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Charlotte Riddell's A Struggle for Fame: The Field of Women's Literary Production

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I

MANY RECENT PUBLICATIONS, including this very volume, attest to the revival of interest in Irish nineteenth-century women writers, with the deployment of an impressive range of critical and theoretical approaches, and a significant expansion in biographical and bibliographical studies. Surprisingly little, however, is yet known about the contexts of women's literary production, by which I mean not only the material factors allowing and/or inhibiting writing and publication but also the symbolic values attached to such processes; what the American cultural critic Richard Brodhead has termed "the history of the acts—successful, failed, and partially achieved—by which potential authors have made themselves into authors within the opportunities and obstructions of particular social situations" (115). Such an enquiry, in the Irish context, is itself restricted by the absence of attention—not alone among studies of women writers—to questions of literary access or to the relative significance of social opportunity and individual achievement. A comprehensive study of the area of women's literary production will require both a detailed historical investigation and the development of fuller theoretical models. Yet this combination, as obvious as it may seem, is not common among current studies of Irish women's writing. Looking back over the last fifteen or so years of scholarship, a regrettable disjunction may be observed: on the one hand, some of the most influential theoretical and critical works are characterized by a striking paucity of historical perspective and bibliographical detail; on the other hand, a number of key bibliographical and biographical studies remain, often deliberately, untheorized. Our understanding of the different historical contexts in which Irish women's writing was produced, and the implications of such differences, is one of the most obvious areas restricted by this division.

It is within such a critical context that this article presents itself, primarily, as a study of one woman writer, the Victorian novelist Charlotte Riddell, and of her place in her contemporary literary "field". Because of its length and the period which it spanned, Riddell's career testifies to many of the important developments in the production and circulation of Victorian fiction. Furthermore, a number of her fictional works take directly as their theme the dilemmas and obstacles encountered by the female author, most notably her autobiographical novel, *A Struggle for Fame*, published by Bentley in 1883,

which will be examined in detail later. While our knowledge of the general context of Victorian publishing has been extended greatly by Peter Keating, John Sutherland, Nigel Cross and others, with some attention given to the writing situation of lesser-known female novelists,¹ a number of primary sources remain insufficiently explored. In the case of Riddell, these include the archives of the Bentley publishing house, the records of the Royal Literary Fund and documents relating to the Society of Authors, all of considerable significance in identifying the contexts within which her status as author emerged.²

The importance of the field of literary production has been most fully demonstrated in the work of French theorist Pierre Bourdieu. The literary field, in his definition, is a social “microcosm” with its own “structure” and “law”:

It is this peculiar universe, this ‘Republic of Letters’, with its relations of power and its struggles for the preservation or the transformation of the established order, that is the basis for the strategies of producers, for the form of art they defend, for the alliances they form, for the schools they found, in short, for their specific interests. (Bourdieu 181)³

The task of the literary critic is, therefore, to reconstruct the field and to identify the status or “predicament” of the individual text (McDonald 13, 19), considering, in Bourdieu’s words, “not only the material production but also the symbolic production of the work, i.e. the production of the value of the work or, which amounts to the same thing, of belief in the value of the work” (Bourdieu 37). Bourdieu further argues that the literary field is structured by a fundamental opposition between the “sub-field of large-scale production” and the “sub-field of restricted production” (39)—fields which are differentiated by economic factors (audience size, financial profits, the speed by which profits are obtained, the length of time during which they are generated, etc.) and by symbolic criteria (measurement of literary value, recognition, prestige, legitimacy).⁴ One characteristic of the area of restricted production, for example, is that “producers produce for other producers” (39) rather than for a large-scale market; symbolic capital, including recognition and prestige, and cultural capital, such as the reading and cultural competence required in receiving the work, define achievement. Thus, as the title of one of

1. For recent studies of Victorian publishing, see Keating, and Cross (1985); older studies which remain central to any discussion of publishers in the period include those by Sutherland (1976), Griest, and Gettmann. For analysis of the experiences of female novelists, see Cross 164-203. Tuchman’s work on the fate of Victorian female novelists opens up important areas of enquiry but the very generalized nature of many of its conclusions limits their usefulness.

2. The Bentley Papers are held in the British Library; a microfilm of the archive is available in a number of other libraries, including Cambridge University Library. The British Library also holds the archive of the Society of Authors, including G.H. Thring’s unpublished history of the society. In 1984, the archive of the Royal Literary Fund, with case files and catalogues, was microfilmed; the files provide a unique insight into the later careers of many writers. See also Cross’s (1984) printed index and introduction.

3. See McDonald for an extremely interesting application of Bourdieu’s work.

4. These rival fields are termed by McDonald as “purists” and “profiteers”: “For the former, the literary field exists in and for itself; for the latter, it is an instrument for achieving other purposes.... The profiteers are discredited because the texts they circulate are valued for their accessibility to the greatest number, while a purist text demands the specialized competence of a reading elect” (McDonald 13).

