



Introduction: rethinking Margaret Harkness's significance in political and literary history

Lisa C. Robertson and Flore Janssen

For most of the twentieth century, Margaret Harkness (1854–1923) was known almost exclusively as the recipient of a letter written by Friedrich Engels in which he expounds his definition of literary realism. Since the 1990s, however, Harkness has been in receipt of increasing critical and popular interest, most of which has been dedicated to her late nineteenth-century novels of life in working poverty in London. Owing to her astute observations of and engagement with the lives of the urban poor, novels such as *Out of Work* (1888) and *In Darkest London* (1891; first published as *Captain Lobe* in 1889) have enriched considerations of the political and social complexities of the late nineteenth century, and have animated studies of the emergence of socialist and labour politics. Yet Harkness and her work remain obscure, and the extent of her accomplishments and interests is only now beginning to receive adequate attention. In fact, at the time of writing the introduction to this volume, many new and enlightening – and often unusual – discoveries are being made by its contributors. From the emergence of works of fiction on unconventional subjects – such as ‘Called to the Bar’ (1897), a novella written while Harkness was living in Western Australia and recently unearthed by Terry Elkiss – to the appearance of a number of translations in various European languages that attest to Harkness’s international reputation, this new historical material helps to illuminate the life and career of a perennially fascinating and very active woman. It is no surprise, then, that the critical landscape surrounding her is an equally dynamic field: important work is currently being conducted by established scholars and

new researchers, and we are delighted to include the efforts of many of them in this collection. While one purpose of the present volume is to collate current scholarship on Harkness and her work and to situate it within the critical debates of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an equally important aim is to open up avenues for further enquiry. This is the first collection to bring together research on the life and work of author and activist Margaret Harkness, and we hope more will follow as scholarship expands.

Harkness and her work

The research currently being carried out by contributors to this volume has helped to piece together Harkness's life and career, many aspects of which remain shrouded in mystery. Her death certificate, discovered by Irene Snatt in the 1980s, confirms that she died on 10 December 1923 at the Pensione Castagnoli in Florence; she was buried the following day at the local Allori Cemetery in a 'tomba di seconda classe'. Her death certificate refers to her simply as a 'spinster of independent means' (HHC, U DLB/8/19, 13 May 1987). Yet this simple description masks the complexities of her social, economic, and professional identities.

Although Harkness's father was an Anglican clergyman, and her family was solidly middle class, she was denied financial support as a consequence of her decision not to marry, and her career reflects her pursuit of an independent income. In 1877 she moved to London in order to train as a nurse at Westminster Hospital, and later undertook training as a nursing dispenser at the Apothecaries' Hall. Yet, not long after accepting a post at Guy's Hospital she determined that it was a career unsuited to her, and turned to writing (BLPES, Passfield Papers 2/1/2/2, c. 1878).¹

While living in London, Harkness may have shared accommodation for a short time with Beatrice Potter (later Webb), a second cousin, and together both women developed friendships with a circle of intellectuals based around the British Museum Reading Room, including such famous contemporaries as Olive Schreiner and Eleanor Marx, who shared Harkness's interest in social and political questions.

During the early 1880s, while living opposite the British Museum in Great Russell Street, Bloomsbury, Harkness produced a number of articles on subjects related to labour and economic issues for a wide range of prominent periodicals, including the *Nineteenth Century* and the *National Review*. Later in the decade, she would also begin to publish

regularly in socialist periodicals such as *Justice* and *To-day*, using both her own name and the pseudonym 'John Law'. Harkness's first novel, *A City Girl: A Realistic Story*, was published in 1887. The story of cross-class seduction, abandonment, and unmarried motherhood was described by Engels as reflecting 'realistic truth' and exhibiting 'the courage of the true artist' (Engels, 1974: 115). A series of novels engaging with the lives of the working poor followed this first effort. Each of these novels offered a sympathetic but unsentimental portrait of urban poverty during a period of financial crisis and labour unrest, often also including other marginalised groups such as immigrant and religious communities. *Out of Work* (1888) presented readers with an image of unemployment during the year of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee and the Trafalgar Square Riots. Also in 1888, Harkness published the serial story 'Captain Lobe', which explored the relationship between the practices and philosophy of socialism and the Salvation Army, in the Christian progressive *British Weekly*. An edited version of the story was published in book form in 1889; it was reprinted in 1891 as *In Darkest London*, with an introduction by 'General' William Booth of the Salvation Army, and included in William Reeves's 'Bellamy Library'. Her 1890 novel *A Manchester Shirtmaker* delved into questions of sweated labour and workers' unity.

