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‘THE WORLD IS WELCOME TO STEEL (!)’: PUBLISHING TRANSACTIONS IN THE LITERARY CAREER OF FLORA ANNIE STEEL

by GRÁINNE GOODWIN

Grumbling to her literary agent in 1908, the Anglo-Indian* writer and best-selling author Flora Annie Steel complained of the writer’s ambiguous position, subject to the whims of the avaricious publisher:

> It is ridiculous, [too], talking of authors and publishers interests being identical. They are not. The author wants an audience, the publisher £.s.d. In fact, also, the publisher is like a market woman, with a basket of eggs to sell. The author is one egg! He [sic] may give away to make others sell.[1]

Steel’s gripe is redolent with what Lewis Coser, reflecting on William Graham Sumner’s paradigm of ‘antagonistic cooperation’, described as the ‘asymmetries of author-publisher relations’.[2] Pierre Bourdieu’s later conceptualisation of the sociocultural relations of the literary field, though more sustained and influential than Coser’s, also envisages author-publisher relations in this oxymoronic way, through the formulation of ‘adversaries in

The title quotation refers to a letter from Flora Annie Steel to William Morris Colles, received 10 Mar. 1894.

[1] Flora Annie Steel [hereafter FAS] to William Morris Colles [hereafter WMC], received 28 Mar. 1908, Austin, Harry Ransom Research Center, University of Texas, Author’s Syndicate Collection [hereafter ASC].

*Throughout this article I use the term Anglo Indian, not in the sense of its current meaning to denote a person of mixed Indian and British ancestry, but as the British in colonial India applied it when referring to themselves.

[2] Lewis Coser, ‘Asymmetries in Author-Publisher Relations,’ *Society* Vol.17, No.1, 1979, p.34.

collusion'; a relationship borne out by Steel's scathing assessment.[3] This analysis considers how Steel dealt with this troubled symbiosis in her publishing transactions over twenty years of her literary career and the extent to which this was conditioned by her status as a female writer. Steel's prodigious body of publishing correspondence, particularly with publisher Frederick Macmillan and William Morris Colles, her literary agent from 1893 to the late 1910s, provides a valuable record of these authorial negotiations and power dynamics.[4] It offers an insight into Steel's publishing affairs, where the issues of professional identity, anxieties over cultural and capital gain, and the relational nature of the literary market are all patent. Despite this rich archival material, Steel's communications with Colles and other publishing figures have been long overlooked.[5] Whilst her novels, short stories and journalism have been subject to significant critical scrutiny, particularly from a post-colonial perspective, nothing has been done to reveal or evaluate the actual publishing practices which brought such writing to publication.[6] This analysis considers the relationships and commercial skills Steel developed across her career in order to conduct the business aspect of her profession, mitigate against the publishing asymmetries she encountered and navigate her manuscripts into print.

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[3] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays in Art and Literature*, trans. Randal Johnson, Cambridge 1993, p.79.

[4] Aside from correspondence to Frederick Macmillan in the early years of her career, Steel's business letters, of which there are over 250, were written to William Morris Colles, who founded the literary agency the Authors' Syndicate in 1890. The collections consist of Steel's incoming correspondence as no transcripts of outgoing correspondence were kept. Unfortunately, none of the correspondence between Steel and William Heinemann, her other publisher, survives.

[5] Robert Colby includes some coverage of Steel in his wider study of the Author's Syndicate. Robert Colby, '"What Fools Authors Be!": The Authors' Syndicate, 1890-1920', *The Library Chronicle* (University of Texas at Austin) Vol.35, (1986), pp.61-87.

[6] See for example: Jean Fernandez '"A Quaint House in the Oldest Quarter": Gendered Spaces of Empire in Flora Annie Steel's *On the Face of the Waters*', *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, Vol.11, No.1, 2015, http://ncgsjournal.com/issue111/PDF/fernandez.pdf [accessed 10 Nov. 2019]; Shampa Roy, '"a miserable sham": Flora Annie Steel's short fiction and the question of Indian women's reform', *Feminist Review*, Vol.94, 2010, pp.55-74; and Aviva Briefel 'The Potter's Thumb/The Writer's Hand: Manual Production and Victorian Colonial Narratives', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, vol.42, No.2, 2009, pp.235-60.

Steel's reference to the publisher as a 'market woman' and her subsequent slippage into gendering them as male also speaks volumes of the inescapability of gender politics at work in these negotiations. As Jacqueline Labbe notes, despite scholarship to address women's publishing transactions and literary professionalism, scholars 'have not yet fully uncovered the economics of female authorship'.[7] In her excellent state-of-the-field analysis, Michelle Levy suggests that one way we might do so is by examining the 'mundane or workaday correspondence between women and their publishers'.[8] Steel's exertions in protecting and controlling her literary property recounted in her epistolary exchanges with publishers and other literary agents offers one such opportunity to illumine women writers' business endeavours. Steel's experiences have much to tell us about how manuscripts were manoeuvred and valued by the different players in the world of publishing, how writers responded to changing conditions in the marketplace and in their own status over time, and how, if at all, the functions and processes of the literary marketplace were configured differently for women.

The literary marketplace of the 1890s in which Steel was located was labyrinthine for many aspiring writers, regardless of gender. The Chace Act of 1891 which resolved tempestuous Anglo-American publishing relations over pirating and copyright may have protected British serial book rights across the Atlantic, but in opening lucrative new markets

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[7] Jacqueline M. Labbe, 'The Economics of Female Authorship', *The Cambridge Companion to Women's Writing in the Romantic Period*, ed. Devoney Looser, Cambridge 2015, p.158. On gendered publishing transactions see e.g., Gaye Tuchman with Nina Fortin, *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers and Social Change*, London 1989 *Writing: A Woman's Business: Women, Writing and the Market Place* ed. Judy Simmons and Kate Fulbrook, Manchester 1998;Valerie Sanders, 'Women, fiction and the marketplace' in *Women and Literature in Britain 1800-1900*, ed. Joanne Shattock, Cambridge 2001, pp.142-61; and Linda H. Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Marketplace*, Princeton 2009.

[8] Michelle Levy, 'Do Women Have a Book History?', *Studies in Romanticism,* Vol.53, No.3, 2014, p.306.

it both raised and complicated the stakes for British literary property in the United States.[9] Further rapid flux and commercialisation was attributed to the nascent "unknown public" who clamoured for lighter, cheaper, and more diverse reading material. This was reflected in syndication, which allowed authors to have their work printed and serialised in the press, and the emergence of the relatively inexpensive one-volume novel which replaced the costly three-volume format.[10] Finally, overt antagonisms between authors and publishers, heightened by the formation of the Society of Authors in 1884 and the emergence of the literary agent in this period, meant that the world of publishing in the 1890s was dynamic but volatile and thorny for those with vested interests in the literary market.[11]

Symptomatic of rising monetary stakes in this period, financial gain has a conspicuous presence in Steel's publishing correspondence as she attempted to determine the value of her literary production and the capital tied up in her own reputation. These pecuniary transactions were also barometers of professional gravitas and literary prestige. Indeed, Steel's vacillation between demanding adequate compensation and her disavowal of monetary incentives is indicative of wider debates reflecting gendered designations of commercial writing as feminine and critically-acclaimed literature as masculine in character in the *fin-de-siècle* period. Within this confluence of gender convention, artistic value and fiduciary interest Steel varyingly resisted, reinforced and tested her negotiating acumen and asserted her professionalism. Her commitment to securing the best value for her literary property involved, as the correspondence reveals, tactics which were variably piqued,

[9] See G. H. Putnam, 'Literary Property: An Historical Sketch', in G. H. Putnam (ed.), *A Question of Copyright: A Summary of the Copyright Laws at Present in Force in the Chief Countries of the World* (New York, 1891), pp. 35-95.

[10] Illiteracy fell to 5% in the 1890s according to Royal A. Gettmann, *A Victorian Publisher: A Study of the Bentley Papers*, Cambridge, 1960, p. 268. The death knell of the three-decker was sounded in 1894 by Mudies's Subscription Library and W.H. Smith who, supported by the Society of Authors, cited fairer reimbursement of the author and the convenience of the reading public as arguments for the one-volume form.

[11] For the most comprehensive history of the Society of Authors see Victor Bonham-Carter, *Authors by Profession,* 2 vols, London, 1978.

cajoling, affable, cautious or authoritative as the power dynamics between colluding adversaries shifted. As Steel carefully gauged the other agents in the literary marketplace, she adopted appropriate tactics and methods to advance her own interests, adapting to circumstances along the way, though sometimes with limited success. Such circumstances were also dictated by the longevity of her career and publishing interactions, which allows us to plot her business dealings into distinct stages from literary novice in the early 1890s through the high-water mark of a best-selling novel to a tailing off of productivity and reputation in the 1910s. The following discussion considers how the deferential female neophyte, the shrewd businesswoman and the detached artiste were all facets of the literary and business persona Steel constructed as she sought to navigate the precarious path between collusion, collaboration and confrontation in the fraught publishing milieu of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century.

