



## Director's Cut

BY CAROLYN OULTON

*Strange Winter.*

*Yes it has been rather.*

Is this actually an amusing opening or has it just been too long since I saw a real person? Like waiting for years to be asked the meaning of 'pulchritudinous', only to mishear it as 'paltrytudinous' and fail once again to impress your children, the stakes feel higher than ever as we have another shot at a happy new year. Although it's nice to know I'm talking to more than six of you.

You remember talk of a mysterious meeting? In between lockdowns a generous donor gave us 80 books as well as letters, ephemera and – of all things - a hair tonic bottle, belonging to Victorian enigma Henrietta Stannard (John Strange Winter. Told you it was funny). Now we're looking for a PG student who's looking for a project – please get in touch!

We just hope Fanny Parkes had equally legible writing, as Ankita Das brings us up to speed with 24 years' worth of journals, while following her round India on a horse.

Meanwhile Gemma Aldridge finds *Middlemarch* infectious. But help is at hand with new Kent Map recommendations - see you at the May #KentMaps symposium?

If there's one thing we could all do with at the moment, it's Goodwill. And if you like a bit of decadence and socialism with your religion (or just Labour leaders called Keir), Ralph Norman has you covered. As one of Bessie Marchant's Christian converts memorably puts it, 'make me one quick, please, cos there's such a dreadful sight o' things as I wants ter ask yer to give me afterwards!'

Some of our authors are funnier than this, so with Bob Nicholson's help, we may steal their jokes for the next issue. Although that might be a bit strange. Get it? Oh never mind...



### Inside this issue:



The Season of Goodwill? p.2-3



It's no laughing matter! p.4-5



'Twas a Strange Winter p.6-7



Tales of Empire p. 8-10

# OUT OF THE ARCHIVE

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY RALPH NORMAN

This year's summer issue of ICVWW included an attention-grabbing interview with Koenraad Claes of Anglia Ruskin on the "[Yellow Nineties 2.0](#)" website. Please do visit the webpages. They show how new technology, when supported by intelligent and informed commentary, can open up and support research on Victorian periodical literature.

One of the important figures described on the website is Mabel Dearmer (1872-1915), contributor of illustrations for *The Yellow Book* as well as *The Savoy* in 1896. By coincidence or design, she was at the same time also drawing for James Adderley's *Goodwill* magazine, a now much neglected and largely forgotten London-based publication from the Christian Social Union.

*Goodwill* physically resembled *The Yellow Book* though seems to have been intended for a quite different end. If anything, it appears to have been something an Anglican clergyman could hand out to slum dwellers. Each issue typically contained a picture for the wall, a hymn to sing, recipes, gardening notes, serialized stories, notes on working conditions, political opinion, and plenty of theology – in sum, a mixture of practical matters, current affairs, and spiritual ideals which a struggling family could put to good use. It represents Christian Socialism for the masses.



**SOCIAL HEROES**

**FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE.**  
By BERTHA SYNGE.

"Oh, leave these jargons, and go your way straight to God's work in simplicity and singleness of heart."  
—F. Nightingale.

**F**ORTY years has seen such a vast revolution in the position of women with regard to work, that it is hard to understand the outcry that arose when Florence Nightingale set out for the Crimea in 1854, to do work hitherto entrusted to men alone: hard to realize the entire reformation she has wrought with regard to our hospitals and the general sanitary condition of our large institutions. There is no need to repeat at length the story of her early life. Born at Flo...

life of ease luxury. Florence Nightingale had other views of a woman's might. Filled with intense sympathy for man suffering and kept alive by gross ignorance with regard to ordinary sickness, she herself investigated hospitals both in England and abroad, with burning desire to improve their condition. No training being afforded in England at this time, she spent the months of her stay in Kaiserwerth learning the rudiments of nursing and the relations of life to health...

Though not much may have been written on *Goodwill*, it provides a snapshot of what Christian Socialism looked like in the 1890s. The Revd Canon Henry Scott Holland of St Paul's Cathedral was an important patron and guiding hand for the publication. With Adderley, he allowed *Goodwill* a broad remit. There were articles on theology by Scott Holland and Charles Gore – predictable, since these two former contributors to *Lux Mundi* (1889) together provided intellectual leadership for the Christian Social Union. They were joined by Cosmo Gordon Lang (later Archbishop of Canterbury), and Mabel's husband, Percy Dearmer. Radical political writers also featured prominently. In July 1895, J. Ramsay MacDonald (later Prime Minister) wrote on 'The Pietist and the Politician'. In March of the same year, John Atkinson Hobson wrote on 'The Unemployed' - this was some time before his later work, *Imperialism* (1902), proved such a source of inspiration for Lenin. There were pieces by Canon Samuel Barnett of Toynbee Hall, and reports on speeches by Beatrice Webb.



