



Oxford University Press, 1990
432 pages, 27 illustrations

This contribution to the recent rush of biographies of eminent Victorians and Edwardians explores the life and art of the woman who was the most celebrated and prolific novelist of her time. She was photographed by Lewis Carroll, befriended by Henry James, reviewed by Gladstone, praised by Tolstoy, paid court to by President Theodore Roosevelt—and then forgotten. Now Mrs. Humphry Ward is at last recalled and brilliantly interpreted by John Sutherland, professor of literature at Caltech. His biography takes us step by step from her agonizing childhood—born Mary Augusta Arnold in 1851 in Tasmania—through her phenomenal career as a best-selling author and pioneering social reformer to her death in 1920, by which time reviewers were dismissing her last novels as “beneath notice.” This detailed portrait depicts the political and personal context from which Mrs. Ward’s novels emerged and describes those people who influenced her intellectually and assisted (or hindered) her at different periods of her life.

Mary was a child to whom the great poet and critic Matthew Arnold was “Uncle Matt,” the renowned Thomas Arnold of Rugby was “Grand-dada,” and Tom Arnold was “Papa.” “That she was an Arnold was the most important single fact in Mary’s life,” Sutherland states. Yet, for the first 16 years of her life, she had little contact with her immediate family and seems to have spent far too much of her unruly childhood in solitary confinement. Her father writes of punishing her as a toddler by locking her up. When her family returned to England and then moved to Dublin, the unwanted Mary was given over to the care of her grand-

mother and aunt, who handled her great rages by having a strong footman carry her to a room where she “screamed herself out” behind bolted doors. At school she was locked into a cloakroom for punishment. A lonely child, she was made even lonelier by isolation. It is not surprising that Mary’s first surviving story (written when she was 13) is an escapist romance wherein her heroine is imprisoned in the recesses of a dungeon.

According to Sutherland’s account of Mary’s early years, the wild, willful, clever child emerges as a Maggie Tulliver who breaks her expensive wax doll into bits and melts the pieces in little saucepans. In describing Mary’s experiences at Rock Terrace Boarding School, Sutherland so graphically conveys the cold and punitive atmosphere that we feel Jane Eyre’s years at Lowood were pleasant by comparison. Biographical narrative and novelistic realism merge in such passages to give us the sense that Mary’s life imitated art, as though she had lived a Victorian novel before she ever wrote one.

Out of her oxymoronic beginnings—an orphan whose father and mother were very much alive—comes a whole series of further contradictions defining Mary Ward. She was both passive and dominant, poorly educated and learned, old-fashioned and modern, selfish and generous. She was a living paradox—“a woman called Humphry.” She helped found Oxford’s first institution for the higher education of women, but did not send either of her daughters to college. Afflicted all her life with debilitating illnesses (including writer’s cramp), she nevertheless remained dynamically hard-working. Although she claimed that her right hand was too weak to

produce critical or historical studies, it was strong enough to write more than two dozen lengthy novels. She was made enormously rich by her huge earnings, yet she was eventually drained dry financially by a reckless husband and a feckless son. Their compulsive gambling forced Mrs. Ward to become "a money-generating fiction machine."

One might think it would be difficult to write a highly readable biography about someone who wrote a good many not-very-readable (at least by current standards) novels. But Sutherland overcomes this difficulty with his superb prose style. Parts of this book are deeply moving, such as the description of the sudden death of Mary's sister Lucy. Other sections are dryly funny because Sutherland is a devastating master of meiosis, combined with a sardonic deadpan tone:

The Edwardian [railroad] passenger was assisted at every station by an army of porters who—unlike their misnamed descendants—were actually prepared to carry luggage.

It was . . . the Wards' first visit to the South of France and not what everyone would have considered a restful itinerary: Paris, Cannes, Monte Carlo, San Remo, Genoa, Spezia, Florence, Pisa—then back by sleeper, all in a fortnight.

