mussolini gradually consolidated his position as dictator. There were new rules about social behaviour: the polite form of address, 'Lei', was to be dropped; women were not to wear trousers; Party members were to do gymnastics. While many people were irritated by these intrusions into their private lives, and some refused to comply, the social fabric was clearly changing.<sup>2</sup>

In external affairs, Italy's allegiances were uncertain. The conquest of Ethiopia, while it restored national pride to Italy, and enhanced Mussolini's leadership at home, had alienated Britain and France. The alienation grew worse when Mussolini joined Hitler in supplying arms and troops to help Franco fight against the republicans in Spain. Still, when Hitler marched on Poland, and Britain declared war on Germany, Mussolini did not move. Italy remained neutral.

But Mussolini had had a startling change of loyalties in 1914, advocating neutrality at the outbreak of the war and then converting suddenly to the side of the Allies.<sup>3</sup> It was hard for England to know what to expect.

The growing power of Germany began to dominate the politics of Europe. In France, the line of defence down the eastern border which had been started when Maginot was Minister of War, and which was completed in 1934, was extended and strengthened. A vast underground fortress

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<sup>1</sup> Dino Taggiasco, *Guida di Bordighera*, Municipio di Bordighera, 1933, pp.62-66.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Leeds, *Italy under Mussolini*, Wayland Publishers, UK, 1972, p.53.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Tannenbaum, *Fascism in Italy*, Basic Books Inc., 1972, p.21

which marked its southern end was cut into the hillside above Menton, just across the border from Bordighera.

The political situation was debated by the English community in Bordighera. There was discussion of fascism as a political ideal. The Library acquired books on the subject, including *My Struggle* by Adolf Hitler. Captain Coates, of the Villa Primavera, gave lectures on fascism in Britain, praising the work of Oswald Mosley, and offering further information on the British Union of Fascists.<sup>4</sup>

Bordighera had benefited from the presence of the English community for over sixty years. The young *Bordighotti* who played tennis in the English Tennis Club, the small army of cooks, chauffeurs and gardeners who took care of the *Inglesi*, the hotel proprietors and town business people, saw no reason for conflict with Britain and hoped that Italy would remain neutral. But there was a growing unease among the English population and, as the storm clouds gathered, many of the lovely villas along the Via dei Colli were sold up, and their owners went back to England.

Others stayed on. Many had spent all their lives in the friendly Italian community. While some had a family property in Britain to which they could return, others had no other home. As the uneasy months went by, they waited.

Local officials in Bordighera joined the Fascist Party. After 1937, membership of the Ballila (the Fascist youth organisation) was compulsory for young people. In 1938, restrictive measures against Jews began to come into force. Then sport came under Fascist control. In 1939 the Italian lawn tennis association introduced a rule that players in international matches should make the Fascist salute at the end of a match when their opponents offered to shake hands.<sup>5</sup>

Then, in 1939, German troops marched into Poland, and Europe exploded into war. On 3rd September, Britain and France declared war on Germany. Italy, as yet uncommitted, stationed troops along its borders. With the help of Muriel Daly, a long-time resident of Bordighera, Mary hurriedly packed a few belongings and, with other British residents, crossed the border to Menton, in southern France. Her servant, Anselma, packed up the household linen and silver and went home with her family to Reggio Emilia. After two weeks of 'spending evenings lighted by lamps wrapped up in dark purple paper', when very little happened and the threat

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<sup>4</sup> *Giornale di Bordighera*, 1932.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Leeds, *Italy under Mussolini*. p.48.

of war seemed far away, Mary – again with Muriel’s help – went back, and Anselma and her family also returned.<sup>6</sup>

For the British residents across the border on the French Riviera, the initial alarm was followed by a watchful return to the former way of life. It was not quite the same; *The Times* was more difficult to get, and blackouts had to be enforced. They had their photographs taken and were registered with the British Consulate in Nice. The writer Somerset Maugham, who had a magnificent villa at Cap Ferrat (between Nice and Monte Carlo), had gone to England to offer his services to the British Government. He was asked to wait. After three months of waiting, when in Britain and France it seemed to be almost ‘business as usual’, he went back to Cap Ferrat and occupied himself with his garden, ordering 20,000 bulbs for the spring.<sup>7</sup>

