

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Writing for their lives: women applicants to The Royal Literary Fund

Journal Item

How to cite:

Mumm, S.D. (1990). Writing for their lives: women applicants to The Royal Literary Fund. *Publishing History*(27) pp. 27-49.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© [\[not recorded\]](#)

Version: [\[not recorded\]](#)

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://pao.chadwyck.co.uk/articles/displayItemFromId.do?QueryType=articles&ItemID=e238-1990-027-00-000002>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

WRITING FOR THEIR LIVES: WOMEN
APPLICANTS TO THE ROYAL LITERARY
FUND, 1840-1880

S. D. MUMM

(Publishing History 27 1990)

'There is life-long penury in it: starvation: suicide: a debtors' prison: hard and grinding work for miserable pay: a cruel task-master: work done to order paid for by the yard', wrote Walter Besant of authorship.¹ Many writers in mid-Victorian England would have nodded rueful agreement with the gloomy sentiments of the founder of the Society of Authors. The destitute condition of many who attempted to win their living with their pens had long been a matter of concern to those who were interested in the literary lifestyle. As a result of this concern, 1790 had seen the establishment of a charity devoted entirely to the relief of destitute authors (and their widows and orphans).² By 1840 the Royal Literary Fund was a well-established and prominent charitable concern, whose coffers were open to all authors who had published works of some literary merit and whose private life was above reproach.

The archives of the RLF are a rich source of information on the social background and career paths of British writers. This is largely due to the efforts of the indefatigable Octavian Blewitt, Secretary of the RLF from 1829 until his death in 1884. Blewitt, in addition to instituting a standard application form in 1841, was blessed with a seemingly limitless capacity for the absorption of literary intelligence and book-trade gossip. His newspaper clippings, notes and marginal comments add greatly to the value of the Fund's archives for the historian.

The applications of women writers contained in the files of the RLF are of special interest for several reasons. It has long been assumed that writing for payment was one area where Victorian men and women could compete on equal ground. Also, authorship was one of the few professions (if profession it was) open to the female sex on any terms, equal or otherwise. It was made even more attractive to women because it could be done in the home, and thus involved no loss of caste, and because it demanded no real capital outlay. Moreover, the opportunity thus offered for the free expression of one's ideas must not be overlooked in any study of why women chose writing as a life-work. Yet despite all these reasons why authorship must have been especially attractive to women, little attention has been paid to women writers of the 'journeyman' class: those women who wrote, as men did, for money. The student of Victorian

culture and society can use the information available in the RLF's archives to create a far more complete portrait of the Victorian woman writer than was formerly possible.³

While there has been growing interest in the conditions of authorship for women writers, largely as a result of Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own*, many discussions of the 'lady authoress' have been based entirely upon lives of a few great or near-great members of the cultural canon. While George Eliot, Harriet Martineau, the Brontes, and Mrs Gaskell have been discussed exhaustively, the great mass of women writers, who resembled Mrs Oliphant and Mary Howitt much more closely than they did the geniuses of their common profession, have largely been ignored. Insofar as this neglect has been the result of the dearth of biographical information for women writers in the lower echelons of the literary world, it is the purpose of this paper to fill some of the more glaring gaps in our knowledge of these women's lives.

The records of the RLF provide a fascinating assortment of information about the career paths of women writers in mid-Victorian England. While these women were perhaps failures in a financial sense, it would be incorrect to assume that the poverty that drove them to petition for charity was the result of lack of literary ability. For the most part, although these women are not unrecognized geniuses, they were writers of talent, and many of them were very popular in their own day. Their destitution was more often the result of circumstances beyond their control. Accordingly, it seems probable that much that is typical of this group in respect to their experiences in the literary world would also apply to their more fortunate sisters, who resembled them in many respects except for the misfortunes that drove the RLF applicants to request charity. The Fund's archives make it possible to sketch out what might be considered a typical career experience for a professional, if undistinguished, woman writer in this age. Perhaps the historian may be permitted to trespass into the realm of fiction in the attempt to create a typical, or composite, applicant, based upon the information contained in the archives of the RLF, and which will be discussed at greater length below.⁴ While not an actual individual, this fictional representative might well have been recognized by many real Victorian women writers as one of themselves.

The year is 1860. Our authoress, an unmarried woman aged forty five, has just applied to the RLF for relief for the first time, fifteen years after the publication of her first novel. Her parents, now dead, had lived in one of England's provincial cities, where her father had been the assistant headmaster of a small preparatory school. She and her sister were educated at home. Her only brother had attended public school, later having a

commission in the Army purchased for him, but he was invalided home from India, and now struggles to live upon his military pension. He is unable to help his sisters. After the sudden death of their father, our authoress and her sister ran a small and only marginally successful girls' school from their home. She and her sister had moved to London after the death of their mother and the closure of the school, which had coincided with the publication of her first novel, in order to be closer to the literary marketplace. They now live in lodgings in Pimlico.

