



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

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Director's Cut

CAROLYN OULTON

New year, new start. And this angel has already almost burned the house down with a lethal combination of enthusiasm, sugar and Seville oranges. ICVWW student Laura Allen made domesticity look so easy in her thesis on home guru Eliza Haweis. Now she has a PhD – see what I did there? – and my kitchen looks like a crime scene.

But the outside world is still more fraught with danger – and not just to the lavender, which I have also managed to take out without actually going anywhere near it. There's a whole, bewildering world of botany out there. From fungi in shapes I don't even want to think about, to recipes that can only lead to trouble because my Latin's frankly pretty rusty. Mushroom soup that I'm hoping isn't poisonous, anyone? But if anyone can help, it's mycologist and illustrator Anna Maria Hussey, as Liz Askey finds out while having a sneaky peep at her diary.

We've also just been asked to update our staff profiles. I won't lie, it was fun preening under a huge umbrella, while the photographer snapped away and made relaxing small talk. And then I saw the large spot on my chin – you'll be seeing it too for the next few years. So I rather sympathise with Marie Corelli, who hid under a blanket from the press, only to find the front page was running a picture of her apparently pretending to be a mole hill. If anything surprises Jo Turner after that, we'd very much like to hear it.

So yes, it's been a surreal start to the year. You could almost say 'Women's Weird'. And with some help from Melissa Edmundson, I think some Victorian authors may just have been reading my mind...

Calls for Papers and Upcoming Opportunities

- Victorian Popular Fiction Association 15th Annual Conference, "Hidden Histories/ Recovered Stories". Send proposals of 250–300 words, a 50-word biography, and a twitter handle (if you have one) to Dr Claudia Capancioni, Prof. Mariaconcetta Costantini and Dr Laura Gill at: vpfaconference@gmail.com. The conference will take place at Bishop Grosseteste University (Lincoln, UK) as an in-person event, but online participation will also be possible. Deadline for proposals: 8th February 2023.
- Women, Money and Markets (1600-1950) conference to be held 12-14 June 2023 at Sheffield Hallam University, UK. The conference will address the role of women in consumerism, shopping, global trade, domestic trade, markets (literary and otherwise), currency, and varying practices of exchange. Please send 250 - 300 word abstracts to: Dr Sarah Dredge: s.dredge@shu.ac.uk, Dr Pete Collinge: p.collinge@keele.ac.uk, and Dr Emma Newport, e.newport@sussex.ac.uk. Please include a covering email outlining briefly your proposed format (individual paper, panel, roundtable, etc.). If you are submitting a proposal for a panel, please include an abstract for each paper in your panel (up to 300 words each). Deadline 28th February 2023.
- 2023 First Book Institute (funded training workshop for early career scholars writing their first book - to be held 4-10 June 2023, Pennsylvania). For information about the First Book Institute, including what to submit as part of the application, please see: <http://cals.la.psu.edu/programs-series/first-book-institute>. Applications should be submitted by 13th February 2023.

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



ICVWW@canterbury.ac.uk



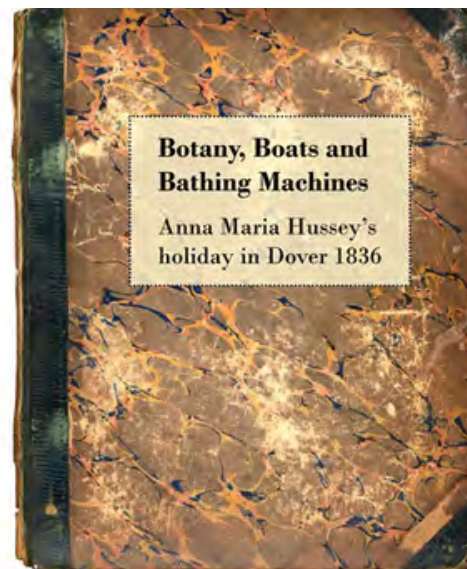
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Out of the Archives

Anna-Maria Hussey: One of Flora's Daughters

ELIZABETH ASKEY

Anna Maria Hussey, née Reed (5 June 1805 – 26 August 1853) was born in Leckhampstead, Buckinghamshire, daughter of the rector Rev. John Theodore Archibald Reed. In 1831, she married Rev. Dr Thomas John Hussey, rector of Hayes, Kent. They had six children, with only two living until adulthood. Yet Anna Maria Hussey was “not your regular Jo[séphine]” rector’s wife. She was also a writer, mycologist and botanical illustrator.



