

AN ELEGY TO A WRITER *by Mildred Harding*

Pearl Craigie, the long forgotten novelist and playwright “John Oliver Hobbes,” who died in 1906, is due for resurrection.

She has haunted me for over 40 years. It was through my study of the Anglo-Irish novelist George Moore in the 1940's (particularly through Joseph Hone's biography of him), that Mrs. Craigie first came into my ken, piqued my curiosity, and won my sympathy. Late in 1893 the 41-year-old author of *A Mummer's Wife* (1884) and *Confessions of a Young Man* (1888) met and fell in love with 25-year-old Pearl Craigie, already a successful writer. Born in America, daughter of a wealthy American patent-medicine manufacturer who settled in England immediately after her birth, Pearl Craigie was beautiful, clever, fashionable, and musical, a woman of strict principles, socially ambitious, separated from her husband, and a recent convert from her family's Nonconformism to Roman Catholicism.

In the winter of 1893-94, Moore and Mrs. Craigie spent much time together and collaborated on a play, *The Fool's Hour* (Act I appeared in the first issue of *The Yellow Book*, April 1894). For the only time in his life, Moore was ready to break his resolution never to marry. Then “suddenly and without a cause” Mrs. Craigie told him she did not wish to see him again. Bitterly hurt, he maligned her everywhere, saying that she had rejected him in the hope of marrying “a handsome worldling” (Lord Curzon), and he portrayed her ruthlessly in the heartless heroine of “Mildred Lawson” (*Celibates*, 1895). After a lukewarm reconciliation (at her insistence, said Moore, who was now in love with someone else), they again collaborated on a play, *Journeys End in Lovers' Meeting*, which was performed in June 1895. Again they quarreled. In 1904, Moore visited Mrs. Craigie in her family's mansion in the Isle of Wight; once more they collaborated on a play, *The Coming of Gabrielle*. “[In] the morning,” Moore wrote to a friend, “she walks in the garden and on the terrace in the most delicious Watteau costumes, rose coloured silks and flowers in her hat.” He spoke of settling

in the Isle of Wight. But once more they quarreled. “I was walking in the Green Park,” Moore later reported, “and I saw her in front of me. I was blind with rage and I ran up behind her and kicked her”—a scene which he elaborated in “Lui et Elles” in the 1921 edition of *Memoirs of My Dead Life*. Thanks to Moore's malicious gossip, their turbulent relationship—which was important grist to his literary mill (especially in *Evelyn Innes* [1898] and *Sister Teresa* [1901])—was the talk of Mayfair and of literary London from the time of their meeting until and even after Mrs. Craigie's death.

What a fascinating woman! I thought. But the 1940's, 50's, and half the 60's brought me no time for pursuing her acquaintance. At last, late in November 1966, in a little hotel in London (where I had just alighted for a brief pre-Christmas holiday), Mrs. Craigie suddenly demanded my attention. From a copy of *The Times* that lay open on a table, the final words of an advertisement by Sotheby's sprang at me like an electric shock: “manuscripts and letters of John Oliver Hobbes.” Postponing my return to the States until the last possible pre-Christmas flight, I buried myself in the Reading Room of the British Museum.

There, as I skimmed John Morgan Richards' (her father's) illustrated, adulatory *Life of John Oliver Hobbes: Told in Her Correspondence With Numerous Friends* (London, 1911) and several articles about her (though not yet any of her own works), Pearl Mary Teresa Craigie was becoming more and more intriguing. The external facts of her life—always against a background of wealth and culture—unfolded like a lavish cinematic period piece in two parts. The first half was charmingly romantic: the pretty girl's precocious, pampered childhood and adolescence in London and, in summers from 1872, in the Isle of Wight; her governesses, private schools, and distinguished patrons; her musical studies in Paris; her presentation at court; her fairy-tale marriage, at 19, to Reginald Walpole Craigie, a handsome man-about-town; their hectic social life, and, in 1890, the birth of a son. Into the more somber second half, the heroine seemed to be crowding several lives: separation from her husband (1891); acceptance into the Roman Catholic Church (1892); a squalid divorce (1895) with complete custody of the child (according to *The Times* report, an “exceedingly filthy” case, “most of its details . . . unfit for publication in a newspaper”); and, throughout these 16 years, constant scholarly study; attendance at galleries, plays, concerts, and operas; occasional public performance as pianist; religious retreats; travel in Europe, the United States, and the Near East; social stardom in Mayfair and country houses, even in India at the Durbar as guest of the Viceroy (1902-03); continual entertaining; friendship and correspondence with a host of brilliant men (e.g., Gosse, Symons, Yeats, Hardy, university professors, painters, musicians, actors, politicians, Protestant and Catholic churchmen); rumored proposals from several distinguished men (e.g., Lord Asquith, Balfour, Curzon); public lectures on literature, including a lecture tour in the United States; through it all, frequent exhaustion and increasingly delicate health—and somehow, also from 1891, a steady torrent of writings as John Oliver Hobbes (tales, novels, plays, journalistic and scholarly essays). Then, at 38, sudden death, in her bed—apparently from heart failure.