Bourdieu's most famous essays announces, the field of cultural production "reverses" the economic world in giving a higher status to symbolic success than material reward.

Charlotte Eliza Lawson Cowan Riddell (1832–1906) was one of the most prolific and well-known of Victorian women novelists and published over fifty volumes of fiction, including some forty novels (the majority in three-volume form) and seven collections of short stories.⁵ Born in Carrickfergus in 1832, daughter of James Cowan, the High Sheriff of Co. Antrim, she and her invalided mother moved to London in 1855, following the death of Charlotte's father. The financial problems left in the wake of James Cowan's death appear to have been a central motivation for their relocation to London, where Charlotte hoped to earn her living as a writer. She experienced considerable difficulty in finding, and retaining, a publisher: her first novel, *Zurriel's Grandchild* (three vols.) was published by Newby in 1856, under the pseudonym R.V. Sparling; her second, *The Moors and the Fens* (three vols.) by Smith and Elder in 1857, under the pseudonym F.G. Trafford. Her next two novels were published under the pseudonym Rainey Hawthorne, one by Bentley publishers (*The Ruling Passion*, three vols., 1857) and the other by Charles Skeet (*The Rich Husband*, three vols., 1858). Riddell remained with Charles Skeet for a further three novels, all published under "F.G. Trafford", before moving to the Tinsley brothers under whose imprint she published thirteen new novels between 1864 and 1878. Following the publication of three very successful novels with the Tinsleys (*George Geith of Fen Court*, three vols., 1864; *Maxwell Drewitt*, three vols., 1865; and *Phemie Keller*, three vols., 1866) as F.G. Trafford, the remainder of her novels were published as the work of "Mrs J.H. Riddell".⁶ In the 1860s, she was co-proprietor and editor of *St James's Magazine* and later editor of *Home Magazine*. Riddell's association with the Tinsleys ended in 1878; in the 1880s, she published eight volumes with Bentley, and also had some works put out by Ward and Downey. Her most popular novels were quickly republished in cheaper, one-volume editions by Tinsley and Bentley; even cheaper "yellow-back" editions of some titles also appeared from Warne and Gall and Inglis. In 1892, Riddell published her last three-decker novel with Heinemann (*The Head of the Firm*), having written over thirty novels in this form. She continued to produce shorter fiction in the years before her death, with her last work *Poor Fellow!* (F.V. White) appearing in 1902; but as the variety of publishers employed in the last fifteen years of her writing life attests

5. For a list of Riddell's published works, see Ellis, Bleiler (1977) or Todd; a number (but not all) of Ellis's errors are corrected by Bleiler and Todd. Ellis's was the first extensive study of Riddell and, while often anecdotal, it remains a key biographical source. In the 1970s, most of Riddell's ghost stories were republished by E.F. Bleiler but since then her work has received little critical attention. One exception is Srebrnik's analysis in 1994 of the reception and audience for Riddell's fiction. For a measured, if short, appraisal of Riddell's work, see Todd.

6. In 1857 Charlotte Cowan married Joseph Hadley Riddell, an engineer. From her husband's business endeavours, and recurring financial difficulties, Riddell drew much of the technological and financial detail characteristic of her novels.

(Hutchinson; White; Remington; Downey), once again her difficulties in securing publication were considerable. She died in greatly reduced financial circumstances, in 1906, having lived in seclusion at her home in Middlesex for some twenty years.

At the highpoint of her career, following the publication of *George Geith* (1864), Riddell was heralded as “the Novelist of the City” and praised for her introduction of material from the contemporary world of London business and trade into the domain of fiction. This subject matter was designed to reach an audience themselves benefiting from economic and social change,⁷ and, for a period in Riddell’s career, the financial rewards were considerable. She was also during her lifetime a popular writer of short stories, especially of stories with a supernatural “angle”. Many of her stories were first published in magazines and a number of her longer ghost stories, such as “Fairy Water” or “The Haunted River”, appeared in Christmas annuals published by Routledge or as the “St James’s Christmas Box” published by F. Enos Arnold. Today, one or two of her supernatural stories continue to be anthologized, most frequently a story entitled “The Banshee’s Warning” or “Hertford O’Donnell’s Warning”. A small number of Riddell’s novels employ Irish settings, most notably *Maxwell Drewitt* (three vols., Tinsley, 1865) and *The Nun’s Curse* (three vols., Bentley, 1888), while Irish characters also appear in a number of her short stories.⁸

The novelty of subject matter in her novels, much praised by some of Riddell’s contemporaries, has by now lost much of its appeal and Riddell’s novels may seem to today’s readers to be overly formulaic and excessively detailed. Her short stories are more rewarding and deserving of attention: her ghost stories, in particular the longer narratives of “The Haunted House at Latchford” (Bleiler 1975) and “The Uninhabited House” (Bleiler 1971), engagingly combine practical and material detail with a supernatural dimension, featuring lawyers’ clerks and other characters of humble background who secure fortune as a result of their encounter with otherworldly apparitions. Riddell’s strongest feature, as a writer of fiction, lies in her characterization: even minor characters are sharply, and frequently sardonically, observed; this sardonic eye finds some of its richest targets in love relationships. As one of her contemporary reviewers, writing in the *Spectator* of 6 October 1883, accurately observed, “We could hardly expect a book from Mrs Riddell in which the principal married couple did not somehow, with the best intentions, fail to make each other happy” (1286).