8.—CHAUCER.

BY THE REV. F. G. A. PHILLIPS.

THE man who loves poetry, and is ble to join in the old song— h for a booke and a shade nook, yther in a doore or out; ith the greene leaves whispering overhede, r the street cries all about. here I may read all at my ease, oth of the newe and olde; or a jollie goode booke whereon to looke, s better to me than goide.



GEOFFREY CHAUCER.

From Todd's "Illustrations of Gower and Chaucer."

frolisom humour and sense of the author.

Geoffrey Chaucer was a man of many parts and diverse experiences: he looked upon things from various standpoints. Born about 1340 as the son of a London tavern-keeper, we find him, turns, a soldier, diplomat, a courtier, husband to a maid of honor, a civil servant, pensioner of the King, a knight, a Member of Parliament, author.

Both sweet and bitter were mixed in his cup of life.

Fame and honour came to him; but, like many a writer, his purse was often empty; like many a poet, his marriage turned out unhappy; like many another great man,

Mabel Dearmer's work for both *The Yellow Book* and *Goodwill* allows us a glimpse of some of the overlapping contexts of religion, decadence, and socialism in late-Victorian London. Besides revisiting George Bernard Shaw's *Candida*, anyone wanting to explore the background should read two excellent books, Seth Koven's *Slumming* (2004), and Frances Knight's *Victorian Christianity at the Fin de Siècle* (2015). Unfortunately, none of these include Mabel's designs. We have reproduced them here, for the first time, for readers of the ICVWW newsletter.

Maltz, Diana. "Mabel Dearmer (1872-1915)," *Y90s Biographies*, 2012. *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, edited by Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities, 2019, [https://www.1890s.ca/dearmer\\_bio/](https://www.1890s.ca/dearmer_bio/).



DEAR CHILDREN,—I know you will be very sorry to hear that your Puzzle-Editor is too ill to come back to England. She is still in Switzerland. Perhaps as your kind friend is lying there in her sick room, you would like to hear a pretty legend from that country which I met with lately. Once upon a time, many hundred years ago, a powerful Baron, living in the little town of Sierre, in the Rhone Valley, was anxious that a wild heathen tribe who dwelt in a remote region high up among the hills, called the Val d'Anniviers, should hear of the faith of Christ. He asked his Bishop's advice and obtained permission to go; and the Bishop solemnly blessed the banner which the Baron's soldiers were to carry. The upland valley where these wild people lived was hard to reach; in fact the only road was the bed of the torrent which poured out from a deep rocky gorge: at some seasons it was nearly dry, so that it was possible to clamber along it. The Baron had chosen such a time for his expedition; and, in the dead of night his soldiers had almost reached the valley, when the loud barking of a hound brought terror to their hearts, as it became immediately the signal for the blowing of many cow-horns, and for the lighting up of many beacon fires on every mountain round. The soldiers were preparing for an attack; but the sight of innumerable torchlights proved the superior numbers of the mountaineers opposing their advance. Prudent counsels prevailed, and they began a hasty retreat. Suddenly the stream which had been dammed up by the inhabitants of the valley, was let loose; and the Baron and his troop were nearly swept away, and escaped only with their lives, their holy banner being lost in their headlong flight. The next day the Baron invited all his people to meet and discuss plans for another attempt but they all were agreed that it was a hopeless task; when a strange, despised little dwarf called Zaccheus, humbly besought leave to go as a missionary to the heathen tribe. He was so utterly mis-shapen that in one of their raids, these mountaineers had carried him away thinking he was a bag of salt; and when they reached home and discovered their mistake, they were so much amused with their mis-shapen little prisoner, that they kept him with them for three years—after this he escaped to his home. But he had learnt their language, which no other man knew, and the Bishop was persuaded to give him a beautifully-illuminated picture Bible, and to allow him to set forth on what seemed but a forlorn hope. When with toil and pain he had clambered up into the Val d'Anniviers, the people crowded round him, and after his seventeen years absence recognised their old friend. But, according to their law, no man who came among them unbidden, was permitted to live. He was sentenced to a horrible death, as a sacrifice to the Giant of the Glacier, and was to be thrown into one of the deep cracks in those great ice-rivers, which creep down

