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MODELS OF AUTHORSHIP: MARGARET OLIPHANT AND GEORGE ELIOT

By Joanne Shattock

This article is about the profession of authorship in the nineteenth century. More specifically it is about the writing lives of two women novelists. Margaret Oliphant’s (1828-1897) work is unfamiliar to most modern readers, apart from her Autobiography, one or two of her supernatural tales, and possibly the ‘Chronicles of Carlingford’, the series for which she was best known, novels and stories set in an English provincial town where life revolves around church and chapel. George Eliot (1819-1880) on the other hand, needs no introduction to today’s readers.

In one of her many reviews of the works of her contemporaries, Margaret Oliphant referred wistfully to what she called ‘the elysium of a popular edition’, a compliment that was denied to her during her lifetime and afterwards. Remembering that she wrote a total of ninety-eight novels, fifty short stories, five full length biographies, three literary histories, historical guides to European cities, and more than three hundred journal articles, this may not seem in the least surprising. I and fourteen colleagues are currently engaged in a twenty-five volume edition of Oliphant’s Selected Works. I am hoping that an indirect outcome of what follows will be to show why we think the edition is important.

My main focus, however, is on factors that determined the career of a professional author in the mid-nineteenth century, from apprenticeship and early publication, to the role of the publisher, and then to what I will call the publishing end game. I want to raise the question of whether there were perceived ‘models’ of a writing career, some possibly more highly regarded than others, and to what extent authors consciously or subconsciously, measured their own achievements against these models.

In 1885 the publisher William Blackwood sent Margaret Oliphant an inscribed copy of a long-awaited publication, the three volume biography of George Eliot by her widower John Walter Cross. As one of its longest-serving reviewers, and as a Blackwood author herself Oliphant could reasonably have expected to have reviewed the book for Blackwood’s Magazine, but William Blackwood clearly thought otherwise. Oliphant seems not to have been put out. Writing to congratulate him on the publication she commented, ‘I don’t think anyone will like George Eliot better from this book, or even come nearer to her’. And then in another letter she added: ‘It is quite astounding to see how little humour or vivacity she had in real life. Surely Mr Cross must have cut out all the human parts’. This was precisely what contemporary reviewers and readers were to say about the biography.

Oliphant had a lot to say in her review about Eliot’s decision to live openly with Lewes. And much to say too about the circle of friends who had surrounded and protected her,
allowing her to live she suggested, in a rarified intellectual atmosphere, removed from many of the pressures of everyday life. She praised the novels, particularly the early ones, and showed she understood much about Eliot, reading her life through her works, as much as through Cross’s biography. She acknowledged her unassailable position in the literary world. But in the respect, close to awe, which she showed for Eliot’s achievement, there is a whiff of envy, and also of disappointment. In general Oliphant’s review reinforced the view of many women writers of the day – that Eliot was a model impossible of emulation.

Oliphant then turned to a notebook she had last used twenty-one years earlier, in 1864, in which she had written out her grief at the sudden death of her ten year old daughter Maggie. The death had followed less than five years after that of her husband Frank from tuberculosis. The notebook was at that point a private document – she would return to it on two more occasions, each prompted by the death of a child. On this occasion she was moved to compare her writing life with those of Eliot and also of Trollope, whose Autobiography, published in 1883, she had also been reading, and for whom she had written an obituary. ‘I have been tempted to begin writing by George Eliot’s life – with that curious kind of self-compassion which one cannot get clear of. I wonder if I am a little envious of her?’, she began. Thinking of Trollope’s account of his daily writing practice, she went on:

I always avoid considering formally what my own mind is worth. I have never had any theory on the subject. I have written because it gave me pleasure, because it came natural to me, because it was like talking or breathing, besides the big fact that it was necessary for me to work for my children. ... When people comment upon the number of books I have written, and I say that I am so far from being proud of that fact that I should like at least half of them forgotten, they stare – and yet it is quite true; and even here I could no more go solemnly into them, and tell why I had done this or that, than I could fly. They are my work, which I like in the doing, which is my natural way of occupying myself, which are never so good as I meant them to be.

And there is more.

I don’t quite know why I should put this all down. I suppose because George Eliot’s life has ... stirred me up to an involuntary confession. How I have been handicapped in life! Should I have done better if I had been kept, like her, in a mental greenhouse and taken care of?

