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# ”Boulogne-sur-Mer, of all places in the world!”: France in the works of Ellen Wood

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## Cover page

### **“Boulogne-sur-Mer, of all places in the world!”: France in selected works of Mrs Henry Wood**

#### **Abstract**

Mrs Henry Wood is frequently cast as impeccably English, yet she spent twenty years of her life (1836-1856) living in France, unusually in the period preceding the beginning of her literary career. This article sets out the known biographical details of Wood's French sojourn, before analysing the place of France and the French in a selection of her work, comprising the handful of France-related stories she published in two London magazines between 1851 and 1856, and two subsequent novels set partly in France: *East Lynne* (1862), and the lesser-known *Oswald Cray* (1864). It is argued that though her experience of France ought to presage a sympathetic or at least a nuanced portrayal, the country remains a threatening place in her fiction, peopled with bankrupts, invalids, quacks, criminals and Catholics, whose actions serve as a counterpoint to the norms of the English social spheres she constructs. In conclusion, Wood's fundamental Englishness as a writer is found to be valid; on a biographical level, this tempers her biographer and son's positive assessment of her relations with France and the French.

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## “Boulogne-sur-Mer, of all places in the world!”: France in selected works of Mrs Henry Wood

### Introduction<sup>i</sup>

The view of Ellen Wood as a quintessentially English writer has been durable one. A contemporary reviewer remarked in 1874 that she “resorts to no garnishes for her plain English fare, but serves up murders and mutton, suicides and rice-pudding, stolen cheques and thick bread-and-butter,”<sup>ii</sup> while in 2001 the *London Review of Books* entitled Dinah Birch’s review of a re-issue of *East Lynne* “Fear among the tea-cups.”<sup>iii</sup> Both point up Wood’s unsettling juxtaposition of lurid sensationalism with banal English social habits. Wood’s novels are set in England, in, as Pykett puts it, “fairly closed communities on the edges of small English country towns”.<sup>iv</sup> And this Englishness frequently has a regional flavour: her home-town of Worcester is fictionalised as “Helstonleigh” in novels such as *The Channings* and *Mrs Halliburton’s Troubles*,<sup>v</sup> and other references to Worcester and its environs abound: in *East Lynne* the penniless earl is Lord *Mount Severn*, a symbolic oxymoron since the Severn is the *river* that flows through Worcester; Anne *Hereford* and Johnny *Ludlow*<sup>vi</sup> both evoke midlands towns near Worcester, and so on.

There is, however, an intriguing aspect to Ellen Wood’s Englishness: the biographical fact that she spent two decades, between the ages of 22 and 42, living in provincial France. In exploring this situation, I shall first briefly set out the known biographical data, before looking at the portrayal of France in some of her fiction.

### Biographical elements

The only extensive biographical sources for Mrs Henry Wood are the obituary and biography published by her son Charles.<sup>vii</sup> Unfortunately, they are both gushing tributes, vague on detail, and often closer to travelogue, a genre Charles Wood was versed in, than biography.<sup>viii</sup> Ellen’s twenty years in France are reduced to a series of vignettes recounting outings to nearby towns such as Chambéry and Aix-les-Bains, embellished with reconstructed conversations with peasants, market stallholders, her friend Madame de Marseine or a nun in a post-coach. We learn neither where exactly the Woods settled, nor why they returned to England. Alongside these works, we find a few published biographical sketches, and occasional autobiographical remarks in Wood’s own fiction; collating these sources gives the following account of her years in France.

Ellen and Henry Wood moved to France in March 1836, soon after their marriage, eventually settling in Dauphiné, the region around Grenoble. They were taken there by Henry’s business activities, as an agent for a family-run banking and shipping firm,<sup>ix</sup> although the only specific information volunteered by Charles is his role in establishing certain French railway lines.<sup>x</sup> At the time of his marriage, Wood was earning several thousand pounds a year; the family had two homes,<sup>xi</sup> and were “surrounded by all that wealth could supply or affection dictate.”<sup>xii</sup>

Despite this, Ellen was initially miserable, missing Worcester Cathedral and Protestant worship, and finding the mountains oppressive, and her schoolgirl French a handicap.<sup>xiii</sup> The climate, too, was problematic: “in the extreme heat of summer, she could only sit or recline, clad in thin gauze or muslin,”<sup>xiv</sup> a problem certainly aggravated by the curvature of the spine from which she suffered. At the opening of Wood’s first published story, set in Grenoble, the heat is “overpowering in the extreme,” and the author warns explicitly against judging it by English standards.<sup>xv</sup> The temperatures left her somewhat neurotic, burdened by “a weight of some great impending evil or calamity,”<sup>xvi</sup> as exemplified by a gnat-sting which almost led to the amputation of her left hand; the ordeal has fictional echoes.<sup>xvii</sup> However, despite such experiences, Charles repeatedly refers to Ellen’s quick mastery of French, and her progressive attachment to France<sup>xviii</sup>: she “grew reconciled to the change, and in the end very much liked her Continental life, and looked back upon it as upon very happy days.”<sup>xix</sup> She made a “firm and lifelong friend” in the local countess, Marguerite de Marseine,<sup>xx</sup> as well as befriending local traders and servants, since she “quickly identified herself with the interests of the humbler classes around her.”<sup>xxi</sup>

France, too, was where Ellen's five children were all born. Her first daughter died in infancy; Charles blames this on a French doctor's insistence on applying leeches to the throat as a cure for scarlet fever. The experience led Henry Wood, a medical autodidact, to take the family's health care into his own hands.<sup>xxii</sup>

By the early 1850s Henry Wood's business interests had collapsed, though the family initially stayed in France. This is the point when Wood embarked on her literary career, publishing short stories semi-anonymously ("by the author of" a previous piece) and without payment,<sup>xxiii</sup> in the *New Monthly Magazine* from 1851, and *Bentley's Miscellany* from 1855. Wood was prolific: 57 stories, on my count, appeared in the *New Monthly Magazine* in the years between 1851 and the family's return to England in 1856, embracing a wide range of subject matters and genres, including sketches, romantic tales, gothic fantasy, burlesque travelogue, and even a pastiche of a soldier's letters from the Crimea.<sup>xxiv</sup> Wood's twenty-year residence in France thus *preceded* her writing career, a fact which sets her apart from other English novelists in France, such as Frances Burney (1752-1840) or George Gissing (1857-1903). Both came to the country *after* their literary success,<sup>xxv</sup> so that their work could not reflect the experience. Both also had French spouses; in contrast, the Woods and their five children formed an expatriate English family.