'AN ABSOLUTELY UNKNOWN WRITER': LITERARY ASPIRANT, 1892-95[12]

Steel came to a literary career relatively late in life, having spent her formative years in British India, where a range of eclectic interests and pursuits had characterised her twenty years' residence. Steel's support of her husband's peripathetic career as a Deputy Commissioner in the Punjab, her reputation as a renowned domestic manager and hostess, her position as a pioneering inspectress of female schools and her keen participation in and sometimes criticism of Anglo-Indian life, warranted her some acclaim in her own lifetime

[12] FAS to Frederick Macmillan [hereafter FM], 9 Aug. 1892, British Library, London, Macmillan Archive [hereafter MA], MSS.54968.

and continue to attract scholarly interest in this 'unconventional memsahib'.[13] Steel's colonial encounter in India furnished her with knowledge and experience, images and ideas, which she translated into literary productions and her authorial career was generally grounded in the Indian milieu with which she was familiar. That said, when at the age of forty-two she returned to Britain permanently in 1889, Steel's literary experience was almost non-existent. Whilst in India Steel had brought out the domestic manual *The Complete Indian Cook and Housekeeper* (1888) with Grace Gardiner and *Wide Awake Stories* (1884), a collection of Punjabi folktales, but this was hardly a prodigious body of work with which to unleash her offensive on the British marketplace.[14] Despite the cultural capital accrued during her decades in British India and her acquaintance with a number of senior colonial officials such as Sir Charles Aitchison and Baden Henry Powell, Steel had neither social nor familial contacts that might assist her to break into specifically literary circles and in choosing to settle in Aberdeenshire on her return she was far removed from London's publishing scene.

In the absence of what Toril Moi has referred to as the 'relational power' of networks and influential literary friends, Steel's first foray into publishing in Britain appeared rather haphazard.[15] She dispatched the short story 'Lal', told from the perspective of a colonial revenue collector and set against the picturesque colour of native Indian life, to most of the

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[13] This epithet appears in the most recent re-evaluation of Steel in *Flora Annie Steel: A Critical Study of an Unconventional Memsahib,* ed. Susmita Roye, Edmonton 2017. For a sense of Steel's activities see, Nancy Paxton, 'Complicity and Resistance in the writings of Flora Annie Steel and Annie Besant', *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, ed. Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, Bloomington, 1992, pp.158-76; Rebecca Sutcliffe 'Feminizing the Professional: The Government Reports of Flora Annie Steel', *Technical Communications Quarterly*, Vol.7, No.2, 1998, pp.153-74; and Ralph Crane and Anna Johnston, 'Administering Domestic Space: Flora Annie Steel's *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook'*, *Empire Calling: Administering Colonial Spaces in Australasia and India*, ed. Ralph Crane, Anna Johnston and C. Vijayasree, Cambridge, 2013, pp.116-28.

[14] *The Complete Indian Cook and Housekeeper* was brought out by the Bombay Educational Press and *Wide Awake Stories* was later reissued by Macmillan in 1894 as *Tales of the Punjab*.

[15] Toril Moi, 'Appropriating Bourdieu: Feminist Theory and Pierre Bourdieu's Sociology of Culture', *New Literary History,* Vol.22, No.4, 1991, p.1025.

'minor magazines' of the day, all of whom rejected it, before she proffered it to more eminent publications such as *Macmillan's Magazine*, which not only accepted the story but requested more like it.[16] While this strategy was opportunistic in character, by choosing the short story as her first publishing venture Steel was displaying some canniness with regard to market demands, which favoured the short story as a fashionable literary form in the 1880s and 1890s.[17] The timing and subject matter of the story were also propitious. In her analysis of the short story collection in this period Claire Gill refers to the appeal of 'exoticised literary depictions of life in far-flung outposts of empire', while Florence Goyet claims that thousands of short stories at this time had 'exotic subjects at their core'. Indeed, Goyet cites *Macmillan's Magazine*'s keen solicitation of Rudyard Kipling's short stories as testament to the fashionablity of colonial subject matter in the 1890s.[18] By the time Steel's story 'Lal' appeared in the April issue of the publication in 1891, *Macmillan's Magazine* had published six of Kipling's short stories since December 1889, underscoring the trend for this particular genre.[19] Therefore, as a literary novice with no proven track record, evidence of a published short story catering so explicitly to contemporary literary tastes achieved a number of ends for Steel. It showcased real potential, it made the writer more marketable and potentially eased the progress and reception of subsequent full-length manuscripts, not to mention

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[16] Flora Annie Steel, *The Garden of Fidelity: Being the Autobiography of Flora Annie Steel 1847-1929*, London 1929, p.193. Steel also sent her early short stories to *Blackwood's Magazine*. She later noted to Colles 'Mr. Blackwood's reader told me I had no chance as a writer'. FAS to WMC, 8 Mar. 1896, Austin, Harry Ransom Research Center, University of Texas, Wolff Collection 6541 [hereafter WC].

[17] See Winnie Chan, *The Economy of the Short Story in British Periodicals of the 1890s*, New York 2007, pp.x-xiv.

[18] Claire Gill, 'Olive Schreiner, T. Fisher Unwin and the Rise of the Short Fiction Collection', *ELT* Vol.55, No.3, 2012, p. 323; and Florence Goyet, *The Classic Short Story*, Cambridge, 2014, p. 87.

[19] See Rudyard Kipling, 'The Incarnation of Krishna Mulvaney', *Macmillan's Magazine*, Vol.61, No.362, 1889, pp. 146-160; and 'Lal', *Macmillan's Magazine*, Vol.63, No.378, 189, pp. 452-455.

allowing the author to earn a small income from writing.[20] Although 'Lal' appeared as an unattributed short story, Steel's second offering 'Heera Nund' was published in *Macmillan's Magazine* under the authorship of 'F. A. Steel' in August 1891, and the publication went on to run eight more of her stories in ensuing years, all set against the Anglo-Indian backdrop which had attracted the magazine in the first place.

For Steel, the deployment of her short stories in *Macmillan's Magazine* functioned as a crucial point of entry to the parent publishing house. In the summer of 1892 Steel submitted her first novel manuscript to Macmillan, where it was dispatched for perusal by its magazine editor (1885-1907) and chief reader (1892-1899), Mowbray Morris.[21] The appearance of Steel's stories in *Macmillan's Magazine* and their favourable reception had paved the way for Steel's lengthier offerings to the publishing house. In his assessment of Steel's first novel-length submission – 'Legacy Duty' – Morris wrote:

> The author of this story is the author of those short tales of Indian life which have been appearing in our own magazine during the last twelve months – "The Bhut Baby" (in the July number). Heara Nund, Harvest etc. Perhaps his art shows better in the sketch than in the finished picture; but if, as I partly

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[20] During the early 1890s Steel was offered approximately £3.3 per thousand words by *Macmillan's Magazine* and Clement Shorter's *English Illustrated Magazine*, see FAS to WMC, 2 May 1894, WC. Prices for short stories varied; the *Strand* offered on average £5 per thousand words whereas the *Yellow Book* offered two guineas for the same word count, see Chan, *Economy of the Short Story*, p.93.

[21] On Morris see Hector Bolitho, 'Mowbray Morris: A Late Victorian Man of Letters', in *A Biographer's Notebook,*, London 1950, pp.157-98, and on his editorship of *Macmillan's Magazine* see George Worth, *Macmillan's Magazine, 1959-1907, 'no flippancy or abuse allowed'*, London, 2003, pp.157-70.

> gather from one of his letters to me, Legacy Duty (not a very happy title, by the way) be his first essay in the novel, it is certainly a promising one.[22]

While the *Macmillan's Magazine* stories were no guarantee of later publishing success, as tentative steps in the literary field they diminished the risk of Steel's 'first essay in the novel'.

As a reader, Mowbray Morris was one of the significant, if shadowy, gatekeepers of cultural production through whom manuscripts had to pass en route to publication. Notwithstanding Marie Corelli's acerbic depiction of the reader as either 'a gaunt, unloved spinster of 50' or 'a dyspeptic bookworm', the publisher's reader occupied an influential, if generally invisible, place in the literary field.[23] The significance of this role was not lost upon Steel, who acknowledged Morris as her 'literary godfather', transforming her status as an amateur writer into a fully-fledged author in the early 1890s.[24] For a writer to make an ally of the reader, opened at least one of the doors obstructing a manuscript's passage to publication, and taking a reader's advice and criticism on board turned the key in the lock a little more readily. Morris's reports on Steel's first two novel-writing attempts suggested a range of alterations and revisions which might make the manuscripts more appropriate for publication. Of 'Legacy Duty' he wrote: 'A little pruning, a little revision of language would greatly improve the general effect', and advised the author to alter the title, which he believed to be too gloomy, to *Miss Stuart's Legacy*, a suggestion which Steel grudgingly accepted.[25] His criticisms of her second manuscript, 'Red Rowans,' were sharper:

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[22] Mowbray Morris [hereafter MM], Reader's Report 7818 'Legacy Duty', 21 Jul. 1892, MA, MSS.55946.

[23] Marie Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, Oxford [1896]1996, p.43.

[24] Steel, *Garden of Fidelity*, p.194.

[25] MM, Reader's Report 7818 'Legacy Duty', 21 Jul. 1892, MA, MSS.55946.