In Bordighera, Mary read *L’Eclaireur* and was comforted by France’s confidence that it could withstand a German attack. But daily life became difficult. Her nephew Pat sent newspapers from Australia; they were sent via England, and took nineteen days to get to Bordighera from there. Letters from England were taking ten days to reach her, and this was a particular worry because she knew that her brother Ernest was ill, and was anxious for news of him.<sup>8</sup> Coffee was hard to get; banking was disrupted and her income was under threat. Her niece and nephew in Australia, Ellinor and Pat Archer, came to the rescue. She wrote to Ellinor telling her of her return, and of how difficult things were. ‘I hope and trust that Italy is going to be neutral and I shall be able to live on here,’ she wrote.<sup>9</sup>

She could still get *The Times*, although it was taking four days to get there. She wrote to *The Times* in January 1940 complaining about the increase in the price of books. She had corresponded with *The Times* for thirty years; this was her last letter to them.<sup>10</sup>

Her health was not good; she found walking difficult, and could not even take her dog for a walk. She had to ask Anselma to do it.<sup>11</sup>

Hitler’s armies continued their march across Europe. After the invasion of Poland, the Germans moved south, and Belgium, Luxembourg and Holland fell in May 1940. In a swift manoeuvre, the German armies passed north-east of the expensive concrete bunkers and defences on which Maginot – and France – had relied, and headed towards Paris. As the inexorable advance went on, it became clear that the French Army, in which so

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<sup>6</sup> Letter from Mary to her niece Ellinor Archer, 22.9.1939. McLaren papers, Baillieu Library, Melbourne.

<sup>7</sup> Somerset Maugham, *Strictly Personal*, Heinemann, UK, 1942, p.96.

<sup>8</sup> Ernest died in April 1940.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Gaunt to Ellinor Archer, 22 September [1939], McLaren Papers, Baillieu Library.

<sup>10</sup> *The Times*, 19 January 1940.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Gaunt to Ellinor Archer, 22 September [1939].



many had such confidence, would not be able to stand against it. All along the Mediterranean coast, the English population packed up, turned out the lights in their villas, and started for home.

With the British Embassy evacuating to Bordeaux with the French Government, the Consul in Nice waited anxiously for instructions. Word came that all the remaining British subjects were to be evacuated from Nice. Five hundred people each were crammed into two colliers which were designed to take a crew of thirty-eight, and they had a nightmare trip back to England – twenty days in which most did not even get the chance to change their clothes.<sup>12</sup>

The tiny remnant of Bordighera's British population could wait no longer. Every day the signs grew stronger that Mussolini would take Italy into the war on what was then clearly the victorious side – that of Germany. Then the ultimatum came: if they did not leave now, they faced internment as enemy aliens in a camp at Abruzzo. Early in June, they packed their belongings and, for the second time, went across the border into the south of France.

By 5 June, Mary and the other refugees were safely settled in Vence, an old walled village in the mountains inland from Nice, at the end of a narrow road that wound up through the rocky hills. In Vence, they were well away from the railway line and from the main roads along the coast.

On 10 June, Italy joined the war as an ally of Germany. Italian soldiers moved into position along the border with France. The civilian population in the villages near the border was evacuated, and many of the townspeople in Bordighera also left.

Meanwhile the German army was advancing into France, and on 14 June German soldiers marched into Paris. While Hitler hesitated about a date for talks, his troops pushed further into French territory; the strategic port of St. Malo was taken on 20 June, and Vichy the same day. Two days later, the French Government signed the Armistice.

Mary's friend, Mrs. Graham, who had been among the group of refugees to Vence, continued on and got safely back to England. From there, she cabled to Mary's niece Ellinor in Australia, to let her know that Mary was safely out of Italy, but that she (Mrs. Graham) had had to leave her behind in Vence, and could not get in touch with her there. Ellinor began a long (and expensive) process of sending letters, telegrams and cables to Government Departments in Australia and Britain to try to get help to her aunt.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> as above. Maugham was among the evacuees.

<sup>13</sup> Exchange of letters and telegrams, Series A981/1, Item DEF581, Australian Archives.

