

## *The Dairyman's Daughter*: From Yesterday to Today

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*The Dairyman's Daughter* is a religious tract, written almost two hundred years ago, that was so widely read and well known that several major authors either mention it by name in their works or show evidence of its influence. As street literature it was sold for a penny, distributed to the poor, given away, and thrown away. It is one of the best examples of its genre and a rich historical record.

*The Dairyman's Daughter* was first published in 1809 in the religious magazine *The Christian Guardian*. Its author the Rev. Legh Richmond had no thoughts of it moving beyond that limited circulation into the wider world, but it was an age of tract literature: cheaply printed religious and political works that were widely distributed to the masses. Hannah More's *Cheap Repository Tracts* had broken ground in using stories to promote morals and counteract pro-revolution tract writers such as Tom Paine. Her immensely popular work supplied Sunday Schools with literature and provided many newly literate readers with the only fiction that they could afford. The Religious Tract Society, formed in 1799, was looking for evangelical writings and quickly seized upon Richmond's story, foreseeing its potential in their own growing armory of tracts, religious books and soon-to-be magazines, which made them a model for other distribution societies all over the world. *The Dairyman's Daughter*, the simple tale of a poor young woman's strong faith and trusting acceptance of her approaching death, captured the popular imagination and became a favourite exposition of evangelical religion, credited with having been the direct means of turning many nonbelievers into true Christians with reformed lives, destined for heaven.

And it was a true story. The daughter of the dairyman, Elizabeth Wallbridge, was born in 1770 in Arreton, on the Isle of Wight. She died of consumption in 1801 at the age of thirty-one. In the nearby towns of Brading and Yaverland, Legh Richmond, recently from Trinity College, Cambridge, had just assumed his new position as resident curate. Only two years younger than Elizabeth, Richmond became her advisor and friend. In reflecting on the type of priest he yearned to be he wrote, 'The character of a fashionable

parson is my aversion; that of an ignorant or careless one, I see with pity and contempt; that of a dissipated one with shame; and that of an unbelieving one with horror.'<sup>1</sup>

Soon after arriving on the Isle of Wight, Richmond read and was inspired by William Wilberforce's book *Practical Christianity*.<sup>2</sup> In this work Wilberforce accuses the great majority of English Christians of thinking that since they live in a Christian country and attend church services, this is sufficient to call themselves Christians and to expect to go to heaven. These so-called Christians consign a very small compartment of their lives to religion, leaving the vast remainder to do with as they please. By seeking amusements to fill up the void in their listless and languid lives, gratifying their appetites, chasing after wealth and power, and by wrapping themselves up in business and daily pursuits, they supplant God as supreme ruler in their lives. Wilberforce calls this attitude a 'decent selfishness' since he is not describing notorious evildoers, but ordinary people.<sup>3</sup> To his mind there are no small sins and no small sinners. All men are sinners by their very natures, in need of hearty repentance and the firm resolution to live new lives.

Richmond referred to Wilberforce as his 'spiritual father'.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps, then, Elizabeth Wallbridge was his spiritual guide. She was already a deeply committed Christian when she met Richmond. Through a letter delivered to Richmond by her elderly father, she introduced herself, and humbly asked that he consent to bury her recently deceased younger sister. Richmond, touched and intrigued, readily agreed. Three days later he performed the service and met Elizabeth in person. He remembered that first encounter: 'I was struck with the humble, pious and pleasing countenance of the young woman from whom I had received the letter. It bore the marks of great seriousness without affectation, and of much serenity mingled with a glow of devotion.'<sup>5</sup>

Elizabeth had read, studied, and prayed since her conversion five years before, but had never had the spiritual counsellor and fellow seeker that she found in Richmond. She believed herself to be a worthless sinner whose deeds were carnal, selfish, and ungodly. And what were her sins? She had a love of fine clothes beyond her station in life and a desire to be seen and admired. Such vanity and pride may seem low in a catalogue of sins to us, but in Elizabeth's eyes these failings proved how far from true piety she was, and how proud and self-centered. After her conversion she had a renewed interest in her parents' welfare and the spiritual health and future of those around her; instead of spending her money on gay apparel, she sent savings home to her father and mother and gave to those poorer than herself. She instead 'put on Jesus Christ' and was 'clothed with true humility'.<sup>6</sup>

