

The Manuscript Novels of Cecilia Campbell

Two neglected manuscripts at the National Library of Scotland, *Alice Clifton* and *Mary Lawrence*, are the work of an unpublished and unrecognized nineteenth century author. Cecilia Campbell's two novels are examples of Scottish women's popular fiction. The manuscripts were donated to the National Library of Scotland in 1968 and have not received much scholarly attention.¹ I will introduce these materials by briefly surveying Campbell's life and work, summarizing the second manuscript novel, *Alice Clifton*, and considering the relation between the novel and the work of Campbell's contemporaries. Campbell's novels vividly present the marks and pressures of social class in late Victorian Scottish society and serve as remarkable specimens of women's popular fiction.

Few details are known about Campbell's life and writings. The majority of the information available on Campbell comes from *Rulewater and its People*, a detailed guide to the major families and events of this region of Scotland, with records dating to the seventeenth century. In this case, it functions as a family history the Cleghorns and contains a single paragraph on the life of Cecilia Campbell. She was born on November 29, 1826, at Weens House, her family's ancestral home near Hobkirk, Roxburghshire, Scotland.² She was the third of eight children. The Cleghorns were a wealthy and prominent family in the region. Cecilia Cleghorn married Arthur Campbell of Catrine on December 26, 1851, and they had five daughters and two sons.³ George Tancred writes that "from her early youth she was fond of poetry, and possessed a strong literary inclination which after her marriage she was unable to

¹ Dr. Emily Friedman photographed both manuscripts.

² George Tancred, *Rulewater and its People: An Account of the Valley of Rule and its Inhabitants* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1907), 391. George Cleghorn was Campbell's brother, and he changed his name to Tancred in 1885.

³ Tancred, *Rulewater and its People*, 391-392.

cultivate.”⁴ Her only newspaper appearances include notices of her marriage and the death of one of her daughters, as well as her charitable donations to various organizations before and after her marriage. Her diaries, notes, and a single poem are at the National Library of Scotland along with her manuscript novels.

Campbell’s early manuscript, *Mary Lawrence*, was written prior to her marriage in the 1840s. She revisited her work later in life, editing and lengthening the manuscript between 1877 and 1885 as a “means of occupation and interest—during a time of sorrow and comparative loneliness.”⁵ Campbell’s time of sorrow may have been occasioned by the death of her eldest daughter, Maria, in 1875. Four of her seven children died before reaching adulthood. Arthur Campbell died on July 8, 1884. At the time of her revision work on *Mary Lawrence*, they lived in St. Georges, Midlothian, and then in Edinburgh, with two of their children and six domestic servants. It is possible that *Alice Clifton* was written during this time. The manuscript is undated, and the latest references are excerpts from three poems in Susan K. Phillips’ *On the Seaboard and Other Poems*, which was first published in 1878.⁶ The story is set over the course of twelve years, beginning in the 1840s. Campbell’s work was never published, and any attempts made on her part are unknown. During the thirty-year period between her revision work on *Mary Lawrence* and her death in 1906, there is no record of either manuscript’s appearance in Scottish or British newspapers.⁷ Considering the thoroughness of Tancred’s account, it is likely that any publications would have been included in *Rulewater and its People*.

⁴ Tancred, *Rulewater and its People*, 391.

⁵ Cecilia Campbell, *Mary Lawrence*, i. This note, along with the author’s address in Edinburgh and a quote from R.C. Trench, Archbishop of Dublin, precede the manuscript.

⁶ Cecilia Campbell, *Alice Clifton*, 29, 155, 241.

⁷ Database searches for the titles of the novels and for key words, such as character names, yield no results. Searches for publications by Campbell under her married and maiden names also return no results.

