**J.A. Hammerton and J.M. Barrie**

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J.A. Hammerton (1871-1949) – journalist, critic, editor, publisher, and professional writer – is best known for his contributions to encyclopaedia and information publishing. His entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* judges him the ‘most successful creator of large-scale works of reference that Britain has known’. On a smaller scale, he is remembered as the author of biographical and critical studies of George Meredith and Robert Louis Stevenson, and of three books on J.M. Barrie. Two of these – *Barrieland: a Thrums Pilgrimage* (a study of the literary landscape of Kirriemuir and its surrounding area) and *J.M. Barrie: the story of a genius* (a full-scale critical biography) – were published in 1929, eight years before Barrie’s death. By contrast, the third title, *J.M. Barrie and His Books: Biographical and Critical Studies*, appeared as early as 1900 when its subject had been a figure on the literary scene for little more than a dozen years. Though not entirely without precedent, the book was unusual in affording a living author such extensive critical treatment, as Hammerton himself acknowledged in a preface. While his critical assessments of Barrie are interesting in themselves, this essay will be less concerned with the contents of Hammerton’s book than with the connections between the two writers and what these tell us about Barrie and the literary world of 1900.

John Alexander Hammerton was born in Alexandria, Dumbartonshire, and raised in Glasgow where he serviced his apprenticeship in journalism. One of his earliest positions was assistant editor of the Glasgow temperance paper *The Reformer*. As a freelance he contributed to other papers in Glasgow, as well as Aberdeen and Dundee, and to several London publications. He became particularly associated with theatrical criticism, working as Glasgow correspondent of the London-based *Pelican*, a publication he describes in his memoir as ‘a risqué and frisky weekly of stage and sport’.[[1]](#footnote-1) This work gave him entry into the Glasgow theatres and music-halls, and in 1893 he brought out a theatrical monthly of his own, *The Prompter*. Further experiences with the theatre influenced one of his most successful books, *The Actor’s Art: Theatrical Reminiscences, Methods of Study and Advice to Aspirants* published in 1897.

In 1894 Hammerton moved south, first to Bolton and Blackpool, and then in 1895, following in the steps of Barrie, to Nottingham, where he became editor of the *Nottingham Daily Express*. Eight years previously the *Express* had absorbed the *Nottingham Journal*, the paper on which Barrie had worked as a leader writer for almost two years over 1883 and 1884. In his volume of memoirs *Books and Myself* (1944), published seven years after Barrie’s death, Hammerton records that ‘when the *Express* acquired the old *Journal* it absorbed none of the literary quality which had distinguished the latter in Barrie’s time’ (114). This retrospective judgement may owe something to an idealised view of the world of journalism that was already etched in the young man’s mind, and which was intimately associated with Barrie. Earlier in *Books and Myself* he recalls how ‘Barrie was irresistible to a young journalist, who saw in *When A Man’s Single* a glimpse of that vanishing literary Bohemia which he little dreamed he was soon to know at first hand, with himself as, in some sort, the editor of the Silchester Mirror, or such as it had become ten years after Barrie wrote its leaders, and conjured up a halo of romance for it.’ (112)

*When a Man’s Single: a tale of literary life* (1888), Barrie’s humorous novel about life on a provincial newspaper, first appeared as a serial in the *British Weekly* under the penname of ‘Gavin Ogilvy’. It is likely that Hammerton first encountered the work in this form since he recalls that William Robertson Nicoll’s immensely successful paper ‘had become one of my indispensable weeklies by the time I started in journalism’ (79). He would also have encountered in the *British Weekly* other sketches and essays by ‘Gavin Ogilvy’, including some that Barrie would soon rework, along with material from other papers, into *Auld Licht Idylls* and *A Window in Thrums*. For the seventeen-year-old apprentice journalist, however, it was the acute observer of literary bohemia rather than the chronicler of Thrums that was most alluring about Barrie. If Stevenson had been the love of Hammerton’s youth, Barrie quickly became an influence on, and a companion of, his early adulthood.

Like Barrie, Hammerton spent just short of two years in Nottingham. In 1897 he became editor of the *Birmingham Weekly Post*, and in 1900, shortly before the publication of *J.M. Barrie and His Books*, literary advisor to the London publisher Partridge & Co., a firm known chiefly for its cheap religious periodicals. His biggest career move, however, came in 1905 when he joined the staff of Alfred Harmsworth’s Amalgamated Press where he oversaw numerous ventures in serial and reference publishing including *The Self Educator* and *Harmsworth’s Universal Encyclopaedia*. Among the most successful serial works to carry his name were *The Great War* and *The War Illustrated*. He became known as the ‘King of the Fortnightly Part’ and the *ODNB* estimates some ‘ten million bound editions that bear his name as editor or author’. All the time he continued writing weekly columns, literary causeries, and other sole ventures (including books on South America), coming into contact with all the leading critics, editors and newspaper publishers of the day.

