Blackmore's Letters to Blackwood: The Record of a Novelist's Indecision

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Why R. D. Blackmore could never duplicate the success of *Lorna Doone* (1869), his third novel, is a question without a convincing answer. For the next three decades he tried to match his great popular achievement, but by the end of his career in 1897 he was grudgingly resigned to being known as a one-book author. Of his thirteen other novels, all but *The Maid of Sker* (1872), *Mary Anerley* (1880), and *Springhaven* (1887) have long been out of print, and most of them suffer from enough lapses into sentimental and trivial dialogue, melodramatic plotting, and garrulous narration to offend modern tastes. Though many of their scenes and characters have intense life, the neglected works never quite achieve the coherence of great fiction — even of so sprawling a narrative as *Lorna Doone*. The source of Blackmore's difficulties in achieving coherence remains as obscure as the operations of his creative mind. But the context of his frustration can be known by following the record of his efforts to write in the most demanding and immediately profitable mode open to the late-Victorian novelist: serial publication.

The difficulties of writing coherent fiction in monthly installments do not explain why his eleven serialized novels fall short of *Lorna Doone*, which — being rejected by at least three leading magazines — was published complete in three volumes. Other novelists of the period had thrived on serialization, and Thomas Hardy was to prove that, in spite of editorial constraints, brilliant success by installments was still possible. But in Blackmore's case this arrangement was unsuited to his health, his working habits, and his weak artistic conscience. The most direct evidence of his problems in writing the next two novels after *Lorna Doone* appears in his letters to John and William Blackwood, with whom he began negotiating near the end of 1870, when the one-volume edition of his latest work showed signs of becoming a best-seller. Its success led him back into the trap of serial publication, despite bitter memories of how Cradock Nowell had been bowdlerized and desperately revised for *Macmillan's Magazine* in 1865 and 1866. Because Blackwood's accepted and began publishing *The Maid of Sker* and *Alice Lorraine* (1875) long before either manuscript was finished, Blackmore soon found himself struggling to keep on schedule while trying to please a publisher whom he almost slavishly respected. His letters record the circumstantial difficulties — the interruptions from visitors, orchard work, or attacks of epilepsy; and they shed some light on the deeper problems of judgment and artistic self-confidence that eventually led to the last-minute surrender of his most ambitious goal: a tragic ending for *Alice Lorraine*.

His desire to please forms a dominant note in the correspondence. When *The Maid of Sker* was finally accepted some three months after he submitted the first number, he told John Blackwood of his need for approval: "A writer, I think, is much like a singer; he may
do his best, but cannot enjoy it, unless he believes that his audience will. The mere thought of a cold reception takes half the caloric out of him" [15 March 1871]. At the outset, his desire to please was part of his desire to sell a manuscript, and he approached the publisher with marked deference to official Victorian tastes. Unlike George Eliot, who at the start of her career convinced John Blackwood that "I cannot stir a step aside from what I feel to be true in character," Blackmore began the correspondence with a readiness to compromise. After calling prudery the "sham virginity of a prostituted age," he had given in to Alexander Macmillan in 1866; now he broached the issue to John Blackwood with submissive caution:

If there are any expressions in it [the first part of The Maid of Sker], wh. you think too strong for the pages of a magazine like yours, or anything of a tone wh. may appear to some like levity, I shall be quite happy to alter wherever requested. Only if the story shd. happen to suit you (except in such small particulars) I must beg to be always permitted to make these changes myself. [17 December 1870]

After the work was accepted, Blackmore even took the initiative in cleaning up the language of the old Welsh fisherman who narrates the story: he deleted "prospects of paternity" because the phrase was "open to a very coarse interpretation" [19 December 1871]. But bowdlerizing still rankled:

I have done my best to send off proofs, in accordance with the Editor's [John Blackwood's] wishes... I cd. only find 3 damns, & have sedulously erased them; also omitted the devil, as if he himself were after me; & Bowdlerized the whole of it. My opinion is that if a book is to be read aloud by young ladies, it shd. be written by them. Especially, when trying to describe the manners of the last century, a writer is crippled if he has to consult the fashion of this alone—a far more deeply wicked age of delicate hypocrisy.