at the precious stones in the binding, and the beautiful illuminations within. But the old chieftain of the tribe was blind, and could not share this great sight, and insisted that Zaccheus must die. But he said to the "Master, I do not fear the death my temerity deserves; but listen first to my wondrous tale of olden times and he read slowly some verses of the Gospel story. Then his death was postponed till the next day, and then till the next; and then they said he might live till the summer came again, so all the winter he taught them but at last the day came when they decreed that however deep their sorrow the law must be kept; and Zaccheus, with his banner round his neck was thrown into a deep chasm, when he disappeared. Wonderful to relate that when he reached the bottom of the fissure he found himself in a valley from which the river flowed into the valley below. He did not go home as he might have done; but returned at once back in hand to the wild people. When they saw him return alive they fell on their knees and stung him. Then they rose and carried him to the old chieftain who, on being told that the God of Zaccheus had saved him in so marvellous a way, called aloud: "Jesus Christ is our God and Zaccheus is His priest!" The little dwarf replied that he was not a priest, but could bring them one if he might go home. They consented willingly to this. And the bishop, on hearing his story, decided that no better missionary could be found, and at once ordained Zaccheus. When he reached the Val d'Anniviers, the people, whose hearts had been touched by the Gospel stories and the help of the poor little dwarf, flocked in crowds to be baptised on the Feast of Pentecost. This was how Christianity reached this beautiful secluded Swiss valley.

COMPETITIONS FOR NOVEMBER.

- 1. If 6 cats kill 6 rats in 6 minutes, how many would kill 100 rats in 50 minutes?
2. There is one word in the English language which has all the vowels in it in their right order and no others; another word has six Y's and no other vowels what are these words?
3. A man had 19 trees to plant, and was told to them in 5 rows of 5 each. How did he do it?
4. A train leaves San Francisco for New York every day, and the journey takes 6 days; how many times will a traveller meet on his journey from New York to San Francisco?
5. I am twice the age that you were when I was the age that you are now, and when you are the age that I am now, our united ages will be 63. What age am I?
6. BURIED CITIES.—(1) At half-past nine we were brought to the door and we started.
(2) We had some enjoyable ices terribly and

# INTERVIEW WITH A GUEST

*Bob Nicholson*

*Reader in History and Digital Humanities,  
Edge Hill University*



## **What is your current research project?**

I'm forever drifting between half-completed research projects. Right now, I'm sporadically chipping away at two different bits of research that will hopefully become monographs. The first explores Victorian responses to America and its popular culture, covering periodicals, fiction, music halls, cocktail bars, boxing matches, tourism, shopping, wild west shows, the 'marriage market', and an eclectic range of other transatlantic encounters. The second project explores the history of Victorian joke telling and is propelled by a desire to move beyond Punch magazine and the usual canon of middle-class male wits. I'm interested in how, and why, jokes were written, told, and recirculated by Victorian men and women. As part of this project, I'm also building a digital archive of historical humour — The Old Joke Archive — that aims to make these ephemeral sources more accessible.

## **What would be your dream research project?**

I'm fortunate to have the freedom and flexibility to direct my own research, and so I've always pursued projects that I'm passionate about. I have plenty of ideas for future research on the history of Victorian popular culture, but I have to resist the temptation to dream about them too much, or I'll never finish the ones I've already started! These days, my dream projects are less to do with new research topics, and more to do with new ways of communicating history — I'm much more excited about the creative challenges of presenting my research as a radio programme, YouTube series, twitter thread, or stand-up comedy routine. This probably explains why I still haven't finished either of those two books.