Our authoress has published six books, all novels. She sold the copyrights of five of them for sums varying from £25 to £50. Unable to find a purchaser for the copyright of her latest work, she has reluctantly agreed to publish it upon the joint-share method. This has to date produced no profit for her, and she suspects that the publisher is misrepresenting the book's sales record. Until this past year, her earnings from writing, supplemented by irregular work as a daily governess which brought in about £30 per year, had sufficed to support herself and her elder sister, now a complete invalid. She is now ill herself, suffering from an unspecified debilitating complaint. Writing as frequently as possible for several women's periodicals, her total literary income for 1859 was £42. Her application to the Fund is successful, and she receives a grant of £20.

In the forty-year span under examination, 164 women applied 454 times to the Royal Literary Fund for assistance,⁵ with 355 (78%) of the applications being successful. 108 applicants received at least one grant. If successful, the applicant could most probably expect to receive a grant of £20 or £30, with the smaller sum being the most commonly received grant, and £30 being the average grant size. Forty-nine per cent of successful applicants received awards in this range. In this period, the smallest size of grant was £10 (awarded to thirty-one applications), and two applications were judged to merit the highest award given to any woman in this period, £100.

What was the class background of the women who applied to the RLF? Can their lack of financial success as writers be ascribed in any way to class disadvantage? R. D. Altick's work on the sociology of authorship helps us to answer the second question, by providing information on social class and education for a more durable group of writers, those who made it into the standard reference work, the *Cambridge Biography of English Literature*.⁶ A comparison of the class backgrounds of the RLF women (as expressed by the occupations of their fathers, brothers, and sons) with those in Altick's sample make it clear that these women were no less middle class than their more successful contemporaries. In both samples, over ninety per cent were middle class in origin.

**Table 1: Size of RLF Grants to Female Applicants
1840-80**

grant size in £s	No.	Total in £s	(%)
10	31	310	8.7
15	31	465	8.7
20	68	1,360	19.2
25	47	1,175	13.2
30	61	1,830	17.2
35	2	70	0.6
40	54	2,160	15.2
45	3	135	0.8
50	32	1,600	9.0
55			
60	18	1,080	5.1
65	1	65	0.3
70	3	210	0.8
75			
80	2	160	0.6
85			
90			
95			
100	2	200	0.6
totals:	355	10,820	100.0

Despite their solid hold on middle-class backgrounds, lack of formal education is a distinguishing characteristic of female writers, as it was of women in general, at this time. Notwithstanding the space devoted to education on the application form, only one applicant (Mary Russell Mitford, Case No. 1067) mentions having attended a school, and less than a dozen broach the subject at all. Less educated, it is probable that women found certain literary avenues at least partially blocked. Women, who were given less 'cultural capital' than their brothers, may have submitted more substandard work for publication, which in turn would have contributed to their lack of success.

The stereotype of the literary spinster is to a certain extent supported by the evidence of the Royal Literary Fund. At the time of their initial application, fifty-six per cent of the applicants were single, twenty-one per cent were widowed, fifteen per cent were

married and residing with their husbands, eight per cent were deserted or separated, and less than one per cent were discovered to be living common-law. The census records for England and Wales in 1861 indicate that in the general population fifty-nine per cent of adult women were wives, twenty-six per cent were described as spinsters, thirteen per cent were widowed, and just over three per cent were placed in the category of unmarried mothers.⁷

Of the 160 women who gave information on place of residence, London was home for fifty-nine per cent. Of these, sixty-six per cent had been born outside the metropolitan area, moving there later, usually as adults.⁸ Being close to one's publisher was viewed as a distinct advantage - one applicant cited her distance from London as a factor in her distress, explaining that publishers were reluctant to assign work to rural writers, because of problems with communication, the increased risk of manuscript loss in the mails, and delay. These writers also had no opportunity of doing the last-minute 'filler' work often demanded by periodicals. Another real problem for rural writers, although it was also felt by those who lived in London and Edinburgh, was their isolation from literary circles. Their chances to make friends and forge personal ties within the book trade were limited, first of all by their sex, but also by their geographic isolation from the centres of the publishing industry. As Ella Jane Curtis observed to the Committee, 'I need not tell you gentlemen, that even for a man, who can go about to all kinds of places, and amongst all manner of people, it is not an easy matter to get [literary] work; how doubly hard then is it not for a woman?'⁹ Despite the belief that Victorian women tended to live in or near their home communities throughout their lives, few (11 %) of the women in this sample lived in their town of birth (unless it was London) at the time of their first application to the Fund.

Although many of the women writers who applied to the RLF produced several types of works, most did tend to have a specialty. Reinforcing the view of Victorian authoresses as the great novel writers, the largest single category (29.6%) is novelists. Poetry held second place with 21.4%, which again is not surprising, verse being the traditional form of expression among those with less formal education.¹⁰ Fully fifty per cent of these women wrote works of the imagination, either novels or poetry. If the data is looked at in terms of fictional prose narratives (tales, tracts, novels, and juvenile fiction), this category also makes up fifty per cent of the total. Factual works, including travel, history, textbooks, science, biography, and other works of scholarship, dominated the output of only thirteen per cent of the applicants. It is interesting to compare these percentages with the output of Victorian women writers listed in the *Cambridge Biography of English Literature*, where thirty-three per cent were novelists, and a full fifty per cent wrote

children's books, while only fourteen per cent were poets.¹¹ That only ten per cent of RLF applicants wrote primarily for children indicates that juvenile writing may have been one of the most profitable genres for women writers, leading to enviable financial security for many.

