

## L T Meade

---

'where young women received the advantages of University instruction to prepare them for the battle of life.'

---

by Holly Cox

L.T. Meade's 1891 novel follows the journey of Priscilla Peel as she embarks upon her undergraduate education at the women's college St Benet's, in the old University town of Kingsmede. What she discovers is challenging in ways she hadn't imagined, and fulfilling beyond anything she might have hoped for. The novel celebrates the communality of women finally able to explore their own capacity for learning and intellectual achievement.

Although she married in September 1879, at the age of 34, Elizabeth Thomasina Meade unusually retained her maiden name not only for the purposes of publishing some 280 novels, but in all areas of her public life. Born in 1844 in Cork, Ireland, she was one of six children, and was educated at home by a governess. Upon her mother's death, and her father's remarriage, she moved to London and began work as a writer. In interviews for such publications as *Young Woman* in 1893, she emphasised her professionalism, and her ability to craft stories for the popular market. This was demonstrated by her capitalisation on the country's fascination with Sherlock Holmes detective stories during the 1890s, publishing detective stories of her own alongside Doyle's in the *Strand Magazine*.

Working for over thirty different publishers throughout her career, Meade's focus was upon independence and the growing awareness of a woman's capacity to work and provide for herself and her family. Her adult fiction took a variety of forms, from romance, stories of aristocratic life, and problem stories featuring topics such as vivisection and drug addiction. However, it was in her novels for older girls that she most promoted the ideas of education and opportunity for women. From 1887-1893, she edited the *Atlanta* magazine, developing for it not just a tradition of good fiction, but articles about education, careers, and history for and about women. Career novels about medicine, art, market gardening and other fields of work and vocation for women became a vehicle for advice about training opportunities for her young readers; *A Sister of the Red Cross* (1900), for example, followed a nurse to the South African War. Meanwhile, novels such

as *A World of Girls* (1886), set in a girls' school, set many of the conventions of the school story which were later taken up by such similarly prolific novelists as Enid Blyton.

In 1891, Meade published *A Sweet Girl Graduate*, set in an all-female college in the fictional university town of Kingsmede, closely modelled on the collegiate systems of Oxbridge. The novel follows the journey of Priscilla Peel, a very intelligent and serious student beginning her undergraduate education at St Benet's College for women. With her parents having been killed, her aunt and sole carer dangerously ailing, and three younger sisters to support, Priscilla is relying upon educative opportunities to provide her with the means to be the bread-winner for her family. At St. Benet's, she is able to work towards this while fuelling the appetite for learning she has always possessed. More to her surprise, however, is the kinship and camaraderie she finds as she is surrounded by other women who share her love of education, her dreams for her future, and her intellect. She is able, through their company and the individual struggles and achievements whose highs and lows she experiences with them, to discover a full and rounded life for herself for which learning, education and independence for women are the foundation. The College's production of Tennyson's *The Princess*, which proves pivotal to the resolution of the novel's plot, is a significant example of the access and appropriation by women of the traditional male literary canon; Priscilla, in taking on the role of the Prince, actively performs this reversal, turning upon its head the long-standing theatrical tradition of all-male casts which sees men take on the female roles. The performance is symbolic of the uprooting of male traditions in celebration of the education of women.

Although *A Sweet Girl Graduate* is vulnerable to traditional stereotypes of the girls'/women's education stories which are by now familiar and, in our contemporary context, seem dated, Meade's determined articulation of the possibilities available to women in terms of education and the life experiences it offered was both unique and prescriptive, cleverly pre-empting the feelings of community and potential later established in the women's colleges of Oxford and Cambridge in the twentieth century.