Coronation Summer and after: Angela Thirkell's 'extra books'

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I want to consider the development of Angela Thirkell's writing career, the directions it took, and what determined them.

She began her writing for publication in Australia, for sheer financial necessity. Her husband, George's business failed, and there were three sons to support. She tried freelance journalism, writing satirical essays and short stories; articles on life in Australia for *London Mercury, Cornhill, Blackwoods*, literary articles for Argus. She did some broadcasting for the Australian Brodcasting Corporation. Her son Graham McInnes describes her at work then: 'at her desk, surrounded by the noise and brawl of a husband and 3 boys, like Jane Austen with her observant silences in the rectory drawing-room, she began' her writing career. Such powers of concentration and achievement surely show a professional writer developing.

After she returned to London, leaving her husband, with their 9-year-old son, followed by her second, teenage son, she had still to earn to provide for herself and the boys. Thus Thirkell embarked upon a career as a writer of books at the age of 43. She drew first on her own early life, writing *Three houses* — the charming, autobiography of an idealised childhood, published by Oxford University Press in 1931, successfully.

She tried writing for the BBC, but failed there. Then met James Hamilton, who was setting up as new publisher. Read for him, including french and german works. She wrote 3 novels that he published: *Ankle deep*, clearly autobiographical, a deserted wife drawn into a relationship with a younger man, pub 1933. then *High Rising*, again fictionalised autobiography, featuring Laura Morland. In 1934 - *Demon in the house* (short stories about the same characters), and *Wild strawberries*, a novel similar in spirited, witty style to High Rising, its main character (Lady Emily) based on a family friend. Also in 1934 - *Trooper to the southern cross*, published by Faber & F: a satirical account of her actual experience crossing to Australia on a troopship with George Thirkell 15 years earlier. In this novel Thirkell shows us herself as she supposes she appeared to military Australians, as well as portraying satirically her view of Australian *mores.* Here is the male Aussie narrator's first meeting with the wife of his Aussie friend, Jerry Fairchild, who represents AT:

'Jerry said: "Here, Tom, I want to introduce Mrs Fairchild to you." Mrs Fairchild gave one wifely look at her husband and walked right away from me. ... Poor old Jerry dashed off after his wife, and I heard him trying to argue with her, but she just climbed over a gate into a field.' They meet again, later, and the properly instructed husband says, 'See here, Tom, I want to introduce you to my wife.' 'That's better', says Mrs Fairfield, and invites him to a meal. 'I don't mind if I do,' said I. Mrs Jerry turned to her friend and said, 'That means Major Bowen thanks me very much and is delighted to accept.' Later the narrator learns the cause of the lady's behaviour: 'It seems she had kept some of her English ideas ... One of her ideas was about introducing people. You or I would say to a pal: "Here, Joe, I want you to know the missis". Or if you wanted to do it very correctly: "I want to introduce Mrs Robinson to you". But this wasn't right according to Mrs Jerry's ideas ... The idea was that you must introduce your pal to your wife and not your wife to your pal, though where the difference comes in you can search me.'

Rachel Mather claims that Thirkell 'found her writing voice with Wild Strawberries immediately upon her return from Australia'. [1] I think this is quite wrong: the variety of work she published in the first three years after her return to England (before Wild Strawberries) shows a writer experimenting with different forms, searching for her own, or the most marketable, style.

Next came another weak novel for Hamilton, in 1935 – *Oh these men, these men*, based on her own unhappy marital experiences. Also in the same year, published by Hamilton, a book of children's fairy tales, *The Grateful Sparrow*. Angela Thirkell wrote of this to Margaret Bird, some 20 years later, 'I am sending you a spare "Grateful Sparrow". It is an enchanting book because of the pictures. They are by Ludwig Richter ... I wrote the stories round the pictures'; and, 'I have known the pictures of The Grateful Sparrow all my life and was brought up on the three writers whose names are mentioned gratefully in the front of the book ... I could not read one of them aloud without quavering.'

