



Frances Hodgson Burnett (1849-1924)

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Children's/Young Adult writer; Novelist.

Active 1869-1924 in England; United States

Frances Eliza Hodgson was born in Manchester on 24 November 1849, the third child of Edwin and Eliza Hodgson. Her father, a successful ironmonger and silversmith, died in 1853. Her mother then raised their five children alone and tried to run the business though she eventually had to sell it. Because of financial difficulties and after several removals within the city of Manchester, the family moved to Knoxville, Tennessee in April 1865 to join Eliza Hodgson's brother. They arrived shortly before the end of the Civil War. The family was still in a difficult financial situation, which was why Frances later that year opened a "Select Seminary for Young People". She and her two sisters had attended a Select Seminary in England.

Shortly afterwards she became a professional writer. In June 1868 her first story, "Hearts and Diamonds", was published in *Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine*, and from that time none of her literary works was ever rejected. She wrote more than fifty novels, most for adults, and thirteen plays. Her first publications were chiefly magazine stories that for some time appeared almost monthly.

In 1870 her mother died and Frances was left to keep house for the family. By 1872 she was making enough money from her writing both to support her family and to travel to England. Before she left she promised her neighbour, the medical student Swan Burnett, to marry him on her return. She stayed in England for several months and returned to Tennessee in August 1873. Even while she was away the publication of her stories continued. On 18 September 1873 she married Swan Burnett. A year later their first child, Lionel, was born.

In March 1875 the family moved to Paris where Swan studied medicine with French doctors. Their second son, Vivian, was born in Paris in April 1876. All the time Frances supported her family with her writing. It brought her to the brink of exhaustion. After this time in Paris she was always prone to nervous illnesses and over tiredness.

From February 1876 her first novel, *That Lass o' Lowrie's*, was serialised in *Scribner's Magazine*. It is an industrial novel set in Lancashire and its pattern closely follows Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*. At its centre is Joan Lowrie, a girl working in a coal mine. The pit owner, Derrick, makes her an offer of marriage. Only after taking care of an unmarried girl and her child and befriending a gentlewoman is Joan able to change and become more conventionally feminine, both in behaviour and in appearance. The novel was Burnett's first great success. The dialogues are mostly set in Lancashire dialect which Burnett studied extensively. Her interest in the dialect was probably stirred by William Gaskell's "Lectures on the Lancashire Dialect" which had been included in later editions of *Mary Barton* (cf. Thwaite 46). In 1878 *That Lass o' Lowrie's* was adapted as a play and staged in New

York. At the same time many unauthorized versions of her early work were being published.

In 1879 she visited Boston for the first time and was introduced into literary circles, where she met, among others, Louisa May Alcott. The same year Burnett published her first story for children, "Behind the White Brick", in the children's magazine, *St Nicholas*. The story was later published in the collection *Little Saint Elizabeth and Other Stories* in 1890.

More novels followed. In 1881 *A Fair Barbarian* was published, first as a serial in *Scribner's*, and later that year in volume form. It is a story very much influenced by Henry James, whom Burnett admired. An American girl goes to stay with relatives in England, a pattern Frances would later adopt in *Little Lord Fauntleroy* as well as in her adult novels *The Shuttle* and *T. Tembarom* (cf. Thwaite 70). Her play *Esmeralda* opened at the Madison Square Garden Theater in October 1881, and from November her third novel, *Through One Administration*, was serialised in *The Century Magazine*.

After this she became so ill from exhaustion that she had to stop writing for some time. It was only in 1884 that she began to write down a story she had told to her younger son, Vivian. It became *Little Lord Fauntleroy*. The book was an immediate success. It sold hundreds of thousands of copies and was translated into several languages (cf. Gerzina 110). Reginald Birch, the illustrator, had depicted Cedric in a velvet suit and lace collar, which then became fashionable in America and Europe. It was published in 1886, first as a serial in *St Nicholas Magazine* and then in volume form. Burnett then began writing the story of "Sara Crewe, or What Happened at Miss Minchin's", which was also published as a serial in *St Nicholas Magazine*, reworked as a play, and then published in volume form in 1888. It was later republished in an enlarged version as *The Little Princess* in 1905.

