

Mary Russell Mitford

(16 December 1787 - 9 January 1855)

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- BOOKS:** *Poems* (London: Printed by A. J. Valpy & sold by Longman, Hurst, Rees & Orme, 1810; enlarged edition, London: Printed by A. J. Valpy & sold by F. C. & J. Rivington, 1811);
- Christina, The Maid of the South Seas; A Poem* (London: Printed by A. J. Valpy for F. C. & J. Rivington, 1811);
- Watlington Hill; A Poem* (London: Printed by A. J. Valpy, 1812);
- Narrative Poems on the Female Character in the Various Relations of Human Life*, volume 1 [no more published] (London, 1813; New York: Eastburn, Kirk, 1813);
- Julian, A Tragedy in Five Acts* (London: G. & W. B. Whittaker, 1823; New York: W. B. Gilley, 1823);
- Our Village: Sketches of Rural Character and Scenery*, volume 1 (London: G. & W. B. Whittaker, 1824); volumes 2 and 3 (London: G. B. Whittaker, 1826, 1828); volumes 1-3 (New York: E. Bliss, 1828); volumes 4 and 5 (London: Whittaker, Treacher, 1830, 1832); volume 4 (New York: E. Bliss, 1830);
- Foscari: A Tragedy* (London: Printed for G. B. Whittaker, 1826);
- Dramatic Scenes, Sonnets, and Other Poems* (London: G. B. Whittaker, 1827);
- Rienzi: A Tragedy, in Five Acts* (London: J. Cumberland, 1828; Baltimore: Printed & published by J. Robinson, 1829; Boston: Press of the Boston Daily Advertiser, 1829; New York: Elton & Perkins, 1829);
- Charles the First, An Historical Tragedy, in Five Acts* (London: J. Duncombe, 1834);
- Sadak and Kalasrade; or, The Waters of Oblivion. A Romantic Opera in Two Acts* (London: Fairbrother, 1835);
- Belford Regis; or, Sketches of a Country Town* (3 volumes, London: R. Bentley, 1835; 1 volume, Philadelphia: Carey, Lea & Blanchard, 1835);
- Country Stories* (London: Saunders & Otley, 1837; Philadelphia: Carey, Lea & Blanchard, 1838);
- The Works of Mary Russell Mitford: Prose and Verse* (Philadelphia: Crissy, 1841);
- Inez de Castro: A Tragedy in Five Acts* (London: John Dicks, 1841);
- Recollections of a Literary Life; or, Books, Places, and People* (London: R. Bentley, 1852; New York: Harper, 1852);
- Atherton, and Other Tales* (3 volumes, London: Hurst & Blackett, 1854; 1 volume, Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1854);
- The Dramatic Works of Mary Russell Mitford*, 2 volumes (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1854).
- PLAY PRODUCTIONS:** *Julian*, London, Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, 15 March 1823;
- Foscari*, London, Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, 4 November 1826;
- Rienzi*, London, Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, 9 October 1828;
- Charles the First*, London, Royal Victoria Theatre, 2 July 1834;
- Sadak and Kalasrade*, with music by Charles Parker, London, English Opera House, 20 April 1835;
- Inez de Castro*, London, Royal City of London Theatre, 12 April 1841.
- OTHER:** *Stories of American Life; by American Writers*, 3 volumes, edited by Mitford (London: H. Colburn & R. Bentley, 1830);
- American Stories for Little Boys and Girls, Intended for Children under Ten Years of Age*, 3 volumes, edited by Mitford (London: Whittaker, Treacher, 1831); republished as *Stories, for Little Boys and Girls: Intended for Children under Ten Years of Age. Selected from American Writers*, first series, 3 volumes (London: Printed for Whittaker, 1835) and *Tales for Young People. Above Ten Years of Age. Selected from American Writers*, second series, 2 volumes (London: Whittaker, 1835);
- Lights and Shadows of American Life*, 3 volumes, edited by Mitford (London: H. Colburn & R. Bentley, 1832);



Mary Russell Mitford (engraving after a portrait by Benjamin Robert Haydon)

Finden's Tableaux. A Series of Picturesque Scenes of National Character, Beauty, and Costume. From Paintings, by Various Artists, after Sketches by W. Perring, edited by Mitford (London: C. Tilt, 1838);

Finden's Tableaux of the Affections; A Series of Picturesque Illustrations of the Womanly Virtues. From Paintings by W. Perring, edited by Mitford (London: C. Tilt, 1839).

