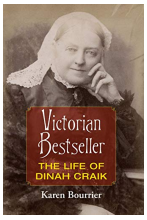
VICTORIAN BESTSELLER: THE LIFE OF DINAH CRAIK



By Karen Bourrier
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Reviewed by Tabitha Sparks on 2021-04-16.

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Though her novels are synonymous with domestic values and Christian piety, Dinah Mulock Craik (1826-1887) was not unacquainted with sensation and even scandal. In this first extant biography of the author, Karen Bourrier deftly mingles two Victorian narratives: the period's emphasis on respectability, modesty, and hard work, and the drama that ensues when these values are disrupted. While Bourrier hesitates to link by causation these two poles of experience in Craik's life, her reader can imagine that the value Craik placed on self-discipline and moral responsibility in her novels compensated for some of her own family circumstances.

As this comprehensive biography vividly reveals, Craik's father, Thomas Mulock, significantly disrupted her early life. While he moved in and out of pauper's prisons and lunatic asylums over the course of his adult life, his daughter supported him for much of it and weathered his storms with equanimity. "[A] volatile man of letters" (21), Mulock started his interesting career as a dissenting minister. His publications, we are told, included "a series of satirical letters to the *Literary Gazette* under the character of Satan" (4), a persona whose belligerence he did not confine to the literary. When "apostates" left his congregation, for instance, Mulock charged them with sodomy and was himself sent to jail. To pay the damages from this trial, young Dinah and her mother and her two brothers were forced to sell their household possessions like the disgraced Tulliver family in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (10).

Despite or because of a largely ungoverned childhood that included "building bonfires and playing with gunpowder" (15), Craik seized independence early, entering into the business of literature while still a teenager. Bourrier uncovers ample evidence of her literary networking in London. Chiefly through the patronage of the well-connected salonnière and novelist Mrs. S.C. (Anna Maria) Hall, she started publishing in *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal.*

Craik's early writings included poetry, translation, fiction, and children's tales. In a gesture that Bourrier suspects was a "publicity stunt" rather than "a sudden outpouring of womanly modesty" (67), she published *The Ogilvies*, her first novel (Chapman & Hall, 1849) anonymously. Craik's entire career was informed by such professional savvy. When *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856) became her best-known novel, she thenceforth signed herself "the author of John Halifax." This "canny marketing strategy," Bourrier writes, "established a trusted authorial persona" that also "linked all her new work to her best-known publication" (129).

John Halifax, Gentleman, the story of a hard-working orphan who starts an illustrious career in a tanning yard, was by far Craik's greatest success. By the end of the nineteenth-century, this "archetypal tale of rags to riches in England" (92) had been through 11 editions in England and 45 in America, where copyright laws did not apply (107). The novel made Craik famous but not rich. Like many mid-Victorian authors (particularly women), she was unable to reap from her publisher, Hurst & Blackett, the material benefits of a popularity that lasted well into the twentieth century (110).

From the mid-1840s to the end of her life, Craik steadily published novels, poems, short stories, children's tales, and essays. Her personal trials were also constant. As a young adult she lost one brother to an accident, another to a probable suicide, and her mother to cancer. Her engagement to George Craik, who was to become a respected partner at Macmillan, came only after a railway accident in which he lost a leg and then recuperated at her house. Craik was present at the amputation, and was, we are unsurprised to read, "good in an emergency" (141).

Both Craik's family and Dinah's father disapproved of her marriage to a man eleven years younger than she. In letters to Dinah that Bourrier quotes, George's father belabored the age difference. The "evidence" of her 38 years, he writes, is "so transparent that it is unnecessary to describe it," and yet he does. The union, he continues, would appear "ridiculous" (146).

By all accounts, however, the Craiks enjoyed a happy and companionable marriage until Dinah's death. Respecting her financial rights, Craik signed a pre-nuptial agreement that protected her property and earnings (163). Shortly after her marriage, Dinah re-enacted a near-cliché of Victorian fiction by adopting a foundling--an infant found nearly frozen "behind a stack of bricks" (165). The child, Dorothy, was precocious and much loved by a writer who made maternal love one of her recurrent themes. In Craik's novels, Bourrier writes, "the adopted child or ward often turns out to benefit his or her new family, reinvigorating the family line with strong moral values and new blood" (174). In childhood at least, Dorothy exemplified this model.

