

WRITING FOR THEIR LIVES: WOMEN APPLICANTS TO THE ROYAL  
LITERARY FUND, 1840-80

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by

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## Introduction

While a very few female writers in the Victorian age have received careful attention from historians of both literature and culture, the great mass of women authors has largely been ignored. This neglect has come about for a number of reasons. Included among them are a tendency to assume that the forgotten are not significant, a belief that an understanding of the second rank is unnecessary, and probably most importantly, the lack of even the most basic biographical information for many of these women. Because minor writers, described by Elaine Showalter as "the links in the chain that [binds] one generation to the next", have been lost sight of, it has been difficult to gain any reliable sense of the relationship between the lives of women writers and the economic and social status of that "singular anomaly", the authoress.<sup>1</sup>

The traditional focus on great writers is probably justifiable when considering times in which reading was confined largely to a well-educated and wealthy minority. However, with the Victorian age in question, it is necessary to expand the examination of authors to include those who, as more people began to read, provided the newly literate

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<sup>1</sup> Elaine Showalter, A Literature of Their Own: British Novelists from Brontë to Lessing (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 7.

classes with their reading material, and through it, with an important part of their cultural education.<sup>2</sup>

Three important attempts to place Victorian authors in a socioeconomic and cultural context have been made in recent years. The earliest of these was R. D. Altick's study "The Sociology of Authorship", published in 1961. Altick's examination of Victorian authors, both male and female, is based entirely upon the information included in the third volume of the Cambridge Biography of English Literature. Important and useful as this analysis is, there are three troubling flaws in the work from the point of view of those concerned with the condition of all women writers in this period. First, Altick's sweeping assumption that the CBEL includes "all but the very lowest stratum of hacks" is open, at the very least, to serious question.<sup>3</sup> Another limitation is the restricted range of inquiry undertaken by Altick--concerned primarily with social class and education, his study contains no information on questions such as writers' marital status, publication record, or income. A third problem is that women, except in the area of education, are not treated by Altick as a separate group. With the rather rigid sex-role expectations typical of the Victorian age, it

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2 R. D. Altick, "English Publishing and the Mass Audience in 1852", in Studies in Bibliography 6 (1954), pp. 4-6.

3 R. D. Altick, "The Sociology of Authorship: the Social Origins, Education, and Occupations of 1,100 British Writers, 1800-1935", In The Bulletin of the New York Public Library, LXVI (1961), p.391. See also Nigel Cross's comments on Altick's assumptions in this regard in his introduction to The English Common Writer.

may not be justifiable to assume that male and female writers shared a completely common experience as professionals.

In the mid seventies Elaine Showalter published a study focused exclusively on women writers, from Brontë to Lessing. Based on her doctoral thesis in literary history, it is provocative and able, but from the viewpoint of the historian the work suffers from a surfeit of theory and a paucity of fact. Although Showalter obviously did a great deal of biographical research, it is only referred to in passing in her discussion of these writers. Showalter's book also suffers from the perennial tendency of much literary history to focus on the great names in the Victorian corpus. This failing is largely unavoidable due to the span of time, extending for over a century, covered in the work.<sup>4</sup>

The latest study of the condition of the Victorian writer is the work of Nigel Cross with the archives of the Royal Literary Fund, a charity which gave money to impoverished writers. Cross's work is unique in that it deals with the great mass of the second rank of writers to a greater extent than it does with the literary stars. He devotes one chapter of his book to women writers in New Grub Street, but his conclusion that women in the literary world

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<sup>4</sup> In this study attention has been focused on women who made their first application to the RLF between 1840 and 1880. This period has been selected for a number of reasons, including the dominance of the three-volume novel and the relative stability of the publishing industry at this time, and the fact that the RLF instituted a standard application form in 1840 which was used with only minor changes until the end of the century.



received the same treatment as men does not seem to be borne out by his own research. Moreover, Cross's discussion of women is necessarily somewhat general, leaving unanswered many of the same questions as Altick's.

Perhaps the justification for a study of this sort is best summed up by Richard Altick's comment on the question of the socio-economic background of Victorian authors: "In a debate as important and complicated as this one is, it is always useful to have some dependable facts, however prosaic, to refer to".<sup>5</sup> It is the purpose of the following study to provide some facts, many of them prosaic, pertaining to the literary experience, economic status, and social condition of Victorian women writers.

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<sup>5</sup> Altick, "Sociology", p. 404.

## The Royal Literary Fund: Its Nature and Function

The Royal Literary Fund was established in 1790 as a charity whose object was the relief of impoverished writers. In 1841 its purpose was described as the administration of

assistance to deserving Authors of established literary merit, who may be deprived by accident, disease, enfeebled faculties, or declining life, of the power of literary exertion; and to afford some relief to their widows and orphans. In the application of this liberality, the utmost caution is used both as to the reality of the distress and the merits of the individual. No writer can come within the views of the Society who has not published a work of some intelligence and public value; and all are excluded whose writings are offensive to Morals or Religion.<sup>1</sup>

The criteria for assistance from the Fund were therefore literary merit, indigence, and moral rectitude.

The membership of the RLF was made up of subscribers<sup>2</sup>, who then had the right to elect the committee. The committee managed the Fund, as well as selecting the chairman, registrar (or secretary), and treasurer. The charity's funds came from donations, legacies, and the profits of var-

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1 Royal Literary Fund, Address for the Anniversary Festival of the Incorporated Literary Fund Society, May 12, 1841. London, 1841, p. 1.

2 All those who donated money to the RLF were classed as subscribers. Membership lasted one year per donation. Although many subscribers were women, no woman served on the committee in this period.

ious fund raising events. The Council, composed of former committee members, in theory monitored the committee for abuses, but in actual practice their policing function was secondary to their role as bait for subscriptions. As with other Victorian charities, it was important to have as many famous names on the Council roster as possible in order to attract contributions. Titled and famous individuals were avidly courted in order that the letterhead of the charity should have the needed cachet. Presumably the ordinary people who then contributed to the charity could feel some sort of identification with those members of the upper ten thousand who allowed their names to be used in the good cause. However, the single most important individual in the organization of the RLF was the secretary--non-elected and salaried, he could become a person of great influence in the literary world. The secretary who made the most lasting imprint upon the organization was Octavian Blewitt, who was secretary from 1829 until his death in 1884.

The nature of Victorian charitable organizations has often been misunderstood, and the motives of Victorian charity misjudged. The nature of the charitable transaction is worth examination in itself, but in this context it will be examined only in the form it took in the Royal Literary Fund. The RLF in the mid-Victorian period was viewed as something of a 'soft touch' among the charities of the day, because it gave large grants, was susceptible to a pathetic story, and did not often resort to the rigorous investiga-

tions of other groups, many of whom regularly consulted the reports of the Mendicity Society. (One of the perennial minor annoyances of the Fund was the tendency of authors, when pleading in newspaper advertisements for charitable donations from the public at large, to use the fact that they had been relieved by the RLF as a proof of their *bona fides*.)

Of course, there were always individuals who viewed any inquiry into their applications as an infringement of their privacy, or as a slur upon their honesty. The well-known and successful author "Holme Lee" (Harriet Parr<sup>3</sup>) reluctantly applied to the Fund in 1872 but almost immediately changed her mind and asked that her application be withdrawn, writing in explanation:

On the whole, I would much rather keep my own and their [her friends] respect, for myself & my profession, & work on til I break down, when I daresay that compliance with the rules of the Literary Fund would come easier--... I shall have better courage without the millstone of charity around my neck.

Richard Jefferies felt the same revulsion at being asked to supply references to the truth of his word as had Parr. He wrote "But the Royal Literary Fund is a thing to

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3 Case No. 1872, Archives of the Royal Literary Fund, 1790-1918, London: World Microfilms Publications, 1982. Because applicants frequently neglected to date their correspondence with the RLF, and Blewitt did not date the notes he made in the files, often all that can be ascertained is the year of application. This is the only dating that will be used, unless more accurate dates are available. Letters are not paginated unless page numbers are indicated on the original.

accept aid from which humiliates the recipient past all bounds; it is worse than the workhouse."<sup>4</sup> For Mrs. J. H. Riddell's autobiographical heroine in The Struggle for Fame, resorting to the RLF was depicted as a sure sign of abysmal failure. The publisher Laplash tells the heroine, "Novel-writing's not a gold mine, and if it were, you're not the woman to dig out the gold. I can see very plainly what the result of your career will be. You'll have to apply to the Royal Literary Fund, and then you'll see whether you like their terms better than mine."<sup>5</sup>

Others hesitated to apply because of their reluctance to accept charity. Ellen Forrester,<sup>6</sup> a crippled poet and millworker, whose primary support was the wages of two daughters who also worked in the mill, delayed until her necessity was urgent. She explained to the committee in 1872 that the economic depression in Manchester had exacerbated their difficulties:

Thus helpless, and with scarcely any income except the wages of the girls--one in delicate health, and one little more than a child [aged 14]--we have sunk step by step into deep poverty. Furniture, clothes, the very beds from under us have gone before I thought of asking for charity.

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4 Cited in Victor Bonham-Carter, Authors by Profession (London: Society of Authors Press, 1984), pp. 147f.

5 J. H. Riddell, The Struggle for Fame, London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1883, vol 3, p. 329.

6 Case No. 1902.

It must be remembered that although some saw the nature of the charitable transaction as demeaning, many more did not. After all, 1094 individuals applied to the Fund between 1840-1880, some of them many times. The sheer volume of applications indicates that the receipt of charity was not an unthinkable act in the middle class.<sup>7</sup> It must also be remembered that the RLF was less onerous than many charities, in the sense that it was a professional charity; since only published authors were allowed to apply, there was a degree of entitlement involved which more universally benevolent groups lacked. These individuals had, or believed they had, a recognized claim upon their profession.

When an application was received at the offices of the RLF, it was turned over to the Secretary, who in this period was Octavian Blewitt. He, drawing upon his encyclopedic knowledge of the gossip of the literary world, would examine the application in order to ascertain if there were any inconsistencies or dubious statements that warranted special investigation. This could include whispers of an irregular living arrangement, an unlikely date of birth, or the claiming of a book commonly believed to be the product of another writer. If all was in order, the letters of reference supplied by the applicant would be read, as well as the letter

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7 The RLF brought itself to the attention of prospective applicants through newspaper advertisements. The long reports of the annual dinner carried in some newspapers also served as a form of advertisement. Naturally, news of the RLF's resources traveled through the literary grapevine, and Blewitt would also occasionally invite a deserving candidate to apply.

written by the applicant herself, which normally accompanied the form. If no irregularities appeared, the references were not contacted, nor was the applicant required to appear before the committee. The committee would vote upon acceptance or refusal, and attach a money value to the successful applications. Blewitt would then write the applicants, informing them of the result of their applications, and telling them how the money would be paid out.

Grants were usually in the form of a lump sum, unless the committee had reason to believe that installment payments were more suited to that particular case. Installment payments were usually given to drunkards and the notoriously improvident, although they seem to have been given more ordinarily to women, presumably on the premise that women were inexperienced in the handling of money, or out of the fear that the grant might fall into the hands of unprincipled men. The average grant received by both male and female applicants in this period was £30, although more female applicants received £20 than any other sum. Thirty pounds was a substantial sum of money indeed, especially when given in charity, and the typical RLF grant in no way deserves Cross's slighting epithet of "miserly".<sup>8</sup>

The nature of the information demanded by the Fund was detailed but not unusually prying by Victorian standards. Blewitt seems to have been intensely curious and rigorously

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<sup>8</sup> Nigel Cross, The Common Writer: Life in Nineteenth-Century Grub Street (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 32.

moralistic but essentially kindhearted--if he became interested in a case he would do his utmost, in his private as well as in his public capacity, to alleviate distress, whether it be by a gift of his own money, finding employment for a son, or recommending a new publisher. However, it must be kept in mind that he was a rigidly moral man, with an irreproachable private life, and he demanded no less from his unfortunate authors. As Blewitt expressed it in 1853, "something more than talent, however brilliant it may be, is invariably exacted....every author, without exception, is excluded ...whose personal character is not proved by satisfactory testimony to be beyond suspicion."<sup>9</sup> Widows were asked to produce a marriage certificate, although widowers were not; failure to produce a certificate resulted in the disqualification of several applicants. But this requirement simply mirrored the attitudes of the time.

Occasionally, however, the decision of the committee would raise a storm of indignant protest from the rejected claimant. One of the most interesting of these was Mary Ann Bird,<sup>10</sup> who probably lost her grant due to her frankness in explaining the reason for her separation from her husband. Instead of accusing him of adultery or mistreatment (these grounds usually gained the sympathy of the committee) she described the reason as "general unsuitability". When her

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9 Royal Literary Fund, Report of the Anniversary (London: John James Metcalfe, 1853), p. 3.

10 Case No. 1713.



otherwise well-founded 1866 claim was refused, she wrote a strong letter to the committee, saying in part:

I supposed also that my claim upon assistance from the Fund (if I had any) was grounded on the fact of my being a literary person in distress....Does it not seem very hard that, because I am placed in the saddest position that a woman can be in, (for what is actual widowhood compared with it?) I am therefore denied the help that I might otherwise obtain.

Bird's letter makes it clear that for some applicants at least, the sense of entitlement was very strong. She based her claim principally upon merit, rather than upon general dilapidation.

The size of the grants bestowed by the RLF fluctuates for a number of reasons, making it difficult to compare grant sizes in any meaningful way. The committee took their evaluation of the literary merit of the writer's works into consideration as well as the publication record and perceived need of the applicant. Very small grants were sometimes given to writers who were avowedly inferior, but who scored high in the areas of necessity and virtuous conduct. Small grants were also given to applicants whom the committee wished to tactfully discourage from reapplying. The treasurer would sometimes accompany the payment of the grant to individuals in these categories with the verbal intimation that the money thus given exhausted their claims upon the charity. During the period from 1840 to 1880 the

Fund never failed to bank a comfortable surplus, so that the financial status of the charity itself does not seem to be an important consideration in the evaluation of grant size.

Table 2.1

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 SIZE OF RLF GRANTS TO FEMALE APPLICANTS 1840-80  
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grant size in £	no.	total in £	(%)
10	31	310	8.7
15	31	465	8.7
20	68	1360	19.2
25	47	1175	13.2
30	61	1830	17.2
35	2	70	.6
40	54	2160	15.2
45	3	135	.8
50	32	1600	9.0
55	--	--	--
60	18	1080	5.1
65	1	65	.3
70	3	210	.8
75	--	--	--
80	2	160	.6
85	--	--	--
90	--	--	--
95	--	--	--
100	2	200	.6
totals:	355	10,820	100.0

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In total, there were 454 applications from 164 distressed female authors in the years 1840-1880. Of these, two withdrew their applications before a decision was made, and 97 applications were rejected. Naturally, those whose first applications were rejected were less likely to reapply than were more fortunate applicants. This must be kept in mind lest the raw data alone make the RLF seem overly generous. The average number of applications per individual is 2.8. Therefore, it may be more proper to say that 78

percent of applications (not applicants) were successful. Forty-nine percent of successful applications received from £20 to £30. Sixty-four percent of successful applications received between £20 and £40, and 73 percent of successful applications were eligible for grants ranging from £20 to £50. The 108 successful applicants (success being defined as receiving at least one grant from the Fund) applied 3.6 times, on average. The number of times successful applicants applied ranges from one to 17. Among the 55 women who received no RLF assistance, four applied twice, and one three times. Overall, 66 percent of applicants were successful at least once, and 33 percent never received a grant.