In 1856 the Woods returned to London, settling in modest rented accommodation. However, they continued to visit France.<sup>xxvi</sup> Dieppe was a favourite haunt, where the couple stayed after *East Lynne's* publication in book-form (1862), and to which the whole family returned frequently, going on picnics and attending "ambassadors' balls," or evenings of "mesmerism and spiritualism."<sup>xxvii</sup>

As the Wood's return dates from 1856, the stories written between 1851 and 1856 were certainly written in France. However, her fiction from this period took only a marginal interest in the country in which she had resided for over fifteen years. The vast majority of her output is solidly "English," with only seven pieces relating to France in some way. These are: "Seven Years in the Wedded Life of a Roman Catholic" (1851),<sup>xxviii</sup> "Annie Lee" (1852-53),<sup>xxix</sup> "A Tomb in a Foreign Land" (1853),<sup>xxx</sup> "The Tour of David Dundyke, Esq." (1854),<sup>xxxi</sup> "War; and the Paris Mesmerists" (1855),<sup>xxxii</sup> *The Reception of the Dead* (1855),<sup>xxxiii</sup> "All Souls' Eve" (1856),<sup>xxxiv</sup> and "St Ouest" (1856).<sup>xxxv</sup> These texts form the basis of the present discussion, along with two novels with passages set in France: *East Lynne* (1862, ch. 21-22, 29-31, 33)<sup>xxxvi</sup> and *Oswald Cray* (1864, ch. 53-54, 57)<sup>xxxvii</sup>. Although both first appeared after the return to England, the French passages draw on personal experience. This emerges clearly in the particular settings: *East Lynne*, like "Seven Years" and "David Dundyke," is partly set in Grenoble; it also has passages set on the Channel coast, in Boulogne-sur-Mer, as do *The Reception of the Dead* (also Boulogne), *Oswald Cray* (Honfleur), "A Tomb in a Foreign Land" (an unnamed "channel seaport"), and "All Souls' Eve" ("Saint-Eloi," near Calais). Other locations such as Paris, and the Pyrenees ("St Ouest"), are one-offs.

Wood's characters, too, are predominantly English. Their relations with the French concern working people (servants, innkeepers, postilions...), or more exceptionally (corrupt) professionals (Monsieur Le Bleu, a medical charlatan in *Oswald Cray*; the "court-dressmaker" who runs a workhouse in "Annie Lee"). Only a handful of French nationals are main characters.<sup>xxxviii</sup> So what are Wood's English characters actually doing in France? In general terms France is the most accessible part of the *Continent*, a negative entity in Wood's work, where characters go under duress, for their health, or as a result of sexually or financially-induced social banishment. I shall take these in turn, though the frontiers are generally porous.

### Financial exile

When Isabel Carlyle (*East Lynne*) decides to accept her doctor's counsel and go to France, the medical grounds are counterpointed to the financial motivation of her intended host, blurring the two:

Lady Isabel was unwilling to take the advice; more especially to go so far as the "French coast." And but for a circumstance that seemed to have happened purposely to induce her to decide, would probably never have gone. Mrs. Ducie – the reader may not have forgotten her name – had, in conjunction with her husband, the Honourable Augustus, somewhat run herself out at elbows, and found it desirable to enter for a time on the less expensive life of the Continent. For eighteen months she

had been staying in Paris, the education of her younger daughters being the plea put forth for the sojourn, and a very convenient plea it is, and serves hundreds. Isabel had two or three letters from her during her absence, and she now received another, saying they were going to spend a month or two at Boulogne-sur-Mer. Dr. Martin and Mr. Wainwright declared that this must remove all Lady Isabel's unwillingness to go from home, for Mrs. Ducie's society would do away with the loneliness she had anticipated: a loneliness which had been the ostensible reason of her objection.

"Boulogne-sur-Mer, of all places in the world!" remonstrated Lady Isabel. "It is said to be crowded and vulgar."<sup>xxxix</sup>

Removal to the Continent, then, may offer financial relief to the nobility. However, those who take this step are not fully-fledged aristocrats; they occupy the uncomfortable position of *heirs* to titles. The debt-laden Frederick St John (*The Reception of the Dead*), also saving money in France, will only inherit the family pile, Castle-Wafer, when his brother dies or when he himself marries<sup>xl</sup>; Augustus Ducie's status as heir is indicated by his being styled "Honourable"; and Francis Levison will inherit a baronetcy on condition his great-uncle dies without issue. A bourgeois mind such as Carlyle's cannot help but make the link between these predicaments: during a dinner, "the conversation at table turned upon the Ducies and their embarrassments. The association of ideas led Mr. Carlyle's thoughts to Boulogne, to Captain Levison and *his* embarrassments."<sup>xli</sup> Continental exile is thus explicitly linked to an unnatural relationship with money: these individuals' theoretical wealth is greater than their available resources, a point emphasised by the loans Levison underwrites on his future inheritance. Levison's situation is more precarious than Ducie's, since the latter is a direct heir, whose father is presumably a hale old fellow showing no signs of imminent demise. Levison's plan to inherit from his "old and rich" uncle, Sir Peter Levison,<sup>xlii</sup> is compromised when Sir Peter remarries, opening up the possibility of a direct heir to the baronetcy and leading Francis Levison's creditors to start demanding repayment. The aristocratic subordination of fortune to title, quite alien to the bourgeois mindset, gives rise to a polarisation between a core of titled peers, and satellite figures like Levison, who has "sold out"<sup>xliii</sup> and is living on his capital abroad. The distinction between home and abroad thus serves as a homology for the nobility's in-group and out-group.