By the mid-19th century, the study of botany had become ‘an occupation of choice, part of the parcel of normative activities for girls and women’ (Shteir, 7). The study of botany was a means by which females could learn informally from each other about the social and divine order, so long as they did not venture into a masculine area of scientific study outside the domestic sphere. Although Hussey appears to have positioned herself within this sphere of female engagement as a daughter of Flora, her writing can be read overall to have a hint of willingness to transgress the normative use of the domestic sphere and garden as an enclosed female space.

Hussey wrote a fairly conventional holiday diary relating a family holiday to Dover in 1836 to her sister, Henrietta. An increase in disposal income for some in the middle class in the mid 19th century led to a growth in tourism in Britain and 'the first concentration of resorts developed in the south-east, particularly on the Sussex and Kent' and 'elite men and women, and travellers were expected to keep a record of what they observed' (Borsay, 180). Hussey seems to have availed herself of this trend in holiday journal writing but her text also shows her to be expressing herself, evident in many female diaries throughout history, as an individual 'with an autonomous and significant identity' (Blodgett, 5).

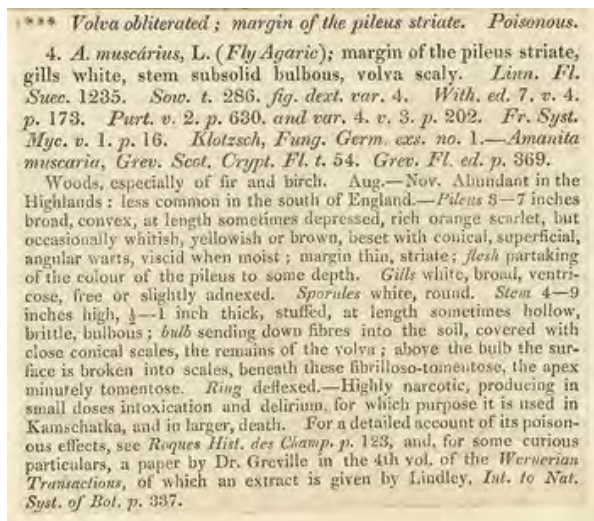
On the whole Hussey's diary is a cheerful account of her holiday with her children and sister. But it also shows us a woman who was keen to learn and have new experiences discovering more about the world around her. She clearly had a fine eye for detail and a skill in expressing her opinions in writing. She comments on poetry, American literature, and art. I feel that there are many instances which give me a glimpse of a woman who was yearning to break out of the confines defined for a rector's wife. But it is never in doubt that she was a caring mother when she expresses concern that her baby has a cold. She opines 'O that I could be rather less anxious' (p.52). But none of these cares prevented Hussey, the enthusiastic adventurer setting out directly after breakfast: 'we rambled along without a care to time' (p.52). Her initial interest seems to have been geology but she became interested in her 'botanical treasures' (p.60). The 'environmental and social' visual experience at the seaside was a growing 'commodity' in the early 19th century where 'new ways of perceiving and capturing' the environment were explored (Borsay, 201). Hussey is keen to take advantage of being in nature and capturing that sense of freedom of plants growing in perfect profusion' (p.59).



Hussey's magnum opus was *Illustrations of British Mycology* (1847-55). Although she cannily positions herself as a humorous female educator, instructing mothers and daughters on how to study mycology, Hussey shows herself to be innovative and original. This text shows her as a forward-looking, impassioned student of nature. She advises that her readers should collect samples so that they can appreciate the beauty of the world and suggests recipes to use after foraging. She encourages her readers to explore the world of fungi with gusto by rambling away from the domestic realm, dispelling any worry about appearing unladylike by getting dirty. She even takes great care to illustrate the dirt on *Agaricus vellereus* (see image above left).

Hussey was an indomitable and enterprising woman whose writing reveals a spirited yearning to learn and create despite having to position her work within the strictures of her society. I aim to document more fully how innovative she really was.

But Berkely knew her worth. He named a mushroom after her (*Husseia*) and a new species of fungus (*Agaricus reedii*) – a deserved honour for such an pioneering mycologist, writer and artist.



All images of Hussey's art work accessed from [Oak Spring Garden Foundation](#).

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

Interview with a Guest

THIS ISSUE WE SPOKE WITH JO TURNER,
PHD RESEARCHER AT LOUGHBOROUGH UNIVERSITY



What is your PhD research project all about?

