

G. B. Lancaster (Edith Lyttleton), 1873–1945

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Edith Lyttleton, writing under the penname of G. B. Lancaster, was until the 1970s New Zealand's most successful popular fiction writer. A prolific author of both short stories and novels, she achieved her success by writing colonial adventure stories in defiance of familial and societal expectations. Living in London, she became an established author in the English short-story market and several of her stories were adapted for the movies. After a significant break in writing occasioned by the deaths of two family members, she effectively began a second career with the publication of four highly popular historical novels. Throughout her career, her writing was concerned with the emergent colonial cultures of Australia, Canada and New Zealand, the unsung heroism of ordinary people involved in colonisation, the interaction between those people and the land, and the place of women in those cultures. Until very recently, Lyttleton has been to all intents and purposes forgotten since the time of her death.

Born at Clyne Vale, a sheep station near Campbell Town, Tasmania on 18 December 1873, Edith Joan Lyttleton was the eldest of four children. Her parents, Westcote McNab Lyttleton and Emily (née Wood), were both from families of the Tasmanian colonial landed gentry and had married in January 1873. Emily was born in Tasmania in 1848, the fourth of seven children, her father having originally come to Van Diemen's Land to be a military officer at the convict garrison. Westcote was born in 1846 in Ireland and grew up in Nova Scotia, being related to the wealthy and influential McNab family that lived there. His family moved to Tasmania in 1859 and once there his father joined a property syndicate. Its acquisitions included Clyne Vale and the 20,000-acre sheep station, Rokeby, in Canterbury, New Zealand. Edith spent the first six years of her life in Tasmania while her father managed Clyne Vale, before the family moved to New Zealand in order for him to manage Rokeby.

Lyttleton's childhood was characterised by oppressive domestic circumstances. Brought up according to a puritanical Anglican faith, all the

children were rigorously disciplined and the girls were especially subject to punishment. This regime was instigated by their mother, who believed that females ought to lead lives of self-sacrificial service. One consequence of this upbringing was that Lyttleton did not receive a formal education, but she developed a love of literature through the influence of her father. His death in 1897 stunned the family and caused Emily to forbid her daughters to marry in order that they might care for her.

Lyttleton had been a compulsive writer from childhood, a habit developed in part as an escape from her home situation, and at age fourteen she won first prize in a Christmas story competition held by a local newspaper, the *Otago Witness*. The competition was judged by poet Jessie Mackay, and the two formed a friendship that lasted until Mackay's death in 1938. Emily strongly opposed the possibility of her daughter becoming known as a writer, but because of the financial insecurity brought on by Westcote's death Lyttleton was nevertheless allowed to begin to write seriously.

Lyttleton's earliest professional writings were short stories submitted to the *New Zealand Illustrated Magazine*. She published these under the penname of Keron Hale until a photograph identified her as Hale. At that point Lyttleton adopted the name she would write under for the rest of her life, G. B. Lancaster, derived from the hero of her first prize-winning story. Because of her mother's views about the impropriety of women writers, Lyttleton retained her anonymity for thirty years. As a consequence of her gender-neutral penname and choices of subject and setting, many readers assumed that Lancaster was a male. Lyttleton began to publish regularly in Australian magazines. She was the most prolific New Zealand contributor to *The Australian* and the *Bulletin* until 1909. The two magazines published sixty of her stories.

Her first book, *Sons o' Men* (1904), was a collection of short stories loosely focused around the group of men employed at the fictional Mindoorie sheep station in Southland, New Zealand. The stories emphasise masculinity, mateship and the power of the landscape, and the underlying ethos of the collection is stated most explicitly in its central story, 'Hantock's Dissertation.' In it, Hantock and Lane explain the colonial character to the bemused Man from England: 'A colonial is not a product of civilisation; he is a product of the

soil. If the rest of the world saw this, it would go to the country that produced him, and not to his forebears' (154).

Lyttleton's first novel was *A Spur to Smite* (1905), and it was her only novel whose central protagonist was a writer. It concerns a Faustian pact between young Australian bushman and aspiring writer Kin Severne and a philanthropist, Haddington, who offers him three years of support in exchange for seven years of service if Severne fails to succeed. Severne does fail, and is pressed into the service of Haddington's exploitative South Pacific enterprises. These experiences require him to change his literary style from an amoral naturalism to a more sympathetic mode, a move which Terry Sturm argues presented 'a challenge to prevalent thinking in New Zealand, and especially in Australia, which linked literary nationalism with naturalism as the preferred literary mode' (71). Published in England, only a few copies of *A Spur to Smite* reached Australasia but it was widely reviewed in England and the United States.