Later she adds:

No one even will mention me in the same breath with George Eliot. And that is just. ... George Eliot and George Sand make me half inclined to cry over my poor little unappreciated self.... I would not buy their fame with their disadvantages, but I do feel very small very obscure, beside them, rather a failure all round ....

Fortunately at this point, she stopped herself from a further downward spiral and began to recount the story of her life. Students of life-writing are familiar with Oliphant’s Autobiography. It is today her best known work. In its innovative, fragmented structure, its poignancy, the nakedness of her grief, and the honesty of her self-assessment it is justly celebrated. It is not, as you might be forgiven for concluding from the extracts, an exercise in self-deprecation, or a defence of underachievement. It is, like Trollope’s Autobiography, an account of a writing life. One of its attractions is the complex tension between her insistence
that she had had to write to support her family, set against her obvious pleasure in her work,
the way her writing structured and gave meaning to her life. The writing, as she says at one
point, ‘ran through everything’; also running through the Autobiography is the question — if
she had not had to write to support her family, if she had written less, might she have produced,
‘a fine novel’, as she calls it, coupled with the anxiety that her work might not necessarily have
been better. For all of these reasons the Autobiography is a remarkable text.

In 1885 Oliphant’s sense of failure in contrast to Eliot’s and Trollope’s success was
understandable, but misjudged. In her own final decade — she had eleven years of writing
remaining — she would produce one of her best short stories, two major biographies, several of
her best novels, and in her last year Annals of a Publishing House, the two volume history of
the House of Blackwood, with which she had been associated for nearly half a century, and the
proofs of which she corrected as she lay dying.

Twenty years earlier, in the mid-1860s, the reputations of Margaret Oliphant and
George Eliot had not seemed so disparate. Their careers had run in parallel in the 1850s, and
and at one point in the 1860s had intersected. The first part of this article is about that conjunction.
There was nine years’ difference in their ages — Oliphant was the younger — but in the 1850s
hers was the more firmly established career. They both came from provincial backgrounds.
Oliphant, born in Wallyford, near Edinburgh, spent most of her childhood and early adult life
in Liverpool and Birkenhead. Eliot grew up near Nuneaton, and spent her early adult years in
and around Coventry. They moved to London within a year of one another. In 1851 Marian
Evans took up residence at 142 Strand, the unorthodox establishment of the radical publisher
John Chapman, who had published her translation of David Friedrich Strauss’s Das Leben
Jesu. In the summer of 1852, shortly after her marriage to her cousin Frank Oliphant, a stained­
glass designer, Oliphant moved to a house in Harrington Square, near Regent’s Park.

For a writer, and particularly a woman writer, the advantages of living in London in the
mid-nineteenth century were enormous. Literary London was a series of interlocking networks,
those of male writers often but not always distinct from those of women. For Marian Evans,
not yet George Eliot, London was liberating, for Oliphant, it was enabling. Oliphant attended
the afternoon parties of Anna Maria Hall and her genial husband Samuel Carter Hall, the
former a powerful patron of women writers through her editorships and contacts with
publishers. She also went to the parties given by her neighbour the novelist Dinah Mulock, later
Dinah Craik, also recently arrived in London, and in Oliphant’s estimation far more self­
possessed and confident in her grasp of the literary marketplace, and so more than a little
intimidating. Oliphant was not by nature a networker. She records in her Autobiography her
reluctance to play the role of ‘literary lady’s demanded by her hostesses, and therefore a
disappointment to them.

142 Strand provided the future George Eliot with an invaluable introduction to
metropolitan intellectual life. It also gave her base from which to lead an independent
professional one. Her early attachment to John Chapman transformed itself into a working
relationship that proved beneficial to them both. Chapman had recently purchased the quarterly
Westminster Review. He persuaded Marian Evans to act as his sub-editor, a privilege for which
she was not paid.

