Mary Russell Mitford's "Our Village" and the development of the professional periodical writer

Abstract

Driven by financial necessity, Mary Russell Mitford was one of the first consistently paid writers working in the periodical press and an early success story with her sketches appearing in multiple periodicals as well as in a range of collected editions throughout the century. This article builds on recent scholarship that places Mary Russell Mitford's "Our Village" sketches in the context of the evolving print culture of the 1820s, and seeks to understand the characteristics of her long-lasting appeal. It argues that, as a professional writer, Mitford's long-term success across multiple publication formats hinged on her marketable brand identity as a canonical woman writer alongside Jane Austen, connecting writing, image, and biography, and her influential development of a descriptive prose technique able to generate an illusion of truthful pictures drawn from life.

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Introduction

In the 1850s, Harriet Martineau wrote that literature owed a debt of gratitude to Mary Russell Mitford:

> I was early fond of her tales and descriptions, and have always regarded her as the originator of that new style of "graphic description" to which literature owes a great deal […] In my childhood, there was no such thing known, in the works of the day, as "graphic description" [...] we had no conception of detail like Miss Austen's in manners, and Miss Mitford's in scenery, or of Millais' and Wilkie's analogous life pictures, or Rosa Bonheur's adventurous Hayfield at noon-tide. Miss Austen had claims to other and greater honours; but she and Miss Mitford deserve no small gratitude for rescuing us from the folly and bad taste of slovenly indefiniteness in delineation.[1]

Martineau was not a fan of Mitford's person (not liking her "so well as I liked her works"), but nevertheless recognises her importance within a canon of "graphic" writers who had significant impact on the development of literature. Three key ideas are present in Martineau's recollection: first, that prominent writers could be categorised and grouped; second, that the successful literary modes of the early nineteenth-century were analogous to artists; and third, that these literary and artistic modes contain a crucial interest in truthful depiction as "life pictures". These themes are all important in understanding Mitford's importance who, as a pioneering writer at the start of professional writing for mass periodicals, set a template by which other writers were later judged. This essay explores these themes as they pertain to Mitford, arguing that the textual construction of Mitford – the version of her presented to readers – was carefully modulated to fit the values required for canonicity, and that Mitford popularised a prose technique that generated an illusion of truthful specificity while being flexible enough for success across a myriad of publication contexts.

Perceptions of Mitford as originating a new writing style are connected to perceptions of Mitford as an authorial identity, a textual construct that enabled a mass audience to relate to her on a personal level. The Mitford people wrote about, painted, and thought they knew from her first-person narratives was a persona that marketed within a pantheon of British women novelists. Mitford-as-textual-construct follows recent scholarship in viewing Mitford's country sketches as

[1]Harriet Martineau, *Harriet Martineau's autobiography and Memorials of Harriet Martineau*, ed. Maria Weston Chapman, 3 vols. Vol. 1 (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1877), 315-16. https://archive.org/details/harrietmartineau01martuoft. Volumes 1 and 2 of the autobiography were written and privately circulated in the 1850s – see P.D. Edwards, *Idyllic Realism from Mary Russell Mitford to Hardy* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 8.

"mediation" rather than "simple idealisation", and is worthwhile for several reasons.[2] First, as the real Mitford's career spanned the transition from eighteenth-century print culture to nineteenth-century "corporate" models of periodical, her textual presence traces the different configurations of authorship at a crucial period in print culture.[3] While previous writers had created marketable personas to help sell books, Mitford was one of the first to do so as a paid freelancer writing for periodicals. Second, as critics have noted, her hugely popular village sketches – usually, but not always, published in volume form under the title *Our Village* – which first appeared in periodicals in the 1820s, were archetypal texts in the formation of national identity and literary genre, that were still in circulation at the end of the century.[4] Yet, as a literary genre, they are slippery, not quite sitting comfortably within journalism or fiction, and even having claims to scientific nature writing.[5] Third, Mitford's village sketches – her most famous work – were consumed in a range of forms starting with their periodical publication and ending the century with lavishly illustrated gift book editions. This packaging and re-packaging of the texts in different ways allows us the benefit of comparison to consider how form relates to knowledge and values. It also, I would argue, demonstrates an important feature of the print culture of the 1820s and 1830s – textual adaptability enabled longevity and, in the age of the first mass audiences, a wide scope of readerships. Finally, the real Mitford's literary fame drew heavily on her real-world network of friends and acquaintances, and, just as her idealised village was conflated with the real Three Mile Cross, her real identity was often conflated with her writing.[6] These conflations, I would argue, were a deliberate ploy that Mitford

[2] Angela Esterhammer, *Print and Performance in the 1820s: Improvisation, Speculation, Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 155.

[3] For detailed discussion of this transition in periodical publishing, see Jon P. Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), especially 50-52.

[4] See Elizabeth K. Helsinger, *Rural Scenes and National Representation: Britain, 1815–1850* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997); Deidre Lynch, "Homes and Haunts: Austen's and Mitford's English Idylls", *PMLA* 115 (2000): 1103–8; Kevin A. Morrison, "Foregrounding nationalism: Mary Russell Mitford's Our Village and the effects of publication context", *European Romantic Review*, 19.3 (2008): 275-287. DOI: 10.1080/10509580802211496.

[5] Amy King argues Mitford's sketches are a hybrid genre - "neither clearly literary nor scientific" - and "encompass a compendium of naturalist observations"; "*Our Village* has simply gone unrecognized for what to a large extent it is: a narrative instantiation of an everyday, amateur, and essentially uncredited naturalist". See Amy King, "Searching our Science and Literature: Hybrid Narratives, New Methodological Directions, and Mary Russell Mitford's Our Village", *Literature Compass* 4.5 (2007): 1485–1503 (1494-95); Amy M. King, *The Divine in the Commonplace: Reverent Natural History and the Novel in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[6] Elisa Beshero-Bondar and Kellie Donovan-Condron, "Modelling Mary Russell Mitford's Networks: The Digital Mitford as Collaborative Database", *Women's Literary Networks and Romanticism: "A Tribe of Authoresses"*, ed. Andrew O. Winckles and Angela Rehbein (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), 137-195. The Digital Mitford contains a growing collection of scholarly editions of Mitford's work as well as network analysis graphs designed "to help illuminate how the widely published Mitford connected with a wide range of correspondents and contemporaries around the world". See https://digitalmitford.org

instigated with her use of a chatty and sometimes intimate first-person narrator in many of her sketches.