One other character in *East Lynne* goes into exile: Isabel. At first sight her estrangement seems more to do with her passion for Levison than with the question of nobility. Yet Isabel's misfortunes also come of her lineage: as an only child, and a female, she forfeits the estate and earldom of Mount Severn to Raymond Vane, presumably her cousin. Her European wanderings are pointedly paralleled to those of the Ducies. At the beginning of the novel, Isabel accompanies Mrs Ducie and her daughters to Mr Kane's concert. The Ducies are subsequently reported in Paris, and although expected in Boulogne,<sup>xliv</sup> Isabel arrives to discover that they are in fact going to Ems, in Germany;<sup>xlv</sup> she next comes across them in Stalkenberg, also in Germany. These movements are never clearly explained. Mrs Ducie improbably pleads "family arrangements" to explain her absence at Boulogne,<sup>xlvi</sup> and we are left to presume they are connected with the family's parlous financial situation.

If their unconsummated nobility leads the Ducies, Levison and Isabel into French and European exile, a distinction is required to distinguish the angelic Isabel from her rakish counterparts. This is provided spatially by the French capital. Though never a setting in *East Lynne*, and never visited by Isabel, Paris is evoked as a meeting place and playground for impecunious semi-nobles. The Ducies are there for eighteen months, and Levison for ten, during which time they are in frequent contact.<sup>xlvii</sup> The city itself is a den of iniquity: Levison evokes "its heated rooms and its late hours,"<sup>xlviii</sup> and once he has deposited Isabel in a "windy old house"<sup>xlix</sup> in Grenoble, he scuttles back to the warmth of the capital, "pursuing his own course and his own pleasure."<sup>l</sup> A similar social distinction is made between the resorts of Boulogne and Trouville during discussions about Isabel Carlyle's curative trip to France. Isabel has two reservations – loneliness and vulgarity<sup>li</sup> – and she is supported by her husband:

Mr Carlyle also demurred at Boulogne-sur-Mer. It did not stand well in his estimation. It was not a place he cared to send his wife to: more especially as he could not remain there with her. Trouville, a pleasant, retired watering place, near Harfleur, and little known in those days, had been the one chosen. Lady Isabel probably would have found it dull and depressing.<sup>lii</sup>

The comparative standing of the two French towns allows Carlyle's bourgeois reserves to be aligned with those of the well-bred Isabel. However, the narratorial gloss gives Isabel far more demotic tendencies, anticipating the exciting and dangerous turn of events which accompanies Levison's appearance in Boulogne.

*Oswald Cray* also involves financial flight, although as with Wood's output post-*East Lynne* generally, the frame is firmly bourgeois.<sup>liii</sup> Here the continent is host to the failed entrepreneur Mark Cray, who moves to Honfleur with his wife after the collapse of a mining venture in Wales. Money, as for the peers-in-waiting, is virtual: Mark and his partner Barker have talked up the mine's potential to attract investors, and when it suffers catastrophic flooding, Mark lies to his brother to borrow money he knows he will not be able to pay back, and considers selling off his shares before word gets out (i.e. "insider dealing"). As in *East Lynne*, expatriation brings no improvement whatsoever: his new venture, as an English doctor in Honfleur (in fact another wheeze of his partner Barker), fails miserably through lack of patients. To crown it all, Caroline discovers she has a tumour which baffles Mark, and which eventually kills her.

These are not flights from crime, strictly speaking. Isabel flees from nuptial boredom, and Levison from debt, rather than his real crime of murder (intriguingly, fear of being found out never prevents him yearning to return), while Mark has been rash and deceptive, but not strictly criminal. Only in "A tomb in a foreign land," is there clear flight from crime, when the showy Captain Carew turns out to be a fugitive conman, Charles Johns: "a successful swindling transaction, in which he was recently engaged, put him into funds, and sent him flying over the water, out of the reach of Bow-street."

Financial and sexual irregularity thus gives rise to expatriation, but more seriously to loss of identity. The disguise of characters – recalling a burlesque episode in Wood's own life<sup>liv</sup> – is one indicator: Johns has "false hair, false whiskers, false teeth, [...] paint on his face, and so altered a style of dress"; Isabel Carlyle (*East Lynne*) adds a veil and "blue spectacles" to her accidental disfigurement; Mark Cray (*Oswald Cray*) opts for similar eyewear, and swaps his beard for a moustache.<sup>lv</sup> Another is renaming: Johns becomes "Captain Carew," just as Isabel Carlyle is first "Miladi" and then "Madame Vine," a transformation which echoes the subsuming of "Ellen Price" in "Mrs Henry Wood."

### **The curative voyage**

Next to money, health is a marginal motivation for expatriation. Things are rarely as simple as in *The Channings*, where Mr Channing is cured after a spell in the sulphur baths at a German spa town.<sup>lvi</sup> Even in *East Lynne*, where Isabel is sent for a change of air in "some place on the French or Belgian coast",<sup>lvii</sup> her recovery is clearly a product not of the bracing sea air but of her growing passion for Levison, a logical outcome since her illness has its origins in a humdrum marriage and the stress occasioned by her interfering sister-in-law.