Mildred Harding writes from Florida.

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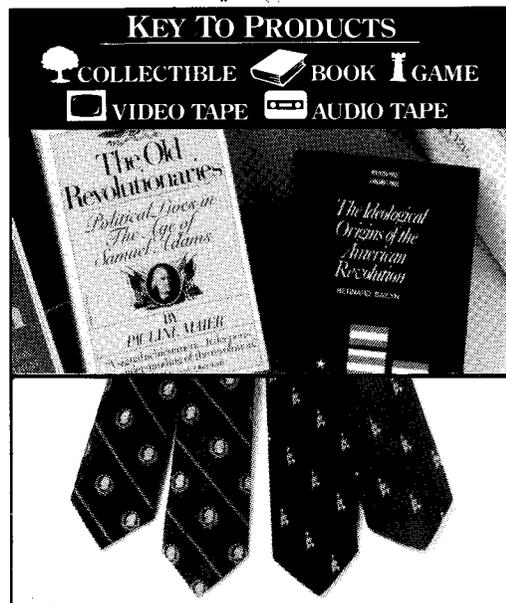
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What sort of inner person, I wondered, was behind all that “turning, turning, / In mazes of heat and sound”? Apparently a tantalizing and very human bundle of contradictions:

Her worldly delight in social pleasures and activities (said Sir Sidney Lee) seemed to be combined with a mystical conviction of their hollowness and futility. In spite of marked business aptitude and a capacity to make money, she spent more than she could afford, and failed to husband her resources. With her sincere devotion to the creed of her adoption, there went a deep despondency . . . in painful contrast with her vivacity in social intercourse. . . . Her sensitiveness to criticism and her eagerness to defend her work . . . against public censure are hard to reconcile with her claim to be treated as an idealist. . . . She was more ambitious of the reputation of a serious thinker than of a witty novelist.

If only I could meet her son! I thought—the Colonel Craigie who had put the Hobbes materials in Sotheby’s hands. When he didn’t appear at the auction (“He’s frail,” Sotheby’s said, “a kind of recluse”), I wrote him a timorous note, which Sotheby’s forwarded.

Suddenly there he was on my hotel telephone, calling from somewhere in Hampshire, his voice happily tremulous, apologizing for not coming to London “straight away” (“I’m just out of hospital, you see”), urging me to come to see him in Preston-Candover.

Two days later I spent several intense hours virtually in Pearl Craigie’s company, so alive was she still to the handsome, courtly, fiery, and humorous old man who had never ceased to adore her. “I’m 76, you know,” he said as he guided me into the living room, “exactly twice her age when she died.” Then he burst out, “Thirty-eight! Only thirty-eight! It should have been me!” Pictures of every size from formal portrait to miniature, mostly of her, some of him, covered the living-room walls, mantel, and tabletops. “She was a little bit of a thing, you know, about your size,” he said, looking down on the top of my head as he handed me a sherry before seating me in front of the fire. After a few minutes his wife joined us. Whatever I asked, he answered eagerly. Sometimes he laughed, sometimes paced the room, sometimes sat quietly, head high, brown eyes—so like hers!—gazing beyond the wall, back more than 60 years; sometimes he looked hard at me with eyes full of tears.