To Richmond it became clear that Elizabeth's pale, delicate appearance signalled advancing consumption and her approaching death. Reflecting on terminally ill people he wrote, 'The fruits of the Spirit ripen fast, as they advance to the close of mortal existence. In particular, they grow in humility, through a deeper sense of inward corruption, and a clearer view



The Cottage at Arreton in which Elizabeth Wallbridge lived.

of the perfect character of the Saviour. Disease and bodily weakness make the thoughts of eternity recur with frequency and power.<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth wrote a brief note requesting that Richmond visit her since she felt in need of his conversation. Their ensuing dialogue chronicled her conversion experience, expounded Elizabeth's faith, and demonstrated her personal proof of Christian salvation, since, as Elizabeth explained, even your very own heart can lie to you but Christ's answers strengthen, refresh and leave no doubt.

The final message summoning Richmond to Elizabeth's bedside was brought by a devout soldier. Elizabeth was only capable of responding to brief questions and murmuring wishes that her parents trust the Lord and that Richmond bury her and visit her parents. Richmond left the home after she lost consciousness and later remembered the experience: 'I never had witnessed a scene so impressive as this before. It completely filled my imagination as I returned Home.'<sup>8</sup>

The book concludes with a description of Elizabeth's funeral. The late afternoon service in a beautiful valley setting, accompanied by a sweetly sung funeral psalm, and Elizabeth's body decorated with leaves and flowers, deeply impressed the young clergyman. He asks his readers to consider how they are like Elizabeth. In particular he asks his poor readers if they resemble Elizabeth in faith as well as in their poverty. He admonishes them to be made rich by faith and to set their hearts on heavenly riches. He blesses them and commands them to press on in their duty until they shall be rewarded at the end of time.

Legh Richmond published two more stories in *The Christian Guardian*

from his stay in the Isle of Wight: *The Young Cottager*, and *The Negro Servant*. In 1814 these two tales, along with *The Dairyman's Daughter*, were published by the Religious Tract Society as *The Annals of the Poor*. This progression of publishing formats, from religious magazine, to individual tracts, to a collection in book form, reveals a variety of audiences, from clergy, to poor individuals, to more prosperous readers. In the same year, *The Dairyman's Daughter* also crossed an ocean and was published by the New England Tract Society in Boston. In 1816 the Religious Tract Society published two enlarged editions of 20,000 copies each, and it has been estimated that only a dozen years later, 4,000,000 copies had been circulated, in nineteen different languages.<sup>9</sup>

Why did it win such instant popularity? Richmond's biographer, the Rev. Thomas Grimshawe, praised its simple and interesting story, its graceful style, and its beautiful imagery. It was a tale of poor people – honest, clean, respectful, hardworking – who focused on their eternal lives, rather than their poverty on earth. Richmond refers to Elizabeth as his friend and teacher; she in turn thanks him for condescending 'to leave the company of the rich, and converse with the poor.'<sup>10</sup> Richmond signs his letters 'Yours in Christ'<sup>11</sup> and 'Yours, with Christian regard.'<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth is 'your obedient and unworthy servant' who begs Richmond to excuse all faults and to correct her grammatical errors.<sup>13</sup> As fellow Christians they are equals; it is not Richmond's purpose to make them equals on earth. This tract exalts the special qualities of the poor who, undistracted by position and worldly riches, can more directly attain the Kingdom of Heaven. Although humble on earth, they serve as teachers and examples to the higher ranks, and a cottage home can serve as the 'house of God and the gate of heaven.'<sup>14</sup> *The Dairyman's Daughter*, then, makes its appeal both to the poor and the well to do, but does not threaten the existing social order.

But not everyone welcomed the tract enthusiastically. An article in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1822 sarcastically attacked Richmond's recent preaching tour of Scotland and enumerated a scathing litany of complaints against his popular religious narrative. Given that, in an 1818 letter to his wife, written from Edinburgh, he refers to himself as 'an Episcopal missionary in this Presbyterian land', we may surmise that Richmond felt that Scotland had much need of him.<sup>15</sup> Preaching sometimes three times a day on Sundays, and almost every weekday, it is not surprising that the one time the *Blackwood's* writer heard Richmond speak he seemed 'wishy-washy' and unmemorable;<sup>16</sup> Richmond was probably exhausted. There may have been some tendency to wander in his sermons, too, since he had taught himself to be an extempore preacher and did not refer to a written text. Elizabeth Wallbridge had heard him but once, almost twenty years earlier, yet she had thought him a worthy messenger of the Word.