During this time Harkness also published a number of short stories and serialised novels in periodicals, and while the subjects and settings are often varied, the treatment of contemporary social and political concerns remains constant. Following a precedent established by Charles Dickens, Harkness published short stories for Christmas editions of periodicals, such as 'A Pantomime Child' (1889), published in the *British Weekly*, and 'Little Tim's Christmas' (1890a), published in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, which foreground concerns about the broader social consequences of poverty and under-employment. In the early 1890s she also published serial stories in periodicals associated with radical politics, through which she explored the connections between sexual and labour exploitation: 'Roses and Crucifix' (1891–92), in the feminist *Woman's Herald*, told the story of a young female bar worker, while 'Connie' (1893–94), published in the *Labour Elector* under the editorship of Harkness's political associate H. H. Champion, followed a young actress who loses her job when she resists the advances of her employer.

The themes of Harkness's writing are perhaps not surprising, given her personal commitments: she was for a time a member of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), worked on the 1888 election campaign for Scottish socialist and Independent Labour Party leader James Keir

Hardie, supported the Matchwomen's Strike of 1888, actively participated in the Dockworkers' Strike of 1889, and travelled to Germany, Austria, New Zealand, Australia, India, Ceylon, and even, purportedly, the United States, for the purpose of investigating the international political situation.

During the mid-1890s Harkness relocated semi-permanently to Australia and continued her prolific writing career in the Australian press, contributing journalism and serial fiction to the *Western Mail* and the *West Australian*. However, she remained preoccupied with the social issues that had formed the basis of her work in Britain. Her 1899 pamphlet *Imperial Credit* explained her position on British labour politics, and her 1905 novel *George Eastmont, Wanderer* offered her retrospective of the Dockworkers' Strike of 1889. However, new impressions also made their way into her work: many of her publications in the Australian press discuss contemporary conditions and politics in various Australian regions. Her 1897 serial novel 'Called to the Bar' was subtitled 'A Coolgardie Novel' and was set in the mining town in Western Australia where she was then living. It was as a correspondent for the *West Australian* that she travelled to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and India, where her previous political associate Annie Besant had settled permanently in 1898. She produced three works based on her experiences in India and Ceylon: the travelogue *Glimpses of Hidden India* (1909; revised and republished as *Indian Snapshots* in 1912), the novel *The Horoscope* (1913), set on a plantation in Ceylon, and a study of *Modern Hyderabad* (1914).

For the setting of her last known novel, *A Curate's Promise* (1921), Harkness returned to the East End. She now depicted the area that had been the focus of her first novels undergoing the destruction of the First World War, and used this context to revisit the relationship between socialism and religion through the dual perspectives of pacifism and imperialism. It is likely, as research into the life and work of Harkness and her contemporaries moves forward, that the list of her works and catalogue of her interests and accomplishments will continue to expand. In their indication that ambition and engagement often surpassed apparent opportunity, the details of Harkness's life have the potential to complicate current ideas of women's limited social position at the turn of the twentieth century.

Critical context

As Harkness's personal experiences and political interests touched on numerous contemporary debates, so now does scholarship on Harkness incorporate and – as this collection shows – expand a range of current critical discourses. In the context of the revival of interdisciplinary interest, especially since around 2000, in urban social history, particularly London's East End during the development of what Stephen Yeo calls the 'religion of socialism' (1977), a new investigation of Harkness's investment in and relevance to such themes will advance these debates more widely. Although much remains to be discovered in regard to the contemporary reception of Harkness's work, the recognition of her debut novel by Engels, the most famous contemporary socialist, has given her a claim to critical consideration which has been accepted by generations of scholars of Marxist thought on literature. As early as 1959 Peter Demetz's monumental study of the literary conceptions and influence of Marx and Engels, *Marx, Engels and the Poets* [*Marx, Engels und die Dichter*], devoted a section to *A City Girl* in order to contextualise Engels's comments on Harkness's use of realism and her representation of class consciousness in that text. Although Demetz's reading is restricted to this single novel, and is inclined to be dismissive of it, it confirmed Harkness's place in a canon of socialist fiction. This recognition prompted a small but significant body of critical work on Harkness, specifically in Germany, offering rigorously historicised readings of her early novels. In his expansive analysis of late-Victorian social writing, *Der spätviktorianische Sozialroman von 1880 bis 1890* (1977), Werner G. Urlaub included what remains one of the most detailed examinations of Harkness's publishing history and the reception of her writing. A close historical examination of Harkness's life and her first novel followed soon after: Beate Kaspar's *Margaret Harkness, A City Girl* (1984) offers an impressive range of historical and biographical information, as well as a careful study of *A City Girl*'s complex relationship to contemporary literary styles and political ideologies. Kaspar's study became the basis for an article by Dorothee Beckhoff (1987) which places particular emphasis on the ways in which Harkness's engagement with literary conventions allowed her to explore the social conditions and class position and consciousness of her protagonists. At the same time, in Norway, an English-language text was produced that was partly responsible for renewing interest in Harkness in the English-speaking academic community. Gerd Bjørhovde's *Rebellious Structures* (1987) posits a holistic analysis of

