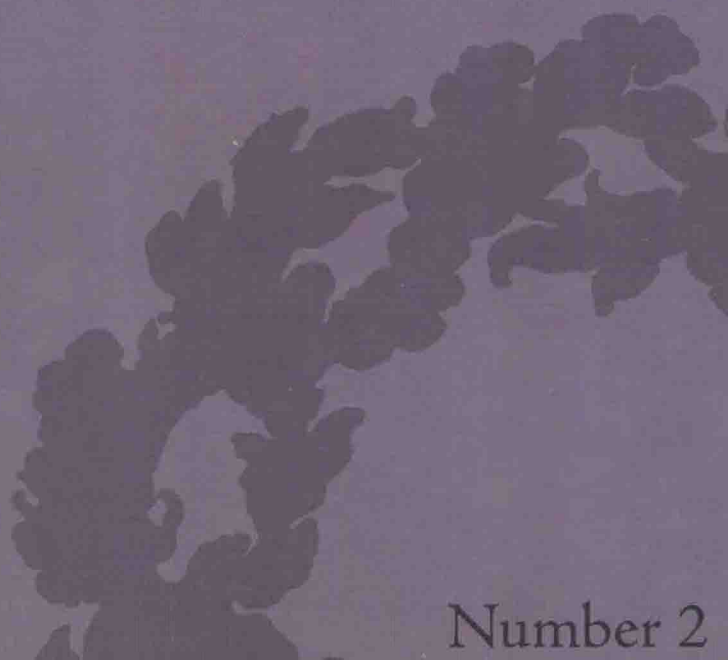


Mary Cholmondeley Reconsidered

Edited by
Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton
and SueAnn Schatz



Number 2

MARY CHOLMONDELEY RECONSIDERED

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LONDON
PICKERING & CHATTO
2010

*Published by Pickering & Chatto (Publishers) Limited
21 Bloomsbury Way, London WC1A 2TH
2252 Ridge Road, Brookfield, Vermont 05036-9704, USA
www.pickeringchatto.com*

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BRITISH LIBRARY CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Mary Cholmondeley reconsidered. – (Gender and genre)
1. Cholmondeley, Mary, 1859–1925 – Criticism and interpretation. 2. Social
change in literature.
I. Series II. Oulton, Carolyn, 1972– III. Schatz, SueAnn.
823.8-dc22

ISBN-13: 9781851966516
e: 9781851966561



This publication is printed on acid-free paper that conforms to the American
National Standard for the Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials.

*Typeset by Pickering & Chatto (Publishers) Limited
Printed in Great Britain by the MPG Books Group, Bodmin and King's Lynn*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to the following for permission to quote from letters and manuscripts in their collections: Alison Cholmondeley; Cheshire Local Studies and Archive; Cambridge University Library; Eton College Library.

Also to Ann Heilmann, the general editor of the Gender and Genre series.

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LIST OF FIGURES

- Figure 1. Frontispiece portrait, *Diana Tempest: A Novel* (1900) xii
- Figure 2. Frontispiece portrait, Percy Lubbock, *Mary Cholmondeley: A Sketch from Memory* (1928) xiii



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Figure 1. Frontispiece portrait, *Diana Tempest: A Novel* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1900). Private collection.