Readers who want to learn from Bourrier's book about the final drama of Craik's life should skip this paragraph. Shortly after finding out that Dorothy had become pregnant while engaged, Dinah is said to have died of "heart trouble." The pre-marital pregnancy, Bourrier suspects, "would have been a devastating blow on an author known for her tales of heroic self-control in men and women." The timing of the pregnancy, Bourrier adds, was evidently concealed, as this news "surely would have damaged the posthumous reputation of the author of *John Halifax*, who was known for writing stories that mothers could be sure would not have an impure influence on their daughters" (240).

Now as in the Victorian era, Craik's novels promote conservative values and practical responses to social challenges, especially in regard to the Woman Question. Rather than urging women to be ambitious, Craik supported women's work and financial independence as social necessities. Not all readers liked her novels. While Queen Victoria endorsed their affirmation of cultural mores rather than biological drives (except perhaps the instincts of motherhood), Charles Darwin found her novels "too virtuous" (156, 222). Literary fashion favored Darwin's verdict over the Queen's, and Craik's literary conservatism extended to her critical tastes. While briefly a reader for Macmillan, she rejected for its "rawness" (113) a manuscript that later appeared as Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862).

Bourrier contextualizes Craik's works without repeating what she calls the tendency of "[c]ontemporary critics ... apt to pick up on the more liberal aspects of Dinah Craik's work, including her positive representations of disability [and] her nuanced explorations of race" (201). In declining to probe in depth Craik's treatment of disability and race, Bourrier avoids critical controversy as well as current trends in Victorian scholarship. In her review essay of 2006, "British Non-Canonical Women Novelists, 1850-1900: Recent Studies" (*Dickens Studies Annual* 37 (2006): 325-341), Talia Schaffer commends the authors of several recent studies of nineteenth-century women writers for having "absolutely no anxiety about issues of literary quality. The critics," she continues, "manifest a serene conviction that women writers' work was shaped by the conditions of the marketplace: relations with publishers, types of editions, genres, and expectations for women writers, and posthumous biographies" (Schaffer, 330). Bourrier does likewise in her detailed, conscientious, and unapologetic treatment of an author considered old-fashioned even while she lived (222).

That said, she aims to reach contemporary readers chiefly by repeatedly stressing Craik's "literary sociability." Though we may be unable to embrace Craik's sentimentality or outmoded values, we can appreciate the deftness with which she traversed a field encumbered by so many obstacles to the woman writer. With seeming composure Craik kept in touch with publishers she no longer worked for, appeased Margaret Oliphant's competitiveness (George Craik was Oliphant's publisher at Macmillan), and cultivated lasting friendships with writers and artists as diverse as Camilla Toulmin, Eliza Meteyard, Sydney Dobell, Eliza Lynn Linton, Mary Howitt, Holman and Edith Hunt, and Charlotte Yonge.

Biographers are often considered successful when their subjects eclipse them. Without reflecting on the editorial choices that shape *Victorian Bestseller*, Bourrier sometimes sacrifices interpretation for coverage. The arc of Craik's life adapts well to chronological biography in its mixture of steady progress (towards literary success and domestic happiness) and dramatic incident: her father's various incarcerations, her surprise marriage at age 38, her adoption of Dorothy, and the timing of her death amidst Dorothy's unplanned pregnancy. This trajectory also accommodates the expectations of the bildungsroman, archetypally exemplified by Craik's *John Halifax.* A biographer writing closer to the time of Craik's life would likely have avoided the subject of Dorothy's pregnancy and perhaps the more salacious opinions of Thomas Mulock, such as his expansive understanding of sodomy. But for modern readers, these details only enrich the life of a novelist whose works can appear saccharine. Their author, Bourrier convinces us, shares some of John Halifax's tenacity in her long career and devoted relationships.

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