

The Harkives: Cataloguing the Coherence and Complexity of Margaret Harkness/John Law

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In our project of assembling a selection of writing by the journalist, novelist, activist, and traveller Margaret Harkness (1854–1923), pseud. John Law, on the open access digital platform The Harkives (*Fig. 1*), we have consistently expanded our own understanding of her working life and the diversity of her publications. Since we began the project in 2015, we have updated the Harkives on a monthly basis, with the addition of annual Christmas bonuses and summer serials; and the repository now includes fiction and non-fiction, journalism and experimental writing, proposals for political and social activism, and observations on economics and religion. Although Harkness remains best known for her novels on conditions in slum neighbourhoods in London at the end of the 1880s, she travelled widely and produced accounts of her stays in Germany and Austria, New Zealand and Australia, and present-day India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. She continued to publish almost until her death, and constantly explored and questioned both received wisdom and her own ideas throughout her long career.

From 1887 until the end of her life, much of Harkness's work appeared under the pseudonym John Law. This alternative identity appears to have created additional freedom for her publications, although it also raises questions about the extent to which the literary and political projects of Margaret E[lise] Harkness and John Law corresponded and intersected. Our research for the Harkives has often involved tracing the voice of Harkness/John Law in order to identify anonymous or undocumented publications, but it has also been necessary to recognize the presence of

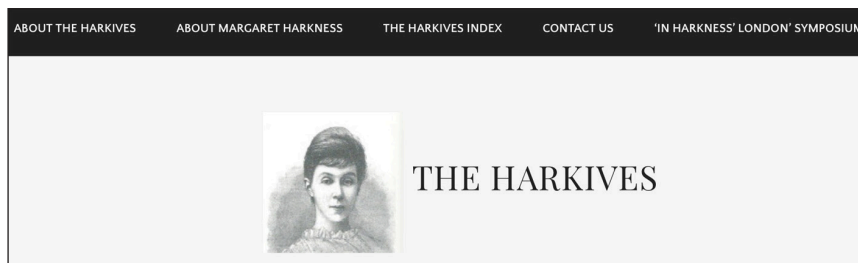


Fig. 1: Banner of The Harkives site <<https://theharkives.wordpress.com>> [accessed 12 October 2018].

a plurality of voices and ideas in her writing. In assembling and collating material for the Harkives, we aim to show the diverse nature of Harkness's publications in order to offer them up to new interpretations that take into account the development of her knowledge and ideas in their changing historical context. While we are eager to expand the current understanding of Harkness's literary and political efforts, and in so doing acknowledge her accomplishments as well as the personal challenges she faced in forging a public career, we have refrained from attempting to draw a biographical picture from the records we accumulate. This article first explores the challenges of collating the work of a writer whose interests and commitments were varied and who maintained deliberately distinct public and private personas. It then considers how the formal challenges of the digital archive have offered opportunities to reformulate current critical understandings of the relationship between text and author, and how these renewed critical approaches aid our understanding of a versatile author like Harkness/John Law.

Identifying Harkness

Since the middle of the twentieth century, critics have attached a variety of labels to the work of Margaret Harkness/John Law, and subsequently to Harkness herself. Tabitha Sparks states that her novels

inspire a contradictory range of responses. They have been classified under such contrary descriptions as radical, sentimental, escapist, naturalistic, patriarchal, and feminist. More consistent is the presence of Harkness herself as an interpretive device: if they disagree on how to characterise the novels, critics are generally fascinated by the way that Harkness's cryptic life and especially her political experience shaped (or might have shaped) her fiction.

As a result, Sparks notes, 'the subject "Margaret Harkness" can seem to be more ripe for scholarship than her novels themselves.'¹

The question of 'the subject "Margaret Harkness"' is one that we have sought to address in the broadest possible terms in selecting material for the Harkives, largely because the sheer scope of the work published by Harkness/John Law resists the type of categorization to which the work and its author have been subjected by contemporary and modern-day

¹ Tabitha Sparks, 'Absent Character: From Margaret Harkness to John Law', in *Margaret Harkness: Writing Social Engagement 1880–1921*, ed. by Flore Janssen and Lisa C. Robertson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming 2019), pp. 39–53 (p. 40).

