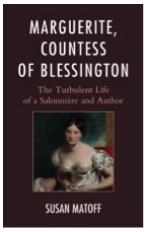
MARGUERITE, COUNTESS OF BLESSINGTON: THE TURBULENT LIFE OF A SALONNIÈRE AND AUTHOR



By Susan Matoff
(Delaware / Rowman and Littlefield, 2016) xviii +369 pp.
Reviewed by Robert O'Kell on 2016-09-21.

Click here for a PDF version.

Click here to buy the book on Amazon.

In the words of its author, this new biography of Lady Blessington "seeks to place her where she belongs in history -- as an important and influential salonnière; a writer of many works, some of which deserve serious attention; an editor of two of the most popular annuals of her day; and a valued friend and confidante" (xv). In most respects this intention has been realized. In the text and the two Appendices, we have here the most complete identification and description to date of the books, stories, and verse written by Lady Blessington. We also have the most detailed and thorough description yet of the events of her life and the relationships within her parental and marital families. Matoff's book is thus welcome, for there hasn't been a serious full study of any of this material in more than 80 years, since Michael Sadleir's *Blessington- D'Orsay: A Masquerade* (1933), which was slightly augmented and reissued in 1947 under the title, *The Strange Life of Lady Blessington*.

There are, however, some disappointments with this study. For the details and interpretation of specific episodes in the life, Matoff relies heavily upon the accounts in both Sadleir's book and the biography written by Richard Robert Madden in 1855. Without a more searching analysis Matoff cannot throw new light on Lady Blessington's gossiped-about relationships with men, especially with Captain Thomas Jenkins, Lord Blessington, and the Count D'Orsay.



Thomas Lawrence, Margaret, *Countess of Blessington* (1822). London, Wallace Collection

The front cover and the frontispiece (xvii) of this study reproduce the famous portrait of its subject by the court painter Thomas Lawrence. It shows Lady Blessington, aged 33, at her most beautiful, elegant, and alluring perfection. But there is a disturbing aspect to this portrait, for she looks directly at us with a skeptical expression (caught in the dark eyes and closed mouth, and in the hesitancy of her hands in her lap) that seems to fend off our curiosity and delight. Indeed, in a masterly way, Lawrence has suggested that there is something on her mind, something private behind the elegant beauty that has caught our attention at this first moment of recognition. But though Matoff often speculates about the scandals imputed to Lady Blessington's relationships with men both before and after this portrait was painted, she does not fully consider the private life of this lady.

The turbulence featured in the subtitle began in early childhood. Unlike her handsomer, livelier siblings, Margaret Power (also called Sally within the family) was a quiet, introverted, and plain-looking child. But as she grew up, she too became very attractive, both physically and intellectually. Her father, Edmund Power, was self-aggrandizing, reckless, improvident, irresponsible, and often drunk. Although he had some largely unsuccessful business interests, he was also employed by the British Army's General, Lord Donoughmore. Appointed as a magistrate in County Tipperary, Ireland, Power was told to suppress any signs of rebellion among the tenantry, and in zealously doing so, he instigated a number of violent episodes. For one of these, the shooting death of a peasant whose wounds Margaret saw, he was charged with murder, and though not convicted, he was removed from his post as magistrate. Despite this, and chronic indebtedness, Power thought of himself as a country gentleman and was fond of entertaining British Army officers in his home.

At the age of fifteen, Margaret was forced to marry one of these officers, Captain Maurice St. Leger Farmer, in return, it was said, for financial considerations. Reckless and violent as Power, he was considered insane by most of those who knew him. In his frequent drunken rages he treated his new wife with such cruelty and brutality that after a few months she ran away, only to find that her family did not welcome her return. In 1809, after staying mostly with various friends and

relatives, she ended up in Dublin, where it seems she came under the protection of another British officer, Captain Thomas Jenkins, whom she had first met at her father's house after the failure of her marriage.