Then Thirkell turned to historical biography, based on and recounting the publishing history of the memoirs of Harriette Wilson, a Regency courtesan. Her introduction to this work shows what she admired about the original memoirs, and so enjoyed in her own reading: 'the style is dashing, the characterisation is true, the conversations are vividly reported'; later she writes of Harriette Wilson, 'She must have got a good deal of pleasure out of her writing, for she was a born writer in the pleasant slip-shod style, with occasional flashes of wit, an excellent eye for character, and a turn for an apt phrase'. It takes one to know one. Thirkell's research was scrupulous; as a friend recalled after her funeral: 'she went every day to the British Museum, faithfully doing her research. Mrs Lodge had been so impressed with her determination to get it right and do as honest a piece of work as she could.'. She wrote to Hamilton, 'You have no idea of the joy, the excitement, the blood-lust, of tracking down one date, one allusion, at the cost of 3 days' work'. The result of all this care was T*he Fortunes of Harriette*,' properly provided with illustrations and index, published by Hamilton in 1936. I will give the flavour of it by quoting the opening of chapter IV:

'Although Harriette had as yet a merely amateur status, some of the professionals had looked upon her with an appraising eye. While she was still living in Somers Town, a certain Mrs Porter of Berkeley Street had called upon her. Mrs Porter exercised the amiable trade of procuress ... the reason of her call was to bring proposals from General Walpole, who desired the honour of Harriette's acquaintance. Harriette accepted the offer, and promised to meet the general at Mrs Porter's house on a given evening, but although she was in need of money her courage failed her at the prospect of a lover of over sixty, and she sent the old nurse, disguised under a thick veil, to take her place. The general swore and raved, and left Mrs Porter's house, closely followed by his elderly charmer, vowing never to patronise the establishment again.'

Then Thirkell wrote another light, social comedy novel, published by Hamilton: *August folly,* which attained the

accolade of Book of the month in 1936. She tried to write a play, but made little progress. [2]

Coronation Summer

Thirkell's next book again required historical research: *Coronation Summer*. [3] 'In the newspaper library at Hendon she immersed herself in *The Times, the Morning Post* and *Bell's Sporting Life* for 1838 — the year of Queen V's coronation.', and wrote a story, 'told in the first person by a young, provincial matron' [2] looking back on her visit to London to attend the coronation.Thirkell wrote about this book herself in a letter to M Bird in 1953:

'I am so glad you like C.S. It was GREThirkell fun to do and took weeks at the B.M. and the B.M. newspaper place at Hendon ... I enjoy it very much myself when I reread it. All the people are imaginary. All the things that happen are real, from Miss Flite (in Westminster Hall where Dickens must often have seen her) to R. Kipling selling stockings in the city.' She told Gordon Haight, 'It was enchanting to meet Dickens's people—seen by his quick eye and stored in his mind for future use. Especially Miss Flite in *Bleak House*, whom you will see in my book, word for word as a newspaper reporter described her, haunting the law courts'.[2]

Coronation Summer I find wholly delightful. The fruits of Thirkell's enthusiastic and meticulous research are well apparent. The visitors to London are shown the town and the sights, recording in detail the street life, art galleries, public events at the Zoological Gardens, Epsom racing, a rowing match, Eton, concerts and opera, and the coronation day celebrations, all embellished with repros of Victorian prints. The period is quickly established, with references to the new-fangled railways; Dickens being serialized; Browning's *Sordello* newly published, and Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle*; Byron has recently died. 'The great historian Gibbon's work on the Roman Empire [has been] made suitable for family reading by that Mr Bowdler who has brought Shakespeare into repute again.' Chopin had visited London the previous year; Mendelssohn, Birmingham. The account of the pictures on show at Royal Academy is exact. There are 'new Guardians of the Law', the police. The heroine writes of the abolition of franking and the introduction of Penny Postage, 'there is something low about a thing that every farmer's daughter can afford'. We learn about 'dust prigging' by 'flying dustmen' who 'make fortunes out of refuse'. clothes, fabrics and fashions are described in close detail; and the Conditions of the dress-makers. 'They are at work till 11 or 12 every night.' Miss Smith is to be discharged as 'she has fainted twice in the workroom, which I cannot allow'. There is even a reference to Harriette Wilson: 'no one knows what has become of her now' (she would have been aged 52 in 1838, departed for Paris).