At 142 Strand she met writers and intellectuals, some of them associated with the
review, others part of various groups who gathered at Chapman’s frequent evening parties. Her
visitors included Herbert Spencer, with whom she formed another attachment, Harriet
Martineau, the phrenologist George Combe, the feminist Bessie Parkes, and most important of all, George Henry Lewes. She also met the novelists Eliza Lynn, later Lynn Linton, and Fredrika Bremer at 142 Strand. The network that formed round Chapman and the Westminster Review intersected with that for which the ‘node’, in the terminology of modern network theory, was Carlyle, who was at the centre of several groups. Marian Evans’s network then was much more extensive, it included both men and women, and it was relaxed in terms of personal relationships. As a single woman living in London she was able to go to the British Museum, to attend concerts, the theatre and dinners, and to contemplate a literary career.

Oliphant and George Eliot never met, either at that point in the 1850s when they were both living in central London or later. There was one important figure in both their careers who could have facilitated an introduction, but that didn’t happen.

Before moving to London Oliphant had already secured a modest success with several novels, published by Richard Bentley, by Henry Colburn, and by Hurst and Blackett, all with the possible exception of Bentley considered to be in the second division of fiction publishers. In 1852 she had achieved what she considered a triumph in having a novel accepted by the prestigious Edinburgh publishers William Blackwood and Sons. Katie Stewart was serialized anonymously in Blackwood’s Magazine in 1852 and published in one volume early in 1853. On the strength of that she wrote to John Blackwood, the magazine’s editor and now head of the firm, with characteristic directness: ‘I come immediately to matters of every day prose – I should like very much if you would employ me in some miscellaneous works – reviews or essays of a lighter sort – by which I might make fifty pounds by the middle of May’.

She now had two young children, and her husband’s business was slow in getting started. Blackwood proposed a sum of twenty pounds a sheet (of sixteen pages), roughly 10,000 words or between twelve and fourteen of the magazine’s pages, for her articles. This was the beginning of an arrangement which lasted until the end of her career, her reviewing running in tandem with her novel writing, her biographies, literary histories, and whatever else she was contracted for. Blackwood often sent the cheques in multiples of twenty pounds in advance, and Oliphant calculated the number of pages she was in debit or credit.

Marian Evans was also short of money. She supplemented the annuity left to her by her father by reviewing for the Westminster and for the Leader, the latter a radical weekly established by Lewes and his friend Thornton Hunt in 1850 and for which Lewes was the literary editor.

Both women had punishing schedules of reading and reviewing in this period. Between 1855 and 1857 Marian Evans took on, at Chapman’s invitation, the ‘Belles lettres’ section within the ‘Contemporary Literature’ feature of the Westminster for seven consecutive issues. By her biographer Gordon Haight’s reckoning she reviewed a total of 166 books, between twenty and thirty books for each article. She was paid twelve guineas (£12.12.0) per number, which came to fifty pounds a year. The Leader paid her a guinea per review. Because the reviews were anonymous she sometimes reviewed the same book in both publications. Blackwood’s terms were far more generous. Oliphant’s annual earnings at this point, from her reviewing, and from her novels, were higher than Marian Evans’s.

George Eliot’s journal recorded the toll the work took on her health. Her bilious headaches were regular occurrences, exacerbated undoubtedly by the varying reactions of friends to the still new relationship with Lewes, the periods of separation as he sorted out his domestic affairs, and by their precarious finances. She and Lewes had by this time established
a home together in Richmond. They worked in the front sitting room, Marian frequently being
driven to distraction by the scratching of Lewes’s pen. Their custom was to work in the
mornings, walk in the afternoon, sometimes receive visitors, return to work before dinner, and
then read aloud in the evenings.

Oliphant seems to have enjoyed robust health for most of her life. She refers frequently
in her Autobiography and her letters to her working habits – writing through the night while
her household slept, wearing a small hole in her finger which wouldn’t heal, from holding her
pen, as she told William Blackwood at the end of her life. In her last decade she sometimes
substituted the time of writing for the date at the top of her letters – midnight, 2.30, 3.00 am
were favourites – as if to reassure the recipient, usually a publisher, that she was working flat
out.