The size of Riddell’s literary output, the type of fiction she produced and the audience towards which her work was aimed, all locate her work in Bourdieu’s “sub-field of large-scale production”, rather than the more valued “sub-field of restricted production”. Yet, as a number of commentators have

7. See Srebrić for an analysis of the social composition of Riddell’s readership.

8. *Maxwell Drewitt* and *The Nun’s Curse* were republished in 1979 by Garland Press.

remarked, this opposition between “purist” and “profiteer” is not so easily maintained; Peter McDonald points, for example, to the discussions concerning the formation and operations of the Society of Authors in 1883/84 as one such complication in the late Victorian period (14-15). The forces which can often be recognized more readily from the careers of large-scale producers—pressures to achieve immediate financial reward, struggles to withstand or to establish changes in the established order—are of some significance to all. In a novel such as *A Struggle for Fame*, Riddell exploits these changes as subject matter for her fiction, at the same time as the form of that same novel, the triple-decker, was experiencing a severe decline in sales appeal. With some accuracy, Riddell would later describe herself as “being behind the age instead of abreast of it” (Ellis 309). Yet, in the very last years of her career, as efforts were made by some fellow authors to secure for her some financial support from the Society of Authors and from the Royal Literary Fund, she was to acquire a curiously representative status as an author who had temporarily achieved success in the literary marketplace but was now marginalized by changing trends.

II

A STRUGGLE FOR FAME vividly depicts the fortunes of one aspiring novelist in mid-Victorian England, over a period of some twenty-five years, from the mid 1850s to the early 1880s. In the context of the small body of existing criticism of Riddell’s work, the novel has received little attention; nor does it appear in the discussion of Victorian “novels about novelists” given in Peter Keating’s influential work *The Haunted Study* (71-74). In contrast, Nigel Cross, author of *The Common Writer*, refers to it “as quite the most detailed novel by a woman on the theme of authorship” and includes a short summary of Riddell’s life and of the novel in a chapter entitled “The Female Drudge: Women Novelists and Their Publishers” (1985: 194-98). Its significance is also recognized by John Sutherland who deems it to be “one of the finest Victorian novels about writing Victorian novels” and provides a brief plot summary in his *Longman Companion to Victorian Fiction* (612).

Much of the material included in *A Struggle for Fame* derives from Charlotte Riddell’s own life, beginning in October 1854 with the arrival from Ireland to England of Glenarva (Glen) Westley and her father. Westley is bankrupt, having lost his personal fortune through speculation in the unsuccessful “Monster Bank for the North of Ireland”, while the family estate at Glenarva, Ulster, is entailed to a male heir; as in Riddell’s life, their movement to London is motivated by Glenarva’s determination to support her parent through her writings. The early chapters emphasize again and again the difficulties experienced by the young Westley because of her lack of knowledge of even “the ordinary details of the literary profession” (1: 226): “She began her life-task in utter ignorance of how to set about it. She did not know how books were printed or published. She had not met an author; more, she

was not acquainted with any person who ever had met one” (1: 229-30). Having completed her first novel at the age of fifteen, she posted her earliest manuscripts to London, Dublin, Edinburgh “and to every other likely address” as advertised in old copies of the *Times*. The obstacles encountered by a young Irish female aspirant are most formidable: Glenarva’s first meeting is with a Mr P. Vassett, of Craven Street, the Strand, who entertains a “particular antipathy” towards new writers, particularly of fiction. He argues that “Irish stories are quite gone out” and shares the “view of the world” that “young ladies cannot possess the amount of experience necessary to produce a readable book” (1: 118-19). The general condescension towards her writing ambitions extends from publisher to father to lover; of the latter, one Mr Lacere, the novel observes:

There never yet lived a wise man who wished women to turn artists, or actresses, or authors; and Mr Lacere, theoretically at least, was a wise man. By some subtle intuition he knew Glen would be far happier if she never gained a hearing—if she laid aside her manuscripts as a child lays aside its toys which have pleased it for a while, and betook herself to the business of life ... (2: 133)

Some of the more vivid passages in the novel—where the perspective of its author is most thinly disguised—occur in response to such attitudes:

In no solitary respect did Glenarva Westley fulfil any of the traditional ideas people have agreed to accept as typifying the possession of talent—manner, voice, appearance seemed more fitted to the quiet arena of home existence than the mad fight and the fierce Struggle for Fame. It was hard upon Glenarva that no human being ever believed she was the right person in the right place. Not when she was plodding amongst the London publishers—not when she was making a little money—not when she had gained a great reputation—not when the time came no one could deny she had achieved more than nine hundred and ninety-nine women out of a thousand ever do achieve—no, not even then did any friend, or relation, or stranger realize it was really Glenarva who had won success and not some quite independent power associated with her in an unaccountable and uncanny sort of alliance. (2: 122-23)