Sutherland is as good at hyperbole as at understatement. He indicates Mary's vainglorious hopes for her only son: "This future Prime Minister of England went up to his college in October 1895." He characterizes a letter from Mary to her husband as one that "would have raised the spirits of Job." His prose is enlivened by similes: Mary

wrote and rewrote her novels "until the manuscripts looked like battlefields." When one of her typescripts seems a trifle *large* ("around three-quarters of a million words"), Sutherland describes Mary as hoping that the publisher, "like a clever corsetière," can hide "what increasingly she saw as an ominous corpulence in her brain-child."

I should warn other American readers that I spent more than a few confusing moments puzzling over various Britishisms. Eventually it dawned on me that "mod cons" are "modern conveniences," but I'm still not exactly sure what it means to "cock a snook" at Oxford or just what Mary Ward's son *did* when he "made the College wall side in 1894." You also may find yourself a bit baffled by some military slang—do you know what "scrimshanking" is, for instance? But these bouts of bewilderment are not so much hindrances as chances for wonder (or research in the Oxford English Dictionary).

One of the facets of Mary Ward's character most difficult to understand is her opposition to female emancipation. She was actively antagonistic and in 1889 published an "Appeal" against women's suffrage that helped hold back for years the extension of the franchise to women. By 1908 she was head of the Women's National Anti-Suffrage League and argued her case vigorously throughout England and Scotland. "No one, least of all herself," Sutherland writes, "has convincingly explained why Mary Ward was so hostile to the cause of women's rights." But Sutherland goes on to suggest Mrs. Ward's "horror of 'militancy,'" her belief that it was "somehow unseemly" for women to

want the vote, and, most important, her inability "to resist wanting to please and serve father figures." Much of her life was shaped by her need for approval from powerful and patriarchal males. Support for the suffragette movement would all too clearly have been for Mary a revolt against those masculine presences, both social and psychic, she longed to serve. Further speculation about her unwavering antisuffragism might turn profitably to her reactions to her father's religious crises. Thomas Arnold converted twice to Roman Catholicism. The first change of heart, in 1856, almost destroyed his marriage and forced his resignation as Education Secretary at Hobart. He returned to Anglicanism in 1865, but eleven years later reconverted to Catholicism, thereby ruining his chances for a chair at Oxford. Such destructive irresolution may have caused an unconscious counter-response in Mary, an unwillingness to change her mind once she took a position. Thus she locked herself into an intellectual prison, in spite of her earlier horror at confinement.

Some of Sutherland's more intriguing, but also discomfiting, chapters describe the altering attitudes toward Mrs. Ward as the 19th century drew to an end. By this point in the biography, the reader (at least this reader) is so sympathetic to Mary and so impressed with her literary output and her social and philanthropic work that it is painful to read about some of the bitter attacks on her. As she moved from being, in the late 1880s, "a famous novelist and thinker" to, in the late nineties, "an institution, an embodiment of middle-class, late-Victorian values," she became a target of scorn for the younger genera-

tion. Lytton Strachey hated her, calling her "old and sordid and insignificant." Max Beerbohm found her dull. Virginia Woolf claimed that "reading Mrs Ward was like catching flu." Even her own beloved nephew Aldous Huxley—his first name taken from the hero of one of Mary Ward's novels—cruelly satirized her in his first published work of fiction. Sutherland's book, however, overcomes these opinions, giving Mrs. Ward a kind of majesty earned through productive labor in the face of suffering. Perhaps we can now begin to agree with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle: "If we wish to give an idea of the later Victorian era with its transition period, its mental unrest, its groping after new truths, its sharp contrasts between old conditions and new problems, where could the student of 2000 find it more clearly set forth, with great dignity of language and thought, than in Mrs Ward." Sutherland gives us a 10-year head start.

At one time in the United States a free copy of Mrs. Ward's far-famed novel *Robert Elsmere* was given with every purchase of a bar of a certain new soap. Nowadays it is not quite so easy or so cheap to get our hands on her books. Still, an excellent series called Virago Modern Classics, issued by Penguin and "dedicated to the celebration of women writers and to the rediscovery and reprinting of their works," published Mrs. Ward's *Marcella* in 1984; and we can hope that the interest generated by Sutherland's new biography will encourage other presses to re-issue more of her good, and once vastly popular, novels. In the meantime, and with the illumination provided by Sutherland, I am going to begin a rereading of *Marcella*:

"The mists—and the sun—and the first streaks of yellow in the beeches—beautiful!—*beautiful!*"

And with a long breath of delight Marcella Boyce threw herself on her knees by the window she had just opened . . .