## Writers and the Victorian Book Trade

In the nineteenth century the population of England increased from 10 million to almost 40 million. At the same time, the proportion of male literates had increased from 67.3 percent in 1841 to 86.5 percent in 1881.<sup>1</sup> Because the reading public for books published in England had grown so enormously in the same period,<sup>2</sup> the market for books, and therefore the opportunities for writers of books, mushroomed. Linked to this was an important economic fact. In 1850-51 100,000 families had an annual income of over £150, with 83,000 of these having incomes of between £150 to £400 per year. By 1879-80, this segment of the population had increased to encompass 285,100 families.<sup>3</sup>

Along with the increases in population, the growth of the middle class, and the improvement in literacy, came a demand for edifying instruction and a mania for self-improvement. As leisure increased in the middle classes, so did the demand for amusement and occupation that was, if not

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1 Female literacy always lagged slightly behind. It increased from 51.1 percent to 82.3 percent in the same period. Richard Altick, The English Common Reader (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 171.

2 Besant estimated that this group grew from 50,000 in 1830 to 120,000,000 in 1890. These numbers, although suggestive, can hardly be based on anything other than the merest guesswork. Walter Besant, The Pen and the Book, (London: Thomas Burleigh, 1899), p. 43.

3 Leone Levi, Wages And Earnings of the Working Classes (London: J. Murray, 1885).

profitable (in both a moral and a fiscal sense) at least innocent. Heavily influenced by evangelicalism, this class tended to view many forms of entertainment as dubious at best. Reading was an obvious way to avoid spending one's increasing free time in possibly mischievous idleness.

As a result of increased demand, and to a certain extent feeding it, books were being published at an increasing rate throughout the second half of the century. In the 20 years before 1855, 46,140 books were published, and in the six years to 1862, 21,360 more were added to publisher's catalogues. 45,000 more were listed by 1871, and by 1880, another 60,000 were available.<sup>4</sup> By 1855 Hodson's Book-sellers, Publishers, and Stationers Directory was able to list 372 publishing firms in London alone. In 1860, within the limits of the city, there were 566 booksellers, 211 booksellers who were also publishers, and 45 specialty booksellers for a total of 812.<sup>5</sup> It is evident that providing the public with reading material was an expanding business that employed huge numbers of people. Central to this industry were the authors, who marketed the products of their minds to English readers through the medium of the publishing industry.

Seven houses monopolized the first rank of the publishing field between 1840 and 1880. These were Chapman and

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4 Edward Marston, After Work: Fragments from the Workshop of an Old Publisher (London: William Heinemann, 1904), p. 39.

5 American Literary Gazette and Publishers' Circular, 1 January 1864, p. 171.

Hall, Bradbury and Evans, Macmillans, Longmans, Smith and Elder, Bentley, and Blackwood. Only the largest publishing firms had the flexibility, vision, and financial resources needed to recognize and promote talent. Without a capable publisher the writer could not hope to lift herself out of the class of writers who lived from one small-scale edition to the next.<sup>6</sup> Less reputable, but also employing large numbers of authors, were Hurst and Blackett, Tinsley, Busby, and Newby.

During the Victorian age, there were four principal modes of publishing. The library editions were three volume issues of new novels, and were not designed for purchase by individual readers, given their prohibitive selling price of 31 shillings sixpence, which was roughly the weekly wage of a skilled artisan.<sup>7</sup> The three volume format, demanded by the circulating libraries for the obvious reason that it maximized their profit,<sup>8</sup> remained the norm for new fiction publication until the 1890s. Its prohibitive price ensured that printings would remain small, with the average edition size of a new novel being 750 copies.<sup>9</sup> "Rita", (Mrs. Desmond Humphries) a popular novelist, explained the finan-

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6 J.A. Sutherland, Victorian Novelists and Publishers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 44.

7 Gertrude Himmelfarb, The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age (New York: Knopf, 1984), p. 411.

8 Volumes were circulated one at a time. Subscribers who wished to take home more than one volume per visit were required to pay an extra fee.

9 Altick, The English Common Reader, p. 263.

cial consequences to the writer of "that absurd three-volume fashion consecrated to the circulating library"--"No one, of course, thought of buying a three-volume book. They were content to read it, and if they liked it well enough would wait for its reappearance in a cheap edition."<sup>10</sup> The demands of the three volume format could affect the writer's sense of literary integrity as well. Frequent complaints that padding the novel to the requisite length was onerous and dulled the merit of the work were heard throughout the century. But it was a buyer's market, and publishers were not interested in shorter works. (Mrs. Gaskell was a fortunate exception to this rule. Married to a Unitarian clergyman in Manchester, she had the personal and financial security necessary to be above haggling over the price of her work, and she used this freedom to ensure the artistic integrity of her novels. Longmans paid her £150 for the copyright of the bestselling Mary Barton, but when they requested that she lengthen the novel so that it would fit more comfortably into the three volume format, she offered to forgo payment entirely rather than add material which might weaken the novel's impact.<sup>11</sup> This dedication to the art of the novel was a luxury that few applicants to the RLF could afford.)

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10 'Rita' (Mrs. Desmond Humphries) Recollections of a Literary Life (London: Andrew Melrose Ltd, 1936), p.43.

11 Sutherland, p. 96.

Part-issue publication was popularized by Charles Dickens' 1836 publication of the Pickwick Papers in monthly shilling numbers. Publishers quickly perceived that the public would spend the equivalent (or more) of the three volume price if the book were issued and purchased on the installment plan. To take an extreme example, a Bible published in 173 numbers cost a total of £5 15s.<sup>12</sup> The part-issue scheme worked best for well-known authors, since in order to be profitable the printing had to be large, and the circulation could not drop too much as the months passed. Sutherland claims that the fabulously high prices some authors got for serial stories was the catalyst that changed the whole status of the profession of author.<sup>13</sup> In 1860 All the Year Round offered Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton £1500 for an eight month story, at the same time paying Mrs. Gaskell £400 for a piece of the same length.<sup>14</sup> Both writers were well-known and popular, although later literary judgment would certainly rank Gaskell above her male counterpart. It is difficult to see what accounted for the difference in remuneration (although Lytton's title undoubtedly played a part) except that Mrs. Gaskell was, as a woman, willing to work cheaply, while Bulwer Lytton was not. Many of the best selling novels of the time were issued in parts before being

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12 Altick, The English Common Reader, p. 265.

13 Sutherland, p. 22.

14 Sutherland, p. 159.



published in the three volume format, at least until the 1860s, when part issue lost place to the magazine serial.

In the 1840s cheap reissues (sometimes known as railway editions) became an important part of the literary marketplace. In 1859 one leading railway publisher (who is not identified) sold 750,000 books priced from one shilling to two shillings sixpence per copy.<sup>15</sup> Cheap reissues varied in price from one to six shillings, with the price dropping as the century progressed. In the 1860s, six shilling reprints of older books were the norm, while by 1870 two shillings would buy the reader a cheap copy of a new book.

It is unlikely however, that the cheap publications were significant in the cultural lives of the working class, even at these prices, until close to the end of the period under examination. Working class families earned on average £52 in 1851, with the amount increasing to £83 in 1881.<sup>16</sup> Among the working classes, five shillings could buy five pounds of butter, or ten pounds of meat; and seven shillings would provide a family of five with good table beer for a month.<sup>17</sup> Until a working class family was moving toward the lower levels of the middle class, it is unlikely that any except the most fanatical lovers of books would see even the

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15 American Literary Gazette and Publishers' Circular, 1 January 1864, p. 174.

16 Altick, The English Common Reader, p. 306.

17 Altick, The English Common Reader, p. 276.

cheapest reprints as more than a luxury item, detracting from the overall welfare of the family.

Profitability for the publishers of cheap reprints depended upon selling enormous numbers of the book over a period of years. "Rita" sold the cheap edition rights for six of her novels to John Maxwell, publisher and common-law husband of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, for £50, for publication in two shilling editions. In her declining years, the books were still selling well, as she bitterly recounts in her Recollections.<sup>18</sup>

The fourth method of marketing literature came to the forefront in the late 50s and early 60s with the proliferation of magazines and weeklies, some with circulations of up to 100,000. In this period every major publishing house established its own journal. Used as vehicles for their new fiction, they were also an ideal medium in which to advertise their entire lists. The spread of the monthly magazine allowed effective serialization of stories for the first time, because the old quarterly publication interval had been too long to sustain interest in continuing fiction.<sup>19</sup>

At the lowest level of the literary world were the cheap publications, usually referred to as the penny press. Authors who wrote for this substratum were exploited to an incredible degree. One RLF applicant, Hannah Maria

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18 Rita, p. 45.

19 C. A. Kent, introduction to Alvin Sullivan, ed., British Literary Magazines: The Victorian and Edwardian Age, 1837-1913 (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1984), p. xvii.

Jones, <sup>20</sup> wrote novels in numbers for the penny press. Around 1830 female hack writers such as Jones were earning 10 and a half pence per page, or considerably less than a penny a line. Men doing work of equivalent quality earned from one to five shillings per page.<sup>21</sup> Jones, who seems to have been a talented writer capable of turning out a better than average product at high speed, was among the most popular of these writers. Her works sold in the twenties of thousands, and were very successful in pirated editions. Despite her popularity and ability, she was unable ever to escape into more legitimate literary avenues because of the stigma associated with being a writer of penny dreadfuls.

Costs were high in the book trade. Printing house compositors were the most highly paid of skilled workers, earning 36 shillings per week in 1832.<sup>22</sup> Small edition sizes reflected the high price of paper in the first half of the century. Special features, such as maps or engravings, increased costs still further. These costs took on uncomfortable immediacy for authors who published on the half-profits system, because they were liable for meeting the expenses of production if the book failed. Emily Beke<sup>23</sup> published three volumes of travel and biography in the 1860s. By 1878 she had paid £218 to the printers, £84 to the engraver, and £15

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20 Case No. 553.

21 Cross, p. 176.

22 Altick, The English Common Reader, p. 262.

23 Case No. 1817.

to the map maker. She still owed the printers £37, the engraver £84, and the publisher £75.

Literary income, for both authors and publishers, fluctuated wildly as the result of mini-booms and depressions in the trade, and was also adversely affected by public events such as the Great Exhibition of 1851, the deaths of famous individuals such as Prince Albert, and national catastrophes such as the Crimean War. During times of great public excitement or absorption, book sales stagnated or slowed to a trickle. In 1854 the publisher William Bentley complained that the Crimean War had harmed the industry: "with regard to novels, their sale is now nearly...gone...business is well nigh paralyzed by this cruel war."<sup>24</sup> Unlucky timing could condemn a new book to still-birth if public attention was diverted at the time to some more dramatic event.

The best of the publishing houses, both in prestige and rate of pay, was the house of Macmillan and Co. Macmillan's rejection rate for fiction in this period was over 95 percent, and the level of their reader's standard is demonstrated by the fact that 44 percent of their rejected manuscripts were later published by other firms.<sup>25</sup> Macmillan published, in the years from 1868-1870, only 30 fictional works (including tales for children) out of 450 ti-

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<sup>24</sup> Sutherland, p. 117.

<sup>25</sup> Gail Tuchman, "When the Prevalent Don't Prevail: Male Hegemony and the Victorian Novel," in Powell, Walter W., and Richard Robbins, Conflict and Consensus: a Festschrift in Honour of Lewis A. Coser (New York: Free Press, 1984), p. 152.

ties overall. Of these 30, only six were unsolicited.<sup>26</sup>

The Macmillan brothers solicited manuscripts largely from the intellectual/literary circle that frequented their home, congregating there to smoke, drink, and trade literary gossip. Women, of course, were excluded from this club-like atmosphere in which crucial literary contacts were made.

There were several methods of payment for literary work in the mid-Victorian period. The most time-honoured was that of publishing by subscription. This method was used by a number of the earlier RLF applicants, who would go around to prospective patrons with their volume, or sometimes nothing more than the prospectus for a volume, collecting subscriptions until enough money had been accumulated to pay publishing costs. By the 1840s publishing by subscription had gone out of favour, and after another decade it seems to have entirely disappeared from the literary scene.

One popular method of literary production was joint-share publication, in which the author and publisher would share both the costs and the profits of the literary venture. The author received nothing until the number of copies needed to cover costs was sold. If the book continued to sell past the break-even point, the profit was (in theory) divided equally between the author and the publisher. Payment of royalties to the author, although fairly common in the United States, was virtually unknown in Great Britain until the 1890s.

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<sup>26</sup> Sutherland, p. 210.

Outright sale of copyright to the publisher was common in the Victorian book trade. The period of copyright in 1800 had remained the same since 1709. Under the old law, authors retained the right to their copyrights for 14 years, which was extended for another 14 if the authors were still living at the expiration of the first period. This meant that no aged author could derive benefit from the work of an earlier stage of life.<sup>27</sup> The 1814 Act extended the period of copyright protection to 28 years, or for the life of the author. The Literary Copyright Act of 1842 extended protection from 28 to 42 years from first publication, or the life of the author plus seven years, whichever was longer.<sup>28</sup> Since international copyright was not legally enforced until 1891 in the United States, when the Chace Act was passed, all English books until that time were vulnerable to piracy. Unauthorized reprinting was the unethical publisher's dream--100 percent profit for the publisher. While the Copyright Act of 1842 had prevented American publishers from flooding English and colonial markets with cheap reprints of English books, it had no effect upon the actions of American publishers within their own borders. In 1859 the New York publishing firm, Harpers, issued 1,912 books. Of these, 1,006 were reprints of English titles.<sup>29</sup> More scrupulous American

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27 Victor Bonham-Carter, Authors By Profession (London: Society of Authors Press, 1984), p. 32.

28 Bonham-Carter, p. 73.

29 American Literary Gazette and Publishers' Circular, 25 February 1860, p. 86.

publishers were content to offer ludicrously small amounts for copyright, with the hapless British author knowing that if this was refused, piracy would be the inevitable result. Some British publishers attempted to forestall copyright theft by arranging to have British works published simultaneously in America by American publishers, but this was difficult to arrange properly, as any delay in the publication of the American edition resulted in copyright free-for-all in the USA. The other requirements for protection of British copyright in America were equally onerous. The book had to be registered before publication by deposit in America of the title-page, and copies of the book itself had to be deposited within a stated period--from 1870 to the passage of the Chace Act the period of grace was only ten days. Delay at the binders or printers or in transporting the sheets to America could easily result in loss of copyright.<sup>30</sup>

It was universally assumed among authors, and often with good reason, that publishers would take unscrupulous advantage of any symptom of vulnerability on the part of a writer. Some publishers would deliberately suppress the sale of a book if the author was unwilling to part with the copyright, until it could be purchased at bargain rates.<sup>31</sup>

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30 Simon Nowell-Smith, International Copyright Law and the Publisher in the Reign of Queen Victoria (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), pp.64-65.

31 James Lackington, Memoirs of the First Forty-Five Years of James Lackington (1794, rpt. New York : Garland, 1974), p. 223.