The picture given in her Autobiography of this period is of a happy time before her
husband’s fatal illness was diagnosed. She recalled working in the back sitting room in the
house in Ulster Place where they moved after Harrington Square, the family life going on
around her. Even the death of a child caused a minimum of interruption. Her nine month old
daughter Marjorie died in February 1855 while she was working on a major review of Dickens.
Frank Oliphant wrote to Blackwood saying she thought she could get the article to him by the
middle of the month so as not to disrupt the magazine’s schedule but a postponement would be
‘more agreeable’. Blackwood of course agreed. On a happier occasion Frank reported the
arrival of their son Cyril in November 1856, assuring Blackwood that his wife was well and
enclosing her proofs which she had corrected ‘with the consent of her nurse’.11

What is more intriguing than these images of the two women working at exactly the
same time on similar tasks in their respective domestic environments is the books they were
reading and reviewing, and the impact of the reviewing on their novels.

They both reviewed Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh, Tennyson’s Maud, the
latest volumes of Ruskin’s Modern Painters, the poems of Sydney Dobell, Longfellow’s
Hiawatha, Browning’s Men and Women, and novels by Wilkie Collins. Marian Evans reviewed
Charles Reade’s It is never too late to Mend, which Oliphant would review later. Oliphant
reviewed the last volumes of Macaulay’s History of England just as Eliot and Lewes were
reading them aloud in the evenings. Both read Gaskell’s Life of Charlotte Brontë when it was
published in 1857 and were profoundly moved by it. Both admired Tennyson. Both revered
Scott and regularly invoked him in their reviews as the touchstone of story-telling.

Marian Evans’s reviews are fresh, engaging, instinctive and intelligent responses to her
reading. There is no sense, in these ‘Belles Lettres’ articles, most of which have not been
republished in full, of hackwork, or weariness, of padding out with quotation to make up the
length. ‘I began … by a sort of writing which had no great glory belonging to it, but which I
felt certain I could do faithfully and well’, she recalled years later.12 She was being modest. As
well as English publications she reviewed books in French and German. One does wonder how
many readers appreciated her review of a volume of Roumanian poetry, in which she discussed
the obvious connection of that language with its Latin roots, or her enjoyment of Milton’s word
play, which she pointed out, showed how well he knew Greek. Her choice of novels was
idiosyncratic: Kingsley’s Westward Ho!, Meredith’s The Shaving of Shagpat, Geraldine
Jewsbury’s Constance Herbert, Holme Lee’s Kathie Brand, and Fredrika Bremer’s Hertha.
There were also a number of novels by anonymous or little known women writers, pursuing
the theme she developed in the better known essay ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’, the
damage women novelists did to their collective reputation by writing about subjects outside their experience. But there are no reviews of Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Trollope or Thackeray, all of whom published fiction in these two years.

With the advantage of hindsight, it is quite striking how the future George Eliot was consciously preparing herself for her novel-writing. Her discussion of renunciation in Geraldine Jewsbury’s *Constance Herbert*, a theme she would later develop in *The Mill on the Floss*, has been noted by Gordon Haight and Gillian Beer. In her review of *Westward Ho!* she warned Kingsley of the dangers of preaching, rather than enabling the moral of his story to emerge naturally through his narrative. Of Charles Reade she wrote that he never rose above cleverness, the difference between his novel and the work of genius is that ‘the one writer is himself thoroughly possessed by his creation – he lives in his characters while the other remains outside them and dresses them up’. There are clear signs in these reviews, as in the longer *Westminster* essays, of Eliot’s reviewing fuelling the creativity which would follow. These are reviews by a writer who is thinking about realism, about narrative, about character development. They are the reviews of a novelist in the making.

Margaret Oliphant was more mainstream than Marian Evans in her choice of novels and novelists in this period. She began with three summative reviews of Dickens, Thackeray and Bulwer Lytton, reviewing all their work to date (1855). In ‘Modern Novelists Great and Small’ (May 1855) she declared the present to be the age of female novelists, and included many of them in her review. A series of articles in 1855-6 with the running head ‘Modern Light Literature’ covered theology, science, history, travel writing, art and poetry, which further demonstrated her range. And she wrote on issues affecting women, some of her forthright views, on divorce and later on the vote, disquieting to a modern sensibility.