Famous in her day for what she herself considered one of her lesser accomplishments, Mary Russell Mitford deserves attention as one of the first women successfully to enter the expanding nineteenth-century marketplace of prose and as the virtual founder of the local-color movement of regional fiction. Her finest work, *Our Village* (1824-1832), five volumes of sketches of English country life, became a local and international success and generated large numbers of imitations and descendants through the century, both in England and America.

Like many other writers of the later Romantic period, Mitford's literary life spanned many genres; she only reluctantly engaged in the prose work that alone brought her financial success. Mitford began her publishing career with an extensive production of poetry between 1810 and 1813; at the time, she was living in an elegant house outside of Reading, with her father and mother, in relative middle-class comfort. But the family had not always been—nor was it to remain—well off. In 1785 her mother, Mary Russell, a distant relative of the dukes of Bedford, had inherited a substantial estate; the thirty-six-year-old heiress almost immediately married George Mitford, a surgeon ten years younger, already addicted to high spending and gambling. They settled in the market town of Alresford, in Hampshire, in a gentility apparently little disturbed by Dr. Mitford's slight practice of medicine. Mary, their only surviving child, was born two years after the marriage, and grew up precocious, reading and reciting poetry from the age

of three, the companion of her father on many excursions in the countryside. Her father's extravagance quickly consumed his wife's property and, in the mid 1790s, led him away from rural Alresford to the more sophisticated seaside resort of Lyme Regis. Setting up in grand style, he tried for about a year to recoup his fortunes at gambling. When the attempt failed, the family fled to uncomfortable lodgings (and possibly debtors' prison) in London, where Dr. Mitford tried to piece together a living with odds and ends of a practice.

On Mary's tenth birthday, she playfully selected a lottery ticket for her father; the twenty-thousand-pound prize enabled the family to resettle, this time in the prosperous town of Reading. Mitford was sent for four years to the fashionable Abbey School in London—whose alumnae included L.E.L. (Letitia Elizabeth Landon, the poet) and the future Caroline Lamb. Here Mitford excelled in languages (including Latin) and literary studies, but she was summoned home in 1802 to grace the parlor at her father's newest folly, a grand mansion on parklike grounds just outside Reading. Here, with occasional trips to London and Northumberland, Mitford lived for the next two decades. Always an avid reader, she kept an extensive correspondence on literary and local topics, and before long she began to compose poetry with an eye to publication. As the family money inevitably disappeared and life grew shabbier, Mitford tried to earn an income with her poems. *Poems* (1810), the first production, was a small volume of miscellaneous poems about nature and flowers, combined with poems of praise for her father's Whig friends. Encouraged by Sir William Eford, an elderly man of letters with whom she carried on a lengthy correspondence, Mitford took on a full-length narrative poem about the newly revealed fate of the Bounty mutineers on Pitcairn Island. Both Eford and, through him, Samuel Taylor Coleridge took an active role in seeing this poem, *Christina, The Maid of the South Seas*, into print in 1811; it met with considerable success in Britain and the United States. As the family furniture and eventually the house itself were put up for sale, Mitford began to voice her hope that her publications might bring in substantial revenues. In 1812 she published a poem of country life, *Watlington Hill*, concentrating on descriptions of country-house scenery and hunting. A year later, inspired by the poems of Sir Walter Scott and Robert Southey, she wrote and published *Narrative*



Miniature of Mitford at age four (from *Constance Hill, Mary Russell Mitford and Her Surroundings, 1920*)

Poems on the Female Character in the Various Relations of Human Life, comprising two ambitious poems—"The Rival Sisters" and "Blanche of Castille," capitalizing on the current English interest in Spain. Although this volume appeared to promise a sequel, it apparently never saw light.