*Books and Myself* is an extraordinarily rich document of the world of journalism, publishing and literature over a period of some fifty years. What is no less remarkable is how Barrie and his works run through the texture of Hammerton’s prose. The book is full of sideways glances and often unexplained references that suggest a complete textual immersion in the author and his works. Clearly the research he undertook for his 1929 biography remained at Hammerton’s fingertips a decade or more later, but the many epigrammatic excursions into the corners of Barrie’s pages indicate something more. To take only a few examples: we learn in the opening pages that he often likened his mother to Jean Myles, the mother of Tommy Sandys in *Sentimental Tommy*; he describes the dress of a brother Scot he encounters in Bolton as ‘after the style of the elders in *The Little Minister*’ (96); and when he is elevated to the editorial chair in Nottingham he explains his feelings at having achieved professional maturity by commenting: ‘the title of one of Barrie’s early articles, “I Look So Young”, no longer haunted me.’ (111) Hammerton is far from hagiographical. *Books and Myself* contains some interesting observations on the shift in Barrie’s critical fortunes since his death seven years previously, and for all that Barrie remained a lifelong love and influence, Hammerton was phlegmatic enough to predict, presciently, that he ‘may be doomed (as indeed I think he is) to suffer something more permanent than eclipse.’ (318)

To return to 1900 and *J.M. Barrie and His Books*. The origins of the volume bear witness to other connections between Barrie and Hammerton and their literary milieux. The book was issued by Horace, Marshall & Son and much of the material was first published as essays in periodicals owned by that publisher, including the *Temple Magazine*, the *Young Woman* (where the chapter on Barrie’s heroines first appeared as ‘Barrie and Womankind’ in April 1900), and the *Young Man*. Ten years previously the latter publication had run Barrie’s serial story ‘A Superfluous Man’, never republished in volume form. Just as he had followed in his footsteps to Nottingham, Hammerton’s career touched on many of the periodical networks with which Barrie had previously been associated. Hammerton also records that the essays were republished in America in the New York *Bookman* and the *Critic*, both important publications which would have added to Barrie’s already high profile on the American literary scene.

Hammerton makes clear in his preface that *J.M. Barrie and His Books* is not an ‘attempt at a formal biography’ and he relies heavily on Barrie’s own words for the loose biographical thread that runs through its early chapters. *An Edinburgh Eleven* (1889) is plundered for the account of Barrie’s ‘College Days’, while his access to copies of the leaders Barrie wrote for the *Nottingham Journal* provide the substance for the second chapter entitled ‘Early Days in Journalism’. The material here would have been substantially new for most readers of the volume, uncovering an aspect of Barrie that was previously unknown. Indeed, in the preface to the volume Hammerton records that it was the reception given to this section of the book when it first appeared that spurred him on to compile the volume:

The idea of the book came to me some four years ago, when, as editor of the *Nottingham Express and Journal* and following the contribution of an article describing ‘J.M. Barrie’s Early Days in Journalism’ to the *Temple Magazine* … I received so many requests for biographical and bibliographical data concerning Mr Barrie that it occurred to me some such work as that now presented to the reader would at least fulfil a useful office if it did no more than supply young men and women with material for ‘Literary Society’ essays on Barrie and his Books. (3-4)

Those final words tell us much about the context of Hammerton’s volume and the literary world of 1900. The expansion of the newspaper and magazine market in the late nineteenth century meant that the concept of ‘Literary Society’ was being driven more and more by journalism and print media. The vogue for collecting ‘biographical and bibliographical data’ about contemporary authors formed part of a new public curiosity about writers and their lives that was facilitated by popular journalism – the world to which Hammerton belonged. It was a theme that pervaded reviews of Hammerton’s volume: ‘Year by year the penalties of celebrity increase’, the *Saturday Review* complained, ‘and the biographer whether fulsome or candid is more and more to be dreaded’ (29 September 1900). Like Henry James, who wrote of the ‘mania for publicity’,[[2]](#footnote-2) Barrie quickly came to shy away from the public eye: ‘never shall man or maid interview me’ he declared in a letter to Arthur Quiller-Couch in 1894.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the context of Hammerton’s volume, however, what is striking about this new media obsession with the lives of authors is that the interest in Barrie was as much bibliographical as biographical. This is evident in the shape of Hammerton’s book itself, parts of which are concerned with tracing the textual roots of the writing. The title itself is suggestive: *J.M. Barrie and His Books* – not *Works*. The ‘Barriana’ and ‘Bibliography’ printed as appendices to the critical chapters drew much comment from reviewers, mainly because they contained a selective list of the author’s anonymous and pseudonymous contributions to the *Nottingham Journal* and other periodicals. Critical attention to this area of Barrie’s writing points to the bibliographical and book-collecting interest that quickly built up around his work. He is one of the earliest examples of a living author whose works were assiduously pursued by collectors. The new vogue for collecting first editions of living authors – which was dismissed by some as faddish – was beginning to emerge at exactly the time Hammerton’s volume appeared, and the book’s critical reception underlines the extent to which the materiality of books would subsequently play a significant part in Barrie’s literary reputation.