## **Critical sources you can't live without?**

To be honest, my research process has always centred on archives and primary materials, and I probably don't engage with critical sources as much as I should. That said, the work of Lynda Nead, Judith Walkowitz, and Peter Bailey really drew me into the study of Victorian popular culture. I also admire Vic Gatrell's books, particularly *City of Laughter*, which explores the history of Georgian humour. In the world of periodical studies, [cont]

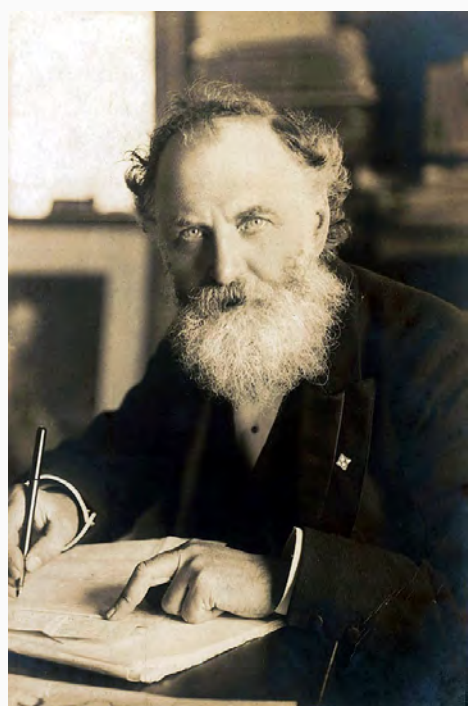
Margaret Beetham's work on women's magazines and the nature of the periodical as a publishing genre is first class, and I've cited Andrew Hobbs' groundbreaking research on local Victorian newspapers in almost everything I've ever published! Finally, it's hard to talk about Victorian print culture without mentioning Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities, and I also like Martin Conboy's use of Bakhtin to describe the 'heteroglossia' (multiple voices) of newspapers and periodicals.

### **What is your favourite work by a Victorian female writer?**

There's so much fabulous material to choose from among the period's professional novelists and journalists, but my research has recently focused more on the letters and articles that amateur writers sent to popular weekly magazines such as *Tit-Bits* and *Answers*. These magazines often provided a platform for women readers to demonstrate their wit. I particularly love a competition that *Tit-Bits* magazine ran in 1889 inviting single women to answer the question, 'Why Am I a Spinster?' A Miss Sparrow, of Paddington, replied "Because I do not care to enlarge my menagerie of pets, and I find the animal man less docile than a dog, less affectionate than a cat, and less amusing than a monkey." Similarly, Miss Florence Watts — an artist who I traced in the census — responded that "I have other professions open to me in which the hours are shorter, the work more agreeable, and the pay possibly better." These papers are an untapped goldmine of Victorian women's writing.

### **If you could have three Victorians round for dinner, who would you have, and why?**

I'm mildly obsessed with W. T. Stead (below), the campaigning Victorian journalist and editor, and would love to talk to him about his work. He was also a passionate spiritualist



and thought he possessed the ability to communicate with the dead via automatic writing, which would be a neat party trick. I'd love to talk with Colonel 'Mexican Joe' Shelley, the leader of a touring wild west show that took Liverpool by storm while Buffalo Bill was conquering London — he's one of history's great nearly men, forever riding in his rival's shadow, and I want to know what happened to him in later life. Finally, I'd love to meet Annie Partlan, who apparently worked as a professional joke writer in 1890s New York. I'm fascinated by the process and profession of joke writing in this period, and I'm particular keen to reveal the role that women played in this industry. Stead was fascinated by America, and drawn to unconventional women, so I reckon he'd be in his element!

# ICVWW ANTICS AND EVENTS



## *What did you say your name was? ICVWW meets Henrietta Stannard*

BY CAROLYN OULTON

The acquisition of a new archive - that of author Henrietta Stannard, also known as John Strange Winter.



I am on my way to meet Michael Seeney (below left): bookseller, collector and preserver of those things ICVWW likes best (I'm talking about archives, keep your mind off the biscuits for goodness' sake). It goes without saying that I am lost. Not as lost as the time I was duped into driving to Hounslow to pick up a Victorian printing press on the grounds that 'it's not really London'. This time I had the sense to google the address before setting off. No this time it's more what my late father would have termed *quite* lost rather than quite lost. If you see the difference.

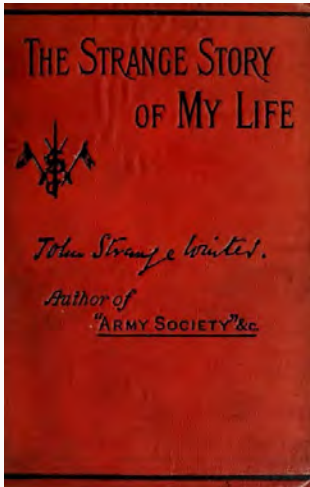
I know I'm close because the sat nav has just mentioned for the third time that I'm only a minute away, before sending me down a left turn I've come to know well. I'm only slightly frazzled as I pull up by a yellow waste disposal unit, fish a piece of paper out of my bag and carefully type in a number. The driver of the police car opposite is starting to take an interest, but I've seen the parking notice and I've got 30 minutes to sort this out.