By 1820 Dr. Mitford's lottery winnings had been spent, and the family was forced to sell their mansion. They moved to a cottage outside Reading, on the turnpike road at Three Mile Cross, the village Mitford was to make famous as "our village." Though life in the tiny cottage could not have been easy, with a demanding and still-extravagant father, Mitford kept up a significant literary activity, not only engaging in an extensive and witty correspondence, but also actively pursuing income in two new fields, drama and prose. As she later wrote, the alternative would have been to leave her family and become a schoolteacher or governess.

For a prolific and imaginative author in need of funds, the stage held great attraction. Mitford had made an abortive try at stage writing in 1813, but only after the move to Three

Mile Cross did she turn to it in earnest, with the diary prayer, "God grant I may make some money of it" (20 December 1820). Her first manuscript, "Fiesco," was rejected after some interest by the actor-manager William Macready. With the advice of a younger author and critic, Thomas Talfourd—friend of William Wordsworth, Charles Lamb, Coleridge, and William Hazlitt, and intimate of the London theaters—Mitford persisted, and by 1825 she had written four tragedies, all on historical themes in the heroic Romantic mode: *Foscari* (1826), *Julian* (1823), *Charles the First* (1834), and *Rienzi* (1828). Only one of these saw timely production, however, the rest being delayed by theatrical infighting and—in the case of *Charles the First*—a licensing ban. The eight-day run of *Julian* in March 1823 brought Mitford a welcome two hundred pounds, but also a fierce critical attack. Mitford seems to have agreed with Macready that the review was sexist, and at once she proclaimed her intention to continue to write on themes of grand historical tragedy. *Foscari*, delayed at first by the coincidence of George Gordon, Lord Byron's simultaneous presentation of a tragedy on the same subject, was further delayed by quarrels with the actor Charles Kemble, who eventually played the lead in a run of fifteen nights in November and December 1826.

Mitford's most substantial theatrical success was *Rienzi*, which she finished by early 1825. A nasty series of private and public squabbles delayed its production; at last the play was produced in October 1828 at Drury Lane theater, with an unknown young actress, Louisa Anne Phillips, as the heroine. *Rienzi* ran to considerable critical praise, was often republished, and eventually became a popular vehicle for the American actress Charlotte Cushman; Edward Bulwer-Lytton referred to it with warm praise in the preface to his novel on the same subject (*Rienzi*, 1835). But even with this success, which kept the Mitford household from dissolution, dramatic work cost Mitford, as she wrote in a 4 December 1825 letter to Talfourd, "perpetual anxiety & constant disappointment." Even so, she kept writing for the stage: three more plays (*Inez de Castro* [1841] and two that remained unperformed—*Gaston de Blondeville* and *Otto of Wittlesbach*, both first published in *Dramatic Works* [1854]). She also wrote a libretto for an opera (*Sadak and Kalasrade*, 1835). The music for the opera was written by a young Reading amateur, Charles Parker, and achieved something less than success.