Figure 2. Frontispiece portrait, Percy Lubbock, *Mary Cholmondeley: A Sketch from Memory* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928). Courtesy of the Yale University Library.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vii
List of Contributors	ix
List of Figures	xi
Introduction – <i>Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton and SueAnn Schatz</i>	1
 I. Defining Women/Defining Men	
1 'Social Suicide – Yes': Sensational Legacies in <i>Diana Tempest</i> – <i>Tamara Wagner</i>	11
2 How to be a Feminist without Saying So: The New Woman and the New Man in <i>Red Pottage</i> – <i>SueAnn Schatz</i>	25
3 'The Bad Women are Better than the Good Ones': The New Woman and Sexual Fall in the Short Fiction – <i>Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton</i>	37
4 Writing Women: Narration and Literary Culture in the Short Fiction – <i>Christine Bayles Kortsch</i>	49
5 Cholmondeley's Fables of Identity – <i>Benedetta Bini</i>	65
 II. Creating Identities	
6 Negotiating the Terms of Celebrity Culture: Cholmondeley's Prefaces – <i>Linda H. Peterson</i>	75
7 'I Know that to be Untrue': Belief and Reality in the Short Fiction – <i>Jennifer M. Stolpa Flatt</i>	87
8 Revising the Gothic: The Spiritual Female in 'The Ghost of a Chance' and 'The End of the Dream' – <i>Karen Yuen</i>	103
9 Guiding Spirit: Stella Benson's Aunt Mary – <i>Marlene Baldwin Davis</i>	117
 III. Past, Present, Future	
10 Naturalized Imperialism in <i>The Danvers Jewels</i> : Reworking <i>The Moonstone</i> – <i>Patricia Murphy</i>	131
11 'Moth and Rust': Cholmondeley's Assessment of the Church of Eng- land – <i>Brenda Ayres</i>	147
12 Dreams of Futurity in 'Votes for Men' and 'The Dark Cottage' – <i>Kirsty Bunting</i>	161

Notes	173
Works Cited	201
Index	211

INTRODUCTION

Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton and SueAnn Schatz

Mary Cholmondeley's *Red Pottage* is among the most regularly 'almost rediscovered' books of *fin de siècle* women's writing. Although it had been one of the most discussed novels of 1899 – and who could resist the pithy catchphrase, 'Have you read Pottage?' – its admirers were lamenting its slow slide into oblivion by the time of Cholmondeley's death in 1925 and by 1957 she was apparently unread even in her home county of Shropshire, where she features in a local newspaper article as 'an almost forgotten' authoress.¹

Attempts to revive her reputation have since included two new scholarly editions of her most famous novel, and the resurgence of interest in New Woman writing over the last three decades has brought a number of critical articles on Cholmondeley's work, with most focusing on *Red Pottage*.² But, as often happens, the success of this one novel, the importance of which is now starting to be fully appreciated, has dealt something like a death blow to her other work. For some *Red Pottage* itself is flawed by its melodramatic suicide plot, a feature that links it to the sensation fiction of the 1860s rather than the more overtly serious New Woman experiments of the *fin de siècle*. But in any case this device remains an almost wilfully missed opportunity – unlike her most obvious precursors in the sensation genre, Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Cholmondeley has not been treated to a television makeover and has not reached a mass audience in modern times.

That she should seek a wide audience in the first place was a source of consternation to those around her when she first began to publish fiction in the 1880s. Born in Shropshire in 1859, Mary was the fourth child and eldest daughter of Richard Hugh Cholmondeley. The Cholmondeleys were themselves an old and well-regarded family, and they were furthermore related to the Lords Delamere, and by marriage to the illustrious Percy family. In 1855 Richard had married the well-connected Emily Beaumont, from an old Yorkshire family. His appointment to the rectorship of the small but picturesque parish of Hodnet in 1873 meant a return home. Not only had his father and grandfather been rectors of Hodnet before him, but his immediate predecessor had been his stepfather

Samuel Heyrick Macaulay, and the evidence suggests that Richard and Emily spent the early years of their marriage in the Rectory.