Mrs. J. H. Riddell's fictional authoress experienced this sort of dishonest usage as Riddell herself had: "all the time while he [her publisher] was insulting her position, and depreciating her work, and grinding her down to the last penny, he was, as she found out afterwards, making a good income from her books."<sup>32</sup> The special vulnerability of women, due to their ignorance of finance and business, could make them extraordinarily gullible. Mrs. Desmond Humphries was tricked, as she understood it, out of the copyright of her short stories. A stamped receipt would be sent with the cheque for the story, which she would sign and return. "At a later date I learnt that the word copyright had been inserted, and I was refused any use of these stories unless I repurchased them. I only discovered how I had been tricked when I was refused permission to collect them in a volume."<sup>33</sup>

To many it seemed that the rule for copyright payments was, the more the author needed money, the less would she be offered. In 1861 Emma Robinson,<sup>34</sup> a Civil List pensioner after 1869, who would later take legal action against two publishers for piracy, wrote "the wages of literature are at best precarious and scanty, dependent on the caprice of the public, and the rapacity of publishers, who measure what to

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32 J. H. Riddell, A Struggle for Fame (London: Richard Bentley and Sons, 1883), v. 3, p. 318.

33 "Rita", p. 47.

34 Case No. 1558.



give--rather what not to give--by the necessities of the writer, not his merits." Edwina Burbury<sup>35</sup> wrote to the committee in 1852 explaining why she had not yet been paid for a work published in the previous year. Fearing that the publisher would reduce his offer for her next book, she wrote, "I dare not press them [Smith and Elder] for an account lest the knowledge of my poverty should give the Publishers too great a power over me."

Although some publishers were scrupulously honourable and even generous in their dealings with authors, many were not. Involvement with the wrong sort of publisher could spell financial ruin and literary eclipse for even talented writers. The Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge was an exceptionally closefisted paymaster--it almost never gave more than £10 for a religious novel, while it was bringing in very respectable profits for the Church of England.<sup>36</sup> In the 1890s Walter Besant, president of the Society of Authors, scathingly described it as a "Society of sweaters for the greater glory of Christ."<sup>36</sup> Wretchedly paid, SPCK authors were frequent applicants to the Fund.

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35 Case No. 1243. Burbury's life is an interesting one; abandoned by her husband, who had eloped with her sister, she struggled on alone until the depraved pair returned to live in the same house with Burbury in order to avoid scandal. With her husband broken in health, Burbury then wrote to support them all. Ironically, her 1868 novel, written in the midst of the scandal, was entitled All for the Best.

36 About £7000 pa in the 1880s. (Cross, p. 200).

In the period before the proliferation of periodicals in the early 1860s, authors were especially vulnerable to low prices for their work, since it was not yet common for many writers to earn supplementary income while labouring over a long novel by writing shorter pieces for the magazines. Ouida received £50 from Tinsley for her 1863 novel, Held in Bondage, and Barbara Hofland's novel, The Son of a Genius, which went through 50 editions and was often translated, earned its creator the sum of £10.<sup>37</sup>

To put the value of copyright in some perspective, it may be well to look at some writers who were never forced to have recourse to the Fund. Mrs. Gore, a talented novelist who was immensely popular throughout the mid-Victorian age, received £95 for The Moneylender, from Bentley in 1842.<sup>38</sup> Mary Elizabeth Braddon, a very successful sensation novelist, was offered £10 for her first novel, Three Times Dead: or the Secret of the Heath in 1856. The publisher later reduced this offer to £5,<sup>39</sup> and never actually paid Braddon more than the 50 shilling advance. The book went through

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37 S.C. Hall, A Book of Memories of Great Men and Women (London: Virtue and Co., 1871) p. 124.

38 Sutherland, p. 157.

39 Until much later in the century many publishing houses did not offer written contracts to authors. At the more reputable level, there might be a standardized printed form with the name of the author left blank. Only the very best houses, like Bentleys, offered individual contracts, and then only to their most popular writers.

three editions in the 1860s under a variant title, earning large sums for the publisher and not a penny for Braddon.<sup>40</sup>

New writers not only had to compete with the well established "names" and relatively low market price of writers like Mrs. Gore, but had to compete with the dead as well in a market that was still relatively restricted. Bentley in 1832 had paid £210 for the copyright of five of Jane Austen's novels. Often a multiplicity of factors combined to make the product of the author's mind virtually valueless:

the rage for cheap literature and the multiplication of inedited [sic] reprints; or of books filled with indiscriminate piracy of copyright; or ill paid and consequently ill executed compilations have ... entirely driven the middle class author from the literary market....<sup>41</sup>

Among novel publishers, Newby was notorious for paying authors poorly. To compound the problem, it was generally difficult for a Newby author to move to another, more generous publisher, as there was stigma attached to having published under his banner--it branded the writer as a talentless hack. Michael Sadleir describes Newby's list as "the early books of unknown authors and the late ones of

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40 Michael Sadleir, Things Past (London: Constable, 1944), p. 82.

41 Alaric A. Watts, 1854 letter of reference for Eliza Meteyard, Case No. 1269.

sellers past their prime".<sup>42</sup> One notable exception was the Brontë family; both Anne and Emily Brontë published with Newby in the 1840s. In fact, Newby was the original holder of the copyright of Wuthering Heights, in 1848 having paid Emily Brontë £50 for all rights to the work. Anthony Trollope is another good example of a Newby author who was unable to break even on a novel until he had freed himself from his association with Newby. When The Macdermots of Ballycloran was published, Newby, in a startling display of the lack of faith he had in his author, almost immediately ordered most of its 400 copies pulped.<sup>43</sup>

Newby could almost guarantee that even the talented author of an excellent book would remain in obscurity as long as publication continued under his banner. He tended, due to a chronic shortage of money and an equally chronic lack of faith in his writers, to keep edition sizes very small, usually around 400 copies for a little-known author. With such a small profit margin, he did no advertising at all, virtually condemning the book to still-birth, as 'puffery'

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42 Michael Sadleir, "Anthony Trollope and His Publishers: A Chapter in the History of Nineteenth-Century Authorship", in The Library, 4th Series, V (1924-25), p. 219.

43 Sutherland, p. 134. This may have been more of a psychological tactic than a business move on Newby's part. He liked to shake the confidence of authors whose work he considered promising by ensuring that their first book was a humiliating failure, in order to artificially depress the prices he would give for copyright of later, more polished (and potentially profitable) works. As well, Newby probably had no interest in publishing Trollope's first novel, but did so out of a natural reluctance to offend the author's mother, Mrs. Trollope, who had offered him the manuscript, and was at the time a very well-known writer.

was already an important factor in book sales. In Sutherland's words Newby had "a deadening attitude of minimizing loss." An exhausting cycle was thereby set up for authors working for this class of publisher: rapid production, little motivation to do one's best work, and little (if any) financial reward, all resulting in the early extinction of whatever talent they may have possessed.

In addition to his tightfistedness, Newby was capable of taking vengeful retaliation upon rebellion among his stable of writers. Writers who felt that their work was worth more than Newby's offer would soon feel the financial power Newby could exert. Elizabeth Goldsmid<sup>44</sup> discovered this in 1851 "having endeavoured to obtain for my last work ... a publisher who would pay me better than Mr. Newby, and having failed in doing so, Mr. Newby, on my returning to him, offered me only £25", (instead of the £50 he usually gave her for copyrights). It had taken Goldsmid nine months to write the £25 novel.

Another novelist who believed that she had been mistreated by Mr. Newby was Elizabeth Margaret Stewart,<sup>45</sup> who published with him on the half profits system. "For two years...[Newby] refused to send any account at all and then furnished a false one," claiming that he had printed 210 copies, although he had earlier stated that he had published 750. She wrote to the RLF explaining that "the whole

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<sup>44</sup> Case No. 1270.

<sup>45</sup> Case No. 1138. Letter of 4 May 1846.

affair is explained by the phrase common among the inferior class of Publishers, '500 for me, and 500 for the author,' it being too usual among such Publishers to double the number of copies for which they agree with the author." Unscrupulous publishers would overprint the book, creating several hundred copies more than were agreed upon between author and publisher, sell the 'extra' copies first, and bill the hapless author for the remainder. Stewart's suspicions, awakened by the discrepancy in numbers, were aggravated by the fact that although the publisher claimed that the novel was a financial failure, he repeatedly pressed her for another book.

While the principal objection to joint-share publication was that needy authors could not afford to wait months or even years for the settlement of their accounts, joint-share publication also left the author especially vulnerable to the machinations of a dishonest publisher. Authors tended to view the half-profits system with disfavour, believing (often rightly) that the publisher padded the accounts before presenting them for settlement. James Spedding, author of the cautionary Publishers and Authors, warned budding authors that it was "the custom of the trade to add to each item of expense some percentage, unknown to those out of the trade, by way of profit upon each transaction, before the division of what are called the profits be-

gins."<sup>46</sup> It was easy for a firm to falsify the statement of costs of publication, inflating the costs enough that the author's real profit was conveniently absorbed. Accompanying the padding of accounts were several other strategies for confusing the issue, including stalling, leaving letters unanswered, and fudging statements. A common device was to have the sales of the book mysteriously stick just short of the number of copies required to be sold before the author would begin to receive payment. As one author experienced it, the sales began to fade away as the magic number came in sight, and they finally stopped entirely within seven copies of the agreed upon amount. After some months with no change in the book's status, the author secretly bought seven copies, but the next account showed no change.<sup>47</sup> It is possible to form some guess of whom that unnamed publisher might have been, from the experience of Julia Pardoe.<sup>48</sup> Author of Confessions of a Pretty Woman in 1846, she sold the copyright to Colburn for £150 with a promise of a £50 bonus when 750 copies were sold. According to her publisher, sales stopped suddenly at 744. This strategy, always popular, became even more so among some disreputable

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46 James Spedding, Publishers and Authors (London: John Russell Smith Ltd., 1867), pp. 18-19.

47 James Hepburn, The Author's Empty Purse and the Rise of the Literary Agent (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 13.

48 Case No. 1102. Pardoe's novels were still being reprinted in the 1890s.

publishers after the popularity of cheap railway editions had been established.

An author who was victimized by another popular variation on the half-profit system was Mary Elizabeth Shipley<sup>49</sup> who ended up owing Elliott Stock £51 after the failure of her novel Phillipa. A publisher such as Stock would undertake to publish a book that he was reasonably sure would fail, his intent being to make money from the too-credulous author, rather than from the reading public. After assuring her that unsold copies were extremely unlikely, Stock claimed that his firm had been able to dispose of only 86 copies. As Shipley explained it, "he undertook to publish it, if at the end of six months I would agree to buy all copies left over at 3/ a copy....The book appeared at 5/ a copy; a prohibitive price, as considering the style of its 'get up' 2/ would have been ample for it." Some women, utterly ignorant of business, were startled to realize the extent to which they were financially responsible for the publication costs of their books. Anita Maycock<sup>50</sup> was taken aback when she was billed for the twelve newspaper advertisements of her novel in 1870. Newby even had a line-item in his bills for "bad debts"; on joint-share ventures this reaped an extra five percent of the profits for the publisher.<sup>51</sup>

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49 Case No. 1978.

50 Case No. 1827.

51 Sadleir, "Anthony Trollope", p. 219.



Publishers could contribute to an author's distress in other, less direct, ways as well. Emma Linskill<sup>52</sup> applied to the RLF with an account of how a story, over which she had expended several month's labour, was 'lost' for three months in the chaos of an editor's office. Her next story was accepted by the same editor with the proviso that major revisions be made. Linskill reluctantly complied, but not without complaining that the artistic unity of the story was completely destroyed in the effort to comply with the editor's demands for a story that would "go". She then heard nothing for five months, after which the mutilated story was returned without explanation and in such a filthy condition that it was unreadable and had to be recopied. When an author was living from payment to payment, such experiences could easily result in an entire year passing without receipt of any literary income, despite a great amount of literary effort having been expended.

Late payment for work was a common complaint of RLF applicants. Newby was of course notorious for his delaying tactics, but periodicals were also fond of the "print this year, pay the next" system of bookkeeping. A change of proprietors could mean losses for authors too, as Augusta Johnstone<sup>53</sup> discovered in 1859 when the journal she had written for for three months changed hands and the new owners refused to acknowledge the old proprietor's debts to authors.

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52 Case No. 2024.

53 Case No. 1486.

Some publishers also did not scruple to profit from their female writers' lack of financial sophistication. It was not uncommon for these women, unused to the world of business, to be persuaded to invest their profits in the publishing house. Although some publishers behaved ethically and honourably in this respect, others essentially appropriated the money. Several RLF applicants would probably never have been in financial difficulties if their credulity in this respect had not resulted in the loss of the profits of entire careers. A number of publishers also failed during this period, causing the loss of amounts of up to £500 owed by them to their authors.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Case No. 1922, Fanny Aiken Kortright, an anti-feminist writer whose works were admired by Gladstone, lost £500 when her publisher failed in 1873. Three years later her difficulties were exacerbated when the Spanish funds failed, causing her the loss of her remaining capital, £900.

## Authorship as a Profession: the Female Experience

At the outset of any discussion of the condition of women writers in mid-Victorian England based upon the documents preserved in the archives of the Royal Literary Fund it is necessary to consider the question of the representativeness of RLF applicants of the literary profession as a whole. In the narrowest sense, as with any sample, the knowledge of the literary life to be gained from an examination of the archives of the RLF cannot be extrapolated or generalized from at all. With this in mind, it is important to be careful, when examining the results of analysis of the data contained in the Fund, to avoid assuming that the results can be applied to all or even to most women writers in the period under study. However, there is nothing to suggest that the women who applied to the RLF were much different from other women writers of the time, except for the misfortunes that drove them to request charity.

It is also important to remember the problem of self-selection which always appears in samples of this sort. In short, many writers who might be equally representative of the female Victorian writer were selected out before the application process even began. Most obviously excluded are those who never experienced financial calamity, whether their good fortune was attributable to high book sales, an independent income, or a second income derived either from another career or another individual. Others who might con-

ceivably have applied for relief to the RLF probably desisted because their personal lives could not undergo the scrutiny which this entailed, or because the process was perceived as too humiliating. Augusta Leigh, Byron's notorious sister, wrote to John Murray in 1850 to explain why she refused to consider applying to the RLF, calling it "a suggestion from which I entirely shrink, and from a feeling which I need not attempt to explain to you as far as relates to the Literary Fund. I know nothing could be effected (supposing the attempt) without every member being aware of it."<sup>1</sup> Yet others (and this may apply particularly to women, who often wrote in complete isolation from the literary world) may not have been aware of the Fund's existence. Others may have been kept from applying from diffidence, fearing that their works were insufficient in quality or quantity, or uncertain of the propriety of such an application from a lady.

The quality and reliability of the data provided by RLF applicants is another consideration. There is always the possibility of deliberate misrepresentation or falsification on the part of the applicants, in an attempt to make their situation seem as pitiable as possible. At least four applicants in this period were labelled by the Mendicity Society as professional writers of begging letters. The possibility that applicants were, perhaps deliberately, un-

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<sup>1</sup> 'George Paston', (Emily Symonds) At John Murrays, 1843-1892 (London: John Murray, 1932), p. 92.

derestimating their incomes is a real one, but because there is seldom any evidence available to corroborate that which was included on the forms, all statements not proven false have been accepted as accurate.