One of *Blackwood's* principal charges was that Richmond's 'very long and florid' descriptions of scenery and of the emotions they evoked were the work of a sensualist.<sup>17</sup> In the article, the author praises the Scots as addicted to the use of reason, encouraged by their pastors to use the intellect

as well as feelings, and to read the Bible as God's revelation to rational creatures. *Blackwood's* is reflecting not only the still prevalent Enlightenment preference of educated men for reason over emotions, but the magazine's policy of refusing to publish literature that they deemed 'extravagant romance, sentimental love stories, or heavily moralistic tales'.<sup>18</sup> Legh Richmond, however, was deeply sensitive to nature and described it in great detail in many of his personal letters. He was particularly effusive in his praises of the beauty of Scotland, not surprising from a man who believed that God often uses nature to reveal divine truths.

*Blackwood's* chief complaint about Richmond's story is that he is simply too hard on poor Elizabeth. The article defends her as a pretty girl who has every right to want to wear showy clothes (as pretty servant girls should); a girl who behaves quite well enough and is in no way any worse than Mr Richmond himself. In fact it was probably some Bible-thwacking parson who made her fret herself into a consumption. Richmond could have helped more by finding her a good husband and leaving her in peace to have children, grow fat, and reach heaven on her own. Indeed, why not?

Elizabeth was not an immoral person at all. But to her own way of thinking, and Legh Richmond's, she was only a nominal Christian, thoughtless for the needs of others, and heedless of the cultivation of her own soul. What she found after salvation was an other-worldliness, a deep peace, and a trust in Christ's sacrifice that allowed her to face her own death with conviction and acceptance. Elizabeth also, it seems, met her death with fewer doubts than Richmond greeted his a quarter of a century later. Falling into unrelenting depression after the deaths of two of his sons, he lamented, 'The enemy, as our poor people would say, has been very busy with me. I have been in great darkness – a strange thought has passed through my mind – it is all delusion. Brother, brother; strong evidences, nothing but strong evidences will do at such an hour as this.'<sup>19</sup>

The last charge to concern us today is *Blackwood's* implied criticism that the *Dairyman's Daughter* was not a true story. Richmond is scolded for correcting the grammar and spelling in Elizabeth's letters since that is inappropriate for historical records. *Blackwood's* was not necessarily criticizing Richmond in suggesting that the story was a created one; after all the magazine had been a leading publisher of high quality fiction since its first issue in 1817, and many of its stories began with a narrator who had observed or heard of the events he was about to describe. But to the evangelical mind at that time it was an important distinction. Truth was far superior to fiction. Even though Hannah More and others were writing fictitious tales that presented moral truths, fiction, especially novels, was considered at the very least a waste of time, and at worst, an insidious force for promoting vice, worldliness, dissatisfaction, and romantic nonsense. Women, impressionable young men, and servants were particularly susceptible to this corruption.

Richmond claimed that the story 'is given from real life and circumstances'.<sup>20</sup> After his death his biographers, responding to claims such as

*Blackwood's*, went to some lengths to verify its authenticity. Elizabeth's surviving brother, who by the way became a Methodist preacher, was interviewed and her original letters were examined closely. In 1836 the American Tract Society, sensitive to American scepticism, sent some of its members to England to visit the Isle of Wight and find proof of the tract's history. What they found was Elizabeth's wooden chair, as described in the story. They bought the chair, brought it back to New York with them, and invited visitors 'to sit in the chair and to believe.'<sup>21</sup> (That same chair, shown on p. 77, is today at the American Tract Society headquarters in Garland, Texas, but visitors are no longer allowed to touch it, let alone sit in it.)

