

## Christmas as Humbug: A Manuscript Poem by Letitia Elizabeth Landon ("L.E.L.")

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"L.E.L."—as she signed her work—enjoyed great popularity and esteem during the 1820s and 1830s, not only in England, but also in the United States and on the European Continent.<sup>1</sup> Landon was a literary prodigy, who started to compose poems as a child and began publishing in March 1820, when she was seventeen years old. She died at the age of thirty-six, in West Africa, where she had gone to live after her marriage in June 1838 to George Maclean, governor of the British post at Cape Coast (in present-day Ghana). In her remarkably productive career, Landon wrote seventeen volumes of poetry, three substantial novels, two books of short stories, a tragedy, countless reviews and critical articles, and many other works, in addition to journals and letters. In fact, considering the quantity and variety of her work, and the high regard accorded it by contemporaries, one might make a case for Landon as one of the most prominent English poets during the period between the death of Byron in 1824 and the emergence of the great Victorians.

Among specific reasons why her poetry is not better known today, is perhaps her early predilection for the now-obsolete genre of romantic verse narrative as, for instance, in *The Improvisatrice* (1824), or *The Troubadour* (1825), which were inspired by Sir Walter Scott's poems. Furthermore, many of Landon's poems appeared in annual volumes like *Forget Me Not*, *The Keepsake*, or *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrap Book*—gift-books which enjoyed a great vogue at the time but went out of fashion in the 1840s, when Landon's work went out too, as if by association with an outmoded cultural phenomenon. (The fiction of Bulwer and Disraeli underwent a similar eclipse.)

Finally, much of Landon's writing is frankly sentimental. Her chosen themes, she says in the preface to her book of tales for children, *Traits and Trials of Early Life* (1836), were "Sorrow, Beauty, Love, and Death." But to dismiss Landon's work as "merely" sentimental is a mistake. Certainly she wrote for the paying press many poems that were little more than charming decorations.<sup>2</sup> But even in the least of them there are hints of an earnestness and intensity that is far from facile or superficial. And in her best work she is never dealing in "mere" sentiment. On the contrary, there are cynical, almost nihilistic qualities in her work; they did not pass unnoticed. Contemporary critics, such as S. Sheppard<sup>3</sup> and Frederic Rowton,<sup>4</sup> commented on her tendencies to melancholy and gloom, with no available solace in religious faith or programs for social improvement (compare E. B. Browning's view of Landon as expressed in "L.E.L.'s Last Question"). As examples, one might cite Landon's poems "Necessity," "The Astrologer," and "The Feast of Life." Landon was even capable of deep sympathy with a wicked lust for revenge. Her poem, "The Laurel," with its vengeful expression of a poet's curse upon a faithless lover, is a case in point. More violent is the revenge of Lady Marchmont, who murders both her husband and her lover—in Landon's novel *Ethel Churchill* (1837; a new edition, with an introduction by the author of this article, was published October 1992 by Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, Delmar, New York 12054).

Criticism of the cruelty, greed, injustice, and vanity of "actual" life, then, is pervasive in Landon's work. But since much of her writing was composed for members of the "establishment" she rarely speaks out on specific political or social issues. A notable exception is her poem, "The Factory" (1835), in which she decries the child labor system.

The interest of "Christmas" is that the poet openly voices the darker thoughts she nourished while writing "poetical illustrations" for costly picture-books that were destined to grace the drawing-rooms of the rich at Christmas time. In this poem, one feels, the mask of propriety is put aside, and the author gives free rein to her anger and bitterness in an ironic tone, which, in light of the sacrosanct status of Christmas, is nothing less than shocking. It is a time when one is supposed not only to be "merry" but also to believe in hope and redemption, even of the

most unredeemable characters, as in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. To join old Scrooge in calling Christmas "humbug" is blasphemous.