This is demonstrated by the interest created by Hammerton’s chapter on *Better Dead* which first appeared in the *Young Man* on 3 March 1900.[[4]](#footnote-4) Early in his account of Barrie’s first book Hammerton explains: ‘I have ceased to be surprised when people tell me they have never read this book of Barrie’s; indeed, it is not astonishing to hear a well-read man declare he has never heard of it.’[[5]](#footnote-5) The point was picked up in the editorial pages of the *Academy* where, it was noted, ‘of the precious first edition of *Better Dead* not even our great national library possesses a copy; its copy is one of the second edition, 1888. Thus early has *Better Dead* become “scarce”.’ The writer went on to comment, erroneously as it happens, ‘I believe Mr Barrie has not reprinted the “book”, and in so doing he has been wise’, and speculated that ‘someday collectors will be seeking for copies of the libretto of “Jane Annie”, the Savoy opera in which Mr Barrie collaborated with Dr Conan Doyle. This was probably one of the weakest librettos ever written’.[[6]](#footnote-6) The subtext here is that even Barrie’s ephemeral publications were attracting interest among collectors – anything ‘scarce’ by or about the author was worth remarking upon. It is an early indication of what was to happen in the 1920s when Barrie’s works became so sought after that, as John Carter retrospectively wrote, ‘*Ulysses* (Paris, 1922) was unsaleable at 10 per cent of the price of *My Lady Nicotine* (1890).’[[7]](#footnote-7)

A conspicuous element of *J.M. Barrie and His Books* is Hammerton’s judgement of Barrie’s early drama. By 1900 Barrie’s dramatic output was small, and his major plays were all ahead of him. But the phenomenal success of *The Little Minister* on both sides of the Atlantic was a sure sign of where the author’s future lay. In his later study of the author Hammerton claims that in 1900 he was ‘strongly urged by my publishers not to deal with any of Barrie’s adventures in the theatre, as the great Nonconformist reading public that loved him as a story-writer had grave misgivings about him as a dramatist – and it was that audience to whom my publishers looked for the sale of the book.’[[8]](#footnote-8) This seems an unlikely stipulation for the publisher to make, and in any case Hammerton was confident, not to say cavalier, in his predictions about the author’s future:

It will be noticed that I do not deal in any place with Mr Barrie as a playwright. As an old student of the acted drama I have no compunction in expressing the opinion that, despite the wonderful success of “The Little Minister” on the stage, Mr Barrie is not, and is not likely to be, a serious factor in the contemporary drama. … his genius can best be shaped in books and not in plays.’ (5-6)

With hindsight it is easy to judge this assessment harshly, and of course Hammerton was able to correct his faulty predictions nearly thirty years on in *Barrie: the Story of a Genius*, tracing ‘the abundance of dramatic invention’ that followed in the years after 1900.[[9]](#footnote-9) But what must be taken from the earlier outright dismissal of Barrie the budding dramatist is a reminder that, even before he turned to the stage and became the most successfully dramatist of his generation, Barrie was held in high esteem as a writer of prose fiction.

Although Hammerton claimed in his later study and in his memoirs that *J.M. Barrie and His Books* had an encouraging press, the major literary organs struggled to look beyond what they saw as an act of presumption. A pre-publication announcement in the *Bookman* led the *Academy* to question the wisdom of the venture: ‘Mr Hammerton appears to be rather in a hurry. According to *Who’s Who*, Mr Barrie is only in his forty-first year, and in the ordinary course of nature has many years of work before him. His publications number only nine, all told – one of the nine (*An Edinburgh Eleven*) being a mere pamphlet, and another (*Better Dead*) of slight dimension’ (8 September 1900). When the volume appeared, the same publication concluded: ‘We do not think that the interests of Mr J.M. Barrie, or of literature, will be greatly served by the rather lengthy monograph on himself and his books, just written by Mr J.A. Hammerton’ (22 September 1900). The *Saturday Review* was equally taken aback: ‘the serious question is whether he may not injure a really admirable author in the esteem of the judicious’ (22 September 1900). Hammerton had pre-empted such criticism in the introduction to his book: ‘I have seen it argued that the publication of such a book as this is a reprehensible practice, in that it implies the elevation of its subject to the rank of a classic. […] it seems to me that a contemporary author of Mr Barrie’s acknowledged eminence is a worthy subject for any writer, be the medium a newspaper, a magazine, or a book.’ (5) Few reviewers accepted the disclaimer, however. The *Speaker* was unequivocal: ‘There cannot be the least objection to a study of a contemporary author done within proper limits, but it ought not to be gone about as if the man were already dead and cold, his statue up in Edinburgh University, and his birthplace at Kirriemuir the property of the nation’ (22 September 1900). Of course one of these seemingly outlandish prospects has now come to pass.