This was the house in which Mary Cholmondeley had been born, and within a few years of her return, she would assume a demanding role both domestically and within the parish. When her mother's declining health left her unable to cope with the demands of their large household, eighteen including servants, Cholmondeley had to take over. She was only sixteen herself at the time, and it became apparent in her own eyes that it was not a role for which she was particularly well suited. By the age of nineteen she had convinced herself that her lack of personal attractions – and perhaps her dislike of household management – rendered her all but unmarriageable, and she determined that rather than fulfilling the traditional career of marriage and motherhood, she would be a writer. She admitted in her private journal:

what a great pleasure and interest it would be to me in life to write books. I must strike out a line of some kind, and if I do not marry, (for at least that is hardly likely, as I possess neither beauty, nor cleverness) I should want some definite occupation, besides the home duties, though they certainly do engross far more of my time than I could have anticipated.³

Between domestic responsibilities and the demands of the parish work expected of the rector's daughters, Cholmondeley often struggled to find time to write. To increase her difficulties she suffered from chronic asthma, which often left her prostrated for weeks at a time. But her personal circumstances were not the only source of frustration. For a woman of her class to take up a profession was simply not done, and it would be many years before she was able to note sardonically that her literary success now made her 'dear Mary' to people who had hardly acknowledged her when she was a shy young girl with only her family position to recommend her. As she later recalled, the county families with whom she exclusively socialized could not initially understand why one of their own would want to join the ranks of 'scribblers'.

While two volumes of Cholmondeley's diary have recently been discovered, the middle volume, covering the period 1879–95, is missing. Her friend and first biographer Percy Lubbock, who had access to it after her death, suggests that the local young men were good naturedly ready to be amused by their neighbour's witty satire, even as they dismissed her writing ambition as fanciful or insignificant. Cholmondeley herself later confirmed that she had had 'few incentives to perseverance'⁴ at this stage of her career. Nonetheless she had the support of her sisters and, despite the suggestions in the largely hostile commentary of *Under One Roof* – published decades later in 1918 – of her mother as well. She herself recalled how she used to entertain her younger sisters Victoria and Hester (who also wanted to be a writer) with improbable accounts of her adventures away

from home, and her first novel, *The Danvers Jewels* (1887), would be dedicated to another sister, Diana, 'who helped me to write it'.⁵ What is clear from the first volume of her diary is that she also set great store by her mother's opinion, submitting early drafts of her work to her for comment and criticism. Cholmondeley's first novel, *Her Evil Genius*, was never published, but by the 1880s she was determinedly sending out short stories to magazines. The first that can be attributed with certainty is 'Lisle's Courtship', published in *Household Words* in 1884,⁶ followed in 1885 by 'Geoffrey's Wife',⁷ a trenchant critique of the sexual double standard that set the feminist agenda for her major fiction of the 1890s.

The first of her novels to appear was the overtly sensational *The Danvers Jewels* (1887), completed at about this time and dedicated to Cholmondeley's sister Diana in acknowledgement of her support in the writing of it. Unsure of how to approach a publisher, Cholmondeley sought advice from a literary acquaintance, Anne Thackeray Ritchie, and her husband. They suggested the firm of Bentley, and an introduction was duly procured by another family friend, the novelist Rhoda Broughton. Bentley approved of the book and promptly commissioned more of the same. Cholmondeley responded with a sequel, *Sir Charles Danvers* (1889), which she described as portraying 'the only life I know, the life of country people'.⁸

But if Cholmondeley would later declaim the snobbery of county families in their response to professional writers, she herself was not free from such social prejudice. This ambivalence is obvious in her initial response to her middle-class publisher George Bentley; she was inclined to distrust him as a businessman with whom her background had not equipped her to cope. During the negotiations for copyright of her first two novels Cholmondeley was in constant touch with the more experienced Ritchie and her husband, seeking advice and airing grievances after receiving letters from the firm. Despite such reservations she had faith in Bentley as a critic and he in her as a writer. Over the years they only met once, but nonetheless forged an extraordinary relationship, reinforced by their shared suffering from asthma. During the writing of her third novel, *Diana Tempest*, Mary was repeatedly thrown off course by illness and by the untimely death of her younger sister Hester in 1892, before eventually herself being put through an intensive rest cure. In one of the last letters she was allowed to write before her rest cure commenced, she reassured Bentley that she had finished correcting the proofs of the novel – she would not be able to write to him again for several months, and then it was to lament the continuing strictures of her doctor.⁹