In combination these reasons make Mitford's body of work both complex and highly valuable in any understanding of the development of writing for the periodical press in the 1820s and beyond. Not least, as Mitford's importance extends well beyond the publication of *Our Village* - as Alison Booth has argued, Mitford (who was also very popular in the US) helped establish an American literary canon through her anthologies and championing of writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne, led an active literary life as hostess, correspondent, and editor, and contributed – and benefitted from – the homes and haunts genre.[7] It is my intention within the scope of this article to focus specifically on how Mitford created a writerly mode suited to commodification in the new market conditions that emerged in the 1820s and which facilitated her work's continual commercial success throughout the century. This essay approaches Mitford's legacy retrospectively via an expensive 1893 republication of her work with an introduction by Anne Thackeray Ritchie which summarises the features of the appeal Mitford had – and continued to have – for Victorian readers. The essay will then seek to understand these features as they arose in their 1820s context, ending with an analysis of Mitford's influence as a writer of descriptive prose.

"Our Village": Publication History

Anne Thackeray Ritchie's 1893 selection of sketches, published as *Our Village* by Macmillan and Co. and now freely accessible online as page scans via archive.org, was not a simple reprint. Instead, the edition is a selection from the original five volumes of *Our Village*, all of which revolve around the conceit of a country walk, and which are ordered chronologically like diary entries or letters from a correspondent. The edition came with a lengthy preface by Thackeray Ritchie and was illustrated by Hugh Thomson as part of Macmillan's "Cranford" series which also included Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* in 1891 and George Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* in 1906, as well as older works like Adison and Steele's *Days with Sir Roger de Coverley* and Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*. The edition is also linked to Jane Austen via its illustrator, Thomson, who in the mid-1890s also illustrated Austen's novels for Macmillan. As a product, the 1893 edition thus situates Mitford's sketches within a nostalgic canon of national literature, which is in keeping with other late Victorian and Edwardian editions of *Our Village*.[8] For example, in 1909 the Edinburgh-based publisher T.N.

[7] Booth, *Homes and Haunts*, 107.

[8] Booth builds on Moretti's mapping of the sketches to suggest the "comparative safety and calm" created by "the pattern of returning home, have allowed *Our Village* to be taken as a prescription for nostalgia", with a volume of Mitford's sketches reading as a "souvenir album of England's rural origins" (Booth, *Homes and Haunts*, 111-112).

Foulis, known for their illustrated gift books, bundled together a selection of Mitford's "Our Village" sketches along with sixteen reproductions of paintings by Stanhope Forbes under the title *Sketches of English Life and Character*. Foulis' retitled edition was advertised as a "presentation book", along with *Tales of Irish Life and Character* written by S.C. Hall (an acquaintance of Mitford's who credited the influence of Mitford's sketches on her own work), Flinders Petrie's *Arts and Crafts of Ancient Egypt*, Johnson's *Mrs. Thrale*, and J.H. Crawford's *The Wild Flowers*, and also as a set with Hall's book and *Reminiscences of Scottish Life and Character* by Edward Bannerman Ramsay, Dean of Edinburgh. These later republications suggest a heightened awareness of the utility of the text for collective nationalism – something that was present from its earliest collection into volumes. As Elizabeth K. Helsinger notes, along with works by Mitford's acquaintances like S.C. Hall and William and Mary Howitt, the sketches offered a "potentially unifying cultural artifact and commodity […] [that] organized a national audience around personal and collective memories of rural English origins".[9]

In examining the expensive 1893 edition, we can see much of what Martineau meant about Mitford's innovative "graphic description". The text of the opening page (see figure 1) is almost entirely one sentence which, in its sprawl, already combines the traits that became most closely associated with Mitford's writing. First, there is the intimacy of the first-person narration which is not a generic "I" but, with its own preferences of taste, reads as an actual individual and which also inducts the reader into its social sphere, so that when the textual world is described as "a little world of our own", the "our" includes narrator, reader, and an as-yet undefined social circle. Second, there is the detail with which the image of the village is painted and the attention to natural images (flowers, ants, sheep). These features are emphasised in this particular edition by the additional title "Country Pictures" and by Thomson's illustrated flowers and bees that take up almost as much space as Mitford's text.

The complex publication history of *Our Village* was neatly summarised in the *Dictionary of National Biography* a year after Thackeray Ritchie's edition in 1894:

> Happily, the pressing necessity of earning money led Miss Mitford to turn, as she says herself, 'from the lofty steep of tragic poetry to the every-day path of village stories.' Her inimitable series of country sketches, drawn from her own experiences at Three Mile Cross, entitled ' Our Village,' began to appear in 1819 in the 'Lady's Magazine,' a little-known periodical, whose sale was thereby increased from 250 to 2,000. She had previously offered them to Thomas Campbell for the 'New Monthly Magazine,' but he rejected them as unsuitable to the dignity of his pages. The sketches had an enormous success, and were collected in five volumes, published respectively in 1824, 1826, 1828, 1830, and 1832.

[9] Helsinger, 121.

> Editions of the whole came out in 1843, 1848, 1852, and 1856, and selections appeared in 1870, 1879,1883,1884, 1886, 1891, and 1893 (edited by Mrs. Richmond Ritchie, with illustrations by Hugh Thomson).[10]

Whether the financial and domestic problems that forced Mitford to write the "Our Village" stories qualify as a happy circumstance is questionable, as is the reduction of the *Lady's Magazine* which had an important role in the history of print media,[11] but the late Victorian biographer's enthusiasm for these stories is palpable. The list of editions is instructive, as is the additional information that the 1852 edition (the last in Mitford's lifetime) grouped together those sketches formed around a country walk for the first time, and subsequent editions often replicated this or, at the very least, prioritised these country walk sketches.[12] The 1893 edition edited by Anne Thackeray Ritchie (listed in the above quotation with her husband's name, "Mrs. Richmond Ritchie") thus follows this precedent, while adding a new preface and illustrations.

