

# Victorian Social Activists' Novels

Editor: **Oliver Lovesey**, University of British Columbia

4 Volume Set: c.1600pp: January 2011  
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The Victorian period was a time of massive social change. Novels played a key role in this process. Whilst today the women authors of these works are better known for their campaigns and non-fiction, the novels presented in this four-volume reset edition are key in fully understanding them as individuals, as well as the causes they were fighting for.

The writers of these novels were involved in various types of activism, using approaches ranging from conservative amelioration to radical militancy. Their works employ a broad variety of genres from the novel of manners, sensation, education and vocation, to allegory, romance, female *bildungsroman* and lesbian fiction.

The position of fiction in the careers of these women is complex. Fiction writing was widely recognized as a 'profession' open to women, supplying ready money for personal expenses and for the social cause. It also permitted access to a broad readership that could not be reached through pamphlets or periodicals, and it allowed the potential for influential literary celebrity. Moreover, romance and the novel had an important position in female education, and fiction allowed writers to voice some of their most unorthodox opinions.



'Over London by Rail' Gustave Dore (1870)  
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- Addresses the role of fiction in Victorian social activism
- Provides the first scholarly edition for the novels, which have not been in print since the nineteenth century
- Novels included are supported by selections from the authors' campaign literature, fiction and other writings
- Full editorial apparatus, including substantial general introduction, volume introductions and endnotes

**RESET  
EDITION**

**Volume 1:**

**Caroline Norton, *The Wife* (1835)**

Appendix: selections from *A Voice from the Factories* (1836); *A Plain Letter to the Lord Chancellor on the Infant Custody Bill* (1839); *A Letter to the Queen on Lord Cranworth's Marriage and Divorce Bill* (1855)

Caroline Norton (1808–77) is one of the best-known Victorian women's rights activists. Her campaigning led to the passage of laws aimed at equalizing the rights of men and women in marriage. After she fled an unhappy marriage, her husband denied her parental access and attempted to render Norton penniless. In response she launched a pamphlet and lobbying campaign which resulted in the passage of the Infant Custody Act (1839). Her subsequent pamphlet campaigns was influential in the securing passage of the Matrimonial Causes Act (1857).

*The Wife* is a semi-autobiographical dissection of marriage à la mode. It focuses on two repressed love affairs and two deeply unhappy marriages. It highlights many of the issues Norton had experienced in her own life and the issues that were core to her campaigns.

**Millicent Garrett Fawcett, *Janet Doncaster* (1875)**

Appendix: selections from 'The Medical and General Education of Women' (1868); 'Why Women Require the Franchise', *Essays and Lectures on Social and Political Subjects* (1872); 'The Future of Englishwomen: A Reply' (1878); 'The Electoral Disabilities of Women' (1870); 'The Women's Suffrage Question' (1892)

Millicent Garrett Fawcett (1847–1929) was one of the leaders of the women's suffrage movement. She, along with her sister Elizabeth Garrett Anderson and their friend Emily Davies, divided their work on women's rights: Davies tackled education; Elizabeth medicine; and Millicent the franchise.

*Janet Doncaster* focuses on the independent career of a woman within a disastrous marriage. In contrast to Garrett Fawcett's own actions, Janet assesses her domestic situation, judges it unworkable, and departs. The novel is a realistic parable focused on an individual with little emotional support and a poor education who must learn to discount heroic fantasies. The penniless, friendless woman displays true nobility and gains a solid inheritance of independent self-assertion.



Mrs Millicent Fawcett (1913)  
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**Volume 2:**

**Ellice Jane Hopkins, *Rose Turquand* (1876)**

Appendix: selections from *The Visitation of Dens, An Appeal to the Women of England* (1874); *The White Cross Army, A Statement of the Bishop of Durham's Movement* (1883); *The Life and Letters of James Hinton* (1879); *The Power of Womanhood; Or, Mothers and Sons. A Book for Parents and those in Loco Parentis* (1899)

Ellice Jane Hopkins (1836–1904) was a social purity campaigner who led the movement against the sexual double standard.

In *Rose Turquand* Hopkins uses a popular form of journalistic Gothic fiction to advance her moral agenda. She blends various narrative strands: the monsters, monks, and dark secrets of Gothic romance; the criminal story of bigamy and attempted murder in a self-consciously modern setting characteristic of sensation fiction.

**Volume 3:**

**Mary Eleanor Benson, *At Sundry Times and in Divers Manners* (1891)**

Appendix: selections from 'In Defense of Domestic Service: A Reply' (1890); *Streets and Lanes of the City* (1891)

Mary Eleanor Benson (1863–90) was the daughter of E W Benson, Archbishop of Canterbury. A social work activist, her writing and direct action during her short life contributed indirectly to the professionalization of social work in London. She read Modern Languages at Oxford and published essays on literature and history in addition to her work among the poor.

*At Sundry Times and in Divers Manners* is set in a small parish. Its focus is the spiritual and personal relations of three sets of characters as well as the religious development of one particular woman, Ruth Kinnaird. Jealousy links the three groups in a series of passionate heterosexual and homosexual relationships.

**Volume 4:**

**Margaret Todd, *Mona Maclean: Medical Student* (1892)**

Appendix: selections from Sophia Jex-Blake, 'Medical Women' (1887) and 'Medical Women in Fiction' (1893); 'Some Thoughts on the Woman Question' (1894); Margaret Todd, *The Life of Sophia Jex-Blake* (1918)

Margaret Georgina Todd (1859–1918) became a doctor in 1894 and practised at the Edinburgh Hospital and Dispensary for Women and Children. More than any of the other social activists in this collection, Todd appears to have regarded herself as a novelist as much as an advocate for women's medical training or a doctor.

In her first and most popular novel, *Mona Maclean, Medical Student* (1892), she wrote with an assured sense of her own insider knowledge of the medical field. Ostensibly it is a reply to Charles Reade's *A Woman-Hater* (1877), one of the first novels to feature a female doctor. While appearing to promote the cause of medical women, Reade's novel domesticates and diminishes their professional ambitions. *Mona Maclean* celebrates a Victorian woman's professional fulfillment. It is an example of New Woman fiction in its radical redefinition of the prevailing stereotype of the intelligent woman as hysterical, and may even be read as an early example of lesbian fiction.

## Related titles

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