Elizabeth had not yet been forgotten. A steady stream of pilgrims visited her grave, and those who had known her continued to be interviewed for details of her life. In a long letter to the editor of the *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* in 1838, Benjamin Carvosso provided a biography for Elizabeth, especially of her conversion experience, and printed a previously unpublished letter of Elizabeth's that identifies the minister as a well-known Isle of Wight Methodist preacher, Mr J. Crabb.<sup>22</sup> This new information placed Elizabeth firmly within a Methodist circle of societies, employers, and friends. To further verify the story, Carvosso quoted extensively from a letter by Mr Crabb, who was still living.

By 1840 an entire generation had grown up with *The Dairyman's Daughter*, both in its original version, and in abbreviated editions published in Britain and in America. Grimshawe, in his biography, particularly took to task the American versions which left out the parts of Elizabeth's letters that explained her religious principles and her pious language. It was not unusual for the American versions of English tracts to be amended for their audiences. Descriptions of scenery and domestic life were sometimes omitted from the British tracts as being foreign to the American experience, and to the experience of the many immigrants who were often the intended audience of the tracts. The American Tract Society also left out Richmond's reference to the Church of England burial service as being in itself the means of converting one of the tract's characters. The Society customarily omitted references to particular denominations in its literature.

A generation had read the tract for its religious merit. We might expect to see the influence of the *Dairyman's Daughter* on the imaginations of other writers. One of the strongest cases for such influence has been made for Charles Dickens, and his wildly popular novel *The Old Curiosity Shop*.<sup>23</sup> This is how it may have happened.

Dickens's new periodical, *Master Humphrey's Clock*, was losing sales, so he decided to give the people what they clamoured for: a novel to appear in serial form in each weekly issue. Thus began the fast and furious creation of Little Nell, her grandfather, and all the stock characters that populate that story. By starting them off in London and setting them on a pilgrimage across the countryside, Dickens develops an allegory based clearly on *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Readers in Britain and America followed the story avidly until, with horror, they realised that Dickens meant to let young

Nell die of consumption, that too familiar long and wasting disease that seemed to make its victims burn with a spiritual brightness. Readers wrote protesting letters to Dickens. They begged and cried, and the Irish M.P. Daniel O'Connell threw the story out of train windows in despair,<sup>24</sup> but the author persevered. With Little Nell's death it has long been theorized that Dickens was working out some of his own questions about death, and although Dickens's approach is certainly not evangelical, he did seem to grant Nell a kind of secular immortality which she achieves by unifying and inspiring the living she has left behind.<sup>25</sup>



The Revd Legh Richmond

There are striking similarities between Nell's grandfather in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and Elizabeth's aged father in *The Dairyman's Daughter*. In both works the young women care for their family members and friends in a self-sacrificing manner. Descriptions of landscapes, churchyards and journeys, Nell's and Elizabeth's angelic appearance before their deaths, and the adornment of their bodies with leaves and flowers before burial are all similar. This is not to suggest that Dickens consciously borrowed these ideas directly from Richmond, but it is more to affirm that since Dickens had undoubtedly been familiar with tracts since his boyhood, these deeply embedded impressions may have surfaced as he raced to develop his characters and move his plot forward. We cannot say, without a shadow of a doubt, that Dickens had read *The Dairyman's Daughter*, although it is highly probable that he had and many other stories like it. We do know that he mentions the tract by name in a later Christmas story, *Dr. Marigold*, published in 1865, so he certainly knew its reputation, and assumed that his audience would recognise its title and its significance.

Ten years after Little Nell's death, the world of literature mourned the death of yet another angelic, self-sacrificing child, this time in America. Little Eva, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, continued the familiar pattern of the dying child whose death reforms and changes the hearts of those around her. Harriet Beecher Stowe gave Eva a strong evangelical role, much like Elizabeth's, as well as her better-known one against the evils of slavery. Mrs Stowe, as the daughter and the wife of Calvinist ministers, would have known tract and Sunday School literature intimately. She even entitled Chapter XXV of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* 'The Little Evangelist'. Her Little Eva, although more flesh and blood than Little Nell and more vibrantly portrayed, is still not an original character; evil men, misunderstood youths,

self-seeking women, and weak but loving father figures were all stock characters, recognisable and understood by their Victorian audience.