commentators. For much of the twentieth century, Harkness scholarship remained largely limited to her three London-based slum novels, *A City Girl* (1887), *Out of Work* (1888), and *Captain Lobe* (1889, reissued as *In Darkest London* in 1891). These three novels address social themes such as chronic poverty, under- and unemployment, and slum housing; they consider political, economic, and social philosophy; and they experiment with different literary and journalistic styles of writing to reflect a variety of voices from across social and political spectra. While the overarching themes of these novels seem easily identifiable, they are rich and variable in their approach to their subject matter; and, as a result, their author has been variously defined as a slum novelist, an East End novelist, a social novelist, and a political novelist. Often, however, critics have concluded that she did not follow through on the projects in which they claimed she participated. In *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction*, Peter Keating argued that Harkness

attempted to reverse the class bias of industrial fiction and correct the blindness of late-Victorian novelists to the urban workers' revolutionary potential. In neither was she successful. Like many minor novelists the value of her work lies in the illumination it casts on the mainstream of English fiction.

This understanding of her novels as an unsuccessful experiment in adapting an existing literary tradition underpinned Keating's conclusion that 'ultimately interest in Margaret Harkness is ideological. The tradition to which her work belongs is a very minor one in the nineteenth century, though it gathers force and becomes more prominent later.'² Based on our expanding knowledge of Harkness and her work, it is clear that this assessment does not do justice to the limited section of her oeuvre to which it refers, let alone to the much wider body of writing she produced over her forty-year career. Recently, critics have argued that much of the value of Harkness's work derives from its ability to reflect a multiplicity of voices; with the Harkives, we seek to illustrate that her wider work represents a vast range of ideas, influences, and realities.

Throughout her working life, Harkness continually sought out new information that she conveyed through her wide-ranging publications. For instance, Rob Breton argues that her novel *Out of Work* constitutes

an attempt to integrate politics and feeling, and to establish an emotional foundation for socialist literature. It includes a great deal of journalistic reportage, plus Zola-esque or naturalistic experiments with the effect of environment and heredity

² P. J. Keating, *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 245.

on identity [...] and a Marxian understanding of the ubiquity of class war.³

The contents of our archive reveal that the presence of these different concepts is the result of Harkness's sustained engagement with each of the ideas Breton identifies. The publication of *Out of Work* followed that of Harkness's most studied novel, *A City Girl*, a reworking of the fallen woman narrative set in workers' model dwellings near Aldgate in east London, but Harkness's career at this point was by no means limited to fictional accounts of life in London poverty. She had joined the professional writers working in the British Museum around 1881 and had embarked on a career that included investigative journalism and historical research; by 1888 she was also conducting social investigations and publishing her findings, and her short stories appeared in a range of periodicals. Her politically charged novels were influenced both by her investigations into deprived areas of London and her active participation in the socialist and labour movements. She read widely in several languages and her writing was influenced by different international literary genres. With reference to Harkness's novels on London poverty, Lynne Hapgood argues that

part of the challenge in addressing Harkness's literary achievement today is that the emphasis of earlier critics has been more on the importance of her work to the broader texture of literary history, particularly European Naturalism, and on her novels' relation with nineteenth-century socialist thought, rather than their intrinsic merit.⁴

This notion that Harkness's work should be judged on its own merit underpins the Harkives: while we include a degree of context, we aim to allow the work to speak for itself, and to reflect both the variety of ideas that it incorporates and the range of the work itself.

In assembling material for the Harkives, we are fortunate in being able to draw on leading research by Harkness scholars who regularly bring both undiscovered and understudied sources to light. Deborah Mutch has catalogued much of the rich body of contributions Harkness made to socialist periodicals in the 1880s and 1890s both under her own name and her pseudonym, while Terry Elkiss has discovered that Harkness, as John Law, continued a successful career as a periodical writer while resident in

³ Rob Breton, 'The Sentimental Socialism of Margaret Harkness', *English Language Notes*, 48.1 (2010), 27–39 (p. 31).

⁴ Lynne Hapgood, 'Margaret Harkness, Novelist: Social Semantics and Experiments in Fiction', in *Margaret Harkness*, ed. by Janssen and Robertson, pp. 130–46 (p. 130).