How Michael manages to navigate me - like a human drone - from the skip to his delightful Victorian house I never think to ask. Partly because I accept that some people are just talented like that; also because I'm too busy gasping like a frog at his collection of art and photographs. 'Of course you know who this is' he says politely as we stop at each studio portrait on the way up the stairs. Actually I don't, but who cares, these pictures are stunning. 'Sexy as hell' is my involuntary comment on one royal mistress, a remark he tactfully ignores. I have no intention of telling you about the next few hours, because when a Victorianist goes down for breaking and entering I don't want it to be my fault.



Suffice to say that I emerge high on the past and that feeling in the nose that comes from sticking it into archives and old hardback books. More than that, I just want to make friends with this woman who says things like, 'Mrs Clifford. Never heard of her. - Oh! my spouse says I have met her' when asked about another writer. It's getting late as I pack the last of the boxes into the car and wonder how to start saying thank you for a bequest like this. And then I'm back - it seems a shame to leave that last bourbon, and anything could happen on the M25.

# WHO WAS HENRIETTA STANNARD?



"All Mrs. Stannard's characters are taken from life. Although there is such a rush for her work from publishers and editors, she will not impose on the public by giving them hurried stuff, and that is the reason her books are so readable and why her name after five years is just as fresh to the public<sup>1</sup> as when she first made it."

Author and journalist Henrietta Stannard was a household name from the 1880s through the turn of the century and beyond, initially under her male pseudonym, John Strange Winter. The pen name was her own creation, originating from the name of one of her fictional characters in her 1881 novel *Cavalry Life*, which her publishers Chatto and Windus allegedly refused to publish under her own name because readers would never believe it had been written by a woman. The novel and its successors *Regimental Legends* (1883), *Bootles' Baby: a Story of the Scarlet Lancers* (1885) and more than a hundred others centred around military life, gleaned from the experiences of her father and other military men in the family and first hand relationships with the soldiers from nearby York barracks.

Stannard wrote much more besides, including a number of short stories and longer serialisations in her teens published under the pseudonym Violet Whyte. In 1891 she started an illustrated weekly magazine for women called *Golden Gates* and she did much for women's rights, advocating the professionalism of female journalists and protesting against the dangerously flammable crinoline skirts.

Intrigued? Read some of her stories online at the [Internet Archive Online](#) and let us know what you think!



By Artist Posters - Library of Congress Catalog

<sup>1</sup> "How I Wrote Bootles' Baby: John Strange Winter Tells The Story." *Answers* Mar 29 1890: 285. ProQuest.

# PROFILE OF A FORGOTTEN WRITER

BY ANKITA DAS

## Travelling Memsahibs: The Curious Case of Fanny Parkes

Fanny Parkes in her journal, *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in search of the Picturesque*, reports a total of fifty-seven native servants working in her imperial household in India. She documents their roles, duties and wages in a comprehensive list. She writes, "We, as quiet people, find these servants necessary" (210). One might read this illustration as a microcosm of the Empire. Parkes' imperial household, its inner workings and subsequent documentation is in essence an allegory of the empire. The figure of the memsahib offers a case in point. When women first began travelling to India, as wives of civil servants of the East India Company during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they came to be popularly known as the Memsahib ('mem' derived from ma'am and 'sahib' was the male form). They were usually born in Britain then moved to India when they married. When women first began travelling to the Indian subcontinent from Europe, accompanied by male relatives, they had to endure an arduous journey, often uncomfortable and beset by various anxieties. Upon reaching India, they had to chart out a new imperial lifestyle for themselves, mostly in the absence of their male relatives. Travelling, reading and writing became commonplace activities that served as a coping mechanism for most women.



Bengali Woman from *Wanderings of a Pilgrim* (1850). (source: Wikimedia)

Fanny Parkes' memoir, published in two volumes as *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque during four and twenty years in the East with Revelations of Life in the Zenana* by Pelham Richardson, is a striking example. She had been writing her journal for almost 24 years between 1822 and 1846. As was common, during these years she lived a mobile existence in India along with her husband Charles Crawford Parkes, a member of the Bengal Civil Service, Collector of Customs and overseer of the ice-pits in Allahabad. During her sojourn in the subcontinent, she begins living in Calcutta and then moves to Allahabad with her husband, from where she later travels to Delhi and Benaras. She travelled throughout the country on an Arab horse, learning the customs, traditions, life and ways of the people.