The plot of Riddell’s three-volume novel largely follows Glenarva’s “struggle for fame”. More ambitiously, though less successfully, it parallels her fate with that of one Bernard Kelly, another Irish migrant, whose journey to success as writer and magazine editor would appear to be modelled on that of journalist and author Edmund Yates.⁹ The early chapters of the novel depict Kelly’s encounter with a number of Irish-born characters living in London, émigrés whose assimilation into English society varies widely and whose characterizations develop a highly farcical quality. Riddell is on firmer ground when she depicts characters from the publishing world, with sharply observed and easily recognizable portraits of such Victorian publishers as Charles Skeet (Vassett), Thomas Newby (Pedland) and the Tinsley brothers (Felton and Laplash). The representation of antiquarian and publisher Charles Skeet/Vassett, publisher of four of Riddell’s early novels, is especially keen:

9. That Kelly is Irish-born, unlike Yates, suggests also some resemblance to the novelist and publisher Edmund Downey (F.M. Allen).

No one knew better than he did that the works he published were not likely to live, but in their generation they were good, useful, amusing. That they were not likely to go down through the ages did not much trouble the gentleman who had assisted at their birth. He felt they would live long enough; they had served their purpose, and could die when they pleased. He felt no such frantic desire for posthumous fame as rendered him unhappy because he could not compass it. If Shakespeare had come back to earth, Mr Vassett would not have risked anything he considered very valuable—say, for instance, the lease of his house at Craven Street—for the honour of standing godfather even to a second Shylock. (1: 89-90)

Vassett's published authors include Lady Hilda Hicks, the author of several three-volume novels on the subject of her matrimonial grievances (based partly on the novelist and poet Caroline Norton), while the many would-be authors visiting his office include Miss Yarlow, author of the life stories of six French actresses (with some resemblance to the novelist and biographer Julia Kavanagh).

The narrative moves through Glenarva's successive publishers, from "Pedland" who brings out her first novel, to "Vassett", with the strongest criticism directed towards the nefarious activities of "Felton and Laplash". Pedland is undoubtedly the publisher Newby, guilty of many sharp practices in his day, most frequently towards authors seeking their first publication. Newby was, for example, sharply criticized by Elizabeth Gaskell for his treatment of the young Emily Brontë, and was at least partly responsible for the incorrect attribution of Morgan Kavanagh's 1857 work *The Hobbies* to his daughter Julia. The publisher Richard Bentley is reputed to have said of him that he would talk to him only in the presence of a witness (Anderson 225-27). Riddell's treatment is more sympathetic, in that Pedland is presented as a crucial source of information on the book trade, both through conversations in which "she heard so much, true and false, concerning the inner life of literature, and the dealings of printers, and publishers, and authors, and editors" (2: 143) and from the sharp lessons learnt from the publication of her novel. This novel, *Tyrrel's Son*, by G.B.W. Shane (in reality, *Zuriel's Grandchild* by R.V. Sparling), is a hopeless failure, with its critics "beautifully unanimous in making merry over her finest passages" and its "particulars", as the narrator explains, worth summarizing only "for the benefit of those young authors who think the way to fame lies along a well-turfed alley" (2: 262-63). Belatedly, the young author discovers that Pedland's novels are regarded in the same light as the Minerva Press was formerly: "if Mr Pedland's name is on a book, it is at once stamped as feeble, poor and trashy" (2: 272).

"Relentless" journeys to publishers are described in detail; many look for a portion of their expenses to be paid, or to have a certain number of subscribers guaranteed, or a known name on the title page as editor. Glenarva's fortunes begin to change, however, when a large publishing house accepts her novel *Middlesex Moors* (*The Moors and the Fens*, three vols., Smith and Elder, 1857) and issues a cheque for £20 as payment for copyright. Another novel is sold to "one of the great West End" houses (*The Ruling Passion*,

three vols., Bentley, 1857) and “by sheer force of audacity” £50 is achieved “for a novel which would have been dear at £5” (3: 40). Soon afterwards, Vassett finally agrees to publish one of Glenarva’s novels (*The Rich Husband*, three vols., Skeet, 1858). In total, four novels are published with Vassett/Skeet in which, in spite of her publisher’s objections, “the trials, the sorrows, the self-denials, the successes of trade—explained processes of manufacture unknown entirely to the reading public” (3: 57) are made the centre of her narratives. The terms agreed with Vassett rise to £150 per novel and then to £250. In the course of the narrative, these details are interwoven, sometimes awkwardly, with changes in Glenarva’s personal life, including the death of her father, her marriage to Lacere a year later, her husband’s growing financial difficulties, and the increasing size, and importance, of her literary proceeds. Meanwhile the author’s true identity remains disguised: “he was drawn respectively as a barrister, a gambler, a man who had neglected his wife, a woman whose wife had run away from him, a man who was about town, a man who had been about town ... and, lastly, he was presented to Glen’s husband, by a chatty individual who professed to know everyone, as a ‘devilish good fellow, sir—and clever too!’” (3: 58).