It is difficult to assess with any accuracy the number of books written by these women, as some applied to the RLF close to the beginning of what would later prove to be long and prolific careers, while others listed only their best or most popular books. The widespread habit of writing under pseudonyms has made it impossible for even the British Library catalogues to be fully reliable. But taking these women's accounts of themselves at face value, and not including periodical contributions or novel-length serials, the 159 women who published books mention 1,252 works on their applications, giving an average publication record of eight books per individual. The range varies from one book (twenty-three applicants) to seventy-nine (one applicant). Fifty per cent of the applicants had written more than five books when they applied, and one-fifth had published more than ten. Nineteen writers were particularly prolific, having more than fifteen books to their credit at the time of their initial application to the RLF.

These women were relatively young when they first became published authors: the average age was thirty-two. Slightly more than half (51.5%) had published their first book before the age of thirty. The range of ages is large: the youngest writer at the time of first publication was thirteen and the oldest was seventy-two. The range of ages at the time of first application to the RLF is also large: the youngest applicant was twenty, the oldest ninety. The average age at which they were forced to have recourse to literary charity was forty-five, when most had been published authors for thirteen or fourteen years. The largest span between publication of the first book and applying to the RLF was an impressive fifty-six years.¹²

Most of the women who published their first books after the age of forty were forced into authorship when their circumstances demanded that they become self-supporting. Emma Marshall might perhaps be seen as representative of the twenty-one per cent in this category. Both a novelist and juvenile writer, she began to write for pay after twenty-four years of marriage because of the failure of her husband's bank, which left them with heavy debts. For the next twenty years she was the family breadwinner, turning out nearly 200 volumes in the evenings, after the day's labour of caring for nine children was over. Through the profits of her pen, her five sons were educated and sent into professions. In the

Table 2: Age at First Publication

<i>Age</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
20 or less	13	8.1
21-25	27	17.0
26-30	42	26.4
31-35	22	13.8
36-40	21	13.2
41-45	11	6.9
46-50	17	10.7
51-55	4	2.5
56-60	0	
61-65	0	
66-70	0	
71-75	2	1.3
76-80	0	
81-85	0	
86-90	0	

Table 3: Age at First RLF Application

<i>Age</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
20 or less	1	0.6
21-25	5	3.1
26-30	9	5.7
31-35	26	16.4
36-40	17	10.7
41-45	24	15.1
46-50	21	13.2
51-55	18	11.3
56-60	15	9.4
61-65	8	5.0
66-70	4	2.5
71-75	8	5.0
76-80	0	
81-85	1	0.6
86-90	2	1.3

totals:* 159 99.9 totals:* 159 99.9

* Due to rounding, percentage totals may not equal 100%

1880s she was earning £500 a year, to 'supplement' her husband's earnings of £100. She turned to the RLF only when increasing age and debility forced her to abandon her reluctantly chosen profession.¹³

Writers who were forced to apply for charitable assistance found, for one reason or another, their incomes inadequate for their needs. One reason for inadequate incomes was the low value of copyright in mid-Victorian England. It is evident from the information these women supplied to the RLF that the price of copyright could be extremely small, far less than the £100 that is often assumed to be the rock-bottom price for a book in this period.¹⁴ Alaric Watts, editor of Colburn's *New Monthly Magazine*, wrote in his 1854 letter of reference for Eliza Meteyard ('Silverpen') of an acquaintance who had been paid £5 for the labour of four months, calling payments of that sort 'extortion', adding that

the bookseller is walking about "seeking whom he may devour" in a plethora of prosperity; whilst his wretched victim *a popular* and what is better a *useful* author - aged, destitute, and sick almost unto death - scarcely knows where to lay his head. ... If experienced male *litterateurs* cannot contend ... successfully, how is it then possible for poor, ailing, afflicted women so to do?¹⁵

Table 4: Sale of Copyrights

<i>Amount (£)</i>	<i>Publisher</i>
8	Tract Society
10	
10	Hurst & Blackett 12
15	Newby
20	Newby
20	-
20	Hurst & Blackett
25	Newby 25
25	Partridge & Co. 30
30	
30	Hurst & Blackett 50
50	Newby
50	'Good Cheer'
60	Nelson & Co. 70
70	-
100	-
130	-
150	-
150-400	-
1,000	Hurst & Blackett*

*Eliza Meteyard received by far the largest copyright price mentioned by any female applicant to the RLF. Hurst and Blackett paid her £1,000 for her biography of Josiah Wedgwood in 1865/66. She had been arranging with another publisher to bring out the book in return for £300, but Hurst and Blackett stepped in and offered her the liberal sum of £1,000 in order to secure for themselves the copyright of what promised to be a most successful book.