What constitutes a 'real', or professional, author? There are a number of factors involved when asking this question of the RLF applicants that make the judgment sometimes very difficult indeed. The span of years over which the applicant wrote indicates something about her seriousness, but can be misleading when an applicant was at the beginning of what was later to prove a long and prolific career. Continuity is a factor, but then it becomes difficult to know what to make of those women who published regularly before marriage, ceased when husbandly disapprobation or family responsibilities interfered, and only resumed their careers under the spur of financial necessity, due to the death or incapacity of the husband. The number of publications to the credit of the author is another possible indication of an author's professionalism, but here too there are many problems in the way of accurate assessment. It is not easy to evaluate the relative merits (in the context of their charitable worthiness) of an author who publishes an undistinguished novel every year as compared to one who may have published only two or three exceptional works over an entire career.

It might be argued that a writer is a professional when the larger part of her income is derived from literary

sources. This definition, although tempting, is untenable, given that many fine writers had private incomes, or depended upon the earnings of a husband or father. This too, would class Lady Blessington as an author but exclude Jane Austen.

Accepting the self-description of the applicants is another trap, given human nature and common sense. The advantages of listing one's occupation as "Authoress" rather than "Governess" or "Mill Worker" when applying to a literary charity are obvious. As far as the self-perception of the applicants themselves provides evidence, it seems that only about one-third of the women under consideration thought of themselves as authors first and foremost. Professional consciousness does not seem to have been highly developed among most of them, although it must always be kept in mind that applicants may have been reluctant to describe themselves to the all-male committee as professional, or talented, because middle class women were not supposed to be ambitious in any sort of self-serving way. Professional writers were also of questionable status through much of this period, even if male, and the limits of respectable behaviour were of course even more narrowly defined for ladies.

It is difficult to judge the career status of the women writers who applied to the Fund for relief. In as much as it is possible to judge only on the basis of output and career length of the 154 women for whom data is available, it appears that 19 (12.3%) of them were not serious writers in

any sense at the time of their initial application. Eighty-eight (57.1%) of the applicants were currently publishing at the time of initial application, and had been doing so for at least five years. Forty-seven (30.5%) of the applicants were at the end of their writing careers, this being defined as a hiatus of more than three years disrupting a pattern of regular publication.

The RLF's acceptance or refusal of the claim is also invalid as a discriminator, since they rejected applicants on moral grounds as well as on the basis of insufficient or substandard authorship. The judgment of the RLF was not infallible when judging literary merit, either. Caroline Leakey's<sup>2</sup> 1871 application was rejected after a committee member reported that her novel The Broad Arrow was "nothing but contemptible trash. I think that the book is one of the very worst novels I ever read." (The Broad Arrow was being reprinted as late as 1886, and the DNB describes Leakey as a "writer of ability"). Other writers included in the DNB but rejected by the RLF in this period include Eliza Acton<sup>3</sup> and Harriet Fourdrinier.<sup>4</sup>

It is tempting to assume that since these women writers were forced to have recourse to literary charity, that they were a set of abysmal failures as writers. Although the

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2 Case No. 1844.

3 Case No. 1407

4 Case No. 1485. Both were rejected on the grounds of insufficient authorship.

first rank of women authors are not among them, a number of the RLF applicants were very successful in their own times and are still remembered in our own. Matilda Ann Mackarness,<sup>5</sup> for one, in 1876 had been writing for 31 years and all of her works were still in print. Given the generally short life span of the novel, this is a remarkable achievement. Other female RLF applicants still read today include Susanna Moodie,<sup>6</sup> Mary Russell Mitford,<sup>7</sup> Eliza Meteyard,<sup>8</sup> Isabella Banks,<sup>9</sup> and in a slightly later period, Ouida.<sup>10</sup>

What possessed Victorian women to attempt to support themselves by writing? The most important answer seems to be lack of career options. In a time when opportunities for remunerative employment for respectable ladies were extremely limited, writing offered the advantage of being done within the home, thus enabling the writer to remain anonymous if she so desired, as well as not requiring any specialized training or outlay of capital. Most became authoresses under the spur of financial necessity. Typical are those women who wrote to support aged parents, or indi-

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5 Case No. 1991.

6 Case No. 1678.

7 Case No. 1067.

8 Case No. 1269.

9 Case No. 1705.

10 Case No. 2714.



viduals like Elizabeth Garnett Hall,<sup>11</sup> who turned to writing when, as she explained it in her 1879 application, "at my father's second marriage I was cast adrift in the world with only a few shillings in my pocket."

Women turned to writing as a means of expressing their ideas, as well as in the hope of augmenting their income through authorship. For many writers it is probable that the impetus to publish was a combination of an inclination for literary work and financial necessity. Camilla Toulmin<sup>12</sup> is a good example of a self-consciously professional writer, while the former governess "Laura Jewry" (Laura Valentine)<sup>13</sup> gave all the proceeds of her novels to charity until widowed after one year of marriage and the birth of a still-born infant in 1854. Annie French Hector published her first novel before marriage in 1854, but ceased writing when she married because her husband disapproved of women authors. After he was partially paralyzed she began to write again, perhaps out of a need for money, and after her husband's death in 1875 she committed herself wholeheartedly to her craft.<sup>14</sup>

R. D. Altick, in his ground-breaking study of the sociology of authorship, used biographical data from the

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11 Case No. 2066.

12 Case No. 1184.

13 Case No. 1351.

14 Nancy Fix-Anderson, Woman Against Women: A Life of Eliza Lynn Linton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 137.

Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature, Volume III in order to ascertain the social backgrounds of English writers, both male and female. In my own study his categories have been applied to the information on class background available for the RLF applicants, differing from Altick's approach in that where he was able to gather information only on the father's occupation, the applicants to the Fund frequently list their husbands', brothers', and sons' occupations in addition to their fathers'. Since there is little evidence of dramatic social mobility in this group, the extra information is useful in placing these individuals more precisely within the class structure of nineteenth century England. Overall, it seems that these unsuccessful writers were no less solidly upper middle-class than were Altick's group, who had achieved enough success to merit mention in the standard reference work. It therefore seems unlikely that the lack of success of the RLF applicants can be in any way attributed to class disadvantage.

Table 4.1

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 SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF VICTORIAN WRITERS  
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	RLF	ALTICK
<u>Upper Class</u>		
gentleman	4 ( 2.7%)	[ 1.7%]
totals:	2.7%	1.7%

### Middle Class

#### Upper Division

merchant, shipowner	4 ( 2.7%)	[ 3.8%]
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#### Middle Division

##### Arts and Professions

physician	14 ( 9.5%)	[ 4.8%]
journalist, writer, scholar	33 (22.3%)	[ 6.1%]
schoolteacher, professor	9 ( 6.1%)	[ 4.8%]
clergyman	20 (13.5%)	[17.8%]
solicitor, barrister	7 ( 4.7%)	[10.9%]
civil servant, diplomat	12 ( 8.1%)	[ 4.8%]
composer, artist, actor	6 ( 4.0%)	[ 3.8%]
engineer	4 ( 2.7%)	[ 1.0%]
officer	19 (12.8%)	[ 5.6%]
misc. businessman	2 ( 1.4%)	[ 0% ]
politician	1 ( .6%)	[ 0% ]

#### Lower Division

tradesman	4 ( 3.2%)	[ 5.3%]
artisan	3 ( 2.0%)	[ 3.5%]
domestic servant	1 ( .6%)	[ 0% ]
bookkeeper	4 ( 2.7%)	[ .3%]

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totals:	96.2%	89.1%
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### Lower Class

labourers of all descriptions	1 ( .6%)	[ 1.4%]
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totals:	.6%	1.4%
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148	100.1%	90.5% <sup>15</sup>
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It is worthy of note that 42 percent of the RLF applicants emerged from family backgrounds where books and writing were important<sup>16</sup> and fully 68.2 percent grew up among what might be termed the 'intelligentsia' of Victorian society.<sup>17</sup>

Despite their solidly middle-class backgrounds, lack of formal education is a distinguishing characteristic of fe-

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15 Because those of Altick's categories for which the RLF has no data have been omitted, the percentage totals in this column will not equal 100 percent.

16 Journalists, writers, teachers, clergymen. There is an exceptionally high percentage of women authors who follow in their father's footsteps in their choice of profession.

17 Journalists, writers, teachers, clergymen, lawyers, government employees, and artists.

male applicants to the RLF, as it was of women in general at this time. Sixty-eight percent of male writers in Altick's study attended a university or comparable institution. Data for their female counterparts is sketchy in the extreme, with only 20 biographical entries finding either home or formal education worthy of note. The female applicants to the RLF provide even fewer clues to their educational background. Only one (Mary Russell Mitford<sup>18</sup>) mentions having attended a school, and less than a dozen bring up the subject at all. Bessie Parkes, describing a 'typical' middle-class family in this period depicts an extremely circumscribed attitude toward the need for education for girls.

The father will certainly send his two boys to school, whether it be to a two-penny, or to an expensive boarding school: the girl will probably be sent also for a few years to one much inferior; but if there is work to be done at home she will be kept at home to do it. In the middle-class family we have taken as a type, she is much employed in making shirts for her two school-boy brothers. [We have heard of a case in which some young ladies, who were offered gratuitous instruction in one of the best ladies' colleges, were kept at home for that purpose.] Her learning is not insisted on, while her brothers are urged forward, and every facility given for them to pursue their studies at home. When the young girl is fourteen or fifteen, we shall certainly find her taken away from school, if not earlier....<sup>19</sup>

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18 Case No. 1067.

19 Bessie Rayner Parkes, Essays on Women's Work (London: Alexander Strahan, 1865), p. 77.

Women, it appears, were denied education because of their gender, not their class.

Less educated women found certain literary avenues at least partially blocked. This probably explains in part the marked tendency of women writers to write imaginative rather than factual works. Moreover, lack of education may have contributed to a possible lower quality of work submitted by women, which in turn would have contributed to the writers' lack of success. Given less 'cultural capital' than their brothers, it is not surprising that many believed (albeit unreasonably) that women's writings showed evidence of a natural intellectual inferiority.

It may also be improper to assume that girls compensated for the lack of formal instruction through voracious reading in family libraries. Although empirical evidence is not available, Camilla Toulmin provides testimony to the attitude that prevailed in her girlhood, where the emphasis upon accomplishment was accompanied by the concern that reading was a form of idleness that would not fit girls either to find husbands or to make their parental homes comfortable. If Toulmin's remembrance is accepted as representative, this attitude may well have proved even more destructive to female literary achievement than sketchy formal education. Toulmin's autobiography describes the common attitude toward recreational reading for young women: "as a rule, when girls had left school, they were thought to be wasting time if seen reading. They were allowed to spend

their superfluous energy in fancy work, and ridiculous wax-flower making, without molestation; but 'put down your book,' and 'don't waste your time that way,' were common expressions."<sup>20</sup> What is more, the books available to girls were seldom of a nature to develop their intellectual powers. Toulmin described the mental food of the typical young girl with a taste for reading:

a girl's reading was generally so circumscribed that she had small chance of mental development, unless the home library were far more extensive than that which was usually found in a middle-class family. In those days lending libraries seldom supplied anything beyond new novels....a mental diet composed wholly of fiction...is not nourishing.

Probably, much 'young-ladies fiction' was very similar in nature to the novels of Cecilia Jenkins.<sup>21</sup> When applying to the Fund in 1848 Jenkins ruefully described her own novels as "light, & respectable, but of no high order...they are not calculated to afford any very high intellectual enjoyment." This sort of fare is not calculated to breed writers of the first quality.

Of the 160 women who give data on place of residence, London was home for 59 percent. Of these, 66 percent had been born outside of the metropolitan centre, but had moved there later, usually as adults. Being close to one's publisher was viewed as a distinct advantage--one applicant

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<sup>20</sup> Crosland, p. 66.

<sup>21</sup> Case No. 1190.

cited her distance from London as a factor in her distress, explaining that publishers were reluctant to assign work to rural writers, because of problems with communication, the increased risk of the loss of manuscript in the mails, and delay. These writers also had no opportunity of doing the rush work often demanded by periodicals.

One real problem for rural writers, although it was also felt by those who lived in London or Edinburgh, was their isolation from literary circles. Their chances to make friends and forge personal connections within the trade were limited, first of all by their sex, and second by their geographic isolation from the centres of the publishing industry. Male writers assiduously cultivated their literary friendships, trading gossip at the clubs and in the waiting room of publishers' offices, which seem to have had a convivial, clubby atmosphere of their own. Mary Howitt, although a successful writer and the co-founder of Howitt's Journal, felt bitter resentment toward her exclusion from the inner ring of London literary circles, writing in her autobiography that "everything in the literary world is done by favour and connections".<sup>22</sup> With this in mind, it is not remarkable that only four RLF applicants moved from London to smaller centres, despite the cheaper living they probably would have found there.

Despite the belief that Victorian women often remained in their home communities throughout their lives, few of the

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22 Howitt, Vol. I, p. 195.

women in this sample lived in the same town (other than London) for a lifetime. Around twenty-three percent of applicants lived in London throughout their lives. Only 11 (6.8%) were living in their provincial town of birth at the time of their application to the Fund.

Fourteen percent of the applicants were of Irish extraction, while five percent were Scottish. In the general population of the United Kingdom in 1841, 30.6 percent were Irish, and 9.8 percent were Scottish, while twenty years later, due to famine and large scale emigration, the percentage of Irish in the population had dropped to 20 percent.<sup>23</sup> Comparing these figures to the RLF data, it would appear that non-English Britons were significantly underrepresented in the profession.<sup>24</sup> Manchester, Edinburgh, and Dublin were the only cities other than London where a significant number (14 percent) of applicants lived. The remainder of the applicants (27 percent) lived in smaller towns or villages.

There is a problem inherent in any attempt to break down the output of the RLF applicants into categories based on the types of books they published. Over-simplification

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23 Volume on Population of the 1891 Census of England and Wales, volume 20, summary table of earlier census returns, p. 123.

24 It may be that writers living away from the metropolis were less likely to be aware of the Fund's existence. On the other hand, the RLF's extensive advertising in high circulation newspapers makes it probable that most writers, rural as well as urban, would have at least heard of the existence of such an organization.



was unfortunately unavoidable due to problems of classification. How, for example, does one categorize devotional poetry written for children, or a religious novel published by the Tract Society? In these cases it has been perforce necessary to be content with selecting what seemed to be the dominant characteristic of the work.

Although many of the women writers who applied to the RLF did not produce only one type of work, most did tend to have a specialty. Reinforcing the view of Victorian authoresses as the great novel writers, the data shows more women wrote novels than anything else. Poets made up the second largest category of applicant, poetry being the traditional form of expression among the less educated.<sup>25</sup> Most had made nothing by their poetical effusions, although one unsuccessful applicant, Rose Acton,<sup>26</sup> claimed in her 1847 application to have made enough profit on a volume of poetry "to furnish a house." Women whose works were so varied as to be unclassifiable came next in order of frequency, followed by those who wrote for children.

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25 According to Cross, virtually all working class writers in this period, male as well as female, were poets.