The period of Mitford's struggles to make a living through the theater was also the period of her most productive work in prose. She briefly considered writing novels, but gave up, imagining them compared to the prose of Jane Austen: "I know how utterly contemptible they will be," she wrote to Talfourd on 29 July 1825. In 1821, on Talfourd's advice (and conscious of Washington Irving's success in *Geoffrey Crayon's Sketch Book*, 1819, 1820), she began to turn her considerable skill as a letter writer—her letters are witty, observant, epigrammatic, engaging—to production of prose pieces for the magazines. Four early sketches were published by Thomas Campbell in the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1821, but Campbell subsequently rejected Mitford and Talfourd's proposal for a series of sketches on village life. The first pieces of *Our Village* were therefore published in 1823 in an obscure journal, the *Lady's Magazine*, where their popularity significantly enlarged the magazine's subscriptions. When the editor absconded owing Mitford some forty pounds, she began to think of publishing the prose pieces herself, to recoup her loss. By mid 1824 the first volume of *Our Village*, containing twenty-four sketches, was published, and it sold well from the first. By September 1824 the publisher asked her for a second series, which was in print by 1826; there were eventually to be five volumes published at two-year intervals until 1832.

In *Noctes Ambrosianæ*, Christopher North's "Shepherd" characterized the remarkable combination of wit and tenderness found throughout *Our Village*: "She has an ee like a hawk's, that misses naething, however far aff—and yet like a dove's, that sees only what is nearest and dearest, and round about the hame-circle o' its central nest" (*Blackwood's Magazine*, March 1829). Indeed, this observer of village life—as indistinguishable from the real Mitford as Childe Harold from Byron—is vital, social, chatty, acute, caring. Her personal life—a father to care for, a cottage and its garden to tend, her former home in all its grandeur not far off—is present but not consuming, for it is the lives of others that fill these sketches: blacksmith, cobbler, cricketers, farmers, maids, tradesmen, odd-jobbers. Like the journals of Dorothy Wordsworth, Mitford's sketches are filled with the stories of those she encounters on walks, social calls, and errands; unlike the journals, of course, these stories are developed over time, anecdotes that become narrations, fleshed out with beginnings, middles, and endings. Harriet Martineau, in her memoir of Mitford, as-

The other published a volume of dramatic
 scenes & then a novel for Mr. Mathews 1827
 & the other I wrote the poem before
 in Pindar's Posthumous for 1838 & the
 three following years.
 In 1843 the book her father & in
 autumn of 1851 left her at St. George's
 three miles from London about the
 middle of the year. The sick & suffering
 & preceding under the protection of
 a woman chiefly confined called
 Mrs. G. who was her father's
 with opportunity of being very well
 & to the other who was called by the
 name of Mrs. G. who was the mother of
 her. She has been possessed in a
 village - shared by the kindness of the
 Society for the relief of the
 North to Long, & advanced by frequent
 visits & while she was in the
 hospital she was frequently conversing
 with Mrs. G. who was the mother of
 & the last before with a female
 attendant her confinement was a severe
 labor, & during this visit her
 son -
 Do not you think best about putting
 in the part respecting the putting the
 money - I wanted to show that I was
 because that by the way of letting my family
 know that I was not in the world.

Born in 1700 on the 16th of December at
 the little town of Abington in Hampshire
 father - George Pittard M. A. son of a younger
 brother of the mother, I Pittard's English book
 : mathematics & some questions of the
 Mathematics - a kind of the history class
 father - Henry Pittard - only surviving child
 & daughter of Richard Pittard & S. Pittard of
 Abingdon & the town of Abington in Hampshire
 or about 1700. He died aged 88 before his
 daughter's marriage, & was buried in
 the church of St. Andrew at Westbury where the
 inscription with Pittard's name & that of that
 friend Mrs. Pittard has a portrait of him in
 the gown with a wig but without a wig
 hanging over it.
 When a few years after Mr. Pittard's
 name was published to Reading - & then a few years
 after that again when he travelled
 in he went you would think it by the
 way in Dorchester in a fine stone
 building built by the great Mrs. Pittard
 before his time but probably that time
 & today - by the time of the
 & then 30 & 40 years ago I was
 to London - but the article is
 in Mrs. Pittard's book for the
 the purchase of it, one price in the
 The book has been since that by
 Pittard's name in London & by the
 & other books in London partly of the
 & that Mr. Pittard was a very
 house about a mile from that town &
 which has done the same thing
 the one of them & where the

Manuscript for an autobiographical sketch by Mitford (BE 101; Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery)

serted that *Our Village* uses an easier, less challenging form than fiction, that there is in the form a lowering of standards, necessitated by the real-life demands placed on the writer by her father and her finances. But this view does not do justice to the precise control of point of view, the careful framing through the activity and interest of the observer-persona, and the craftedly unobtrusive style. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's praise of Mitford's "Dutch minuteness" is perhaps more apt.