Table 5: Literary Income from all Sources (Yearly)

Amount (£)	No.	(%) ¹
1.10	8	16.3
11-20	4	8.2
21-30	5	10.2
31-40	5	10.2
41-50	6	12.2
51-60	3	6.2
61-70	6	12.2
71-80	3	6.2
81-90	-	-
91-100	2	4.1
101-110	-	-
111-120	1	2.0
121-130	2	4.1
131-140	-	-

141-150	1	2.0
Over 150 ²	3	6.2
total:	49	100.1

¹ N=49

² The three applicants who earned more than £150 claimed £200, £270 and £299 respectively.

Evidence from the archives of the Fund indicates that the assumption that £100 was the normal price of copyright in the mid-nineteenth century is erroneous, at least in the case of women authors. A great many authors, some of whom enjoyed both critical and popular success, found £50 to be a much more typical copyright value.¹⁶ Indeed, in the sample provided by the women applicants to the RLF, the median value of a copyright was only £30.¹⁷ When all sources of literary income are taken into account, including sales of copyrights, joint-publishing profits, and periodical contributions, it becomes evident that these women were not earning enough to preserve a standard of living that would enable them to maintain the middle-class standards with which they grew up. Thirty-one per cent of those who reported their annual literary income earned less than £30 in that year which was bad enough to force them to request charity. Sixteen per cent claimed literary receipts from £30 to £50 per year, and twenty-seven per cent made between £50 and £75. Only ten per cent of these individuals earned from £75 to £100, and a fortunate twelve per cent (most with dependent families) made over £100 per year from their writing.

It has not been possible to ascertain how many women supported themselves solely by writing throughout their adult lives, although a number of them undoubtedly did so. One of these was Julia Corner, a popular writer of history for children. Comer applied to the RLF for aid at the age of seventy-five, writing with manifest pride that 'as long as I was able to write I was sure of a maintenance'.¹⁸ Male or female, few writers in any age have been able to claim as much.

Most (89.6%) of the journeyman women writers whose careers are encapsulated in the archives of the RLF supplemented their literary incomes with money earned in other ways. The most common means of making extra money was teaching, in schools conducted in their own homes, or as daily or live-in governesses. Fifty-six of these authors taught in order to augment their literary earnings, making from £7 (for a live-in governess) to £80 (for a daily governess who taught languages and drawing) per year. The exhausting nature of this profession was often mentioned as a reason for inferior work or long gaps between publications.

After teaching, the next most common method of supplementing a meagre writing income was the letting of lodgings, followed closely by needlework. Of the two, taking in boarders was by far the more lucrative. The eight women who let lodgings earned from £20 to £80 thereby, while the needleworkers (seven of them) made between £7 and £20. One RLF applicant, Ella Curtis, wrote to the Committee explaining the reason for the increasing gaps between her books:

nor have I been of late able to devote that time to study which those who aim at excellence even in the lowest branch of their profession cannot afford to dispense with; for as soon as I drop the pen, I am obliged to take up the needle!¹⁹

Among other authoresses there were two editors of journals, two readers of manuscripts for publishers, two who did copying work, and two actresses. Other occupations mentioned include the matron of an institution, librarian, companion, private secretary, shopkeeper, maker of artificial flowers, mender in a hosiery warehouse, and mill worker. In this oddly assorted group, an editor made as much as £84 per year, while the mender in the hosiery warehouse, who had worked there since the age of eleven, earned ten shillings a week 'when in full employ'.²⁰

Another group of women writers depended to some extent upon private assistance - support from friends, family, or estranged husbands. Overall, 20.7% of RLF applicants mention regular payments of this kind, varying in amount from £5 to £100 per year. After gifts from individuals, the next most common non-literary source of income was derived from investments or annuities. Twenty-five applicants (15.2%) had some income from these sources. Several applicants had recourse to the Fund only after the failure of the bank or fund to which the profits of their writing careers were entrusted. The largest investment income was £90 per year, and it is an impressive proof of this writer's popularity that this income was the fruit of the invested profits of the applicant's novels.²¹ However, the median amount of investment income was only £20 per annum, an income which could not support a spinster, much less a family, in even the lowest reaches of the middle class. Thirty-eight women (22%) also received assistance from charities other than the RLF in this period, mostly from organizations designed to relieve widows and orphans of clergy or military officers. Amounts received ranged from £5 to £40 per annum. Ten women authors received grants from governmental sources, either the Queen's Royal Bounty or the Civil List, on the basis of their contribution to literature. These grants (the Queen's Bounty being a one-time gift and the Civil List an annual pension for life) ranged in size from £30 to £100.

The RLF was for many a last resort. The 164 women writers who applied to the Fund for relief between 1840 and 1880 listed over 300

reasons for their financial distress. Overall, the illness or debility of the applicant was the most commonly mentioned reason for their need of assistance, cited by fifty-seven per cent;²² the burden of supporting other family members (31.7%); and the loss of a supporting individual to death, incapacity or desertion, 26.2%. The next most frequent calamity was the loss of property, experienced by twenty per cent of the women writers in this study. Bank failures, embezzlement by trustees,²³ speculation, the failure of foreign funds, and the bankruptcy of insurance companies were all reasons why women who were once protected from the dismal realities of poverty were no longer so. The other causes of distress frequently mentioned were lack of literary employment and financial difficulties with publishers. It is clear that married women were to some extent less dependent upon their continuing productivity, as the loss of the husband's income is the most common precipitating cause of distress (mentioned by sixty-four per cent of the married women writers), while the illness of the writer is the primary reason in all other categories of marital status. Paralysis, failing eyesight and blindness were the most frequently mentioned disabilities, all of which may have been caused or aggravated by occupational factors.