Parkes' travelogue allows us to interrogate the patterns of oriental sensibility in imperial India – a sensibility, owing to the geographical vastness of the subcontinent, that was conditioned by myriad regional cultures and an overarching imperial discourse. Parkes, like her contemporaries Emily Eden, Maria Graham and others, negotiates her life in India through a spatial paradigm marked by a curious individualism and constant motion though restricted by imperial mores. In Parkes, we see a similar desire to remap India using personal experience of wandering and domesticity.

Parkes' mapping of India reflects her previous knowledge about the Orient, which was often borrowed from previously published guidebooks, poems, and other kinds of literary material from the East. Most of her ideas are organized in an imperial chronology, named "Wanderings of a Pilgrim... with revelations of life in the Zenanas," the latter an Indian harem. The contents section of the book reveals the narrative structure, reflecting Oriental restructuring and detail, while also mapping the chronology of Empire. The journal opens with [Chapter One] "Departure from England" with an account of the ship, prickly heat, thoughts of home and the Albatross, displaying the common insecurities of a traveller to the Orient. References to the Albatross are made early in the text as symbolic of Coleridge's poem of bringing in luck. Parkes' control of her writing style, posing as the oriental scholar well versed in the Indian languages and ways of life, sets off an anxious need for self-location. She begins the narrative through an Orientalist framework of references that first begins with the frontispiece of the "Pukka Hindu God Ganesha" as the muse.

The sketch of Ganesha is one of the idol that Parkes carries with her to England among numerous other artefacts. He is said to have crossed the Kala Pani or the Black Waters to accompany her to England. Parkes' use of Ganesha as the muse and to deal with the sense of Oriental pollution textually begins early on in the text. Pollution of a British memsahib culturally and racially and her subsequent Indianization leads her to cross the Kala Pani along with her muse. Moreover, references to Indian cultural practices can be considered to be an attempt to increase her knowledge of the Orient and be part of the Orient-Empire debate. The Oriental framework within which Parkes writes allows her to justify the inclusion of myriad unconnected events and pieces of information without a firmly structured narrative. It also allows her to piece together her wanderings throughout India.



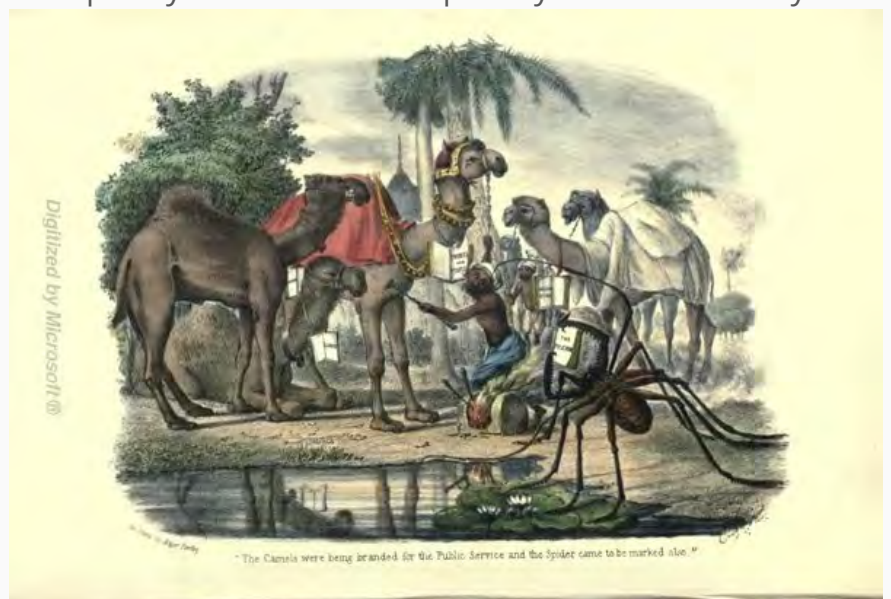
Ganesha from *Wanderings of a Pilgrim* (1850). (source: Wikimedia)

Parkes' imperial pilgrimage brings her to the oriental harems or zenanas, often perceived as a space for beautiful, indolent women under the despotic rule of Oriental rulers. The space has been reimagined many a times in travel narratives by other British male writers, who viewed it as portrayed in Byron's *Oriental Tales* (1813) and Shelley's *Laon and Cythna* (1817) which deploy images from the zenanas. Many literary writings during this period also replicated images of the zenana, which showcased Oriental femininity amid speculations of the mobility and the private lives of women who lived in them.

