

Mary Elizabeth Braddon 1837-1915

One of the most popular and prolific novelists of her day and the virtual founder of a new school of "sensational" fiction, Miss Mary Elizabeth Braddon was born at No 2 Frith Street, Soho Square, London on 4th October 1835. Her father, Henry, a solicitor by profession, wrote several books on sporting subjects and also contributed articles (under the pseudonym of 'Rough Robin') to the **Sporting Magazine**.

Miss Braddon was educated privately in England and France and showed an eagerness to write at an early age. In about 1856, while she was living at Beverley in Yorkshire, she was offered a commission by a local printer to produce a serial novel "combining the humour of Dickens with the plot and construction of G.P.R. Reynolds." The result was **Three times dead, or The Secret of the Heath** which, however, ceased running after only a few instalments, the printer having become bankrupt. Later the author re-wrote the novel and it was eventually published in 1861 under the title **The Trail of the Serpent**.



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In 1862, Miss Braddon's best-known novel **Lady Audley's Secret** began serialisation in the magazine **Robin Goodfellow** and, after that periodical had ceased publication, it was continued in **The Sixpenny Magazine**. Later in 1862 it appeared as a "three-decker" and scored an immediate success.

Many novels and plays followed from the pen of this indefatigable writer. Miss Braddon was a regular contributor to **Punch** and **The World** and she even produced a serial story in French, which was published in the Paris **Figaro**. She wrote the greater part of numerous Christmas annuals (such as **The Mistletoe Bough**) and was the editor of several magazines, notably **Temple Bar** and **Belgravia**.

In 1874, after the death of his first wife, she married the publisher John Maxwell (d. 1895). She and Maxwell had, in fact, been living together for some years at his Richmond home – Lichfield House in Sheen Road – and they had five surviving children born between 1862 and 1870. A son born in 1866 was later to become the novelist William Babington Maxwell (d. 1938). Maxwell also had five children from his first marriage who stayed with the couple during the holidays. Although the family spent a great deal of time at their country house – at Annesley Bank, near Lyndhurst in Hampshire – Richmond was to remain their permanent home.

At Lichfield House Miss Braddon was surrounded by a wide variety of ornaments, pictures, books and bric-a-brac, not to mention the manuscripts of her novels which were bound in crimson leather. Her husband invested in property in the King's Road area of Richmond and named certain roads after characters in her novels. These included Marchmont Road (after John Marchmont in **John Marchmont's Legacy**) and Audley Road. Braddon Road was built in the 1930s on part of the Selwyn estate.

Miss Braddon was an accomplished horsewoman and one of her greatest pleasures was to go riding in Richmond Park.

She died at Lichfield House on 4th February 1915 and was buried at Richmond Cemetery. A bronze wall memorial plaque in Richmond Parish Church was unveiled in the same year.

After her death, Lichfield House continued to be occupied until 1920 by her son, W.B. Maxwell. From 1921 to 1925 it was the home of Col. Sir Henry George Norris and, from 1926, that of Arthur Howitt, a member of the local council who had been Mayor of Richmond in 1924-25. In the mid-1930s the house was demolished and the present block of flats – Lichfield Court – built on the site.

In Miss Braddon's novels there were several references to the locality in which she lived. Hampton Court and Mortlake are both mentioned in **London Pride** (1896) and her story **The Winning Sequence** (published in **Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper** of December 27th 1896) was founded on an old legend surrounding Suffield House, Richmond. The house was once said to be haunted by the ghost of a Lady Suffield, who had become insane after the death of her lover in a duel following the discovery of his cheating in a game of cards.

Richmond and Twickenham probably figure most prominently and dramatically in **The Conflict** (1903). In the scene at the river party given by the wealthy American, Vanessa Stormont :-

"Alas! dawn would come too soon, and carriages at half-past four place. Brentford clock chimed the third quarter after one, as the boats passed the fair lawns of Syon House, a sheet of white light, and then plunged into the dark shadow of the"

"I'm sure ghosts live there", said Vanessa; "the ghost of Pope, perhaps".

"Pope has an island more convenient to his grave".

"The Eel Pie, where there's an inn and people drink beer", cried Vanessa, disgusted. "No, he would much rather haunt a desert island like that".

"Too many rats", said her companion.

Later the launches pass under Richmond Bridge and by Buccleuch House "with its river-kissed lawns and the big hotel crowning the wooded hill". The party disembark somewhere in the area of Twickenham, at a brilliantly-lit Pavilion and it is then that the murder of Lady Mary Selby – a member of the Party – takes place. Her body is found in a backwater near Montpelier House.

During her lifetime Miss Braddon's novels were savagely attacked by some critics. These attacks were usually aimed at the moral rather than the literary content of her work, but she also had some influential admirers, not least amongst whom was Queen Victoria herself.

Perhaps the best assessment of her output has been given by Michael Sadleir in the **Dictionary of National Biography** :-

"It is an injustice to regard Miss Braddon as a mere sensationalist. She was a clever, cultivated woman with wide sympathies and interests. Not only was her response to natural beauty always quick and keen (even in her earliest books she showed great power of description alike of landscape and weather-moods), but to the end she was intensely aware of the world and eager to be part of it. This hunger for actuality gives her best work a quality

beyond that of mere sensationalism, and to her joyous acceptance of life in every form must be attributed her popularity, not only among the masses but also among her fellow-writers. That her books should have delighted readers so exigent and so diverse as Bulwer, Reade, Thackeray, Sala, Labouchere and Robert Louis Stevenson proves them to be distinct with some quality beyond that of mere dramatic ingenuity".

Suggestions for further reading

Carnell, Jennifer **The literary lives of Mary Elizabeth Braddon; a study of her life and work.** 2000

Dickens, Mary Angela **Miss Braddon at home.** (*Windsor Magazine* September 1897, pp.415-418)

Dictionary of National Biography article on Mary Elizabeth Braddon

Evans, Margaret **Miss Braddon of Lichfield House.** (*Richmond History* no.10 May 1989, pp.65-72)

Hatton, Joseph **Miss Braddon at home: a sketch and an interview.** (*London Society* January 1888, pp.22-29)

Holland, Clive **Fifty years of novel writing: Miss Braddon at Home.** (*Pall Mall* November 1911, pp.697-709)

Miss Braddon. (*The New Review* December 1911, pp.564-576)

Sensational novelists: Miss Braddon. (*North British Review* September 1865, pp.180-204)

Walbank, F.Alan **Queens of the circulating library.** 1950 (includes a section on Miss Braddon)

Wolff, Robert Lee **Sensational novelist: the life and times of Mary Elizabeth Braddon**

More information on Mary Braddon and other famous residents of the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames is available from the Local Studies Collection.