Table 6: Causes of Distress (All Categories of Applicants)

<i>cause of distress</i>	<i>no.</i>	<i>(%)</i>
illness of applicant	77	47.0
support of dependants	52	31.7
illness/death of supporter	43	26.2
want of employment	25	15.2
loss of property	24	14.6
disputes with publishers	19	11.6
business failure	11	6.7
Chancery suits	10	6.1
changing literary tastes	10	6.1
failing eyesight	10	6.1
publisher failure	9	5.5
desertion	8	4.9
supporter unemployed	8	4.9
insanity	8	4.9
old age	6	3.7
bank failure	5	3.0
embezzlement of property	4	2.4

Although the practice of imprisonment for debt was becoming rare by 1840, at least two of the women who applied to the RLF wrote some of their works from a debtors' prison. Elizabeth Hardy (No. 1292) began life in

comfortable circumstances, but the joint-share bank in which the bulk of her fortune was invested failed, and the remainder was embezzled by her solicitor. Thus plundered, she turned to authorship in 1830, at the age of thirty-four, and supported herself by this means until 1852. In this year, at the age of sixty-five, she was incarcerated in the Queen's Bench Prison as the result of her inability to pay a small debt, the result of another bank failure. She wrote steadily for periodicals while in confinement, but died in prison in 1854. The £40 voted her by the committee of the RLF during this time was seized by her creditors. At the inquest into her death one of her fellow-prisoners described the life of this elderly and feeble woman as one of unceasing literary toil: 'She would be up before daylight, writing as an authoress, and would frequently sit up to a late hour at night, engaged in a similar way.' Another RLF applicant, Eliza Parsons (No. 21), wrote a four-volume novel while confined in the King's Bench Prison for debt, in a desperate, and unsuccessful, attempt to earn her release.

Although it may seem that one of the most disadvantageous factors for a woman writer was the lack of a husband, since single, widowed and separated women make up eighty-four per cent of the applicants to the Fund, less obvious elements must also be considered. The most important of these is the number of other individuals dependent upon the writer's earnings. As mentioned above, one of the reasons why women authors were forced to have recourse to the RLF was the burden of supporting family members upon meagre and fluctuating incomes. Of the 164 applicants, 42.6% mention being the sole source of income for others as a cause of their distress. Of these seventy individuals, fifty-one per cent were in households headed by women alone. Of the applicants with dependants, twenty-seven per cent had one other individual to support, twenty-six per cent supported two dependants, while forty-seven per cent supported three or more.²⁴ The average number of dependants supported by a literary spinster was three, although seven women had only one other individual to support, and one overburdened aunt had ten. This was seen as unfortunate but not unnatural, given the self-sacrificing and care-taking role assigned to women by Victorian society. The largest number of dependants supported by a woman writer applying to the RLF was eleven. Isabella Banks, best known as the author of *The Manchester Man*, had ten children to provide for as well as supporting an alcoholic, abusive husband who entertained at intervals the delusion that he was the second Christ, and whose 'chief pleasure [was] to thwart and persecute his unhappy wife.'²⁵ Taking up the pen at the age of forty-three under the compulsion of dire want, her literary income was deservedly higher than most of the other applicants, peaking at £320 in 1881, but it was unequal to the demands placed upon it.

Mary Howitt wrote of her friend, the popular novelist and poet Eliza Meteyard in 1850 that out of the money obtained from the sale of her first novel (*The Doctor's Little Daughter*)

she has provided for and sent out a young brother to Australia, while for another she is striving in the same way. Indeed, she is both father and mother to her family; yet she is only seven-and-twenty, and a fragile and delicate woman, who in ordinary circumstances would require brothers and friends to help her .²⁶

Sometimes a literary spinster's dependants were her parents. Mary Russell Mitford is probably better known now for her daughterly devotion to a worthless father than for her very popular *Our Village*. She supported him until his death, and 'to this love and to his extravagance his daughter's life was sacrificed. Every fortune that came his way, including a £20,000 prize in the lottery, was wasted, gaily and plausibly, by Dr. Mitford ...'²⁷

Other unmarried women writers supported hoards of relatives. Selina Bunbury turned to authorship in her late teens when her family lost their Irish property after forty years' involvement in a Chancery suit.²⁸ Bunbury described her professional debut to the Committee in purely pragmatic terms: 'Without having shown any previous inclination or talent for writing, I commenced at once my career as an author, and for many years wrote anonymously and successfully in periodicals and otherwise for the alleviation of family distress'. She dutifully supported both of her elderly parents until their deaths, paid her brother's fees at Oxford (he obtained a living upon graduation but died six months later) and maintained an invalid sister. By 1859 she was supporting only her sister and a nephew whom she later put through Oxford. In 1871, when she was sixty-eight years old, and writing with her left hand because of paralysis in her right, she was producing an astonishing seventy to eighty pages per day, largely for periodicals, in order to maintain herself, her sister, and a thirteen year old orphan niece .²⁹

