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'In Harkness' London: The Life and Work of Margaret Harkness', Birkbeck School of Arts, 22nd November 2014: Conference Review

Reviewed by

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Image taken by Eliza Cubitt (UCL)

This one-day symposium organised by scholars from Birkbeck and the University of Warwick was the first event to bring together research on the late nineteenth-century writer and social activist Margaret Harkness. In recent years, there has been a revival of critical interest in nineteenth-century London. The city's East End, in particular, has been a locus of inquiry that has produced important scholarship on urban poverty, philanthropy and the emergence of socialist and labour politics. While many of these studies have introduced Harkness as an important figure in late-nineteenth-century literature and politics, her work and her life remain obscure. This

conference was spurred by a growing interest in 'slum' novelists and social investigators reflected by events such as 'Arthur Morrison and the East End', held at Queen Mary in November 2013. The organisers aimed to provide a forum to open up scholarship on a critically neglected writer. This event brought together leading researchers to collate historical and critical scholarship with the aim of producing discussion and debate and indicating avenues for further research. Discussions pointed toward the need for more research into socialistic fictions and suggested Harkness's value in contributing to a female perspective on the social dynamics of poverty.

Margaret Harkness has thus far surfaced in scholarship as a rather composite figure—David Glover has called her 'an unlikely chronicler of East End misery' (2012: 64). Terry Elkiss's fantastic keynote paper demonstrated his recent findings of 'the hidden Harkness'. Using LSE archives including the diary and letters of Beatrice Webb, Elkiss offered new perspectives on Harkness's character, asserting that while Harkness has frequently been seen as mercurial, her lifelong commitment to the poor and to women demonstrates her political steadfastness.

In her talk on 'Battersea Dreaming', Victoria Le Fevre read Nelly Ambrose in Harkness's *A City Girl* (1887) as a consumer, whose ideals and gaze are both imbued with a commercial quality. In the same panel, David Glover examined the political context of Harkness's novel *George Eastmont, Wanderer* (1905), which is set during the 1889 Dock Strike. Glover suggested that Harkness's project requires, but does not achieve, a cycle of novels—similar to the project of Émile Zola in his *Les Rougon-Macquart* series or Balzac's in *La Comédie Humaine*. Questions from the audience interrogated the nature of Harkness's realism. Given the strength of her reliance on personal experience and journalistic observation, a central question in reading Harkness becomes: 'what is being fictionalised here?'

Tabitha Sparks's paper examined subjectivity in *A City Girl*, suggesting that understandings of the novel as unsophisticated express the challenge of its terseness. Sparks identified as problematic for readers the apparent lack of feeling and thought exhibited by Nelly. In Nadia Valman's paper 'Walking Harkness's' London', the peripatetic protagonists of *Out of Work* (1888) and *In Darkest London* (1889), a novel of almost perpetual movement, were insightfully compared to Nelly's alienation and difficulty of movement suggested by Sparks and Le Fevre. The connection between characters' movement and the 'micronarrative' form in *In Darkest London* was neatly established by Valman: like the characters, the novel moves persistently between scenes and episodes. Questions in response to these papers unpicked the unusual relationship between East and West London expressed in Harkness's work—a theme that continued to be of interest throughout the day.

If the biographical form of the 'woman journalist' is hard to pin down, then the significance of her literary legacy is just now beginning to be properly valued and assessed. By focusing on questions of genre, Ruth Livesey's path-breaking talk showed how much is still to be redressed in existing criticism of Harkness. Livesey highlighted clear problems with Engels's critique of *A City Girl's* relation to realism, and instead espoused a more sophisticated treatment that posits this novel as a reappropriation of the early Victorian domestic melodrama. Lynne Hapgood drew out a

pervasive aesthetic dilemma within Harkness's fictional method, which emerges from her struggle to give voice to the voiceless. Her characters come to exemplify conditions of language poverty through their silences and social alienation.

Eliza Cubitt's talk explored another sort of aesthetic dilemma which turned on Harkness's suspicion of the uses of art and ekphrastic enquiry in the realist novel. But Cubitt also hinted at the creative possibilities of this 'differential aesthetic'. Andrew Whitehead was intrigued by the way that *George Eastmont, Wanderer* sheds light on the writer's life and her relationships to political colleagues such as Henry Hyde Champion. Whitehead noted that a significant period that the author spent in India remains largely unaccounted for, as do significant portions of the special correspondent's international activity.