Harkness's writing project in the broader context of women's writing at the *fin de siècle*, considering readership, contemporary attitudes to social class, and the influence of gender on Harkness's writing and reception. The interest in different European countries in Harkness's work reflects her transnational reputation as well as the international influences on her political thinking and writing style, which drew inspiration from the naturalist novels of authors like Émile Zola.

The 1990s witnessed a wide-ranging revival of interest in Harkness's work in the English-language academy. Of great value in this process was a new edition of *Out of Work* (1990), introduced by Bernadette Kirwan, which appeared as part of Merlin Press's Radical Fiction Series. The broader analysis of Harkness's writing project was taken up by scholars on both sides of the Atlantic who often shared an interest in Harkness's investment in an analysis of the intersections of gender and social class. To name a few examples: Deborah Epstein Nord's extended project on women's networks at the *fin de siècle*, culminating in the enduringly valuable *Walking the Victorian Streets* (1995), recognises Harkness's originality in representing new literary figures in the developing literature of London's East End; and Sally Ledger, building on Bjørhovde's work, included Harkness's first novels and the subjectivity of their protagonists in her study *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (1997). By the end of the decade, entries on Harkness were included in *Late Victorian and Edwardian British Novelists* (Sypher, 1999) and the *Dictionary of Labour Biography* (Bellamy and Kaspar, 1987), and gradually information on her life and work became more widely available, creating a fruitful basis for further interest and research.

From this time onwards, many of the contributors to the present volume began to engage with the development of Harkness scholarship, each offering original work contextualised within current critical debates. Ruth Livesey developed her initial examination of *A City Girl* in the context of the political implications of women's involvement in social work (1999) into a chapter on women's social investigation and methods of 'disciplining space' (2007b: 88). Lynne Hapgood, who had already produced examinations of the role of socialism in the work of female political writers (1990; 1996), contributed a chapter on Harkness to John Stokes's *Eleanor Marx (1855–1898): Life, Work, Contacts* (2000), in which she considers Harkness's position against the background of increasing critical interest in London's East End. David Glover's study *Literature, Immigration, and Diaspora in Fin-de-Siècle England* (2012) offers new insight into the social make-up of the communities which

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Harkness's fiction describes. Both independently and taken as a body of foundational research in Harkness scholarship, these scholars' work has made an important contribution to the present understanding of the socio-political environment in which Harkness worked.

Further scholarship by Ellen Ross, whose work on gender ideology in urban working communities in her collection *Slum Travelers* (2007) has helped to shape a historical image of the environment in which Harkness worked, and Seth Koven, whose study *Slumming* (2004) revived critical interest in philanthropic work and social research in the late nineteenth-century East End, has helped to fill in the contextual background of Harkness's social project. Both Matthew Beaumont (2005) and Ruth Livesey (2007a) have developed scholarly conceptions of the relationships between socialism and feminism during the period, each with explicit and productive reference to Harkness's life and work. Deborah Mutch (2013) and Rob Breton (2010) have produced innovative readings of Harkness's relationship to different literary styles and the nature of politically engaged publishing at the end of the nineteenth century. These historical and critical advances form the basis of many of the chapters in this collection, and many are developed further in the chapters of this volume.