There are examples of Oliphant’s reviewing influencing her novels. I have argued that her reviews of two novels by a little known novelist, F. W. Robinson, had a direct influence on the plot and some of the characters of *The Perpetual Curate*, one of the Chronicles of Carlingford. And critics have suggested that the research and writing of her biography of the Scottish preacher Edward Irving (1862) fuelled an interest in religious vocation that found its way into several of the Carlingford novels. There is no doubt that she was energized by her reviewing. There are probably other examples of her reviews of the novels of other writers feeding her own creativity. So many of her ‘miscellaneous pieces’ as she called them were biographical sketches, that one could also see her journalism at this point as a training ground for her full scale biographies. But it would be wrong to see Oliphant’s reviewing as an apprenticeship for something else. Her critical judgements in these early years were sure-footed. She could be opinionated, wrong-headed at times, but she was also perceptive and shrewd. If she was in training for anything in these reviews of the 1850s it was to become the influential critical voice of her generation, an achievement which was signalled by her obituarists – memorably in Henry James’s double-edged comment that ‘no woman had ever, for half a century, had her personal “say” so publicly and irresponsibly’. They did not always agree.

The editors of George Eliot’s *Journals* regard the *Westminster Review* number for January 1857 as her ‘farewell to journalism’. The statement is not quite true. When her friends Bessie Parkes and Barbara Bodichon established the feminist *English Woman’s Journal* in 1858 and invited her to contribute, she replied ‘I have given up writing “articles,” having discovered that my vocation lies in other paths. In fact *entre nous*, I expect to be writing *books* for some
time to come’. But she returned sporadically to reviewing whenever Lewes’s commitments required her cooperation – as with his advisory role in George Smith’s Pall Mall Gazette in 1865, and with his editorship of the Fortnightly Review (1865-6) to both of which she contributed. There was never a point, I believe, where she consciously decided never to write for the periodical press again. But there did come a time when her earnings from her novels made it easy to refuse invitations.

January 1857 marked another turning point. That same month ‘The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton’ the first of three stories that comprised Scenes of Clerical Life began its serialization anonymously, in Blackwood’s Magazine. It brought Marian Evans, her identity then a carefully guarded secret, into the Blackwood fold.

John Blackwood was a crucial element in the careers of both Oliphant and George Eliot. His relationship with each, however, was quite different. The son of William Blackwood I, the founder of the firm, and of Blackwood’s Magazine, he was of an age with George Eliot – he was born in 1818. He was good looking, sporting, gregarious, intelligent but not an intellectual, very much at home in male company. The likelihood of a close working relationship let alone friendship between them was not obvious at the outset. Blackwood was in the process of becoming an astute publisher of fiction, a good judge of the literary marketplace and of what would appeal to readers of Blackwood’s Magazine. He prided himself on never publishing a book he had not read himself. He trusted ‘to no opinion but his own’, as Oliphant later said of him. He also believed in nurturing his authors.

Blackwood and his brother William, known as ‘the Major’ – he had been in the Indian army – made regular trips to London during which they called on the firm’s authors. Both Oliphant and Lewes were on their visiting list, but not the author of ‘the Clerical Scenes’ as Blackwood referred to them, who had been introduced to him by Lewes, and whose identity was still a secret. The brothers’ visits to each household are recorded in the letters and diaries of the participants. Marian Evans, introduced as ‘Mrs Lewes’, liked Major Blackwood immediately and noted in her journal that she was sure he had guessed who she was, as indeed he had, reporting this back to Edinburgh. On another trip he called on Margaret Oliphant in Ulster Place, and found her busy with a review of Sydney Smith. He was taken to meet her husband in his studio, and reported back on the progress of her article, and said her husband’s business seemed to be flourishing. Unfortunately this wasn’t true.

John Blackwood did not meet ‘George Eliot’ until February 1858, after Scenes of Clerical Life had come out in volume form with her newly devised pseudonym on the cover. According to her Journal, when Blackwood called on Lewes he asked ‘Well, am I to see George Eliot this time?’ Lewes replied Do you wish to see him: Blackwood: ‘As he likes – I wish it to be quite spontaneous’. Eliot: ‘I left the room and G. following me a moment, I told him he might reveal me’. The letter Blackwood wrote to his wife about the event was telling. George Eliot was ‘a most intelligent pleasant woman, with a face like a man, but a good expression’, he told her. The well known photograph, taken in 1858 by John Mayall, bears out his description. He went on: ‘Lewes says he would do ten times the work for me that he would do for any other man, and he does not think any other editor in the world would have been able to induce George Eliot to go on. It was very flattering, as his experience of editors is very great, and he is a monstrous clever fellow’.