The idiom of the period is splendidly reproduced, with phrases such as, 'we must smoke Emily about this affair'; 'They will prose away by the hour and take no notice of our charms'; and 'I am completely bambaized'—'doubtless a piece of Ned's Cambridge slang'. There is a long cockney dialogue overheard in the street. The Victorian narrative style is authentic, as in these examples:

'How often do we utter in moments of lightheartedness sentiments which riper experience bids us forswear! Had I known then—but which of us knows what lies before him?'

'Did a thought of our young Queen on the day of her accession cross my mind at this moment? Reader, it did!'

We are given the heroine's first sight of the wicked DeLacy Vavasour: 'Black clustering curls escaped from beneath his hat, and his dress was of the highest elegance. His large and expressive eyes seemed to pierce my very mind, and I thought that a faint sneer of contempt curled his finely chiselled nostril.' But still, 'His deep manly accents thrilled my nerves.'

We have the Victorian attitudes. At the art gallery, contemplating a picture, the young ladies are told: 'the moral lesson to be drawn from it was more importance than its artistic merit'; 'The work is indeed well studied and harmoniously coloured ... but as a subject, its pauper character and the associations connected with it cannot be regarded as favourable.' We have the prudery. Emily, 'a giddy creature', with 'a want of delicacy', is condemned for saying, 'Lassy me!' At the zoo, when she cries, 'I long to see the female gorilla' Mr Darnley is reported, 'pained as I could see by Emily's shocking use of the word female ...'. There is great coyness about pregnancy. 'an event is expected within the next 6 months which, while adding to the number of inmates of Tapton Hall, will put traveling out of the question for me for some time to come. But I have said enough.'

The plot of *Coronation Summer* resembles those of Thirkell's much-admired Jane Austen. Two young girls come from the country to London; which of the available suitors will they marry? Mr Henry Darnley, like Mr Darcy, saves the heroine's family from financial and social disgrace before proposing marriage to her. Gifts of livings enable young men, ordained, to marry.

The style is often Dickensian, with lively comedy, crowd scenes and references to Dickens' characters. For example:

'Ruffianly looking fellows, like Bill Sikes, jostled and hustled the crowd with their light-fingered associates, Artful Dodgers in the fullest sense of the words, took advantage of the confusion to make off with handkerchiefs, reticules, watch-chains, and other small articles.' When a woman complains that her silk handkerchief has been stolen, and a policeman shows five that have been recovered, she claims one and has to identify it. 'If that partickler hankercher ain't mine, you ask all the neighbours or ask my little girl here.' They ask the little girl; 'Speak up, lovey," said the woman, "and tell the gentleman about auntie's hankercher". "Please sir, piped up the little girl, holding up a large bandanna, "here's auntie's wipe. She told me to prig it off an old party, and I done it that quiet as he never seed me".'

Thirkell's own satirical style, too, is well in evidence. Here are a married couple straight from Barsetshire:

'Charles would challenge any one who sent a note to me, would you not, Charles?'

'No, my dear,' said Mr Seaforth, 'In the first place I am - or was - a soldier, and don't care to risk my life when I needn't. In the second place I have every confidence in your virtue, and in the third place I believe you would be too lazy to read a *billet doux* and would make it into paper boats or cocked hats for the children.'

The servants, too, could well hail from Barsetshire.

'Our philosophical confabulation was interrupted by Mrs Bellows & Upton, who had just returned from Hyde Park Corner, where they had stood for nearly 10 hours and obtained an excellent view of the procession.

'I'm sure you'll excuse me and Mrs Upton coming in like this, miss', said Mrs Bellows, whose good-natured countenance was almost purple with her exertions, 'but I thought you'd like to know we was back'.

