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Hubert Crackanthorpe: Selected Writings,
ed. by William Greenslade and Emanuela Ettorre (Cambridge: MHRA, 2020),
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Hubert Crackanthorpe is often found in the footnotes of books on the 1890s, which reference his short life and death by suicide at the age of twenty-six as one of the defining tragedies of the era. This collection is a timely reminder of why he was so well regarded by his supporters – and reviled by his detractors.

Crackanthorpe and his wife Leila, née Macdonald, were the golden couple of the English decadence: attractive, literary, well connected, and rich. They came to grief in what Henry James, quoted in William Greenslade's introduction, called a 'somewhat small sordid drama of crude, incompatible youthful matrimony' (p. 1). That is certainly one way of putting it. They married in 1893 but by 1896 were both with lovers: Crackanthorpe with Richard Le Gallienne's sister Sissie Welch; and Leila with a French artist called the Comte d'Artaux. They lived together in a rather improbable ménage à quatre in Paris, in an apartment off the Champs-Élysées. The Crackanthorpes' relationship broke down, and Leila summoned her solicitor from London to initiate divorce proceedings. I learned from William Greenslade's introduction that John Waller Hills, the solicitor and man of letters Leila Crackanthorpe consulted in this fateful period, was her cousin, which makes the whole business even more of a family affair than it already was. What is more, Hills married Stella Duckworth, who was half-sister to Vanessa and Virginia Stephen (later Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf) so there is another connection to modernism for the *Yellow Book* set.

The intended divorce would be devastating even in excess of the usual distasteful divorce proceedings, because the grounds Leila invoked was 'legal cruelty': that her husband had infected her with a venereal disease. The cruelty was 'legal' because a wife was unable to refuse to consent

to sex (a situation which was not changed in law until 1994). Crackanthorpe sent Sissie back to London and argued with Leila. He then disappeared, not to be seen again for seven weeks, when his body was fished out of the Seine and identified in the morgue by his cufflinks and other personal items.

Crackanthorpe's youthful death produced a mythology of mourning for the great lost leader of literary realism. His friends declared that English letters had lost a rival to Maupassant and Chekhov. Critics of his work sneered that his miserable end was no more or less than such a decadent deserved.

The editors have done a service in collecting the best of Crackanthorpe from his four books: *Wreckage: Seven Studies* (1893), *Sentimental Studies and a Set of Village Tales* (1895), *Vignettes: A Miniature Journal of Whim and Sentiment* (1896), and *Last Studies* (1897). The last, posthumous volume was published with a dedication by his mother Blanche Crackanthorpe to Hubert's friends 'who saw in the unfolding flower of his manhood a renewal of the bright promise of his early youth'; and an 'Appreciation' by Henry James. The editors have also published here three hitherto uncollected stories, one of which had not previously been published at all. Three pieces of Crackanthorpe's non-fiction are also featured, including his interview with Émile Zola and an essay on 'Reticence in Literature' from the *Yellow Book*.

The editors have done some great bibliographical sleuthing in tracking down the original references for Crackanthorpe's work as well as its later publication in such editions as Guido Bruno's chap books of 1915, produced from his 'Garret on Washington Square'. It was not until the 1960s that scholars such as Wendell Harris and William Peden offered literary criticism which presented Crackanthorpe as a pioneering author of the under-studied period of literary transition from 1880-1920. An increasing volume of criticism and life writing followed in the twenty-first century, culminating in this annotated reprinting of selected prose with scholarly annotations.

The stories are set in Crackanthorpe's world: the two locations of London literary life and scenes from the Lake District. Two persistent themes are that marriage is a big disappointment

and infidelity not much better. In literary terms Crackanthorpe sits in the context of the contemporary French scene with which he was familiar; in the milieu of the prosecution of Vizetelly for publishing Zola; and under the dread hand of the circulating libraries with their suppressive effect on artistic innovation. Crackanthorpe's writing was met with the criticism that it was 'Zola-esque', 'morbid' and 'loathsome'. In his turn, he argued for the need for an unfettered English realism in letters. Crackanthorpe moved with a literary cohort; *Wreckage* was one of a number of naturalist short story collections published in 1893. George Egerton's *Keynotes* and Henry Harland's *Mademoiselle Miss* were also published this year; two years later came Ella D'Arcy's *Monochromes* which are in the same vein, as are the stories later collected in Ella Hepworth Dixon's *One Doubtful Hour* of 1904.