My research investigates paternal thematics in the life and work of Marie Corelli, who had uncertain origins but was raised within a literary family. Her adoptive father was the writer, poet, and editor Charles Mackay; a professional acquaintance of Dickens. Corelli idolised her adoptive father and in interviews made much of him, as well as the family's Dickensian connection. I argue that this connection and the paternal thematics within Dickens' works, as well as the relationship with her adoptive father, influenced Corelli's writing.



MARIE CORELLI AND HER PET DOG,
COURTESY OF WIKICOMMONS

Is there anything that you've come across which has particularly surprised you while you've been working on your PhD project?

At the outset of the project, I was aware of Corelli's bestseller status, but it was only when I got into the newspaper archives that I truly appreciated how famous she once was. A story I love appeared in the *Daily Mirror* in 1905. The equivalent of a paparazzi photographer was stalking Corelli and her life-companion Bertha Vyver, as they embarked upon their daily jaunt up the river in Stratford-Upon-Avon. Corelli's chosen mode of transport, consolidating the romantic persona she liked to present (a novelist of continental origin), was her own gondola. When Corelli and Vyver spotted the photographer, they proceeded to cover themselves with a blanket to foil him, but the resulting image of the concealed author still made the front page.

What would your dream research project be?

I'm fortunate to be conducting my dream project! As a mature part-time student, I had a long time to ruminate on what I'd like to study at PhD level (it took eight years to complete my degree and Masters) and my supervisors, Sarah Parker and Anne-Marie Beller, have facilitated the pursuit of my specific interest and have supported me right from my initial proposal. We even went on a research road-trip together to Corelli's home and archives. In terms of what comes after the PhD, I would be very happy if my next project involved more Corelli – she's a dream of a subject.

Can you tell us a little about your recent/forthcoming publications?

It feels wonderful to say that I'm under contract to produce the Corelli volume of the VPFA Key Popular Victorian Women Writers series (forthcoming 2024). I am writing the book alongside my thesis, which may sound like a daunting task, but they are very much complementary endeavours. I switch between projects when I reach an impasse, and often Corelli texts I am working on cross over and inspire other ideas for writing. Amongst other things, the book thematically explores Corelli's presentation of femininity and masculinity in various writings, and I've had the opportunity to shine a light on several of her understudied texts.

What are your favourite texts by Victorian women writers, and why?

My favourite Corelli text is *Vendetta!* There was no such thing as the difficult second novel for Corelli, and this was published within months of her debut. She produced a breathless, gothic narrative which involves a character being buried alive, deception, and disguise, all against a backdrop of the horrors of the Naples cholera epidemic of 1884. In terms of other Victorian women writers, I adore the evocative and discomfiting *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin as I think it surprises in terms of what a nineteenth-century text can be. My final pick would be George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, as I've returned to it several times during my life, and whenever I do, it has made me appreciate it differently. To me, it is the perfect Victorian novel.

On Women Writers

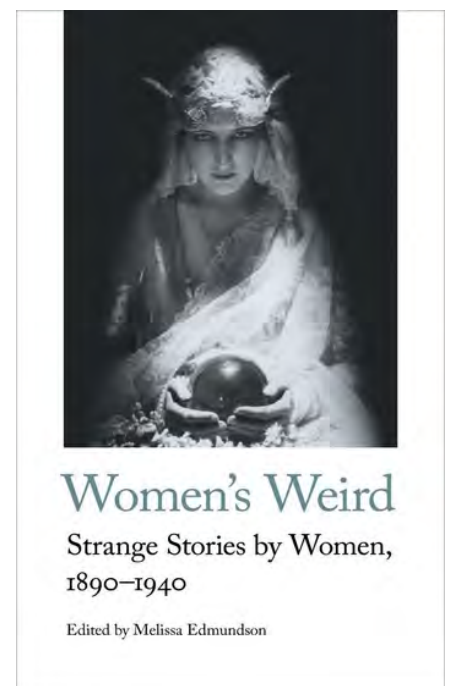
Edith Nesbit and the case for Women's Weird

MILLY KATE HARRISON, PHD RESEARCHER AT LOUGHBOROUGH UNIVERSITY

Often linked to writers such as H. P. Lovecraft and M. R. James, Weird fiction has long been the domain of the masculine. A mode of writing commonly associated with the Gothic, the Weird is described by H. P. Lovecraft as something more than your average spook tale: it is preoccupied with the notion of Cosmic Fear, and the presence of a breathless atmosphere and of inexplicable dread. It may very well be that we are accustomed to seeing the Weird in tales of adventure set on foreign shores or confined to a laboratory as a result of novel experimentation in science or philosophy. It may, however, be less common to see the Weird play out in the domestic drawing room.