Australia for over a decade around the turn of the twentieth century.⁵ Our own research has also discovered several unknown texts and helped to illuminate those that are more obscure: Flore Janssen has identified unknown fiction and anonymous journalistic publications in the *British Weekly* and the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and Lisa C. Robertson has contributed significantly to our knowledge of Harkness's travel writing, setting us on the trail of her reports from Germany in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1890 and exploring her accounts of travel on the Indian subcontinent and in Sri Lanka in the first decades of the twentieth century. An enduring challenge we face with the Harkives is not the difficulty of reconciling the various versions of Margaret Harkness/John Law that emerge from the publications under both names, but rather ensuring that the form of the archive reflects the diverse nature of the interests and pursuits expressed by these texts. The digital archive format presents a number of challenges in representing this complexity, but it has also raised important questions about methodologies of archiving.

Archiving Harkness

In recent years, the improvement and proliferation of tools dedicated to the digitization of historical texts has energized critical debate about memory, history, and technology. In her examination of the symbolic value of libraries, institutions that 'both house and represent the historical record', Marlene Manoff notes that discussions around library policy technology as both threat and saviour. 'On the one hand', she explains, 'computers are seen as the ultimate memory tool capable of providing access to everything ever written. On the other hand, the digital record is liable to manipulation, distortion or erasure.'⁶ Yet both positions are aligned by a heightened focus on the formal context of these records: the procedural methods and systems that inform their creation, dissemination, and interpretation; or what Terry Cook describes as the 'formative processes underpinning [...] archival interpretation [as well as] animating [their] arrangement and description'.⁷ Such attention to the formal qualities of new digital technologies — whether characterized by anxiety or enthusiasm

⁵ See, for example, Deborah Mutch, *English Socialist Periodicals, 1880–1900: A Reference Source* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); and Terry Elkiss, 'A Law unto Herself: The Solitary Odyssey of M. E. Harkness', in *Margaret Harkness*, ed. by Janssen and Robertson, pp. 17–38.

⁶ Marlene Manoff, 'The Symbolic Meaning of Libraries in a Digital Age', *Portal*, 1 (2001), 371–81 (p. 379).

⁷ Terry Cook, 'The Archive(s) is a Foreign Country: Historians, Archivists, and the Changing Archival Landscape', *Canadian Historical Review*, 90 (2009), 497–534.

— generates an opportunity to view afresh our own critical methodologies and formulate new interpretive frameworks.

Cook's description of the interpretation, arrangement, and description of memory as archival practice builds on the work of scholars who have considered the concept of the archive as both physical and imaginative concept. The critical origins of this idea are found in Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) in which he suggests that an archive is broader than a collection of historical documentation or the institution in which these texts are housed and the practices by which they are organized. Instead, it is a kind of discourse formation: both the 'system of enunciability' and the 'law of what can be said'.⁸ This concept has permitted the helpful critical distinction between the broader concept of 'an archive' — one that incorporates the expansiveness of Foucault's original definition — and the materially specific notion of an institution's 'archives'. While this distinction is productive, Helen Freshwater explains that any notion of archive suggests 'continual oscillation between the poles of thing and theory'.⁹

The Harkives reflects various forms of oscillation. In its most practical terms, the project aims to make available a diverse range of textual sources by and about Harkness in order to broaden the current understanding of her as principally a London novelist and to encourage research into her political and literary career and those of her contemporaries. Since the launch of the Harkives, our methods have, in many ways, been determined by practicality and economy: we, ourselves, transcribe print records and digital resources into a web-mounted HTML file that is then hosted by WordPress. As our digital archive has developed, we have been confronted by questions of method and methodology, particularly in view of the ways our own archival practice has shaped the interpretation of the material we make available.

The first and perhaps most obvious result of our method is formal consistency across the records of the Harkives. While high-resolution digital images of many of the periodicals in which Harkness's writing appeared are now available through databases such as Gale or ProQuest, these companies own the image rights to these digitized documents even if the text itself is out of copyright. Furthermore, these databases are costly subscription services to which many individuals and institutions do not have access. Producing transcribed e-text versions of these documents allows us to make this material open access without complications relating to copyright. However, the fact that journals, newspapers, novels, and letters, which

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. by A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 146, 145.

⁹ Helen Freshwater, 'The Allure of the Archive', *Poetics Today*, 24 (2003), 729–58 (p. 752).

differ greatly in their original form, look similar in their digital iteration results in a uniformity to records that, while it eliminates preconceptions of the relative value of different kinds of publications, is inconsistent with the original documents. The way we aim to address this difficulty is twofold: we provide a brief introduction that supplies information about the historical and material context for the document, and we also include bibliographic information so that users of the Harkives can locate the original artefact.