While much of the novel is given over to portraits of individuals, more light is cast on the wider context of Victorian publishing as the story continues. A number of changes in the publishing industry of the 1860s combine to end Glenarva’s association with Vassett: among these the extinction of small libraries, the birth of monopolies (chiefly Mudie’s circulating library), and, above all, the rise to prominence of the Burleigh street publishers, Felton and Laplash (a thinly disguised portrayal of Edward and William Tinsley). The business practices of Felton and Laplash, “destined to change the whole aspect of publishing and to set every Miss throughout the country who had learned to write scribbling stories under the idea there was nothing to do save send in her slipshod manuscript and receive a handsome cheque in return” (3: 98), are trenchantly and extensively criticized by Riddell. “Rotten from the first as the South Sea Swindle”, their business was “eminently simple—it consisted in looking out for names and trying to bag them” (3: 108). “Almost unknown” authors find their terms raised from £20 to £200; in the case of Mrs Lacere, £800 is offered for one novel, *Heron’s Nest* (Riddell’s *George Geith of Fen Court*, three vols., Tinsley, 1864), on condition that the existing agreement with Vassett be cancelled. The publication of the novel also marks the end of Glenarva’s anonymous authorship: “thanks to Messrs Felton and Co., she was now common property” (3: 201). Faced with competition for a subsequent novel from a magazine seeking serial publication, Felton and Laplash are forced to make the “astounding offer” of £1000, all rights remaining with the publishers for the space of three years.

With this “pecuniary windfall”, Glenarva experiences the financial summit of her career, a position almost immediately undermined by a savagely critical review by her compatriot Bernard Kelly. Her fall from fame is swift. Felton reduces by £600 the sum which *Heron’s Nest* is expected to generate

and Glenarva is forced to agree to a reduction in terms for later novels. With the death of Felton (Edward Tinsley), her position worsens as her books are no longer advertised or sent to reviewers. Laplash argues that she has been totally overpaid and displays a clearly fraudulent ledger entry to demonstrate “he was a loser to the extent of twenty-four pounds nine and tenpence half-penny over the transaction” (3: 321). Urging her that she’ll never live “out of three-volume novels”, his parting words resonate not only through the novel but also, as will be seen, through the later life of its author:

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. (3: 329)¹⁰

With the ending of her agreement with Laplash/Tinsley, Glenarva returns to peddling her manuscripts and is once again treated “as the worst of imposters”; some seven years after the peak of her fame, her works are unknown to many publishers. Yet another article by Kelly, now praising her work, prompts a revival in interest, the magazine serialization of one of her novels is successful, and support is pledged by a publisher known from more prosperous days—George Bentley of the firm of Richard Bentley and Son, and the publisher of *A Struggle for Fame*.¹¹

As the novel nears its end, the publisher promises that “money must follow fame”. The recurring plot of the narrative, however, demonstrates that fame “crossed the threshold hand-in-hand with death” (3: 340)—a highly melodramatic statement, yet drawn from the author’s life story. As the publication of her first novel occurred close in time to the death of Glenarva/Riddell’s parent, so the return of public recognition takes place at the same time as the death of her husband.¹² The relationship between husband and wife in *A Struggle for Fame*, published three years after the death of Joseph Riddell, is vividly and soberly realized. Characteristically for Riddell’s work, it is a relationship marked by discontent and misunderstanding and even the highly sentimental reconciliation which occurs near the conclusion fails to counteract the effect of earlier, more pointed observations. In the final pages of the third volume, Glenarva refuses the suit of a childhood friend, and remains, in the narrator’s words, “a struggling woman trying to trace a pencil-mark on the tablets of time” (3: 350).

10. In 1878, the year after Riddell published her last Tinsley novel, the firm went bankrupt with losses of some £33,000, owing money to many authors including Riddell. In his published memoirs, *Random Recollections of an Old Publisher*, William Tinsley would state that his firm never paid less than £400 for a Riddell novel (96), yet *A Struggle for Fame* suggests that much of this money was paid through bills of hand (frequently cashed at a discount by struggling authors) or postponed (Sutherland, *Victorian Novelists* 46).

11. In 1880, Riddell’s *The Mystery in Palace Gardens* was serialized by *London Society* and published by Bentley in three-volume form. Richard Bentley died in 1871 and was succeeded as owner by his son George; in 1871 the firm was renamed Richard Bentley and Son.

12. Joseph Riddell died in 1880, leaving substantial debts which Riddell, over ten years later, continued to discharge (Ellis 319).