Expanding critical categories

Although Harkness has received less critical attention to date than her career warrants, it is clear that her life and work have continued to inspire scholarship for over half a century. As new evidence continues to emerge, new critical perspectives allow for useful reinterpretations of existing information. The myriad different social, political, and historical themes on which Harkness and her work touch continue to push and reform critical boundaries. As early as 1982, John Goode predicted that a more complete profile of Margaret Harkness would be valuable for the many ways it would illuminate the 'fraught conjecture of radical feminism and socialism' (Goode, 1982: 52) at the turn of the twentieth century. It is becoming increasingly evident that the study of Harkness's work will not only contribute important new perspectives on the political and historical origins of working-class politics, the welfare state, and pan-European social movements, but will also help to embroider studies of other critical categories, such as genre analysis and postcolonial studies. The contributions to this volume promise to be of significance in furthering this project.

Margaret Harkness: Writing Social Engagement 1880–1921 begins by addressing Harkness's life and work with two contributions that develop current biographical understandings of Harkness's life. Terry Elkiss's meticulously researched biographical portrait in chapter 1, 'A law unto herself: the solitary odyssey of M. E. Harkness', draws on newly uncovered archival material in order to establish a profile that expands Harkness's public voice as 'John Law'. While this volume illuminates Harkness's own biography, and that of many of her colleagues, friends, and even adversaries, it is committed to exploring the nuances between biography and history, as well as fiction and non-fiction. This concern is central to Tabitha Sparks's chapter 2, 'Absent character: from Margaret Harkness to John Law', which shows how the 'bio-critical approach' that has dominated studies of Harkness's work proves to be incompatible with her own literary objectives.

The London location of Harkness's best-known work strongly influenced both her representations of working poverty and her own thinking in response to the social problems she sought to portray, and in Part II, 'In Harkness's London', three contributors engage with different representations of London life and politics in Harkness's work. Nadia Valman's chapter 3, 'Walking Margaret Harkness's London', considers Harkness's portrayal of multiple viewpoints in one narrative, and her experimentation with formal conventions of fiction to express the perpetually incomplete nature of social struggle. Eliza Cubitt's chapter 4, 'The problem of leisure/what to do for pleasure: women and leisure time in *A City Girl* (1887) and *In Darkest London* (1891)', explores another kind of marginalised experience in the East End: that of women's leisure activities. Cubitt investigates how Harkness's representation of a 'vibrant, noisy East End of London' contradicts the 'perceived duality of a nineteenth-century city' that was thought to contain leisure and labour on opposite poles. David Glover, in chapter 5, 'The vicissitudes of victory: Margaret Harkness, *George Eastmont*, *Wanderer* (1905), and the 1889 Dockworkers' Strike', engages with Harkness's representation of the labour politics of East London. Glover reads the novel, which documents the 1889 Dockworkers' Strike but expresses doubt about its broader achievements, as a 'symptom of the difficulties' Harkness faced as an active participant in that struggle.

Harkness's writing not only offered a fresh perspective on her chosen subject matter, but also pushed the boundaries of literary genre. This collection puts forward three contributors' enquiries into the imbrication of generic categories in Part III, 'Harkness and Genre'. In chapter

6, 'Soundscapes of the city in Margaret Harkness, *A City Girl* (1887), Henry James, *The Princess Casamassima* (1885–86), and the Katharine Buildings, Whitechapel', Ruth Livesey examines the 'profound disorientation' created by Harkness's representation of character through 'aural documentary', and the ways this eschewed the 'epistemic regimes of the eye' that dominated naturalist discourse. Lynne Hapgood's chapter 7, 'Margaret Harkness, novelist: social semantics and experiments in fiction', investigates the limitations of the novel form when its project is the representation of working-class characters. In studying the range of contemporary – and often competing – discourses represented in Harkness's fiction, Hapgood suggests that her novels use affect to communicate to readers the social alienation experienced by their characters. In chapter 8, '"Connie": melodrama and Tory socialism', Deborah Mutch explores the ways that Harkness uses the 'dual lenses' of melodrama and certain characteristics associated with 'Tory socialism' to allow readers to engage with and predict the dramatic conclusion of this unfinished novella.