While the details of Campbell's life and work are largely undocumented, her writing offers astute social commentary on class and materialism. *Alice Clifton* takes the structure of a reformed coquette novel. The novel opens with a description of Roxburghshire, where Clifton lives in picturesque isolation with her father, who has retired in disgrace from the East India Company.⁸ Campbell's descriptions of the countryside are perhaps the most beautiful and detailed in the novel. Her writing demonstrates a knowledge of botany and appreciation for the landscape and its native plants. Early in *Alice Clifton*, she describes Alice's search for an old border tower which is to be the endpoint of her walk:

“The day was beautiful. It was early June — the spring time of Scotland, when the leaves had just burst into their full green beauty, and when the soft west wind blew across the moors, — lately so bleak and chilly, — like the breath of some southern clime.

— ...

The heather — of course — was not in bloom, but the scarcely less beautiful wild thyme lay in luxuriant patches on the green turf of the hillside, and the fragile looking blue bell peeped from among the graceful ferns. —

...The afternoon being fair and cloudless — Alice extended her walk beyond the little glen, intending to collect the primrose roots on her way back. — There was an old border tower, she had heard spoken of as being at no great distance, and wishing for some object as the limit of her walk, she directed her steps towards it. — Her course was still over moorlands, in many places thickly intersected with sheep paths, and occasionally traversed by a rough cart road, or an old stone wall. — The young lambs were sporting about on every side — enjoying to the utmost that happiest season of their lives...

Alice noticed — and took interest in all, but soon her attention was drawn in one direction, for on turning round a knoll — one of the loveliest views she had ever seen burst upon the sight. She was at the edge of a ravine which descended rather abruptly to a rapid river, whose bed was strewed with masses of stone, and shadowed by graceful clumps of natural wood. — A small village occupied the slope on either side, the communication between being preserved by a rude wooden bridge for pedestrians, while a ford at a short distance supplied a passage for horses and vehicles.”⁹

This walk launches Alice into a series of encounters that will introduce the major characters of the novel. Alice wanders into the fictional village of Medford, where she befriends

⁸ The novel's numerous references to the East India Company are likely a result of Campbell's family connections. Her brother, George Tancred, served in the East India Company for four years.

⁹ Cecilia Campbell, *Alice Clifton*, 14-16.

Janet, a relative of one of her former boarding school acquaintances named Rachel. She is soon invited to visit Rachel in Shilton, Warwickshire. In Shilton, Alice befriends Julia Lovell, the only daughter of a wealthy family. After overstaying her welcome with Rachel, Alice moves in with Julia. During her stay at Lovell Court, Alice persistently flirts with Julia's fiancé, Reginald, and commands his full attention. While Reginald is preoccupied with Alice, Julia falls victim to the predatory Mr. Singleton, who convinces her to elope with him on the night of her birthday party. Just before this party, at the peak of her self-seeking behavior, Alice encounters a woman with a sick child who asks for help. Knowing the Lovell family will turn her away, she directs her to their home. Later, Alice sees the woman crying over her child's grave. This woman, Evelyn, occupies only a small portion of the story, but she becomes one of the most significant characters in the novel. Evelyn's official introduction to Alice and the events of the night that follow are some of the most powerful and haunting in the novel. The scene is fast-paced and focuses on Evelyn's ethereal, ghostly nature. When she enters Julia's party uninvited, she becomes the subject of admiration and wonder:

“Alice was compelled to unite with him in admiration of the lovely girl who stood before them, and who attracted all eyes by her strange foreign style of beauty, and her unusual dress. She was above the ordinary height, and there was enough to command attention in the air with which she carried her well shaped head, and in the graceful ease of every movement; but it was the matchless contour of her form and face, the splendour of her dark eyes — which riveted the beholder's attention. —

She was dressed in a robe of pure white, confined at the waist by a string of costly pearls. No other adornment glittered on her person, or hemmed the rich dark tresses which fell over her neck and shoulders in unconfined luxuriance. — ”¹⁰

Evelyn is consistently described as dark and foreign, but light and ethereal in her dress, presence, and sense of morality. She has a singular reason for her appearance at Julia's party, which is to confront Alice:

¹⁰ Cecilia Campbell, *Alice Clifton*, 115.

“‘Alice Clifton!’ she said — ‘you lost my blessing. I did once ask you for pity and love — but you gave them not.’

