

VIOLET FANE



Violet Fane (1843-1905) was a minor nineteenth-century writer who achieved some popularity and who is now almost, but not quite, forgotten.

As with almost all the others in this account, she did not come from ordinary stock but was the grand-daughter of a baronet and the daughter of a man who would have been one but for his early death. Although born at Littlehampton the family owned Beauport Park and her birth name was Mary Montgomerie Lamb. The 1851 census records her living at Beauport with her family, but thereafter it appears that some of those recorded separated, no doubt after the death of her father in 1856. Her first marriage was to an Irish landowner, Henry Sydenham Singleton, in the West End in 1864, and they had four children.



Within a year of his death in 1893 she married again, to Sir Philip Henry Wodehouse Currie GCB Currie, GCB. (later Lord Currie of Hawley), the British ambassador to the Ottoman empire; this meant a move to what was then still Constantinople. (Remember that ambassadors then were not just the Crown's senior representative in any foreign land: by then only eight had the title, in the countries most important to the UK.) She died at Harrogate in 1905, and her husband died in 1906.

When Mary Singleton she quickly established herself in London, from her first publication in

By Francis Grant

1872. She took the pen name *Violet Fane* from Benjamin Disraeli's *Vivien Grey*, possibly with reference to her mother, whose maiden name was Grey. Her success was no doubt partly because of her good looks but also because she had an engaging manner and an imaginative use of words. In due course she was one of those who were regarded as part of Oscar Wilde's 'circle' – indeed he mentioned her name when applying for a job in 1887. By that time she had published only poetry.

Her publications were not many, at least in comparison with the other authors considered in this account. This list omits most of her articles and gives the names by which the books are generally known:

as Violet Fane:

From dawn to noon, poems (1872)

Denzil Place, a story in verse (1875), reprinted as *Constance's fate: a story of Denzil Place*

The queen of the fairies and other poems (1876)

Anthony Babington (1877, verse drama)

Autumn songs (1889, poetry)

Under Cross and Crescent (1896, poetry)
Betwixt two seas (1900, poetry)
Sophy, or the adventures of a savage (1881, novel)
Thro' love and war (1886, novel)
The story of Helen Davenant (1889, novel)

as Mary Currie:

Are remarkable people remarkable looking; an extravaganza (1904, essay)
The feast of kebobs (1904, autobiographical essay)

as translator:

Memoirs of Marguerite de Valois, Queen of Navarre (1892).

One modern critic has written:

“Violet Fane” briefly became the poetic darling of the upper classes from which she hailed and a frequent contributor to Victorian periodicals, both horrifying and titillating her literary audience and aristocratic friends with her sexual antics. Fane’s popularity undoubtedly derived from the rumored [sic] autobiographical nature of her poetry, which commonly depicted scandalous and illicit love affairs forbidden by law and society. Despite finding acceptance in her own time, due in part to the author’s elevated social position, exotic adventures both geographic and sexual and personal charm, Violet Fane’s love-obsessed and occasionally racist work does not translate well in the twenty-first century except as a means to gain insight into themes and imagery within late female Victorian poetry. Despite being the wellborn daughter [sic] of Sir Charles Lamb of Beauport Park in Sussex, Fane frequently succumbed to her romantic passions – with no regard for her reputation, rather like her distant kinsman the rakish Restoration poet John, Earl of Rochester. Prurient to say the least, her sexual history encompassed a mysterious premarital affair, hasty marriage to Irish landowner Henry Sydenham Singleton after its failure, and multiple adulteries. While married to Singleton she indulged in a *ménage à trois* with the eccentric poet Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, husband to Byron’s granddaughter, and Blunt’s cousin her future spouse Sir Philip Currie, Ambassador to Turkey and Italy. Blunt called her “Angelina” and “his pagan muse”, regarding her love as a successful rival to his struggles to embrace Roman Catholicism and referencing the “fiery” gypsy blood she inherited from her mother; but he was not her ultimate choice. Marriage to the ambassador Currie came swiftly on the heels of Singleton’s death, ushering in a new life amidst exotic locations that she vividly detailed in poetic verse and periodical articles. Violet Fane had little difficulty in establishing a readership for her romantic, occasionally Byronic verses describing the complex agonies of female love. Popular with “upper-class women as well as milliners, apprentices and ballet girls”, Fane contributed to publications such as *Lady’s Realm* and Wilde’s newly re-christened *Woman’s World*...

According to others, her writing has considerable power and she showed skill in her poetry. Her themes will obviously be dated to a modern ear, but – apart from the touch of racism – the slightly riské nature of her subject matter would hardly seem out of place now.

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Sources

Richard Ellman: *Oscar Wilde* (Penguin 1988)

List from www.poemhunter.com/violet-fane/biography/, adjusted

Sylvia Craig: *Should we care about "Violet Fane"?*

List of works from various sources