But Landon is, of course, no Scrooge. Scrooge dismisses Christmas because he is interested only in money; he accepts without question the actualities and institutions of the world, such as prisons and workhouses. By contrast, Landon strongly protests the conditions of everyday life. Like Dickens, she glances back to an idealized Christmas past, "When the red hearth blazed, the harper sang, / And the bells rung their glorious chime." She writes in this nostalgic vein in her poems, "Christmas in the Olden Time, 1650" and "Thoughts on Christmas-day in India,"<sup>5</sup> where she seems to be drawing on happy memories of her childhood at Trevor Park—the ancient gabled country house at East Barnet, where her family lived until the postwar depression of 1815 compelled them to move back to London.<sup>6</sup>

But when Landon turns her thoughts from the past and considers the present, she—unlike Dickens—finds no redeeming power in memories. The "merry" Christmas of her past, and of tradition and conventional belief, appears to her as an empty, obsolete illusion. At Christmas, as at any other time, people hurry along dreary streets, struggling to make a living; the needs of the poor, old, and helpless are ignored; a child is murdered so its body can be sold for use in scientific experiments.<sup>7</sup> In the countryside, the mythical "Captain Swing"—as the rick-burners and machinery-breakers were known—is setting fire to haystacks and barns to protest agricultural depression, unemployment, and the importing of cheap Irish labor. At the same time, there were repercussions from the French revolution of 1830, together with intense political controversy over electoral reform, which finally resulted in the passage of the Reform Bill of 1832.<sup>8</sup> And the cholera, having marched across Europe, has now arrived in England like a plague, seemingly carried across the English Channel by unseasonably warm winds.<sup>9</sup>

Amid material struggle, crime, social protest, and disease—Landon suggests—celebration of Christmas is not a gesture of hope, but a hypocritical mockery. She sees the prevailing social conditions as signs that the nation is under a kind of curse, or moral retribution, as a punishment of society as a whole for its evil and inhumanity.<sup>10</sup> She implies that neither faith nor annual effusions of good feeling alter

fundamental conditions in a world which rolls round in its diurnal course like a vast juggernaut, crushing everything before it. For Landon, the only refuge is the ethereal, unattainable realm of the ideal, to which she appeals so eloquently in poetry that earned for her pen name—"L.E.L."—the epithet "magical letters."

The constellation of topical allusions in Landon's "Christmas" suggests a date around Christmas 1831, when she was living at 22 Hans Place, London. The drab interior of her narrow attic chamber—in which most of her works were composed—is described in detail in Laman Blanchard's *Life and Literary Remains of L.E.L.* (London, 1841), and starkly depicted in an illustration to Thomas Crofton Croker's *A Walk from London to Fulham* (London, 1860; reprinted 1896).<sup>11</sup>

Other works written by Landon at about this time are her first novel, *Romance and Reality* (1831), and her poems for *The Easter Gift* (published by Fisher in 1832 and reprinted in following years). Most significant for the present purpose is that she had been engaged as "editor" of the first volume of *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrap Book* (published late 1831, dated 1832). For this and other similar works, Landon had to compose dozens of pieces to accompany engraved plates which had been prepared in advance and sent to her during the summer. As one critic comments: "A more devastating form of drudgery it is difficult to imagine."<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, one may agree with L.E.L., as she writes to her publisher, not so much with complacency as, undoubtedly, with pointed irony: "Some of my best poems have appeared in the Drawing-Room Scrap Book."<sup>13</sup>

The text of "Christmas" is printed, by permission, from the holograph manuscript (signed "L.E.L.") in the collection of Mr. John Elliott, Jr., to whom grateful thanks are due. The poem does not appear in volumes of Landon's collected works. However, L.E.L. published literally hundreds of poems in newspapers, magazines, gift-books, anthologies, etc., and many of these were never collected for republication, either by the author or by later editors. There are also many poems in manuscript collections. The bibliography of Landon's voluminous work is therefore an immense, complex subject, and it has hardly been touched. That "Christmas" may perhaps have been published somewhere may be suggested by the stanza-break marks in the left margin of the

ms.—these would presumably have been noted for the use of a printer. But it is of course possible that the poem never appeared in print.<sup>14</sup>

The ms. of "Christmas" is lightly punctuated and contains a number of deletions which suggest that Landon was, at least to some extent, composing or revising her verses as she wrote. In fact this may well be a first and only draft of the poem. The author was known, even as a teenager, for the ease and rapidity with which she composed. In the absence of a fully punctuated text, gone over by a contemporary editor and proofread by the author, one hesitates to make extensive alterations or additions—line endings can serve for pauses; but a few emendations seem to be called for. Where changes have been made or textual comments are needed, actual readings of the ms. are noted as follows: references are to lines; ms. readings are given in roman type; angle brackets enclose readings crossed out by the author; square brackets enclose editorial explanations, in italics.