> It has some serious faults, of construction, of language, and particularly of taste. Mrs. Steel has an unfortunate fondness for commonplace moralising, for affecting more learning than she has, and for employing trite French phrases, which she appears to conceive a mark of good society. She is a desperately slovenly writer … and has the most bewildering system of punctuation that ever set the laws of composition at deviance … you might at any rate return her manuscript and ask her to consider your reader's suggestions.[26]

Steel took Morris's report of her work very seriously, confiding to Frederick Macmillan: 'I have been working at the revision of "Red Rowans" in such leisure as I can find; but I fear it will take time to dispose of Mr. Morris's criticisms', but dispose of them she did and Macmillan's published the novel in late 1895.[27] Morris's role in negotiating the manuscript to press was the typical work of a reader who had to ensure that a piece of writing met with the standards, moral as well as grammatical and structural, of his firm. Steel complied with Morris's suggestions epitomising the author's sometimes unwilling collusion with readers in order to guarantee the publication of their work.

Whilst deferential compliance characterised the relationship which Steel had established with Morris, there was also a strongly gendered flavour to the connection. For three years she allowed Mowbray Morris, and Frederick Macmillan himself, to labour under

[26] MM, Reader's Report 8760 'Red Rowans', 31 Jan. 1894, MA, MSS.55950.

[27] MM, Reader's Report 7818 'Legacy Duty', 21 Jul. 1892, MA, MSS.55946.

the misconception that she was F. A. Steel, Esq.[28] In his first review of her work, Morris assumed Steel to be a male author, with an administrative background in India, surmising: 'The writer has lived long in the country – in some official capacity …. Perhaps his official experience leads him sometimes into details which might be thought tiresome …. But as a rule his Eastern knowledge is not aggressively nor irrelevantly exhibited'.[29] Morris was impressed by Steel's Indian expertise and sense of officialdom, which he erroneously equated with male credentials. Steel later gleefully recalled Morris's error in supposing her a man, commenting: 'There had been no reason why I should undeceive him, and the mystification of the public had amused me'.[30] While Steel never pretended to be a male writer in her correspondence, signing herself throughout her life as the ungendered 'F. A. Steel' to all correspondents, some design was clearly at work to prevent her undeceiving Morris, perhaps justly given the number of manuscripts from aspiring female Anglo-Indian authors Morris rejected in the early 1890s.[31]

For Steel, newly arrived in this literary marketplace, the decision to perpetuate the misconception surrounding her identity clearly helped assail the publishing hurdles her manuscripts encountered, but it was also an astute marketing strategy which heightened the profile of her name and reflected what Rachel Buurma has labelled an authorial 'individualizing technology' as well as the gendered self-fashioning which was common

[28] Steel, *Garden of Fidelity*, p.194.

[29] MM Reader's Report 7818 ''Legacy Duty', 21 Jul.1892, MA, MSS.55946.

[30] Ibid. Also see FAS to FM, 9 Aug. 1892, MA, MSS.54968, where Macmillan has written on the back of Steel's letter: 'F. A. Steel Esquire Accepts our offer of £200 for the entire copyright (including right of publication in Macmillan's Magazine) of 'A Legacy Duty'.

[31] Morris declined manuscripts from Mrs Edith Cuthell ('Indian Idylls' and 'Indian Memoirs') in May 1892, Miss Stogden under the penname Mary Edwood ('Life's Lottery') in May 1893, Mrs Pritchard ('The Chronicles of Budepore') in Nov. 1893 and Miss Dyan ('Through the Khyber and after') in Feb. 1894. See MA, MSS.55946, 55948, 55950 and 55951.

practice in this period, especially among female writers.[32] In the opening years of her literary career the identity of 'F. A. Steel' generated quite a literary and publishing stir. One review remarked of her short story 'Harvest': '"If this is not by Kipling, then it is by Diabolus"'.[33] Given the Anglo-Indian content of her short fiction, linking Steel's name with a writer of Kipling's stature and success was undoubtedly financially attractive. The silence Steel maintained on the subject added mystification which in all likelihood worked as a highly useful marketing device for publicising her name, building her reputation, and easing and enhancing the reception and price of her material, particularly in the niche market of Anglo-Indian literature.[34] The association of her work with Kipling did not go unnoticed by Steel and in a letter to the editor Clement Shorter she jestingly commented on 'those banal comparisons between me and a certain Mr Rudyard Kipling which are fast depriving me of my last hope in the critical faculty of my fellows …Well! Every Hindu god has his feminine "*sakti*" and the oddity of the idea attracts me'.[35] It also underscores the significance of naming, as Bourdieu asserts, 'the only legitimate accumulation [of cultural capital] consists in making a name for oneself, a known, recognized name.'[36] Acknowledging the importance of this capital, by 1893 Morris admitted in one his reader reports for Macmillan that the firm

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[32] Rachel Sagner Buurma, 'Anonymity, Corporate Authority and the Archive: The Production of Authorship in late-Victorian England', *Victorian Studies,* Vol.50, No.1, 2007, p.24. Also see Marysa Demoor, *Marketing the Author: Authorial Personae, Narrative Selves and Self-Fashioning, 1830-1930*, Basingstoke 2004.

[33] Steel, *Garden of Fidelity*, p.195.

[34] For more on Anglo-Indian literature see Edward Oaten, *A Sketch of Anglo-Indian Literature*, London 1908; Margaret Steig, 'India Romances: Tracts for the Times', *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol.18, No. 4, 1985, pp. 2-15; and Benita Parry, *Delusions and Discoveries: India in the British Imagination, 1880-1930*, London 1998.

[35] Letter from FAS to Clement Shorter, 16 Oct. n.d [1892/3], Brotherton Library, University of Leeds, Shorter Collection.

[36] Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, p.75.

could now 'allow some attraction in Mrs. Steel's name'.[37]

Despite initially corresponding with Morris and Frederick Macmillan from behind a presumed male identity, Steel's negotiations with the firm as an aspirant writer were often tentative and deferential. In Steel's first communication with Macmillan in 1892 her caution was tangible: 'The question of terms I always prefer leaving to those who, presumably, know more of marketable values than I do. Therefore, I invariably and contentedly accept whatever is offered me by experts. In the present case, I consider the sum mentioned, £200 for the copyright, quite sufficient'.[38] Steel, deploying the modesty card, acknowledged Frederick Macmillan's experience and on this occasion yielded the authority to value her first book-length manuscript of 'A Legacy Duty' to him. Many authors in the early stages of their career were frequently ill-equipped, even inept, when it came to managing finances, dealing with increasingly elaborate business arrangements, and estimating the price of their literary production. Writers whose business acumen did not match their literary abilities conducted their transactions with a certain degree of diffidence, and therefore had little option but to comply with hard-nosed publishers. However, in concluding her first letter to Macmillan, Steel was far from the timorous author. The letter tails off suggestively as Steel hinted: 'The book is a first venture by an absolutely unknown writer. Perhaps the next time – but that is forestalling the future'.[39] Steel revealed that she was not going to be quite the 'invariably and contentedly' passive negotiator her opening remarks implied and that she was already reasonably aware that publishing alliances could often be adversarial in nature.

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[37] MM Reader's Report of 'Wide Awake Stories', n.d 1893, MA, MSS.55950.

[38] FAS to FM, 9 Aug. 1892, MA, MSS.54968.

[39] Ibid.

As Steel's experience of the literary marketplace developed, subsequent correspondence with Frederick Macmillan displayed growing self-confidence, enough to hazard an improvement to the existing percentage for her American royalties in 1893:

> I have been beset by the world and its worries including the steady decline in silver securities. The latter must be my excuse for asking if you cannot see your way to a little rise in the American royalty. I know it only varies between 10% and 15% as a rule; but at the same time I think "Red Rowans" is a book which will sell infinitely better in a cheap form … [40]

In contrast to her earlier acquiescence, Steel's allusion to silver securities and her knowledge of American royalties set her up as *au fait* with the markets and, with some polite probing, she was shrewd enough to attempt to negotiate *a little rise* in royalties.[41] This confidence was further revealed when, within a year of Steel's initial transactions with Macmillan's, she was playing the literary field by accepting an offer from William Heinemann for a collection of stories she had also submitted to Macmillan's. In her letter informing Frederick Macmillan of Heinemann's purchase of the collection, Steel chided him for dragging his feet over negotiations and also made him aware of the enhanced prices the rival firm was offering.[42] Her professed knowledge of market values allowed Steel to negotiate more equitable rates,

[40] FAS to FM, 7 Feb. 1893, MA, MSS.54968.

[41] No memorandum for the royalty agreement between Steel and Macmillan's for *Red Rowans* exists in the Macmillan Archive, so it is difficult to ascertain whether Steel's gambit was successful. A letter to Morris Colles informs him that the firm was writing to America to enquire whether they could increase the royalty. See FAS to WMC, 24 Feb. 1894, ASC.

[42] FAS to FM, 7 Apr. 1893, MA, MSS.54968.

but it also alerted Macmillan to the fact that Steel did not intend to build her career upon author-publisher loyalty if it injured the prices her writing could achieve. Meanwhile, Macmillan, like all publishers, had to be vigilant in offering authors acceptable royalty percentages in order to retain their services or risk losing a potentially lucrative investment.