Considering this notion of a 'Domestic Weird' may strike the reader or critic as odd, as though the Weird is an exclusionary mode with no interest in – or overlap with – the domestic spaces where women's lives have traditionally been conducted. Yet recent critical and commercial interest in what has been deemed 'Women's Weird' shows that is far from the reality. New work in this area seeks to highlight these lost voices and to help reinstate women into the history of the Weird mode, including that of the Victorian period. One such volume, edited by Melissa Edmundson and published by Handheld Press in 2019, is the first Handheld volume of 'Women's Weird'.

Spanning 1890-1940 and including a range of female authors, the tales in this volume showcase writers who employ the Weird on women's terms, often introducing Cosmic Fear into the domestic space. Commenting on this, Edmundson explains in her introduction that women's involvement with such speculative arts has its own long history, even if it hasn't always been acknowledged in public contexts. A longstanding cultural connection between women and concepts of fate, destiny, and intuition proves just how well-suited women are to working within the Weird mode, and collections such as those by Handheld promise exciting opportunities for further research and scholarship.



The Case of Edith Nesbit

Among the thirteen female authors featured within Edmundson's first 'Women's Weird' collection is Edith Nesbit, a prolific British writer active from the late-Victorian to the interwar period. While adaptations of her 1906 children's novel *The Railway Children* may have helped to secure her public memory in more recent years, Nesbit's abundant written output is as varied as it is expansive.

Born in Surrey in 1858, Nesbit travelled a great deal as a child, spending much time in Europe with her chronically ill sister. Following her sister's death in 1871, she returned to the south of England and embarked more seriously upon a writing career. Her early works involved mostly poetry, yet she is best remembered for her work in children's fantasy, though her expansive repertoire contained everything from prose to political essays. She was also a committed founding member of the socialist organisation The Fabian Society and often gave addresses on socialism at venues such as the London School of Economics.

Nesbit's life often influenced her written work, including her horror output, which sees her as one of the key authors showcased in this Women's Weird revival. Her four volumes of horror fiction showcase a range of perspectives, but most often utilise the Weird in order to consider the shock and trauma related to specifically gendered anxieties at the time of writing. Her short tale 'Man-Size in Marble' (1887), for example, offers commentary on the life of a newlywed couple, ranging from the strengths and disadvantages of life as a working female writer to the ever-present spectre of male violence, both within the domestic space and without.



EDITH NESBIT

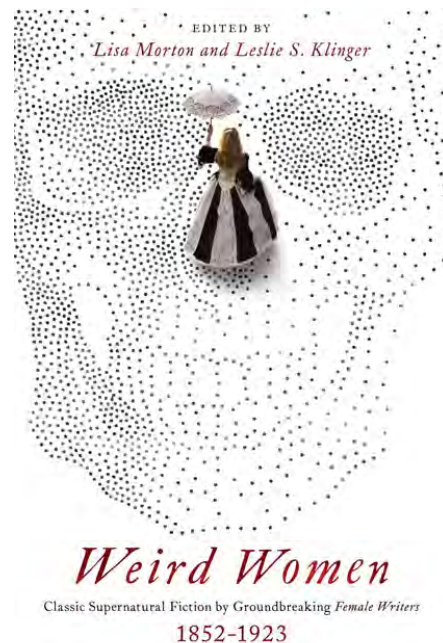
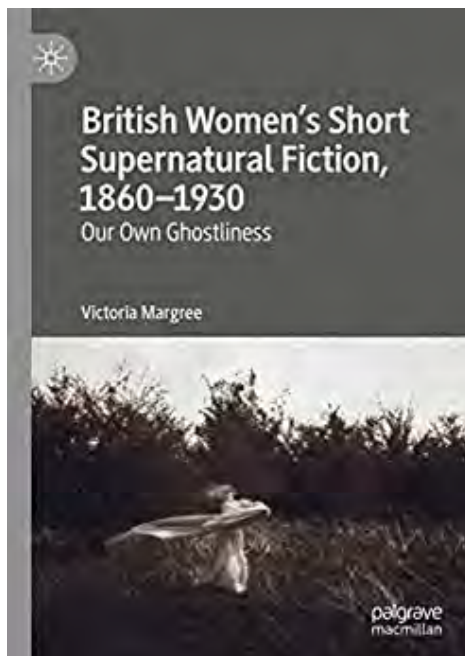
COURTESY OF WIKICOMMONS

Understanding Nesbit's turbulent first marriage to known libertine Hubert Bland in 1880 helps to shed light on her complex portrayal of such themes. Her shifting attitudes to the figure of the 'New Woman', for example, appear in keeping with her shifting attitudes to her own career, her commitment to socialism, and her life within the home, and continue to do so up until her death aged 65, in 1924.