### Christmas.

Now out upon you Christmas!  
     Is this the merry time  
 When the red hearth blazed, the harper sang,  
     And the bells rung their glorious chime?

You are called merry, Christmas [5]  
     Like many that I know  
 You are living on a character  
     Acquired long ago.

The dim lamps glimmer o'er the streets  
     Through the dun and murky air [10]  
 You may not see the moon or stars  
     For the fog is heavy there.

As if all high and lovely things  
     Were blotted from the sight,  
 And earth had nothing but herself,— [15]  
     Left to her own drear light.

A gloomy world goes hurrying by  
    And in the lamplight's glare  
Many a heavy step is seen  
    And many a face of care. [20]

I saw an aged woman turn  
    To her wretched home again  
All day she had asked charity  
    And all day asked in vain.

The fog was on the cutting wind [25]  
    The frost was on the flood  
And yet how many past that night  
    With neither fire nor food.

There came on the air a smothered groan  
    And a low and stifled cry [30]  
And there struggled a child, a young fair child  
    In its mortal agony.

"Now for its price," the murderer said  
    On earth we must live as we can  
"And this is not a crime but a sacrifice [35]  
    In the cause of science and man."

Is this the curse that is laid on the earth  
    And must it ever be so  
That there can be nothing of human good  
    But must from some evil flow? [40]

On on and the dreary city's smoke  
    And the fog are left behind  
And the leafless boughs of the large old trees  
    Are stirred by the moaning wind

And all is calm, like the happy dream [45]  
    Which we have of an English home  
A lowly roof where cheerful toil  
    And healthy slumbers come.

Is there a foreign foe in the land  
That the midnight sky grows red [50]  
That by homestead and barn, and rick and stock  
Yon cruel blaze is fed?

There were months of labour, of rain and sun  
Ere the harvest followed the plough  
Ere the stack was reared, and the barn was filled [55]  
Which the fire is destroying now.

And the dark incendiary goes through the night  
With a fierce and wicked joy  
The wealth and the food which he may not share  
He will at least destroy. [60]

The wind—the wind it comes from the sea  
With a wailing sound it past  
'Tis soft and mild for a winter wind  
And yet there is death on the blast.

From the south to the North hath the Cholera come [65]  
He came like a despot king  
He hath swept the earth with a conqueror's step  
And the air with a spirit's wing.

We shut him out with a grille of ships  
And a guarded quarantine [70]  
What ho! now which of your watchers slipt?  
The Cholera's past your line.

There's a curse on the blessed sun and air  
What will ye do for breath?  
For breath which was once but a word for life [75]  
Is now but a word for death.

Woe for affection when love must look  
On each face it loves with dread  
Kindred, and friends; when a few brief hours  
And the dearest may be, the dead. [80]

The months pass on, and the circle spreads  
 And the time is drawing nigh  
 When each street may have a darkened house  
 Or a coffin passing by.

Our lot is cast upon evil days [85]  
 In the world's winter time,  
 The earth is old, and worn with years  
 Of want, of woe and of crime.

Then out on the folly of ancient times [90]  
 The folly which wished you mirth!  
 Look round on the anguish—look round on the vice  
 Then dare to be glad upon earth.

L.E.L.

- 1 Christmas [no punctuation]  
 4 rung [clearly, and not "rang"—see OED for examples of this past tense form as used  
 by Southey (1797) and Disraeli (1837)]  
 4 chime.  
 11 stars [the star of Bethlehem would not be visible here]  
 16 [the image recalls Byron's "Darkness"]  
 21 aged woman [perhaps an ironic parallel to the Virgin Mary]  
 27 past [alternate past tense form for "passed"—see OED; cf. l. 62]  
 28 f<l>ood.  
 31 young fair child [perhaps an ironic parallel to the Christ Child]  
 32 agony [no punctuation]  
 33 'Now for its price,' [single quotation marks]  
 35 sacrifice [a bitter inversion of Christ's sacrifice]  
 39 That that there [sic]  
 40 flow.  
 45 all is calm [perhaps an ironic echo of the Christmas hymn, "Stille Nacht" ("Silent  
 Night"), composed in 1818 by Franz Gruber, with words by Josef Mohr]  
 45 happy <home> dream