These developments demonstrate that as a colluding adversary Steel was not prepared to let the publisher have it all his way and showed her to be an adept businesswoman. By the autumn of 1893 Steel was testing the limits of these negotiating skills as she equivocated over where to send her next novel manuscript, 'The Potter's Thumb'. In this instance Steel chose to snub Macmillan, sending the work to Heinemann for first refusal. Steel's rationale for turning to Heinemann in preference to MacMillan was ostensibly the former firm's ability 'to push it better here and in America. The which is a great gain to a writer'. Nevertheless, the fact that Heinemann had offered £300 for the copyright of the manuscript compared to the £200 she had received from MacMillan for a book copyright but a year earlier, also factored into her manoeuvrings.[43] As a result Steel's correspondence with Frederick Macmillan at this time was alternately confrontational and apologetic. She opened one exchange sniping: 'I am very sorry – especially as you evidently either think me a fool, or – ', before regaining some epistolary composure. In more repentant mode in her next letter Steel admitted: 'You had the right to see "The Potter's Thumb" also. And I am very sorry to seem ungrateful'.[44] Steel's apparent ingratitude stemmed from what Frederick Macmillan perceived as her disloyalty of '"going elsewhere"'.[45] Despite the loyalty and exclusivity with which publishers like Macmillan regarded dealings with authors, by the late-nineteenth century the notion of a mutually-enduring relationship had been eroded by the amount of capital at stake in

[43] FAS to WMC, 16 Dec. 1893, WC.

[44] FAS to FM, 21 and 31 Dec. 1893, MA, MSS.54968.

[45] FAS to FM 18 Dec. 1893, MA, MSS.54968.

publishing.[46] If fair treatment was measured by money then, rather than being at the mercy of one publisher, writers like Steel, who considered themselves undervalued, had only one recourse and that was to take their literary merchandise elsewhere.

Steel's growing popularity and the involvement of an industry competitor, however, overcomplicated the relationship she had established with Macmillan. It would seem that in attempting to play one publishing firm off against the other Steel had tested her commercial capacities to their limits. Steel's failure to cope with two wrangling publishers became manifest in late 1893 when she sought to alleviate publishing pressures by employing a literary agent. In December of that year Steel approached William Morris Colles of the Authors' Syndicate, complaining: 'I am being somewhat harassed by publishers wanting my next novel'.[47] Steel, like many authors during the 1890s, sought to circumvent this problematic aspect of her literary production by delegating negotiations to an agent. In her introductory letter to Colles, Steel exemplified writers' motivations behind drawing on the services of an agent, informing him: 'My only excuse for thus troubling you being the fact that though I believe myself to be a good woman of business I have not a single friend in the Literary world and I know nothing of copyrights and royalties'.[48] Steel's appeal is redolent with feminine deference and *naiveté* and points up her negotiation of gender conventions as she simultaneously emphasised her business prowess and her vulnerability.

Despite contemporary animosity directed towards the emergent literary middleman and the perception that agents were parasitic and disruptive of author-publisher relations,

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[46] See Jonathan Rose, 'Was Capitalism Good for Victorian Literature?' *Victorian Studies*, Vol.46, No.3, 2004, pp.489-501.

[47] FAS to WMC, 16 Dec. 1893, WC.

[48] Ibid.

Steel's letter of introduction requests a literary friend, a significant conceptualisation of a relationship construed principally on business grounds and one which confirms Marrisa Joseph's assertion that it was 'difficult to distinguish the boundaries between paid agent and friendly service'.[49] Indeed, many of Colles's clients seemed to have conceived of their association with him in a similar vein to Steel, who considered his role as one of guardianship. New Woman authors Sarah Grand and Beatrice Harraden both envisaged this type of professional relationship, with the former telling Colles: 'It is a great blessing to have you to fall back upon for help in this most worrisome part of the business, the placing [of stories], which you do so perfectly, and so successfully. I do not know what I should do without you'.[50]

If Colles functioned as an emotional and practical boon to his authors, his dealings also screened the writer from sullying their literary and artistic pretensions by becoming too intimately exposed to mercenary considerations. In a letter early in her correspondence with Colles, she sets up the contradiction between compensation and reputation. Feigning the publishing *ingénue*, Steel asserted:

> Mr. Heinemann has not made me any offer beyond that of £300 "for the rights." I do not know what that implied, as I do not enter into the question … I am quite willing to leave the matter in your hands. I have neither the need, nor the desire to be grasping, and I should like Mr. Heinemann to understand this … I wish you also to understand that in

[49] Marrisa Joseph, 'Enter the middleman: Legitimisation of literary agents in the British Victorian publishing industry 1875-1900', *Business History*, Vol.60, Online, p.11 [accessed 2 Oct. 2019]. On the literary agent see William Heinemann, 'The Middleman as Viewed by a Publisher', *Athenaeum* No.3446, 11-18 Nov. 1893, p.663; James Hepburn, *The Author's Empty Purse and the Rise of the Literary Agent,* Oxford 1968; and Mary Ann Giles, *The Professional Literary Agent in Britain, 1880-1920*, Toronto 2007.

[50] Sarah Grand to WMC, 15 Aug. 1904, ASC.

> transacting business with publishers myself I have never once disputed a price.[51]

In dealing personally with publishers Steel seemed to find it difficult to disentangle her desire to maximise profit with notions of her artistic integrity and identity. For Steel, using Colles as an intermediary went some way to resolving these tensions. As Paul Delany has suggested, an agent allowed the author to 'relate to their publishers as ladies and gentlemen, and to the critics as disinterested artists, while leaving it to the agent to drive the shrewdest possible bargain for the literary property they had on offer', hence ensuring that their literary production was perceived as a creative enterprise rather than a trade.[52] By resorting to Colles, Steel was therefore making the best of the resources the current literary climate had to offer during a period of tentative career development and literary ambition.

From its inception Steel's relationship with Colles was construed as more collaborative than collusive, but even the closest of literary relationships could be adversarial, and Steel frequently rankled Colles by circumventing him and brokering negotiations herself. Steel seems to have written some leeway to negotiate for herself into her contract with Colles, and she reminded him that this had been one of the factors which had inclined her to employ him instead of the eminent agent A. P. Watt.[53] However, apart from Steel's sporadic autonomy, Colles remained Steel's 'unseen mentor,' dealing with all her contractual arrangements (particularly American copyrights), ironing out disputes, handling the fall-out

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[51] Within three months, Steel was stressing: 'you may sell; but for every penny you can screw out of them.' FAS to WMC, 21 Mar. 1894, WC.

[52] Paul Delany, *Literature, Money and the Market: From Trollope to Amis*, Basingstoke 2002, p.111.

[53] FAS to WMC, 27 Jun. 1912, ASC.

when some of her work was forged and remaining, as she had originally requested, her 'friend in the literary world'.[54] This professional friendship outlasted those with both her major publishers as the pair continued exchanging letters, business and personal, into the late 1910s, reflecting the careful trust/control nexus which Steel looked for in her literary transactions.

'A REAL LIONESS': LITERARY SUCCESS, 1896-1900[55]

By 1895 Steel had six books – two collections of short stories, her Punjabi folk tales and three novels – in circulation, not to mention the prodigious quantity of periodical fiction which Steel churned out, with the result that she had 'built up a sort of furtive half-reputation' which Arnold Bennett ascribed to the 'mild domestic novelist' of this period.[56] In the autumn of 1894 Steel had set sail for India to conduct research for her 'Epic of the Race'; an "Indian Mutiny" novel which had been a long-cherished project of hers and which would become her best-selling book, *On the Face of the Waters* (1896).[57] The resulting manuscript which Steel meticulously researched, having been granted access to the Punjab government's confidential boxes and 'waded through Kaye, Malleson, Holmes' and 'every book in the India Office', was written and revised during 1895 and early 1896. She claimed to have re-written one

[54] FAS to WMC, 20 Jun. 1894, WC. Steel's work was forged in 1912 by Henry Gubbins (author of the 1914 science fiction novel *The Elixir of Life*) and the matter was entrusted to Colles on 25 Jul. 1912. See letters from FAS to WMC, 21 Mar., 3 Apr., 18 Apr., 25 Apr., and 11 Jul. 1912, ASC.

[55] Steel, *Garden of Fidelity*, p.230.

[56] Arnold Bennett, *How to Become an Author: A Practical Guide*, London 1903, p.23.

[57] Steel, *Garden of Fidelity*, p.226, p.203.

chapter fourteen times, commenting: 'I was assailed by many fears. And as I scarcely ever consult anybody about my work, such as it is, and as none of my family have ever read my books until they are published, I had to take my courage in my hand'.[58] It is little wonder then that before the manuscript was fully completed Steel and Colles were in frequent correspondence on strategies for its future success. As far as prospective publishers were concerned Macmillan, her original backers, and Heinemann, who had published two of her books, were both considered by Steel and Colles to have a proprietary claim to the writer's latest offering, with Macmillan to be given first refusal.[59]

However, the main point of deliberation prior to the manuscript's completion was the potential for serialisation and its aptness for 'On the Face of the Waters'. For writers, the serialisation of a novel might bring between two and six pounds per thousand words, a remuneration that could certainly surpass a writer's earnings from publication in book form only.[60] In the case of 'On the Face of the Waters' Steel's concern was not primarily financial but rather her 'only reason' for considering serialisation was that the novel could, in consequence, be illustrated.[61] The illustration of her work was an issue over which Steel tried to keep tight creative control through considerable and repeated fastidiousness. Prior to the issue of 'On the Face of the Waters' serialisation Steel had harangued Colles on her stipulations for illustration and would have shared David Skilton's critical view that

[58] Steel, *Garden of Fidelity*, p.200.