But of course I see the necessity of accommodation; & I do not deny the justice of the editor's observations. There is a sentence as full of bad English as one of Anthony Trollope's. — If I cd. write effeminate stuff, like his, I might get on a bit. [16 January 1872]

The problem continued during the publication of Alice Lorraine. Blackmore deleted a reference to "the pony's accouchement," apparently after Mrs. John Blackwood objected; he changed a phrase concerning rabbits that "keep on in the family way" to rabbits "that run in families"; yet in the same novel he could describe drunken British soldiers looting a Spanish city without offending the editor's household. His profane "sporting parson" was forbidden to swear (13 May 1874); the rector's cry of "The Devil" became "Ods beds!" (actually a more profane expression), while "May I be d—d"
dwindled still further to "May I be dashed..." The thundering oaths he might have sworn are hardly apparent from the manuscript.

While irritating to Blackmore, these concessions look far from drastic in retrospect, and they were part of his freely chosen duties in writing for a respectable magazine. More serious problems, over which he had less control after signing his contract, arose from his struggle to stay ahead of the printer. Here was a direct threat to the coherence of his fiction, especially when he tried to construct a tragic plot for Alice Lorraine. Lured by the prospect of immediate payments, Blackmore invited difficulties by contracting to finish novels without having them near completion in manuscript — something that he had never been rash or prestigious enough to do in the previous decade. The Maid of Sker was accepted after he had submitted only the first two numbers; when the first installment appeared in August, 1871, he apparently had finished no more than four (possibly only three) of the eventual twelve installments. The pressure to keep on schedule left him little time for revision, especially because his writing was frequently interrupted. As a market-gardener on his little estate at Teddington, he was often called from his desk to help with the work or to settle a dispute among his pugnacious field-hands. In June of 1871, as the time came to send The Maid of Sker back to Edinburgh, he already felt hard-pressed and asked, unsuccessfully, for a delay so that he could further revise the first number: "I cannot bear to do things by halves, & cannot escape from a bitter knowledge that I ought to go over the whole again. Indeed I wd. gladly write it all over, once again; but fear that it is now too late, Nev'less, if you can allow me until Sept., for first No., I shall have more hopes of coming near my standard of good work. Strawb., strawb. strawb., is my whole work now from 4 A. M. to 9 P. M.; & if one can get a good crop, they pay much better than literature" (26 June 1871).

Occasional attacks of epilepsy, "the bane of my life, ever since my schooldays" (17 January 1872), posed a still deeper threat to the writing of coherent narratives:

> the strange effect of my illness is to make the brain upon many subjects a "tabula rasa," until the entire influence is gone. And I have lost many little threads, & bits of indication, wh. I never can recover, & must replace by others. I read my own work (while in this state) as if it were written by another hand - wh. is doubtless advantageous for purposes of criticism, but not for cohesion. [6 February 1872]

With his penchant for digression, these circumstances were ominous, and all the more so because he rationalized the whole issue of coherent plotting: "To me it appears to matter little, for the uses of a magazine — whether a tale be perfect in plot, construction, & so on — in other words as a whole — so long as it is truly written, interesting, & amusing" [27 February 1871]. By thinking...
in terms of installments, Blackmore ignored the fact that his serials would eventually be read in book form, and he equated the success of the magazine with achievement of his artistic ends. As a consequence of this attitude, he consulted the editors in matters of plotting, asking William Blackwood for official approval when he approached the most sensational moment of *The Maid of Sker* the death of the villainous Parson Chowne:

P. S. - I have a horrible fate in store for Chowne. Will you kindly answer 2 questions.
1. Can anything be too bad for him?
2. Can you readers stand a little horror? [17 May 1872]

They could indeed; for though the birth of a foal might be indelicate, violence was not, and Parson Chowne dies frothing and snapping with rabies while being smothered by his only friend (Ch. 67). Though in this instance Blackmore got what he wanted, the letter implies his willingness to leave decisions of plotting up to his distinguished editors. By deferring to the Blackwoods' tastes and placing the success of their magazine above any aesthetic ideal, he surrendered much of his freedom as an artist.

To write a tragic novel when the public still expected happy endings Blackmore needed all the freedom and power that an author could command. *Alice Lorraine* was to be his most ambitious work, centering on the downfall of a noble family at the time of the Napoleonic Wars, with shifts in scene to the orchards of Kent and to Wellington's army in Spain, in episodes based upon Napier's *History of the War in the Peninsula and the South of France*. The tragedy of a father's contempt for his disgraced son and of his daughter's suicide had to be blended with pastoral and historical romance to make one cohesive story. Blackmore reported the first sign of trouble in January, 1874, saying that he had already begun the novel five times. He was having difficulty with the character of the baronet's high-spirited son, who was meant to be "upright, honorable, & affectionate" and yet "the ruin of his friends" [23 February 1874]. The first installment appeared in March; by July, Blackmore was already hard-pressed to keep ahead of the printer:

Herewith I send part VI of A. L. - of what sort it is, I am sure I can't tell, I have been so pestered with interruptions of one sort & another. And I really think - if it makes no difference to Maga - that I ought to slip one month, either Septr. or October (whichever you prefer). For verily my brain wants leisure & my body wants a change; & I am sure that I could write twice as well after a pause & refreshment. I get scarce any sleep, but a whirl of dreams from 2 to 6 A. M. - for to write by day, at this time of year, is almost impossible. The moment I sit down, some blessed fellow comes about some confounded trifle, & I have to go down below to keep the peace. [8 July 1874]

This time Blackmore's request was granted, and in November the magazine appeared without an installment of *Alice Lorraine*. 
In spite of interruptions, by the year's end he had succeeded in constructing a difficult if not quite tragic crisis for the main characters. The heir of the Lorraines falls into disgrace after being held responsible for the loss of government monies; his sister must decide whether to marry a wealthy rake or commit suicide; by her death the estate could be mortgaged to raise funds to redeem the family honor. Fulfilling an ancient prophecy, on the night before her wedding she steals through the snow toward the black waters of the Woeburn, seeking "death with a firmer step than a bride's towards a bridegroom." Then she commits her body to "the Deathbourne" (p. 356).

At this point Blackmore wrote his publisher asking what to do. As he told another novelist on the same day, he was "in the anguish of polishing off" his heroine. But to John Blackwood he suggested as alternative:

Jany. 20th 1875

My dear Blackwood,

Herewith comes part XI corrected. Alice is to go to a smash in the Woeburn, as intended ab initio, & foretold by the Astrologer. It has always been meant for a Tragedy, & by the sacrifice of her life all are saved. However I know that the public hate tragedies; & it is just possible to rescue her, if compatible with good art. And I feel that so much light writing has crept in, that I hesitate as to the final darkness. Pray give me your opinion, & Mrs. Blackwood's [if she kindly reads it], & your good nephew's. If you are unanimous against the fatal result, there is time to vary it; if you let me know speedily.

I hope you are quite rid of cold.

Ever yours

R. D. Blackmore

The note marks the zenith (or the nadir) of his efforts to meet the demands of serial publication. He must have known that John Blackwood had accepted the drowning of an earlier heroine in George Eliot's Mill on the Floss, published by the firm, but not serially, in 1860. Then Blackwood had written that "the greatest lovers of all ending happily must admit that Providence was kind in removing Maggie. She could not have been happy here." But if Alice Lorraine could be rescued, she might still find happiness, having finally met a man whom she could love in the last number. By introducing a mysterious locked box early in the novel, Blackmore also had a way to retrieve the family fortunes, providing that the box contained gold or jewels. With these options, the crisis in the narrative was at the same time a crisis of choice for the author, who spent at least one January day hesitating before "the final darkness."

He did not quite surrender responsibility to the Blackwoods. His next letter announced a decision: "Alice has been pulled out again, as I quite perceived & anticipated the force of your remark that
the general tone of the story does not lead to intense blackness. The next batch will be light & (I hope) pleasant reading" [27 February 1875]. By reviving the apparently dead heroine, he returned to the motif that had ended *Lorna Doone* and that would recur in his later novels, including *Cripps the Carrier* in the following year. Rather than emulating Sophoclean tragedy, he settled for an echo of Euripides' awesome drama of death, rescue, and renewal: the heroine's homecoming calls to mind "the pale return of Alcestis" (p. 377).

Was the ending "compatible with good art"? For unsuspecting reviewers at the time, it worked well enough, though the Athenæum called it "a little far-fetched." The *Examiner* commended Blackmore's handling of one "incident at the close" which "would in other hands have appeared unreal and grotesque. . . ." The *Saturday Review* recognized the author's "difficult task" of aclimatizing "an Antigone or Alcestis on the less heroic soil of English womanhood." None of these critics suggested that the novel should have ended tragically; instead they praised the pastoral scenes for which Robert Louis Stevenson thanked Blackmore many years later. The echoes of Theocritus and Horace, not of Sophocles and Euripides, governed the critical verdict that Alice Lorraine "will sustain the reputation of one of our best English novelists. Seldom have we come across so fresh and pleasant a prose idyl."

