



Women's Writing from the Fin de Siècle through World War I

[*The History of British Women's Writing, 1880-1920*](#). Vol 7 in the "History of British Women's Writing." Ed. Holly A. Laird. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 315 pp.

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<1>*The History of British Women's Writing, 1880-1920* is volume seven in a ten-volume series on the history of British women's writing, and it is designed as a reference work with multiple short articles. It emphasizes fact-packed information rather than scholarly argument, although the choice of topics itself constitutes an argument; it is, for instance, an intervention in this field to present female detectives, suffrage writing, museum culture, and Welsh writing as major components of women's literary history. If I were teaching a course on women's writing at the turn of the century, I would certainly recommend *The History of British Women's Writing, 1880-1920* to my students as a highly valuable resource.

<2>Because the volume aims to be more encyclopedic than argumentative, there is little in it that might be controversial. Indeed, the articles uniformly achieve a very high standard. Each of the twenty-one articles is informative, accurate, and solid. Scholars, however, will find that many of the articles offer faithful summaries of well-known information, reliable enough to give to students but not particularly intended to extend scholars' expertise.

<3>Each section has one or two stand-out articles. Part I, 'Modern Women,' has four subdivisions. In the first section, 'Modern Women: From the New Woman to the Suffragette,' Tina O'Toole and Jane Aaron reveal the importance of Irish and Welsh women writers in the period, while Lyn Pykett gives an

authoritative summary of Ouida's changing reputation. One outstandingly informative article by Lisa Hager offers a useful summary of the scientific and technological advances that affected women, including eugenics, photography, magnetism, and psychology, from the nineteenth century through modernism. But perhaps the most interesting piece in this section is Barbara Green's account of suffrage fiction, which benefits from focusing on only two writers, Evelyn Sharp and Ella Hepworth Dixon. While Hager manages an impressively extensive overview, Green produces an intensive analysis. Throughout the collection, these will stand as the two alternatives that consistently produce the best results: either packing in a great deal, or focusing analytically on just a few texts.

<4>The second section is called 'From the Decadent to the Queer,' and while Dennis Denisoff and Joseph Bristow produce perfectly good accounts of paganism and decadence respectively, for me the star of this section was the article by Catherine Delyfer, followed by Ruth Hoberman's. Delyfer's analysis of the Pygmalion myth is outstanding: an original account of the various ways women writers engaged with this myth, ranging from imagining stasis, to speaking back against the artist who shaped them. While Hoberman's piece covers some of the same ground, it adds perspective on how women felt about their objectification within the walls of the museum.

<5>'From the Nation to the Globe,' the material of the third section, has Glenda Norquay's strong account of Scottish literature, which, like Green's piece, benefits by intensive focus on a few authors (although one wonders why it was not put with the Irish and Welsh material of the first section) and a piece by Edward Marx about 'women writing Japan' that, like Hager's article, demonstrates extraordinary mastery over a vast quantity of information. I liked Holly Laird's article on Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm*, (1883) with its single subject. But my favorite piece in this section was Judy Suh's exploration of travel writing. Suh investigates how women used gendered ideas in an imperialist context, drawing on British imperial power when they were abroad, only to ironize that approach in the interwar years. This variation does not disrupt her analysis, but forms its basis. As she concludes, 'these works *dynamize* imperialism, rather than straightforwardly justifying or memorializing it' (171). Their very complexity and indeterminacy is part of the work they do.

<6>Part II is called 'Modern Genres,' and consists of two sections, the first 'From the Story to the Lyric' and the second 'From Journalism to the War Memoir.' Organizing women and genres into two different sections seems a bit odd; isn't New Woman writing a genre, and aren't journalists women? The rationale for sorting them is not particularly clear. I suspect that student researchers might have found the book easier to use if its material had been divided in a less elegant, but more straightforward way, perhaps a section on genres, a section on national origins, and a section on single authors and works. This would have enabled readers to find what they wanted right away.

<7>Within Part II, 'Story to the Lyric' section has the most useful basic overviews in the volume, so it should perhaps have been the introductory section, instead of arriving two-thirds of the way through the book. With two articles on short stories, and two on poetry, it feels a bit repetitive, but Margaret Stetz's piece on short stories is refreshingly argumentative and jaunty in style, while Kate Krueger gives a clear overview that will be useful for students. The poetry articles are also quite different. Emily Harrington's article on women's lyric looks at the ways women employed abstraction and absence, while Linda H. Peterson focuses on John Lane's use of Sapphic poets to recover from the blow of the Wilde trial.

<8>I relished the final section most, however. S. Brooke Cameron points out that slum journalism was one of the few genres where being female actually helped women writers, since it allowed them

intimate access to domestic spaces. Cameron outlines new forms of representation that derived from this slum journalism, and I found it particularly interesting to consider techniques like 'doorsill talk,' witnessing, voicing, invoking and disrupting sympathy (253). Meaghan Clarke's piece on female art critics and Joseph Kestner's article on female detectives illuminate aspects of women's writing in this period that most readers will not know.

<9>Most illuminating, however, is Bette London's piece on war memorials. London points out that women's testimonials to their lost soldiers occupies a space between the public and the private, presents them with a challenge in terms of how to document a life cut short, and a difficulty in justification: was this an exceptional person or a typical man? In her sympathetic investigation of the genre, London points out that the elements that seem to downgrade the genre – unfinishedness, triviality – point towards the importance of fragmentation in literary form in the century to come. Like Suh, London points out that the apparently formally problematic elements in this genre actually point towards crucial modes of conceptualizing the subject.

<10>*The History of British Women's Writing, 1880-1920* is a solid reference work that also occasionally taught me new ideas: Sapphism as a publisher's strategy, the widespread use of the Pygmalion model, the variety of war memorials, and the surprising usefulness of being female when doing imperialist and slum writing. Most of the book, however, is about providing brief, definitive summaries of basic elements: short stories, New Women, poetry, decadence. Don't come to this book for groundbreaking critical work, but do use it for your students and enjoy, as I did, the moments of illumination studded amidst the basic overviews.