- 50 the <mind> midnight  
 51 by <by> homestead  
 52 <The> Yon  
 52 fed.  
 53 of <su> rain  
 55 barn [suggests the setting of the Nativity]  
 67 conqueror's <king> step [the image may parallel the Epiphany]  
 68 wing [no punctuation]  
 69 a <guard> gville [sic, clearly, over <guard> probably a slip of the pen, or possibly an inadvertent phonetic spelling reflecting the author's pronunciation]  
 71 slipt [sic, clearly, with no punctuation, and not "slept"]  
 74 for <the> breath [no punctuation]  
 75 word for life [Greek ψυχή, Latin "anima" and "spiritus"—as in the Holy Spirit—literally mean "breath"]  
 79 Friends, and kindred [with author's indication to transpose]  
 80 dead [no punctuation]  
 85 is <ch> cast  
 87 The <ol> earth  
 90 mirth [no punctuation]  
 92 [The words "glad upon earth" and the previous reference to the "old" earth (line 87), recall phrases from the well-known hymn that begins: "Turn back, O man, forswear thy foolish ways," by Louis Bourgeois (1551). The moral message expressed in the first two stanzas of the hymn, with their reference to "tragic empires," is perfectly in harmony with Landon's poem.]

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Many American editions of her works were published in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York; and in Germany her poem *The Improvisatrice* was reprinted as *Die Sangerin, nach dem Englischen von Clara Himly, Englisch und Deutsch* (Frankfurt: Schmerber, 1830). During Landon's visit to Paris in the summer of 1834, she frequented the famous salon of Mme. Recamier, and made the acquaintance of many literary figures, including Heinrich Heine. See *The Autobiography of William Jerdan*, 4 vols. (London, 1852-53) 3:187-206, where several of Landon's letters from Paris are printed. See also the reference to Landon in: Heinrich Heine, *Sakularausgabe*,

vol. 24, *Briefe an Heine*, 1823-36, ed. Renate Francke (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag; Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1974) 266; also Fritz Mende, *Heinrich Heine: Chronik seines Lebens und Werkes* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1970) 116—including “Besuch bei Landon,” June 29, 1834. (I am grateful to Eric Sams and Peter Branscombe for these German references.) In connection with Landon’s reputation in Germany, note also her poem “Wave, Wind and Bark” (alternative title, “Forget-Me-Not”), translated by the poet Wilhelm Gerhard (1780-1858) as “Welle, Lüftchen und Rinde” (alternative title, “Vergiss mein nicht”) and published in William Sterndale Bennett’s musical score, *Sechs Gesänge*, Opus 23 (Leipzig, 1841). Several of Landon’s publishers had connections with Germany: Ackermann (or Ackerman—both spellings occur), Shoberl, and Fisher, for example. Detailed research would undoubtedly turn up evidence that Landon’s work was known and respected both in Germany and France. It is fair to consider her a member of the international circle of influential women of letters at the time, among whom (at a slightly earlier period), one of the most brilliant was Germaine Necker, baronne de Staël-Holstein (*dite* Mme. de Staël). I mention her in particular because the heroine of her novel *Corinne* (1807) was one of Landon’s role-models, and a pattern figure for *The Improvisatrice*, and “Erinna.”

<sup>2</sup>An example is the poem “Little Red Riding Hood,” in *The Book of Gems: The Modern Poets and Artists of Great Britain*, ed. S. C. Hall (London, 1838) 179-81, with an engraving by W. H. Simmons of a picture by J. Inskipp.

<sup>3</sup>*Characteristics of the Genius and Writings of L.E.L. with Illustrations from her Works, and from Personal Recollection*, by [Miss] S. S[heppard]. (London, 1841).

<sup>4</sup>Editor of *The Female Poets of Great Britain* (Philadelphia, 1853); reprint edited by Marilyn L. Williamson (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1981).

<sup>5</sup>“Christmas in the Olden Time, 1650” appears in *Fisher’s Drawing Room Scrap Book* for 1836, 47-48. “Thoughts on Christmas-day in India” appears in *The Zenana and Minor Poems*, with an introduction by Emma Roberts (London, 1839) and in Landon’s *Poetical Works*, ed. W. B. Scott (London, 1873), reprint edition with an introduction and additional poems, ed. F. J. Sypher (Delmar, N.Y.: Scholars’ Facsimiles & Reprints, 1990) 504-06.