This says much about the future relationship of the three. Lewes, as much as Blackwood, would become the strategist behind the successful marketing of Eliot’s work. He...
was, as has often been noted, her literary agent before the term was in common use. Blackwood
respected Lewes’s judgement, and it can be seen even at this early stage Lewes knew how to
get the best from the publisher. Lewes and George Eliot acted as a team, particularly in
determining the format of her novels, arguing against serialization which she disliked and in
the negotiations over her copyrights. Oliphant’s image of the ‘mental greenhouse’ in which
Lewes supposedly kept her was not true in respect to publishing arrangements.

Blackwood’s relationship with Margaret Oliphant was quite different. She was ten
years his junior, attractive, feminine, forthright and business like in her dealings with him, but
also vulnerable, and soon to become more so. She published Katie Stewart at the age of twenty-
four. Much later she discovered that he and his brother always referred to her as ‘Katie’, after
the title of her novel. By the 1860s Oliphant was regularly invited to Strathlyrum, the country
house he rented near St Andrews. He encouraged a friendship between her and his new young
wife. She had already established one with his sister Isabella. He wrote to her about his golfing
fiascos. She asked him to send her his picture, suggested that if he had a spare theatre ticket
when in London she would love to go, and they exchanged news of their children.

Oliphant was out of the country in 1859 when Adam Bede was published and so out of
the loop of gossip and speculation about the author’s identity. So carefully had the secret been
kept, that Joseph Langford, manager of Blackwood’s London office, thought that she was the
author. She and her family had gone to Italy in the hope that the warmer climate would help
Frank Oliphant’s now advanced tuberculosis. He died in October and she remained in Rome
until the birth of their last child in December. She returned to England in the spring of 1860, a
widow with three young children, and as she wrote in her Autobiography, in ‘the last deeps’ about her writing.

The dark days of the winter of 1860-61 were so deeply etched on her memory that, as
her biographers have noted, on three separate occasions she recounted the story of going to see
the Blackwood brothers in Edinburgh, they having rejected various articles she had written, and
after another rejection, going home to her children, holding back tears, and writing through the
night the first of the stories which became the ‘Chronicles of Carlingford’. The situation as
regards her writing was not quite as bleak as she had remembered, but she was right in her
judgement that the event was a ‘turning point’. In this she was indirectly helped by George
Eliot.

The first numbers of Salem Chapel were being serialized anonymously in Blackwood’s
Magazine in the spring of 1862, just when Eliot was approached by George Smith, of Smith
Elder, and the proprietor of the new monthly magazine the Cornhill, with an unprecedented
offer of £10,000 for her next novel, Romola, to be serialized in the magazine. Blackwood was
hurt by what he regarded as her betrayal, but he played his cards well. He did not believe in
offering ‘wild’ prices to his authors, he told her, but he would not stand in the way of her
obtaining better ones. To Joseph Langford he wrote: ‘The going over to the enemy without
giving me any warning and with a story on which from what they both said I was fully intitled
to calculate upon, sticks in my throat but I shall not quarrel - quarrels especially literary ones
are vulgar’.  

Eliot’s defection meant that Blackwood was now free to give Oliphant more attention.
A genuine literary partnership developed between them. ‘Few bolder or better critics ever
existed’ she wrote of him in her review of Eliot’s Life. His great strength was that he lived ‘in
the atmosphere of the reader rather than of the writer’. Unlike George Eliot, Oliphant enjoyed
the discipline of monthly serialization. She was delighted when the *Saturday Review* thought the ‘Chronicles of Carlingford’ had been written by George Eliot. Eliot not surprisingly became irritated as this rumour circulated. ‘I am NOT the author of the Chronicles of Carlingford’, she wrote to Sara Hennell. ‘They are written by Mrs Oliphant, author of “Margaret Maitland” etc. etc. etc.’. She added ‘And I should tell you by way of interesting you in Mrs Oliphant that she is a widow with a family of six children and does a perfectly stupendous amount of work of all sorts – translation and article writing and everything literary’.27 In another letter she wrote ‘I shall be much obliged to you if you will take any opportunity that occurs of contradicting the report that I am the author of Mrs Oliphant’s stories. And, in general, you may be sure that whenever a fiction is mine it will bear the name of George Eliot’.28 She also made Bessie Parkes publish a retraction of a statement in the *English Woman’s Journal* that the author of *Adam Bede* had written the Carlingford novels.