Raised to expect the inheritance of a considerable fortune, Jenkins was a gentleman, and from 1810 to 1814 he was part of an establishment at Sydmonton in Hampshire, the county where Margaret also lived. According to Matoff, "no proof of the nature of their relationship has been discovered. Whether or not it was a sexual relationship, one of just companionship, or one based on Jenkins's pity for Margaret's situation, may never be ascertained" (7). It is known, though, that Captain Jenkins was away for almost two of these years while serving with his regiment in the Peninsular Campaign. We also know that Margaret spent her time well in this uncharted period, for by its conclusion, as Matoff notes, she "emerged as a thoroughly knowledgeable woman with a lively interest in the arts, her conversational skills well honed, and not a trace left of the plain, shy, child." Instead, she was "a clever, lovely, and accomplished woman of twenty-eight" (7-8). Such a transformation would at the very least require the resources of a classical library and probably the presence of sophisticated companions (33, n. 19), which would seem to reinforce Matoff's inference about the "stately mansion" (18) that Lady Blessington later mentioned as her residence at this time: it may indeed have been Sydmonton Court.

During her time with Captain Jenkins, Margaret met an aristocratic Irish friend of his: Charles John Gardiner, Viscount Mountjoy, lieutenant colonel of the Tyrone Militia. Mountjoy, a recent widower, was soon smitten by the clever Irish beauty with the soft, low voice and winning manner. Also, according to a later account by her good friend, Walter Savage Landor, Mountjoy offered to rescue Jenkins when he was finally ruined by his gambling and extravagance and forced to leave England. Jenkins, Landor writes, replied that he was "ruined beyond redemption, and never could return to England, nor stand between her [Margaret] and fortune." Mountjoy's generosity to Jenkins evidently flowed through Margaret, for "[t]he exile received from her," Landor adds, "one hundred pounds quarterly until his death" ("Lady Blessington," *Athenaeum*, [London: No. 1425], 17 February 1855, 200-201). Matoff, however, sees Mountjoy's generosity in an entirely different light. "The story goes," she writes, "that Mountjoy paid Thomas Jenkins £10,000 as recompense for his expenditure on Margaret's dresses, jewels, and keep. Thus for a second time in her life was Margaret sold and bought" (8). Matoff does not cite her source for this "story," which appears in Sadleir's book, and in Landor's account--to which Sadleir refers--there is nothing about such a sum of money or the inference Matoff draws from it. Instead Landor highlights Margaret's virtuous character and generous spirit. Here as often elsewhere in Matoff's narrative, the absence of full and accurate documentation weakens the authority of her derivative analysis.

By 1816, when Mountjoy became the Earl of Blessington, he considered himself engaged to Margaret (though legally she was still married to Captain Farmer), and he set her up in a house in Manchester Square, London, where she lived with her 22-year-old brother Robert. Again, like her relationship with Jenkins, the precise nature of her relationship with Mountjoy at this time remains ambiguous. Richard Madden provides the testimony of Mr. Arthur Tegart, a well-respected medical doctor, that, though he frequently met Mountjoy [Blessington] at Mrs. Farmer's house, he "was never unaccompanied there by a mutual friend or acquaintance" (qtd. 50n). Nonetheless, to the world it all looked less than virtuous. Fortuitously for her, however, she became a widow in November 1817, when--after an evening of heavy drinking with imprisoned friends--Captain Farmer fell from an upper story window of the King's Bench Prison and died from his injuries. Four months later, on the 16th of February 1818, she and the Earl were married by special licence in London, and she emerged from the ceremony with a new name and title: Marguerite, Countess of Blessington.

She now lived very well. On one hand, in spite of the seemingly enormous wealth that he drew from his estates in Ireland, Lord Blessington's fortune was dwindling and could not keep pace with his lavish expenditure. On the other hand, with an annual income then estimated at £23,000, he proved an adoring and indulgent husband who chiefly aimed to ensure his wife's every comfort. This included an elegantly furnished house at 11 St. James's Square, suitable for entertaining society. Among its distinguishing features (still visible today) are the four classical sculptures standing at the roof line -- muses indicating Lord and Lady Blessington's shared interests in literature, classical antiquity, and the fine arts.