Jenijoy La Belle
Professor of Literature

Books continued

Origami Zoo An Amazing Collection of Folded Paper Animals

by Robert J. Lang and Stephen Weiss

St. Martin's Press, 1990
135 pages

Robert Lang (BS '82, PhD '86) and his coauthor, both considered among the world's finest paper folders, present a menagerie of 37 original designs for paper beasts—from woolly mammoths to horseflies and black widow spiders, from pandas and skunks to eagles and praying mantises—with detailed diagrams and step-by-step instructions on how to make them yourself. It helps to have a lot of patience and excellent small-muscle control, but anyone who mastered the origami beaver that Lang designed for *E&S* readers in the Winter 1989 issue should have no trouble—well, perhaps a little trouble with the praying mantis. Lang works in the Photonics Group at JPL and is a lecturer in applied physics at Caltech.

The Curious Cook More Kitchen Science and Lore

by Harold McGee

North Point Press, 1990
339 pages

McGee (BS '73) earned his PhD in English literature from Yale and went on to write *On Food and Cooking: The Science and Lore of the Kitchen* (1984), of which the *New York Times Book Review* said: "Good books of food scholarship are rare; this one is to be treasured." Now comes the sequel, proving wrong anyone who thought the

first encyclopedic volume covered everything there was to cover. Here McGee goes beyond the scholarship of the first book and describes his own experiments—"the fun I've had playing with foods." Learn, for example, how spattered oil from a frying pan ends up on the *inside* of the cook's glasses (not exactly Millikan's oil-drop experiment); why mushrooms don't get soggy if you soak them; why oil wilts lettuce leaves but why cutting them with a knife does *not* turn them brown; why searing meat does not seal in juices; and why cooking in an aluminum pan won't give you Alzheimer's disease. You don't have to be a cook to find this fun to read; any scientist who eats will find it fascinating.

Raising Money Venture Funding & How to Get It

by Ronald E. Merrill
and Gaylord E. Nichols

AMACOM, American
Management Association, 1990
283 pages

The authors offer a wealth of tips for getting over the first major hurdle of starting your own business—finding capital. They tell how other new entrepreneurs have done it, what investors look for, how to avoid the legal pitfalls, and how to write a successful business plan; most important, they describe how to establish an enduring relationship with investors. Most of the case studies in the book originated in the Caltech/MIT Enterprise Forum, a unique organization that advises new companies and critiques business plans. As director of Caltech's Industrial Relations Center, "Nick" Nichols played a

leading role in founding the Enterprise Forum, and Merrill has been a key participant for many years. The book's foreword is contributed by Caltech Trustee (and venture capitalist) Benjamin Rosen (BS '54), who starts off: "When I was at Caltech some thirty-odd years ago, and we were assigned, say, a physics problem, there more often than not was a unique answer to that problem. Well, the answer to a business problem may not be unique. In fact, in many cases, there is no answer." But even if there are no unique answers, there are strategies, and this book tells how to develop and follow them.

The Right Place at the Right Time

by John D. Roberts

**ACS Books
American Chemical Society, 1990
299 pages**

In this book, part of the series *Profiles, Pathways, and Dreams: Autobiographies of Eminent Chemists*, Jack Roberts, faculty member since 1952, former division chairman, former provost, and currently Institute Professor of Chemistry, Emeritus, chronicles his career, which he sums up as having been "unbelievably fortunate" for reasons of always being where the title suggests. The book contains a lot of chemistry for those interested in the development of nuclear magnetic resonance, but non-chemists need not be deterred by the drawings of chemical structures that decorate most of the pages. In between is the personal story, told with the characteristic Roberts warmth, of his "lucky" life. Many photographs.