"St Ouest," however, can be read as a sarcastic attack on medical tourism. The Ashleys have been sent to France to cure Lady Ashley of shock, verging on insanity, brought on by the accidental death of their son. Neither seem to be enjoying the Continent – "I hate and despise it," Henry Ashley confides in a friend. After a carriage accident in which their postilion is killed and both Henry and his pregnant wife slightly injured, the couple find themselves marooned in St Ouest, an "odious" town whose primitive sanitary conditions provoke regular fever epidemics. Within a week, Henry himself is laid low; doctors prescribe a "change of air," and he eventually leaves for Paris and then England, a circularity which wryly suggests the pointlessness of curative travelling. But more seriously, Henry's departure also leads to the disruption of his lineage, since their two-month-old baby boy, born soon after the accident, is carried off by convulsions after his departure. Lady Ashley, desperate for a male heir, offers to take away the recently born son of the dead postilion – whose wife has also passed away – with the intention of passing him off as their own son. Although Lady Ashley is clearly no longer insane, it is hard to conclude that the Ashleys would not have done better to stay at home. A similar critique occurs in *The Reception of the Dead*, where Adeline de Castella's curative residence in Boulogne-sur-Mer fails to prevent her death from tuberculosis when her planned marriage falls through.<sup>lviii</sup>

In general terms, then, France has a detrimental effect on health and well-being, and Wood goes to great lengths to contrast this situation with what might obtain in England. On

Henry Ashley's fever, Wood remarks that "our commissioners of health [...] might probably have assigned its cause to that sanitary gutter, which, with a few more, equally sweet, ended in a pool of stagnant water and a pestiferous malaria"; for Caroline Cray's tumour (*Oswald Cray*), a French quack, Monsieur Le Bleu, prescribes leeches (recalling the treatment of the Woods' daughter Ellen), in stark contrast to the London doctor she subsequently consults; the carriage accident in "St Ouest" is put down to a stretch of road which is "a disgrace to any civilised land," and rail catastrophes such as that at Cammère (*East Lynne*), though more frequent in England, are said to be more dramatic in France.<sup>lix</sup>

The presence of Wood's characters in France is thus explained by almost entirely negative factors: financial troubles or misdemeanours, and ill-health; furthermore, their sojourns have markedly negative outcomes: loss of identity, ill-health, and even death. While such plot developments were not unusual in Victorian fiction, it is surprising to find them in the work of a writer with extensive experience of the country, and who moved there for very different reasons.

### Anglo-French issues

Like the various motivations which incite characters to gain France, two other subjects in Wood's fiction throw light on her view of the country: the Crimean War, a current event at the time of writing, and the doctrinal divide between Catholicism and Protestantism.

Two of the texts under study refer to the Crimean War (1853-1856), a conflict in which Britain and France were allied against Imperial Russia. The battle of Alma (20 September 1854) figures in "War; and the Paris Mesmerists," published in 1855, and the siege of Sebastopol (September 1854-September 1855), in "All Soul's Eve," from January 1856. This topicality was calculated to appeal to the magazines in which Wood published. The *New Monthly Magazine* was dominated by "politics and social comment presented in substantial articles intended to be informative rather than entertaining"; only 22 per cent of its content was fiction aimed at its female readership.<sup>lx</sup> In short stories such as these, and also the "Stray Letters from the East," purportedly from an English serviceman in the Crimea, Wood sought consciously to cater to the magazine's "jaunty masculine bias"<sup>lxi</sup>; their intertextuality helped to bridge the gulf between "'manly' fact and 'feminine' fiction."<sup>lxii</sup>

In both stories, however, the Crimean War is a distant, unelucidated event, whose principal effect is the disappearance of a central character. The war is not analysed in historical or political terms; instead Wood concentrates on individual and social reaction to the disappearance. This includes the practice of rich families "buying" lower-class replacements for their conscripted sons, processions to commemorate the dead, and recourse to fortune-tellers. In "All Souls' Eve," Francis Latange's frowned-on courtship with an Irish woman leads his mother to refuse to buy a replacement for his military service. When war actually breaks out, Madame Latange offers to backtrack, but the honourable Francis leaves for the front, where we learn later that he has been killed. The mother organises a procession to honour her lost son, insisting, despite warnings of ill omens, on a night-time vigil (hence *All Soul's Eve*). In a supernatural finale, the young man appears, bent over his own tombstone, during prayers around the empty grave: he had only been *believed* dead, after losing an arm at the storming of Malakhof, and has made his own way home. "War; and the Paris Mesmerists" adopts a similar structure (a courtship tale spiced up with supernatural aspects). Here, the dissolute André de St Sévron brings about the death of his younger brother Gaston, whose success in the affections of an English woman, Clara, has excited his jealousy. At the outbreak of war, Gaston, a soldier, finds his regiment has not been called up to fight, but André manages to get him transferred and thus sent to the front, much to the dismay of the family. After a period with no news from Gaston, André proposes that he and Clara consult one of the "mesmerists" who are all the rage in Paris at this time. Despite the name, there is no connection with the theories of Franz Mesmer; these are simple fortune tellers hawking a trade among those desperate for information from the front. The "mesmerist" correctly sees that Gaston has been killed, leading André to declare his desire to marry Clara; he is, of course, turned down.