Using the supernatural elements of her fiction as a vessel for commentary on themes such as patriarchal ideology, Nesbit's work is indicative of a wider trend within female-authored fiction of adopting the Weird as a conduit for social critique. This finely tuned balance between entertainment and politically tuned narrative is a goldmine for inquisitive readers and critics alike, helping to further diversify our understanding of the Weird mode alongside uncovering the rich inner-lives of Victorian women writers.

Further Reading:

- Melissa Edmundson (ed.) *Women's Weird: Strange Stories by Women, 1890-1940* (Handheld Press, 2019) & *Women's Weird 2: More Strange Stories by Women, 1891-1937* (Handheld Press, 2020).
- H. P. Lovecraft, 'Supernatural Horror in Literature' (1927). Available to read free online here: <https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/essays/shil.aspx>
- Victoria Margree, *British Women's Short Supernatural Fiction, 1860-1930: Our Own Ghostliness* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).
- Lisa Morton and Leslie S. Klinger (eds.) *Weird Women: Classic Supernatural Fiction by Groundbreaking Female Writer 1852-1923* (Pegasus, 2020).



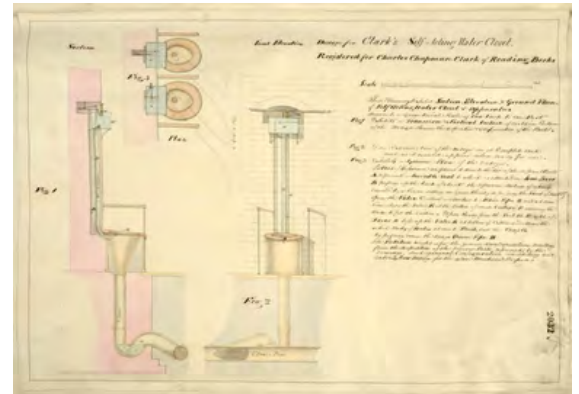
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Media Menagerie

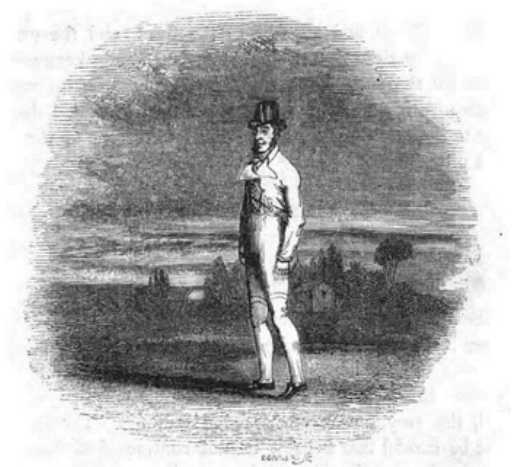
The best easy reads and quick-fire resources on the web

Who doesn't need to know how the Victorians proposed dealing with malodorous lavatories? Check out our recent favourite National Archives blog articles:

- [The spirit of invention in the Victorian home](#)
- [Hidden in plain sight: finding working-class women in The National Archives](#)



This [monthly podcast](#) relives the social and cultural history of the Victorian period. Even better, you don't have to read anything - just plug in your electro ear trumpets and off you go!



Need inspiration for that New Year's resolution to exercise more? You need '[manly exercises](#)'. But don't forget your straw hat!



The ever-expanding [Kent Maps](#) site doesn't require an affiliation with Kent. You might never have heard of it and your geography skills can be negligible. Take an interest in artistic and literary figures, historical and literary themes, or just fancy some [time travel](#) in your lunchbreak though and this is the site for you. Why not explore:

- [Edith Nesbit's adventures in the Garden of England](#)
- [Find out who Dickens called 'a medium and an Ass'](#)
- [Have yourself a huffkin and pork pie for lunch!](#)