For all its praise as Blackmore's "best work" in 1875, the novel eventually shared the neglect that became the fate of all of his books besides *Lorna Doone*. The author's own words after completing the last number are apologetic and filled with a sense of defeated purpose:

> It was not so much the mere want of time wh. pressed me out of form with A. L., as bad health and perpetual interruptions, & petty cares at the critical stage. The book has taken two years to write, wh. surely ought to suffice, & wd. have done so thoroughly, if I had not made so many foul copies, & dallied over my beginning so.

> However it must take it's [sic.] chance; I have made some changes in the form complete, to strengthen weak links, & so on. I do not think that I shall ever attempt a full-length novel again. The strain on the brain, & the trouble to keep clear, take too much fibre out of me.

[31 March 1875]

Though he wrote no more novels for Blackwood's until the end of his career, he did write many more for other magazines, including one for the Graphic a year afterwards. But his later work avoids tragedy. Scenes of suffering and death are kept outside of his main focus, sometimes occurring at the outset, as in *Erema* (1877), and usually involving minor characters such as the memorable Captain Carroway and his family in *Mary Anerley* (1880), one of Blackmore's finest romances. In *Springhaven* (1887), a flawed heroine
suffers and makes others suffer the consequences of her character, but she too is saved from a suicidal drowning and given a second chance for happiness. With the exception of Dariel (1897), his last novel, containing a story of fatal pride-and-misunderstanding within the main narrative, his later fiction evades the genre that had frustrated him in 1875. After Alice Lorraine, the task of blending pastoral and tragic themes would be left to Thomas Hardy, parts of whose work—the pastoral parts—Blackmore intensely admired.23

NOTES

3 Dunn lists Cornhill, Once A Week, and Blackwood's (see p. 128); perhaps by accident, Macmillan's also missed a chance to publish Lorna Doone (see William E. Buckler, "Blackmore's Novels Before 'Lorna Doone,'" Nineteenth-Century Fiction, X [1956], 187).
4 See Buckler, especially pp. 181-87.
5 The letters are held in the Blackwood Collection of the National Library of Scotland and are quoted by permission of the Trustees, in the absence of a Blackmore heir. The correspondence dwindles after 1876, but ends with a flurry of notes concerning the publication of Blackmore's last novel, Dariel (1896-97). A few letters from the publishers are found in the collection, including one from John Blackwood on the uncle of James Anthony Froude, the original of the scandalous Parson Chowne in The Maid of Sker.
8 See Blackmore's postscript of 13 May 1874: "With kind regards, & gratitude for the approval of the ladies—[the pony's accouchement shall not take place—]."
9 Ch 20, p. 69 of the manuscript in the British Museum; the published text is quoted from an undated cheap edition by Sampson Low, Marston & Co., p. 96.
10 Ch 22, p. 79 of the manuscript; p. 109 of the published text.
11 Buckler quotes Blackmore's assertion that Credock Nowell was "finished" by 28 April 1865, a month before the first installment appeared (p. 182). Yet Blackmore had to rewrite the ending, after making earlier changes requested by the editor (see p. 186).
12 On 25 March 1871 he said that he was redoing the third number; by June 26 his strawberries left him no time to rewrite the first number; by 14 October 1871 he was correcting proofs of "part IV",...
two months after serialization had begun.

13 See the letter of 7 January 1874; he had made the same statement on 18 June 1873 (see Dunn, p. 128).

14 From Blackmore's handwriting, the word appears to be "slip" instead of "skip."

15 Letter of 20 January 1874 to Mrs. Alfred William Hunt, quoted in Dunn, p. 119. In the same letter he complains of serial publication, saying that fiction writing is "very delicious when done without 'time bargains.' It then bears hard on resources."


17 No. 2479 (1 May 1875), 583.

18 No. 3,510 (8 May 1875), 525; the incident could have been either the heroine's return to life or the subsequent discovery of pearls and opals in the Astrologer's box.

19 XXXIX (15 May 1875), 633.

20 Stevenson's letter of 11 May 1889 is in the National Library of Scotland.

21 Saturday Review, XXXIX (15 May 1875), 634.

22 Spectator, XLVIII (10 July 1875), 885.

23 See Dunn, p. 164. I wish to thank the librarians of the manuscript department of the British Museum and especially Dr. T. I. Rae of the National Library of Scotland for kindly assistance, and the American Philosophical Society for financial support for this research.
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ERRATUM

The title of Max Keith Sutton's essay was given incorrectly in the table of contents of ELT, XX:2 (1977) as "Blackmore's Letters to Algernon Blackwood . . . ."; the title is given correctly at the head of the essay as "Blackmore's Letters to Blackwood . . . ." The brothers Blackwood were John and William, of course. We deeply regret the misprint.