26 Case No 1170.

Table 4.2

DOMINANT TYPE OF PUBLICATION<sup>27</sup>

Type of Work	No <sup>28</sup>	%
Novels	47	29.6
Poems	34	21.4
Misc.	22	13.8
Juvenile	16	10.0
Tales	8	5.0
Travel	5	3.1
History	5	3.1
Textbooks	4	2.5
Tracts	4	2.5
Natural Science	3	1.9
Translations	3	1.9
Biography	3	1.9
Scholarly	2	1.2
Cookery	2	1.2
Devotional	1	.6
totals:	159	99.7%

Fifty percent of the women who applied to the RLF wrote imaginative works--novels or poetry. Looking at the data another way, fictional prose narratives (tales, tracts, novels, and juvenile fiction) also make up 50 percent of the total. Factual works, including travel, history, textbooks, science, biography, and scholarship, dominated the output of only 13 percent of the applicants. Of all the Victorian women writers listed in the Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature, 33 percent were novelists, 50 percent wrote children's books, and 14 percent were poets, with the remaining three percent being classified by Cross as "other".<sup>29</sup> The difference in the percentage of women in the

<sup>27</sup> Excluding periodical publications.

<sup>28</sup> In this instance, 'no'. refers to the number of applicants, rather than the number of their works.

<sup>29</sup> Cross, p. 167.

two samples who wrote for children is striking--fifty percent in the CBEL as opposed to only ten percent of RLF applicants. Such disparity suggests that juvenile writing may have been one of the most profitable genres for women writers, providing enviable financial security for many.

It is difficult to state with any confidence the number of works written by each author--the numbers given below are at best an approximation. Ordinarily, the number of works the applicant mentioned on her application to the Fund is the source for the data, but this can vary from the actual publication record for a number of reasons. Some writers, such as Camilla Toulmin (Mrs. Newton Crosland)<sup>30</sup> applied to the RLF while relatively close to the beginning of what would prove to be long and prolific careers. For these applicants, their eventual career publication record is much more impressive than the books listed at the time of application would indicate. For writers who applied many times over the span of a career, or in extreme old age, this is less of a problem. However, some writers omitted to mention some of their works in their applications. Some seem to have listed only their best or most popular books, while others listed only as many as the limited space would allow. For example, Julia Corner,<sup>31</sup> applying at the age of 75, listed only eight works: the British Library catalogue cred-

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30 Case No. 1184.

31 Case No. 1916.

its her with 79 titles, all published before her application to the RLF. The rule that only writers of works moral in nature or uplifting in tone would be considered eligible for assistance, means that some may have been tempted to 'forget' to mention books that seemed too gossipy, risqué, or lightweight to merit the Fund's approval. As a result of these considerations, the writers' rendering of themselves has generally been taken at face value, meaning that the totals include only the works which the RLF considered in making its decisions, despite the fact that the British Library Catalogue or the Dictionary of National Biography records have totals that are often considerably higher.<sup>32</sup> Each title has been counted only once, meaning that new editions or revisions were not considered as new works and not included in the totals. Periodical contributions<sup>33</sup> and book length serials have not been included.

Any discussion of the publication record of female RLF applicants is complicated by the widespread custom of publishing under a pseudonym, usually masculine. Anonymous or pseudonymous publication was a tactic employed more often by women than by men, as any publicity attached to the name of a respectable woman was held to be somehow degrading. Piecing together information from the British Library cata-

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32 However, if the writer referred the RLF to her publisher, or wrote in "etc.", I have used the BLC totals, as unsatisfactory as they sometimes are.

33 Including contributions to journals, annuals, and (rarely) newspapers.

logue and the archives of the Royal Literary Fund, it seems that more than half of the women who applied to the RLF published under something other than their own names, at least some of the time. The problem of assigning authorship that arises from this practice is complicated even more by the cases of women who co-wrote with other family members. Jane Porter,<sup>34</sup> who collaborated with her brother on a number of novels, was evidently the creative force in their partnership--after her death he was unable to find publishers for his own, unassisted works. This was also the case with the Clara<sup>35</sup> and John Moore partnership. Isabella Banks<sup>36</sup> also wrote jointly with her husband in the early years of their marriage, before his alcoholism escalated to the point that he became little more than a permanent burden and an impediment to her own career. The publisher William Tinsley also mentions a case where a father claimed full credit for books that were wholly the work of his daughter.<sup>37</sup>

Those women whose husbands were also authors and who chose to publish only under the protection of their husbands' names, from a desire to have no shadow on the purity of their feminine domesticity, could find that this was a disadvantage when it became necessary to prove authorship.

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34 Case No. 1055.

35 Case No. 1106

36 Case No. 1705.

37 William Tinsley, Random Recollections of an Old Publisher, 2 vols., (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., 1900), pp. 92-93.

Frances Collins,<sup>38</sup> widow of Mortimer Collins, explained to the committee in 1879 that her respect for the domestic sphere had left her without any absolute proof that she was indeed the author of the novels she had written, as "not foreseeing the necessity of making a name for myself, and objecting, as a woman, to appear in public in any way, my work went under my husband's name."<sup>39</sup>

Overall, the 159 women who published books mention 1,252 books on their applications, giving an average publication record of eight books per individual. The range varies from one book (23 applicants) to 79 (one applicant). Fifty percent of the applicants had written more than five books when they applied. One-fifth of the applicants had published more than ten books. Nineteen writers were extraordinarily prolific, having more than 15 books to their credit at the time of their initial application to the RLF. It must again be stressed that these figures understate the case, given the fact that a number of writers applied while relatively young and unestablished, and since the sample is unavoidably diluted by the inclusion of non-serious applicants, whose applications make it clear that their authorship was only incidental to their lives, and who seem to have been 'trying it on' with a charity that had something

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38 Case No. 2071.

39 Frances Collins' representation of her situation may not be at all accurate. Both of the Mortimers were detected by Blewitt in barefaced falsehoods, claiming for instance that they had no income when they were actually making upwards of £500 a year. See Case No. 1785, Mortimer Collins.

of a reputation of being softhearted, rather than making a serious claim to authorship.

Aside from the value of their copyrights, or the precarious profits of share publishing, RLF applicants had one other important source of literary income, which was writing for the periodical press. Overall, 38 percent of these women wrote for periodicals. Fifty-eight (35.4% of the total number of applicants) as well as listing published books, had periodical contributions varying in number from respectable to enormous. In later years a new form was instituted by Blewitt for the convenience of those basing their claim for assistance largely on periodical contributions. However, in the forty year span under examination, only five (3%) of the women applying to the Fund based their claim solely upon writing for periodicals. The rate of success for those applicants who wrote only for the periodical press was lower than that for those whose publications were more varied. Of the five applicants whose claim to assistance was based solely upon their periodical publications, four applicants were rejected outright, while the fifth was awarded two £40 grants.

It has proved impossible even to attempt to record the number of periodical articles contributed by these women. They tended to be vague in their enumeration, often content with a statement similar to, "Many stories in All the Year Round." Some applicants listed only those pieces published in the better-known journals, while others recorded only

those published most recently. Others could no longer remember all their contributions, while yet others simply stopped enumerating their periodical publications when they reached the bottom of the form.

The group as a whole was relatively young when they first became published authors: the average age was 32.6 years. The range of ages is extremely large: the youngest writer was 13 and the oldest at the time of first publication was 72. Slightly more than half (51.5%) of the applicants had published their first book by the age of 30.

It is possible to gain some idea of the number of women who were publishing in each decade, based on the information contained in their applications. However, it must be remembered that ongoing information is available only for the less than half of the applicants (71, or 43.3%), who continued to make repeated application to the Fund. This is especially true of the period after 1879.



Table 4.3

PUBLICATION RECORD<sup>40</sup>

Decade	No. of applicants publishing	(%)
1790s	1	.63
1800s	5	3.14
1810s	10	6.29
1820s	24	15.09
1830s	45	28.30
1840s	78	49.05
1850s	63	39.62
1860s	65	40.88
1870s	40	25.15
1880s	15	9.43
1890s	6	3.77
1900s	1	.63
1910s	1	.63
total:	354	222.61 <sup>41</sup>

For this particular group of RLF applicants, their publishing peaked in the 1840s. The later drop is probably due to a number of causes, the most important being the increasing numbers of journals and provincial newspapers to which women could contribute.

Virtually all the women who published their first books after the age of forty seem to have been forced into authorship by circumstances that demanded that they become financially self supporting. There are 34 women (21% of the total) in this category. Emma Marshall, who was both a novelist and juvenile writer, began to write for pay in 1878 after 24 years of marriage. She did so because her husband's bank had failed, leaving them with heavy debts. For the

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<sup>40</sup> Books only.

<sup>41</sup> Totals equal more than 100 percent because many of these women had careers spanning several decades.

next 20 years she was the family bread winner, turning out nearly 200 volumes by writing in the evenings, after the day's labour of caring for nine children was over. Through the profits of her pen, her five sons were educated and sent into professions. In the 1880s she was earning £500 a year, to 'supplement' her husband's earnings of £100.<sup>42</sup>

The range of ages at the time of first application to the RLF varies from 20 to 90. The average age at which they were forced to have recourse to charity was 45. The women authors under study had, on average, been published writers for 13.2 years before their situations became so desperate that the applicants were forced to have recourse to literary charity. Fifty percent had applied within 11 years of their first publication, while only eight (5.03%) applied in the same year that their first books were published. The largest span between becoming a published writer and applying to the RLF was 56 years. Slightly over 50 percent (51.5%) of authors had applied for assistance by the age of 45.

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<sup>42</sup> Marshall.

Table 4.4

## AGE AT FIRST PUBLICATION

Age	No.	%
20 or less	13	8.1
21-25	27	17.0
26-30	42	26.4
31-35	22	13.8
36-40	21	13.2
41-45	11	6.9
46-50	17	10.7
51-55	4	2.5
56-60	0	-
61-65	0	-
66-70	0	-
71-75	2	1.3
76-80	0	-
81-85	0	-
86-90	0	-
totals: <sup>43</sup>	159	99.9

Table 4.5

## AGE AT FIRST RLF APPLICATION

Age	No.	%
20 or less	1	.6
21-25	5	3.1
26-30	9	5.7
31-35	26	16.4
36-40	17	10.7
41-45	24	15.1
46-50	21	13.2
51-55	18	11.3
56-60	15	9.4
61-65	8	5.0
66-70	4	2.5
71-75	8	5.0
76-80	0	-
81-85	1	.6
86-90	2	1.3
	159	99.9

Unfortunately, few of the applicants made specific mention of the amounts they received for their copyrights. Those that did make it evident that copyright values could be incredibly small, considering the length of time it would take even a practiced writer to write even the most formulaic three volume novel.

Around 1800, when the earliest of the RLF applicants under consideration were publishing, William Lane was offering from £5 to £30 for copyrights. Alaric Watts, editor of Colburn's New Monthly Magazine, wrote in his 1854 letter of reference for Eliza Meteyard<sup>44</sup> of an acquaintance who had been paid £5 for the labour of four months, calling payments

<sup>43</sup> Due to rounding, percentage totals may not equal 100 percent.

<sup>44</sup> Case No. 1269.

of that sort 'extortion' and saying that "The bookseller is walking about 'seeking whom he may devour' in a plethora of prosperity; whilst his wretched victim a popular and what is better a useful author--aged, destitute, and sick almost unto death--scarcely knows where to lay his head...."

Table 4.6

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SALE OF COPYRIGHTS  
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Amount (£)	Publisher	Note
8	Tract Society	Novel
10	-	Novel-length serial
10	Hurst & Blackett	Novel (1868)
12	-	Novel-length serial
15	Newby	Novel
20	Newby	Novel
20	-	-
20	-	-
20	Hurst & Blackett	Novel, 1868
25	Newby	Novel
25	-	-
25	Partridge & Co.	£15 bonus if 2nd ed.
30	-	-
30	-	Novel
30	Hurst & Blackett	Novel, 1861
50	-	-
50	-	-
50	Newby	Novel
50	"Good Cheer"	Novel-length serial
60	Nelson & Co.	Novel
70	-	-
100	-	Novel (1878)
130	-	-
150	-	Needlework manual
150-400	-	Novels, late '40s
1000	Hurst & Blackett	Bio by Meteyard <sup>45</sup>

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45 Eliza Meteyard received by far the largest copyright price mentioned by any female applicant to the RLF. Hurst and Blackett paid her £1000 for her biography of Josiah Wedgewood in 1865-66. She had been arranging with another publisher to bring out the book in return for £300 but Hurst and Blackett stepped in and offered her the liberal

Evidence from the archives of the Fund seems to indicate that the generally accepted belief that £100 was the normal price of copyright for a novel in this period is erroneous, at least in the case of women.<sup>46</sup> Poetry of course paid miserably, with Mary Russell Mitford receiving "about the rate of sixpence a sonnet" for poems published in the 1820s.<sup>47</sup> A great many writers, some of whom enjoyed both critical and popular success, found £50 to be a much more typical copyright value. Indeed, in the sample provided by the women applicants to the RLF, the median value of a copyright was only £30.<sup>48</sup>

Further evidence that the assumption that £100 was not the typical value of a copyright for women writers is provided by Henry Tinsley in his discussion of the Edmund Yates/ Mrs. Cashel Hoey scandal. After discovering that several novels with Yates' name on them were actually the

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sum of £1000 in order to secure for themselves the copyright of what promised to be a most successful book.

46 Cross, p. 135; and Elaine Showalter, A Literature of Their Own (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p.

48. Gail Tuchman (1984) describes £250 as "a reasonable price" for a copyright in the 1850s, adding that "no self-respecting author would accept as little as £50". In Powell, p. 148.

47 Mitford to Thomas Talfourd, 13 April 1823, quoted in William A. Coles, "Magazine and Other Contributions by Mary Russell Mitford and Thomas Talfourd" in Studies in Bibliography, 1959, p. 220.

48 The median is the most appropriate measure of central tendency in cases such as this, where the data is highly skewed and there are inexact data at the extremes of the distribution.

work of Hoey,<sup>49</sup> Tinsley mused on the strangeness of the literary world, where a book acknowledged to be the work of a woman neither sold as well or received as great a price for copyright as work by the same woman writing as a man.<sup>50</sup> Women may also have been discriminated against at a much earlier point in the publication process. Tuchman and Fortin's work indicates that novels by women were less likely to receive serious consideration by publishers, if the house of Macmillan can be seen as representative.<sup>51</sup> In her doctoral thesis, Showalter mentions that writers as disparate as Charlotte Yonge, R. D. Blackmore, Anthony Trollope, and the American author Mary Murfee were all convinced that books attributed to female authors were not taken as seriously by reviewers, nor did they sell as well. In short, the research for this thesis has uncovered no evidence that would corroborate the assumption that men and women were treated indifferently with regard to payment as well as other aspects of literary work,<sup>52</sup> while the evidence

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49 This story receives corroboration from P.D. Edwards in Frances Cashel Hoey--Victorian Fiction Research Guide No. 8 (St. Lucia: Dept. of English, University of Queensland) 1982), pp. 6-11. He had earlier discounted it in a monograph on Yates in the same series (Victorian Fiction Research Guide No. 3), but a later discovery of some of Hoey's correspondence caused him to revise his opinion.

50 Tinsley, p. 141.

51 Gail Tuchman and Nina Fortin, "Edging Women Out: Some Suggestions About the Structure of Opportunities and the Victorian Novel", in Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, Vol 6, No. 2, (1980), p. 320.

52 As stated by Elaine Showalter in A Literature of their Own, p. 52, Nigel Cross in The Common Writer, p. 135, and

presented by the applicants to the RLF would indicate that the contrary was more usually true.