[59] FAS to WMC Colles, 20 Jan. 1896, WC.

[60] On serialisation see Graham Law, *Serializing Fiction in the Victorian Press*, London 2000; and Catherine Delafield, *Serialization and the Novel in the Mid-Victorian Magazine*, Farnham 2015.

[61] FAS to WMC Colles, 20 Jan. 1896, WC.

'illustration affects the sheer mechanics of the reading of fiction'.[62] The failure of the *Windsor Magazine* to suitably illustrate one of her stories – 'A Danger Signal' – had compelled Steel to issue the injunction: 'I am going to burden all manuscripts of mine in future with the promise 1st. That illustrators, if any, must be submitted to me, so that they shall not outrage all known canons of art and probability. 2nd That I must see the last proof before printing'.[63] Editors and publishers, on the other hand, were not so willing to comply with such requests. Responding to Steel's insistence that she be permitted to approve the illustrations for the story 'At the grave and gate of death' the editor W.H. Wilkins of the *Ladies Realm* informed Colles: 'It would add a new fervour to an editor's life if every contributor wished to see proofs of his illustrations, and I could not undertake to do it'.[64] Steel's exactitude with regard to the presentation of literary property and the refusal to relinquish control over the aesthetics of her printed material characterised her relations with publishers and their illustrators throughout her literary career, and pre-empt a series of disputes as late as 1918 between the author and the renowned illustrator Arthur Rackham, which were conducted via a bitter epistolary exchange, with Sir Frederick Macmillan acting as mediator.[65]

By late March 1896 Steel reneged on the idea of serialisation entirely with the prospect that it would delay book publication.[66] She had determinedly refused to forward the

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[62] David Skilton, 'The Relation between Illustration and Text in the Victorian Novel: A New Perspective', in *Word and Visual Imagination: Studies in the Interaction of English Literature and the Visual Arts*, ed. Karl Josef Hōltgen, Peter Daly and Wolfgang Lottes. Erlangen 1988, p.305.

[63] FAS to WMC, 13 Dec. 1895, ASC.

[64] W. H. Wilkins to WMC, 13 Jan. 1897, ASC.

[65] FAS to FM, 5 Mar. and 10 Apr. 1918, MA, MSS.54968.

[66] Steel believed she could secure serialisation in *The Graphic* or *Pall Mall Gazette*, but not until 1898/99. See FAS to FM, 7 Mar. 1896, MA, MSS.54968.

manuscript to *Blackwood's Magazine*, stating as her reasons their previous refusal and criticism of her early work, and also refused to treat with Clement Shorter of the *English Illustrated Magazine* and the *Sketch*, who owed her £3 for a short story.[67] Of most pressing concern in her correspondence with Colles at this time was protecting the integrity of her manuscript which she felt serialisation might compromise. Repeatedly affirming her complete autonomy over the work, Steel explained to Colles: 'I have worked very hard at the book without the least reference to its success with the B.P. [British Public] or the critics or the editors, and it has to remain my book and not theirs!!'.[68] Colles, who as Steel's agent was most concerned with the commercial viability of the manuscript by placing it in an appropriate periodical, seemed to have missed Steel's possessive insistence on the manuscript's autonomy. Writing to him again, Steel maintained: 'I am half in doubt about serialising at all. It would drag it a bit, and only the illustrations attract me. I look on it you see as a real work, and however it may fail I've done my best work'.[69]

In her use of the phrase 'a real work', Steel distinguished this manuscript from her preceding literary production and from her willingness to collude with readers, publishers and editors if it ensured the publication of her writing, for, as she informed Frederick Macmillan, 'The book is more to me than a commercial enterprise'.[70] Emotional and professional attachment to 'On the Face of the Waters', as an ex-Anglo Indian for whom the "Mutiny" had special connotations and as a writer who felt it her finest work, meant that Steel sought to exert absolute control over her creation. As Gauam Chakravarty has argued, 'more than any other event in the British career in India the rebellion was the single favourite subject of

[67] FAS to WMC, 8 Mar. 1896, WC; and FAS to WMC, 26 Mar. 1896, ASC.

[68] FAS to WMC, 7 Feb. 1896, ASC.

[69] FAS to WMC, 20 Feb. 1896, ASC.

[70] FAS to FM, 7 Mar. 1896, MA, MSS.54968.

metropolitan and Anglo-Indian novelists' and the perceived fortitude, heroism and sacrifice of British combatants, bound up with the precariousness of British rule and the traumatic loss of civilian life (including women and children) which the "Mutiny" epitomised, continued to hold a fascination for the reading public.[71] Steel's interpretation, which followed the exploits of the British protagonists Kate Erlton and Jim Douglas as well as offering a native perspective of events in 1857, featured the "Mutiny" not just as a backdrop to an adventure romance, but as the subject of the story itself and eulogised the conduct of British troops in Delhi under the leadership of military hero John Nicholson. The novel tried to capture the epic proportions of the "Mutiny", and also seemed intended to compete with more formal, non-fiction analyses of 1857; it was 'at once a story and a history' as she told readers in the preface.[72] On completion of the manuscript Steel wrote again to Colles avowing: 'The book is finished. It may be bad, it may be good. But I don't alter a line of it except to please myself'.[73] This did indeed mark a distinction from Steel's previous publishing strategies, where she had suggested to Colles: 'If the 'Queen' felt attracted, I could easily re-write several portions so as to make it [the 1894 novel *Red Rowans*] more 'serial'; perhaps more 'serious'; bring the conversations more 'up to date' etc'.[74]

In the end, however, Steel did not have to endure any tampering with her manuscript. When the manuscript was sent to Macmillan Mowbray Morris, instead of cautiously

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[71] Gautam Chakravarty, *The Indian Mutiny and the British Imagination*, Cambridge, 2005, p.4. In the early 1890s the Mutiny continued to loom large for the British reading public. Fiction works included G. A Henty, *Julub, the Juggler*, London, 1893; and Hume Nisbet, *The Queen's Desire: A Romance of the Indian Mutiny,* London, 1893. Recent published personal accounts included William Forbes-Mitchell, *Reminiscences of the Great Mutiny,* London, 1893; and M. H. Ouvry, *A Lady's Diary Before and During the Mutiny*, Lymington, 1892. See also Christopher Herbert, *War of No Pity: The Indian Mutiny and Victorian Trauma*, Princeton, 2008, pp.273-88.

[72] Flora Annie Steel, *On the Face of the Waters*, London, 1915, first published 1896, Preface, p.i.

[73] FAS to WMC, 26 Mar. 1896, ASC.

[74] FAS to WMC, 24 Feb. 1894, ASC.

accepting the novel on the usual grounds that Steel carry out his recommended alterations and improvements, declined the manuscript outright, an outcome which Steel described as a 'knock-out blow'.[75] The decision did seem at variance with Macmillan's previous receptivity to Steel's work and Morris's six-page reader's report makes for interesting reading. In his assessment Morris found little to recommend that manuscript, slating it on every level and in particular Steel's treatment of subject and her execution of military history. Morris's own personal prejudices surface in his critique, commenting:

> That Mrs. Steel has taken all pains to succeed no one will dispute; but she has chosen a subject beyond her powers. For my own part I do not consider the Indian Mutiny a fit subject for fiction … the tremendous tragedy of it is too recent and too real to be twisted into a novel in this literal fashion. Certainly it is not a subject for a woman's hand.[76]

Morris viewed empire and epic, in the words of Graham Dawson, as 'predominantly a man's story,' both in the doing and in the telling.[77] His gender bias against a woman writer's capacity to deal with a military and historical theme reacts against what he perceived to be a threatening feminisation and fictionalisation of an event overtly associated with heroism and masculinity.

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[75] Steel, *Garden of Fidelity*, p.226. There does seem to be some confusion over Macmillan's rejection of 'On the Face of the Waters'. Although not dated, a letter from FAS to FM, which we can deduce by cross-referencing the address (Bramley Cottage, 4 Campden Hill Place) was sent during June 1896, implies that the publisher may have rethought the firm's rejection and made an offer for the book rights which Steel turned down. See FAS to FM, n.d. 1896, MA, MSS.54968.

[76] MM Reader's Report 10161 'On the Face of the Waters', 4 Jun. 1896, MA, MSS.55955. Italics mine.

[77] Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, London 1994, p.13.