The variations across editions as well as the sketches' original publications in the *Lady's Magazine*, the *New Monthly Magazine,* and other periodicals raise the question of what exactly we mean when we say "Our Village". Indeed, as Kevin A. Morrison suggests, "Our Village" is all of the different versions even though *Our Village* might be a static text – one of five volumes, or three, or two, or even just one volume – that sits on the shelf or is hosted on archive.org as a series of scanned images.[13] The later anthologies of the sketches mainly reproduce what previously existed in another form, although perhaps in a different order, but, as King notes, "what we decide makes up the text of *Our Village* in some sense will shape how it is understood as having influence".[14]

Given the complexity of the publication history and the difficulty in accessing copies of the *Lady's Magazine*, it is unsurprising that scholarship has considered Mitford's sketches from a range of different perspectives. For example, Elizabeth K. Helsinger, reading the original five volume publication against Cobbett's *Rural Rides* (1822-26) points out the disconnection between Mitford's village and the wider regional and national context to argue that Mitford creates "a stable, metaphorically English space by inviting us to forget how it is embedded in a national geography".[15] Meanwhile, taking up the idea of the country walk, Franco Moretti and Esterhammer have both

[10] "Mitford, Mary Russell", *Dictionary of National Biography*, 38 (London: Smith, Elder, & co., 1894), 84-86 (85). https://archive.org/details/dictionaryofnati38stepuoft
[11] See Jennie Batchelor, *The Lady's Magazine (1770–1832) and the Making of Literary History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022).
[12] For more detail on this, see Edwards, 11.
[13] Morrison, "Foregrounding nationalism".
[14] King, 1493.
[15] Helsinger, p. 128.

considered place and narrative mobility, again concentrating on the original five volumes.[16] Both Moretti and Esterhammer are interested in the 1820s context: Moretti maps the changing geography across the five volumes, connecting this with the geography of rick burnings and machinery destruction associated with Luddism and the Swing Riots;[17] Esterhammer considers the original publication in the *Lady's Magazine* to argue the sketches "offer a counter-discourse" to the "exotic travel writing" that had been prominent in the magazine.[18] Meanwhile, Morrison, also interested in the periodical context of Mitford's sketches, suggests that in this form they "appear far less concerned than their later instantiations with discursively constructing notions of Englishness", and makes a strong case for greater attention to the changing forms of publication.[19] Alongside this, Alison Booth makes a compelling case for biographical and historicist readings of the sketches, as illustrated by her point that geographical scope increases as the volumes progress (noted by Moretti) partly because as a professional writer Mitford aims to "avoid repetition", and because the financial success of the earlier sketches enabled Mitford to buy a pony chaise and travel further than she could previously.[20] Booth has also published important work on the literary tourism that developed around "Mitford's village", encouraged especially by her friends the Howitts.[21]

Although attention to these publication contexts is important, especially the periodical publications of the sketches, it is also important to note that there is not one single periodical publication of the sketches, but many reprints and abridgements. The sketch "Rosedale and its tenants", for example, first appeared anonymously in the *New Monthly Magazine* in January 1824, and then was reprinted with the pseudonym "L." in the US edition of the *New Monthly Magazine* on 1 July 1824, and *then* in 1830 was included in the fourth volume of *Our Village*, following which it was reprinted with Mitford's full name as an abridgement in the New York magazine *The Albion, A Journal of News, Politics and Literature* on 2 October 1830, featured in this format on the front page of the *New-York Mirror: A Repository of Polite Literature and the Arts*, a day later, and on 16 October 1830 in the *Philadelphia Album and Ladies' Literary Portfolio*. As such, the proliferation of contexts and possibilities for intertextual relations is far larger than an "original" periodical publication and a "reprint" in a volume. Esterhammer's description of the sketches as occupying a "multi-layered

[16] Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005); Esterhammer, 154-63.
[17] Moretti provides a map of incidents relating to "Luddism, 1811-12, and Captain Swing disturbances, 1830" which clearly shows Mitford's village to be in the midst of a concentration of incidents. See Moretti, 60.
[18] Esterhammer, 162.
[19] Morrison, "Foregrounding nationalism", 276-77. See also Kevin A. Morrison, "Modulating Narrative Voice: Mary Russell Mitford's Sketches of Rural Character", *Women's Writing*, 22.4 (2015): 505-524 (514-19). DOI: 10.1080/09699082.2015.1025471.
[20] Alison Booth, "Mid-Range Reading: Not a Manifesto", *PMLA*, 132:3 (2017): 620-627 (623).
[21] Alison Booth, *Homes and Haunts: Touring Writers' Shrines and Countries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

textual universe" therefore seems extremely apt. More than most texts, Mitford's sketches resist any attempt at singular characterisation, contextualisation, or interpretation.[22] However, it is precisely this mutability of Mitford's writing and persona that made her work so effective as a commodity in the nineteenth-century marketplace. Mitford stands out among nineteenth-century writers as an early example in which text, commodity culture, and authorial brand identity combined in a model for enduring financial success. Her success was due in part to the fact that it was so easy to think of her village as a real place and, through the intimacy of her prose, feel as though one knew the real Mitford.

Brand Identity: A Portrait of the Author as a Close Friend

In 1832, still four years before Dickens would make Mitford's professional model his own as "Boz", Mitford was already famous, having just completed the fifth volume of *Our Village*. Readers connected with Mitford via her intimate first-person narrative in a way that meant many felt they knew her and her characters personally and could recognise her village as a familiar part of their world. Indeed, many of Mitford's friends first introduced themselves to her in writing after reading *Our Village* and often commented on feeling as if they already knew her.[23]

The feeling of acquaintance was furthered by the production of portraits made available to the public.[24] The first was by the fashionable society portraitist John Lucas in 1830, the year the fourth volume came out. The portrait fit neatly within a commodity culture in which one might collect "authors": the *Athenaeum* reported that the portrait would "be eagerly purchased by Miss Mitford's very many admirers - it was one we certainly wanted to complete our own collection of modern distinguished writers".[25] Lucas painted another portrait of Mitford in 1852 to coincide with the last edition that would be published in her lifetime, and this later portrait was published (via an engraving) in *Bentley's Miscellany* along with a brief retrospective of her career in connection to the publication of her *Recollections of a Literary Life*.[26] These portraits were an important part of Mitford's brand identity, especially in the post-1852 editions which read as though the sketches are