One central question is the difficulty involved in assembling an archive that is formally coherent, but which also embodies the complexity of Harkness's identity and the diversity of written work over the course of her career. Since critical interest in Harkness's life and work intensified in the 1980s, scholars such as Ingrid von Rosenberg, Matthew Beaumont, and Seth Koven have all puzzled over what seemed to be the inconsistency of her interests and political commitments.¹⁰ Meanwhile, Elkiss's biographical research presents new complications with each discovery: how are historians to interpret the career of a woman who was not only a socialist and labour activist, author and journalist, but also the proprietor of a typewriting school, a keen cyclist, and chief defendant in an arson trial? ('A Law unto Herself'). Furthermore, in her examination of the implications of bio-critical approaches to Harkness's work, Sparks argues that although this framework has been significant for feminist scholarship, Harkness's deliberate construction of the authorial persona John Law functions as an important signifier: undoubtedly, it stands for 'Not Margaret Harkness' ('Absent Character'). In seeking to collate, catalogue, or create coherence between documents of the Harkives, we aim to consider how these formative processes have implications that affect users' perceptions of the texts themselves and also of Harkness's identity.

The theoretical approach to this diversity of text and complexity of identity has led us to new methodological questions. Drawing on Sparks's proposition, we have inverted our thinking: with the production of each e-text we aim to set aside bio-critical approaches that emphasize how an author produces a text and to focus instead on the ways that each text constructs its author. The most literal examples of this process are, for instance, those articles or novels that describe Harkness as 'Author of *A City Girl*' or 'Author of *Out of Work*'.¹¹ This form of construction provides an

¹⁰ Ingrid von Rosenberg, 'French Naturalism and the English Socialist Novel: Margaret Harkness and William Edwards Tirebuck', in *The Rise of Socialist Fiction, 1880–1914*, ed. by H. Gustav Klaus (Brighton: Harvester, 1987), pp. 151–71; Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); and Matthew Beaumont, "A Little Political World of My Own": The New Woman, the New Life, and *New Amazonia*', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 35 (2007), 215–32.

¹¹ See, for example, the first edition of Harkness's *Out of Work* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1888), which states on its title page, 'John Law, author of "A City Girl,"

opportunity to think about authorship and intertextuality in the context of Harkness's work. There are, too, more subtle opportunities to engage with connections between text and authorial persona across Harkness's work. For instance, 'Women as Civil Servants', published in *Nineteenth Century* in 1881 and attributed to Margaret E. Harkness, makes use of formal and thematic conventions in order to construct an authorial persona distinct from that which informs an article such as the allegedly confessional 'A Year of My Life', signed 'John Law', and published ten years later in the *New Review*.¹² With the Harkives we do not aim to fill in Harkness's biography based on the historical or material details described in her writing, but rather to think about the ways that each text supplies its own dynamic authorial framework.

Richard Pearson explains that the development of 'new texts, archives, and little known materials to world-wide scholarly practice could generate new understandings of the Victorian period'.¹³ In addition to the resources that the Harkives makes available, we hope that the digital format itself will encourage a rethinking of the relationship between authorship and authorhood, and of attention to the theoretical limitations of historicism — a practice Joseph Childers has described as 'responsible historicism'.¹⁴ With a renewed attention to method and revised methodology, the problem of authorial identity or thematic inconsistency becomes an opportunity to forge new connections across Harkness's work — and across nineteenth-century studies more broadly.

Etc., Etc.']; or the published collection of articles that appeared in the *British Weekly, Toilers in London* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1889), which states only 'Edited by the author of "Out of Work," Etc.'.

¹² Margaret E. Harkness, 'Women as Civil Servants', *Nineteenth Century*, September 1881, pp. 369–81; John Law, 'A Year of My Life', *New Review*, October 1891, pp. 375–84.

¹³ Richard Pearson, 'Etexts and Archives', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 13 (2008), 88–93 (p. 90).

¹⁴ Joseph Childers, 'Troubling the Archive: Disciplines, Timeframes, and other Annoying Limitations', Paper presented at the conference 'World Victorian Literatures', University of Warwick, 18–19 May 2016.