While these pieces show that political issues of the day were of little interest, Christianity is central to Wood's work, and contributed both to her success in Victorian England, and her fall from favour after the First World War. Her moralising, interfering omniscient narrator, frequently upbraids characters for their transgressions or foibles, or insists on the veracity of her

portrayals in harangues directed at the reader. Wood was an unerring Protestant, and took a correspondingly dim view of religion in Catholic France. This attitude was on the wane in Victorian Britain, though more markedly so among men than women.<sup>lxiii</sup> Indeed, as late as 1892 Matilda Betham-Edwards was still beating the drum for Protestantism in her *France of To-day*, to the consternation of the *Athanaeum's* (male) reviewer.<sup>lxiv</sup>

Wood consistently insists on the distinction between the two dogmas. Protestant clergy, for instance, are specified and supplied whenever necessary. In *East Lynne*, Isabel assures the departing Levison that “the French Protestant minister is prepared to marry us, the instant news of the divorce shall arrive.”<sup>lxv</sup> In Grenoble, this seems reasonable; more surprising is the note Barker writes to Mark Cray from Honfleur reassuring him that “We have an English church, you can tell Mrs Cray, if she’s particular on the point” (*Oswald Cray*).<sup>lxvi</sup> In “St Ouest,” a remote Pyrenean village, the presence of a *pasteur* for the christening of the Ashley’s dying child is attributed to divine intervention: “It happened – it is wonderful to see and reflect how great emergencies are sure to be provided for! – that a Swiss Protestant minister halted for that evening at the hotel.” The clergyman subsequently buries the infant, since “Monsieur le Curé, the local priest, with magnanimous generosity, allowed it to be laid just outside his cemetery: not inside, lest it might contaminate the ashes of the departed Roman Catholics.” Similarly the tomb in “A tomb in a foreign land” is “in the narrow corner of [the cemetery] consecrated to Protestant interments.” It seems unlikely Victorian English travellers could afford to be so particular: according to Marandon,<sup>lxvii</sup> outside Paris (where they did have their own church) they participated in the Catholic mass, though not the sacraments.

Wood’s most sustained treatment of French Catholicism comes, strikingly, in her first published work, “Seven Years in the Wedded Life of a Roman Catholic” (1851). This text is untypical in its wholly French cast and its setting, in Wood’s adopted Grenoble.

The plot hinges on the dogma of confession, and seeks to show how a meddling priest can use the access it provides to a wife to undo a marriage. Marie de Maulevrier, a girl with a Catholic convent education, has married Albert de St Léger, “heir of one of Grenoble’s most powerful families.” But where Marie is devoutly Catholic, Albert – note the names – is, despite his upbringing, “at heart a Protestant,” like his Swiss mother. However, he does not practise, and jokes with his friends and wife about the “trickery and cunning of the Catholic priests,” whom he considers “a set of intolerant ———.” Despite this, the suggestible Marie comes under the influence of the cunning Father Leance, during her regular visits to the confessional. Leance’s interference leaves the St Légers increasingly estranged, especially when Marie, on Leance’s bidding, agrees to send their son to a Jesuit boarding-school. Finally, in a melodramatic climax, Albert hears his wife plotting with Leance, through the panelling of the confessional. Horrified, he commits suicide in the cathedral.<sup>lxviii</sup>

Confession was one of the many Catholic dogmas rejected by the Protestant churches. However, it was not a fundamental discord. Luther’s 1529 catechisms in fact came down in favour of private confession for absolution, and it was only during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that Protestant congregations, including both Lutherans and Anglicans, progressively abandoned “auricular” confession with a pastor, for “corporate” confession – a collective act of repentance and absolution during the ecumenical service. This distinction explains the importance of the Catholic confessional in the eyes of Protestants, for it encapsulated the separateness of confessor and penitent.

However, auricular confession also exemplified the differing *national* status of the two churches. France’s religious subordination to the supranational Catholic church appeared to the English an unconscionable loss of sovereignty. In a rather unjustifiable homology of Rome’s sway over Paris, French priests were presumed to interfere in the day-to-day lives of their parishioners. The Father Leance of “Seven Years” is not alone in Wood’s fiction: in *The Reception of the Dead* the eavesdropping Father Marc foils Adeline de Castella’s planned elopement, and subsequently dissuades her father from giving his blessing to the match, arguing that by marrying a Protestant she would forfeit her chance of salvation. Like Marie de Maulevrier, the religious-minded Adeline bows to church authority and declines Frederick St John; her tuberculosis immediately and dramatically worsens and she dies.

Wood also shows a typically Protestant distaste for the showiness of Catholic ritual. This may take the form of gentle mockery: during the baptism scene in “Seven Years,” the narrator wryly remarks that “Charles Albert Hiersaint Louis Marie Gustave Prosper were the names; and

few enough, too, for France”; later Marie’s own sister finds the sumptuous party which follows “scarcely compatible with the solemn words breathed over that infant this morning.”

One ritual presented as typically French (though not explicitly Catholic) deserves special scrutiny: that referred to in the title *The Reception of the Dead*. One character recounts such a “reception” as follows:

They dressed the corpse up in rich white robes, as if for her bridal, with flowers and jewels, and white gloves and white satin shoes. And then she was placed upright at the end of the grand salon, and all the neighbouring people for miles round, all the rich, and as many of the poor as could get admission, came to visit her.<sup>lxxix</sup>

Nothing in the ethnographic record corresponds exactly to such a ceremony, though several echoes are found in regional French funeral tradition. In the sense that dying unmarried was widely considered “abnormal,” “the funeral ceremonies come to replace the nuptial ceremonies in which the deceased would have taken part”, as the French folklorist Arnold Van Gennep puts it.<sup>lxxx</sup> Examples are thus attested of certain aspects of Wood’s mock-wedding, such as the bridal dress and white flowers, symbols of virginity.<sup>lxxxi</sup> Such events were also considered occasions for joy, in keeping with both the nuptial symbolism and a Catholic doctrine which spared the “pure” from passing through purgatory in the afterlife.<sup>lxxii</sup> Furthermore, in some regions, unmarried females’ faces remained visible during the wake, and were only covered for the cortège; in the northern Meuse department, Van Gennep reports that the face sometimes remained uncovered even in the church.<sup>lxxiii</sup> However, in all these cases, the deceased is laid horizontally;<sup>lxxiv</sup> there is no suggestion of imitation of a living person, as Wood has it.