[22] Such features can be found elsewhere in the era's sketch literature and, as Tom Killick notes, both Mitford and Charles Dickens (whose sketches were popular in the 1830s), looked to Washington Irving's "Geoffrey Crayon" sketches as a key influence. See Tim Killick, *British Short Fiction in the Early Nineteenth Century: The Rise of the Tale* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).
[23] Katie Halsey, "'Tell me of some Booklings': Mary Russell Mitford's Female Literary Networks", *Women's Writing*, 18:1 (2011): 121-136. DOI: 10.1080/09699082.2011.525014.
[24] Here one might compare Mitford with Felicia Hemans who worried about becoming a celebrity icon and whose portrait was thus not widely circulated until her death in 1835. See Theresa Adams, "Picturing Sympathy: Felicia Hemans's Portraits and Portrait Poems", *Women's Writing*, 30.2 (2023): 127-14. https://doi.org/10.1080/09699082.2022.2152541.
[25] "Mary Russell Mitford", *The Athenaeum*, 14 August 1830.
[26] "Mary Russell Mitford", *Bentley's Miscellany*, January 1852.

letters of an informal, domestic nature, as they add another component by which readers might feel as though they feel acquainted with Mitford.

As a part of Mitford's brand, Lucas' portrait is not forgotten in the long introduction that Anne Thackeray Ritchie wrote for the lavishly illustrated 1893 edition of *Our Village*. Thackeray Ritchie benefits from the availability of biographical information, quoting extensively from Mitford's letters and autobiography to reconstruct an image of the life of the author within the village. Throughout this account, she emphasises Mitford's personal relationships, especially the pilgrimages made by others to visit her, and Lucas' portrait is a notable part of this biographical history, featuring here in the parade of visitors:

> Mr. Fields, the American publisher, also went to see Miss Mitford at Swallowfield, and immediately became a very great ally of hers. It was to him that she gave her own portrait, by Lucas.[27]

The brief mention in the preface indicates the continuing currency of the portrait as an object of interest to readers in 1893. In fact, the portrait has a larger textual presence as James Fields, the visitor in question, had earlier recorded his friendship with Mitford in his anthology of literary friendships, *Yesterdays with Authors* (1871), constructed around the idea of portraits. Fields explains the value of portraits as surrogates for people, even people one has not actually met, in an introduction he added to the 1873 American edition, carried in subsequent editions, which begins:

> Surrounded by the portraits of those I have long counted my friends, I like to chat with the people about me concerning these pictures, my companions on the wall, and the men and women they represent. These are my assembled guests, who dropped in years ago and stayed with me, without the form of invitation or demand on my time or thought. They are my eloquent silent partners for life, and I trust they will dwell here as long as I do. Some of them I have known intimately; several of them lived in other times; but they are all my friends and associates in a certain sense.[28]

In saying that these portraits stand in even for those he has not met, Fields invites readers to similarly imagine authors as friends on the basis of text and image alone. The choice of portraits as a conceit points to the importance of something more than just authorial identity. Rather, portraits bring a heightened sense of proximity and physical presence which corelates with the casual intimacy of Mitford's prose – for instance, her habit of addressing the reader directly as though speaking with

[27] Anne Thackeray Ritchie, Introduction to Mary Russell Mitford, *Our Village* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1893), xlix. https://archive.org/details/ourvillage00mitfuoft/

[28] James Fields, *Yesterdays With Authors* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company 1873), 3. https://archive.org/details/cu31924013260413/

a companion rather than addressing a generalised audience: it is "our" village, after all. In its opening chapter, Mitford's book literally asks readers "Will you walk with me, courteous reader?".[29]

In his construction of Mitford's identity from prose descriptions and reprinted letters, Fields merely repackages a commodified persona with which readers would already have been familiar. The section on Mitford begins with Lucas' 1852 portrait which she gave to Fields when he visited:

> That portrait hanging near Wordsworth's is next to seeing Mary Russell Mitford herself as I first saw her, twenty-three years ago, in her geranium-planted cottage at Three-Mile Cross. She sat to John Lucas for the picture in her serene old age, and the likeness is faultless. She had proposed to herself to leave the portrait, as it was her own property, to me in her will; but as I happened to be in England during the latter part of her life, she altered her determination, and gave it to me from her own hands.[30]

The portrait is useful in Fields's text as a reference point for the authorial presence that would likely be familiar to Mitford's fans. Field's is not *just* familiar with it, however, he is its custodian: the physical handing over – "from her own hands" – marks Fields' close connection to Mitford's literary celebrity and to Mitford herself.

Thackeray Ritchie's preface takes a similar approach by staking a claim for her own personal connection to Mitford. She does this by recalling acquaintances the Thackeray family shared with the Mitfords, and describing her own literary pilgrimage to Three Mile Cross:

> We went down to Reading the other day, as so many of Miss Mitford's friends have done before, to look at 'our village' with our own eyes, and at the cottage in which she lived for so long. A phaeton with a fast-stepping horse met us at the station and whirled us through the busy town and along the straight dusty road beyond it. As we drove along in the soft clouded sunshine I looked over the hedges on either side, and I could see fields and hedgerows and red roofs clustering here and there, while the low background of blue hills spread towards the horizon. It was an unpretentious homely prospect intercepted each minute by the detestable advertisement hoardings recommending this or that rival pill. […] Then we come within sight of the running brook, uncontaminated as yet; the river flowing cool and swift, without quack medicines stamped upon its waters […] at last the phaeton stops abruptly between two or three roadside houses, and the coachman, pointing with his whip, says, 'That is "The Mitford," ma'am.—That's where Miss Mitford used to live!' Was that all? […] my preconceived village in the air had immediately to be swept into space, and in its stead, behold the inn with its sign-post, and these half-dozen brick tenements, more or less cut to

[29] Mary Russell Mitford, *Our Village* (1893) p. 5.
[30] Fields, 263.

