

Writing and Camden Town - Literary accounts

Mark McCarthy May 2018

Contemporary nineteenth century literature has not been previously explored for its accounts of Camden Town, portrayed both directly by name and by association. There are varied styles – satire, realism, tragedy, humour – with writers drawing on their own direct experiences. Yet Camden Town also is used as reference for ‘otherness’ – a place for people whom the reader might not normally meet or a lodging for someone on hard times.¹

George and Weedon Grossmith, who together wrote the satirical novel of suburban life, *The Diary of a Nobody*, knew Camden Town well. As children, they lived in Mornington Crescent and went to the North London Collegiate School (for boys) in Camden High Street. George married Emeline Noyce, daughter of a north London doctor, at St Stephens’ Church in Camden Town. The church setting plays a cameo role in the novel:

November 26 Sunday ...A rather annoying incident occurred, of which I must make mention. Mrs Fernlosse, who is quite a grand lady, living in one of those large houses in the Camden Road, stopped to speak to me after church, when we were all coming out. I must say I felt flattered, for she is thought a good deal of. I suppose she knew me through seeing me so often take round the plate, especially as she always occupies the corner seat of the pew. She is a very influential lady, and may have something of the utmost importance to say, but unfortunately, as she commenced to speak a strong gust of wind came and blew my hat off into the middle of the road. I had to run after it, and had the greatest difficulty in recovering it. When I had succeeded in doing so, I found Mrs Fernlosse had walked on with some swell friends, and I felt I could not well approach her now, especially as my hat was smothered with mud. I cannot say how disappointed I felt.²

Some writers who were contemporary with the Grossmiths were critical of suburbia for its ‘small minded conservatism’ ‘sedulously aping the décor of those who come from a more leisured class’.³ The Grossmiths took a more sympathetic approach: suburbia may be stuffy but it is also safe within a world of changing social values. In *The Diary of a Nobody*, Mr Pooter is a ‘new man’ of the time, with home interests of interior decoration and gardening. Drama comes through oppositions – his son Lupin’s ‘modern’ attitudes, his two neighbours Mr Cumming and Mr Gowing and the power of his employer, Mr Perkupp.⁴ The Grossmiths’ Pooter was a forerunner of tolerance, for his small but understandable aspirations and recognisable social mistakes: *The Diary of a Nobody*, written for *Punch* to amuse, suggests that Camden Town might hold a distance from the heavier moralism of Victorian England.

¹ A short search of period fiction in the British Library showed many brief mentions of Camden Town.

² George and Weedon Grossmith, *The diary of a nobody*, Oxford 1995:67.

³ Kate Flint, ‘Introduction’, In *Ibid*:vii-xxiii.

⁴ Stephen Wade, *A Victorian somebody: the life of George Grossmith*, Gosport 2015:151.

George Gissing came to London from the north of England. Believing himself too poor to marry an educated woman, he chose Edith Underwood, daughter of a Camden Town shopkeeper, whom he had met in a café near his Marylebone Road flat. According to his friends, she was 'common'.⁵ *New Grub Street*, the novel for which he is best known, includes a fictionalised account of Edith's parents house in St Paul's Crescent (in Camden Town, near present Agar Grove): 'a quiet by-way, consisting of small, decent houses. That at which she paused had an exterior promising comfort within: the windows were clean and neatly curtained, and the polishable appurtenances of the door gleamed to perfection'. Nevertheless, Gissing's descriptions were objected to by real clerks in letters to newspapers at the time: 'Mr Gissing's picture of our home life is as strikingly inaccurate as the rest of his descriptions'.⁶

Charles Dickens mentions first 'Camberling Town' and then Camden Town by name in his portrayal of the vast excavations in *Dombey and Son*.⁷ Yet the cutting for the London Junction Railway extension to Euston was on Lord Southampton's land at Chalk Farm, rather than in Camden Town. The Dickens family did live at 16 Bayham Street, adjacent to Camden High Street, in 1822. William Matchett, writing in *The Dickensian* in 1911, imagines, in the attic room, Dickens' 'first real beginnings in authorship, which he regarded as "extremely clever" but was too bashful to show anyone'.⁸ The house was, perhaps, a model for the Cratchits' home in *A Christmas Carol*. It was in Dicken's mind: a clerk in Christmas Carol, to whom Mr Scrooge had reluctantly given a day's wages (2/6d) runs home to Camden Town; and the prize turkey for Bob Cratchett, later in the story, is sent by cab to Camden Town.