Wood, then, has exaggerated a variety of traditions into a freak show; she seeks to forestall any charge of fabrication by insisting that the custom is both archaic (“We scarcely ever meet with a case now”<sup>lxxv</sup>) and highly localised (“Susanne never met with the custom till she came to these parts”<sup>lxxvi</sup>). It is, though, repeatedly asserted to be French: both the dying Adeline – to whom it will be applied – and her Spanish father, initially oppose the ceremony, but her mother, who was “French all over, and clung to French customs”<sup>lxxvii</sup> wins the day: “It was a negative soothing to her wild grief to know that [...] the world would look upon her, once more, arrayed in all the pomp and splendour of dress and earthly life.”<sup>lxxviii</sup> This pomp, however, has become low entertainment: “a chemist [...] had stepped in to have a look,” “Monsieur Durante [...] had come all the way from Ostrohove to see the sight.”<sup>lxxix</sup> In a gothic climax, Frederick St John, Adeline’s rejected (Protestant) admirer, who has been brought unawares to the reception by her boarding-school friends, faints on discovering he is standing in front of her corpse.

On occasions, Wood’s portrayal of Christianity is slightly less sectarian. In “Annie Lee,” the laziness of the heroine, Catholic by her late mother, is contrasted with the deep-seated work ethic of her father and half-sisters. In a bid to shake Annie from her sloth, her father has her apprenticed to a French “court-dressmaker” in London: “The farmer thought this home might suit, for madame was a Catholic, and Annie had been brought up in this faith.” When “madame” turns out to be running a workhouse, the exhausted heroine escapes into the arms of a rake, who gets her pregnant and then abandons her. Frenchness and Catholicism are thus part and parcel of this downfall. However, the second part of the story, which follows her marriage to a vain and bigoted Protestant clergyman, recounts the harm that the couple inflict on one of the pupils at the school they run (a pupil who turns out to be Annie’s own son...), thus disconnecting morality from doctrine, and allowing the narrator to conclude that both husband and wife had “cloaked their inhumanity under the name of religion.”<sup>lxxx</sup> In *The Reception of the Dead*, a striking death-bed scene seems to minimise sectarianism even more explicitly: Adeline’s English friend Rose is reading to her from the “Prayer-book” (i.e. the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*), when her aunt enters, “beseeching her to remember she was a Roman Catholic.” The girl replies:

“Dear Aunt Agnes, [...] when you shall be as near to death as I am, you will see the fallacy of these earthly differences, how worse than useless they must appear in the sight of our universal Father. There is but one Heaven, and I believe it is of little moment which form of worship we pursue, so that we pray and strive earnestly in it to arrive there. I shall be none the worse for listening to the prayers from this English book: they are all truth and beauty, and they soothe me. The priests will come later.”<sup>lxxxi</sup>

However, this tolerance is a one-way affair. Catholics may admire Protestantism – Albert de St Leger (“Seven Years”) is also “at heart a Protestant,” subject to “disaffection,” and even given to

“wish[ing] his little son had been brought up a Protestant.” Tellingly, though, no Protestant character expresses admiration for Catholic rituals or texts; these are consistently portrayed as superficial, hypocritical, and dangerous, sometimes mortally so. And as we have seen, Wood has her characters adhere scrupulously to Protestant rituals and officiants, again contradicting Adeline’s open-mindedness in this passage.

## Conclusion

From an examination of Ellen Wood’s France-related fiction it is clear that her twenty-year residence in the country did not inspire her to depict French society in flattering terms. Her only praise goes to certain picturesque landscapes (e.g. Honfleur, in *Oswald Cray*<sup>lxxxii</sup>); portrayal of the French is almost unremittingly negative. French main characters are rare, and when the English find themselves in France it is because they have financial, sentimental, or health worries. This may reflect standard Victorian reasons for overseas travel, although it does not reflect how Wood herself came to France. Signally, her characters’ sojourns do nothing to alleviate their difficulties, and frequently worsen things, making them generally desperate to return home. Being abroad is explicitly linked to social isolation, and the resultant loss of identity symbolised by disfigurement or disguise. The sense of alterity finds its principle outlet in anti-Catholicism, with the usual Protestant complaints - superficial pomp, confession, interfering priests – forming the basis of asides or sustained attacks.

While it is necessarily speculative to attempt to map fictional worlds onto a writer’s life, and especially so where biographical data are mediocre, it seems reasonable to draw some general inferences concerning Wood’s two decades in France. One is her shallow integration into French society, visible in a reproduction of clichés involving meddling Catholic clergy or coquettish young women. The breadth and depth of her attacks – which extend to twisting regional tradition into ghoulish fantasy – would be surprising had her stay been fulfilling and stimulating. The Woods’ worsening financial plight in the early 1850s is mirrored in her characters’ reasons for gaining France, and subsequently disliking it; the loss of their daughter Ellen in mistrust of French medical practitioners. As for Wood’s anti-Catholicism, it shows a more general attachment to English values and morality. This may be partly ascribed to female social insecurity, which is counterbalanced by the dual moral and national identity afforded by Anglicanism. The analysis is supported by the less marked anti-Romanism of Victorian men, and it finds a counterpart in the largely female Catholic congregations which Wood herself noted in mid-century France.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> However, it may also suggest how isolated, or even besieged, the Wood family found itself in provincial France, with four children to feed, and the breadwinner’s business concerns slowly coming to grief.

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<sup>i</sup> I wish to thank Florence Bayard (University of Caen) and Mark Smith (Open University) for their help in the preparation of this article. Any mistakes are the sole responsibility of the author.

<sup>ii</sup> Rev. of *Lost for Love*, by Mrs Henry Wood. *Spectator* 17 Oct. 1874: 1303. Quoted in Deborah Wynne, *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001) 89.

<sup>iii</sup> Dinah Birch, “Fear among the tea-cups.” Rev. of *East Lynne*, by Ellen Wood, ed. Andrew Maunder. *London Review of Books* 8 February 2001.