Mitford's updating of the urbane wit of the mid eighteenth century forms a surprising vehicle for the inherently sentimental and picturesque subject matter—country scenery and life. A cottage in the forest receives a skillful description in the mode of the Romantic picturesque:

a picture of a place, with its French windows and verandahs, its trellis and porch covered with clematis and jessamine, its baby-house conservatory and its miniature lawn. It was situated in the midst of woody, winding lanes, lost, as it were, in the labyrinths of our rich and intricate country, with an open grove of noble beeches on one side of it, and a clear stream, crossed by a winding bridge, on the other.

But after this obviously warm observation of a pretty scene, the persona pointedly and wittily undercuts the sentimentality of her description:

It seemed a spot made expressly for brides and bridegrooms, doomed, by the inexorable laws of fashion, to four weeks of connubial felicity, to get creditably weary of solitude and of each other.

This acute narrator takes subjects of apparent ordinariness (the life of an insignificant crossroads village, the courtships of servant girls, the short-term lease of a cottage in the woods) and reveals their importance, not by commenting explicitly but by telling the stories that lie behind the subjects. The important themes of *Our Village* are found, not surprisingly, in the interests of the observer-narrator and developed in the stories she tells: the dignity of working-class life; the difficulties of courtship and marriage choices for servant women; the powerful influence of marital status on individuals of both genders and all classes; the importance of age—childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, old age—in the moral and economic choices of everyday life; the difficult interaction between established gentry, urban nouveau

riche, and village labor; the steady pressure on village life exerted by national economic change and proximity to the swelling city of London.

There are ample evidences in *Our Village* of the tensions of post-1815 England, above all the pressure of time and change on individuals and communities; yet these evidences are mediated by the exceptionally calm, almost unchanging narrator, one who, not unlike the poetic voice of Wordsworth, feels change deeply and insists upon a compensatory continuity. Mitford's sketch "Lucy" ends with such a moment: Lucy, the narrator's servant, a lively, gossiping and flirtatious girl, is jilted by her beau, a handsome tailor from London whose business in the village fails. On the rebound, she marries a pleasant enough, but pedantic, schoolteacher and moves to the city of S--- [old Sarum?]. There "Mitford" visits her, saddened at the change she finds in Lucy: "She, a schoolmistress, a keeper of silence, a maintainer of discipline, a scolder, a punisher! Ah! she would rather be scolded herself; it would be a far lighter punishment." But this change, though involving loss for both Lucy and herself, is recognized as necessary, for it has made Lucy independent of servitude and given her the pleasure of her own house:

What a pleasure it is to see Lucy presiding in that parlor, in all the glory of her honest affection and warm hospitality, making tea for the three guests whom she loves best in the world, vaunting with courteous pride her home-made bread and her fresh butter, yet thinking nothing good enough for the occasion; smiling and glowing, and looking the very image of beautiful happiness. Such a moment almost consoles us for losing her.

After tea, Mitford walks us through the old ruins in which the town of S--- and Lucy's new home are built, evoking again the themes of time, change, and loss, but this time romantically. The essay ends:

Nothing can be finer than the mixture of those varied greens, so crisp and life-like, with the crumbling grey stone; nothing more perfectly in harmony with the solemn beauty of the place, than the deep cooings of the wood-pigeons, who abound in the walls. I know no pleasure so intense, so soothing, so apt to bring sweet tears into the eyes, or to awaken thoughts that "lie too deep for tears," as a walk around the old city on a fine summer evening. A ride to S--- was always



Mitford's cottage at Three Mile Cross, circa 1836 (lithograph by E. Havell)

delightful to me, even before it became the residence of Lucy; it is now my prime festival.