III

A *STRUGGLE FOR FAME* was published by Bentley in 1883, the fourth of eight novels by Riddell which they issued in the 1880s. Documents in the Bentley archive relating to the contract for publication and ledger of sales enable some analysis of the fate of the novel itself in the context which it describes. The firm had rejected Riddell's work earlier in her career, with the exception, as outlined above, of *The Ruling Passion*, which they published in 1857. Under the terms stipulated for this novel, signed on 20 April 1857 by the young Charlotte Cowan, the author undertook to dispose to Richard Bentley a written work of fiction "sufficient in extent to form when printed three volumes in post octavo of 320 pages in each volume", while Richard Bentley agreed to purchase "the entire copyright of and in the aforesaid work ... for the consideration of fifty pounds" (British Library, Add. MS 46617, f. 133).¹³ By 1883, the identities of both author and publisher had altered: the agreement now referred to "Charlotte Eliza Lawson Riddell", implicitly, because of her widowed status, freed from the stipulation printed at the end of the form that "in the event of the author being a married lady, this agreement should be countersigned by her husband". The other party was now entitled "Richard Bentley and Son ... Publishers in Ordinary to the Queen's Most Excellent Majesty" while the replacement of handwritten agreements by printed forms further testifies to the firm's growth in status. The terms of the 1883 agreement are as follows:

the said Mrs Riddell—having written a work at present entitled "A Struggle for Fame"—which is understood to be equal in extent to three volumes crown octavo ... hereby agrees to sell, and the said Richard Bentley and Son hereby agree to purchase, the sole right of publication for one year of the said work upon the terms hereafter recorded; viz. that the sum of three hundred pounds shall be paid by Messrs Bentley and Son to Mrs Riddell (or to some-one duly authorized by her) upon the delivery of the story complete. (Add. MS 46620, f. 313)

A note added to the form clarifies that right of publication is for "three volumes only". The agreement is witnessed on Riddell's behalf by "Charles J. Skeet" who, in a handwritten note added by Riddell to the contract, is authorized to receive the money on her behalf.¹⁴

The sum of £300 for the right of one year's publication of the three-volume edition was, relative to other sums given to Bentley authors at the time, a moderately good revenue.¹⁵ This type of agreement whereby copyright was purchased for a limited time period was, according to Royal Gettmann, used for "difficult or suspicious authors" or for authors of established reputation (88). At this period the Bentley firm usually purchased outright copyright and

13. The copyright for the novel was resold to Riddell in July 1861 and the novel was republished by Warne in 1876.

14. This authorization suggests that Skeet may have lent money to Riddell or had prior ownership of rights for the novel; in 1881 Riddell had returned to Skeet/Vassett to publish her novel *Alaric Spenceley*.

15. Eliza Lynn Linton's *Christopher Kirkland* (1885), for example, was purchased by Bentley for £250; however, as late as 1887, Bentley was willing to offer the much more successful Rhoda Broughton the sum of £1300 (Gettmann 84, 126).

frequently employed the more cautious system of an initial payment for first printing and further payments if other printings were required.¹⁶ Like most of Riddell's work, *A Struggle for Fame* was published as a three-decker novel, with the established sale price of a half guinea per volume, thus a total per novel of 31s 6d (Keating 22-23). The price of the novel meant that few readers could afford to buy the novel: instead the majority of three-deckers were read by members of the circulating libraries, the largest of which was Mudie's Circulating Library, founded in 1842. For a yearly subscription of £2 2s (little more than the cost of one three-decker), a member of Mudie's library could borrow four volumes at any one time. Unsurprisingly, Mudie's library was the single most important purchaser of Victorian fiction. Mudie typically took 1000 copies of a total Bentley sale of 1,600 copies, obtaining discounts of fifty per cent or over on the purchase price (Gettmann 132, 258-60).

The ledger entry for *A Struggle for Fame* reveals that the novel sold, within a year of publication, 965 of the 1052 bound copies which were produced (Bentley MS 2801). The precise size of Mudie's order is not available but the novel did feature on Mudie's subscription list. Total costs of production were £394 which, together with the £300 given to Riddell, amounted to £694; revenue by March 31, 1884 was £772, giving a publisher's profit of £78. While this sum may seem very small in today's terms, it was typical of the modest revenue generated by three-decker novels. In comparison with other novels published by Bentley at the time, for example novels by fellow Irish-born writer Annie Hector and the well-known Eliza Lynn Linton, Riddell's work was distinguished by making even a modest profit.¹⁷ The novel, however, never appeared in one-volume form, possibly due to its fate in contemporary reviews. The *Athenaeum*, *Saturday Review*, and *Spectator* all gave substantial space to the novel but the consensus was that it was depressing, gloomy and far too long. Riddell's concern with the material realities of publication—for this reader, the feature of most enduring interest—was a particular target of criticism, judged not only as tedious in its detail but also as overly pessimistic in its conclusions. For the *Athenaeum* reviewer, the novel was “merely a story about novel-writing”: “The mysteries of printing, publishing, and writing books and reviewing them are gone into with considerable minuteness; the general effect is not very pleasant and not very true to life”; however, the reviewer concludes, “if it serves to deter persons of no aptitude from writing novels it will have done good” (201).