'I hope you had good places,' said I.

'Indeed we did, miss, being as I have my nephew, my own younger sister's son as you might say, working as porter at St George's Hospital. They had closed the hospital for the day, unless it was for any poor creature that got hurt in the crowd ... [they here recount their coronation day experiences] ...'but here I stand gossiping when what you young ladies want is a nice cup of tea, and my girl gone trapesing out I'll be bound, and good gracious if there isn't my front door bell'.

Coronation Summer's heroine-narrator is high-spirited though propriety-conscious She easily blushes and weeps, but 'I succeeded in keeping 6 successive governesses in their

place.' 'Rarely did a visit to Papa's sanctum mean anything but misunderstanding on his part and indignant tears on mine.'

Her husband likes to open his own parcels, so when he is engaged with his bailiff she opens a newly arrived one in the library, taking care to do it so that she can wrap it again undetectably. She explains to the reader, 'This is indeed not hypocrisy on my part, but I find that the wheels of life run far more smoothly if well greased.' She is wittily presented by Thirkell, writing of her best friend and rival, 'Emily rose to her feet, looking, were her features better, almost sublime';

Of her father, after her marriage: 'the expense of the journey, combined with his gout, will keep him at a distance where affection can still hold sway, unchecked by propinquity'.

There is a parody of a Victorian novel by the villain, Jocelyn FitzFulke. 'Still can I feel the wild romantic passion.'

Hamilton declined to publish *Coronation Summer;* Oxford University Press (which had published Thirkell's first book, the autobiographical Three houses) accepted it. It was published in 1937, coinciding with the coronation of George VI, and sold less well than the Barsetshire novels.

What happened next

Coronation Summer was Thirkell's 11th book, her third that was <u>not</u> based on her own life and experience, and her last 'extra' book, outside the Barsetshire sequence (preceded by *Three houses in 1931, Trooper to the southern cross* in 1934, The Grateful sparrow 1935, Fortunes of Harriette 1936). She had already published three Barsetshire novels (*High Rising, Wild Strawberries, August Folly*), and The *Demon in the house* short stories; they had all proved very popular. Thereafter she wrote only the best-selling, comic sequence of novels set in Trollope's Barsetshire, producing another 24 of them in the remaining 23 years of her life. They became formulaic, repetitive, self-mocking, sardonic. There was no more research; she used the events of her own life and the people around her to draw on for each novel. friends 'put up their guard when they met her for fear of appearing in her next book'. The final total body of her work was 29 novels in this sequence, with two other, weaker, early novels (*Ankle deep and O These men)*, and the four 'extra' books.

The rejection of *Trooper to the Southern Cross* and *Coronation Summer* by Hamilton, and of both *Coronation Summer and Fortunes Of H* by the buying public, clearly rankled. perhaps OUP's acceptance of both *Coronation Summer* and *Three Houses* accounts for the unsolicited tribute in E Sir R (1955). We are told that Percy Hacker has published '(through the courtesy and generosity of the *Oxbridge Press)* several works on classical subjects highly thought of by such as were qualified to understand them'.[8] *Oxbridge University Press* also publish Philip Winter's book on Horace's Epistles. Mr Birkett tells Philip (in *Summer Half)*, 'The Press are delightful people to deal with. You have to sell entirely on your own merits, which is so flattering.'

Angela Thirkell's attitude to Hamish Hamilton, by contrast, as shown in her letters to M Bird, became one of resentment towards a perpetually demanding taskmaster. in 1940 he married for the second time. Thirkell chose to give the couple as a wedding present a copy of her first book, *Three Houses*, that had been published not by Hamilton but by Oxford University Press: an extraordinary choice of gift. She wrote in her accompanying note, 'It is the one Real Book I shall ever write'.[2] the subtext seems to me to be extreme resentment at the type of book she was condemned continually to produce for her permanent publisher.