Suddenly there rose before Alice’s mind — the woman closely muffled in her grey cache mire cloak — whom she had met in the wood, and seen again beside the little grave; — yet how could she reconcile in one — such totally opposite characters? — the tattered gipsy, and the beautiful girl in her pure robe and girdle of pearls, — the bereaved mother, and the radiant visitant of the ball-room? —

‘I do not understand you Miss Evelyn —’ she said ‘am I right in addressing you by that name?’

‘Evelyn — I am called’ the girl answered ‘but it is my Christian name — At present — I do not tell you my name as a wife. —’

‘But you cannot be the same person whom I met a few weeks ago — and yet your voices are alike.’

‘It is the same voice Alice Clifton — I am the same person. — No! not the same — quite. I was a Mother when I begged you to save my child — dying for want of what I had not to give. — I am without a child now.’ ...Alice was visibly affected as she answered —

‘I feared it was so, — but you must remember that I did not turn away without sending you to this very house for succour —’

‘Where I was rudely put away. — Ah! had I been dressed that day like now — it would have been different. — NO one refused me this night, — and yet I am the same. — Is it always in your country that people think so much of a piece of cloth or a string of pearls?’”¹¹

It is later revealed that Evelyn is Alice’s sister. She was raised in India, where she met and married Mr. Singleton, and she has travelled to England to find him. He steals Julia’s jewelry and abandons her in a crashed carriage. Evelyn follows them and alerts the Lovell family.

During her time in England, Alice neglects correspondence with her father, who loses his will to live when separated from her. Before Alice returns to Scotland, she becomes engaged to Reginald’s brother, Lionel, but her father writes a letter condemning this relationship because Lionel is the son of his old enemy. This is a misunderstanding that is resolved later in the novel, but it greatly affects Alice in the moment. She is deeply ashamed of her behavior at Lovell Court and completes a series of trials after she returns to Scotland. She has lost her father’s affection and idolatry, and Evelyn has taken her place in his heart. They both treat her as a servant, selling

¹¹ Cecilia Campbell, *Alice Clifton*, 118-120.

her possessions to fund a trip to Madeira in an attempt to restore Evelyn's now-failing health. Over the course of two years, Evelyn's health gradually declines and she dies. Alice and her father return to England, where she works to support him by sewing lace. He dies without fully forgiving her.

After her father's death, Alice's trials continue. She first lives with a minister, Mr. Russel, and his mother for a time before Reginald's new wife, Lady Clara, hires Alice to copy a manuscript she has written. Alice mistakes Reginald's portrait in their home for Lionel and thinks that Lady Clara is married to Lionel. This is one of many incidents of misrecognition and miscommunication that Campbell relies on to advance the plot. Lady Clara's maid, Miss Wilmer, conspires to marry a wealthy neighbor named Mr. Hanley and blames Alice for her own mistakes and lies; Alice is forced to resign from her transcriptions and leave Lady Clara's home. After a stay with two miserly sisters, Alice joins Rachel and her children on their travels. Their ship wrecks, and Alice saves Rachel's children. She makes an additional sacrifice for her former enemy, Miss Wilmer, who is now Mrs. Hanley:

“But the shattered vessel was rapidly settling down, and the Captain — still at his post of duty — shouted to all who remained on board to put on the life-belts with which he had supplied them, and not to trust to the boat which could scarcely be launched in time. —

Alice was trying to make use of her's, when a Lady — in dressing-gown and shawl rushed in a frantic state from the other side of the half-detached boat, in which she had expected a seat, and waving her arms in the air cried in a shrill wailing voice — ‘Oh! Will no one save me!

I will give a thousand — ten thousand pounds to any one who will save me!’ A pale young man who was lying on deck — disabled by a blow he had received when the ship lurched forward, — said quietly — ‘Much good it'll do us at the bottom of the sea!’

Alice at once discerned that the frantic lady was Mrs. Hanley, and a great compassion for her not unnatural terror and despair at such a time — gave her strength once more to lose her life even for the sake of one who had tried to harm her— ‘Take this life-belt’ she said hurried, reaching her own to Mrs. Hanley — ‘stay — I will fasten it on for you — with God's help it is your best chance of safety.’