By 1883, the three-decker novel was already in decline. Two years earlier, in 1881, Charles Mudie had sought from George Bentley a further discount for twenty-five copies of Riddell's *The Mystery in Palace Gardens*, bringing

16. The full royalty system, more familiar today, whereby the author receives a percentage of the published price for every book sold, was, as Peter Keating has shown, “hardly known in Britain before the 1880s” (15) and was first used by Bentley only in 1885 (Gettmann 116).

17. Linton's *Christopher Kirkland* generated a loss of £68, having sold 648 of 1000 printed copies (Gettmann 126). The Bentley files also show that *The Executor* (1883) by Annie Hector, for which Hector received £500, generated a loss of £100 on a sell-out run of 1000 copies (MS 2801).

the price down to twelve shillings; while Bentley refused, the circulating library's altered opinion regarding the desirability of the three-volume form was becoming clear (Gettmann 258; Griest 65). In June 1894, Mudie's announcement that henceforth it would pay no more than four shillings per volume for fiction was the death knell for the form; by the end of the year, Arthur Mudie had declared, in a letter to George Bentley, that the three-volume novel was "no longer possible" (Gettmann 260; Keating 25). The consequences for Riddell may be traced in the fate of "Michael Gargrave's Harvest", a story first published in the *Illustrated London News* in 1878 which, in 1894, she was planning to extend to three volumes. In January 1894, Riddell agreed to sell the not yet completed work to Bentley for the total of £200, with £25 payable on signature of the agreement, £125 payable on publication, and £50 on the sale of 900 copies in three-volume form. Further clauses refer to royalty payments, payable after the sale of 500 copies, should the work be re-issued in a one-volume, 6s edition; additional terms are outlined should the work be issued at "a still lower price" (Add. MS 46625, f. 108; Wolff 4: 30). In 1897, the story not yet having been published, a new agreement was made with Bentley under which the book was to be issued "in a different manner", i.e. directly as a one-volume work; royalty terms were altered to start from the first copy, and a sum of £50 on account of future royalties, payable on publication, was promised (Add. MS 46626, f. 280). In 1898, the Bentley firm was purchased by the Macmillan house and Riddell's work remained unpublished.¹⁸

IV

IN 1899, RIDDELL'S LAST short story collection, *Handsome Phil and Other Stories*, was published by F.V. White. One of the stories, entitled "Out in the Cold", makes for very poignant reading in the context of its author's own history. It tells of a woman called Annabel Saridge who lived in "an out-of-the-way Irish town", "not many years ago" (132). The early pages describe Annabel's father, an Irish scholar who won some recognition for his work and was awarded a Government pension of £200. Inserted into the narrative at this point is a strangely bitter digression: "Those were the days when such pensions were bestowed as a reward for success, and not as a punishment for failure. No author at that time was, together with the whole British public, informed that a pittance of fifty pounds annually would be doled out to him in consideration of his 'insufficient means of support'..." (134-35).

From a young age, Annabel has a passion for writing tales, a talent which is disguised from her father who "objected to female authors—as 'persons who had unsexed themselves'" and much regretted by her mother; "If he

18. According to Wolff (4: 30), the story was published in an expanded form in a South African newspaper in 1893/1894. The shorter story had previously been published, together with a story by Mrs. Hungerford (author of *Molly Bawn*), by Munro publishers in New York, c. 1878.

thought you wanted to write books of your own, it would kill your poor father,' said Mrs Saridge with conviction" (137-38). Annabel's efforts to sell her stories for publication meet with many rejections; by the time some modest remuneration is achieved, it proves vital in supporting, first, her by now widowed mother and, later, the solitary author. The "supreme effort of her life" (143), written by the ageing and impoverished Annabel, is received by a publisher whose wife proves to be the author's childhood friend. Recognition and companionship beckon but the story ends with the death of Annabel, still on the threshold of fame, and her last writing efforts, made moments before she dies, are deemed by her friends to be "purposeless scrawls" (152).

The story is clearly a highly sentimental one yet it also contains more sombre and realistic undercurrents; it is difficult to avoid reading it as a meditation on Riddell's own writing life and also on the "what-might-not-have-been" had its author remained in her childhood home. Details in the narrative also seem an uncanny anticipation of events in Riddell's life over the next two years. In February 1900, the writer Ethel Tweedie applied to A. Llewelyn Roberts, secretary of the Royal Literary Fund, seeking support for her father's friend Charlotte Riddell, on the basis that Riddell is "now 68 years of age and in very failing health, so much so that she can do very little work and she has no private means whatever".¹⁹ Tweedie's accompanying testimonial emphasized various tragedies in Riddell's life: "her husband ... unfortunate in business she not only paid his debts but kept him for many years during which time he was a complete invalid", her "paralysed brother" whom she "entirely maintained for many years", the "failure of a publisher owing her large sums" (most likely William Tinsley), and the author's own recurring illness. Riddell, according to Tweedie, "has written thirty or forty novels, although never paid very large sums for them, and writing before the days of American copyright!"; also "she will not make a public appeal for the Civil List" (Royal Literary Fund, file no. 2573).