For a short while in 1824 Dickens lodged in Little College Street, on the east side of Camden Town. This memory is unhappily portrayed in chapter five of *David Copperfield*:⁹

"Traddles ... lived in a little street, near the Veterinary College at Camden Town, which was principally tenanted, as one of our clerks who lived in that direction informed me, by gentlemen students, who bought live donkeys, and made experiments on those quadrupeds in their private apartments ... The inhabitants appeared to have a propensity to throw any little trifles they were not in want of, into the road: which not only made it rank and sloppy, but untidy too, on account of the cabbage leaves ... An indescribable character of faded gentility that attached to the house I sought, and made it unlike all the other houses in the street..."

The house, as with Bayham Street, is now demolished.

⁵ Jacob Korg, *George Gissing: a critical biography*, London 1975:151.

⁶ London Literary Society <literarylondon.org/the-literary-london-journal/archive-of-the-literary-london-journal/issue-9-1/the-use-of-london-lodgings-in-middlebrow-fiction-1900-1930s>

⁷ Dickens books report this and his family house in Bayham Street, but less Little College Street.

⁸ Willoughby Matchett, 'Dickens in Bayham Street', *The Dickensian* 1911:181

⁹ Julian Wolfreys, *Dickens's London: perception, subjectivity and phenomenal urban multiplicity*, Edinburgh 2012:63-64.

In suburbia, Kate Flint, has suggested, 'one is buying oneself, at least in the imagination, into the culture of the aristocracy'. From the 1890s, 'a distinctive fiction of suburbia appears'. The protagonists remain middle class – although a clerk rather than businessman or professional and 'very seldom do we read of members of the working class: poverty tries to hide itself with Venetian blinds ... a casual labourer would be surprising'.¹⁰ Similarly, Ged Pope suggests 'The suburb is predicated on offering a clear sense of order and homeliness'.¹¹ And Michael Heller argues that 'authors such as Keble Howard, Shan Bullock and William Ridge praised suburbia, its denizens and its way of life'. Ridge's novel, *A Clever Wife*, for example, ends with Cicely confessing to Henry that 'I had no idea that the suburbs could contain such joy'.¹² Another describes 'the rise of a 'cockney assistant head clerk in a railway company to debonair superintendent of the line' – of relevance to local employment in Camden Town – and 'suburbia and domestic stability featured throughout the novel as strong factors in his rise'.¹³

But there is a contrary narrative. The narrator in Wilkie Collins' novel *Basil: a Tale of Modern Life*, with 'Regent's Park close at hand', strays into 'unfinished streets, unfinished crescents, unfinished squares, unfinished shops and unfinished gardens'; '...neither the main character, nor the reader, has much idea of what is actually happening in these opaque north London suburbs ... full of secrets and shocking revelation: suppressed passion, secret marriages, criminal impersonations, disavowed affairs, complex and obscure family relations'.¹⁴ Similarly, Arthur Machen's narrator sets out to explore '...unknown unvisited squares in Islington, dreary byways in Holloway, places traversed by railway arches and viaducts in the regions of Camden Town'.¹⁵ Machen's world is filled with suburban anxieties, a 'city of nightmares'.¹⁶

A mixture of these views is held by a young middle-class man in Compton Mackenzie's successful novel *Sinister Street*, published in 1914.¹⁷

'Presently upon an iron railway bridge Michael read in giant letters the direction Kentish Town behind a huge leprous hand pointing to the left. The hansom clattered ... past the dim people huddled upon the pavement, past a wheel-barrow and the obscene skeletons and outlines of humanity chalked upon the arches of sweating brick ... and, just beyond, three houses from whose surface the stucco was peeling in great

¹⁰ Kate Flint, 'Fictional suburbia', *Literature and History* 1982;8(1):70.

¹¹ Ged Pope, *Reading London's suburbs*, London 2015.

¹² Michael Heller, 'Suburbia, marketing and stakeholders: developing Ilford, Essex, 1880–1914', *Urban History* 2014;41(1):62-80.

¹³ William Ridge, *Sixty-nine Birnam Road*, London 1908.

¹⁴ Wilkie Collins, *Basil: a Tale of Modern Life*, Oxford 2000:25 and 51-52.

¹⁵ Arthur Machen, *The London adventure*, London 1924:11.

¹⁶ Amanda Caleb, 'A city of nightmares: suburban anxiety in Arthur Machen's London gothic', In Lawrence Phillips, Anne Witchard, *London gothic: place, space and the gothic imagination* London, London 2010:41-49.