The miserable woman shuddered as she accepted Alice's generous assistance, and

recognized her former victim — ‘How noble of you!’ she murmured ‘I did very wrong — but that worthless money tempted me. — Oh! if God would only forgive me as you do!’

Alice had not time to reply, the belt was securely fastened and as she ran to find another for herself, a cold green wave swept over the deck and the boards seemed to slip from under her feet. — A rush was made to the higher parts of the ship, and Alice felt a strong arm seize hold of her waist and bear her above the water to a nest-like place among the rigging, which she could not by her own efforts have reached, and where for the moment at least she was safe. —

Then — oh! joy! — her beloved Lionel’s voice, in feeble accents which told of over-taxed strength, — whispered tenderly in her ear amid the wild cries of despair — ‘Trust in God my Alice and take courage — we may yet be saved — or — die together!’”¹²

The shipwreck is the turning point in Alice’s life, and she proves herself worthy of Lionel and redeemed in the reader’s eyes. At the conclusion of the novel, Alice is planning to accept a marriage proposal from Mr. Russel, the minister she lived with after her father’s death, when a small incident changes the direction of her life:

“In that moment of anxious watching — she gave up all hope with regard to herself, and made a firm resolve to live henceforth only for the good of others. She would begin at once by accepting her kind and worthy friend Mr. Russell as her partner and guardian, in the close relationship which he understood such terms to express; — and the only reward of her sacrifice should be the success of her daily efforts to make him comfortable and happy. — ...Punch’s clear high pitched voice attracted her attention in a decidedly unpleasant manner. — She heard him exclaim as he ran across the room to Lionel —

‘Look! look! here’s your own little fern that came off your hat! — would you like it back again?’

‘No my boy — and it cannot be the old sprig of spleenwort — if you mean that — for I threw it away at the station.’

‘But Miss Kifton picked it up’ said Punch in a loud decided manner — ‘I saw her — she put it in her purse and here it is!’

Alice turned cold and hot alternately, and inwardly lamented her folly in allowing Punch to possess himself of this hitherto forbidden plaything, — and a provoking silence settled down on the whole party of interested listeners. — ...Lionel with a composed countenance which belied the tumult within his heart — accepted the little fern from Punch saying as he did so —

‘Thanks my boy! — it has pressed wonderfully considering its faded condition, and it is rare enough in this part of the country — I will keep it.’

On opening the bit of folded paper from which Punch had withdrawn the fern, in order to replace his new treasure, Lionel found within in Alice’s handwriting the date of her departure from Southampton, about two months previously, and his own initials

¹² Cecilia Campbell, *Alice Clifton*, 311-312.

L.S.V!

Lionel found no little difficulty in concealing his intense satisfaction. — The faded leaf, owing to its very worthlessness — assumed an unspeakable value as a witness to Alice's love for him. — An engagement ring — studded with gems might be prized for its intrinsic value; but a withered fern pricked from the dust and carefully treasured for the dear sake of him who had gathered and worn it — had surely a strong claim to be believed when it revealed its precious secret! —"¹³

The novel ends with a description of Alice and Lionel's marriage and children. A portrait of her father hangs above their mantle.

This summary does not cover all the turns and incidents of the plot, but it captures some of the significant events related to the author's social commentary. Campbell uses each of Alice's living situations as occasions for social commentary, especially on class and women's work. The summary excludes the religious themes that pervade the text and does not represent the focus on natural imagery and symbolism involving plants. *Alice Clifton* is an example of female bildungsroman comparable to the work of contemporaries such as Margaret Oliphant. She shares Oliphant's emphasis on place and setting but not the self-determination or career interests of protagonists like Kirsteen. *Alice Clifton* appears to be directed at young readers and seems to be an early example of what Ethel Forster Heddle developed in her adventure stories for girls. Campbell takes a more moralizing approach to her protagonist's journey without neglecting adventure or intriguing personal drama. The materials in the Cleghorn archive offer an important glimpse of late Victorian Scottish society and women's writing.

¹³ Cecilia Campbell, *Alice Clifton*, 353-354.