Unsurprisingly, *J.M. Barrie and His Books* did not escape a sardonic swipe from T.W.H. Crosland in his scurrilous lampoon of Scottish life, literature and character, *The Unspeakable Scot* (1902). Crosland’s lazy humour is levelled at Hammerton’s book in a chapter entitled ‘The Scot as Biographer’. Hammerton dismisses this with mild indifference in *Books and Myself*. He was clearly more offended by what he calls the ‘one violent attack’ that was made on the book, ‘of which I was warned in advance by the editor of the paper wherein it was to appear.’ (155) IN his preface Hammerton had commented that ‘naturally enough Mr Barrie’s sharpest critics have been they of his own country.’ (4) He was about to discover this applied to his own work as well. He does not name the paper in which the violent attack appeared, nor does he disclose the identity of the reviewer who wrote under the penname ‘Alan Northman’. He confirms, however, that ‘most of us in the literary world of that day knew who he was.’ And the identity of the assassin reveals something important about the direction in which Barrie’s reputation within Scotland was destined to take. The writer of the review was the publisher Andrew Melrose, whose firm issued the publications of the *Sunday School Union*, a direct competitor in the Sunday School market of Hammerton’s then employer Partridge & Co. But this was not the only axe the reviewer had to grind. Melrose was also an intimate friend of George Douglas Brown, whose anti-Kailyard novel *The House with the Green Shutters* would be published the year after Hammerton’s book in November 1901. Written in part as a realistic counterblast to Barrie’s *A Window in Thrums*, as well as to the work of Ian Maclaren, Brown’s novel has come to be seen as a landmark in Scottish literature, laying the foundations of the modern Scottish novel and consigning the work of Barrie and his imitators to the Kailyard. And we know from a later biography of Brown that in the summer of 1900 the author read to Melrose the early draft of the short story that became *The House with the Green Shutters*, and that it was Melrose who encouraged him to develop the story into a novel.[[10]](#footnote-10) The damning review of *J.M. Barrie and His Books* thus appeared at precisely the moment that Brown was writing his damning indictment of Scottish small town life and the Kailyard. Was Melrose helping to clear a path for his friend?

George Douglas Brown died in August 1902 nine months after the publication of his novel aged just 33. In the following year there appeared a book entitled *George Douglas Brown: Biographical Memoir* by Cuthbert Lennox, to which Andrew Lang wrote a lengthy introduction and Andrew Melrose a set of closing ‘reminiscences’. The three contributors to this volume project as much enthusiastic admiration for their subject as does Hammerton for his. The ever-critical *Academy* greeted it with the damning headline ‘Superfluous’. Yet whereas *J.M. Barrie and His Books* was sorely judged for daring to confer classic status on Barrie, death made a classic of Brown and *The House with the Green Shutters*, which assumed its rightful place in the Scottish literary canon. As another review of Hammerton’s volume put it, ‘failure, after all, is more interesting than success.’[[11]](#footnote-11)

1. J.A. Hammerton, *Books and Myself: Memoirs of an Editor* (London: MacDonald, 1944), p. 56. Further references are in the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Richard Salmon, *Henry James and the Culture of Publicity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *The Letters of J.M. Barrie*, ed. Viola Meynell (London: Peter Davies, 1942), p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hammerton returned to *Better Dead* in 1928 when compiling another volume, *Books and Persons*, reprinting the essay with some excisions and an additional opening section. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. J.A. Hammerton, *J.M. Barrie and His Books* (London: Horace, Marshall & Son, 1900), p. 79. Further references are in the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Academy* (10 March 1900), p. 258. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. John Carter, *Taste and Technique in Book Collecting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. J.A. Hammerton, *Barrie: the Story of a Genius* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., 1929), p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ibid*., p. 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. James Veitch, *George Douglas Brown* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1952), p. 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Review of Reviews* (October 1900), p. 400. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)