To write at such a pace virtually guaranteed slipshod work of inferior quality. Bunbury would probably have sympathized with the career of Harriette Smythies, who was 'the author of several works of fiction of considerable merit and w[oul]d, I am sure, have produced still better books, if she had not been under the pressure of writing for periodicals.'³⁰ Born in 1813 of good family, Smythies was known (as were several others) as the 'Queen of the Domestic Novel' in the 1850s. Her works declined in popularity with the rise of the sensation novel and by 1862 the journal that had been paying her eight guineas a week folded, and her services were dispensed with. In the same year Smythies's publisher went bankrupt, and she was unable to salvage the amount he had owed her. By 1864 her daughter was consumptive, and Smythies separated in the same year from her husband, a dissolute clergyman, who allowed her £50 per year. By 1873 her youngest son was suffering from consumption, and the next year she was involved in legal proceedings against a periodical for refusing to pay for a story they had printed. After the mid-1870s debility

and poor health had incapacitated her and she was no longer able to write. By 1882 all of her children had died of consumption except for one son, and she had spent large amounts of money ('these terrible expenses') in a vain search for health for her children in warmer climates. During these years Smythies published thirty-eight books, mostly novels and poetry, as well as writing a prodigious quantity of pieces and serial stories for periodicals.

Among married women writers, seventy-two per cent were the sole breadwinner for their families, their husbands incapacitated by illness or out of employment. The remainder of the married women who applied to the RLF had employed husbands, but for some reason their spouses' earnings were inadequate. For example, Susanna Mary Paull was the wife of a clergyman who had suffered the permanent loss of his voice. As a result of this calamity they were forced to pay out almost the entirety of his annual stipend in order to employ a curate, leaving them dependent upon her literary earnings.³¹ Other women had the misfortune to be tied to men who were simply no good at business, and repeated business failures brought several formerly prosperous writers to the brink of destitution.

Family responsibilities could be crushing. Isabella Banks, mentioned above, wrote from London in 1880, where she was negotiating the publication of a cheap edition of her novels:

At present I am in a whirl of trouble with Mr. Banks. He is suffering from acute cancer yet is not amenable to any medical control. [He has] maddened himself with alcohol and is threatening to take his life before the night ... is out though this is no new threat; he did make the attempt once under like conditions and I am in a state of nervous tremor.³²

While affairs were in this state (1878-80) Banks managed to write a three-volume novel, *Wooers and Winners*, forty-three articles for periodicals and a 24-part story entitled 'More Than Coronets' for the *Girls' Own Paper*, while crippled with rheumatism in the hands. A hard life was no novelty to Banks; five years earlier she had written to the Committee of the RLF of the labour exacted by her heavy family responsibilities:

I have been gradually freeing myself and family from the incubus of debt, incurred in bygone efforts to keep home together. *But* to accomplish this, and maintain ourselves respectably I accepted literary engagements beyond my physical strength. A strong man could scarcely have achieved more than I have done; viz, kept a weekly journal and a monthly magazine supplied with a separate serial story at one and the same time not a chapter being ready in advance. How I have done it is proved by the success of my 'Manchester Man' in *Cassell's Family Magazine*.... Since last October

I have been working unremittingly until 3.4.5.6 in a morning. Have had my household cares in the day and a fearful load of domestic anxieties. Have lost my aged mother by sudden death, have seen my eldest daughter fading day by day, and to crown it all have had my husband come home half killed, to need constant attendance for six weeks, and during that time was myself suffering from a painful disease joined to the consciousness that I was '*breaking down*'. I wrote my last monthly instalment for Cassell's with vinegar to my head and ice to my throat; with the close railway trains whizzing and shrieking past the study window every 5 minutes.³³

Aside from illness and the demands of familial ties, many of the reasons women writers sank into poverty had to do with the nature of the Victorian book trade itself. To many it seemed that the rule for copyright payments was, the more the author needed money, the less would she be offered. In 1861 Emma Robinson, a Civil List pensioner after 1869, who would later take legal action against two publishers for piracy, wrote to the Committee of the RLF 'the wages of literature are at best precarious and scanty, dependent on the caprice of the public, and the rapacity of publishers, who measure what to give - rather what *not* to give - by the necessities of the writer, not his merits.'³⁴ Edwina Burbury wrote in 1852, explaining why she had not yet been paid for a work published in the previous year. Fearing that the publisher would reduce his offer for her next book, she wrote, 'I dare not press them [Smith and Elder] for an account lest the knowledge of my poverty should give the Publishers too great a power over me.'³⁵

If a writer avoided falling into the pit of low copyright prices on the one side, she was likely to stumble into the ditch of joint-share publication on the other. Ideally, in joint-share publishing, author and publisher shared equally the risks and the rewards of book production. In reality, unscrupulous publishers would sometimes overprint the book, producing several hundred more copies than the official records indicated, sell the 'extra' copies first, and bill the hapless author when the legitimate copies did not sell. Authors also suspected that half-share accounts were frequently padded. With the house's books generally closed to the author, and with women especially vulnerable because of their ignorance of business, it was easy for a firm to falsify the statement of costs of publication, inflating the costs just enough so that the author's real profit was absorbed.

