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Beatrice Harraden (1864-1936)

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Beatrice Harraden (1864-1936)

Abstract

This is a brief biography of Beatrice Harraden (1864-1936), an Anglo-Indian writer who achieved fame at the start of the age of mass-market fiction. She was part of a community of women working in and around Bloomsbury.

Keywords

England, literature, health tourism, suffrage movement

Disciplines

History | Modern Literature | Theatre History | Women's History | Women's Studies

Notes

<https://www.pascal-theatre.com/biographies/beatrice-harraden/>



Beatrice Harraden

Novelist, campaigner for women's rights and suffrage.

24 January 1864 – 5 May 1936



Portrait of Beatrice Harraden no later than 1895 Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

A tribute by Molly McClain

Beatrice Harraden was an Anglo-Indian writer who achieved fame at the start of the age of mass-market fiction. She wrote a bestselling novel, *Ships that Pass in the Night* (1893), a tragic romance between two strangers who meet in Swiss sanitarium that treats tuberculosis patients. Tuberculosis, among other illnesses, had reached epidemic proportions by the 1890s. Harraden's candid appraisal of the emotional and psychological challenges

faced by invalids and their caretakers touched a nerve in late Victorian readers. The book went into eleven editions and was later translated into numerous languages, including Japanese.

Harraden began her writing career in the 1880s, encouraged by the novelist Eliza Lynn Linton and a circle of female writers working in and around Bloomsbury. A graduate of the University of London, Harraden was a reader at the British Museum Reading Room. She sat under the great domed ceiling and penned children's books, novels, and short stories. Physically slight, she had a deep, low voice, cropped black hair, and spectacles that gave her a scholarly air.

Harraden was supported in her work by well-to-do, middle-class parents who lived in St. John's Wood. Her father Samuel Harraden was a Cambridge-educated musician and entrepreneur who exported musical instruments to British India, including one of the first phonographs exhibited in Calcutta. Her mother Rosalie Lindstedt was born in India. She was the daughter of a Swedish man and a Kashmiri woman. The couple raised their three daughters and two sons with 'the liberty to shape a career for themselves,' in Harraden's words.

Like many of her contemporaries, Harraden suffered chronic illness. She had damaged her ulnar nerve by playing the violoncello, leading to occasional paralysis in her right arm. She also may have suffered from neurasthenia, a nervous disorder that caused fatigue, anxiety, headache, and depression. One contemporary described her as 'one of those small, slight women who are consumed by their own intense nervous and mental force.'

Harraden regularly encountered doctors who believed that her troubles stemmed from the fact that she pursued a professional life as a writer. 'If I could be like a cabbage, I might recover quicker,' she wrote drily. In the early 1890s, she took a prescribed 'rest cure' at a *kurhaus* in Davos, Switzerland, where she lay in the cold air, bundled in blankets. She tried hydrotherapy, or the water cure, at a health spa in Harrogate. She also went to a health resort on Lake Geneva where she spent her days in bed consuming a fatty, milk-based diet designed to increase her supply of red blood cells.

In 1894, Harraden took up an invitation to visit British friends who had moved to San Diego, California, for the 'climate cure.' By this time, it was recognised that tuberculosis was not the product of miasma or foul air but the result of infection by the tubercule bacillus. The germ theory of disease, however, had yet to produce cures. Some physicians argued that a healthful climate remained the best form of palliative care available. Southern California, which encompassed six distinct climate zones, made it possible for the health seeker to travel to the region best suited for their ailment in a matter of hours. Moreover, there was little seasonal change in temperature.

Harraden had intended to rest, as her doctors had recommended but she found herself deeply involved in life on the lemon ranch owned by John and Agnes Kendall. She pruned trees and gathered fruit. She learned to build a fence, harness a horse, and undertake the kind of household chores typically done by servants in England. More importantly, she pursued her writing. She later recalled, 'I never remember any period of my life when I had more ideas, more ambitious and broader, stronger and more eager ideas and interests.'

Energised by her experience, Harraden co-authored *Two Health Seekers in Southern California* (1897) with Dr. William A. Edwards, the house physician at the luxurious Hotel del Coronado, at that time the single largest hotel

in the world. Her contribution consisted of two chapters in which she recommended the 'nature cure' to women, in particular. Climate could help alleviate symptoms but, in her view, it was regular physical activity in the out-of-doors that was necessary to conquer disease, at least in its early stages.

Physical activity was not a unique suggestion to the problem of poor health but it was rarely prescribed for women. Social Darwinism promoted the idea that physical struggle was necessary to the survival of the race. Men were encouraged to overcome illness through strenuous activity and immersion in nature. Women, however, were often advised to rest and avoid physical and intellectual work.

In the 1890s, however, there was a new appreciation for women's capacity for work. If women could sweep carpets, they could row boats; if they could work in laboratories, they could perform experiments. Harraden was in the vanguard of what later would be described as 'feminism,' the belief that women could achieve as much as men given the same opportunities.

Harraden did not settle permanently in California but returned to London where she began to fight for women's rights and suffrage. For a time, her fiction writing became less important than her political activism. She wrote and gave speeches on behalf of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) and the Women Writers' Suffrage League, among other organisations. She participated in marches, sold campaign literature, and produced a one-act suffrage play, 'Lady Geraldine's Speech.' In 1913, she joined other members of the Woman's Tax Resistance League in refusing to pay tax on the same grounds as the former American colonists: no taxation without representation.

During the First World War, Harraden volunteered to provide food, shelter, and clothing for Belgian refugees. She also worked as a librarian at the Endell Street Hospital for Soldiers, the only British army hospital staffed entirely by women. There, she made sure that wounded soldiers were not subject to 'improving' literature but allowed to choose books for themselves.

In her novels and short stories, Harraden addressed issues faced by modern women. These included restrictive marriages; emotional entanglements; gendered expectations of how women should look, dress, and behave; efforts at self-realisation; and the burden of independence. Many of her novels have remarkably unhappy endings, suggesting that Harraden was deeply aware of the social conventions that kept women from achieving personal autonomy. She expressed this sentiment in a novel, *Katharine Frensham* (1903), in which the title character says, 'I begin to see why life is far easier to men than to women. The fight with the outer world braces men up. They go forth, and pass on strengthened. But women are chained to circumstance—or chain themselves.'

Harraden chose an unconventional path. She never married or had children but surrounded herself with other ambitious women. While she continued to experience periods of debilitating illness, she did not allow 'the world of suffering' to define her life. A friend described her as a person with 'more vitality than others, more scorn of convention, more ardour to initiate and to save.'

Harraden never recaptured the critical praise or fame that accompanied her first novel, *Ships that Pass in the Night*, but she continued to work. Over the course of her lifetime, she produced seventeen novels, short stories,

non-fiction pieces, newspaper articles, and a play. She died in a nursing home at Barton on Sea, a village in Hampshire, at the age of 72, having constructed a life of art and activism as her 'bridge between life and death':

'We shall go on building our bridge between life and death, each one for himself. When we see that it is not strong enough, we shall break it down and build another. We shall watch other people building their bridges. We shall imitate, or criticise, or condemn. But as time goes on, we shall learn not to interfere, we shall know that one bridge is probably as good as the other; and that the greatest value of them all has been in the building of them. It does not matter what we build, but build we must: you, and I, and everyone.'

Ships That Pass in The Night.

Molly McClain is Professor of History at the University of San Diego. She is the author of three books and numerous articles in British and U.S. history, including *Ellen Browning Scripps: New Money and American Philanthropy* (2017).

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