> one square pattern! So this was all! this was 'our village' of which the author had written so charmingly! These were the sights the kind eyes had dwelt upon, seeing in them all, the soul of hidden things, rather than dull bricks and slates. Except for one memory, Three Mile Cross would seem to be one of the dullest and most uninteresting of country places […][31]

Using the style of one of Mitford's own sketches, Thackeray Ritchie contrasts the "village in the air" and the real one, situated in a countryside bestrewn with advertisement hoardings. The divergence here between the idealised England of Mitford's sketches, now lost to the past, and the existing England readers actually experience, might seem specific to the 1893 re-reading of the sketches but was actually a long-standing feature of Mitford's sketches. In this aspect Thackeray Ritchie's preface is not a revolutionary re-reading but is part of a critical heritage through which Mitford's legacy was sold and re-sold to a book-buying public. Critical appendages to Mitford's writing, like this preface and like Field's repackaging of Mitford's letters and biography, kept the sketches fresh as newly minted commodities and worked mainly because of the disconnectedness of the village from context, which (as outlined above) modern critics have suggested give them a metaphorical Englishness. From their first publication, the idyllic village of the sketches has seemed anachronistic and its apparent timelessness prevents it becoming irrelevant to readers since there are few context-clues of place and time to become outdated.

What *is* different about the 1893 context is that Thackeray Ritchie is able to present the discrepancy between text and reality as a result of the passage of time. For Thackeray Ritchie, the village of Mitford's "memory" has faded into the past, but she does not go as far as to suggest it never existed. Instead, she uses Mitford as a foil to comment on her own times. For instance, she writes:

> The literary ladies of the early part of the century in some ways had a very good time of it […] THEY were dolls perhaps, and lived in dolls' houses; WE are ghosts without houses at all; we come and go wrapped in sheets of newspaper, holding flickering lights in our hands, paraffin lamps, by the light of which we are seeking our proper sphere. Poor vexed spirits! We do not belong to the old world any more! The new world is not yet ready for us.[32]

The irony about this, however, is that the world Mitford created might have been a self-contained idyll as Moretti and Helsinger have argued, but it was driven by real-world economic necessities and market forces.[33] After all, Mitford originally wanted to be a poet and a playwright. In fact, she was both, authoring numerous books of poetry and staging multiple tragedies of varying success before hitting upon the success of her village sketches. Economic necessity forms only a small part of

[31] Thackeray Ritchie, xxxix.
[32] Thackeray Ritchie, xxi-xxii.
[33] Moretti, 44; Helsinger, 128.

Mitford's literary persona, however, and tends to be included only to heighten other aspects. Thackeray Ritchie, for example, does note the economic realities of Mitford's life, but only by way of demonstrating her womanly virtue as a faithful and diligent daughter. "Her long endurance and filial piety are very remarkable," Thackeray Ritchie says, adding, "her loving heart carried her safely to the end, and she found comfort in her unreasoning life's devotion".[34] A different way of presenting this information would be to say that, forced by the need to provide for her family and with gendered social practices limiting her options, Mitford, a talented playwright, turned to a new avenue that had opened up for paid writing: the periodical.

Professional Writing: Mitford and the *Lady's Magazine*

Although it was not quite a "little-known periodical" as the *Dictionary of National Biography* characterised it, the *Lady's Magazine, or Entertaining Companion for the Fair Sex* (1770-1832) where Mitford first published what would become the "Our Village" sketches between 1822 and 1824, was something of a relic of the previous century. Nevertheless, market awareness was baked into the magazine from the start: it had been launched in 1770 by the Paternoster Row bookseller George Robinson Sr. as a profit-making enterprise which excerpted soon-to-be-published books (published, of course, by Robinson) to increase potential sales of both book and magazine. According to Jean E. Hunter, the *Lady's Magazine*, as a profit-driven enterprise, was the "first magazine for women to transcend the interests of its editors" whereas predecessors like *The Female Spectator* (1744-46) and Jasper Goodwill's earlier *Ladies Magazine or the Universal Entertainer* (1749-53) had been limited to the vision and enthusiasms of their editor-proprietors.[35] Instead, the *Lady's Magazine* constructed itself around an imagined community of women readers and writers. While Hunter is right to note the magazine's pioneering use of excerpted and reprinted material, the magazine also published original work which drew, as Jenny Bachelor puts it, on "a large community of obscure volunteer reader-contributors".[36] Readers, too, were a mixed community - although it is impossible to build a perfect picture of who was buying and reading the magazine, Jan Fergus' analysis of provincial

[34] Thackeray Ritchie, ix.
[35] Jean E. Hunter, "The *Lady's Magazine* and The Study of Englishwomen in the Eighteenth Century," *Newsletters to Newspapers: Eighteenth-Century Journalism*, Papers presented at the Bicentennial Symposium at West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia, 31 March-2 April 1976, ed. Donovan H. Bond and W. Reynolds McLeod (West Virginia University, 1977), 103-118 (104).
[36] Jennie Batchelor, *The Lady's Magazine (1770–1832) and the Making of Literary History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 6.

readers suggests the *Lady's Magazine* was read by men as well as women, mostly from lower-middling social status such as labourers, schoolmasters, and curates.[37]

In the early nineteenth century, the *Lady's Magazine* underwent a series of changes that moved it away from the deeply personal community-driven magazine to what Klancher has called the "corporate" magazine model that was common from the 1830s onwards.[38] In the 1810s, for instance, the magazine gradually made a shift away from original fiction in favour of excerpts from newly published works. Such editorial changes tended to come, as in other periodicals, with staff changes and in the case of the *Lady's Magazine* changes were prompted by the deaths of George Robinson Sr. in 1801 and George Robinson Jr. in 1811.

Among the biggest changes – and the principal reason Mitford published in the magazine - was that it began paying for contributions. This happened occasionally from 1810 onwards and became consistent practice from 1820. Mitford was, therefore, one of the *Lady's Magazine*'s first paid contributors. The fact she wrote for the magazine out of financial necessity was not uncommon among its contributors, many of whom were also women from the middle classes, and even before the magazine made formal payments as a matter of policy it benefitted from the work of women who wrote out a situation of financial necessity. Examples of such women included Norfolk-based contributor Elizabeth Yeames, who was not paid for her numerous contributions between 1803 and 1818 but whose appeal for help by public subscription was supported by the magazine, and Mary Pilkington, who began contributing to the *Lady's Magazine* from 1809 after falling out with the Thomas Vernor and Thomas Hood's *Lady's Monthly Museum* (1798-1828) over payments, and who *was* paid.[39] These other writers also authored books, so it is possible that periodical writing held a reciprocal relationship between the formts for them, as it had for the Robinsons who had launched the magazine and, indeed, as it would for Mitford. Nevertheless, financial necessity was an important motivation not just for writing but for the type of writing – Yeames and Mitford, for example, both began as aspirant poets and turned to other genres to fit market demands.