Changing literary tastes could doom a writer with a specific 'line' to sudden anonymity and consequent poverty. Matilda Ann Mackarness (No. 1991), credited by the *Dictionary of National Biography* with forty-two books, described the sudden decline in her career as a catastrophe, especially considering the small amounts

she had received for copyright:

Left a widow and *penniless* with seven children to support - the youngest 1 year and the eldest (a girl) 12, I have for ... years struggled to support them on literary labour.... Till 1874 I was very successful but ... I have had no order from Publishers since, nor will they take anything I send them.³⁶

Many writers, like Mackarness, were unable to change with changing tastes among their readership. This problem is mentioned most frequently in the late 1860s and early 1870s with the increasing popularity of the sensation novel, whose best-known practitioners were Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Mrs Henry Wood. Some RLF applicants attempted the new form successfully, while others objected to it on the grounds that sensationalism vitiated the moral sense. Emma Marshall (No. 2272) blamed the popularity of 'these immoral novels' for the fact that her formerly profitable domestic novels and historical romances were virtually unsaleable by 1869. The taste for her pure tales peaked in the early 1860s (she wrote more than 200 of them) and then rapidly lost ground to the bigamy novels and others of that ilk. She voiced what must have been the opinion of many Victorian women writers in her autobiography, complaining of 'current fiction, with its unpleasantness and misery and suicidebrought about by illegal *love* (so called). There surely is a very degenerate taste abroad. This phase of society I cannot touch.'³⁷

Some women found that, as the years passed, the strain of constant literary toil and financial anxiety became psychologically disabling. Julia Tilt (No. 1691) wrote to the Committee in 1861 of the mental toll exacted by a lifetime of only marginally successful work.

I could tell you gentlemen of years of suffering in writing for daily bread in the support of my mother and family - I have fought and toiled - toiled and fought - and now I have neither health nor spirit to engage in the strife .³⁸

Laetitia Landon described the psychological condition of a successful and popular female writer in a letter to S. G. Hall.

What is my life? One day of drudgery after another; difficulties incurred for others, which have ever pressed upon me beyond

health ... envy, malice, and all uncharitableness - these are the fruits of a successful literary career for a woman.³⁹

The fruits of a relatively unsuccessful literary career were even more bitter. Ann Jane Cupples (No. 2015), a popular writer on scientific matters for juvenile readers, who was praised by individuals as disparate as Charles Darwin and George Macdonald, and who supported her invalid husband for fourteen years, as well as her mother-in-law and an epileptic brother-in-law, wrote miserably to the RLF in 1877, 'I must just go on leading the forlorn hope if I have to die in the doing of it.' Her total literary earnings in that year were £45.

When one considers all the misery and heartache contained in the records of the Royal Literary Fund, it is tempting to echo Besant's dire warning to prospective authors. It is equally tempting to wonder why, when authorship was proverbially precarious and impecunious, women would choose it as their means of livelihood. The rewards for the fortunate few were very great, and probably many hoped that talent or luck would bring them the substantial incomes of a George Eliot or, on a lower plane, of a Mrs Gore. Others felt compelled to express their ideas in print, often despite the disapprobation of family and friends. Still others turned to writing out of a lack of options. Without training or capital, few middle-class occupations were open even to men, and fewer still to women. With all other doors of opportunity firmly shut against them, writing became the choice of those without choices.

NOTES

I wish to thank Christopher Kent of the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada, for his generous assistance with earlier drafts of this article.

1 Walter Besant, *The Pen and the Book*, London 1899, p.8.

2 Women authors were eligible on the same terms as their male counterparts from the first.

3 Nigel Cross's chapter on 'The Female Drudge' in *The Common Writer: Life in Nineteenth Century Grub Street*, Cambridge 1985, is a very important, although rather general, study of women applicants to the RLF. Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own*, Princeton 1977, also discusses lesser-known writers to some extent. Perhaps Dale Spender's *Mothers of the Novel*, London 1986, most resembles this paper in approach. However, the focus of this paper is upon women writers who made their first application to the RLF between 1840 and 1880, while both Cross and Showalter deal with several generations of writing women, and Spender considers writers before Austen.

4 This composite author is, in some respects, a Weberian ideal type, in so far as she delineates a generic concept as defined by general attributes.

5 Of 1,094 applicants 163, or 15%, were women writers. All women authors applying to the RLF in this period were included in my sample. It must

be remembered that another 28% (300 individuals) were the widows or orphans of writers. Eighty-nine of the applications by widows had been preceded by one or more applications from the then-living spouse, resulting in 8.1% of dual, or overlap, applications. So, of actual writers (879 of them in this forty-year period), 18.7% were female, and 81.3% were male. This percentage seems to mirror the ratio of men to women in the profession as a whole, where estimates of the percentage of authors who were female ranges from 15-20%. With the 1871 census reporting 2,443 authors, editors and journalists in its returns, there may have been around 400 women describing themselves as authors at this time.