Ianthe Pemberton, in Northbridge Rectory (1941), shares and exposes Thirkell's experience of the undervaluing of her true work, source of pride, and setting up of the trivial. Keenly collaborating with Harold Downing on the scholarly *Biographical dictionary of Provence*, 'that valuable and practically unread work', Miss Pemberton is taken aback to be asked by a publisher to write articles to form a cookery book. She declines the handsome terms he offers, explaining, 'Mr Downing does not get an advance on account of royalties, and I would not like him to feel that I could earn more by a cookery book than he can by his real brain-work'. Thirkell sardonically observes, 'If everything goes well Miss Pemberton's articles and her book will have considerable success and bring in more money than her more serious works have ever made'—as in Thirkells own rueful case.

Twenty years after *Coronation Summer,* Thirkell wrote another novel about the crowning of a young English Queen, this time contemporary.[9] *What Did It Mean? (1954)* treats of the village celebrations of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, with the organization of a Pageant. Well-rehearsed characters are replayed—the Pomfrets, Mertons and Villars—and familiar quotations and episodes re-presented. The freshness and gaiety of *Coronation Summer* are sadly lacking — but the readership of *What Did It Mean?* is likely to exceed that of *Coronation Summer* by a major factor.

Laura as Angela

It is always accepted that Thirkell presents herself in her most-featured character, Laura Morland, a best-selling novelist who produces a book a year, as did poor driven (by finances and publisher) Thirkell. Laura is a widow who turns to novel-writing to pay for the private education of her four sons, as Thirkell did, providing alone for hers.

It is clear that Thirkell attributes to Laura Morland exactly the equivalent of her own works in her own eyes. She frequently speaks of them caustically, calling them 'second-rate' (HR), rubbishy' (DH),'all the same' (CBI), 'pot-boilers' (GU), 'the same book over and over again' (*Never Too Late).* Laura's career is early explained to us: in *High Rising* we are told of her (as we could be of Thirkell), 'she had written for magazines for some years past, in a desultory way, but now the problem of earning money was serious'. Laura explains to her publisher, 'It's not highbrow. I've just got to work. You see, my husband was nothing but an expense to me while he was alive, and naturally he is no help to me now he's dead, so I thought if I could write some rather good bad books, it would help with the boys' education'. In *The Demon in the house*: 'Laura thought so humbly of her own potboiling that to hear it stigmatized ... as rubbishy stuff didn't depress her in the least. If she could have made it more rubbishy and so sold more thousands of copies, she would willingly have done so, but the artist in her ... kept her standard up, firmly if spasmodically'.[5] Laura's attitude culminates bitterly in *Love at all Ages*, Thirkell's last completed novel in, 'It is my thirtieth ... I HATE having to write them and I would sooner DIE, but I can't afford not to, so every year I very ANGRILY write another one'.[6]

Laura's attitude to her readers — those that she does not meet personally — is disdainful to the point of despising. 'Mrs Morland, well used to every form of illiteracy and imbecility from her admirers' (E Sir Robert). She resents their persistently getting her books from their libery [sic] rather than buying them with the money which is her sole motive for writing.

How closely Laura represents Thirkell's protagonist is confirmed by a letter (to Margaret Bird) of October 1958: 'I have told Hamilton I can't get on with a book just at present ... but I may try again & put Mrs Morland in my position & see how she can get out of it.'

The sentiments expressed by the fictional Laura are bitterly paralleled in Thirkell's own statement to the *New York Times Book Review* in 1956, 'I expect to write the same book every year until I die, though I'd rather die than write another book';7 and frequently in Thirkell's letters, written in the last ten years

of her life, to her typist and confidante, Margaret Bird - constant complaints distressing to read. In Sept. 1952, when Thirkell was aged 62: 'I must start T 1953 within a week or so— most unwilling as I'd sooner DIE than work, tho' work I must.' In April 1954: H.H. (Hamilton) has an idea that it would be a Good Thing for me to do two novels in one year, but this I strenuously oppose. I do not think there is enough audience for two —and in any case I feel extremely unequal to it.' In Aug 1955 (when she was 65), 'I am unwillingly beginning the next book as HH [Hamish Hamilton] wants one for the New Year (I don't)'. In Oct 1958, aged 69: 'I would almost rather be a Dustman or a Street Sweeper sometimes than write a book.' And in Jan 1959: This book has been a Plague ever since the beginning, but it has got to be finished, drat it.'