Oliphant asked for, and received £1,500 for her next novel, *The Perpetual Curate*, not a match for George Smith’s offer to Eliot, but a large one for Blackwood. With this novel Blackwood was more interventionist, making suggestions for the development of the plot, and at one point sending an instalment back to her because he didn’t think it would work. As Miss Marjoribanks, the best of the Carlingford novels, got underway Oliphant wrote to him: ‘I will do the very best I can to content you, ‘but you make me nervous when you talk about the first rank of novelists etc.’.29

It seems clear that in the mid-1860s, when Oliphant was at the top of her game as a novelist and as a reviewer, in John Blackwood’s mind Eliot and Oliphant were his two best novelists. Writing to one of his nephews who was to meet each of them in turn in May 1866 he described them as ‘probably the two cleverest women in the world’.30 But their careers with his firm would soon diverge.

Just as Oliphant was advantaged by Eliot’s move to George Smith and the *Cornhill*, she was indirectly affected by the comparative failure of Eliot’s next novel *Felix Holt*, published in June 1866. Although the sales, 5,000 copies, were such that any other novelist but Eliot would have regarded it as a success, the novel made a loss for Blackwood. He was concerned on two fronts: that George Eliot’s reputation might be declining, and that the future of the three volume novel was looking increasingly uncertain. ‘The next time we take the field together I think we must experiment in a new form’,31 he wrote to her in September.

David Finkelstein, the modern historian of the House of Blackwood notes that from 1870 onward the firm began to move away from three volume novels, to concentrate on biography, general history, and books of travel. Only seven of Oliphant’s remaining novels were published by Blackwood. She was contracted by them instead for biographies, for short stories, for a series of Foreign Classics, eventually for a history of the firm, all of which made a profit. For her novels from then on she turned to Macmillan, with whom she had been publishing since 1859, to her old friends Hurst and Blackett, and to periodicals like *Good Words*, the *Cornhill*, the *Graphic*, *St Paul’s Magazine*, *Longman’s Magazine*, and to Tillotson’s fiction agency through which her novels were serialized in newspapers.

Thanks to Lewes’s entrepreneurial flair George Eliot was not adversely affected by the move away from the three volume novel, which was her preferred format. Lewes proposed a new format for *Middlemarch* – eight books published at two monthly intervals, republished in four volumes, at a price readers could afford. It was a form of serialization but one that suited her. *Middlemarch* was a commercial success, although there was some indication that the later
The novel did not have quite the same popular appeal. By now Blackwood's attitude to George Eliot had moved from one of respect to one of near reverence. When Langford expressed doubt about the so-called 'Jewish element' in *Daniel Deronda* and its likely appeal to readers, he was unmoved. 'The simple fact is, she is so great a giant that there is nothing for it but to accept her inspirations and leave criticism alone', he responded, and that said it all.32

The publishing endgame for Eliot was about to begin. In 1877 Lewes proposed a collected edition, to be known as the Cabinet Edition, the 'elysium' so desired by Oliphant. Sound commercial sense rather than sentiment dictated all collective editions in the nineteenth century. The object was to keep the author before the public for as long as possible. Nineteen volumes had been published by the time of Eliot's death in 1880. The final George Eliot work published by Blackwood was Cross's *Life*, which was added to the Cabinet Edition. By 1880 Lewes and John Blackwood were both dead. John Blackwood's successor, William Blackwood III, son of 'the Major' did not have his uncle's flair for spotting winners, or his ability to retain his authors. According to Finkelstein the firm 'drifted' and relied on popular fiction, colonial memoirs, biographies, and 'endless reprints of George Eliot's novels in proven formats'33 up to the first World War.