He told me, first of all, about the shock of learning, at nearly 16, of his mother’s death. And the cause? “She killed herself. I feel sure of it. She was terribly upset when she left us. She took too many sleeping pills. And no wonder.” Several long strains in her life had become excruciating: poor health, constant work, financial anxieties (she supported herself and her child with her writing and lecturing), difficult relationships with both her parents—her beloved, moody “comic millionaire father,” continually on the verge of bankruptcy, and her eccentric, increasingly mad and maddening mother. When I broached the subject of her marriage and divorce, he said, “It was a love match. They were happy at first.” Then he was silent. “Hadn’t you better spill the beans, love?” his wife said softly. He hesitated a little. “Well, yes . . . but,” and looking solemnly into my eyes, “this must go no further.” I promised that it wouldn’t. And he told me a shocking fact about his father

(which I have never seen publicized and have never told). When his mother, then pregnant, had learned the situation, she was terrified. “She rode horseback recklessly. Just think! She tried to get rid of me!” The Colonel’s revelation explained the reticence and disgust in *The Times* report of the divorce and filled me with compassion for the young woman who, with the baby and his nurse, had fled from her husband and announced to her father, on his doorstep, “I will never set foot in my husband’s house again.” Indeed it illuminated as nothing else could have done the whole future course of Pearl Craigie’s life.

Was George Moore right about her hoping to marry Lord Curzon? “Certainly not!” Did she ever consider remarrying? “Only once, I believe. The painter, Walter Sickert. But she was determined not to let anyone pay her debts for her.” Besides, remarriage would have conflicted with her Roman Catholicism and so with her conscience.

About the relationship between his mother and himself, the Colonel spoke with special delight and poignancy. “Before I went to Eton we were never apart for long. Do you know, I slept in my mother’s bedroom until I was 10 years old!” Through all his years at Eton she wrote to him nearly every day—tender, humorous letters. He loved her visits. “She was so lovely! I was so proud of her!” When he returned home for holidays, he would bound up the stairs to her. Her sense of fun, her humor, never failed her. “Mother taught me religion. She did even that with humor.” He recalled with particular immediacy being in a box at St. James’s Theatre, in his eighth year, for the opening night of John Oliver Hobbes’s play *The Ambassador* (1898). At the final curtain, the audience clapped and called “Author! Author!” Finally his mother—petite and elegant in white satin—walked onto the stage. The audience was quiet, baffled. Then someone called out, “Oh, pretty John! pretty John!” and amid general delight, the clapping broke out anew.

At last, with my taxi at the door, the Colonel handed me Zoë Procter’s (Mrs. Craigie’s secretary’s) privately printed autobiography (“It’s hard to find. Borrow mine! Just drop it off at my club!”) and then, sweeping up the three late letters of his mother’s that he had been showing me (too precious to give to Sotheby’s), he put them, too, in my hands, saying, “Keep them! I want someone kind to write about my mother!” Then he kissed me on the cheek and, as his wife led me to the door, called “Good-bye! Bless you!”

How could I *not* feel committed to such a trust? But, alas, after a few zealous days in London libraries and bookshops, I was back in the United States, unavoidably bound to other tasks, and once more—except for tracing and buying her books, which had long been out of print—“the dream” had to yield to “the business.”

When, nearly 20 years later, I finally opened the box in which I had stored my Craigie books and papers, I had to face the question: What if—however interesting Pearl Craigie herself—her works (which I had still not read) actually deserve their oblivion? Temporarily ignoring her plays, I plunged into her novels, resolutely unbiased.

With the first that I read, her final one, *The Dream and the Business* (1906), excitement banished doubt. Then all the rest fueled my enthusiasm. Here was treasure!—a variety of fresh, compelling “good reads” in pure, graceful prose; a world of live and fascinating men and women; and throughout, a

personal, unique voice constantly engaging the reader, mind and spirit, with the luminous intelligence of the author. Surely, I thought, Hobbes merits a place on the literary scholar's bookshelf as well as the general reader's, in the company of Austen, the Brontes, George Eliot, and Mrs. Gaskell, of Meredith, Hardy, and Galsworthy, not to mention such moderns as Virginia Woolf, Rose Macaulay, Murdoch, Lessing, Graham Greene, and Evelyn Waugh.

Why, then, have these novels been unprinted and almost completely ignored all these years? True, certain of their characteristics could deter some readers: occasional unnatural dialogue and "precious" witticisms (especially in the early works); in some plots too much reliance on coincidence and on letters and journals; intrusive comments; "dated" morality; a religious point of view. But which novels by Hobbes's established predecessors and contemporaries are free of those same characteristics?

