

Edna LYALL, A Forgotten Best-Seller, 1857 - 1903 by John T Milton

Edna Lyall was a pseudonym produced from nine of the thirteen letters of her real name, Ada Ellen Bayly. She was born in Brighton in 1857, the youngest of four children, three girls and a boy. Her brother became a clergyman and both her elder sisters married clergymen. Her father, a barrister, and her mother died before Edna was fourteen. A delicate child who was to suffer ill health throughout her life, she was educated first at home, then at the home of her guardian at Caterham and finally at private schools in Brighton. Thereafter she lived first with her elder sister in Lincoln and then, from 1880 until her death, in the home of her second sister who had married the Revd HG Jameson. This family came to Eastbourne in 1884 when Hampden Gurney Jameson became a curate at St Saviour's Church; he was later to become the first vicar of St Peter's, a living which he held until his retirement in 1917. Edna Lyall, by which name I shall generally call her throughout this article, lived in the family house in College Road until her death in 1903.

The house involved was given the number which it still carries, No 16 College Road, when it was re-numbered in about 1908. Her biographers (G A Payne *and* J M Escreet) have described what was then No 6 College Road as a picturesque, detached, gabled, red-tiled property, nearly covered with ivy and Virginian creeper and sheltered by elm trees.

On the top floor with an extensive view of the downs over trees and gardens was the room used by the authoress as a study.

In 1892 Edna Lyall wrote in a letter to a friend...

'Yesterday I was extravagant enough to buy the adjoining plot of land. The owner threatened to build upon it... We mean to make a tennis lawn.' This plot of ground has never been built upon but it is now developed as a car park.

Ex Oriente Salus provides some further information about this property which was the first built on that side of the street. It was built by a College master and used as a small boarding house for pupils between 1875 and 1883. This book also records that a studio was added on the garden side for the use of the author. A building that might meet such a description does indeed exist but it is strange that the two writers who visited her should not have mentioned it. The ivy and creeper has long since been removed and the brickwork seems to be in good repair.

Edna Lyall had from her early schooldays wanted to be a writer and her first book was published in 1879. *Won by Waiting* was a juvenile story of a girl's life. It was not very good and sold only a handful of copies at that time. Seven



From Photograph by G. F. Arden, Esq.
"EDNA LYALL"

years later it was re-issued, to the author's dismay, and by 1894 it had reached a 13th edition. Her first major work was *Donovan*, published in 1882 without success. Two years later her next novel *We Two* was favourably reviewed in *The Spectator* and other magazines and became immediately popular. This also created a demand for *Donovan* and within twelve years both these books had run to more than 20 editions. She had, before then, disposed of the copyright of the two books by which she was to be best known for only £50. From this time on, however, writing was to become a lucrative employment and publishers clamoured for her work. She wrote in all some 20 books including 14 full length novels of which only the three mentioned above date from before her arrival in Eastbourne. When probate was granted on her estate in 1903 her effects were valued at nearly £26,000 despite her generosity to charitable causes during her lifetime.

Donovan is the story of a young man made misanthropic and atheistic by early misfortune and his ultimate conversion under the influence of his young sister and of the girl with whom he falls in love. This must make it sound like the archetype of the bad, popular Victorian novel but the writer's treatment of her characters makes it much better than this. The two main characters of *We Two* are Luke Raeburn and his daughter Erica. Luke Raeburn's life is modelled on the character and experiences of the secularist and politician Charles Bradlaugh with whom the author discussed the attitude of the non-believer and whom she greatly admired and respected. She took a leading part in raising money to pay his re-election expenses after he had been debarred from taking his seat in Parliament when he refused to take the oath. Edna Lyall remained a firm friend of Bradlaugh until his death, and of his daughter. This attitude took great courage for a devout churchgoer at a time when Bradlaugh must have been regarded by middle-class Eastbourne as the very Devil incarnate. Throughout her life she sought tolerance for sincerely held views however opposed they may have been to her own. One hostile critic wrote that 'Miss Lyall's object is to show how much more of Christ's spirit the agnostic has than the Christian'. This is a most unjust distortion of her standpoint which sought to recognise the good qualities of Christians and secularist alike while censuring narrow-minded intolerance wherever it occurred.

She wrote four historical novels set in her favourite period of the 17th century. The continuing success of her work may be judged by the fact that *Hope the Hermit, A Romance of Borrowdale* (1898), after magazine serialisation, sold 9,000 copies on the first day of its separate publication.

Many of her contemporary novels took a strong line on the social and political issues of the day. *Doreen, The Story of a Singer* (1894), which might well be considered as her best novel, is a strong plea for Irish Home Rule and was praised by Gladstone, who greatly admired her work. In a letter to her he remarked upon 'the singular courage on which you stake your wide public reputation on the Irish cause'. *Wayfaring Men* (1898) called for a tolerant view from society of actors and actresses and made a plea for the equalisation of the English divorce laws. Her last novel *The Hinderers* (1904) spoke out against the sufferings experienced by women during the Boer War.