Perhaps suspecting that her background and earlier relationships might preclude invitations from other hostesses, Lady Blessington launched an evening salon to compete with those of Lady Holland and Lady Charleville. Partly because of her comparative youth, beauty, and wit, but also because of her warmth and kindly, sympathetic temperament, she immediately attracted a glittering circle of actors, artists, aristocrats, and politicians. In words that Matoff quotes from Madden, "It was something of frankness and archness, without the least mixture of ill nature, in every thing she said, of *enjouement* in every thought she uttered, of fullness of confidence in the out-speaking of her sentiments, and the apparent absence of every *arrière pensée* in her mind, while she laughed out unpremeditated ideas, and *bon mots* spontaneously elicited, in such joyous tones that it might be said she seldom talked without a smile at least on her lips; it was something of felicity in her mode of expression, and freedom in it from all reserve, superadded to the effect produced by singular loveliness of face, expressiveness of look and gesture, and gracefulness of form and carriage, that constituted the peculiar charm of the conversation of Lady Blessington" (qtd. Matoff 16).

While Madden clearly enumerates the attractions of Lady Blessington's public persona, his description conveys something less than a full impression of the salon itself, for the real nature of it depends on the content and tone of conversations among the guests and with their hostess. These, of course, with very few exceptions in diaries or memoirs, have not been recorded. Indeed, one of the chief attractions of the evenings at a salon was that its participants could speak off the record: free of the social or political constraints they otherwise felt in public, people of differing opinions and perspectives could meet and talk informally. Consequently, while sources such as letters, diaries, and memoirs name some of those known to have frequented Lady Blessington's salons, there is rarely any substantive record of what was said at them.

Perhaps the most dazzling of the guests at Lady Blessington's first salon was the French aristocratic dandy and wit, Alfred, Count D'Orsay. Though his relationship to Lady Blessington soon came to define both their lives, he was at first the perfect complementary attraction at St. James's Square for Lord Blessington as well as herself. The lord was so much fascinated by D'Orsay that later gossips cast him as the lover of both the lord and his lady. There is, however, no evidence of that, and in raising the question of D'Orsay's sexuality (about which Sadleir was also skeptical), Matoff suggests that both Blessingtons thought of him chastely: while the lord may well have seen the handsome twenty-two-year-old Count as an adopted son, the lady simply welcomed the presence of such a clever and handsome companion. Whatever the case, they relished his company. In 1822, when they set off on a prolonged visit to Italy, they met D'Orsay en route in Avignon, where they persuaded him to join their party, and henceforth he became a member of their household.

At the beginning of April in 1823, the Blessingtons met Lord Byron in Genoa and spent much of the next ten weeks in the poet's company. D'Orsay enhanced their contact, for he and Byron enjoyed each other's satirical wit, especially when directed at fashionable life in England. Of more consequence, however, was Lady Blessington's journal recording their meetings, which would later form the basis of her most successful book, *Conversations of Lord Byron with the Countess of Blessington* (1834). A few days after their arrival in Genoa, Lord Blessington received the terrible news that his ten year old son Luke, his only legitimate male heir, had died in England on the 26th of March. While still distraught over this tragedy, Blessington drew up a new will, with a codicil to the effect that if D'Orsay married either of Blessington's daughters from his previous wife, Harriet (then aged eleven) or Emilie Rosalie (then fourteen), that daughter (or rather, D'Orsay!) would inherit Blessington's Dublin estates. The final version of this will named Lady Blessington as Harriet's guardian.