The quote from *Lyrical Ballads*, followed by the echo of the Immortality Ode in the final word of the essay ("festival"), implies that these sketches are structured on an aesthetic more demanding than may be apparent from their "charming" appearance.

Mitford's work in the prose sketch continued after the five volumes of *Our Village*, with *Belford Regis; or, Sketches of a Country Town* (1835) and *Country Stories* (1837). Neither is as inventive or as aptly composed as *Our Village*, though both met with decent commercial and critical success and helped to keep the wolf from the cottage door. The project of *Belford Regis*—the description of life in nearby Reading—is interesting as a precursor of later nineteenth-century market-town fictions, but the sketches, while in places witty and observant like those of *Our Village*, seem less convincing as a whole, missing the truth of their overall subject, a rapidly growing trading town not far from London. Mitford was hampered by the frenetic and demanding conditions of life at the cottage, with an ever more demanding father. Her mother died in January 1830, but Dr. Mitford lived on in the care of his daughter until 1842. She may also have been re-

stricted by nostalgia, writing with, as she says, "the peculiar tastes and old-fashioned predilections" of one who remembers the Reading of forty years earlier.

Other literary enterprises of her later years include the editing of several volumes of stories about life in the United States. Mitford's strong interest in American literature led also to correspondence and visits with American men and women of letters, many of whose careers were advanced by Mitford's essays and anthologies; these American connections included James Greenleaf Whittier, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Daniel Webster, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose work Mitford actively promoted and whose visit she was disappointed to miss. Increasingly connected and recognized in the literary world, Mitford became a close and confidential friend of Elizabeth Barrett (though not of her husband, Robert Browning), and their extensive correspondence, which began in 1836, is well known. Edmund Gosse claimed that Mitford was responsible for the first publication, in 1847, of Barrett's *Sonnets to the Portuguese* (1850), but John Carter and Graham Pollard's bibliographic investigations have revealed this "publication" to be a forgery by T. J. Wise. A less disputed connection with

Barrett is that the famous lapdog Flush began domestic literary life at Three Mile Cross and went to Wimpole Street as a gift from Mitford.

In 1837 Mitford was asked to edit *Finden's Tableaux*, a series of elegant "coffee-table" anthologies of poems, sketches, and engravings, drawing on her widening circle of literary friends for material. In the same year Mitford was given a state pension, and in 1842 a private subscription was raised to help her pay the debts left after her father's death; the last decade of her life was relatively free of financial worries. Her beloved cottage, however, had so deteriorated that by 1851 she had to abandon it for another in Swallowfield, about three miles further from Reading. Invalided by an accident in her pony chaise, she continued an active correspondence with many friends until her death in January 1855. Her final literary projects include the publication in 1852 of *Recollections of a Literary Life*, a volume of personal and anecdotal essays about her reading and her acquaintances with literary figures, both English and American, and in 1854 of her longest prose narrative, *Atherton*, comprising the first of three volumes, of which the other two were fugitive stories. *Atherton*, on which she had worked sporadically and reluctantly for years, finds its strength in the descriptive vein of the village sketches rather than in mastery of plot, incident, or character development.

Remembered largely in terms such as "charming" and "pleasant," Mitford's prose sketches are probably best seen not merely in such nostalgic perspectives, but also as precursors of the fictions of community that were to find their English masters in such writers as Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell, and a strong American life in the local-color writings of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Sarah Orne Jewett.

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Papers:

There are letters in the Becks County Library, Reading; the John Rylands Library; the Harvard University Library; the Bodleian Library; and the Huntington Library. The British Library has Mitford's diary for 1819-1823.