The magazine, it should be noted, was not Mitford's first choice – her sketches had already been rejected by the *New Monthly Magazine* (1814-84) where she had published a number of sonnets and prose articles in 1821[40] – and her only motivation appears to have been the contributor payment.[41] With the help of her friend, Thomas Noon Talfourd (who was himself a professional

[37] Jan Fergus, *Provincial Readers in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 216. Cited in Jennie Batchelor, *The Lady's Magazine (1770–1832) and the Making of Literary History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 124.
[38] See Klancher, 50-52.
[39] Batchelor, 132-35.
[40] William A. Coles, "Magazine and Other Contributions by Mary Russell Mitford and Thomas Noon Talfourd", *Studies in Bibliography*, Vol. 12 (1959), 218-226 (218-19).
[41] King, 1492.

writer), Mitford submitted and published (and republished) work widely in the periodicals of the 1820s.[42] There is no evidence to suggest she was an avid reader of the *Lady's Magazine* or otherwise a part of the magazine's community. Indeed, at the publication of the first volume of *Our Village* in 1824, Mitford's relationship with the *Lady's Magazine* was about to end with her refusing the demands of Charles Heath, then editor, to concede copyright of the sketches or to continue writing at a reduced rate of six guineas a sheet – this following the debacle of the magazine's bankruptcy the previous year and the flight to France of Heath's predecessor and brother-in-law, Samuel Hamilton, who still owed Mitford (and others) money.[43]

Within the context of the *Lady's Magazine*'*s* adaption to a changing market, Mitford's popular sketches functioned as archetypes for a version of successful periodical writing. In the magazine itself, Batchelor argues that other writers, influenced by the narrow geographical scope of Mitford's work, modified "the length, scope and tone of their imaginative prose" to fit the magazine's requirements.[44] Indeed, Batchelor goes so far as to argue that Mitford's first sketch, published in the December 1822 issue, "effectively serves both as a manifesto for the new direction in which the magazine was travelling from the 1820s onwards and as a sign of a new editorial intolerance of the enthusiastic flouting of the classical unities once so common in the geographically expansive novels and melodramatic short stories that the periodical had published for decades".[45] How does Mitford's sketch do this? Through comparison with Jane Austen, "the most correct of female writers" as Mitford describes her.[46] This, indeed, is the context for which Mitford's work was originally written – as part of an intertextual print culture in which plot is second to character and scene and readers encounter textual "pictures" that connect with the pictures and views of other writers. As we have already seen, Martineau connected Mitford to Austen, as did the Macmillan editions of the 1890s, but Mitford herself suggested her place alongside Austen as early as that very first sketch. Intertextuality is unavoidable in periodical culture which is inherently multi-voiced and Mitford's style of casually referencing artists and writers like Austen seems to have fit this context well. Moreover, it suggested her own place within an emerging canon of nineteenth-century literature. As will be seen in the next section, the final characteristic of Mitford's work that made it so well suited to mass print culture was its pictorial quality. Mitford's sketches pioneered a model for distinct, personal text that

[42] See Coles, "Magazine and Other Contributions", for an account of these activities, as well as the "Working Bibliography of Mary Russell Mitford's Publications" on the *Digital Mitford Online*: https://digitalmitford.org
[43] Batchelor, 137.
[44] Batchelor, 202.
[45] Batchelor, 236.
[46] Mitford's comment is in a footnote to the sketch "Nutting". Mitford, *Our Village* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1893), 201.

was also easy to repackage for different media and audiences and which lent itself to secondary productions like illustrations and gift books like Field's and Thackeray Ritchie's.[47]

Mitford's Descriptive Mode and Categorical Specificity

Scholars have rightly noted the visuality of Mitford's writing – what Helsinger calls "the politics of sight" in which seeing allows a surface-level familiarity with subjects for both narrator and reader, thus serving to "confirm social and economic barriers but also to further empower the professional and the audience for which she writes".[48] Mitford had, as Booth and others have noted, drawn inspiration from Washington Irving's Geoffrey Crayon and Charles Lamb's urban essays.[49] However, to nineteenth-century readers, in its pictorial quality Mitford's work represented a sea-change: "it was Mary Mitford who first asked the reader to come out among the roses or to go driving along the scented lanes. Everybody else had described [...] but she went abroad with us […]".[50] This model was copied and used as a benchmark against which to judge other writers throughout the century. For example, a review of Henrietta Mary Batson's book *Dark: A Tale of the Down Country* (1892), found fault with it as a novel, but praised it as a series of pictures: "Slight as is the story, it is however very remarkable from its veracious local colour, and admirable pictures of cottage life". The reviewer goes as far as to say Batson "photographs village life" and "might do for the villages of our day what Miss Mitford did for hers, and still do it better".[51] Mitford's prose, Martineau suggested, stood out against a background of "slovenly indefiniteness in delineation". Indeed, the apparent specificity of Mitford's prose gave it an aura of truthfulness, or an air of pseudo-photographic fidelity, to acrostically apply the words of the later critic, had. appealed to readers throughout the century. Yet, as will be seen, this sense of specificity is an illusion built using a generalising technique of categorical specificity that enabled it to appeal to a broad range of readers.

In an important recent reading of Mitford's sketches, Jayne Hildebrand argues that Mitford's "thick description" creates an "immersive virtual world", which enabled her to work through competing scientific ideas of environmental space.[52] In Hildebrand's reading, Mitford's sketches