There are certainly unmistakable lacunae in Harkness's enthralling life history that scholars such as Terry Elkiss are endeavouring to demystify through painstaking work in the archive. A review of our notes scribbled down in response to Victoria Le Fevre's talk revealed the following rather enigmatic maxim relating to Margaret Harkness: 'she disappears everywhere'. Although the provenance of this quote is unknown, it summed up the spirit in which speakers and delegates pursued this singular, independent-minded writer and grappled with her broader fictional project.

At times throughout this conference, Harkness seemed poised to take up her rightful position as a prominent coadjutant for a particular cohort or cause (whether as an advocate Henry Hyndman's Social Democratic Federation, a prominent member of the emancipated 'New Women' movement or an irascible traveller who broke with organised radical movements to her carve out her own reclusive brand of Christian socialism). [John Lucas's review of *Out of Work*](#) on the *London Fictions* website, contains a photograph of leading figures in the 1888 Match Girls' Strike. This image may show Harkness sitting front of centre while adopting a relaxed, self-assured posture and a receptive, almost playful half-smile. There is only one other confirmed likeness that was recently discovered by Lisa Robertson, a co-organiser of this symposium, in a journal entitled *The Queen* (published in 1890).

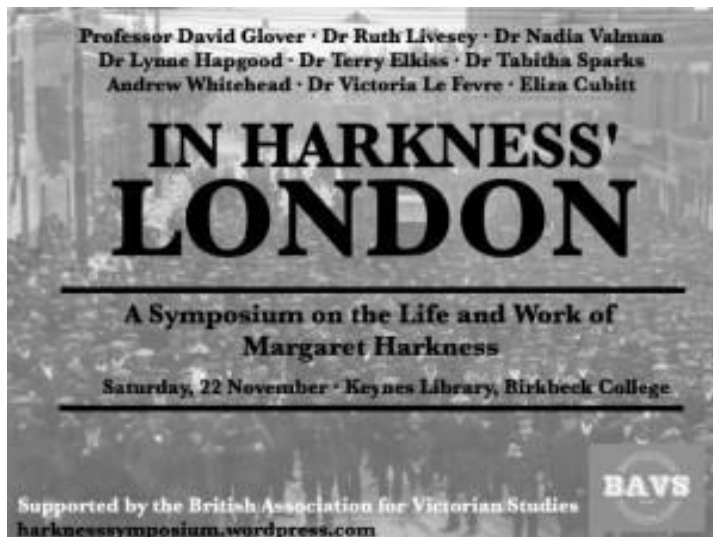
But despite these enigmatic glimpses, Harkness repeatedly fails to resolve into a stable image and seems predisposed to take on the nebulous persona of the 'friendly woman journalist' so reticently referred to by Beatrice Webb (1979: 407). But was this evasion at least partly tactical? Could it be that Harkness intended to flicker in and out of visibility while her works remained free from any easy efforts to pigeonhole them as the generically stagnant works of a realist, naturalist, socialist, evangelical, 'New Woman' or 'slumming' writer?

Consistently rich talks elicited energetic discussions and gestured toward a number of fertile areas which future scholarship might seek to address. One particularly engaging debate focused on the significance of silence, noise and street music in Harkness's stories: to what extent do these acoustic traces give utterance to the unrestrained defiance of a dispossessed mass? Indeed, although the consistency of Harkness's programme could be doubted, participants were asked by Lynne Hapgood to consider her author who so earnestly gave a 'voice to the voiceless'.

During the closing 'roundtable' session, chaired by Deborah Mutch, it became evident that the symposium had helped to crystallise a number of critical approaches

certain to enrich our appreciation of Harkness's fictional output for years to come. Reading Harkness's unfinished novella 'Connie' (1893–4) fittingly prompted more questions than answers about her wider project. It was a great pleasure, nonetheless, to pursue through discussion such an intriguing author: one who 'disappears everywhere'.

Congratulations and thanks to Flore Janssen (Birkbeck), Lisa Robertson (University of Warwick) and Dr Ana Vanilla (Birkbeck) for organising such a productive and enjoyable day.



Conference poster

Used with permission of Lisa Robertson

References

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Notes on Contributors

Eliza Cubitt is a PhD student at University College London, where she is researching representations of the East End in the work of Arthur Morrison (1863-1945). Together with Lisa Robertson, she convenes the Literary London Reading Group hosted by the Institute of English Studies at Senate House.

Peter Jones is an early career researcher who recently finished his PhD at Queen Mary, University of London. He is working on a new monograph project looking at the cultural history of south London and has an award-winning article about to appear in *The London Journal* which looks at the history of London street markets. Peter set up the Literary London Reading Group at Senate House and is the organizer of the Literary London Society's annual conference, which will be held in July 2015.

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