

Reclaiming an Undervalued Writer

Review of *The Writings of Hesba Stretton: Reclaiming the Outcast* by Elaine Lomax
Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2009

To a Central European Anglicist, the name of Hesba Stretton is not likely to ring a bell. On the rare occasion when it does, her name would be stored in a mind-box labeled "19th century evangelical writing" and a professional would be inclined to agree with the anonymous mid-20th-century author of Stretton's profile who claimed that her writings were "as incapable of surviving the transfer to another age as a fish [was] incapable of living out of water" (Lomax, 12). Dr. Elaine Lomax of De Montfort University sets out to challenge such a dismissive evaluation of Hesba Stretton with her extensively researched book.

Lomax claims that to remember Stretton simply as a writer of evangelical fiction for the young is to overlook many of her other books - she published over sixty - as well as the wide range of activities she was involved in. By studying Stretton's life and work, the reader can get a thorough picture of the cultural, social and political upheavals of 19th-century Britain. In order to appreciate her fully, we also need to see her in the context of reform movements, as she was a founding member of the London Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. Thus Lomax's study of the complexity of Stretton's concerns both in her writing and in her practical activities and of the functioning of the figure of a child in Stretton's times is an important contribution to the rapidly developing field of childhood studies. It is only logical then that Ashgate published Lomax's book as a part of its series *Studies in Childhood, 1700 to the Present*,

Hesba Stretton was born as Sarah Smith in Wellington, Shropshire in 1832 and died in 1911. She adopted the pseudonym, and by "refusing the patriarchal name of Smith" she asserted "her identity and independence of male power and protection" (36). In the life of this interesting and very complex woman, Lomax asserts, religion played an important part and influenced her practical activities (27). Her desire for freedom influenced her narratives (30) in which she paid great attention to all forms of enslavement, imprisonment, confinement and

engagement, including the suffocating city slums and workhouses, and the institution of (forced or conventional) marriage. In many ways, Stretton shared concerns and strategies with Charles Dickens as well as with Elizabeth Gaskell (19). "Political concerns surrounding 'otherness' or marginalization [...] figure as both central and underlying themes" of her writings (46).

At the same time, Stretton was a keen campaigner for the improvement of the living conditions of children. Her reform efforts were firmly grounded in her investigations, as she spent time in slums, orphanages, infirmaries, refugees and missions (42). Thus she witnessed first-hand "the horrible cruelty practiced on little children" (42) and in her writings she featured abandoned children, orphaned children and street children to raise the awareness of how vulnerable such children are to exploitation (108) and how easily they become victims (for example how young slum girls are forced into prostitution). In the chapters analyzing motifs and strategies within Stretton's narratives, Lomax illustrates how complex Stretton's vision of childhood is – "puritanical influences are largely supplanted by a recognition of the child as innocent, but always present is the evangelical idea of potential corruptibility; if not innately sinful, children [can be] too easily led astray." (85) Similarly complex are Stretton's narrative techniques and thus her work, Lomax concludes, should become a "fertile ground" (217) for literary critics as well.

After finishing this well-written, highly informative and analytical book, the reader must agree that Elaine Lomax has succeeded in her attempt to reclaim Hesba Stretton for the 21st-century professional audience and I assume that this book will inspire further research into Stretton's work.

by Šárka Bubíková