Even at the relatively exalted £100 level, few would argue that the money was not dearly bought. Charlotte Brontë wrote to the publisher George Smith in 1847, pointing out that "one hundred pounds is a small sum for a year's intellectual labour."<sup>53</sup> When Longmans offered Anthony Trollope £100 for The Three Clerks in 1859, Trollope responded in characteristic fashion:

I am sure you do not regard £100 as adequate payment for a 3 vol. novel. Of course an unsuccessful novel may be worth much less--may indeed be worth less than nothing. And it may very likely be that I cannot write a successful novel, but if I cannot obtain moderate success I will give over, and leave the business alone. I certainly will not willingly go on working at such a rate of pay.<sup>54</sup>

Trollope, with his secure position at the General Post Office, could afford such independence of speech and action. By and large, women writers, for whom opportunities for respectable and well-paid employment were rare indeed, could not.

Only 49 RLF applicants give the exact amount of literary income earned during the year of application or the year

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Merryn Williams in Women in the English Novel 1800-1900, p. 14.

53 Sutherland, p. 157.

54 Sutherland, p. 137.

previous to application. Of these, 31 percent earned less than £30 per year, while 16 percent claimed literary receipts ranging from £30 to £50 per year. Twenty-seven percent of RLF applicants who claimed income from literary sources earned between £50 and £74. Only 10 percent of individuals in this category earned between £75 and £100 per annum, and a fortunate 12 percent earned over £100 from writing. Slightly later, Walter Besant estimated that in 1898 there were 1300 living novelists. Seventy of these, he claimed, earned over £1000 per year; 150 made over £400, 200 lived on earnings of £100 to £400, with the rest [880] earning less than £100 annually.<sup>55</sup>

It was only in the highest income groups that a woman could truly hope to support herself by her authorship. One who did was Caroline White,<sup>56</sup> who earned her living by writing for more than 30 years, before the loss of an editorial position on a lady's magazine when it folded in 1877 forced her to apply for charity at the age of 64. Camilla Toulmin<sup>57</sup> judged her literary success by a standard that would have been immediately recognizable to the gentlemen who made up the committee of the RLF: "That I have through every struggle maintained the position of a gentlewoman will I trust be considered a sufficient evidence that I do not lack energy to exert whatever talent I may possess." Other

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<sup>55</sup> Besant, p. 63.

<sup>56</sup> Case No. 2022.

<sup>57</sup> Case No. 1184.



applicants were not so fortunate. After the death of the publisher who had given her indexing and copying work, Julia Blott<sup>58</sup> had been driven to pawn her entire wardrobe, receiving for it the sum of £12.

It has not been possible to estimate how many authors supported themselves solely by writing throughout their adult lives, although a number of them undoubtedly did so. One of the most prolific authors was Julia Corner,<sup>59</sup> a fine writer of history for children. The British Library catalogue credits her with 79 titles, many of them going into several editions. Corner applied for assistance to the RLF for the first time at the age of 75, writing with manifest pride that "as long as I was able to write I was sure of a maintenance." Male or female, few authors in any age have been able to claim as much.

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58 Case No. 1743.

59 Case No. 1916.

Table 4.7

## LITERARY INCOME FROM ALL SOURCES (YEARLY)

Amount (£)	No.	(%) <sup>60</sup>
1- 10	8	16.3
11-20	4	8.2
21-30	5	10.2
31-40	5	10.2
41-50	6	12.2
51-60	3	6.2
61-70	6	12.2
71-80	3	6.2
81-90	-	-
91-100	2	4.1
101-110	-	-
111-120	1	2.0
121-130	2	4.1
131-140	-	-
141-150	1	2.0
over 150 <sup>61</sup>	3	6.2
total:	49	100.1

On average, the RLF applicant who mentioned literary income earned £63 in the year that was finally bad enough to drive her to have recourse to the Fund. More meaningfully, the median value indicates that half of the applicants had earned £43 or less.

A 'superfluous woman', as so many of the RLF applicants might have been described, faced a frightening lack of options if she was unable to command fair prices for her work. Often without family connections of any kind, they felt utterly adrift in a world where the economic opportunities for

<sup>60</sup> N = 49.

<sup>61</sup> The three applicants who earned more than £150 claimed £200, £270, and £299 respectively.

women were severely restricted. Mary Linskill,<sup>62</sup> writing in 1877, testified:

I do not possess any means of living save by my own labour: nor any other talent save the one by which I am striving to live....I hardly know how I shall subsist until I learn from you whether this application proves successful or not. Should it fail I have no alternative whatever save that of breaking up my home at once. Beyond that I do not see a single step....

Alone, threatened with homelessness, and teetering on the verge of destitution, these women were a reality that Victorian society would have preferred to deny, and did seem to keep swept under the rug, except for the rare charity designated for the relief of impoverished gentlewomen.

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62 Case No. 2024.

### The RLF Applicants: From Marginality to Destitution

As Cross has pointed out in his study of the Fund, the essential prerequisites for sustained, successful authorship in the Victorian age were education, social status, leisure, and an independent income. Few of the women who made their first applications to the RLF between 1840-1880 could claim any of these privileges. As a result of this, most of the applicants had non-literary sources of income that contributed largely to their support. Overall, 147 (89.6%) of the women applying to the Fund mention one or more outside sources of income. Of this group, 88 applicants (59.8%) worked at something other than writing in attempts to supplement their literary income. Needless to say, the need to work at other occupations was a factor in their lack of success as writers.

The most often mentioned means of supplementing meagre literary earnings was teaching. Fifty-six women (34.1% of the total number of female applicants) describe themselves as governesses or school mistresses. Most of the individuals in this group seem to have been the proprietors of boarding schools of varying sizes and degrees of profitability; several had established school after school, only to fail repeatedly due to causes such as bad management, outbreaks of typhoid fever, or the establishment of local high schools. The exhausting nature of this occupation was com-

monly mentioned as a cause of long gaps between publication or as a reason for substandard writing. Mary Elizabeth Shipley<sup>1</sup> wrote to the committee in 1875:

Unfortunately, the many delays and disappointments which seem to attend the profession of literature as a livelihood have made it necessary for me to teach as well as to write, & the two occupations do not work easily together. Teaching exhausts my strength and prevents me from doing my best in writing.

Of those who mention the annual profits of their teaching endeavours, the income per annum claimed ranges from £7 (for a live-in governess) to a high of £78 earned by one applicant who worked as a daily governess. The average income claimed from teaching was £34 per year. Those blessed with exceptional stamina could manage to combine both careers until increasing age called a halt. Anne Raikes Harding,<sup>2</sup> whose husband died in 1803, leaving her with three young children, was one of the fortunate ones, as she explained to the committee in 1851:

I had...been given a sound Education and good principles, & was endowed by nature with some latent Energy, Strength of mind, industry & perseverance all of which were soon called into action. For 35 years I laboured incessantly as a Governess and Literary writer--conducting and teaching in my own establishment by day, and writing by night.

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1 Case No. 1978.

2 Case No. 1281.

The remainder of the occupations mentioned by the women applying to the RLF are varied. Eight let lodgings, earning from £20 to £80 per year, and seven mention doing needlework or fancywork, earning £7 to £20 a year thereby. Ella Curtis<sup>3</sup> wrote a letter to the RLF in 1881 explaining what she perceived of as a decline in the quality of her published works. "Nor have I been of late able to devote that time to study which those who aim at excellence even in the lowest branch of their profession cannot afford to dispense with; for as soon as I drop the pen, I am obliged to take up the needle!" Among other applicants there were two editors of journals, two readers of manuscripts for publishers, two who did copying work, and two actresses. Other occupations mentioned include matron of an institution, librarian, companion, private secretary, shopkeeper, maker of artificial flowers, mender in a hosiery warehouse, and mill worker. In this oddly assorted group, an editor made as much as £84 per year, while the mender in the hosiery warehouse, who had worked there since the age of 11, earned 10 shillings a week "when in full employ."<sup>4</sup> Some of the applicants in this last group were obviously not middle class in background, despite their literary ambitions.

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3 Case No. 2030.

4 On this wage she supported herself and her 71 year old mother, who had been able to keep herself until the age of 70.

Table 5.1

EARNED (NON-LITERARY<sup>5</sup>) SOURCES OF INCOME<sup>6</sup>

Source of Income	no.	amount (£) <sup>7</sup>	% <sup>8</sup>
<b>1. Educational</b>			
Schoolmistress	24	12 [ 10-12]	27.3
Governess	23	45 [ 7-78]	26.1
Language teacher	7	10 --	8.0
Music teacher	2	-- --	2.3
totals:	56	33.3	63.7
<b>2. Other</b>			
Letting lodgings	8	46 [ 20-80]	9.0
Needlework/Fancywork	7	13 [ 7-20]	8.0
Editor	2	84 --	2.3
Copier of MSS	2	-- --	2.3
Reader of MSS	2	41 [ 30-52]	2.3
Actress	2	-- --	2.3
Private secretary	1	70	1.1
Secretary of association	1	60	1.1
Matron	1	30	1.1
Librarian	1	--	1.1
Companion	1	--	1.1
Shopkeeper	1	18	1.1
Made artificial flowers	1	--	1.1
Hosiery warehouse	1	25	1.1
Millworker	1	--	1.1
totals:	32	39.6	36.1
	88		99.8

The second most common source of non-literary income was an unearned one--private assistance from friends, family, and estranged husbands. Nineteen women who also ap-

5 Non-literary is defined in this context in such a way that editors and publishers' readers are included in this class.

6 Charitable donations are discussed elsewhere.

7 Because there is a range of income in every category, I have provided an average and put the range in square brackets.

8 The percentages in this table are given as percentages of the number of RLF applicants who worked for wages. (N = 88)

plied to the RLF received regular gifts from friends, 11 had help from their families, and four mention receiving a separation allowance. Overall, 20.7 percent of female RLF applicants depended, to some extent, on private assistance. The amounts varied from £100 per year from a father to his widowed daughter to £5 a year from friends. The average amount of assistance per year was £21.

After gifts from individuals, the next most frequently mentioned non-literary source of income was derived from investments or annuities. Twenty-five applicants (15.2%) had some income from these sources. Several applicants had recourse to the Fund only after the failure of the bank or fund to which the profits of their writing careers were entrusted. The largest investment income was £90 per year, and it is an impressive proof of the popularity of this writer (Harriet Parr<sup>9</sup>, who wrote as 'Holme Lee') that this income was the fruit of the invested profits of the applicant's novels. The smallest amount of investment or annuity income mentioned was £12 per year. The average total was £38 per annum, an income which could not support a spinster, much less a family, in even the lowest reaches of middle class respectability.

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9 Case No. 1872.



Table 5.2

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 UNEARNED (NON-LITERARY) SOURCES OF INCOME
 

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Source	no.	amount (£)	(%)
1. <u>Private Assistance</u>			
Gifts (friends)	19	37 [ 5-70]	12.9
Gifts (family)	11	43 [ 10-100]	7.5
Alimony	4	43 [ 8-78]	2.7
totals:	34	40.2	23.1
2. <u>Investments/Annuities</u>			
Investment income	13	40 [ 12-90]	8.8
Annuities	12	35 [ 13-52]	8.2
totals:	25	38.2	17.0

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There are 38 instances of assistance from charitable organizations other than the RLF in the period under examination. A few individuals received aid from several agencies, most notably Selina Bunbury,<sup>10</sup> who collected amounts varying from £10 to £35 from seven charities, not including the RLF, in the years from 1864 to 1881. Overall, 22 percent of the RLF applicants mention being the beneficiary of financial assistance from charities.

With few exceptions, the charities gave an annual pension to the objects of their bounty, rather than a one-time grant. Among the private (not administered by government) charities, these amounts varied from £5 to £40 per annum. The majority of these groups, which were usually run by philanthropic committees, were occupationally based, being intended to relieve the distress of the dependents of clergy-

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10 Case No. 1089.

men or military officers, or some other clearly definable group.

Table 5.3

OCCUPATIONAL CHARITIES

Charity <sup>11</sup>	Value (£)	No. of Recip.
Corp. of the Sons of Clergy <sup>12</sup>	10-35 pa	5
Clergy Pension Fund <sup>13</sup>	20-40 pa	3
Friends of Clergy Fund	35	1
Royal Navy Benevolent Fund	12 pa	1
Naval Pension	14 pa	1
Army Compassionate Fund	5 pa	1
Military Officers Pension	40 pa	1
Officers Daughters Fund	12 pa	1
Governess Benevolent Society	20 pa	1
Actors Fund	26 pa	1

The governmental charities, unlike those oriented toward members of certain occupational groups, were merit-based. Most important among these were the Civil List Pension and the Queen's Royal Bounty. The Civil List was intended to relieve desert accompanied by distress, and about £500 per year was available for new pensions for authors. At least one RLF subscriber, Robert Bell, refused the offer of a Civil List pension of £60 as an insult,

<sup>11</sup> Applicants were often imprecise about the names of the charities to which they were indebted. Where variant names are given, I have assumed that the funds were bestowed by different agencies, unless I have positive evidence to the contrary.

<sup>12</sup> This charity relieved individuals with incomes of less than £50 per year.

<sup>13</sup> This charity relieved individuals with incomes of less than £40 per year.

claiming that it would injure his literary reputation.<sup>14</sup> No such considerations deterred two female RLF applicants who gratefully accepted pensions from the Civil List of less than £40 per year.

While the Civil List was a provision for life, the Queen's Bounty was a one-time grant, although a few fortunate individuals received it twice. The criteria for a grant from the Queen's Bounty was essentially the same as that for a Civil List pension, although Cross claims that the standard of literary merit required in order to qualify was lower.<sup>15</sup> All told, including both old and new Civil List pensions and the Queen's Bounty, the government had about £8,500 to spend on relieving literary distress every year.<sup>16</sup> Recipients of these grants and pensions were given between £30 to £100, with £30 being considered unusually low.

Table 5.4

PENSIONS GRANTED BY GOVERNMENT

Charity	Value (£)	No. of Recip.
Civil List	30-100 pa	7
Royal Bounty	75-100	3
Government Pension	50 pa	1
Scottish Exchequer	7.10 pa	1

14 Civil List Pensions of less than £50 per annum were atypical: £100 was the most usual amount and is the sum most commonly mentioned by both male and female applicants to the Fund.

15 Cross, p. 87.

16 Cross, p. 88.

Under the category of "other" charities have been included all charities for which the source of funds or the criteria for bestowal were unclear. Some, including items such as the Bishop of Oxford and (the Deans of?) Sts. Paul and John, were probably donations prompted by private benevolence. Only those sources of funds which were specifically described as annual are listed as pensions per annum, although some of the other sources were likely annual as well.

Table 5.5

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OTHER CHARITIES  
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Charity	Value (£)	No. of Recip.
Royal Charity	10-30	3
Royal Hospital	19 pa	1
St. Johns	15	1
St. Paul's	15	1
Prof. of Eccles. Hist., Oxon	10 pa	1
Royal Almonry	10	1
St. Katherine's	10 pa	1
Bishop of Oxon	10 pa	1

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The RLF was for many a last resort. The 164 women who applied to the Fund for relief between 1840 and 1880 listed over 300 reasons for their financial distress. Overall, the illness or debility of the applicant was the most commonly mentioned reason for their need of assistance. The burden of supporting other family members or the loss of the supporting individual to death, incapacity, or desertion came next. The next most common calamity was the loss of property. Bank failures, embezzlement by trustees (Mrs. Eliza

Walker<sup>17</sup> had her substantial fortune embezzled by her brother and at the same time discovered that her husband was a bigamist, and Mrs. Georgiana Wieland<sup>18</sup> had £23,000 embezzled by her elder brother), speculation, the failure of foreign funds, and the bankruptcy of insurance companies were commonly mentioned as reasons why women who were once adequately protected from the dismal realities of poverty no longer were. The other causes of distress frequently mentioned are want of literary employment and financial difficulties with publishers.