Given the popularity of associating the zenanas with Oriental women and the curiosities that it brought along with it, most women travel writers found it as an imperative task to devote long sections of their narratives to write about the inside workings of the zenanas. Parkes' travelogue is titled as, "Revelations of life in the Zenanas" suggestive of laying bare the mysteries associated with the forbidden spaces of the zenana. In doing so Parkes, through the textual space of her narrative, allows the male reader into the harem. Her lucid style that lays bare the daily lives of women, their activities, chores, clothes and their overall physical appearance, helps the British male reader to experience the zenana textually.

Having entered the zenana with a lot of enthusiasm to record the responses of Oriental, she meets with much disappointment and expresses pity for the lost grandeur of Delhi, with impoverished states of the begums and their toothless smiles. A critical scrutiny of Parkes journals reveals that perspectives on Indian women helped to strengthen the reformist politics of the Empire. She draws upon contemporary British ideologies of femininity and describes the politically active role of begums as part of a chaotic administrative system.

The Empire provided women like Parkes with more opportunities to transcend their traditional roles in a socially accepted capacity. It was the complexity and the variety of their experiences that made these women, and the many others who travelled and lived in the Empire, worthy of further analysis. Likewise, it is the similar themes that appear in their narratives that establish not only their presence, but their significant participation in the British Empire.



Read Parkes' memoir online at Archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/wanderingsofpilg01parluoft> and contact Ankita Das at [ankita.das@live.in](mailto:ankita.das@live.in) or via Twitter @AnkyDas to find out more!

# NEW YEAR REFLECTIONS ON YEARS GONE BY

BY GEMMA ALDRIDGE

After a year that has been eventful enough to eclipse the entire decade, the idea of reflecting on the past may seem... ill-advised. Parallels between 2020 and the events of 1918, in which the Spanish Influenza pandemic spread to every continent, have already been made by many. But travel back to 1871 and you'll find some unexpected parallels in George Eliot's magnum opus.

Having never read *Middlemarch* myself, the 150th publication anniversary seemed like an excellent reason. I won't lie – I struggled to wade through the quagmire of political commentary and scientific debate that seems to take up a large amount of the first hundred or so pages, but I persevered and the rewards were great. I became invested in the lives of each of the characters, from saintly Dorothea to the charming but feckless Fred Vincy. Eliot's exploration of each individual's nuanced experiences, their aspirations and disappointments, made for a thought-provoking and moving read. Perhaps this is why Virginia Woolf famously praised it as "one of the few English novels written for grown-up people" (Woolf, qtd. in Russell vii). Yet as a 'state of the nation' novel, what struck me the most when reading this novel was the parallels I could draw between the experiences of the characters and the experiences of 2020. Set in the 1830s, the novel takes place during a period of political unrest in the run up to significant reforms. For us, with a no-deal Brexit on the horizon and an endless tirade of politicians arguing over what is or isn't the best option for the country, I felt the truth in the emotion, if not the sentiment, behind Mr Vincy's declaration that "the country's in that state! Some say it's the end of the world, and be hanged if I don't think it looks like it!" (Eliot 332). And I need not explain the significance of the constant fear of an outbreak of cholera that underlies the more immediate concerns of the inhabitants of Middlemarch.

These strange coincidences make me wonder what *Middlemarch* would look like if Eliot was writing today. It may seem that the novel would not contain many differences, certainly when it comes to the political and health aspects. After Mr Bulstrode and Dr Lydgate's struggle to establish the new Middlemarch fever hospital, I'm inclined to imagine that Eliot would view the Nightingale Hospital, and indeed the entire wonderful NHS, as a complete triumph. What's more, with her emphasis on the social responsibility each of her characters owes their fellow creatures and the support and goodwill she advocates between neighbours, Eliot would no doubt be incredibly moved by the extent people have gone to in the last year to help one another out.

My resolution for the year ahead is to try and see things through Eliot's eyes, and with that in mind, I can't help but feel hopeful as I look forward to 2021. Happy New Year from all of us here at the ICVWW.