<sup>iv</sup> Lyn Pykett, *The “Improper” Feminine: The Women’s Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992) 114. Pykett includes all Wood’s 1860s sensation novels in this description; the London setting of the second of the two parts of *Oswald Cray*, discussed here, runs counter to this. Mrs Henry Wood, *Oswald Cray* (1864; London: Bentley, 1891).

<sup>v</sup> Mrs Henry Wood, *The Channings* (London: Bentley, 1862); *Mrs Halliburton’s Troubles* (London: Bentley, 1862).

<sup>vi</sup> Mrs Henry Wood, *Anne Hereford* (London: Bentley, 1868); *Johnny Ludlow* (6 volumes of stories, London: Bentley, 1874-89).

<sup>vii</sup> Charles W. Wood, “Mrs. Henry Wood: In Memoriam,” *Argosy* 43 (1887): 251-70, 334-53, 422-42, republished online at <<http://gaslight.mtroyal.ca/WoodX1.htm>>. Charles W. Wood, *Memorials of Mrs. Henry Wood* (London: Bentley, 1894).

- viii On the Woods' stay in France: C. Wood, *Memorials*, 69-120. For Wood's travel writing see Charles W. Wood, *In the Valley of the Rhone* (London: Macmillan, 1899).
- ix Andrew Maunder, "Mrs Henry Wood (1814-1887)." *The Literary Encyclopedia*, 18 July 2001. The Literary Dictionary Company. 10 Jan. 2008. <[www.litencyc.com/php/speople.phm?rec=true&UID=4790](http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.phm?rec=true&UID=4790)>.
- x C. Wood, "In Memoriam"; *Memorials*, 143. Note also that the hero of *Oswald Cray* is at one point to be sent to Spain as an engineer on a rail project, likely "to prove of great advantage [...] in a pecuniary point of view." Mrs H. Wood, *Oswald Cray*, 320; ch. 55.
- xi C. Wood, *Memorials*, 78-79.
- xii C. Wood, "In Memoriam."
- xiii C. Wood, "In Memoriam"; *Memorials*, 69-71.
- xiv C. Wood, "In Memoriam."
- xv [Mrs Henry Wood,] "Seven Years in the Life of a Wedded Roman Catholic," *New Monthly Magazine* Feb. 1851: 245-55.
- xvi C. Wood, "In Memoriam"; cf. *Memorials*, 78: "always affected by intense heat with a feeling of approaching calamity."
- xvii [Mrs Henry Wood,] *The Reception of the Dead*, *New Monthly Magazine* Feb. 1855: 231-46, Mar. 1855: 271-84, Apr. 1855: 475-88, May 1855: 23-38, June 1855: 181-94, July 1855: 312-26, Aug. 1855: 467-83. In this story, set in France, one character's hand is stung by a wasp (pt 2: 280); much later, reference is made to a person who "died of an accident to his hand" (pt 7: 473).
- xviii C. Wood, *Memorials*, 69, 71, 81-83
- xix C. Wood, "In Memoriam."
- xx C. Wood, *Memorials*, 89-97.
- xxi C. Wood, *Memorials*, 83 (quotation), 83-86.
- xxii C. Wood, "In Memoriam."
- xxiii C. Wood, *Memorials*, 240.
- xxiv Cf. Wynne, *The Sensation Novel*, 63.
- xxv Gissing published *New Grub Street* and *The Odd Women* in 1891 and 1893, and arrived in France in 1898, aged 41; he remained until his death in 1903. Burney published *Evelina* (1778) and *Cecilia* (1782) in her twenties, yet her stay (1801-1812) coincided more or less with her fifties.
- xxvi "[E]very year" (C. Wood, "In Memoriam"); cf. [before 1862] "[t]hey had not been abroad for nearly three years" (*Memorials*, 237).
- xxvii C. Wood, "In Memoriam"; *Memorials*, 199-201, 237. An interest in the supernatural emerges as early as 1855, in [Mrs Henry Wood,] "War; and the Paris Mesmerists" *Bentley's Miscellany* 1855: vol. 37, 78-91. Collected as "A Mesmerist of the Years Gone By" in Mrs Henry Wood, *The Unholy Wish and Other Stories* (London: Bentley, 1890).
- xxviii [Mrs H. Wood,] "Seven Years."
- xxix [Mrs Henry Wood,] "Annie Lee," *New Monthly Magazine* Dec. 1852, Jan. 1853. Collected as "The Beautiful Annie Lee" in Mrs Henry Wood, *Popular Family Tales of English Life* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, n.d.)
- xxx [Mrs Henry Wood,] "A Tomb in a Foreign Land" *New Monthly Magazine* Sep. 1853: 10-26. Collected in Mrs Henry Wood, *Adam Grainger and Other Stories* (London: Bentley, 1890).
- xxxi [Mrs Henry Wood,] "The Tour of David Dundyke, Esq." *New Monthly Magazine* Aug. 1854: 419-433, Sep. 1854.
- xxxii [Mrs H. Wood,] "War."
- xxxiii [Mrs H. Wood,] *The Reception of the Dead*.
- xxxiv [Mrs Henry Wood,] "All Souls' Eve" *New Monthly Magazine* Jan. 1856: 82-95. Collected in Mrs Henry Wood, *Told in the Twilight* (London: Bentley, 1875), and in Mrs H. Wood, *Adam Grainger*.
- xxxv [Mrs Henry Wood,] "St Owest" *New Monthly Magazine* Sep. 1856: 62-75. Collected as "Ashley" in Mrs Henry Wood, *Ashley, and Other Stories* (London: Bentley, 1897).
- xxxvi Mrs Henry Wood, *East Lynne* (1862; London: Dent, 1984).
- xxxvii Mrs H. Wood, *Oswald Cray*.