What a sorry contrast to the joy Thirkell found in research for historical writing!

Laura's best books

Thirkell's bitterness at having eternally to devote her labours to grinding out the popular, best-selling series clearly shows alongside her pride in and regret for what she called her 'extra books'. Laura too looks fondly back on early, 'extra' products of hers. In *Private enterprise* (1947),[8] Laura Morland observes, 'one doesn't think of books one earns one's living by as REAL books'. In *Never Too Late* (1956),[9] Lord Crosse asks Laura about 'those extra books - those off the record books if you prefer it. ... What about that life of Molly Bangs? ... I think it is charming. Just enough solid fact — and your own delightful brand of humour'. Laura explains, 'I came across Molly Bangs in some old Memoirs and thought she was worth following up. She lived at hack and manger with half the aristocracy. So then I thought I'd find out some more. So I went to London for a bit and researched like anything, just for fun.' Molly Bangs must be Harriette Wilson of *The fortunes of Harriette.* Laura declares, 'I really enjoyed going to places like the British Museum and the newspaper library at Hendon ... and just reading and reading and then making notes' - just as Thirkell had done.

Later in *Never too Late* Laura is said to have written two books 'under another name'. 'She was particularly proud of those two because hardly anybody else knew about them.' 'One was a quite frivolous book about three Ladies of the Town in the early 19th century. The other was an experience of her own when she got mixed up during the war with an Anglo-Mixo-Lydian association. Of course she couldn't write it under her own name because of libel, but it was extremely funny. She has the makings of an excellent reporter in her if only she could keep to the point'. Here we have Thirkell's self-criticism of her 'real' writing.

The wartime experience written under another name must represent *Trooper to the southern cross,* which is indeed 'extremely funny'. Laura says of the pseudonymous authorship of this book, 'I invented Esme Porlock. He was quite a nice man, but a one-book man. He could never do it again'. Note that the name Esme is ungendered, like Leslie Parker, the pseudonym Thirkell used for *Trooper to the Southern Cross*. (In *Growing up*, Philip Winter remarks, 'I love all those names that haven't any gender, like Leslie and Lindsay and Cecil and Evelyn. Not Esme, though.'). The Brontes, too, of course chose ungendered pseudonyous names: Acton, Currer and Ellis Bell.

Writing to Margaret Bird of her books in 1959, Thirkell records: 'There are 29! I think — not to speak of three or four non-novels — all exactly the same.' In *Never too Late*, asked how many books she has written, Laura answers, 'About thirty, counting the ones that aren't books'—explaining that this means, 'some that aren't novels, but they are quite good. And a book for children with the most divine stories. I cry whenever I read them because they are so beautiful.' Obviously this last refers to Thirkell's 'The Grateful Sparrow', and the fourth 'real book' must be Coronation Summer.

Laura Morland's literary reminiscences are all authentically identifiable as referring to Thirkell's works. In NTL, Laura even confesses, 'I once wrote a story which was so bad that I can't think why Adrian Coates ever published it. It had excessively bad reviews which were perfectly justified ... For a long time I didn't like to think of it, but now I don't care'. That must be 'O These men these men' of 1935, which she calls in a letter to M Bird, 'an incredibly bad book!'