¹⁷ Compton Mackenzie, *Sinister street*, London 1916. Quoted by Tindall, 'Fields beneath':206-7 and *Camden History Review* 1983;7:9.

slabs and the damp was oozing in livid arabesques and scrawls of verdigris’.

Yet returning later to Camden Town, his mood improves:

‘When he began to examine the Camden Road as a prospective place of residence, it became suddenly dull and respectable ... chatting nursemaids, a child throwing a scarlet ball high into the air...’

Two writers of international stature lived for a period in Camden Town (Figure 3.2), putting their experience more generally into their work. Theodor Fontane spent his earlier years as London correspondent to a Berlin paper, living at 6 St Augustine’s Road. His writing included *Ein Sommer in London* (1854) and *Aus England, Studien und Briefe* (1860).



Figure 3.2. Plaques in Camden Town for Fontane, Verlaine and Rimbaud¹⁸

Arthur Rimbaud took lodgings with Paul Verlaine at 8 College Street, near to the Veterinary College. The two poets had been living in London from April in 1873, slipping in and out of the British Museum library and advertising to teach French.¹⁹ Rimbaud wrote *A Season in Hell* during the summer, and partly prepared *Illuminations*, to be published the following year. The trace of London hovers in the works, mixed with his home town of Charleville on the Belgian border in France. The young German bourgeois journalist living near Camden Square and the young French poets in lodgings to the south indicate the mix of Camden Town. At other times they lived elsewhere in London also: Camden Town was often a place of transit.

¹⁸ Author’s photographs.

¹⁹ Graham Robb, *Rimbaud*, London 2000.

A writers miscellany

The selection opens with a lightly satirical poem 'A visiting governess' in 1899 on her daily Omnibus journey – to Grosvenor Gate. Early she journeys from Camden Town ... The carmen have learnt her morning hour ... 'Confident, clever, and cool is she, And learned in much of the Girton lore ...' The choice of Camden Town and the link to Girton surely reflects Miss Buss' North London Collegiate School, first in Camden Street and then on Camden Road.

Egan Mew, *A London Comedy* Matthews, 1899

[The Governess' is second of eight poems in the section 'Maids' in the anthology.]

THE VISITING GOVERNESS

Early she journeys from Camden Town,
Brisk and pretty, supple and slim.
She's busy en route with the missing noun;
She'll glance at the "dictée" — a "theme" skim,
Casting a look at the lesson-book,
Or loosing her thoughts on a casual whim.

The carmen have learnt her morning hour;
They guard the corner she always fills.
Fine days or wet days have no power
To alter her ways — the ways she wills.
She travels afar in her rumbling car,
T'wards Grosvenor Gate from the Camden Town.

Confident, clever, and cool is she,
And learned in much of the Girton lore,
A Grad of the newest school is she —
Yet bears no taint of the 'Varsity bore
The savoir-faire of her graceful air
Tells one as much — and hints far more of London Maids.

As she passes on with a courage sweet,
'Mid a world of chance, thro' a web of Fate,
Ah, how she brightens Life's gloomiest street!
For a maid more merry, yet sane, sedate,
You may look for long in the crowding throng
Of Camden Town — or of Grosvenor Gate!

A second poem is "The Ballad of Camden Town" in James Elroy Flecker, *Forty-two poems*, Dent, 1911, is rather maudlin.

THE BALLAD OF CAMDEN TOWN

I walked with Maisie long years back
The streets of Camden Town,
I splendid in my suit of black,
And she divine in brown.

Hers was a proud and noble face,
A secret heart, and eyes
Like water in a lonely place
Beneath unclouded skies.

A bed, a chest, a faded mat,
And broken chairs a few,
Were all we had to grace our flat
In Hazel Avenue.

But I could walk to Hampstead Heath,
And crown her head with daisies,
And watch the streaming world beneath,
And men with other Maisies.

When I was ill and she was pale
And empty stood our store,
She left the latchkey on its nail,
And saw me nevermore.

Perhaps she cast herself away
Lest both of us should drown :
Perhaps she feared to die, as they
Who die in **Camden Town**.

What came of her ? The bitter nights
Destroy the rose and lily,
And souls are lost among the lights
Of painted Piccadilly.

What came of her ? The river flows
So deep and wide and stilly,
And waits to catch the fallen rose
And clasp the broken lily.

I dream she dwells in London still
And breathes the evening air,
And often walk to Primrose Hill,
And hope to meet her there.

Once more together we will live,
For I will find her yet :
I have so little to forgive ;
So much, I can't forget.