Late in June, Mary got a message through to her brother Guy, in Tangier, to say that she was well. The British Government had arranged for the American Vice-Consul in Cannes to look after the needs of the handful of British subjects trapped in France. By mid-August, the Department of External Affairs in Canberra could advise Ellinor Archer that Mary was 'receiving the usual financial assistance accorded to British subjects'<sup>14</sup>. About the same time, Mary got word to Mrs. Graham, in Farnham, Buckinghamshire, that she was now well, that there was plenty of food available, and that she and the forty other British people in Vence were receiving financial help through the US Vice-Consul.

Mary, like most of the others, received her income via an English bank, and banking transactions became at first difficult and eventually impossible under the war-time conditions. She was living at La Roseraie, a small *pension*, and needed to pay for her keep.

The Alpes Maritimes area was rocky hill country which had little arable land, and had always relied on food brought in from the more productive agricultural areas of France. As the war progressed, transport was disrupted, and food supplies began to dwindle.

Towards the middle of 1941, Mary's health declined, and she was admitted to Sunny Bank, the British hospital in Cannes which had served the English population there since the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) had laid its memorial stone in 1897. Its continued existence, in German-occupied territory, and in the face of severe food shortages, was a marvel for which its matron, Margaret Williams, was awarded the MBE at the end of the war.

The hospital patients were given £5 a month as relief money by the American Consul. If they had funds in England, or anywhere else, and were likely to be able to repay it, they were given a further £5 a month. The hospital put two beds into its former single rooms, and reduced its charges to that patients who were receiving only £5 per month got a hospital bill a little under that amount, which was far less than the actual cost of their accommodation. (The pre-war charge per single room had been between £1 and £2 per *day*.)

An ingenious and complex system was worked out to ensure the well-being of the patients and the financial survival of the hospital. John Taylor, banker and estate agent, who had been British Vice-Consul at Cannes for twenty years and a long-time resident, had gone to England in 1940, and was able to get access to the English bank accounts of the hospital patients. The American Vice-Consul, Basil MacGowan, who looked after

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<sup>14</sup> as above.

their relief on behalf of the British Government, arranged for the patients to sign a promissory note for the amount of their bill, and these were sent to John Taylor in London. Taylor collected the money from the patients' accounts and paid it in to the Foreign Office, who sent it to MacGowan, who paid the patients' bills at Sunny Bank.<sup>15</sup>

In this way Mary and the other patients survived through the latter half of 1941. Conditions grew worse as the German occupation, previously confined to the north, spread southward. Italian troops also moved in to the south. Food grew scarce. Local people would come with a gift of a few eggs, or some produce from their gardens. A section of the hospital grounds was ploughed up and planted with vegetables, but these were often taken by the Germans as they ripened. In spite of the difficulties, no-one in need was turned away from Sunny Bank.

As time went on, conditions grew worse. Patients who no longer needed treatment could not be sent home; the nurses' home was turned into a convalescent wing-cum-hostel to care for them. Clothing was difficult and then impossible to get. Staff listened to the news from the BBC on a radio in the hospital cellar while someone kept watch at the head of the stairs.

With the *Mairie* (Town Hall) under German control, the staff and patients were harassed by the Germans. Nurses were finger-printed, taken away for identity checks. Patients were questioned. Mail from England was stopped completely, but letters could be sent to Switzerland and then sent on from there. Mary came to the attention of the German authorities because she received a conspicuous amount of mail from Switzerland, and she was questioned several times because of this, and because she had famous brothers who had been in the British armed forces and in intelligence during the Great War. But, elderly and frail as she was, she remained fully aware, and provided no information which could help the enemy.<sup>16</sup>

Because most of the patients were elderly, deaths at the hospital were not uncommon. Most of the patients were far from their families, but the staff were unwilling to let them go to their graves alone, and made sure that one of the nurses went to each funeral. They had one black coat and one black hat between them; they shared not only the sad duty of funeral attendance, but the clothing as well. One of the young nurses reflected years later:

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<sup>15</sup> H.D. Carlton, Treasurer: unpublished papers, Sunny Bank Hospital, 30 March 1941.

<sup>16</sup> Recollections of Miss Elsie Gladman, former nurse at Sunny Bank.

I remember attending the funeral of one of my patients, a youngish woman who had one son – a prisoner of war in Germany – and a daughter in England. She had died without seeing them, or hearing from them. I found myself crying and I found I was really upset because I thought if it was I who had died I should have been in the same predicament. My family would be entirely unaware of my death, and the sense of loneliness at this thought was too much for my frayed emotions.<sup>17</sup>

In the early part of the war, the hospital had a man who made small wooden crosses for each grave. This stopped when he was taken away to a concentration camp.