D'Orsay's arranged marriage to the fifteen-year-old Harriet (whom he had just met) took place on the 1st of December 1827, apparently on an understanding suggested by Lady Blessington that the marriage would not be soon consummated. But in any case, like the union of the fifteen-year-old Margaret Power with Captain Farmer, the marriage was most ill-advised: it entirely ignored the bride's thoughts and feelings and ended in a separation after four years of obvious incompatibility. Considered by those outside the family a wicked, infamous, and disgusting scandal, the whole affair fed malicious gossip about the sexual relations of both D'Orsay and the Blessingtons.

Most of the Blessingtons' years in Italy were spent at Naples sight-seeing and entertaining in the high style, though there were also short periods of residence (after D'Orsay's marriage to Harriet) in Pisa, Rome, and Florence. At Rome in 1828 the young Richard Madden was a frequent guest of the Blessingtons and became a witness to both the domestic and social life of the family, while in Florence Lady Blessington met Walter Savage Landor, the erudite and eccentric poet who became her close confidential friend and who learned from her the story of her earlier life. As Matoff shows, both authors thus provide important testimony to what Landor called the "generous" and "high-minded" character of the lady (54), assailed as it was in the vulgar press in the years to follow.

In May of 1829, while Lord and Lady Blessington were living in Paris, he suffered a severe stroke and died two days later at just forty-seven years of age. Tragically, the Earl's death not only robbed her of his presence, which had become indispensable to her happiness, but also cut deeply into the resources needed to maintain the luxurious world she had come to inhabit as his wife. Her jointure of £2000 per year, while more than adequate for the needs of an ordinary person, could hardly support her habits and expectations as well as her dependents within the family, including her father, her brother Robert, her sister Mary Ann, her step-daughter Harriet, and the ever extravagant D'Orsay. It was to supplement her modest income that she undertook a literary life after returning to England, where she re-established her salon, first at 8 Seamore Place, Mayfair (from 1832 to 1836), and then at Gore House in Kensington (on the site of what is now the Albert Hall).

Despite the insinuations of scandal in the satirical press, her salons in the 1830s and 1840s were even more successful than her earlier one at St. James's Square had been. From her time in Italy she had gained an impressive knowledge of the treasures of classical antiquity, and her time in Paris during the 1830 revolution had stimulated her interest in politics. As a result, her London dinners and evening salons drew a host of clever friends and distinguished visitors from the fields of politics, literature, art, science, and fashion. On any given evening she could draw a dozen or more MP's amid some very distinguished party leaders, from the Tory Duke of Wellington to the Whig Lord John Russell and the Radical Lord Durham, to name just a few. She grew especially close in these years to Edward Bulwer (later Bulwer Lytton), the novelist, Radical MP, and--at this time--Editor of the *New Monthly Magazine*. After Bulwer brought along Benjamin Disraeli, his flamboyant friend and fellow-novelist, who was also eager to enter Parliament, both men became confidants of their hostess. Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray also joined the many famous artists, musicians, and foreign dignitaries who attended her salons.

Salon-keeping served Lady Blessington's literary ambitions well. As editor of two Christmas annuals, *Heath's Book of Beauty* (1834-49) and *The Keepsake* (1840-49), she could use her connections among her aristocratic, literary, and political friends to find contributors who would bring some cachet to each volume. As noted in a recent study of annuals, these lavishly produced and expensive coffee-table books, composed of engravings, short stories, poems, and occasional essays, were very popular in the 1830s among those who formed fashionable society and those who aspired to join it. Matoff explains in ample detail how laborious was the task of soliciting contributions from those who mainly wrote for other forms of publication. She also succinctly surveys the pieces that were written by Lady Blessington herself, mostly short tales, bits of prose, and verses accompanying illustrations. Even more helpfully, Matoff lists in Appendices A and B all of Lady Blessington's books as well as her contributions to her own and other annuals. While later readers have found these effusions mostly trite or overly sentimental in tone, Matoff's efforts are nonetheless valuable as contributions to the literary history of a minor genre.