Emanuela Ettorre remarks in her essay on Crackanthorpe's works that his first collection, *Wreckage*, was 'peopled by characters who build their lives upon the illusions of a love that is doomed to die, or which degenerates into abject forms of manipulation, seduction, deceit and abandonment, not to mention prostitution' (p. 35). The wreckage of the title is the wreckage of damaged relationships such as that recounted in 'Profiles' about a bookmaker's daughter and a lieutenant. She lives with her aunt whom she hates; and he must get permission from his parents to marry. She strikes her aunt and runs off and they consummate their relationship. When he leaves her alone, she becomes infatuated with a friend of his who seduces her. She becomes a prostitute and even when the lieutenant entreats her, she refuses to leave the profession for him as she does not love him. Her decline is described not as a moral but a physical withering: 'She grew careless of her dress and her person, and at last callous to all around her' (p. 96). The short story contains all the material for a Victorian three-decker condensed into fifty-three pages.

A more specifically 1890s theme is presented in 'A Conflict of Egoisms' which is set in the world of print. Crackanthorpe dwells on the impossibility of establishing harmonious relationships in an urban society characterized by solitary lives. A successful writer, Oswald Nowell, exudes 'the tolerance of indifference' (p. 102). He encounters Letty Moore, the daughter of a sub-editor on a

halfpenny evening daily paper. She works her way up, 'in and out of the narrow, grimy building in Fleet Street, doing all manner of odd jobs, carrying messages, copying and answering letters, after a while working up paragraphs and even writing leaderettes' (p. 103). She is made a sub-editor on a ladies' weekly and when two years later the editor dies, she gets the job. Nowell proposes only to discover that in marriage they cannot communicate, and he tries to drown himself by putting stones in his pockets but, a weak man, he dies from the exertion of the attempt.

These stories encompass much of Crackanthorpe's world: the woman in 'Profiles' unable to maintain either of the relationships she has been involved in; the man in 'A Conflict of Egoisms' following an unsuccessful marriage with suicide. As Ettorre notes, the contemplation of suicide or failed suicide is a common theme in Crackanthorpe's stories.

Crackanthorpe's female characters range from career women to frivolous opportunists, and prostitutes with no shame for their work. Sometimes their nature is revealed too late: in 'A Dead Woman' a landlord finds out only after her death how his beloved wife had betrayed him. The men show no greater conventional morality. In 'Dissolving View' a rich man is about to marry when he receives a letter to say a chorus girl is about to give birth to his child. He goes to see her and is delighted to find she has died in childbirth, along with the child – Crackanthorpe's version of a happy ending.

The lack of morality and conventional gender roles are taken further in Crackanthorpe's next volume, *Sentimental Studies*, which is an attack on Victorian sentimentality – the unpretentious and loving are crushed by the more ambitious, or merely the more selfish. In a characteristic story, 'In Cumberland', a country vicar loves a woman who marries a squire. Years later she visits the vicar when he is ill with a fever, and he becomes convinced she is in love with him. He gets better, throws in his living, and begs her to go away with him, which she refuses to do.

The naturalistic short story in English had a very short period of glory, soon to be totally outstripped by the detective stories of Arthur Conan Doyle, the science fiction of H. G. Wells, and the fantasies of Kenneth Grahame. The 'psychological insights' praised by Henry Harland in

the work of Crackanthorpe did not long survive the century in short story form. Whether Crackanthorpe would have gone on to write novels, and profit from the future success of that form, is open to question. Rudyard Kipling took that path with very limited success and returned to the short story. Egerton never reached the success of her short stories with her novels or plays. Crackanthorpe remains forever an 1890s writer, his development cut short by his death at an age when most writers would be coming into their own. Whether he might have fulfilled his promise as the titan of English naturalism, or whether that notion was a romantic fiction nurtured by his bereaved friends is a question whose only answer can lie in this excellent collection of his work.

This is an informative, comprehensive, and detailed introduction to Crackanthorpe for those who know little about him. It is an illuminating companion edition for those already familiar with his dark vision of life in the 1890s, which his own life trajectory so much resembled.