A Spur to Smite marked the beginning of a prolific period for Lyttleton and her next novel came only a year later. Set on a South Otago sheep station, *The Tracks We Tread* (1907) explores the influence of the environment on those who work there and details the new social codes being established in the colonial world. The novel was less well received than *A Spur to Smite*, with overseas reviewers in particular criticising the impenetrability of its intensely local language. Her next novel, *The Altar Stairs* (1908), was set in the Pacific and the title suggests the novel's moral concerns. It focuses on the relationship between Australian Rod Maclean, hired by a commercial venture wishing to open up the northern Solomon Islands, and missionary Jack Strickland. Its depiction of the cultural destruction achieved in the name of commerce marks the beginning of a critique of capitalism that Lyttleton was to develop in her later writing. In 1908, her mother sold Rokeby and most of the family – including Edith – left New Zealand to settle in England.

En route to England the family visited Canada, and Lyttleton wrote articles about her travels for the Literary Supplement of the New York *Evening Post*. While in Canada she also formed a lifelong friendship with the poet and short story writer Helena Coleman. On the suggestion of New York publisher

George Doran, who had read her articles, she visited outposts of the Royal North-West Mounted Police in the Yukon to gather material for a novel. Shortly after her arrival in London, *Jim of the Ranges* (1910) was published. Begun while in New Zealand, it is the most self-consciously American in style of her novels. Set in the Australian outback, its protagonist is the bushman Jim Kyneton, who joins the police force in Victoria, Australia out of a sense of obligation to the land. The novel proved very successful in England and the colonial market but, ironically, was never published in America.

A long holiday around Great Britain in 1910 provided the material for Lancaster's first English novel, *The Honourable Peggy* (1911). A romantic social comedy, it jarred with her reputation for colonial settings and did not sell well. In response, Lyttleton turned to her Yukon experiences, and left England for Canada in April 1911 with the intention of writing a novel. She stayed with Coleman and set herself a demanding writing schedule that took its toll on her health. Nevertheless, the success of the resulting novel, *The Law-Bringers* (1913), established her at the forefront of popular fiction writers. It is a tale of two Canadian Mounted Policemen — upright but dispassionate Jim Tempest and fallen but charismatic Dick Heriot — and the society taking shape within the rugged Canadian landscape. The popularity of the novel, in both the United States and England, guaranteed Lyttleton's financial independence for the next decade, gained her contracts for future novels, and led to the reissue of much of her earlier work.

Following *The Law-Bringers*, Lyttleton turned her attention to the potentially lucrative short-story market. Her attempts to establish herself among the English and United States monthly magazines were hampered by the demands of her domestic situation. Nevertheless Lyttleton published twenty-five stories from 1910 until the outbreak of World War I. The war delayed work on her next novel, as she became heavily involved in work for the Red Cross and the support of Dominion soldiers on leave in London. During the war she wrote patriotic journalism and her articles were published in the newspapers of many allied countries.

Lyttleton's next novel, *Fool Divine* (1917), was published during the war and Terry Sturm describes it as one of her 'least known and most underrated novels' (140). It focuses on Christopher Gascoyne's involvement in the search

for the cause and cure of yellow fever, the breakthrough that allowed the building of the Panama Canal. Its critique of United States' influence in Central America and the excesses of capitalism was largely ignored by critics, who preferred to emphasise the romance, exoticism and adventure of the plot. Her next novel, *The Savignys* (1918), was a political comedy set in England that was actually written before the war. Lyttleton felt it was out of step with the post-war political environment, but it was released due to pressure from her publishers.

Between 1919 and 1925, Lyttleton returned to the short story genre. Now recognised as an established author, she was able to command top prices. Several of her stories were filmed at this time. Recognising the demand for stories of the Canadian frontier, at least half of her more than eighty stories from this time were set in the Canadian North West. By contrast, only three stories were set in New Zealand, reflecting the lack of a New Zealand magazine to publish in. Lyttleton visited Canada for new material in mid-1920, but her strenuous schedule led to a physical collapse that left her debilitated until March 1921. Over the next two years she struggled to balance her domestic obligations with the demands of her short-story contracts.