Dickens was not the only author to mention *The Dairyman's Daughter* by name and expect that his audience would understand his allusion. In 1851 George Borrow published *Lavengro: Scholar, Gypsy, Priest*. In this autobiographical novel the hero, an aspiring writer, is asked by a successful publisher if he can write a series of evangelical tracts 'something in the style of *The Dairyman's Daughter*, since that is the kind of literature that sells at the present day.'<sup>26</sup> The young writer buys a copy of the tract, but after reading it he confesses that he can write nothing like it since 'the man who wrote it seems to be perfectly acquainted with the subject; and moreover, to write from the heart.'<sup>27</sup> In George Eliot's short novel, *Janet's Repentance*, it is Legh Richmond's popular biography that is mentioned.<sup>28</sup> And we have already mentioned Dickens's story *Dr Marigold*, which includes an unscrupulous sideshow operator who tries to make his main attraction pretend to be an American Indian who has been converted by reading *The Dairyman's Daughter*.

These are all specific references to Richmond and his tract; there were also many allusions to tracts in general including Dickens in *Bleak House*, Wilkie Collins in *The Moonstone*, and Thackeray in *Vanity Fair*. They were generally not flattering references; usually the person who distributed the tracts was represented as a prig and a pest. Times were changing. The romantic sentimentality so much appreciated earlier in the century was giving way to sneering sarcasm. By 1892 Oscar Wilde would remark, 'One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing.'<sup>29</sup> In 1930 Aldous Huxley would write about the vulgarity of Little Nell<sup>30</sup> and literary criticism up into the 1960s treated her with derision, taking Dickens to task for soppy deathbed shenanigans that shamelessly play on the emotions. Only recently have readers and critics perhaps felt distanced enough from the Victorians that they can understand the book within the cultural and religious climate that it was written.

Let us leave literature aside now, and look at how historians of religion have treated *The Dairyman's Daughter*. We find great appreciation for its message and influence, especially among the Methodists. In fact Methodism seems to have adopted Elizabeth for its own, as a representative symbol of all a real Methodist should be. In Abel Stevens's 1858 three-volume work *The History of the Religious Movement of the Eighteenth Century called Methodism*, he claims that Elizabeth Wallbridge has consecrated the Isle of Wight forever in the history of Methodism and the regards of the Christian world. Over the next five pages he summarizes the entire tract, and finishes:

Such are only a few references to the most affecting, the most generally read of Christian idylls – The Life and Death of Elizabeth Wallbridge, the 'Dairyman's Daughter', loved and wept by millions, in the palaces of the wealthy, the cottages and hovels of the poor, the log-cabins of emigrants in the frontier



wildernesses of America and Australia, and in the homes of converted heathen throughout most of the missionary world. No history of Methodism that should omit her name would be complete . . . and her life, obscure in itself, has become historical in its results; thousands have owed their salvation to its record; tens of thousands have received comfort and strength from it in their hours of extremity. It has translated into at least thirty languages, and her grave attracts to her native island more pilgrims than go to see its unrivaled scenery, or to gaze upon the residence of the queen of her country, which adorns its beautiful coast.<sup>31</sup>

Additional histories of Methodism mention the tract as well. As late as 1974 the *Encyclopedia of World Methodism* included an entry for Elizabeth Wallbridge, defining her as a British Methodist. (There is no entry for Legh Richmond, although he appears in *Encyclopedia Britannica* at least as late as 1910.)

There are other references both in literature and in religious writings and sermons. *The Dairyman's Daughter* was part of the popular imagination for over fifty years, and continues to have a vital existence today. The American Tract Society no longer publishes it, although their website highlights it. The Society states that it is not 'well-adapted to the tastes and requirements of today'.<sup>32</sup> Several small publishers do continue to issue it in its entire form, largely as a heritage publication; in the U.S. and Canada at least it is aimed largely at home-school audiences. In June of this year [1999] the tract became available full-text on the World Wide Web, as the first piece listed among a collection of forty-five tracts.<sup>33</sup> None of these publishers are issuing it as an historical novelty – a period piece that is only useful in helping modern readers understand an earlier time. *The Dairyman's Daughter* is still in print for exactly the reason it was first written by Legh Richmond and first brought to a larger audience by the Religious Tract Society. Its purpose is to touch hearts and change lives.

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