[47] Morrison provides a useful summary of some of the other contexts in which Mitford's sketches were repackaged including children's and instructive moral literature. See Morrison, "Modulating Narrative Voice".
[48] Helsinger, 123. See also Edwards, 6-11.
[49] Booth, *Homes and haunts*, 107.
[50] Louise Stockton, "Among the New Books", *New Peterson Magazine*, January 1893.
[51] "Dark: A Tale of the Down Country" [review], *The Bookman*, 16 January 1893.
[52] Jayne Hildebrand, *Novel Environments: Science, Description, and Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023) 38-42. The observational mode of early nineteenth-century sketch writing that Hildebrand notes here has been elsewhere connected to painted panoramas. See Jonathan Potter, *Discourses of Vision in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Seeing, Thinking, Writing* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Alison Byerly, *Are We There Yet?: Virtual Travel and Victorian Realism* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

inculcate first the "static, bounded habitat of natural theology and natural history" before disrupting this with invocations of the "dynamic, decentered environments of transformationist biology" such as those espoused by Erasmus Darwin and Jean-Baptiste Lamarck.[53] The tension between these ideas is well exemplified in Mitford's recounting of an anecdote about the duke of Marlborough who, desiring to grow wild field-tulips on his estate, transplanted half an acre of meadow to the depth of two feet, thereby "transforming the habitat itself into a mobile unit of cultivation".[54] Hildebrand's reading leads to the important point that sketches, as a literary form, function "as a kind of greenhouse, even a transplanted meadow, of literary form—an enclosed, bounded space that uproots entire local habitats in all their particularity, rendering them portable for the delectation and appreciation of distant readers".[55] This, I would agree, is a key part of Mitford's success over the course of the century as new editions repackaged her sketches in different ways for different audiences and changing social attitudes. However, it is a misstep to see descriptive sketches as signalling "the end of the habitat concept, and its yielding to a more dynamic understanding of environmental space in which all locales are portable, all ultimately formally similar to any other place". Rather, the concept of habitat relies on an idealised notion of space that presents generality but masquerades as particularity. We can see this in a passage in which Mitford self-consciously invokes habitat as a scientific term:

> Primrosy is the epithet which this year will retain in my recollection. Hedge, ditch, meadow, field, even the very paths and highways, are set with them; but their chief habitat is a certain copse, about a mile off, where they are spread like a carpet, and where I go to visit them rather oftener than quite comports with the dignity of a lady of mature age.[56]

Here, as Hildebrand notes, Mitford partitions the countryside into "a distinct set of unique habitats – hedge, ditch, meadow, field".[57] However, these zones only split the generic category "countryside" into smaller, more precise categories. In this sense, Mitford does not present "local specificity", as Hildebrand suggests, but a categorical specificity which aligns with the idea of transplantation since it separates nature into regular, repeated units that make interchangeability possible. A more apt way of understanding the organisational logic here is to draw on Helen Kingstone's discussion of nineteenth-century "big data" projects to think of habitat as a method of aggregating information about the natural world by conceptualising it as manageable units.[58] This especially makes sense

[53] Hidebrand, 42.
[54] Hildebrand, 71.
[55] Hildebrand, 71.
[56] Mary Russell Mitford, *Our Village*, 72. This sketch, included as "The Copse" in the Thackeray edition, was first collected in the second volume of *Our Village*.
[57] Hildebrand, 52.
[58] Helen Kingstone, *Panoramas and Compilations in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 8-12.

given the concept's origins in natural theology and natural history, both of which sought to find a unity or harmony in the natural world, what one might call the "book of nature" approach, in which nature is a coherent whole to be read. We can contrast this with the "magazine of nature" suggested by the physicist James Clerk Maxwell:

> Perhaps the 'book' as it has been called, of nature is regularly paged; if so, no doubt the introductory parts will explain those that follow, and the methods taught in the first chapters will be taken for granted and used as illustrations in the more advanced part of the course' but if it is not a 'book' at all, but a magazine, nothing is more foolish to suppose that one part can throw light on another.[59]

As a "book", nature can be understood as a harmonious whole in which one part illuminates another. In Maxwell's discussion that means Newton's laws of motion would apply to other kinds of phenomena such as electricity. In biology, it means that habitats can be defined as generic categories without need for recourse to unique particulars (the field mouse lives in a category of field, for instance, rather than a specific field mouse living in a specific field). Mitford's sketches (at least in volume form) present an overview of their locale which readers found realistic and compelling – so much so, many felt they like they had actually visited the village – through the invocation of categorical specificity in which, ultimately, the "copse" is an archetypal copse and the "field" an archetypal field. Mitford's technique in presenting an overview is related to the observational mode of painted panoramas and prefigures later sketch writers.

Immersion is a second important feature of Mitford's observational mode and, again, is an important part of nineteenth-century overviews more broadly.[60] If, as Harriet Martineau suggested, Mitford created a "new style of 'graphic description'", then this depends, as Edwards rightly suggests, not just on pictorial detail but "also on the establishment of a sense of close identity between her own observation and the reader's".[61] Readers are asked to accompany Mitford's narrator through the scene, invoked most obviously in her early question, "Will you walk with me, courteous reader?".[62] Modern readers might recognise these features as those often associated with Dickens' *Sketches by Boz* as well as his wider journalism, and it is surprising that nineteenth-century critics did not often make that connection.[63] In any case, while Mitford's work was, and continues to be, seen as a model for a certain type of rural description, it was also among the first to capture the graphic mode of

[59] James Clerk Maxwell, "Analogies. Are there Real Analogies in Nature?" [written for the Apostles Club], 1856.
[60] Kingstone, pp. 8-13.
[61] Edwards, 10.
[62] Mary Russell Mitford, *Our Village* (1893) p. 5.
[63] Deborah Nord writes of *Sketches by Boz*: "'As he [Dickens] collapsed the class distinctions between reader and subject, he emphasised not the distance but the correspondence between the observer and the urban scene". Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 50.

writing "pictures" which was so useful for periodical forms of publishing in which discussions are open-ended, and texts are rarely complete and might be repurposed and reprinted for and in a range of contexts.

To give a striking example of how categorical specificity worked as a tool for textual picture writing, we might move away from Mitford for a moment to consider Edward Gibbon Wakefield's pamphlet *Swing Unmasked, or the Causes of Rural Incendiarism* (1831) which he wrote in response to the "Captain Swing" riots. The pamphlet was quoted, excerpted, and discussed at length in *The Spectator*, *The Times*, and in American periodicals such as *The Catholic Telegraph*, and *Niles' Weekly Register*. Wakefield was a propogandist for the British colonization of Australia and New Zealand who would become best known for his procedural "scientific" or "systematic" ideas about colonization. The previous year he had been a founding member of the National Colonization Society along with Robert Rintoul, the editor of *The Spectator*, and Robert Torrens, the owner of the *Globe* newspaper, among others, including John Stuart Mill. It is possible, therefore, that the wider reprinting of his pamphlet was to some extent due to his connections with writers and editors. However, it was not so much his ideas in the pamphlet that garnered attention as his graphic descriptions which, like Mitford's, presented a categorical specificity where individuals are representative of larger groups, instead of particularity where individuals are unique.