After a gap of eleven years Burnett travelled to England in 1887 to spend the summer in Suffolk. She moved on to Paris and Florence during the autumn. While she was in Europe an unauthorized version of *Little Lord Fauntleroy* was produced at the Prince of Wales Theatre in London. She successfully sued the producer, thus securing the rights of British novelists to the dramatic versions of their work.

She returned briefly to America in September 1888 and then returned to England in late spring 1889. When Lionel became ill at the age of sixteen she travelled back to America to take both her sons to Europe. After a few months Vivian returned to America with his father, while Frances stayed in Paris with Lionel who was suffering from consumption. He died in Paris on 7 December 1890.

Burnett returned to America in 1892 but she still travelled to England every year. She spent the summers with Vivian who was by then a student at Harvard. From November 1896 she was in America for fourteen months. During that time Swan Burnett moved out of their house, and they were then divorced in 1898. That year she took out a lease on Maytham Hall in Kent, where she lived for ten years, except for the winters which she spent either in London or in Washington. Maytham Hall would become a most important setting for her writings. She began to spend much of her time in its walled rose garden, even befriending a robin. The result was her most famous novel, *The Secret Garden*. Published as a serial in 1910 and in volume form in 1911, *The Secret Garden* has become a classic for children and adults.

In February 1900 she married Stephen Townesend, an actor and former medical student, with whom she had started co-producing her plays as early as 1889. He was ten years her junior, which made her the focus of magazine gossip columns. Her son Vivian even stopped visiting her in England as he did not like her new husband. After only two years, the marriage was over. Frances returned to America and spent the first few weeks in a private hospital suffering from mental stress. After several years of travelling between England and America she lost her lease on Maytham Hall in 1908. She then bought land in Plandome, Long Island, and built a house. In 1914 she returned from England for the last time, after a ten month tour of Europe. It was her thirty-third Atlantic crossing. She moved to Plandome and lived there permanently until she died of colon cancer on 29

October 1924.

Burnett wrote about her childhood in her 1893 memoir *The One I Knew the Best of All: A Memory of the Mind of a Child*, in which she explored the development of her childhood imagination from an outside perspective. She wrote of herself, “Her inward desire was to be a good child” (*The One I Knew* 15). By choosing the third person perspective she claimed to represent not merely her own childhood but the workings of the mind of any imaginative child: “I might fairly entitle it ‘The Story of *any* Child with an Imagination’” (“Preface” vii). A full account of her life was published in 1927 by her son Vivian Burnett in *The Romantick Lady: The Life Story of an Imagination*. Later biographies include Thwaite's *Waiting for the Party*, which focuses on the insecurities that accompanied Burnett's fame, and claims that she never found real contentment.

In the latest biography Gretchen Gerzina takes a more academic stance and links Burnett's life and writings with their contemporary context. Gerzina wants Burnett to be considered not only as a writer for children, but also as a novelist for adults and as a playwright:

Throughout her life, Frances was known for five things: her unrelenting literary production, which often drove her to illness; her love of beautiful clothes and domestic surroundings; her inability to remain settled in any one place, or even in one country; her wonderful gardens; and in the second half of her life, compassion and enormous generosity to friends and strangers alike. (Gerzina xii)

Gerzina explores other themes including

border crossings of all kinds, and transformations through self-determination and nature; a fierce independence, coupled with a sometimes disastrous sympathy for others; a tendency to romanticize herself and her life, equally matched by her warmth and compassion for others; a refusal to read newspapers, but a temper that rose up against wrongdoers and led her to conduct battles in public; an often debilitating need to work in order not only to support herself but to help support a host of family members. (xii)

Frances Hodgson Burnett was an extraordinary woman in her lifetime and is today regarded as one of the most important writers of literature for children in the English language.

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