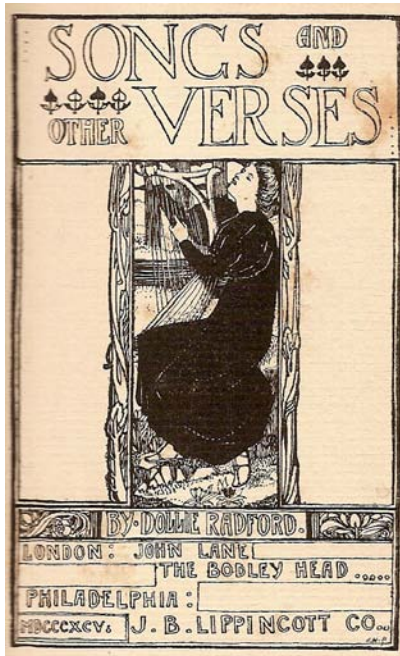




the yellow nineties online

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DOLLIE RADFORD (1858-1920)



Wilson, Patten. "Title Page."
Songs and Other Verses.
London: John Lane The Bodley
Head, 1895.

More than most contributors to *The Yellow Book*, Dollie Radford managed to unite the two opposite directions of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. She pursued the direction of a conservative aesthetics associated with the reflexive discourse of an art for art's sake ideology, which led to the Decadence of the fin-de-siècle poets. And she pursued the direction of a radical politics associated with the communal discourse of an Arts and Crafts ideology, which led to the socialism of William Morris and the feminism of the New Woman poets. This union of aesthetics and politics is well conveyed by two images of Radford. One is Patten Wilson's 1895 woodcut for the title page of Radford's *Songs and Other Verses*. Wilson depicts the poet as a sandalled harpist in a billowing gown, lost in the reverie of her songs. Vertically framed by art-nouveau columns, she appears as the quintessential Pre-Raphaelite

aesthete. The second image is Frederick Hollyer's 1887 photograph of the Hammersmith branch of the Socialist League. Seated between Morris's two daughters, Radford commands front and centre as a revolutionary (Livesey 496).

Dollie Radford (nee Caroline Maitland) grew up in London, where her father worked as a tailor. The oldest of six children, she suffered at the age of ten the death of her mother, followed by her father's series of separations with his second wife. Educated at Queen's College, she was a close friend of Eleanor Marx, reading Shakespeare with the Dogberry Club in Eleanor's home, playing charades with Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and

providing care for Marx's wife (Comyn 163). She published her earliest poems as "C.M." in the radical *Progress: A Monthly Magazine of Advanced Thought* in 1883, months before marrying Ernest Radford, whom she had met in the library of the British Museum in 1880. The young couple shared their interests in poetry, politics, and the arts and crafts. Moving to 9 Hammersmith Terrace, she was delighted to "have a Pre-Raphaelite as a landlord – F.G. Stephens, to wit" (qtd in MacEwen, "Radfords" 30) – and Morris for a neighbour, attending his weekly socialist meetings as an active campaigner. When her husband was hired as the secretary for the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, she helped organize its first exhibition in 1888. Also, through her husband's membership, Radford was an associate of the Rhymers' Club but could not attend the male-only meetings at the Cheshire Cheese.



Bryden, Robert. *Dollie Radford*. 1902. Woodcut. *Poets of the Younger Generation*. Ed. William Archer. London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1902.

Each of Radford's books includes a sequence of gentle love-lyrics, written "in tender measures" ("The Little Songs"), usually addressed to a lover, but sometimes to children from their mother. She interrupts these conventional sequences with a number of poems that startle with their unpredictably decadent, feminist, or socialist views. The first two of her four poems in *The Yellow Book* exemplify the love songs. In "A Song" ("Outside a hedge of roses," 6 [July 1895]: 121-22) the singer is ready to venture beyond her walled garden of sweet blossoms to follow the showering laughter of her lover through the thorns. Enlivened with imagery of thistle down, tides of the sea, or self-reflexive "golden rhymes," these poems often celebrate the collaborative creativity of poets in love. The poet lauds the power of her partner's poetry, but then writes back, exchanging roles as poet and muse: "if you will sing the songs I play" (*Songs* "If you will sing" 34).