Of Steel herself, he disparagingly remarked: 'Mrs. Steel's passion for local colour is indeed overwhelming. She uses it as a child uses its first box of paints, daubing them all over the paper', an evident reversal of his previous opinion on F. A. Steel, Esquire's 'Legacy Duty', which commended the author's shrewdness, clarity, and ingenuity.[78] Throughout his critique Morris reiterated this sense of feminisation, feminine inferiority and what is acceptable for a woman to write, concluding:

> ... even the most uncritical reader could not, I think be blind to its obvious faults – its length, its superfluities, its perplexities, its extraordinary language, its vulgarities, the triviality and the lightness of its motives compared with the greatness of its theme …. I cannot believe she will find an audience. She has written a vulgar epic; and a vulgar epic will be tolerated by neither gods nor men nor columns.[79]

The manuscript was declined on the 4 June 1896 and it was largely the firm's rejection of the book which soured publishing relations between Steel and Macmillan's for the next twenty years.[80] However, Steel had already found 'an immense believer' in the manuscript in William Heinemann, who expressed an interest in the "Mutiny" project since it had been mooted, and within days of Macmillan's decline Steel was negotiating a contract with him.[81] Financially, Morris came to regret his judgment when *On the Face of the Waters* promptly

[78] MM Reader's Report 10161 'On the Face of the Waters,' 4 Jun. 1896, MA, MSS.55955.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Business contact between Frederick Macmillan and Steel did not resume again until November, 1917 with a book proposal of English fairy stories. See FAS to FM, 13 Nov. 1917, MA, MSS.54968.

[81] Steel, *Garden of Fidelity*, p.227.

became a popular success as 'the public sprang at it without prompting'.[82] The novel was also warmly received by the critics and subsequently became a best-seller, going into six editions in 1896 and was re-published as one of Routledge's 'Hundred Most Popular Novels of the Century' series in 1898.[83] Although sales figures for the novel do not exist, the book's commercial success can be charted through its performance in the *Bookman*'s 'Monthly Report of the Wholesale Book Trade'. Between its release in November 1896 and December 1897 *On the Face of the Waters* featured in the top ten wholesale book sales, with the *Bookman* commenting in August 1897 that the novel had been 'remarkable for its continuance' and again in October that the book represented a 'more permanent demand than is a rule nowadays'.[84] Reviews from all quarters confirmed Steel's authority as a legitimate narrator of Anglo-Indian history and fiction. Kipling, writing to William Heinemann applauded: 'a "topper" – in my opinion *the* mutiny novel for which we have waited so long'.[85] The *Spectator* echoed the acclaim of the *Saturday Review*, *Daily Chronicle* and *The Times*, when it extolled: 'There is many an officer who would give his sword to write military history as Mrs. Steel has written the history of the rising, the siege, and the storm. It is the most wonderful picture'.[86]

Steel, with Colles assistance, had negotiated *On the Face of the Waters* to become one of the literary hits 1896/7. The book, however, still had to overcome the final hurdle of

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[82] Anon. 'Review of *On the Face of the Waters*', *The National Review* Vol.29, No.169, 1897, p.148.

[83] Reviews appeared in the *Edinburgh Review*, *Critic*, *Academy* and *Athenaeum*, from critics including Alec Waugh, Lockwood Kipling and A.C. Lyall. In Nov. 1896 Steel wrote: 'so far the criticism seems good' and later 'The book seems to be going well…all competent judges seem pleased.' See FAS to WMC, 20 Nov. 1896 and 3 Jan. 1897, WC.

[84] 'Monthly Report of the Wholesale Book Trade', *The Bookman*, Vol.12, August 1897, p. 112 and Vol.13, October 1897, p.4..

[85] Letter from Kipling to William Heinemann, 5 Nov. 1896, in ed. Thomas Pinney, *Letters of Rudyard Kipling,* Vol.2, Basingstoke 1990, p.270. (Italics Kipling's).

[86] An Indian Novelist', *Spectator*, 14 Nov. 1896, p.672.

publication in the United States. From her earliest encounters with Colles, Steel had been alert to the advantages of the American market and impressed upon him her desire to have her work promoted there. The huge English-reading audience was of course the attraction, as one contemporary, Augustine Birell, noted: 'a British author's thoughts wander in the direction of the setting sun – to America and Canada – where by vast leaps and bounds a population grows; where all can read, and where the English language is universally spoken'.[87] However, while the literary property of British writers was legally protected under the Chace Act, there were still discrepancies in the monetary worth their work was valued at in America. Although Steel stated that it was not purely pecuniary incentives which motivated her, she made it her personal crusade to achieve more than the standard 10 percent royalties for the American edition of *On the Face of the Waters*.[88] As she later wrote: 'I had come to the conclusion that ten per cent was not just. I was in no urgent need of money. My husband and I were not rich, but we had a sufficiency; so it appeared to me that I was by God appointed to make a stand for others. So I stood'.[89] Although Steel couched her offensive for appropriate American rights in terms of the greater literary good, her American dealings reveal a more acquisitive attitude to *On the Face of the Waters* than her preoccupation with the integrity of the British edition.

The episode is charted both in Steel's autobiography and in her letters to Colles in the autumn and winter of 1896/7. When the American publishers Colles had applied to on Steel's behalf refused to offer her royalties of 12 per cent, Steel made her 'stand'. In defiance Steel wrote: 'if the publishers wont [sic] deal I will print and copyright for myself… I am

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[87] Augustine Birell, *Seven Lectures on the Law and History of Copyright in Books*, New York [1899]1971, p.35.

[88] FAS to WMC, 10 Mar. 1894, ASC; and FAS to FM, 17 May 1894, MA.

[89] Steel, *Garden of Fidelity*, p.228.

independent of publishers really, because I do not write to get money. At the same time I mean to protect a book which is worth protecting in my opinion'.[90] Simultaneously staking her claim to literary integrity and commercial success, as she had done throughout the novel's progress, Steel stated her intention, a principle she honoured, of protecting her copyright by setting and printing the manuscript independently in the United States less than a week before the book's release in Britain, at a personal cost of £400. With the novel's instant success in the United Kingdom, Steel's risky decision to copyright and print herself proved a coup. Assisted by the novel's critical and popular reception in Britain, the value of her American copyright increased, and she self-righteously informed Colles that she would rather have the edition 'sent over here to light my fires with' than accept any terms lower than the holy grail of 12 percent; a figure she eventually achieved, ironically from MacMillan & Co., New York, who had only that year become independent from the British branch of the publishing house.[91]

In a subsequent letter to Colles, Steel's sense of triumph was palpable, exulting: 'I am more glad to have the Yankees on the hop than anything in my literary career'.[92] Although Steel couched her offensive for what she considered appropriate American rights in terms of the greater literary good, her objectives were also financial. As Delany has pointed out, 'Writers had to be interested in money, both as a force in society and as the reward for their enterprises, no matter how strict a line the genteel tradition tried to draw between literature and "trade"'.[93] This was a balance Steel struck successfully as she plied *On the Face of the Waters* literary and remunerative value. In February 1897 Steel confidently informed her

[90] FAS to WMC, 25 Jul. 1896, ASC.

[91] FAS to WMC, 4 and 5 Dec. 1896, WC; and Steel, *Garden of Fidelity*, p.228.

[92] Ibid.

[93] Delany, *Literature, Money and the Market*, p.13.

agent: 'the price I take now, will be my price for life. I am not likely to rise beyond my own high water mark'.[94] The success suffused Steel's publishing negotiations and saw her confront Constables & Co. over a manuscript (for *In the Tideway*) they had bought four years previously but had failed to publish, as well as pitting Macmillan and Heinemann against each other for the rights to her forth-coming novel, *Gift of the Gods* (a contract Heinemann succeeded in securing).[95] In a letter to Colles in the new year of 1897 Steel, in confident literary spirits, announced: 'I wish I had fifty books a year to dispose of! publishers would learn to deal straight if they wanted to get any of my work'.[96]

Steel's self-assurance also emanated from being advanced as a popular and critically-applauded writer. The success of her "Mutiny" novel functioned as a calling card, giving her access to the literary *beau monde*, as the symbolic and financial capital of *On the Face of the Waters* was converted into social capital. It would appear that Steel realised the importance of this literary sociability, having informed Colles in mid-January of 1897 that she would be in London for a week, Steel did a volte-face, notifying her agent that she would be taking a house in the capital for six months.[97] As she herself described, 'for the cold weather of '96 and the summer of '97 I was a real lioness' and she used this success as a springboard to attend literary dinners and institutions and as *entrée* to a number of literary clubs for writers of both sexes.[98]

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[94] FAS to WMC, 17 Feb. 1897, WC.

[95] On Steel's altercation with Constables see letters from FAS to WMC, 7 Feb., 17 Feb. and 29 Apr. 1897, and n.d. addressed Palace Gate, WC; and FAS to WMC, 19 and 20 May 1897, ASC.

[96] FAS to WMC, 18 Jan. 1897, ASC.

[97] FAS to WMC, 23 and 30 Jan. 1897, WC.

[98] Steel, *Garden of Fidelity*, p.230. See Gráinne Goodwin '"An Adamless Eden": counterpublics and women writers' sociability at the *fin de siècle* through the experiences of Flora Annie Steel', *Women's History Review* Vol.22, No.3, 2013, pp.440-459.