Always a supporter of the Liberal party, Edna Lyall was an active member of the Eastbourne Women's Liberal Association and worked hard behind the scenes in three general elections when the Liberal candidate was narrowly defeated. She did not live to witness the only occasion of a Liberal victory in the last 100 years, the general election of 1906. An advocate of women's rights and suffrage, her death preceded the militant activities of Emmeline Pankhurst's Women's Social and Political Union. How would she have reacted to the active demonstrations of the 'Votes for Women' campaign? Her retiring temperament would have been at odds with her determination to support a cause in which she believed. Her efforts to increase women's influence in politics were exerted in a quiet way and her modest temperament and physical frailty would have weighed against her taking an active part in political demonstration.

The Revd G A Payne describes Edna Lyall as 'slight and fragile in appearance, with a quiet restful face full of expression, kindly thoughtful blue eyes, firm mouth, a high intellectual forehead and an abundance of brown hair, shy and reserved, full of sympathy, ever ready to give practical help and advice and to do anything to make things a little brighter for others. Her manner is gentle and her voice sweet in tone'. Payne visited her in her writing room at College Road and found portraits displayed of some of her particular heroes including Gladstone, Scott, Charles Lamb and, from the 17th century, John Hampden, Algernon Sydney, Cromwell and Milton. It was here that she held regular Sunday afternoon meetings followed by tea for local girls, mainly employed in the town shops, a practice which continued for nearly 20 years until just before her death.

Throughout her life she suffered poor health, particularly weak eyes and respiratory ailments. Nevertheless she travelled quite widely in this country and on the continent, often for recuperative purposes, and was particularly fond of Cumberland and Norway. These and other places she had visited including Ireland, France, Italy and Austria, are described in her novels. Edna Lyall died peacefully from pericarditis at her home in Eastbourne at the age of 45. Her funeral service was held at St Peter's Church and was followed by cremation. In accordance with her 'modern' views on funeral reform there were no flowers. Her ashes were buried in Bosbury Churchyard, Herefordshire, where her brother was vicar.

A three-light stained glass window was erected in the south aisle of St Peter's representing Hope, one of the three Theological Virtues, to the memory of Ada Ellen Bayly. When this church was demolished in 1972 much of the glass was re-used elsewhere or sent to the Stained Glass Museum at Ely but the Diocesan Board can find no records of what happened to these particular windows. Her memory is, however, still alive when the peal at St. Saviour's is rung. Bells nos 2, 3 and 4 carry these inscriptions:

2. Cast 1886/Donovan/D.D. Ada Ellen Bayly/A.M.D.G.
3. Cast 1886/Erica /D.D. Ada Ellen Bayly/A.M.D.G.

4. Cast 1886/Hugo /D.D. Ada Ellen Bayly/A.M.D.G.
D.D. - Deo dedit - given to God.
A.M.D.G. - ad majoram Deo gratiam – to the greater glory of God.

These bells are named after characters in her first three major novels. Donovan and Erica have been referred to earlier. Hugo is the hero of her first historical novel '*In the Golden Days*' (1885).

A long obituary notice appeared in the *Eastbourne Gazette* for Wednesday 11 February 1903 referring in respectful terms to her sympathetic character, her devotion, her generosity, her strongly held views and her freedom from partisan bitterness. On the previous day *The Times* had spoken of the considerable merits of her best work. Other tributes at the time were paid to her fine charitable spirit which could perceive good qualities in persons whose views she held in abhorrence. It was also written that although not to be enrolled among the great names of English fiction she had unquestionably exerted a great and wholesome influence on popular thought and life. The 1910 Supplement of the *Dictionary of National Biography* devotes three columns to Ada Ellen Bayly and provides a fair comment upon her literary ability. 'Her style is always clear and pleasant. She developed a genuine faculty of constructing a plot and she was especially happy in the characterisation of young girls. But her earnest political purpose, which came of her native horror of oppression and injustice, militated against her mastery of the whole art of fiction'. Nearly 80 years later Edna Lyall is no longer on the library shelves and is hard to find in the reserve stocks although volumes can sometimes be picked up at a moderate price at second-hand shops. It is certainly sad that she is not to be found in the local Eastbourne library. She is the only author referred to under Eastbourne in the *Oxford Literary Guide to the British Isles* (1977 edition), who actually wrote the major part of her output in the town. Strangely, although that volume correctly quotes the period of her residence it asserts that she lived at no 6 Osbourne (sic) Road in Old Town, a house that was not built until 30 years after her death!

I commend to members of the Society the work of an authoress with close local connections who provides an interesting sidelight on late Victorian mores, provided that they do not expect to find another Charlotte Young or even an Ouida or a Marie Corelli.

References -

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