Despite these setbacks *Diana Tempest* (1893), as Bentley recognized, marked a major turning point in Cholmondeley's development as a writer. If *Sir Charles Danvers* represented 'the only life I know' in its ambiguous invocation of parochial ennui redeemed by the lovingly detailed country house way of life, *Diana Tempest* would figure that world as under perpetual threat. Based on an anecdote

dote related at a dinner party about a wealthy young man (Cholmondeley was deeply struck by an incident of life echoing art, when the subject of the original anecdote went on to marry her cousin a few years later), the novel was intended to focus on the plight of John Tempest rather than Diana. Indeed Cholmondeley would have called the novel simply *John*, had Margaret Oliphant not beaten her to it by over two decades with her *John: A Love Story* of 1870.¹⁰ Despite the author's protestations that the main interest of the story centred on John Tempest and his moral dilemma, modern readers have inevitably been drawn to the heroine whose determination to think for herself, and whose contempt for appearances, raises questions routinely associated with the better-known New Woman protagonists of the 1890s.

At the time Cholmondeley noted wryly in her diary that while this novel won her a degree of celebrity in London, a return to the country – where no one cared what she did – was a salutary corrective to her pride. Not surprisingly then she had mixed feelings when her father's retirement, and the loss of the family estate to debt, rendered an abrupt move from Hodnet essential in 1895. It was shortly after this that Cholmondeley moved to London with her now-widowed father and two surviving unmarried sisters, Diana and Victoria (the only sister to marry was Essex in 1886, and it was her daughter who would become famous as the modernist novelist Stella Benson). The departure from Hodnet was a development that Cholmondeley clearly found liberating – even though it meant leaving the spacious rectory in Hodnet for a flat (obscuring or dismissing the loss of status this implied, her brothers would now start referring to their father and sisters flippantly as 'the flatites').¹¹

But the late 1890s would prove to be a difficult time in many ways. The sale of the Bentley firm to Macmillan in 1898 would leave Cholmondeley without a regular channel for her work, and it was also at this period that she found herself struggling with an addiction to morphia, the drug routinely used to treat her condition over a period of some years. Indeed the writing of *Red Pottage* confirmed a trend whereby Mary spent three years writing her new novel, only to break down immediately it was finished – she was literally forced to correct proofs in the middle of a severe illness. As she began to recover over the next few months, she wondered how she had managed to do it at all:

I dont [*sic*] remember much about it except the exhaustion, the hand round my head, the morphia, and the horror which it throws on everything, the long depression of convalescence, not wholly gone yet. I was delirious for many nights. And by day proof sheets after proof sheets arrived. All these while she nursed me dear Di read, and the hours in the day when my head was clear; whenever there were any such hours were spent in consulting these many sheets. I did not care, but I remembered that I had cared about the book, and I forced myself to do them. I corrected them twice over.¹²

None of these difficulties make their way into the Cholmondeley myth of the shy spinster from Shropshire, and it seems possible that they were hardly suspected by her wide circle of friends, who knew better than to try and penetrate her reserve, if indeed they ever looked beyond the wit and polish that she was remembered to have brought to social situations.

Nor did her wide circle of admirers necessarily suspect the mental suffering she underwent during this period. *Moth and Rust*, the novella published in 1902 and her first work to appear after the hugely successful *Red Pottage*, takes as its somewhat unpromising hero an aristocratic man who angers his mother by engaging himself to a middle-class fiancée. But the story ends tragically when he is unable to trust his lover in the suspicious circumstances she has naively got into by agreeing to keep a guilty secret for her dying friend. Ironically it was as Cholmondeley was writing this that she learned of the misunderstanding that lay behind her own tragedy. As a young woman she had been devastated by the inexplicable withdrawal of the man she had hoped to marry, but she had been too proud to question his motives, which she took to be ambition and an unwillingness to commit himself when he was not yet in a position to marry. Now she learned that quite simply the man she loved had been told that she was bored by his attentions. Even in her diary she was reluctant to examine the implications of this disaster on the course of her life, but it was a theme that she could pursue at a distance, in fictional form. *Prisoners: Fast Bound in Misery and Iron* (1906) explores the dilemma of a woman in middle age who has never recovered from the loss of her lover decades earlier, and two of the four stories in *The Lowest Rung* (1908), 'The Understudy' and 'St Luke's Summer', tackle the same theme from different perspectives.