'A BROKEN REED': LITERARY DECLINE, 1900-13 [99]

Looking back in 1929 with the benefit of retrospect Steel claimed that 1900 marked the 'zenith of such reputation as I had achieved'.[100] In that year, with the success of *On the Face of the Waters* still current and her presence conspicuous in literary circles and women's writer associations, two more of her books appeared (*Voices in the Night* and *The Host of the Lord*). These two novels, however, were her last major publications for five years. In the interim Steel's attention was directed elsewhere. Steel herself was intermittently ill with severe laryngitis, what she referred to as 'those troublesome throat attacks', and spent at least one winter recuperating in Italy.[101] Steel's correspondence with Colles at this time was also characterised by excuses and pretexts for neglecting her writing, which Steel attributed to the precedence she gave to familial commitments, particularly her husband's health. Hal Steel suffered from a sense of claustrophobia in London and Steel later recounted 'it was sheer cruelty to keep him in towns'.[102] Hal's distaste for life in London also seems to have infringed upon Steel's literary sociability. At the very moment Steel might have been capitalising on her literary success she shifted her emphasis to familial issues which were injurious to her professional aspirations. In response, Heinemann was noted to be '"peeved" with her because she refused to live in London .... He seemed to think that not only was it

[99] Steel to WMC, 8 Oct. 1902, ASC.

[100] Steel, *Garden of Fidelity*, p.254.

[101] FAS to Mary Donaldson, 25 Dec. 1903, University of St. Andrews, Donaldson collection, MS7330.

[102] Steel, *Garden of Fidelity*, p.234.

good for the author's sales to be seen at first nights, but also for their work'.[103] In March 1903 Steel sent regrets to Colles regarding her future literary output, apologising: 'my social and domestic horizon looms a bit dark with manifold business which are fresh duties. My husband isnt [sic] over well … My daughter, too, threatens to come home sick. So it would be unwise to be too previous'.[104] This response would suggest that after inadequately fulfilling her feminine responsibilities in the flurry of literary activity and networking of the late 1890s, the new century saw Steel prioritise familial and domestic obligations instead.

The gendered way in which Steel envisaged the limitations placed upon her writing and her literary connections is apparent and prevented her from consolidating the professional gains she had made with the publication of *On the Face of the Waters* in the long term. Steel's tendency to frame her writing within the context of womanly duties was by no means unique. More than for male writers, domestic and familial forces were for women both the causes of and legitimate defences of any dearth in literary production. If feminine duties operated dually as an obstacle to work *and* the grounds for a gendered apologia, Steel also tried to invoke a sense of detachment from the financial incentives of writing to excuse her lack of literary labour. In 1902 Steel wrote Colles a revealing letter in which a number of complex emotions are discernible:

> I am afraid I am a most disappointing person, but – do you know dropping sales and ever waning popularity only make me laugh and feel satisfied. I cant [sic] compete with authors like John Oliver Hobbes for instance who permitted her publisher to entice the reading public by sops to their vulgarity

[103] Cited in C.A Dawson Scott's 'Review of *William Heinemann* by F. Whyte', *The Bookman* Vol.75, No.447, 1928, p.203.

[104] FAS to WMC, 11 Mar. 1903, ASC.

> and vice! There. I shall write when I can - and that may be never. I am not idle, I am working quite hard but not in a very visible way as yet. … I am sorry, again, to be such a broken reed – but I cannot be otherwise … I am a slow worker in some ways and there is no reason for hurry save pounds shillings and pence – and they don't appeal to me in the very least.[105]

Steel's initial feelings of remorse were surmounted by defaming the work of another popular writer, John Oliver Hobbes (the pseudonym of Pearl Craigie), who had had three best-selling novels three years in succession from 1901 to 1903. By deriding the general readership Steel also compensated for professional disappointment, whilst maintaining a wilful assurance that she would work to her own dictates regardless of the financial underpinnings of the literary marketplace. In prioritising her professed artistic credentials over purely commercial interests of 'pounds, shillings and pence', Steel's final remarks are reminiscent of her early negotiations in the literary field disavowing any desire to haggle and affecting what Bourdieu claims is an 'interest in disintrestedness'.[106] This line of defence was one which Steel resorted to on a number of occasions after 1900 by affecting her distaste of money as pretence for literary decline. Steel too hoped to exude the purists' indifference, with comments like 'I have learnt to take so little interest in that side of life which contains money getting and fame winning and even ease-giving'.[107] Due to her status as a predominantly popular writer, and one who had revealed (and would again) her preoccupation with the commercial side of literary life, in her attempts to 'suspend' her concern for remuneration

[105] FAS to WMC, 8 Oct. 1902, ASC.

[106] Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, p.40.

[107] FAS to WMC, 23 Aug. 1902, WC.

Steel was deluding only herself with such detachment.

Despite her protestations of idleness, Steel was not without work in the period 1900-1905. She was experimenting with writing a play and still occasionally producing short stories which she sent to Colles to place.[108] In addition, she was pursuing journalistic writing through a commissioned series for the *Saturday Review*.[109] However, by 1904-5 she was writing again in earnest, in preparation for the publication of two non-fiction books *A Book of Mortals* (1905) and *India* (1905) and the novel *A Sovereign Remedy* (1906). With the impending publication of these works 1905 saw Steel re-enter negotiations in the literary field with renewed vigour as she broke with the commercial disinterest which had typified her correspondence with Colles in the preceding five years. Nevertheless, Steel still had to contend with a five-year absence from book publishing, by which time *On the Face of the Water's* 1896 success, and with it her reputation, had been eclipsed. This inevitably impacted upon Steel's networking and negotiations, and manifested itself in her expressions of disillusionment with the publishing fraternity. Steel's exasperation as a writer whose career had waxed and was now tailing off was evidenced in the contractual quibbles which increasingly punctuated relations with her long-term publisher, William Heinemann, and were expressed to Colles as the third-party in this publishing triangle.

In switching publishing allegiance to William Heinemann permanently in 1896 the relationship which Steel and the publisher developed was perceptibly more symbiotic than arrangements with Frederick Macmillan had ever been. According to his 1928 biography of William Heinemann, Frederic Whyte claims: 'Of the eighty or ninety writers of fiction for

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[108] See letters from FAS to WMC, 8 Dec.1902, 24 Jan. 4, 16 and 28 Feb. 1903, ASC. The play had an Indian setting, but Steel gave no other indication of plot or characterisation.

[109] FAS to WMC, received 16 Dec. 1902, ASC. On Steel's journalism see Gráinne Goodwin '"I was chosen out as oracular": the *fin-de-siècle* journalism of Flora Annie Steel,' *Women's Writing* Vol.18, No.4, 2011, pp.505-523.

whom he published during the 'nineties, quite a large number came to regard him as a friend'.[110] Whyte also records one of Steel's recollections which fondly reminisced: 'My memories of William Heinemann are all pleasant; he was a good friend to me, and so long as he lived I was certain of sound advice and able administration of my affairs'.[111] Steel's own autobiography recalls hunting parties, dinners and his support of her *sortie* into suffrage tax resistance in 1912, offering further testament of the close friendship the two shared.[112] Whilst these retrospections give the impression that Heinemann's relationship with Steel epitomised all that was cordial and co-operative in author-publisher relations, the period between 1905 and 1912 witnessed a perceptible deterioration in the pair's business transactions.

Back in the early 1890s Steel had been complimentary about Heinemann's contractual arrangements and had commented on his even-handedness: 'It is very noble of him to say I may fix my own terms but I certainly shall not take advantage of it!'.[113] By 1905 Steel's attitude to her arrangements with Heinemann had become more begrudging with her adversarial attitude manifesting most clearly in discussions over the *The Book of Mortals: Being a record of the good deeds and good qualities of what humanity is pleased to call the lower animals*. As the subtitle suggests, this publication was an odd philosophical treatise on the relationship between humans and animals, the premise of which had limited appeal to Heinemann and was ambivalently classified under the 'miscellaneous' section of book listings.[114] Before signing the contract for the book Steel instructed Colles: 'I do not care, so

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[110] Frederic Whyte, *William Heinemann: A Memoir*, London 1928, p.100.

[111] Ibid, pp.108-110.

[112] Steel, *Garden of Fidelity*, p.265.

[113] FAS to WMC, 30 Jan. 1894, WC. The agreement was for *The Potter's Thumb*.

[114] FAS to WMC, 11 Mar. 1903, ASC; and Steel, *Garden of Fidelity*, p.260.

long as thirteen for twelve be [sic] struck out. I have never yet had it in an agreement and I am not going to begin it. I have spent £15 in illustrations that I have got and a very great deal more in research etc. So Mr. Heinemann has a good bargain'.[115] Steel objected to the 'thirteen for twelve' clause, which calculated prices in accordance with the standard trade discounts publishers offered, effectively granting thirteen books for the price of twelve. Steel had taken exception to this clause since the mid-1890s referring to it as a 'perfectly senseless stipulation' and repeatedly had the line removed from her contracts.[116] But even beyond this contractual wrangling, the publication of *The Book of Mortals* proved a real bone of contention between Steel and Heinemann. Steel refused to allow the book to be released in Heinemann's livery and also quarrelled with William Heinemann on an appropriate release date for the publication.[117]

The other focus for Steel's ire with Heinemann was the advertising policy of his firm. The publication of *The Book of Mortals* proved as contentious in this respect as it had in terms of its physical appearance. Steel's desire to see the book released in good time for the Christmas market of 1905 had already caused friction between Steel and her publisher. It had, in Steel's opinion, arrived too late upon the market and in February 1906 Steel was complaining that Heinemann's 'scarcely advertised the Book of Mortals at all. Out of say 100 people I meet 50 say to me – "Have you published that book on animals yet?" and are surprised to hear it has been out for three month'.[118] As a growth industry in late-nineteenth

[115] FAS to WMC, received 29 Aug. 1905, ASC.