Decadent poets of the 1890s often pursue the exquisite expression of a fleeting impression that emphasizes a tension between the permanence of artifice and the decay of life. While some address the effects of decay in the breakdown of language, Radford belongs with those who address the effects of decay in the social order of urban culture. Arthur Symons, for example, depicts the banality of London nights at the music hall. But Radford is more political than Symons with her critique of the suburban hell of subways and cigarettes. "From the Suburbs" depicts the London underground where tired husbands return from the daily bustle of business to a quiet evening of suburban leisure far removed from the romance of armoured knights treasuring a lady's glove (*Songs* 82-86). "A Novice" features an equally parodic scene of a domestic Madonna haloed by the serpentine smoke of her cigarette. In its bathetic movement towards the trite details of her "future state" going up in a thin curl of smoke, the poem appears to exemplify the decadence of an irresponsible sophistication, our urban corruption of the natural order. But it should also be read as a New Woman poem, assuming a radical agenda for the class of women "daintily prepared" for little else than perfume who must first dare disaffection and defiance before preparing for rebellion (*Songs* 78-81).

Her third poem for *The Yellow Book*, "A Ballad of Victory" (9 [April 1896]: 229-32), is a direct statement of her socialist politics. A scarred maiden in a tattered dress pauses from her pilgrimage to rest amidst the "costly merchandise / Where people thronged in eager quest" in the bustling "market place." The maiden is Victory, but she appears defeated unless the youth of the heartless town can keep faith in her strength. The question-and-answer structure and the looming tragedy that characterize the ballad genre threaten to dash the trace of hope that rests not upon a foreign messiah but within ourselves if we work together to revolutionize our lives.

Her most ironic poem of radical protest is a dramatic monologue, a plea to the next generation. "From our Emancipated Aunt in Town" is addressed to nieces embarrassed by their eccentric aunt who dallies with the avant garde, "all that is weird and wild and new." The old regime wherein ladies lived like Cinderellas devoting their lives to a fairy prince is a patriarchal dream now gone. But failing to push beyond the desire to appear daring, the aunt feels too old to scale the heights of the New Woman question. Radford

clearly worries that the next generation may merely join the young nieces who smile condescendingly in quiet lanes far from public meetings, shunning “their place as future leaders” (*Songs* 87-93).

Radford also wrote five books for children, a novel, a book of short stories, and a verse play. She wrote little while coping with her husband’s dementia during the last dozen years of her life, but she completed “The Ransom” for a successful stage run at the Little Theatre. It features a remarkable choral exchange between prostitutes and housewives feeling equally dead to the world. As the Prostitutes cry, “We are dead ere the dawn of our dying,” the Unloved Women reply: “We are ghosts growing sick of our life. / Oh, Love, hear the sound of our crying / That breaks through the waste of our strife.”

Radford’s collected *Poems* adds a new sequence that turns from gentle love to a Gothic imagery of unrequited lust: a torrent on the heath (“At Night”), an angel “veiled in grey..., wrapt in fire..., outcast from heaven” (“My Angel”). Though not prolific, Radford ranged widely in her interests from playful nursery verse to conventional love songs and from decadent disaffection to feminist rebellion and socialist revolution.

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Selected Publications by Radford

A Light Load. London: Elkin Matthews, 1891.

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“The Ransom” [verse play]. *Poetry Review* 6 (1915): 117-53.

For children

Songs for Somebody. London: David Nutt, 1893.

Good Night. London: David Nutt, 1895.

The Young Gardeners Kalendar. London: De La More, 1904.

Sea-Thrift: A Fairy Tale. London: De La More, 1904.

In Summer Time: A Little Boy’s Dream. Harting: Pear Tree, 1905.

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