

Sensationalising Hull: Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Theatrical and Literary Connections¹

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Best-selling Victorian sensation fiction author Mary Elizabeth Braddon was (in)famous for novels depicting female bigamists, attempted murder, arson and bribery; anything and everything that shocked Victorian sensibilities. Before she gained international fame with *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and *Aurora Floyd* (1862) though, she began her writing career in the East Riding, and she continued to use the county as a setting for her fiction for the next fifty years. Braddon also toured the county as a travelling actress in the 1850s, sparking a debate within Hull's Board of Health while raising money for Pearson Park. Braddon's connections with Hull and the East Riding illustrate her creative talents, her fiery passion and a notoriety that continued for the rest of her life.

Theatrical Hull

As Jennifer Carnell has demonstrated, Braddon's acting career began in 1852 and lasted for almost a decade. During this time she travelled around the country, from Scotland to Southampton, from the provinces to the capital. Braddon worked hard and had a talent for acting, and so she went from small walk on parts to eventually becoming a leading lady. Between 1856-7, Braddon joined Messrs Wolfendon and Melbourne's theatrical company, which gave her regular work to help support her ageing mother, Fanny. Wolfendon and Melbourne ran Hull's Queen's Theatre on Paragon Street, which was reputedly the largest theatre outside of London, and so was a sound engagement. During her stay in Hull, Braddon lived just around the corner on Grimstone Street with a family sympathetic to thespians. While with this company Braddon performed in comedies, tragedies, Shakespearean plays and a pantomime, indicating her adaptability and increasing knowledge of classic and contemporary literature that she later drew on in her writing career. Wolfendon and Melbourne's company also played Beverley's Assembly Rooms for six nights, expanding Braddon's knowledge of the area surrounding the city. While in Beverley, Braddon befriended the actor, Wybert Rousby, who, almost twenty years later, starred in the leading role of one of Braddon's own plays, *Griselda* (1873). After leaving Hull to join Henry Nye Chart's theatrical company in Brighton, Braddon returned to Hull to perform in the Theatre Royal for six nights in 1859. Not only does this indicate that Hull was a major northern city, as it is on the touring circuit, but it is likely that while she was here, Braddon read about the Mayor of Hull's plans to establish 'The People's Park' in the local papers.

Pearson Park Benefit Night

Hull's Mayor, Zachariah Pearson, bought 27 acres of land for £7,400 to create a park that was freely open to the public - this was the first of its kind in Hull as other parks charged for admittance. Once Pearson gave the land to the Board of Health they had to raise money to build 'The People's Park'. This public endeavour relied heavily on donations from wealthy benefactors, and Wolfendon and Melbourne offered to host a theatrical benefit where all gross proceeds from the entertainment would go straight to the Park. Their offer caused a debate within the Board of Health, the minuets of which were published in the *Hull Packet and East Riding Times*. Some members of the Board felt that

¹ This article is based on: Janine Hatter, 'Closing the Curtain: M. E. Braddon's Last Performance as Mary Seyton', *Notes & Queries* (2015), 62: 3, 426-9.

the theatre was a disreputable occupation and so the money was tainted, while others argued they should look upon the offer as a compliment to the committee. In the end, the offer was accepted and the benefit night took place on 25th June 1860. The night's entertainment consisted of a musical score, a comedy, an operatic song, a poetic address, a comedic interlude and a farce. Braddon performed in the comedy, as well as writing the poetic address in which she compares Pearson's offering of the Park to Hull's shipping industry: Pearson had 'never launched a better, braver barque / Than when he charted this the People's Park'. The benefit night rose £70, which went to fund the entrance gates, lake and bandstand, and leaves a lasting monument to the Mayor and Hull's theatrical standing.

Literary Hull

While Braddon was acting to earn a living, she was also pursuing a writing career. Braddon lived in Black House, Beverley Parks for six months as a governess, and began writing under the patronage of John Gilby. He helped her published her first poetry in *The Beverley Recorder and General Advertiser*, while she also published her first novel, *Three Times Dead* (1860), with the printer Charles Empson of Toll-Gavel. Though Braddon moved to London in 1860, she never forgot her time in Hull and the East Riding – she uses the county as a backdrop to her fiction over the next fifty years. Braddon consistently depicts the county's rough beauty, the people, their habits, hobbies and food, illustrating the long-lasting impression the area made on her imagination. Indeed, the county becomes a character in its own right changing over time. After the phenomenal success of her 1860s sensation fiction, Braddon continued to publish two novels per year, flooding the London market with her literary output. To widen her readership and appeal, from the 1870s Braddon began syndicating her novels to newspapers in the major industrial cities of the north through William Tillotson of Bolton.² This led to Braddon publishing her 'new and powerful' novel *Phantom Fortune* in the *Hull Packet and East Riding Times* from 9th March - 26th October 1883.³ This was over twenty years after she left the city, showing how Hull left a lasting impression upon the creative author. Overall, Braddon described living in Beverley as the 'happiest half-year of my life', and this friendly, welcoming and homely atmosphere shines through in her literary depictions of Hull and the East Riding.

² Jennifer Carnell and Graham Law, "'Our Author": Braddon in the Provincial Weeklies', in Marlene Tromp, Pamela Gilbert and Aeron Haynie (eds.), *Beyond Sensation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context* (New York: 1999) 127-63.

³ 'New Story of the Highest Rank and Excellence', *Hull Packet and East Riding Times* (9 February 1883), 5130, 1.