The section most frequently quoted in the periodical press was Wakefield's arresting description of English pauperism:

> What is that defective being, with calfless legs and stooping shoulders, weak in body and mind, inert, pusillanimous, and stupid, whose premature wrinkles and furtive glance tell of misery and degradation? That is an English peasant or pauper - for the words are synonymous [...] He is married, of course - for to this he would have been driven by the poor laws [...] But, though instinct and the overseer have given him a wife, he has not tasted the highest joys of husband and father. His partner and his little ones being, like himself, often hungry, seldom warm, sometimes sick without aid, and always sorrowful without hope, are greedy, selfish, and vexing; so, to use his own expression, he 'hates the sight of them,' and resorts to his hovel only because a hedge affords less shelter from the wind and rain. Compelled by parish law to support his family, which means to join them in consuming an allowance from the parish, he frequently conspires with his wife to get that allowance increased [...][64]

[64] "Swing Unmasked", *The Spectator*, 17 December 1831.

The passage continues in this manner and was quoted in full in the *Spectator*, *The Times, Niles' Weekly Register*, and *The Catholic Telegraph*.[65] In the *Spectator*'s view, Wakefield's pamphlet rehearsed familiar ideas and was "important and valuable" only in that he "draws some pictures of rural degradation, with a power not inferior to that of any writer of the present day", using the above passage as an example of such a "picture". In *The Times*, Wakefield is described as "a clever and ingenious generalizer [...] his examples become classes", again with the above passage quoted, although the reviewer goes on to take issue with Wakefield's claims that poverty was an unchanging historical fact and that the early nineteenth-century drive towards education was a cause of unrest. In *Niles Weekly Register*, the passage is cited as evidence in a broader discussion of free trade from a US perspective, and *The Catholic Telegraph* simply quotes the passage as a literary picture, presented without comment under the title "An English Peasant".

The different republications suggest that Wakefield's pamphlet was read not *only* as a political argument but in similar terms to other "pictures" situated on the border between journalism and literature. As a "picture", Wakefield's description of a singular English peasant who stands as an archetype for all peasants, operates similar to Mitford's sketches. Indeed, I would argue Mitford's sketches played an important role in pioneering and popularising pictures as a literary mode which combined literary description – the "picture" element - with a generalising tone that treats the particular as representative of a broader class. The fact that Wakefield's "picture" of "an English peasant" was republished as worthwhile reading in its own right, separate from the pamphlet's arguments, connects it to connects to other genre examples, including Mitford's "Our Village" which arguably pioneered the genre. It also points to the political significance of the drive to generalise from singular anecdotal, perhaps even fictional, examples. Is Wakefield's description "true"? *The Spectator* seemed to think so, though *The Times* showed a little scepticism, commenting that "much of what he says is true," but "most is striking" so that "surprise rather than conviction is the feeling with which one lays aside his work".[66] The problem is that the truthfulness of the text rests upon its persuasiveness. Either the truth is self-evident from these pictures or it isn't.

Mitford's sketches are "true" in the same way as Wakefield's. Truth here functions through an alignment of the reader's worldview with the narrative perspective. It is "our" village, but only if you can share the values and experiences ascribed by the narrator – this is not unmediated perspective, but perspective mediated such that it seems our own. For example, on one walk the reader meets a new acquaintance of the narrator's:

[65] "Swing Unmasked", *The Times*, 30 December 1831; Untitled article, *Niles Weekly Register*, 25 February 1832; "An English Peasant", *The Catholic Telegraph*, 7 July 1832.
[66] "Swing Unmasked", *The Times*, 30 December 1831.

> Now we go round the corner and cross the bridge, where the common, with its clear stream winding between clumps of elms, assumes so park-like an appearance. Who is this approaching so slowly and majestically, this square bundle of petticoat and cloak, this road-waggon of a woman? It is, it must be Mrs. Sally Mearing, the completest specimen within my knowledge of farmeresses (may I be allowed that innovation in language?) as they were. It can be nobody else.[67]

The first sentence, in the present tense and with first-person plural, immerses the reader in the scene, the second adds to this, speaking to the reader as though from one walking companion to another, and the third presents a particular person as a categorical example – they are a "specimen" of a class. Assuming the reader can recognise from their own experience the classes Mitford invokes – not just the farmeress but also the "park-like" common, the "clear stream", the "clumps of elms" all of which are vague enough to serve as generic examples – then the narrative appears "true" to life.

Conclusion

Mitford's use of categorical specificity to generate an immersive virtual world, the pluralistic form of her sketches, and her curated public image, set a template for professional writing that would be further developed by later writers like Dickens, W.M. Thackeray, and Gaskell, all of whom similarly cultivated graphic modes of description suitable for an array of markets and forms as well as public images. The textual Mitford and the real Mitford are often conflated in texts like Thackeray Ritchie's and Fields', but there are moments when the distinction is more apparent. For example, while Thackeray Ritchie feels she knows Mitford personally such that she "can scarcely realise that this acquaintance exists only in the world of the might-have-beens", she is also happy to choose which Mitford she cares to notice.[68] Thackeray Ritchie writes:

> Neither the dust nor the ethics of the world of men quite belonged to Miss Mitford's genius. It is always a sort of relief to turn from her criticism of people, her praise of Louis Napoleon, her facts about Mr. Dickens, whom she describes as a dull companion, or about my father, whom she looked upon as an utter heartless worldling, to the natural spontaneous sweet flow of nature in which she lived and moved instinctively.[69]

Such was the nature of Mitford's fame. Readers read Mitford in the manner of visiting an old friend, or – later – of visiting the charming haunts of a lost age. Mary Russell Mitford's self-construct of herself as a near acquaintance, as well as the prose techniques employed in her sketch writing, thus

[67] Mitford, p. 78.
[68] Anne Thackeray Ritchie, Introduction to Mary Russell Mitford, p. vii.
[69] Anne Thackeray Ritchie, Introduction to Mary Russell Mitford, p. l.

had a wide and deep impact that lasted from the 1820s until the early twentieth century. Her importance in pioneering a mode of commercialised authorial identity and prose writing specifically suited to nineteenth-century print culture has yet to be fully understood and appreciated.