<sup>6</sup>Concerning Landon’s years at East Barnet, see the information and bibliographical references in the introduction to a reprint of her first book, *The Fate of Adelaide* (1821), ed. F. J. Sypher (Delmar, N.Y.: Scholars’ Facsimiles & Reprints, 1990). See also *N&Q* 236 [ns 38] (1991) 520.

<sup>7</sup>*The Times*, London (7 Nov. 1831) p. 6 col. 4, under the heading “Police,” reports the case of the murder of a fourteen-year-old boy, whose body was sold to a “demonstrator of anatomy at the King’s College,” who believed that “death had been produced by violence.” The grim details of the story are fully exposed in a series of articles in subsequent issues of the newspaper; for references to later dates and pages, see *Palmer’s Index to The Times Newspaper* for 1 Oct. to 31 Dec. 1831, under the heading “Police.”

<sup>8</sup>On the agricultural disturbances, see Elie Halévy, *The Triumph of Reform 1830-1841*, 2nd ed. (London: E. Benn, 1950) 7-9.

<sup>9</sup>See the memorable description by Eugene Sue in *The Wandering Jew*, Book I, “Interval” between chapters xvi and xvii; original title *Le Juif Errant* (Paris, 1844-45). For a near-contemporary scientific discussion of cholera, see the classic epidemiological papers by John Snow in *Snow on Cholera* (New York: OUP, 1936). Snow is mainly concerned with British outbreaks in 1848 and 1854, but the cholera of 1831-32

(referred to by Landon) was observed by him, and is mentioned in several places in his book (20, 99-100, 104-05). There was a widely held belief at the time that cholera was spread by airborne means (9, 113-14, 159-60); however, Snow persuasively argued that it was in fact transmitted via contaminated drinking water. Snow also discusses the association of cholera with warm weather (117-18), when water was more likely to be drunk at relatively mild temperatures, instead of being boiled and therefore purified, in the process of making hot tea. There are numerous articles on cholera in *The Times* at this period; see *Palmer's Index to The Times Newspaper* for 1 Oct. to 31 Dec. 1831.

<sup>10</sup>For near-contemporary instances of disease regarded as a kind of moral retribution, see Carlyle's *Past and Present* (1843) III.iii, and Kingsley's *Alton Locke* (1850).

<sup>11</sup>I owe this reference to the kindness of Mr. John Harris, author of *The Artist and the Country House* (1979). Croker's text and illustrations about L.E.L. originally appeared in *Fraser's Magazine*, vol. 31, no. 181 (January 1845) 5-7, 14-15. The illustration is reproduced in the introduction to my edition of Landon's *Ethel Churchill* (6), cited in the text of the present article. The description given by Blanchard is in his *Life*, vol. 1, 78-79.

<sup>12</sup>D. E. Enfield, *L.E.L.: A Mystery of the Thirties* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1928) 88.

<sup>13</sup>Quoted in the memoir of L.E.L. by William Howitt (signed "W. H.") in *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrap Book* for 1840 (5). See Thackeray's review of the *Annuals* for 1837, where he speaks of Landon in detail: "She will pardon us for asking, if she does justice to her great talent by employing it in this way? It is the gift of God to her—to watch, to cherish, and to improve: it was not given her to be made over to the highest bidder, or to be pawned for so many pounds per sheet. An inferior talent (like that of many of whom we have been speaking) must sell itself to live—a genius has higher duties; and Miss Landon degrades hers, by producing what is even indifferent." *Fraser's Magazine*, vol. 16, no. 96 (December 1837) 763. The review is unsigned but the attribution to Thackeray is given by Miriam M. H. Thrall in *Rebellious Fraser's: Nol Yorke's Magazine in the Days of Maginn, Thackeray, and Carlyle*, *Columbia University Studies in English and Comparative Literature* 117 (New York: Columbia UP, 1934) 295. This volume contains a chapter, "The Story of L.E.L.," on Landon's association with Maginn (193-207).

<sup>14</sup>Except for the first eight lines, quoted in an entry which appears on an untitled, undated auction-catalogue leaf, among papers relating to Landon, in Special Collections and Archives, Rutgers University Libraries, New Brunswick, New Jersey. A powerful 20th-century work expressing somewhat similar doubts about Christmas is the title story by Katherine Anne Porter, in her collection *The Leaning Tower and Other Stories* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1944).