Frail and nearly blind, Mary was almost 81 when she died on 19 January, 1942. Her burial service was conducted by the English chaplain, and she was laid to rest in the English Section of the Cemetery at Cannes. Her burial place was recorded at the Cimetière de Grand Jas, but in later years, with the pressure for more space in the cemetery, new graves were laid out in the section where she had been buried, and her grave cannot be identified.<sup>18</sup>

Guy, who had been on the staff of the British Embassy in Washington during the Great War, had asked the US Consul to keep him informed about Mary. So it was that a telegram from the US Consulate in Nice to the United States Ambassador in London was relayed to Mr. [later Sir] Anthony Eden, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, who passed on to Guy via the United Services Club, London, and to Australia House for the Department of External Affairs, Canberra, the news of Mary's death.

Ellinor and Pat read about it in the Melbourne papers on 31 January, four days before the official notification arrived.

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<sup>17</sup> Elsie Gladman, *Uncertain Tomorrows*, Excalibur Press, London, 1993, p.37.

<sup>18</sup> A small amount of ground left unallotted in the section, and overgrown with flowers, may be the site of her grave, but this cannot be established from the records.



## XII

### Epilogue

When Mary Gaunt was growing up in the 1870s and 1880s, she chafed at the way her brothers could travel, live a life of adventure, and get on in the world, while her world was restricted and overshadowed by theirs. In her long life she did a lot to change this situation, but you would hardly have known it from her obituary notice in the Melbourne *Argus*.

The death has occurred at Cannes (France) of Mary Gaunt, Australian novelist. Mary Gaunt was a daughter of the late Judge Gaunt, of Melbourne. Sir Guy and Sir Ernest Gaunt, both Admirals of the British Fleet, were her brothers. So, too, were Mr. Clive Gaunt, formerly of the Burma Civil Service, and now of Frankston, and Lt.-Col. Cecil Gaunt, of the Indian Army. In 1894 she married Mr. Hubert Lindsay Miller of Warrnambool. On his death in 1900 she went to England, and, after many vicissitudes, established herself as a novelist.

She travelled widely, and eventually settled at Bordighera, in Italy. Two days before Italy entered the war she was evacuated to Cannes. She was still in hospital there when she died. She was about 86.<sup>1</sup>

This is the woman who wrote regularly for *The Argus*, as well as other Melbourne papers; the woman described by *Table Talk* at the time she left Australia as 'the well-known Victorian novelist'<sup>2</sup> and 'one of the best known and successful of Victorian authoresses',<sup>3</sup> who was already earning a living from her pen; the woman whose novel about pre-marital love was banned by the Circulating Libraries in England.

Mary Gaunt left Australia as a successful writer; she lived in England, then in Italy, and, although she remained staunchly Australian, she did not come back home. Australia virtually forgot about her.

She was the author of twenty-six books and many short stories and articles. She knew the bush as Henry Lawson never did, and wrote stories of the goldfields, of bushrangers and bushfires, of life in the Australian

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<sup>1</sup> *The Argus*, 31 January 1942.

<sup>2</sup> *Table Talk*, 7 March 1901

<sup>3</sup> *Table Talk*, 10 November 1899, p.14.

colonies, that are still a valuable record of a world long gone. She travelled to places few Western women had travelled to before, and wrote successful books about her travels. She supported herself by writing short stories and articles, as well as from the royalties on her books.

She grew up in a Colony where women were not entitled to higher education, to the vote, or to professional careers. In her own life she broke down the barriers to two of these areas, and made it easier for the women who followed her.

When she died, in January 1942, it was wartime. Australians had just heard of the loss of the *Sydney*; Japan had entered the war, and the conflict which had begun on the other side of the world was suddenly very close to home. With thousands of fighting men and women killed or wounded, Australia had a lot on its mind. The death of a half-forgotten writer in occupied France went almost unnoticed.

In the past, the contribution of women to Australia's history has often been overlooked, but in recent years there has been a deliberate attempt to restore at least some of the women achievers of Australia's past to their rightful place in the historical record.

I am happy to have made this contribution to such a cause.

Bronwen Hickman  
Melbourne, 1997.

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