Many of her stories from this time would show a concern with the plight of single women who had outlived their youth and now found that they had missed domestic fulfilment. Nonetheless, in her own middle age, Cholmondeley was finding her home life increasingly stressful, admitting to herself at least that 'I am not by nature domestic'.¹³ In the early years of the new century she would resolve this dilemma, using the income from her writing to lease a house in Ufford, Suffolk, where she would write many of her later stories, and which she used as a setting for her last novel, *Notwithstanding*, published in 1913. The possible effect on her asthma was always a concern for Cholmondeley, but having satisfied herself that the local air would suit her 'coquettish lungs',¹⁴ she leased the property from the eccentric local landowner, Edward Brooke, and set about doing it up. This house became a refuge from the claustrophobia of family life in the flat, but it also gave her a renewed sense of purpose in the immense amount of work entailed in making it habitable. After the death of her father, who had himself been in poor health for some years, in 1911, Diana took a flat of her own. From this time Cholmondeley was able to spend more of her time in the

country with Victoria, the closest of her sisters emotionally despite a ten-year age gap; it was here that she spent much of her time during the war, vividly recalled in the preface to her last collection of stories, *The Romance of His Life and Other Romances* (1921).

Cholmondeley had been emotionally involved with the life of Ufford from the start, and in her account of zeppelin raids and the tragedy of the local men who were sent out to fight and never returned, she instinctively identifies with the locals of Suffolk in their experience of war. In 1914 she contributed an article to the propagandist *King Albert's Book: A Tribute to the Belgian People from Representative Men and Women throughout the World*, in which she describes an encounter with Belgian soldiers in the area, even inventing a local regiment, the West Lowshires, for the occasion; in March 1915 the parish magazine noted the death of Reginald Cholmondeley, the son of her elder brother of the same name, and her favourite nephew.¹⁵

Cholmondeley, with her sister Victoria, volunteered for war work in these years. But with the return of peace she turned her thoughts back to the more distant past, publishing *Under One Roof*, a vivid if sometimes tendentious account of family life in Hodnet Rectory, in the new year of 1918. In this final engagement with the troubles of her early life, she recalls the support of her sisters for her writing – and in particular the lost promise of the youngest, Hester. But in her discussion of these formative influences, there is no mention of the man she had hoped to marry, or the sense in which his loss had confirmed her writing vocation.

In the last years of her life, Cholmondeley would publish her most radical critique of the Woman Question, a debate that permeates *The Romance of His Life*. But there would be no more novels, a loss that she herself attributed to the war. In fact she was also in physical decline, suffering a stroke in 1921 from which she never fully recovered. At her death in 1925 she was known as the author of eight novels, two collections of stories and a family memoir. But her reputation rested, as she acknowledged with something like despair, on one of those novels alone. It was a reputation that by the time of her death was already under attack. In her last years her own fame had been superseded by that of her niece Stella Benson, and Cholmondeley herself sometimes felt dangerously out of touch with the new generation of writers Benson represented. Nonetheless, the horrifying story in her most celebrated work, of a writer's manuscript being wilfully destroyed, and by a judge who is reading it without her consent, can be seen to speak for the conflicts and tensions of a generation of late Victorian women authors.

* * *

The essays in the first section of this monograph, 'Defining Women/Defining Men', examine Cholmondeley's role in the ongoing discussion regarding