Especially pathetic are the stories of the women writers who were imprisoned for debt, although this practice was becoming rare by 1840. Elizabeth Hardy<sup>19</sup> began life in comfortable circumstances, but the joint-stock bank in which the bulk of her fortune was invested failed, and the remainder was embezzled by her solicitors. Thus plundered, she turned to authorship in 1830, at the age of 34. In 1852, when Hardy was 65, she was sent to Queen's Bench prison because of her inability to pay a small debt, the result of another bank failure. She wrote steadily for periodicals while in confinement, but died in prison in 1854.<sup>20</sup> At the inquest into her death one of her fellow-prisoners described

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17 Case No. 1354.

18 Case No. 1058.

19 Case No. 1292.

20 The £40 voted her by the committee of the RLF was seized by her creditors. The inquest is reported in an unidentified and undated clipping included in the case file.

the life of this elderly and feeble woman as one of unceasing literary toil: "She would be up before daylight, writing as an authoress, and would frequently sit up to a late hour at night, engaged in a similar way." Another RLF applicant, Eliza Parsons,<sup>21</sup> wrote a four volume novel while confined in the King's Bench prison for debt, in a desperate, and unsuccessful, attempt to earn her release.

Changing literary tastes could doom a writer with a specific "line" to sudden anonymity and consequent poverty. Matilda Ann Mackarness,<sup>22</sup> whom the DNB credits with 42 books, described the sudden decline in her career as a catastrophe, especially considering the small amount she had received for copyright:

Left a widow and penniless with seven children to support--the youngest 1 year and the eldest (a girl) 12, I have for ...years struggled to support them on literary labour....Till 1874 I was very successful but ...I have had no order from Publishers since, nor will they take anything I send them.

Some writers were unable to change with changing tastes among their readerships. This problem seems to be especially common in the late 60s and early 70s with the increasing popularity of the sensation novel, whose best known practitioners were Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Mrs. Henry Wood. Some RLF applicants attempted the new form unsucces-

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21 Case No 21.

22 Case No. 1991.

fully, while others objected to it on the grounds that sensationalism vitiated the moral sense. Emma Marshall<sup>23</sup> blamed the popularity of "these immoral novels" for the fact that her formerly profitable domestic novels and historical romances were virtually unsalable by 1869. The taste for her pure tales peaked in the early 60s (she wrote more than 200 of them) and then rapidly lost ground to the bigamy novels and others of that ilk. She explained her position in her autobiography, complaining of "current fiction, with its unpleasantness and misery and suicide brought about by illegal love (so called). There surely is a very degenerate taste abroad. This phase of society I cannot touch."<sup>24</sup>

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23 Case No. 2272.

24 Beatrice Marshall, Emma Marshall: A Biographical Sketch. (London: Seely and Co., 1900), p. 281.

Table 5.6

## CAUSES OF DISTRESS (ALL CATEGORIES OF APPLICANTS)

cause of distress	no.	(%)
illness of applicant	77	47.0
support of dependents	52	31.7
illness/death of supporter	43	26.2
want of employment	25	15.2
loss of property	24	14.6
disputes with publishers	19	11.6
business failure	11	6.7
Chancery suits	10	6.1
failing eyesight	10	6.1
publisher failure	9	5.5
desertion	8	4.9
supporter unemployed	8	4.9
insanity	8	4.9
old age	6	3.7
bank failure	5	3.0
embezzlement of property	4	2.4
changing literary tastes	3	1.8
totals:	322	191.4 <sup>25</sup>

Causes of distress have also been broken down by the marital status of the applicant, in the belief that this provides a clearer picture of what constituted calamity in each state of life. It is clear that married women were to some extent less dependent upon their continuing productivity, as the loss of the husband's income is the most common precipitating cause of the application for charity, rather than the illness of the applicant, as is the case in all other categories of marital status.

<sup>25</sup> Because many applicants listed several causes for their present distress, totals will equal more than 100 percent.



Table 5.7

## CAUSES OF DISTRESS (UNMARRIED AND WIDOWED APPLICANTS)

cause of distress	spinsters	widows
	no. (%)	no. (%)
illness	50 (55.0%)	15 (44.0%)
support of others	28 (30.8%)	13 (38.2%)
death of supporter	12 (13.2%)	14 (41.2%)
want of employ	14 (15.4%)	9 (26.5%)
dispute with publisher	14 (15.4%)	4 (11.4%)
loss of property	11 (12.1%)	9 (26.5%)
failing eyesight	7 ( 7.7%)	1 ( 2.9%)
Chancery suit	6 ( 6.6%)	--
business failure	6 ( 6.6%)	--
bank failure	4 ( 4.4%)	1 ( 2.9%)
publisher failure	4 ( 4.4%)	4 ( 4.4%)
changing lit taste	3 ( 3.3%)	--
embezzlement of prop	2 ( 2.2%)	--
old age	2 ( 2.2%)	--
insanity	1 ( 1.1%)	--
desertion	NA	NA
totals	168 (184.8%)	72 (211.8%) <sup>26</sup>

26 All totals will equal more than 100 percent because many applicants listed multiple causes of distress. The responses of 91 spinsters and 34 widows are included in this table.

Table 5.8

## CAUSES OF DISTRESS (MARRIED &amp; DESERTED/DIVORCED APPLICANTS)

cause of distress	married	deserted/divorced
illness of supporter	16 (64.0%)	1 (7.7%)
desertion	NA	8 (61.5%)
illness	7 (28.0%)	5 (38.5%)
support of family	7 (28.0%)	4 (30.7%)
supporter unemployed	6 (24.0%)	2 (15.4%)
business failure	4 (16.0%)	1 (7.7%)
Chancery suit	2 (8.0%)	2 (15.4%)
insanity	2 (8.0%)	1 (7.7%)
loss of property	1 (4.0%)	3 (23.1%)
embezzlement of prop	1 (4.0%)	1 (7.7%)
publisher dispute	1 (4.0%)	-- --
failure of publisher	-- --	1 (7.7%)
want of employment	-- --	2 (15.4%)
failing eyesight	1 (4.0%)	1 (7.7%)
old age	1 (4.0%)	1 (7.7%)
changing literary taste	--	1 (7.7%)
totals:	49 (196.0%)	34 (261.6%) <sup>27</sup>

At the time of their first application to the Fund, 55.5 percent of the female applicants to the RLF were single<sup>28</sup> and 20.7 percent were widowed. 15.2 percent were married and living with their husbands, while 7.8 percent were married but living apart from their husbands, due to separation or desertion. One applicant was found by the zetetic Blewitt to be living common-law.

<sup>27</sup> All totals will equal more than 100 percent because many applicants listed multiple causes of distress. The responses of 25 married women and 13 deserted or separated women are included in this table.

<sup>28</sup> This agrees with Showalter's conclusion that of women writers born between 1800 and 1900 a constant proportion of roughly 50 percent were unmarried.

Table 5.9

## MARITAL STATUS AT TIME OF INITIAL APPLICATION

Marital Status	No.	(%)
Single	91	55.5
Widowed	34	20.7
Married	25	15.2
Deserted	8	4.8
Separated	5	3.0
Common-Law	1	.6
totals:	164	99.8

When these figures are compared to census records for England and Wales in this period, it is evident that fewer RLF applicants were fulfilling what their society saw as their natural destiny than the national average. According to the 1861 census, 58.4 percent of women over 20 were wives, while 12.7 percent were widowed. 25.7 percent of English women were listed as spinsters, and 3.2 percent were described as unmarried mothers.<sup>29</sup>

Although it may seem at first glance that one of the most disadvantageous factors for a woman writer was the lack of a husband, considering that single, widowed, and separated women make up 84 percent of the total number of female applicants to the Fund, less obvious factors must also be considered. The most important of these is the number of other individuals dependent upon the writer's earnings.

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<sup>29</sup> Volume on Population of the 1861 Census of England and Wales, volume 15, pp. 19-24. There were 3,488,952 married women, 756,717 widows, 1,537,314 spinsters, and 192,938 unmarried women with children, according to the report of the census takers.

One of the reasons why applicants were forced to have recourse to the RLF was the burden of supporting family members upon meagre incomes. Of the 164 applicants under examination, 70 (42.6%) mentioned being the sole source of income for others as a cause of their distress. Of these 70 individuals, 51 percent were in households headed by women alone. Of the applicants with dependents, 27 percent had one other individual to support; 26 percent supported two dependents,<sup>30</sup> while 47 percent supported three or more. Thirty percent of the widows were heads of families, with, on average, two dependents. Among the separated or deserted, 39 percent were the sole support of others, usually their children.

Of the 164 female applicants to the Fund in the mid-nineteenth century, 23 percent of the single applicants were supporting at least one other person. The average number of persons supported by a literary spinster was three, although seven women had only one other individual to support, and one had ten. This sort of added burden was seen as unfortunate, but not entirely unnatural, given the self-sacrificial and care-taking role assigned to women by Victorian

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30 In all cases where the number of dependents is not specified, the applicant using terms such as sisters or grandchildren, I have chosen to assume the minimum possible number. This error on the side of conservatism means that this figure is probably slightly inflated, while the next figure should probably have been somewhat higher.

society. Mary Howitt wrote of her friend, the popular novelist and poet 'Silverpen' (Eliza Meteyard<sup>31</sup>) in 1850 that:

out of the money thus obtained (from the sale of The Doctor's Little Daughter), she has provided for and sent out a young brother to Australia, while for another she is striving in the same way. Indeed, she is both father and mother to her family; yet she is only seven-and-twenty, and a fragile and delicate woman, who in ordinary circumstances would require brothers and friends to help her. <sup>32</sup>

Another, better-known poet, Christina Rossetti, wrote to Macmillan in 1881 explaining her refusal to sell him her copyrights--"My brother's wife has just presented us with twins! so the minutest prospective gains become of double value, and I cling to my dear copyright more than ever...."<sup>33</sup> Sometimes a literary spinster's dependents were her parents. Mary Russell Mitford's<sup>34</sup> father was described in the Athenaeum as

a sanguine, cheerful, and speculative man, who tried physic, played at whist, spent every one's money, and something more....To this love and to his extravagance his daughter's life was sacrificed. Every fortune that came in his way, including a £20,000

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31 Case No. 1269.

32 Howitt to sister, in Margaret Howitt, ed., Mary Howitt: an Autobiography vol 2 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1889), pp. 61f.

33 Rossetti to Macmillan, 23 April 1881, in Letters to Macmillan, ed. Simon Nowell-Smith (London: Macmillan, 1967), p. 94.

34 Case No. 1067

prize won in the lottery, was wasted, gaily and plausibly, by Dr Mitford....<sup>35</sup>

Her father went through more than £80,000 in a few years, living at his club in London, while his wife and daughter remained behind in the country to write humble and grateful letters begging for a pound with which to purchase food.<sup>36</sup>

Among married women, 72 percent were the sole breadwinner for their families. The husbands in these cases were either incapacitated by illness or completely out of employ. The average number of dependents supported by these women was three as well. The remainder of the married women who applied to the RLF (28%) had an employed husband, but for one reason or other his earnings were inadequate. For example, Susanna Mary Paull<sup>37</sup> was the wife of a clergyman who suffered the permanent loss of his voice. As a result of this calamity they were forced to pay out almost the entirety of his annual stipend in order to employ a curate, leaving them dependent for their living upon her literary earnings. Other women had the misfortune to marry men who were just no good at business. Mrs. J. H. Riddell, a well-known novelist for several decades, was married to an inept businessman, forcing her to become the chief breadwinner shortly after her marriage. In order to maintain the family

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35 Mary Russell Mitford obituary, The Athenaeum, January 13, 1855.

36 Hall, p. 437.

37 Case No. 1803.

and to pay off his debts, she published 56 works of fiction between 1855 and 1902.

The most dependents supported by a woman writer applying to the Fund was 11. Isabella Banks,<sup>38</sup> best known as the author of The Manchester Man, had ten children to provide for as well as supporting an alcoholic, abusive husband who entertained at intervals the delusion that he was the second Christ, and "whose chief pleasure [was] to thwart and persecute his unhappy wife."<sup>39</sup> Resuming the pen at the age of 43 under the compulsion of dire want, her literary income was deservedly higher than that of most other applicants, peaking at £320 in 1881, but it was unequal to the demands placed upon it. She applied to the RLF 17 times, 15 times successfully, receiving a total of £550. It is interesting to speculate on what might have been Mrs. Bank's reaction to Showalter's claim that there is no evidence that the claims of motherhood and literature were incompatible. At least one woman writer, Harriet Martineau, believed that she could not have written had she had children.<sup>40</sup>

The demands of familial obligation were not confined to members of the immediate family. Selina Bunbury<sup>41</sup> became an

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38 Case No. 1770.

39 Case No. 1705.

40 Elaine Showalter, The Double Standard: Criticism of Women Writers in England, 1845-1880 (University of California at Davis: unpublished dissertation, 1970), p. 49.

41 Case No. 1089.

author in her late teens when her family lost their Irish property after 40 years involvement in a Chancery suit.<sup>42</sup> In her 1843 application Bunbury describes her motives for becoming an author in purely pragmatic terms: "without having shown any previous inclination or talent for writing, I commenced at once my career as an author, and for many years wrote anonymously and successfully in periodicals and otherwise for the alleviation of family distress." She supported both of her elderly parents until their deaths, paid her brother's fees at Oxford (he obtained a living upon graduation but died six months later), and maintained her invalid sister. By 1859 she was supporting only her sister and a nephew whom she later put through Oxford. In 1871, when she was 68 years old, and writing with her left hand because of paralysis in her right, she was producing at the astonishing rate of 70-80 pages per day, largely for periodicals, in order to maintain herself, her sister, and a thirteen year old orphan niece. She pointed out that earlier in her career she had been able to command a living for herself and her family by writing between 40-50 pages per day.

Periodicals, paying by the sheet, were initially attractive to aspiring authors, who discovered too late that the rate of remuneration that all but the upper echelon offered was so low that only constant, grinding toil would

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<sup>42</sup> Chancery suits seem to have deserved the opprobrium heaped upon them by Charles Dickens in Bleak House. Ten of the women who apply to the RLF lost property in them, and several had their eventual lunacy attributed to their legal involvement.



provided the barest necessities of life, leaving the writer no time to plan, much less execute, more ambitious projects. Mary Linskill,<sup>43</sup> who wrote mostly for serial publication, wrote bitterly in 1877 "I have yet had no fair chance of doing fair work." Charlotte Anne Smith<sup>44</sup> compared her situation in 1869 to that of a donkey on a treadmill, writing "I am compelled to labour hard in writing Stories for the cheap Periodicals--the path upward into the higher Magazines is beset with many difficulties, and Poverty is a great obstruction."

It is not surprising that women writers were apologetic about the slipshod quality of much of their work written at this pace. Bunbury would probably have sympathized both with Sarah Smith Jones,<sup>45</sup> who wrote to the committee in 1868 that her "literary efforts are crushed and crippled by the anxiety of mind consequent on the lack of any pecuniary resources," and with the description of the career of Harriette Smythies, who was "the author of several works of fiction of considerable merit and w[ould] I am sure, have produced still better books, if she had not been under the pressure of writing for order to periodicals."<sup>46</sup>

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43 Case No. 2024.