More significantly, Matoff assesses Lady Blessington's twenty works of fiction, especially her first full-length novel, *The Repealers* (1833), which chiefly explores the relations between tenant farmers and their landlords in rebellious Ireland. As Matoff deftly shows, Lady Blessington's "political" novel was an eloquent and sympathetic attempt to make the condition of Ireland intelligible to English readers, but it also sharply satirized English society in a way that can be read as defending her own virtue and integrity. Though she went on to produce other novels on various social themes, none had quite the power or success of this first one. As a result, Lady Blessington's literary fame has derived not from her fiction but from the books adapted from her journals -- the previously mentioned *Conversations of Lord Byron* (1834), *The Idler in Italy* (1839), and *The Idler in France* (1841).

In the 1840s, as the Christmas annuals gradually lost their popularity, Lady Blessington found it ever more difficult to find suitable contributors to them. Since that problem was compounded by a decline in her health, her income could no longer sustain the expenses of her salon and the demands made on her by her relatives. To cover her outstanding debts, she finally decided in April 1849 to move to Paris and leave the beautiful contents of Gore House (including the famous portrait) to be sold at auction. On June 3 she moved into her newly furnished apartment on the Rue de Cirque and that evening went to dinner at the home of the Duc and Duchesse de Guiche, D'Orsay's nephew and his wife. Later that night, upon retiring, she had difficulty breathing before eventually falling into a deep sleep from which she did not awake. The next day she died of heart failure at the age of 60. She was buried at Chambourcy in a pyramid mausoleum designed by Count D'Orsay in which his remains also now reside.

Matoff's biography is very much shaped by what she sees as the tragic arc of Lady Blessington's life, and there is no denying that her social triumph amidst the events of a "turbulent life" makes a fascinating story, well worth telling again. The real scholarly contribution of this study, though, is the detailed account of Lady Blessington's literary career as an editor and author.

Robert O'Kell is Professor Emeritus in the Department of English, Film & Theatre, and Dean Emeritus of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Manitoba, Canada.

SUSAN MATOFF RESPONDS

My thanks to Professor Robert O'Kell for his review, which summarizes the book so well that I was reminded of Washington Irving's complaint to William Jerdan, editor of the Literary Gazette. Though "highly flattered that his Essays should be deemed worthy of insertion in so elegant and polite a miscellany," so much had been included, he implied, that no one need buy the book! [qtd. Matoff, *Conflicted Life: William Jerdan* 1782-1869 [Sussex Academic Press, 2011] 92).

The reviewer finds "some disappointments with this study" in that I did not provide a "searching analysis" into Lady Blessington's "gossiped-about relationships with men." Perhaps he overlooked the note in the Introduction concerning her relationship with Count d'Orsay, in which I stated that in my opinion this relationship "distracts us from considering Lady Blessington as a person worthy of this study: her achievements both personal and professional were remarkable....." (xvi). Implicitly, my opinion extends to any other men in her personal life as, for me, they are irrelevant to her professional life as a salonnière and author, which was the focus of my book. It is by her work that we can know and judge her, and I am sorry for the reviewer's disappointment expressed more than once, at the lack of more "gossip." My book does, however, focus on her friendships with Bulwer Lytton and Benjamin Disraeli, both important literary and political figures. They were arguably more important in her life than any of the men with whom she was alleged to have had a sexual relationship.

Rather strangely, Professor O'Kell notes a need for more "full and accurate documentation" about the money Lord Blessington paid to his future wife's protector, but acknowledges as my source Walter Savage Landor's letter in the Athenaeum, reported by Michael Sadleir in his earlier biography of the Countess. I am puzzled as to what further documentation would convince him of this incident, other than perhaps sight of a withdrawal statement from Lord Blessington's bank account!

I am grateful to Professor O'Kell for so minutely examining my study of Lady Blessington, and am pleased he concluded that it constitutes a "real scholarly contribution" which, after all, is what we all aim for.

Leave a comment on Robert O'Kell's review.

Name:

Email:

Comments:

I'm not a robot

reCAPTCHA
Privacy - Terms

Submit

About Us
Copyright © Dartmouth College, 2008-2020