Attempting to explain that long neglect, three of Hobbes's few recent critics—Oliver Edwards, Margaret Maison, and Vineta Colby—have pointed to those and other deterrents. But each of those three has also made a strong case for the merits of at least some of Hobbes's novels. While acknowledging that Hobbes's use of letters and journals, her comments, and her "mysticism" might annoy, Edwards praises her erudition and wit, her "unique achievement," especially in her two-volume historical-political-religious work *The School for Saints* (1897) and its sequel, *Robert Orange* (1900): "a novel no other writer would have attempted or could have accomplished" ("Mrs. Hobbes," *The Times*, Dec. 15, 1966). In an informative, appreciative survey of Pearl Craigie's life and work, Maison emphasizes, without condemning them herself, traits which have displeased some readers: the epigrams and witticisms of the earliest novels and the deepening "note of religious sincerity" in the later ones—"undertones of pain and anguish . . . a more serious philosophical strain . . . profounder spiritual insight . . . occasional touches of mysticism" ("The Brilliant Mrs. Craigie," *The Listener*, Aug. 1969, 272-73). Of Hobbes's novels as a whole Maison says:

. . . her novels . . . can hardly be dismissed as mere period pieces reflecting drawing-room manners and that peculiar blend of faith and frivolity characteristic of the Nineties. They have, besides a clever wit, a depth of philosophical thoughtfulness, a rather sad wisdom and a consistently good style—all rare qualities in feminine fiction.

In *The Singular Anomaly: Women Novelists of the Nineteenth Century* (1970), Colby treats Hobbes comprehensively—but unfairly!—as one of five women novelists who, like George Eliot, "had first-rate minds" and explored the "most serious social and ethical questions of their time," but who, unlike her, "could never assimilate and integrate their knowledge and their ideas into a work of art." Barb after barb, Colby's account of Pearl Craigie herself is excessively harsh, as in these typical comments:

Her misfortune . . . was that in being able to have everything [because of her father's wealth], she possessed or mastered nothing.

The personal pose she assumed was that of tragic muse. Like many another poseur, Mrs. Craigie

eventually became what she pretended to be.

To trace her life is to see a small-scale drawing-room tragedy: a bright talent misspent and wasted.

—and in this unkindest cut of all:

Writing was a form of personal indulgence for Mrs. Craigie as, indeed, her whole life was an indulgence; her ill health, her religion, her philanthropy, probably even her unhappy marriage, are expressions of it. In 1898 her mysterious malady . . . was finally diagnosed as a form of epilepsy, *le petit mal*. She appeared to welcome the diagnosis as an excuse for a veritable debauch of self-indulgence—physical, spiritual, and intellectual.

That cruelly biased view of the author distorts Colby's discussion of Hobbes's novels. So, too, does Colby's procrustean effort to fit the novels to her thesis. She unduly emphasizes, on the one hand, the brains, diligence, ambition, egotism, and "weird and perverse taste" expressed in the novels, and on the other, their *lack* (as she sees it) of truly imaginative content and of formal, technical excellence. Remarkably, however, even in such a treatment all Hobbes's novels shine through as too vital to deserve neglect, and Colby admits that the last four (*The Serious Wooing*, *Love and the Soul-Hunters*, *The Vineyard*, and *The Dream and the Business*) "show increasing technical mastery owing in part at least to her experience in the theatre."

My particular claim (to be developed elsewhere) is that Pearl Craigie's novels—wrung as they are from her own intense experience, her own brief and strenuous journey toward self-knowledge—brilliantly and wisely illuminate the lives of women, especially of intelligent, sensitive, sophisticated women living in the cultural storm and stress of the end of an era. In her diverse female characters—sirens, scholars, and artists, lovers and loved ones, saints and sinners, Eves and Liliths, dutiful and rebellious wives and daughters—modern women will surely see their sisters and themselves. In her philosophical and increasingly mythic interpretations of the life of men and women, modern readers will see a passionate rediscovery of perennial classical and Judaic-Christian concepts and values: of the very meaning, within that religious-humanistic framework, of tragedy, comedy, honor, character, fate, freedom, responsibility, passion, love, duty, sin, renunciation, redemption, grace, blessedness . . . of the arts, of myth . . . of life itself.

