**‘”And yet these things were done by educated and kindly men”: negotiating change in Mary Cholmondeley’s *The Romance of His Life*’.**

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In 1919 Mary Cholmondeley wrote to Rhoda Broughton that ‘My imagination has dropped dead into the giant crevasse of the war.’ She never wrote another novel. Her second short story collection, published in 1921, would also be her last and contains little new material. However the positioning of narratives that challenge both gender roles and cultural determinism speaks as much to a post-war society as it does to the Edwardian past. In these stories Cholmondeley focuses on national issues from suffrage and eugenics to employment and environmentalism.

The 1909 ‘Votes for Men’ in which a female prime minister insists that few educated men want the vote, is set against the futuristic story ‘The Dark Cottage’ (first published in 1919), in which a landowner returns from the Front after a near fatal injury and recovers his memory after an operation fifty years later. ‘The Goldfish’, written in 1919 and first published in magazine form in 1920, invokes both fin de siècle aestheticism and contemporary art culture to suggest that women’s professional careers continue to be hampered by a masculine establishment.

Two new stories deliberately rewrite the Victorian narratives with which Cholmondeley’s fame was associated. ‘The End of the Dream’ depicts an apparently passive female character who offers no resistance to the demands of her domineering and unimaginative husband; but by the end of the story she has eloped with a younger man, who has appeared to her as a dream not of the future but of an idealised past. The title story ‘The Romance of his Life’ centres on the emotional charge of a dull but naïve university don, who falls in love with a non-existent woman when his students write him a series of love letters as a prank.

But if these stories critique received expectations of a Victorian-born author at the end of her career, the frame preface invokes the past as a prism through which readers can start to imagine a new future.