There are other references too to the 'extra books' in Thirkell's later work. H Wilson is mentioned also in The Old Bank House (1949) - 'I have forgotten my latin, as Miss H W once wrote'. In Enter Sir R (1955) we find, 'Lord Mellings, rearing up his spiritual form (as Harriette Wilson wrote of one of her many temporary protectors); and a line is quoted, 'used in a rude lampoon against that gifted author Miss H W'. LAA 293. In her last completed novel, Love at all Ages, Thirkell refers to 'a nice book from the library ... about Queen Victoria's Coronation, by someone with a name like Turtle, and there were some very interesting illustrations'.[9]

No wonder Laura so frequently speaks, so caustically, of her 'good bad books'. The undiscerning rejection of *Coronation Summer*, first by Hamilton, then by the (non-)buying public, clearly rankled. Lord Stoke suggests that the Molly Bangs story 'would be a Rare Book one day'. How bitterly sad that indeed, *The Fortunes of Harriette* is now out of print and almost unobtainable.

Thirkell's subsequent career, complete with Laura's own exposée, seems to me to smack of the sardonic 'life-game' identified by Eric Berne, 'See what you made me do'.[12] Laura constantly offers Thirkell's conscious defence: 'Does it ever occur to you why people write books?' she asks Lord Crosse. 'Practically all of us write to educate our children or help our grandchildren, or supplement our small incomes, or to be able to travel. Not for the sake of Literature.' Thirkell succeeded in these lesser, necessitous ambitions. But her four Extra Books indicate the contribution that she might have made to Literature, had finances permitted, and Hamilton and her readership encouraged.

Others who understood

Tony Gould is one who appreciates the higher value of AT's 'extra books'. Introducing *Trooper to the Southern Cross*[14], he writes: 'In the Barchester stories, she celebrates a way of life which, though rooted in reality (too much for some: friends and acquaintances were not always delighted to find themselves appearing in them in all too lifelike a guise), was essentially literary and second-hand, as the borrowed topography suggests. ... In *Trooper to the Southern Cross* AT's ambivalent relationship with Australia and Australians in general ... provides a creative tension which is missing in the cosy fantasy world of the Barchester novels. ... In the apparently mindless complacency of the language, as in the engaging artlessness of the narrative, lies the art which conceals art.' Gould regards this book as AT's 'most enduring claim on our attention'.

Rachel Ferguson, Thirkell's closest friend, observed her sardonic choice of the lesser part, burying of her sterling talent to exploit the merely glittering. In her words of 1952, '*Three Houses* deserved success as did *Harriette Wilson* and *Coronation Summer*, for Angela Thirkell is a conscientious researcher and an exceptionally well-read woman. ... But today I think Angela Thirkell ... with a smile of gentle sarcastic malice, has accepted the position of well-known author. About the type of book for which she would in future be known she has long made choice. And for one reader who has ever heard of *Coronation Summer* a thousand know all about *Summer Half*, *Pomfret Towers*, *Marling Hall*, and their Buntings and

Brandons, to the tune of one per annum. If this sounds peevish, I can only plead that, in my view, no writer of Angela Thirkell's gifts, humour, observation and background has the right to jettison her wide knowledge of the actual.'[10]

Margaret Crosland, writing in 1981,[11] saw a darker reason for Thirkell's abandonment of 'real books' for Barsetshire: a parallel to the potential and the outcome in Thirkell's own life. Crosland deems Angela Mackail 'an easy prey for the life-force, to use Bernard Shaw's phrase. There seems to have been no other reason why, when she was twenty-one, she insisted on marrying a good-looking singer who might previously have been something of a homosexual, who fairly soon took to drink and even beat her. ... Not content with one doomed marriage she embarked on a second and as a result went to Australia, as far as humanly and socially possible from the native Kensington she never left in spirit.'

Thus, beautiful, talented, with 'many brilliant relations and friends', young Angela Mackail wilfully forsook all these for first marital humiliation, then Aussie suburban drudgery. Similarly, after experimenting with several forms of writing - journalism, drama, autobiography (*Three Houses*), historical biography, and children's fairy tales (*The Grateful Sparrow*), culminating in this wholly delightful tribute to Austen and Dickens, *Coronation Summer*— Angela Thirkell buried her stirling talents to tread the path to popular success, sales in thousands, and the income she needed for self- and sons-supporting.

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