Surveying her life and work, we can imagine with what delight Pearl Craigie—if she had lived to be old—might well have added to her charmed circle of friends and correspondents many of the most exciting minds of our own century; indeed, in a letter to her publisher (1904), Mrs. Craigie prophetically stated for herself her strong claim upon us:

I am absolutely certain that my *biggest* sales are for the future, because some of my best ideas are far in advance of the present average reader. . . . I write from knowledge and that is why . . . the books will ultimately have value. They have many faults, no doubt, but they are not twaddle. As psychological stuff they are sound and as studies of modern English life, they are the truth.



Dreams of Education by E. Christian Kopff

"They say such different things at school."

—W.B. Yeats

The Legacies of Literacy by Harvey J. Graff, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press; \$57.50.

From Humanism to the Humanities by Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; \$27.50.

William Butler Yeats, Senator of the Irish Republic, heard about contemporary trends in education from "a kind old nun in a white hood":

The children learn to cipher and
to sing,
to study reading-books and
history,
to cut and sew, be neat in
everything
in the best modern way.

All that industrious scurrying after mediocrity made Yeats dream of the heights of human beauty and self-fulfillment, polar opposites to the goals of modern education. A year ago a columnist in a Denver paper found out how much money is paid to teenage girls who have illegitimate children. He demanded high school courses to teach poor girls not to produce babies. Such different things do we seek from education in our time. What is the history of such disparate cravings and demands?

Harvey J. Graff, of the University of Texas at Dallas, tries to answer part of that question in *The Legacies of Literacy*, an ungainly but interesting survey of the secondary scholarship on literacy from the ancient Greeks to today's Third

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World. Graff does not ask much of literacy: It is the ability to write your name and read a basic document. Some people can do one and not the other. A society may be literary, that is, depend on written laws and a written sacred scripture and yet (as in the Middle Ages) have only a minority of literate citizens. Societies have achieved total literacy without a school system, such as Lutheran Sweden and Iceland in the 17th and 18th centuries. Literacy by itself does not correlate highly with economic progress or, indeed, any social good. The fast rising literacy rates in modern Africa, for instance, have not led to democracy or wealth. Take-off periods such as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment were not heavily literate. Although the education industry in America claims that we need ever more education, "new literacies," most new jobs in America need less reading ability, not more. When the U.S. Army tested its recruits, it found that "they were able to perform successfully in jobs where the reading difficulties of material exceeded their average reading ability by four to eight grades," because they were interested in the tasks and friends helped them.

At this point the reader of *Chronicles* is becoming impatient. It is all very well to assert the absence of a literacy crisis, as long as literacy is defined as the ability to sign a welfare check and read the want ads and *TV Guide*, as the Los Angeles School District did some time ago. But in today's complex world we need much more. We need access to several foreign languages and cultures, to mathematical types of reasoning, and to the ability to analyze issues and facts critically and objectively. Most people in America, however, receive their culture orally from movies, radio, TV, and cassettes.

Public school literacy enables them to function at their jobs. They study the Bible in Bible study groups, not with Greek and Hebrew lexica and commentaries. They do not read Gibbon, Rabelais, or *Chronicles*, and they do not feel the lack.

The average person gets along quite well on his own level with skills derived from public schools and on-the-job training. Our leaders, on the other hand, suffer from short-sightedness rooted in a monoglot ignorance of the world, past and present, and an uncritical acceptance of what is dished up in the public prints. Anthony Grafton of Princeton and Lisa Jardine of Cambridge (UK) think that the liberal arts curriculum inherited from the Renaissance is part of the problem. *From Humanism to the Humanities* traces the development of Humanist education from 15th-century teachers such as Guarino of Verona, who emphasized the ethical significance of reading great Latin authors, to the 16th-century world of Peter Ramus, who led the way towards a more pragmatic, job-oriented curriculum.

Grafton and Jardine are both excellent Renaissance scholars, and Grafton is one of our best intellectual historians. This, however, is not a very good book. It exudes the Pushmepullyou bouquet often emitted by double authorship. The idea for the book was born 10 years ago, when the authors' paths crossed for a semester; and although their original research has developed, their thinking on this topic is still immature.

Harvard University Press claims that "the book is based on intensive archival research," but most of it is an interpretative summary of earlier scholarship, such as Lauro Martinez's *Social World of the Florentine Humanists* (1963) and Walter Ong's *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* (1959). Page after page is derived from T.W. Baldwin's *William Shakespeare's Small Latine and*