Lucy Clifford. Mrs Keith's crime was a best-seller in the 1870s and, with more novels, Lucy went on to be in the circles of the leading writers of the day.

(p8) Her birth certificate says she was born in Great College Street 2 August 1846. Her grandfather was Thomas Gaspey, historian and journalist, author of 20 books, whose daughter Louisa Ellen married John Lane in 1844 and she, Lucy was the oldest of her children. But it seems there was disharmony and Lucy was sent to live with her grandfather in Shooters Hill.

William Clifford was born in 1845 in Exeter. From Cambridge, Clifford arrived at UCL to find men and women taught separately. He met Sophia Lucy Jane Lane in 1873. They married at Hanover Square 1876, but died in 1879 of TB. They had lived in 26 Colville Road Notting Hill; Lucy later (1899) moved to 7 Chilworth Street, Paddington. Thus, Lucy Clifford's link to Camden is only in her childhood.

Monty Chisholm, *Such silver currents: the story of William and Lucy Clifford, 1845–1929* (2002)

George Sala was a journalist who worked in his early years for Dickens, and thereafter for the London Illustrated News, travelled widely and died in 1888 in Melbourne, Australia. He describes inheriting some freehold houses at Camden Town, and 'the dark days of the long nightmare of Bohemianism' – times not otherwise described.

myself. My Aunt Eliza died in 1850, and the reversion, which included some freehold houses at Camden Town and a modest sum in Consols, came to us. My children to be taught to cook; and until about 1851, when my brother Charles and I kept house together, we did all the cooking at our lodgings in Camden Town. During the dark days of the long nightmare of Bohemianism, I did not forget how to cook, but my culinary faculty was in a state of suspended animation.

George Sala, *The life and adventures of George Augustus Sala 1828-1895*, New York, Scribner, 1895.

Edgar Wallace (1875-1932) *The man who knew*, pp 32, 281,

The cab took them to Camden Town, and they descended in front of a respectable-looking house in a long, dull street. It was too dark for the girl to take stock of her surroundings, and she had scarcely time to gather her parcels together before the man opened the door and pushed her in.

The next two hours inside the house are discussion between two characters on how to dispose of 'the girl'

At the same house in Camden Town, "69 Flowerton Street", later there is an unusual event:

The characters were a young man and a girl. The girl was extremely pretty and very pale. The man was the exact double of Frank Merrill. He was dressed in a rough tweed suit, and wore a soft felt hat with a fairly wide brim. But it was not the appearance of this remarkable apparition which startled the investigator. It was the attitude of the two people. The girl was evidently pleading with her companion. Saul Arthur Mann was too far away to hear what she said,

but he saw the young man shake himself loose from the girl. She again grasped his arm and raised her face imploringly.

Mr. Mann gasped, for he saw the young man's hand come up and strike her back into the house. Then he caught hold of the door and banged it savagely, walked down the stairs, and, turning, hurried away.

Finally the mystery is resolved, with the girl no longer held in the house...

Daniel Puseley (1814–1882) was an author under the pseudonym of Frank Foster. Son of Henry Puseley, maltster, was born at Bideford, Devonshire, on 9 Feb. 1814, and was educated at the grammar school in that town. He entered a London mercantile house, and was afterwards a commercial traveller. In 1844 he became a hosier and silk merchant in Gutter Lane, city of London.

In 1857, after visiting the Antipodes, he published '*The Rise and Progress of Australia, Tasmania, and New Zealand. By an Englishman,*' Thereafter, he devoted himself to literature and to philanthropic undertakings. In 1868 he gave a banquet, the first of its kind, to six hundred ragged-school children, at St. James's Hall, London.

In later life he was impoverished by the loss of his savings in foreign stocks. He died at 21 Rochester Road, Camden Town, London, on 18 Jan. 1882, and was buried in Highgate cemetery.

[https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Puseley,_Daniel_\(DNB00\)](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Puseley,_Daniel_(DNB00))

Dinah Craik 1822-1887 was raised in Staffordshire, her father was a non-conformist minister. She came to London and was quickly successful with novels including *The Ogilvies*, *Olive* and *The Head of the Family*. The setting tended to be of a small town, perhaps Scotland, with the protagonists only occasionally going to London. A photograph in the Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre states that she lived 1851-1852 at 94 Camden Street, formerly 18 Camden Street North.



Photo by HWE Lockyer (Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre)

Some of *The Ogilvies* is set around Russell and Brunswick Squares in what we would now call Bloomsbury. But Craik is primarily a writer of people, and their places are secondary. She herself moved to Hampstead and had a wide circle of contacts.