



the yellow nineties online

edited by Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra

LEILA MACDONALD (1871-1944)

The poet Leila Macdonald was born on 7 February 1871 in Mayfair to wealthy parents. Her father Reginald Somerled Macdonald was a Queen's Counsel (a senior lawyer). He died when Macdonald was five. Her mother also died young, leaving the child to be brought up by the housekeeper in the house of her grandfather, Sir William Grove, who was a judge and a scientist.

Her family may have known that of Hubert Crackanthorpe, the writer she was to marry, as they had much in common, both being aristocratic with legal connections and property in the north. Macdonald was described by Hubert Crackanthorpe's grand-nephew David as "a handsome young woman of literary tastes" but also as "unbalanced" (58, 136). Whether this is a reasonable description it is difficult to say, as no contemporary evidence attests to it.

Leila and Hubert's marriage took place on St. Valentine's Day 1893, in St Paul's Church in Knightsbridge. After the wedding they went to France, to the neighbourhood of Orthez, where Crackanthorpe's friend, the poet and novelist Francis Jammes, rented a villa for them. During this stay Jammes recounts that Macdonald was burned on a picnic by an exploding spirit stove being used to make their afternoon cup of tea. She suffered damage to her eyes necessitating visits to a specialist for at least two years. On their return to London, the young couple lived first at 36 Chelsea Gardens and then at Lindsey House, 96 Cheyne Walk on the Chelsea Embankment, which they had decorated by Roger Fry. The marriage seems to have been a difficult one from the start. Crackanthorpe wrote of communication difficulties in relationships, sometimes to a grotesque degree, in his 1895 book *Sentimental Studies*.

In the period after their marriage Macdonald wrote four pieces which appeared in *The Yellow Book*: a story of French provincial life called "Jeanne-Marie" in Volume 3 (October 1894); a short poem, "Red Rose," in Volume 4 (January 1895); some lyrical "Refrains" in Volume 5 (April 1895); and a poem entitled "To the Bust of the Pompeian Coelia" in Volume 7 (October 1895). Ella D'Arcy felt that Macdonald owed her inclusion in *The Yellow Book* to "the intercession of her husband and the affability of [Henry] Harland" (Mix 183). However, D'Arcy's judgement cannot be substantiated and seems to have been personal.

Macdonald miscarried early in 1896 and it seems reasonable to see an allusion to this event in her verse play "The Love of the Poor," which appeared in *The Savoy* in April of that year. The verses dramatize the encounter of an old man, an old woman, and the soul of their dead child, who brings them comfort in their misery.

Macdonald's miscarriage undoubtedly disturbed her and upset the already precarious marriage. She later averred that she had contracted a venereal disease from Crackanthorpe, presumably syphilis. It may be that the miscarriage was caused by syphilis but, until there were other signs (or a later lover accused her of infecting him), Macdonald would not have known she was diseased.

After the miscarriage, Macdonald went travelling and took a lover. Crackanthorpe also went abroad, with Sissie Welch, the sister of Richard Le Gallienne. Macdonald and her lover, and Crackanthorpe and his, lived for a time in a rented apartment in Paris. This lasted until Macdonald left and officially asked for a divorce, citing "legal cruelty," or the transmission of venereal disease to a spouse. Distraught by Macdonald's divorce proceedings, Crackanthorpe drowned himself in the Seine on 5 November 1896. His body was recovered on 23 December and removed to London.

After Crackanthorpe's disappearance, and before his body was found, Macdonald returned to London. Although she stayed with the Harlands and was in contact with other old friends, she never regained her former position in literary life. Her book of 1904, *The Wanderer and other Poems*, went almost unnoticed.

Crackanthorpe's family blamed Macdonald for his death and there is reason to believe she feared them. She was said (in the 1901 census) to be living on journalistic work but none has been found. She did not remarry or have children and died at 52 Rue de Théâtre Paris on 29 December 1944 at the age of seventy-three.

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