Oliphant's attitude to George Eliot softened after her review of the *Life*. She referred to her a lot in the reviews of her last decade. In her *Blackwood* series 'The Old Saloon' in June 1887 she pronounced her 'the only woman who has yet attained the highest place in literature' and 'the great female writer of the Victorian period'. Writing in another article about the power of fiction to transport, she recalled the impact made on her by reading *Silas Marner* when it arrived at the end of that dark winter of 1861, before she began the Carlingford stories. And in reading through Eliot's letters to John Blackwood in preparation for *Annals of a Publishing House* – this was the first time she had seen all the letters as opposed to those included by Cross – she remarked on their unique relationship, and acknowledged that Eliot had been a good business woman.34

It could be argued that the Trollopian model of the successful author was just as much in Oliphant's mind in that section of the *Autobiography* that I quoted in the beginning of this paper. As Valerie Sanders has commented, 'she shrewdly saw in him someone who had been tempted, like herself, into being too prolific'.35 In her obituary Oliphant wrote:

> It would be vain to calculate what Mr Trollope might have done had he . . . left us only the half-dozen stories which embody the History of Barset. . . . Our own opinion is that every artist finds the natural conditions of his working, and that in doing what he has to do according to his natural lights he is doing the best which can be got from him. But it is hopeless to expect from the reader either the same attention or the same faith for twenty or thirty literary productions which he gives to four or five. The instinct of nature is against the prolific worker. In this way a short life, a limited period of activity are much the best for art; and a long period of labour, occupied by an active mind and fertile faculties, tell against, and not for, the writer.36

It was her obituary for Trollope, but it was also a justification of her own writing life.

The anxiety of over-production haunted many nineteenth century writers besides Oliphant, enabled and encouraged as they were by a diversified literary market to earn a reasonable living by writing, driven by personal circumstances, anxious too about their legacy, and as the century progressed, pursued by a celebrity culture.
There is a final irony in the publishing endgame as it related to Oliphant. She continued to work steadily in her last decade, supporting her two adult sons, who never developed professional careers despite their Eton and Oxford educations and her exertions on their behalf, and also her two nieces, the daughters of her brother Frank. ‘I am a wonder to myself, a sort of machine so little out of order, able to endure all things, always fit for work whatever has happened to me’, she wrote in 1890 at the age of sixty-two.” She became increasingly conscious, though, that newer writers were overtaking her, and in the analogy she used in a preface to a collection of stories, aware that her career was on its ‘ebb tide’.

There was more grief to come, with the deaths in 1890 and 1894, of her sons. She returned to the notebook in which she had last written after reviewing George Eliot’s life, once again recording her grief, her despair and now her inability to write. The Autobiography ends starkly: ‘And now here I am all alone. I cannot write any more’. Then, ever mindful of her responsibilities to her surviving family members she began to revise the autobiographical fragments into what she considered a saleable commodity – a writer’s life. When her surviving niece Denny, and Annie Walker Coghill, who had been her secretary for many years, set to work to prepare the manuscript for publication after her death, because it was too short to fill a volume, they marked up sections of her letters for inclusion, in accordance with standard practice for a Victorian ‘Life and Letters’. Any one reading her letters in the National Library of Scotland will have noticed that there are many extracts marked with pencil brackets that do not appear in the published work. At the last moment William Blackwood decided that the Autobiography and Letters of Mrs. Margaret Oliphant, as it was to be called, should be published in one volume, not two. This may have been a decision based on publishing costs. Or possibly in 1899 the two volume ‘Life and Letters’, like the three volume novel, was thought to have had its day. But to her family the single volume seemed a snub by the publishing house she had served so long.

Today Oliphant’s Autobiography is regarded as among the most important examples of the genre the nineteenth century produced. Cross’s three volume George Eliot’s Life on the other hand was credited with having contributed to the rapid decline in her reputation in the ten years following her death, and considered an example of the deficiencies of the Victorian model of biography. In both cases, it has taken the efforts of modern editors to repair the work of their well intentioned but misguided Victorian predecessors, to re-present the writing lives of these two remarkable authors.

Notes


4 The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant. The Complete Text, ed. Elisabeth Jay

5 Jay (1990), pp. 16-17.
7 Jay (1990), p. 16.
9 Blackwood MS 4106, 28 March 1854, National Library of Scotland.
11 Blackwood MS 4111, 9 Feb. 1855; MS 4119, 18 Nov. 1856.
24 Jay (1990), p. 3.
28  *Letters*, vol. 4, p. 28.
29  Coghill, p. 198.
31  *Letters*, vol. 4, p. 307.
33  See Finkelstein, ch. 1.
35  *Selected Works of Margaret Oliphant*, vol. 3, p. 365.
37  Jay (1990), p. 56.