- xxxviii Albert and Marie de St Léger (“Seven Years”); André and Gaston de St Sévron (“War; and the Paris Mesmerists”); Francis Latange (“All Soul’s Eve”).
- xxxix Mrs H. Wood, *East Lynne*, 200; ch. 20.
- xl [Mrs H. Wood,] *The Reception of the Dead*, pt 2: 279, 282; pt 4: 33.
- xli Mrs H. Wood, *East Lynne*, 227; ch. 23.
- xlii Mrs H. Wood, *East Lynne*, 11; ch. 2.
- xliii Mrs H. Wood, *East Lynne*, 209, 210; ch. 21.
- xliv Mrs H. Wood, *East Lynne*, 200; ch. 20.
- xlv Mrs H. Wood, *East Lynne*, 209; ch. 21.
- xlvi Mrs H. Wood, *East Lynne*, 206; ch. 21.
- xlvii [Mrs H. Wood, \*East Lynne\*, 200; ch. 20; 209; ch. 21.](#)
- xlviii Mrs H. Wood, *East Lynne*, 210; ch. 21.
- xlix Mrs H. Wood, *East Lynne*, 290; ch. 29.
- <sup>1</sup> Mrs H. Wood, *East Lynne*, 288; ch. 29.
- <sup>li</sup> Mrs H. Wood, *East Lynne*, 200; ch. 20.
- <sup>lii</sup> Mrs H. Wood, *East Lynne*, 200; ch. 20.
- <sup>liii</sup> Deborah Wynne, “See what a big wide bed it is! : Mrs Henry Wood and the Philistine imagination,” *Feminist Readings of Victorian Popular Texts*, ed. E. Liggins & D. Duffy (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001) 89-107: 101.
- <sup>liv</sup> On one occasion her husband disguised her in a monk’s cowl so that they could visit a French monastery. C. Wood, *Memorials*, 121-42.
- <sup>lv</sup> [Mrs H. Wood, \*East Lynne\*, 418; ch. 40; \*Oswald Cray\*, 362; ch. 50.](#)
- <sup>lvi</sup> [Mrs H. Wood, \*The Channings\*, ch. 17.](#)
- <sup>lvii</sup> Mrs H. Wood, *East Lynne*, 199; ch. 20.
- <sup>lviii</sup> Ellen Wood may have been less scathing later in her life. After her husband’s death in 1864, doctors sent her to France for four months (C. Wood, *Memorials*, 166-67); “The result proved the wisdom of the advice” (167).
- <sup>lix</sup> Mrs H. Wood, *East Lynne*, 327; ch. 33.
- <sup>lx</sup> Quotation and statistic from Wynne, *The Sensation Novel*, 62.
- <sup>lxi</sup> Wynne, *The Sensation Novel*, 63.
- <sup>lxii</sup> Wynne, *The Sensation Novel*, 64.
- <sup>lxiii</sup> Sylviane Marandon, *L’image de la France dans la conscience anglaise 1848-1900* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1967) 530.
- <sup>lxiv</sup> Marandon, 531.
- <sup>lxv</sup> Mrs H. Wood, *East Lynne*, 294; ch. 29.
- <sup>lxvi</sup> Mrs H. Wood, *Oswald Cray*, 372; ch. 52.
- <sup>lxvii</sup> Marandon, 529.
- <sup>lxviii</sup> Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*, published just two years later (1853) also exploits the dramatic potential of the confessional. Brontë’s account of the lovelorn Lucy Snowe’s visit to one, however, is considerably more nuanced than Wood’s, suggesting the attractions this practice held for Protestants. See Michael E. Schiefelbein, *The Lure of Babylon: Seven Protestant Novelists and Britain’s Roman Catholic Revival* (Macon, Georgia: Mercia University Press, 2001) ch. 5.
- <sup>lxix</sup> [Mrs H. Wood,] *The Reception of the Dead*, pt 7: 473.
- <sup>lxx</sup> Arnold Van Gennep, *Manuel de folklore français contemporain*, tome 1, part 2, “Cérémonies familiales: du berceau à la tombe”, volume 2, “Mariage, funérailles” (Paris: A. et J. Picard, 1946) 814.
- <sup>lxxi</sup> Van Gennep, *Manuel*, 814.
- <sup>lxxii</sup> Arnold Van Gennep, *Le folklore de la Flandre et du Hainaut français (Département du Nord)*, tome 1 (Brionne: Gérard Montfort, 1935) 122-5. One informer remarks (123) that “on s’y réjouissait de ce que le défunt avait été moissonné dans l’âge de l’innocence”. The richness of the banquet following such funerals was noted by folklorists from the first half of the nineteenth century (Dinaux, quoted 126).
- <sup>lxxiii</sup> Van Gennep, *Manuel*, 717.

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lxxiv The closest equivalent is the dressing of seated corpses, including priests in their vestments, though this is attested in two or three isolated localities nowhere near the Channel coast. Van Gennepe, *Manuel*, 716.

lxxv [Mrs H. Wood,] *The Reception of the Dead*, pt 7: 472.

lxxvi [Mrs H. Wood,] *The Reception of the Dead*, pt 7: 473.

lxxvii [Mrs H. Wood,] *The Reception of the Dead*, pt 7: 477.

lxxviii [Mrs H. Wood,] *The Reception of the Dead*, pt 7: 477.

lxxix [Mrs H. Wood,] *The Reception of the Dead*, pt 7: 483.

lxxx [Mrs H. Wood,] "Annie Lee", 261.

lxxxi [Mrs H. Wood,] *The Reception of the Dead*, pt 6: 326.

lxxxii Mrs H. Wood, *Oswald Cray*, 376-7; ch. 53.

lxxxiii "[I]t is not often that the lordly sex in France trouble the insides of churches" ([Mrs H. Wood,] "Seven Years," 249); also C. Wood, *Memorials*, 118.