

Not “Just” a Children’s Writer: Hesba Stretton’s Reformist Fiction

The Writings of Hesba Stretton: Reclaiming the Outcast. Elaine Lomax. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009. 243 pp.

Reviewed by **Deborah Denenholz Morse**, College of William and Mary

<1> Elaine Lomax has written a comprehensive and original account of the life and works of Hesba Stretton (née Sarah Smith), best known by Victorians as the author of Religious Tract Society and, to a lesser extent, Scottish Temperance League fiction. Stretton is known (if at all) in our own time as the author of the bestselling children’s novel, *Jessica’s First Prayer* (1867). As Lomax has thoroughly and insightfully demonstrated, Stretton was a social reformer all of her life, and a very gifted writer whose work is not easily categorized; it encompasses genres in which the realist “Condition-of-England” novel is ruptured by melodrama and gothic nightmare and inflected by fairy tale and fantasy. In her children’s books about poor, oppressed children of London, Manchester, and Liverpool (*Jessica’s First Prayer*, *In Prison and Out* [1880], *Pilgrim Street* [1867], *Little Meg’s Children* [1868]), Stretton was committed to changing the appalling conditions in which many thousands of Victorian children lived and died. She extended her concern to child performers (*An Acrobat’s Girlhood*, 1889) and to the animals that were so often cruelly mistreated in Victorian society (*Only a Dog*, 1888). She was the passionate advocate of all creatures in her society who were dispossessed of their right to be safe, and to be fed and housed properly. As Lomax tells us, “Like Dickens and Gaskell before her, Stretton, from her earliest writings, displayed deep concern over the impact of poverty and the struggles of the disenfranchised, whether such deprivation arose from the cotton famine in Manchester in the early 1860s or the conditions in the slums of London in the ensuing decades” (11).

<2> Stretton was also very much a writer about the plight of women in her culture in intricate novels that dealt with “Woman Question” issues like marital cruelty (*The Doctor’s Dilemma*, 1872), the dutiful daughter left bereft upon a parent’s death (*Bede’s Charity*, 1872), child abandonment (*A Thorny Path*, 1879), domestic abuse (*The Storm of Life*, 1876), and marital discord and child neglect (*Half Brothers*, 1892). She wrote about out-of-work cotton mill workers during the American Civil War (*David Lloyd’s Last Will*, 1869) and about the disastrous results of alcoholism not only in the poorer classes (*Lost Gip* [1873], *Her Only Son* [1887], *Nelly’s Dark Days* [1870]), but also in the middle class (*Brought Home*, 1875).(1) She was a trenchant critic of hypocrisy and, as an evangelical Christian, she was a believer in the possibility of transformed lives through Christian redemption. As Lomax states, “Stretton presses her case for reform, recognizing that social amelioration entails both individual and collective responses and responsibilities, and a progressive belief in material and environmental, as well as moral and

spiritual transformation” (216). Lomax convincingly shows how Stretton’s work is informed by Victorian discourses from sanitation to the agitation for the 1882 Married Women’s Property Act.

<3> Stretton was a very popular writer, as Lomax makes clear. *Jessica’s First Prayer* had sold well over two million copies and had been translated into “at least fifteen languages” (55) by the time its author died in 1911. *Little Meg’s Children*, *Lost Gip*, *Alone in London* (1869), and other novels were also immensely popular and sold many thousands of copies. If there is one criticism I would be tempted to make of this fine recuperation of Stretton’s work, it is that Stretton’s sheer *readability* is not stressed enough, nor are there many long quoted passages from which we can judge this for ourselves. I recall reading one Stretton novel after another in the Bodleian and not being able to stop reading them – except when I needed to cry at the end of *Only a Dog* or *The Storm of Life*. Stretton is a very good writer, a gripping storyteller at her best. There are sections of *Half-Brothers* that are reminiscent of *Wuthering Heights* (as Lomax suggests), and *Brought Home* would bring present-day readers to tears, with its scenes of the heroine’s protracted sufferings from alcohol abuse. The terrors of the young girl Cassy in her abusive father’s home, in Epping Forest, and in her domestic slavery (*Cassy*, 1874) or of Margery out all night in the London cold (*Bede’s Charity*) are powerfully depicted.

<4> If Lomax does not, perhaps, emphasize enough how compelling much of Stretton’s work is, *The Writings of Hesba Stretton* explores the complexities of that fiction with an intensity and scope that are admirable. Lomax is especially perceptive concerning the anxieties about gender, class, race, and nation that pervade Stretton’s novels, “the precariousness of boundaries, the ease with which one may become ‘the other’” (3), but she also sees this slippage as crucial to the empathy Stretton wants us to feel. Lomax emphasizes the tensions in Stretton’s life and art, such as her ability at once to value respectability and caste and to critique the social hypocrisies that uphold the Victorian class system, or to sympathize with the harrowing lives of slum mothers and yet to be furious at these same mothers when she looks at the wretched lives of their children. Lomax’s eloquent chapters on Stretton’s visions of Victorian lower-class motherhood and the child victim recognize and explore these contradictions.

<5> As an unmarried, financially secure middle-class woman in Victorian society, Stretton was able to provide a unique view of gender relations in her culture. She herself was devoted to her sisters and brothers, and lived with her beloved sister Elizabeth all her life, until Elizabeth died slightly before Hesba herself, in 1911. Sisterhood – often across class lines – is powerful in many of Stretton’s novels, as in the love and devotion of Sophy Chantrey’s friend Ann Holland, who gives up her saddler’s work to go with her alcoholic friend to New Zealand, where Sophy ultimately recovers her health and self-respect. Stretton often portrayed the masculine violence in working-class households (*Cassy*, *The Storm of Life*, *Nelly’s Dark Days*) and the lives of fear and despair that both women and children in those households endured. Throughout her life, Stretton fought for legislation that would protect her society’s women and children. For lower-class children in particular, her resolve to protect them from want and abuse was legendary even in her own time; she was a founding member of the London Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. In her portrayals of England’s urban children, such as the “street arab” Don, who dies from starvation while taking care of an abandoned little girl (*A Thorny Path*), or the working-

class Sylvanus, who takes in the destitute former thief Rachel and her little daughter (*The Storm of Life*), Stretton suggests the individual compassionate response to pain and hardship that will support humane laws in the land. I, for one, am very grateful to Elaine Lomax for her complex and perceptive readings of Stretton's important work

Endnotes

(1)For an analysis of Stretton's treatment of maternal alcoholic figures in relation to the child victim narrative, see Deborah Denenholz Morse, "Unforgiven: Drunken Mothers in Hesba Stretton's Religious Tract Society and Scottish Temperance League Fiction," in *Other Mothers: Beyond the Maternal Ideal*, ed. Ellen Rosenmann and Claudia Klaver (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008): 101-124.(^)