While Harkness's connections and associates appear throughout this volume, the two chapters in Part IV, 'Personal influences', offer a focused examination of the literary and cultural relationship between Harkness and two of her well-known contemporaries. In chapter 9, 'Socialism, suffering, and religious mystery: Margaret Harkness and Olive Schreiner', Angharad Eyre expands earlier studies by scholars such as Epstein Nord to consider afresh the affective relationships and political ambitions of what Epstein Nord describes as networks or communities of independent women (Epstein Nord, 1995: 181). Eyre understands the friendship between Harkness and Schreiner to be one that provoked a shift in Harkness's fiction, one which moved away from realism and towards a mode of representation punctuated by mystery and allegory to articulate the hope for a better future. In chapter 10, 'Margaret Harkness, W. T. Stead, and the transatlantic social gospel network', Helena Goodwyn examines the extent to which both Harkness and Stead made use of the 'rhetoric of progressive Protestantism' across the generic categories of their writing: realist fiction, activist journalism, and critical travel writing. In examining the 'clash between socialist and evangelical rhetoric' in the context of emerging 'modern marketing methods', Goodwyn exposes the problems inherent in labels of ideological inconsistency as applied on gendered terms.

Harkness's work in the twentieth century has still been virtually untouched by scholarship, and in Part V, 'After London', this collection

suggests some potential avenues for exploration of Harkness's later work. In chapter 11, 'Through the mill: Margaret Harkness on conjectural history and utilitarian philosophy', Lisa C. Robertson evaluates the writing which Harkness produced during her time in the countries that are now India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Robertson argues that Harkness's work during this period consciously eschews conventional historical methodology and offers an important counter-narrative to colonial history. In chapter 12, 'Lasting ties: Margaret Harkness, the Salvation Army, and *A Curate's Promise* (1921)', Flore Janssen examines continuity and change in Harkness's representations of London poverty and the work of the Salvation Army in the 1880s and 1920s, and considers the possibilities explored in Harkness's final novel of 'making good' in a society facing the destruction wrought by the First World War.

Margaret Harkness: Writing Social Engagement 1880–1921 makes a useful companion text to the two new editions of *A City Girl* that have been published by Victorian Secrets in the United Kingdom, edited by Deborah Mutch (2015), and by Broadview Press in North America, edited by Tabitha Sparks (2017). As these texts begin to appear more frequently on the reading lists of universities and colleges, and encourage a new generation of researchers to re-evaluate existing perceptions of Harkness and her work, the contributions offered by scholars in this volume will provide important groundwork for any study of representations of urban life around the turn of the twentieth century.

Conclusion

Harkness's work continues to reform critical boundaries and broaden notions of women's opportunities for professional development and political engagement across the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her life and work were guided throughout by her own initiative. Many women involved in late nineteenth-century socialist circles, like Eleanor Marx or Beatrice Potter Webb, benefited from the support of male affiliates and family members, but Harkness appears to have been socially and politically self-reliant. Earning her living by her pen, she was largely economically self-supporting as well. There can be no doubt, furthermore, of the independent spirit required for her numerous global and transcontinental migrations in an era when many women had only recently achieved legal recognition as independent persons, following the passage of the Married Women's Property Act in 1882. Harkness's writing offers its own sense of independence. While some scholarship has

designated Harkness's exploration of ideologies as divergent as socialism and Salvationism as evidence of her inconsistency, it seems, rather, to be the case that each of her novels uses a different narrative voice to explore various subjects, often for diverse audiences. As Harkness writes of her protagonist in *George Eastmont, Wanderer*, her 'mental history had been one of continual development' (Law, 1905: 21), and this development guided her selection and treatment of subjects in fiction and journalism.

This volume illuminates new aspects of Harkness's life and work directly, but also outlines the complex and dynamic world in which she and her contemporaries operated. In compiling this collection we have aimed to present a collation of Harkness scholarship to date, on which our contributors have built in order to offer exciting new insights into a fascinating figure operating at the heart of many contemporary debates that have reverberations even into the present day. In doing so we hope to have laid more solid foundations than have been available to scholars hitherto, upon which may be constructed new critical and historical analyses that we expect to have significant impact not only on the future of Harkness scholarship but on critical conceptions of social and political dynamics at the turn of the twentieth century. In rethinking Harkness's life and work, we hope the collection will inspire broader rethinking of the critical categories and historical assumptions through which we define the long nineteenth century. We present this volume as an invitation to researchers everywhere to contribute to the development of a richer understanding of Harkness's life and work as well as to rethink the cultural and political landscape in which she lived.

Note

- 1 Joyce Bellamy and Beate Kaspar suggest 1881 as the date, on account that it seems to have 'caused a rift with her family' (1987: 104).

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