The regulations of the Royal Literary Fund, a society constituted in 1788, stipulated that relief could be extended only to "authors of some published work of approved literary merit, who shall be in want or distress", with all relief "given as a donation towards the removal of the distress of the Applicant, and not as a loan, nor for the completion of any literary work". The "literary claim in every new case" was to be "affirmed by vote of the General Committee before the question of want or distress shall be considered" (file no. 2573). In the case of Riddell, the application made to the fund was completed by J.M. Barrie, then a committee member. To the question "present means of support", he replied "practically none"; "cause of distress" was "can write little now". In response to the invitation to list the titles of her

19. Ethel Tweedie was the daughter of physician George Harley and the author of numerous travel narratives. Her autobiography, entitled *Thirteen Years of a Busy Woman's Life*, contains a detailed account of her campaigns to secure financial support for Riddell (80-89).

published works, Barrie cited two novels—"George Geith" and "The Junior [sic] Partner" (his erroneous recollection of Riddell's novel *The Senior Partner* is itself significant)—and summarized the others as "over thirty novels, written during nearly 50 years". His accompanying note to the committee explained that "tho' once a popular writer there is now little demand for her work, and she writes so slowly nowadays that her income is almost *nil*. She sold all her popular books for fixed sums, and such of them as still have any sale bring her in nothing" (file no. 2573).²⁰ The committee meeting of 11 April 1900, also attended by Edmund Gosse and Sidney Lee, awarded £200 to Riddell, a considerable amount relative to other sums granted at the time. The minutes of the committee further reveal that refusal on the grounds that "literary claim is insufficient" was a common occurrence; later that same year, it would prove, in an ironic twist, to be the Fund's reaction to the application of one William Tinsley (file no. 2581).

Tweedie's quest for financial support for Riddell was pursued on a number of fronts. She had previously attempted to obtain a Civil List pension for her and would seem to have been refused, an event which may lie behind Riddell's 1899 story (Tweedie 81, 87-88). Tweedie then made a personal application to Prime Minister Balfour and succeeded in obtaining a grant of £300. With this money, together with the grant received from the Royal Literary Fund and donations from friends, she approached the Society of Authors, proposing that £300 capital be given to the society to hold in trust for Riddell from which a yearly pension of £60 would be paid to her, "the Society retaining the three hundred at her death" (88). The Society of Authors, founded in 1883, had long campaigned for the establishment of literary pensions and one of its earliest actions was to lobby against the unjust dispensation of Civil List pensions (Keating 29). According to Thring, secretary and author of an unpublished history of the society, Tweedie's proposal was instrumental in stimulating the active establishment of a pension fund. Of Riddell, Thring notes, "It is possible that amid the flood of modern fiction, the knowledge of her work may be swept away, and that modern bright young things (hateful expression) may never have heard of her reputation. But she had a good list of sound works to her name" (225). At the first meeting of the Pension fund committee, Riddell was allotted £60 per annum, there being "no competitor of equal standing"—again a considerable allocation for the society whose total receipts in that year were only £800. The gaining of this pension marked an interesting, if temporary, return to public attention for Riddell and was clearly a substantial achievement, both financially and in symbolic terms. Later, Elizabeth Lee's entry for Riddell in the *Dictionary of National Biography* would further emphasize the author's identity as first pensioner of the Society of Authors.

By the time of her death, the decline of Riddell's career had acquired a

20. Similarly, letters from Riddell during this period show that while some of Riddell's early work remained available in cheap reprints, it generated less and less revenue (Ellis 319-20).

particular notoriety among her fellow authors. To Thring and Barrie, she was the victim of contemporary market forces, of the “commercialization”, “mas-sification” and “flood” of fiction so frequently underscored as characteristic of the previous decade. In this field of very large-scale production, she appeared as a relic of older days, whose cause deserved championing and at least modest financial support. Yet Riddell in her day, as we have seen, was an insightful observer of such trends and, as far as she could manage, their beneficiary. Her status in the 1900s is curiously emblematic, as a producer who reminded other, more successful, producers of the vagaries and uncertainties of the market. It is fitting that she was the first pensioner of the Society of Authors given that this society, quite courageously, dedicated itself to the undoing of established, elitist definitions of authorship (Keating 27-29, 45-48). Now, almost a century after her death, a number of her works deserve more critical attention than they have received. For readers and critics still seeking adequate models for understanding the complex processes of women’s literary production, or their “struggles for fame”, the case of Charlotte Riddell—life, work, and reputation—is certainly worthy of notice.

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