

Margaret Oliphant 1828-1897

Had we been living a hundred years ago, especially if we had been avid readers of fiction, we should certainly have known of the writer Margaret Oliphant. Yet today this popular Victorian novelist is little remembered, even in Windsor where she lived and worked for over thirty years.

Queen Victoria herself was a great admirer, indeed Mrs Oliphant was the only author whose every latest work was obtained for the Royal Library. The books must have taken up a lot of shelf-space, for Mrs Oliphant was very prolific, producing in all 92 novels, 8 volumes of short stories, and 25 non-fiction works. She also wrote innumerable journalistic articles; in fact, by the end of her life she had written so much that her pen had worn a hole in her index finger!

A Scotswoman by birth, Margaret Oliphant first came to Windsor in 1865 and loved it at once for "the beauty of the river and the Castle and the air of cheerful life about". Cheerfulness was just what she needed then, since life so far had brought her rather more than a fair share of grief.

When a young woman – and already publishing novels – she had married her cousin, Frank Oliphant. He was a stained-glass artist who, among other commissions, worked with Pugin on the windows of the new Houses of Parliament. Unfortunately he contracted tuberculosis, and died in Rome while fruitlessly seeking better health in a warm climate. He left Margaret with two young children, Maggie and Cyril, another expected and £1,000 of debts. Only Margaret's pen stood between the family and destitution.

Cecco (christened Francis but never known by that name) was born six weeks later, and somehow Margaret weathered the storm and built a new life. Four years later tragedy struck yet again in Rome. While Margaret was staying with friends in the city her beloved Maggie caught a fever, died within a few days, and was buried beside her father.

This time it took Margaret much longer to pick up the pieces, but for the sake of her boys' education she eventually returned to England. She decided to send them either to Eton or Harrow, and her first visit to Windsor determined her in Eton's favour. As she had permission for Cyril to live at home while attending school she looked for a house to rent. She found just what she wanted in 6 Clarence Crescent, a "very bright" house which she loved for its sunny aspect and for the Crescent garden

which the family called "the Plantation". With its "fine trees and wild nooks and corners" it was a perfect place for the boys to play.

Margaret made friends with her neighbours and with the Hawtreys, "a parsonic family up to their necks in school feasts and soup kitchens and flannel petticoats". (Stephen Hawtreys was the incumbent of Holy Trinity Church.) She entertained lavishly, with boating parties in summer and amateur dramatics in winter. These were the "dear and blessed boyish days", which were perhaps the happiest of her life.



Margaret Oliphant on the steps of 9 Clarence Crescent with Cyril (standing), Cecco and Frank Wilson.

When she came to Windsor Mrs Oliphant was doing well as a writer, especially with her "Carlingford" series of novels. They are set in an imaginary small town, not far from London (unfortunately we cannot suggest it is Windsor, since she had written several Carlingford stories before she came here). *Salem Chapel* and *Miss*