



***Pennies, Profits and Poverty: A Biographical Directory of Wealth and Want in Bohemian Fleet Street,***

By Robert J. Kirkpatrick

London: Robert J. Kirkpatrick, 2016.

iv/+550pp. ISBN 9781518690990.

[Click here to purchase](#)

The nineteenth century was a golden era for books and writing, the Education Acts contributing to high literacy, with a consequent demand for popular and affordable reading matter. The mass-market for books came into existence, with authors like George Eliot, Charles Dickens and Mary Braddon having huge followings across class, and in formats ranging from subscription library tomes to journals and yellowbacks, the antecedent of the paperback. In such a rich and varied market, a few writers were winners, rich, popular, and subsequently canonised. Others, regrettably the majority, might have achieved large readerships, but struggled, often dying in poverty.

Robert Kirkpatrick has previously written on popular nineteenth-century publishing for boys, both as bibliographer and historian, and is responsible for the Ashgate *Encyclopaedia of Boys' School Stories* (2000). Here his focus is on Fleet Street. While the locale was a centre for publications aimed at the elite, it also had a bohemian end. Here could be found publishers radical, popular and even disreputable, such as the publisher and pornographer, John Duncombe. Those who campaigned for political reform and the free press also championed cheap literature for the masses, not necessarily enlightening, but certainly entertaining. For the revolutionary, sensational and even pornographic side of publishing to co-exist is perhaps unusual, but it was part of the great diversity found in this small but busy area. A huge volume of words emerged from Bohemian Fleet Street in the Victorian era, a gold mine for researchers. However, it has been relatively under-examined, hence the welcome arrival of Kirkpatrick's book.

*Pennies, Profits and Poverty* consists of two parts, accurately and evocatively titled: "Publishers and Profits," covering approximately seventy firms; and the rather larger "Hacks and Handouts." The arrangement is not alphabetical, but chronological. In the first part, the listings begin with the early nineteenth-century Duncombes and conclude with Alfred Harmsworth over a century later. Similarly, the first author listed in the second half is Pierce Egan the elder (b. 1770s); the final being John G. Rowe (1874–1956). The definition of the long nineteenth century would thus seem to be stretched considerably.

From the first, Kirkpatrick emphasises the contrast in fortunes between authors and publishers. Edward Lloyd died in 1890, leaving an estate valued, in current terms, at £54 million pounds. His wealth had been based on prolific publication of "penny bloods," by such authors as James Malcolm Rymer (*Varney the Vampire*), who died relatively prosperous. More typical of Lloyd authors was Thomas Peckett Prest, who received a

pauper's funeral. Many of the authors listed might be described as hacks, but they had a huge influence, even if the impact of their writing was not necessarily reflected in personal prosperity. They deserve better than their modern obscurity—and Kirkpatrick has performed formidable research in revealing these hard, scribbling lives. Indeed he has been able to considerably expand on the sometimes sketchy biographies found in sources such as the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. He notes, however, that even in such sources the authors tend to have considerably more entries than their publishers, something of a last laugh.

In this quest, Kirkpatrick has been helped by the increasing digitisation of sources, such as newspapers and census records. The increase in genealogy websites has also been significant. However, a particular boon has been the archive of the Royal Literary Fund. It was set up in the late 1700s as a charity for “deserving” authors who had fallen on hard times—something all too common in Bohemian Fleet Street. Because the applicants were obliged to provide supporting evidence of their need, the archive contains detailed biographical information not found easily elsewhere. As Kirkpatrick states, the written records of popular publishers tended not to survive, in contrast to their contemporaries, such as George Bentley. Moreover, those publishers in some danger of the law—the radicals and the pornographers—were necessarily discreet, leaving few records by which they might be charged.

What is revealed here are precarious lives, with the publishers being frequently subject to bankruptcy, and the authors, the debtor's prison. Bohemian Fleet Street might involve much fraternal drinking and good cheer, but it was constantly on the breadline. There were also what the Victorians considered irregularities—common-law marriages and illegitimate children. Small wonder that moralists deplored the popular publications as a danger to public morals. The real issue was that the newly literate working class read less religious and improving tracts than they did thrilling adventures. It was entirely their choice—and they thus supplied Bohemian Fleet Street with income and opportunity.

Kirkpatrick writes that his approach is necessarily selective: nearly all of the authors in the second part were chosen because they applied to the Royal Literary Fund. His aim is to depict a *milieu* over a century, via the lives of its participants, and in this he succeeds triumphantly. *Pennies and Profits* provides a rich feast, in which truth is stranger than fiction. William Dugdale began as a Quaker, found literary piracy profitable, but also published Tom Paine and *Fanny Hill*. William Strange libelled a linen draper, and was sued when he obtained etching plates made by Albert and Victoria, and tried to publish them. Numerous other fascinating gems are sprinkled through these pages.

One significant quibble: women feature in this book largely as help-meets. Certainly, while publishers tended to be male, the literature of the time was not, with the Gothic genre in particular being notable for women writers. Only one woman has an entry, Hannah Maria Jones, an early writer of popular serials. Perhaps she was the only Fleet Street bohemian woman to apply to the Royal Literature Fund (which used her ill for having a common-law marriage—the same cruel distinction being made for publishers' widows). Given the success in America of women dime novelists like Metta Victor, or

the Australian Mary Fortune, it begs the question of whether Englishwomen were less numerous, more pseudonymous or else unlikely to apply to the Royal Literary Fund. It might also be wondered whether the entry for prolific boys' writer and publisher John Allingham (aka "Ralph Rollington") should have mentioned his great-niece, the major crime writer Margery Allingham, whose fortunes were so markedly different. Yet, overall, *Pennies and Profits* represents diligent and innovative research into a fascinating world of often marginalised figures in literary history, and is to be thoroughly commended.

*Lucy Sussex*  
*Independent Scholar*