6 R. D. Altick, 'The Sociology of Authorship: The Social Origins, Education, and Occupations of 1,100 British Writers, 1800-1935', *The Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, Vol. LXVI, 1961, pp.398-404. Although Altick's sample contains both men and women writers, it does so in roughly the same percentages as the RLF, so comparisons may still be permissible.

7 *Census of England and Wales for the year 1861*, General Report, IV. Conjugal Condition of the People. P.P. 1863 [32211 LIII Pt.1,1, pp.192]

8 The dreary annals of poverty are chronicled in the frequent address changes of repeat applicants, many of whom moved from one undesirable address to another on a yearly basis.

9 *Archives of the Royal Literary Fund 1790-1918*, London 1981. Ella Jane Curtis, No. 2030. Letter of 20 June 1877.

10 Virtually all well-known working-class writers in this period, male as well as female, were poets.

11 Cross, op. cit., p.167.

12 Julia Corner, No. 1916.

13 Beatrice Marshall, *Emma Marshall: A Biographical Sketch*, London 1900. Case No. 2272.

14 Both Nigel Cross, p.135, and Elaine Showalter, p.48, assume this. Gail Tuchman describes £250 as 'a reasonable price' for a copyright in the 1850s, adding that 'no self-respecting author would accept as little as £50'. ('When the Prevalent Don't Prevail: Male Hegemony and the Victorian Novel', in Walter Powell and Richard Robbins (eds), *Conflict and Consensus: a Festschrift in Honor of Lewis A. Coser*, New York 1984, p.48.)

15 Alaric Watts' letter of reference for Eliza Meteyard, No.1269.5 June 1854.

16 Ouida (Case No. 2714) received £50 from Tinsley for her 1863 novel *Held in Bondage*, and Barbara Hofland's *The Son of a Genius*, which went through fifty editions and was often translated, earned its creator £10. Mary Elizabeth Braddon, the great 'sensation' novelist, received only a fifty-shilling advance for her first book, never being paid the balance of the £10 promised her.

17 The median is the most appropriate measure of central tendency in this case, where there are extreme values at either end of the

distribution and the data is highly skewed.

18 Julia Corner, No. 1916. Undated letter accompanying application of 4 June 1873.

19 Ella Jane Curtis, No. 2030. Letter of 2 April 1881.

20 On this wage she supported herself and her seventy-one-year-old mother, who had been able to keep herself until the age of seventy.

21 Harriet Parr, No. 1872, who wrote as 'Holme Lee'. Letter of 8 February 1872.

22 Because many applicants listed several causes of their poverty, totals will equal more than 100%.

23 Ties of blood were no protection against financial chicanery. Mrs Eliza Walker (No. 1354) had her substantial fortune embezzled by her brother and at the same time the unfortunate lady discovered that her husband was a bigamist. Mrs Georgiana Wieland (No. 1058) had £23,000 embezzled by her brother.

24 The percentage of women writers supporting three dependants probably errs on the side of conservatism, because where the applicant used terms such as sisters or grandchildren, I have assumed the minimum possible number.

25 James Humand's letter of recommendation for Isabella Banks, No. 1705. 26 February 1880.

26 Howitt to her sister, in Margaret Howitt (ed.), *Mary Howitt: an Autobiography*, Vol. 2, Boston 1889, pp.61ff.

27 Mary Russell Mitford, obituary, *The Athenaeum*, 13 January 1855. Dr Mitford spent more than £80,000 of capital in his life.

28 Chancery suits seem to have deserved the opprobrium heaped upon them by Charles Dickens in *Bleak House*. Ten of the women who applied to the RLF in this forty-year period lost property in them, and several had their eventual lunacy attributed to their legal involvement.

29 Selina Bunbury, No. 1089. Earlier in her career she had been able to command a living for herself and her family by writing between forty and fifty pages a day.

30 Edward Bulwer-Lytton's letter of recommendation for Smythies, 2 September 1866, No. 1255.

31 Susanna Mary Paull, No. 1803. Letter of 2 November 1869.

32 E. L. Burney, *Mrs. G. Linnaeus Banks*, Manchester 1969, pp.96-7. 33 Banks to RLF, 1 July 1875.

34 Emma Robinson, No. 1558.

35 Edwina Burbury, No. 1243. Letter of 10 April 1852. Burbury's life was a sad one: abandoned by her husband, who had eloped with her sister, she struggled on alone until the depraved pair returned to live in the same house with her in order to avoid scandal. With her husband broken in health, Burbury wrote to support them all. Ironically her 1868 novel, written in the midst of the scandal, was entitled *All for the*

Best.

36 Mackarness to RLF, undated letter accompanying her 1877 application. 37

Beatrice Marshall (ed.), *Emma Marshall: A Biographical Sketch*, London 1900, p.281.

38 Tilt to RLF, accompanying her 1861 application.

39 Helen C. Black, *Notable Women Authors of the Day*, Glasgow 1893, p.72.