[116] FAS to WMC, 10 Jun. 1896, ASC; and Colby 'What fools authors be,' p.142.

[117] FAS to WMC, 10 Nov. 1905, ASC.

[118] FAS to WMC, 20 Feb. 1906, ASC. Steel expressed her irritation at Heinemann's advertising policy concerning *The Hosts of the Lord* in the autumn of 1907, saying 'This isn't business and I am sick of publishers', see FAS to WMC, 31 Oct. 1907, ASC.

century Britain the literary marketplace had a close relationship with the advertising sector, with Bennett advising the aspirant writer that: 'An occasional diplomatic letter to the publishers in reference to advertisements may sometimes do good. An enterprising firm will advertise a book, especially a novel, four or five days a week in daily and weekly papers, for two and even three months'.[119] Predictably, publishers took a different view. Frederick Macmillan remarked sardonically that 'It is notorious that authors never see any advertisements of their own books'.[120] Advertising could prove a vital device in marketing books and therefore materialised as a constant sticking point between authors and publishers. Heinemann did invest in pushing *The Book of Mortals* throughout December 1905, but with reviews describing it as 'odd' and 'unsatisfactory and somewhat mystifying' he was probably right to restrict expenditure on a perplexing book which had limited saleability, despite Steel's protestations.[121]

Whilst much of Steel's dissatisfaction with Heinemann was palpable this was usually aired to her agent and channelled to the publisher through him. As Steel's correspondence with Colles indicates, misgivings about publishers were raised in this manner without challenging the publisher directly. Despite her estimation of Heinemann's 'sound advice and able administration,' Steel's later letters to Colles reveal that her retrospective praise did not always reflect her opinions on the service Heinemann provided as a publisher. Steel, in a number of letters from 1906 onwards, confided her uncertainty in the firm's abilities and writing to Colles she expressed that the company was 'losing grip somehow on novels' and

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[119] Bennett, *How to Become an Author*, p.189.

[120] Frederick Macmillan to Maurice Hewlett, *Letters to Macmillan*, ed. Simon Nowell-Smith, London 1967, p.249.

[121] For advertisements see *The Speaker* and *The Saturday Review*, Dec. 1905. A Baffled review appeared in *The Saturday Review*, Vol.101, No.2640, 2 June 1906, p.696.

of William Heinemann himself that he was 'remiss of late' and not 'working well at all'.[122] The niggles which had beset Steel's association with Heinemann in this period escalated and led to Steel venting her frustration and bemoaning the author's status as a disposable egg in the publisher's basket of wares. This exasperation saw her willing to break her relationship with Heinemann in 1908 over the novel *A Prince of Dreamers*, when she informed Colles: 'By all means let Edwin Arnold have it if Heinemann wont [sic] pay' and began ultimately abortive talks with Arnold, before reluctantly letting Heinemann have the book after he spoke with Arnold behind her back.[123]

To compound Steel's doubts about the service she was receiving from Heinemann she also held reservations about the firm's growing unsuitability for her publications. By 1911 Steel was commenting: 'for some time I have been a bit disgusted with Heinemanns [sic] books' and that she did not 'much care for the style of his novels now-a-days. He is becoming "a product of the age"'.[124] Belittling the Heinemann publishing house functioned as a strategy of displacement for Steel. While Steel declared herself aware that she did 'not write for the present reading public' she could excuse her own diminishing status by questioning the firm's reputation and by placing the style of her work at variance with the falling standards she perceived in the company.[125] These letters demonstrate Steel's efforts to renegotiate a place for herself in a reconfigured literary marketplace where her writing style and literary eminence were *passé*. In 1912 Steel acknowledged that her position in the field was becoming undeniably marginalised, explaining to Colles: 'I don't write much more. It

[122] FAS to WMC, 12 Mar. 1906, 1 Dec. 1908, and 11 Jul. 1912, ASC.

[123] FAS to WMC, 30 Jan. 1908, ASC.

[124] FAS to WMC, 19 Sept. 1911, ASC.

[125] FAS to WMC, 1 Dec. 1911, ASC.

isn't worth it. The world is too naughty. I am not in the least interested in secret women and coal strikes. Both are hideous and abnormal'.[126] Such a statement reveals what Bourdieu has dubbed the 'social ageing of authors'.[127] Steel at sixty-five, physically as well as socio-culturally ageing, was out of sync with the prevailing literary trends and the interests of the reading public, which she categorised in terms of sex and socialism. Critical reception to her later works, which were preoccupied with Mughal history, bore out this shift in literary tastes with the *Athenaeum* lamenting 'an excess of mysticism' in *A Prince of Dreamers* and the *Saturday Review* noting the 'peculiar scholarship' of *King-Errant* (1912).[128] This contrasted with earlier appreciations of Steel's writing which had lauded its exotic subject matter and historical rigor. With changing tastes and the changing nature of her work, which increasingly focused upon using the Mughal past to address 'the troubled British Indian present', Steel seemed resigned to her literary decline, refocusing her efforts on women's suffrage activism, which by 1910 had superseded her authorial interests and energies.[129] Despite this, Steel stayed with Heinemann. He continued to publish her material with a steadfastness that Steel's letters failed to appreciate and it was she who remarked rather disingenuously in 1912 that 'somehow it is difficult to break from an effusive publisher'.[130]

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[126] FAS to WMC, 15 Mar. 1912, ASC.

[127] Bourdieu, *Field of cultural Production*, p.187.

[128] '*A Prince of Dreamers*', *The Athenaeum*, No.4240, Jan. 1909, p.27; '*King-Errant*', *The Saturday Review*, Vol.114, No.2976, Nov. 1912, p.649.

[129] Adam Padamsee, 'The Politics of Sovereignty and Violence in Flora Annie Steel's *A Prince of Dreamers*' *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol.58, p.24.

[130] FAS to WMC, 15 Mar. 1912, ASC.

CONCLUSION

Steel's status as a literary light had unquestionably dimmed by the 1910s. Nevertheless, as a veteran novelist she continued to write.[131] She is therefore an ideal exemplar of how a 'slowly built career is nearly indestructible; neither time nor decay of talent nor sheer carelessness will quite kill it.'[132] This analysis has viewed the publishing world from the perspective of one writer's slowly-built career, revealing along the way the historical changes and personal vagaries which came into play when negotiating the literary field. By adopting this long view and taking a career perspective we can gain new vantage points on the literary field, even if the inter-positional power struggles within it remained constant. Steel aptly illustrates the relationships and commercial skills writers developed in order to conduct the business aspects of their profession successfully, but she also reveals how these relationships fluctuated over time and according to prestige. The publication and success of *On the Face of the Waters* proved the watershed in her career. Almost eight years after its triumph, Steel was still capitalising on her reputation from the book. She urged Colles to secure a better deal for a short story, reminding him: 'I think most people recognise me as "On the Face"'.[133] Once made, her reputation was a durable commodity, even if she could not quite demand the sums or literary status she had in the heady days of 1896/7 and as a consequence had to invoke a sense of detachment from the financial incentives of writing to cope with this decline.

Steel's quotidian dealings with other players in publishing have also featured

[131] Steel produced another ten books between 1913 and 1929.

[132] Bennett, *How to Become an Author*, p.20.

[133] FAS to WMC, 2 Mar. 1905, ASC.

prominently here and they illustrate how the day-to-day correspondence of writers can, as Levy asserts:

> … tell us a great deal: about women's motivations for print; about their bargaining savvy (or lack thereof); about the financial agreements that were negotiated and the business models adopted by publishers; about the division of labor between authors and publishers; about the nature of the social and professional interactions between male publishers and female authors.[134]

Steel's letters reveal how she worked to achieve authority, validation, and credibility, a task she courted with determination. She did not shy away from conflict even if a recalcitrant publisher obstructed her path to securing monetary worth. She maintained control of significant elements of her work and sometimes drove hard bargains with agents and publishers. Her commitment to securing the best market value for her literary property also involved tactics which were variously combative, wheedling, cordial, obsequious and authoritative. During a newspaper interview in 1914 Steel was asked to describe her experience of authorship. In reply she claimed: 'I have never had any difficulty. I have always been asked for my books and tales. I have been surprisingly successful'.[135] While we might put Steel's rather rosy account of her literary career down to authorial image management, this exploration has exposed the complex literary negotiations, identities and

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[134] Levy, 'Do women have a book history?', p.302.

[135] Anon, 'An English Novelist in Jamaica', *The Gleaner* (Jamaica), 30 Mar. 1914.

publishing asymmetries which were masked by her confident claim. In the process, it offers a better understanding of the business of authorship and its gendered, commercial, aesthetic and social dimensions through one popular writer of the *fin de siècle*.