44 Case No. 1751.

45 Case No. 1770.

46 Lord Lytton's 2 September 1866 letter of reference for Smythies, Case No. 1255.

Harriette Smythies, whose 1866 letter of recommendation is quoted above, was known as the Queen of the Domestic Novel in the 1850s. Born in 1813 of a good family, her works declined in popularity with the rise of the sensation novel and by 1862, when Smythies was 49, the journal that had been paying her eight guineas per week folded, and her services were dispensed with. In the same year her publisher went bankrupt, and Smythies was unable to salvage the amount he had owed her. By 1864 her daughter was consumptive, and she died two years later, aged 20. In that same year Smythies separated from her husband, a dissolute clergyman, who allowed her £50 per year. By 1873 her youngest son was suffering from consumption, and the next year she was involved in legal proceedings against a periodical for refusing to pay for a story they commissioned from her and used. After the mid 1870s debility and poor health had incapacitated her and she was no longer able to write. By 1882 all of her children had died of consumption except for one son, and she had spent large amounts of money ("these terrible expenses") in a vain search for health for her children in warmer climates. During these years Smythies published 38 books, mostly novels and poetry, as well as writing a prodigious quantity of pieces and serial stories for periodicals.

Elaine Showalter points out that one of the distinguishing characteristics of the female novelists is

the seriousness with which they took their domestic roles.<sup>47</sup> Crowded conditions and constant domestic pressures only exacerbated the problem of writing well. Harriet Wieles<sup>48</sup>, widow of "Leigh Cliffe" Wieles, wrote for periodical publication while sharing a one room flat with four children under ten and her mother. Even for those who wrote in less crowded conditions, constant interruptions were normal for women, often because their writing was not viewed as serious work. Helen Mathers (Mrs. Reeves) described a typical day as a series of constant domestic interruptions:

just as I have settled down to do a good morning's work, and have perhaps finished a page, someone comes in and puts letters or account books on it, or my boy Phil rushes in and lays his air gun or his banjo upon the table, or my husband brings in some little commission, or a heap of notes to be answered for him.<sup>49</sup>

Susanna Moodie,<sup>50</sup> who had emigrated to Canada and authored Roughing It in the Bush, found that the demands placed upon her by her ill husband and the six small grandchildren for whom she was caring, and by their widowed mother, created a hectic atmosphere in which no work was possible. The 1865 novel she promised Bentley, Dorothy Chance, or the Fortunes

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47 Showalter, Literature, p. 61.

48 Case No. 1133.

49 Black, p. 72.

50 Case No. 1678.

of a Foundling, never materialized, largely as a result of these family demands.<sup>51</sup>

Isabella Banks wrote from London in 1880, where she was negotiating the publication of a cheap edition of her novels:

At present I am in a whirl of trouble with Mr. Banks. He is suffering from acute cancer yet is not amenable to any medical control. [He has] maddened himself with alcohol and is threatening to take his life before the night or the week is out though this is no new threat; he did make the attempt once under like conditions and I am in a state of nervous tremor.<sup>52</sup>

While affairs were in this state (1878-80) Banks managed to write a three volume novel, Wooers and Winners, 43 articles for periodicals, and a 24 part story entitled "More Than Coronets" for the Girls' Own Paper, while crippled with rheumatism in the hands.<sup>53</sup> A hard life was not a novelty to Banks; five years earlier she had written the committee of the RLF of the labour exacted by her heavy family responsibilities:

I have been gradually freeing myself and family from the incubus of debt, incurred in bygone efforts to keep home together. But-- to accomplish this, and maintain ourselves respectably I accepted literary engagements be-

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51 Susanna Moodie to Bentley, 1865, cited in Sutherland, p. 209.

52 E.L. Burney, Mrs. G. Linnaeus Banks (Manchester: E.J. Morton, 1969), pp. 96-7.

53 Burney, pp. 94, 101.

yond my physical strength. A strong man could scarcely have achieved more than I have done; viz, kept a weekly journal and a monthly magazine supplied with a separate serial story at one and the same time not a chapter being ready in advance. --How I have done it is proved by the success of my 'Manchester Man' in Cassell's Family Magazine....Since last October I have been working unremittingly until 3.4.5.6 in a morning. Have had my household cares in the day and a fearful load of domestic anxieties. --Have lost my aged mother by sudden death, have seen my eldest daughter fading day by day, and to crown all have had my husband come home half killed, to need constant attendance for six weeks, and during that time was myself suffering from a painful disease joined to the consciousness that I was 'breaking down'. --I wrote my last monthly installment for Cassell's with vinegar to my head and ice to my throat; with the close railway trains whizzing and shrieking past the study window every 5 minutes.<sup>54</sup>

Some women found that as the years passed, the strain of constant literary toil and financial anxiety were psychologically disabling. Julia Tilt<sup>55</sup> wrote to the committee in 1861 of the mental toll exacted by a lifetime of only marginally successful work. "I could tell you gentlemen of years of suffering in writing for daily bread in the support of my mother and family--I have fought and toiled--toiled and fought--and now I have neither health nor spirit to engage in the strife." Mary Howitt, despite her relative affluence--she was never forced to apply to the Fund, although she wrote letters of reference for a number of appli-

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54 Case No. 1705. Banks to RLF, 1 July 1875.

55 Case No. 1691.

cants--found that the mental exhaustion resulting from full-time authorship exacted a heavy psychological price. In 1848 she wrote to her sister, "I am so deadened and stupefied...that I can hardly rouse myself...I sit down after breakfast and work, work, work; then when the usual stint is done, I only want to be quiet and sleep...."<sup>56</sup>

Laetitia Landon described the psychological condition of a successful and popular female writer in a letter to S.G. Hall. "What is my life? One day of drudgery after another; difficulties incurred for others, which have ever pressed upon me beyond health...envy, malice, and all uncharitableness--these are the fruits of a successful literary career for a woman."<sup>57</sup> The fruits of a relatively unsuccessful literary career were bitterer. Mrs. Ann Jane Cupples,<sup>58</sup> a popular writer on scientific matters for juvenile readers, who was praised by individuals as disparate as Charles Darwin and George MacDonald, and who supported her invalid husband for fourteen years, as well as her mother-in-law and an epileptic brother-in-law, wrote miserably to the RLF in 1877: "I must just go on leading the forlorn hope if I have to die in the doing of it." Her total literary earnings in that year were £45.

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<sup>56</sup> Howitt, vol. 2, p. 46.

<sup>57</sup> Hall, p. 266.

<sup>58</sup> Case No. 2015.

One could go on, describing the experiences of women authors such as Caroline Wetherall<sup>59</sup> whose application describes her as "quite insane from studious habits"; and several authors who suffered the most disastrous of occupationally related physical illnesses, blindness. Others endured the consequences of an unlucky marriage choice throughout their lives: Fanny Osborne,<sup>60</sup> the daughter of a well-known artist, was permanently disabled after a series of beatings by her husband, a clergyman who played the confidence game in Jamaica; Sarah Coombe,<sup>61</sup> who described her distress as the result of the "Bad Conduct of a Husband -- who neglected his family and attached himself to a worthless Female"; Mary Kerr Hart<sup>62</sup> whose husband had been insane for twenty years; and Harriet Emma Cunningham,<sup>63</sup> who although living in 'grace and favour' apartments at Windsor, became destitute after her husband was transported for 15 years for performing an abortion on a girl made pregnant by a Church of England curate, and many whose standard of living plummeted when their husbands lost their jobs due to accidents or ill health. Further examples exist, but they would only serve to reinforce the impression produced by even a casual examination of the archives of the RLF: that these appli-

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59 Case No. 1097.

60 Case No. 1293.

61 Case No. 1152.

62 Case No. 1047.

63 Case No. 1417.

cants were, for the most part, industrious and reasonably talented writers who for many years eked out a subsistence-level living from literature, but who slid into poverty when their private circumstances became adverse.



## Conclusion

To summarize this preliminary study of the women writers who applied to the Royal Literary Fund in the mid-Victorian era, perhaps the historian may be permitted to trespass into the realm of fiction and to attempt to create a typical, or composite applicant. While not an actual person, this fictional representative might well have been recognised by many real Victorian women writers as one of themselves--the more fortunate among them would no doubt have blessed their good fortune in escaping the calamities that led her, like so many of her sisters, to turn to charity.

The year is 1860. Our applicant, an unmarried woman aged 45, has just applied for relief from the RLF for the first time, 15 years after the publication of her first novel. Her parents, now dead, lived in one of England's provincial cities, where her father was the assistant headmaster of a preparatory school. She and her sister received their education at home from their mother, with their father supervising their progress. Her only brother attended public school, and a commission in the army was purchased for him, but he returned from India as an invalid, and now struggles to live upon his military pension. He is unable to assist his sisters. After the sudden death of her father, she, her mother, and her sister ran a small, marginally successful girls school from

their home. She and her sister moved to London after the death of their mother the failure of their school, and the publication of her first novel, in order to be closer to the literary marketplace. They live in lodgings in Pimlico.

Our applicant has published six books, all novels. She sold the copyrights of five of them for sums varying from £30 to £50. Unable to find a purchaser for the copyright of her latest work, she reluctantly agreed to publish it upon the joint-share method. This has to date produced no profit for her, and she suspects that her publisher is misrepresenting the book's sales record. Writing as frequently as possible for several women's periodicals, her total literary income for 1859 was £42. Until this past year, her earnings from her writing, supplemented by irregular work as a daily governess which brought in about £30 per year, had sufficed to support her and her elder sister, now a complete invalid. She is now ill herself, suffering from an unspecified debilitating complaint.

Her application to the RLF is successful, and she receives a grant of £20. She will apply twice more in the next decade, being granted £15 and £20 respectively. After this her name no longer recurs in the records of the Fund, leaving the reader to wonder whether her silence was due to death, discouragement, nomination to an

almshouse for impoverished gentlewomen, or more happily, the return of financial stability.

More generally, perhaps the most useful conclusion for this tentative foray into the masses of information contained on women writers in the archives of the Royal Literary Fund might be to suggest some possible areas for further research. Because of the dearth of research in this area, the little that is known remains somewhat speculative, and many areas of interest remain for examination.

The question of whether women were the victims of economic discrimination in the price they received for their work will remain unanswered until a study of their male counterparts at the same level of success is undertaken. The suggestion that women were treated with less seriousness at the submission stage of the publication process by publishers' readers has been made, but it would be interesting to carry out the same sort of analysis of critical reviews of published books to ascertain whether works by women were treated differently by the critics than those of men. It may also be possible to determine whether books by women were advertised at the same rate, and in the same media, as comparable works by men. Comparative studies of copyright prices, publisher acceptance rates, critical attention, and advertising by publishers would create some sort of meaningful atmo-

sphere in which to discuss the question of whether literary discrimination existed.

The operation of the Fund itself is worthy of further study. It would be interesting to know if certain genres of works were more likely than others to receive grants, or whether grant size varied with type of work. An overall study of application results might indicate whether the RLF was most interested in promoting virtue, alleviating misfortune, rewarding industry, or encouraging talent. The identity of the RLF itself, both how it was viewed by others and its self perception, is another relatively unexplored area.

In some ways the most interesting of these unanswered questions may be the problem of the role of professionalism in the perception and self-concept of the woman author. Frequently expressed in this period was the fear that the literary profession was becoming overcrowded by amateurs, and especially by female amateurs. The paradox implicit in the above statement is one that Victorians who knew the literary world struggled with throughout the period. The question of whether writers were seen as professional, and what in fact was meant by the term, remains an unanswered one. The field both suffered and profited from the fact that there was no exclusionary training or apprenticeship required before one could style oneself a professional author. It was an advantage in that it allowed many writers of ability, in-

cluding women, to attempt to succeed in the field, but it also seduced some untalented or indolent individuals into a way of life that seemed to be equally open to all. The terminal grants given by the RLF were one way of indicating, without undue offense, that an aspiring writer might well consider another line of work.

Writers such as Thackeray typified the old tradition of the writer as proudly non-professional; the gentlemanly, leisurely amateur who wrote for posterity, or at least for nothing more than his own amusement, is an English literary tradition, mythical as it may largely be. Among this class of writer, money, although certainly welcome if it came, was not the incentive for literary production. It was believed that gentlemanly authors wrote for other, nobler purposes, among them the desire for fame, the wish to use literature for didactic or edifying purposes, and the impulse to preserve their own knowledge for the future. Women writers, on the other hand, were forced into an amateurism that was certainly not gentlemanly, and was equally far from being leisurely. They were so harried by their desperate struggle for cash income that the time for study and reflection taken for granted by the gentlemanly amateur was an unattainable luxury for them.

Other writers, notably Dickens and Trollope, approached the business of living by the pen with a distinctly hard-headed attitude. Their pragmatic, profit-

oriented approach to the literary world gained them the contempt of those who believed that a gentleman was above haggling over the price of a copyright, but this merchantilistic orientation was destined to become the normal attitude before many years had passed. Ladies, almost by definition, would have found this decidedly non-altruistic behaviour virtually impossible to integrate into their dealings with publishers. To demand more than they were offered, to discuss financial arrangements with individuals who may have seemed to them to be of the shop-keeping class, even to deal with men in the business world on an equal basis, violated many of the norms for feminine behaviour in a society that was acutely conscious of questions relating to both gender and money. It is evident that both models for authorship extant in the Victorian age implicitly excluded women.

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January 14<sup>th</sup> 1880. Grant of £60. *W. H. Herdman*  
 ROYAL LITERARY FUND. *Revised*  
 (In 12 monthly instalments of £5)

Form of Application for an Author.

Christian name and surname of the Applicant in words at length.	<i>Edith Herdman</i>			
Profession, University or other titles.	<i>Elocutionist &amp; Literateur.</i>			
Age, Date and Place of Birth.	<i>Born 11. December 1834 - Parish of St. Pancras, Bunton Street.</i>			
Present Residence.	<i>102 Liverpool Road</i>			
Whether single or married; and if married, or having been so, and having a family, the number, respective ages, and circumstances of the children.	<i>Single.</i>			
If relieved before by the Royal Literary Fund; and if so, how often, and to what amount on each occasion.	<i>No.</i>			
Present means and sources of income, whether from Salary, Annuity, Pension, or other kind of provision.	<i>Occupation on Illustrated London News &amp; other journals.</i>			
The amount of such income yearly; and the actual amount of literary earnings during the past year.	<i>Eighty pounds - [£30 due from The Caricature Express and Examiner.]</i>			
TITLES OF PUBLISHED WORKS, in two columns. <i>To be continued, if necessary, on the following page.</i>	No. of Vols.	Size.	Place of Publication.	Date of Publication.
<i>Handbook of Elocution and Oratory -</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>12mo</i>	<i>London</i>	<i>1864</i>
			<i>Cupbell.</i>	
<i>Lecture on Denryson -</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>8vo</i>	<i>London</i>	<i>1878</i>
			<i>Simpkin and Marshall</i>	
<i>Please Turn Over</i>				
In the case of an Application founded on Contributions to Periodical Literature, the Schedule to the next page must be filled up.				

Dated this *1<sup>st</sup>* day of *January* 1880.

(Signature of Applicant.) *Edith Herdman*