Following the death of her sister in November 1923 and her mother four months later, Lyttleton suffered an emotional breakdown and her writing career came to a complete halt by 1926. As she gradually recuperated, she used her new freedom to travel and until 1940 lived nowhere for more than a year at a time. From 1926 she moved between New Zealand and Australia, and spent time in Tasmania in 1927 conducting research for a book about her Australian family origins. Unable to settle in a New Zealand literary community that she felt to be pretentious and amateurish, Lyttleton returned to England in 1930.

Lyttleton burst into the public limelight once more with the release of *Pageant* (1933), the fruit of her Tasmanian research and the first of her 'Dominion-historical' novels. Set in mid-nineteenth century Tasmania, it follows the fates of several wealthy families placed within a carefully historicised narrative of the growth of the new colony. Its ironic tone marks a sharp discontinuity from her previous novels, paralleled by a shift in focus

towards women characters. It is also sharply critical of the convict economy that underpinned early Tasmanian society. *Pageant* was chosen as a Book of the Month by the Literary Guild of America and was awarded the Gold Medal of Australian Literature Society for the best Australian novel of the year.

Between 1932 and 1934, Lyttleton's writing was interrupted by legal struggles against an unsatisfactory contract, as she sought to secure a greater return for herself and the ability to negotiate Australasian printing rights separately to those for England. Her next historical novel, *The World is Yours* (1934), was set in the Yukon and, although it sold less well than *Pageant*, Lyttleton's new contract meant that she did better out of it financially. Returning to Australia in 1933, Lyttleton was accorded celebrity status and, now able to adopt a more public profile, for the first time she allowed photographs of herself to be published.

In 1934 she began research in New Zealand for her next novel, but it was in Australia that she wrote the majority of *Promenade* (1938). Spanning six decades of the early settlement and colonisation of New Zealand, it follows the Lovel family as its members struggle to both adapt to and shape the new country. Evidence of successful adaptation is found in the poetry of the first New Zealand born generation of the family, Roderick and Tiffany:

To every exile the land they were leaving would be for ever the first, the dearer land. But here (so far as Jermyn knew) was the first voice of those who were no exiles, to whom New Zealand was the only land they knew. They knew the Maori too, egad, thought Jermyn, reading. (161)

Promenade is trenchant in its criticism of patriarchal Victorian society and the 'Holy Immolation of Marriage,' and it is especially notable for its diverse, independent-minded and resilient women characters.

Leaving New Zealand for the last time in 1938, Lyttleton visited Nova Scotia to research her next novel before she took up an offer of accommodation in Norway. While there her health broke down, due to a combination of a weak heart, high blood pressure and nervous stress; the outbreak of World War II meant she was only able to return to London in December 1939. Once again she became involved in the war effort, at the

expense of both her writing and her health, and she was hospitalised in early 1943. The next year her novel of Nova Scotia, *Grand Parade* (1944), was published. Reflecting its continuity with *Pageant* and *Promenade*, Terry Sturm argues that one of Lyttleton's 'central aims in *Grand Parade* is to give expression to the unrecorded history of women in the process of colonisation' (263). Lyttleton's health declined rapidly after the publication of *Grand Parade*, and she died on 10 March 1945. Later that year New Zealand critic F. A. de la Mare, in *G. B. Lancaster 1873-1945: A Tribute*, described her as 'the foremost novelist of New Zealand.' (3)

Having written over 250 short stories, 14 novels, poetry and journalism, Edith Lyttleton stands as one of New Zealand's most prolific and internationally successful writers. She succeeded in the face of a family and society that struggled to reconcile her gender with her occupation and subject matter. Her rapid descent into posthumous obscurity reflects the popular register of her work and the neglect of this genre – and of pre-1930s New Zealand literature in general – that has characterised much New Zealand literary criticism. However, the 'popular' label belies the consistently serious concerns of her novels: the delineation of the emergent colonial cultures of Australia, Canada and New Zealand; the portrayal of the injustices of colonisation; and the depiction and criticism of the treatment of women in such societies. With the publication of her biography and the increasing attention now being paid to New Zealand's earliest writers, Lyttleton seems due to be repositioned as one of New Zealand's significant literary figures.

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Edith Lyttleton's papers are held privately in Auckland, but collections of her correspondence are in the State Library of New South Wales (Mitchell Library, the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington; the National Library of Australia; the Mount Allison University Archives, New Brunswick, Canada; the Victoria University Library, Toronto; the New York Public Library (Berg Collection and the Pennsylvania State University Libraries (Rare Books and Manuscripts, Special Collections Library).