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Hamilton, Catherine Jane [*pseud.* Retlaw Spring] (1841-1935), author and journalist, was born on 25 January 1841 at Kilmersdon, Somerset, where she was baptized on 12 April 1841, the younger of two daughters of Richard Hamilton (1805?-1859), vicar of Kilmersdon, and his wife Charlotte, *née* Cooper (1809-1882), the fifth daughter of William Cooper, of Queens County, Ireland. She was of Irish heritage on both sides. Her father belonged to a military family with roots in Strabane (county Tyrone) - his father, John Hamilton, and her father's four older brothers were all officers in the Fifth Foot – and was a graduate of Trinity College Dublin. He had been a bright scholar with an aptitude for languages, and as a preacher was praised for his powerful sermons and his ability to bring the Bible to life for his parishioners.

Catherine Hamilton spent her childhood at the Old Vicarage in Kilmersdon. After she contracted typhoid fever as a young girl and nearly died, her father sought a healthier site for his vicarage, and had a new home built on a hill overlooking the village. The Hamilton family moved there in 1852 when Catherine was eleven. She and her sister had a series of governesses, but her father superintended their education, teaching them French, as well as Latin and Greek, and encouraging them to read widely. Catherine apparently 'devoured' books in her youth, working her way through all the novels available (including many usually deemed 'unsuitable' for children), along with the *Quarterly* and *Edinburgh Review* and the

weekly papers to which her father had access through his book club (Hamilton, 'Recollections', 161). She assisted her father by teaching in the village Sunday School, and as he gradually lost his hearing and then his sight, she and her sister helped him in remembering prayers as well as entire sermons.

As a teenager, she travelled to Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight with her father, and visited her mother's family in Dublin. Finances had always been tight in the Hamilton household, but her father's death in July 1859 left the family unable to make ends meet. They were forced to leave Kilmersdon and to rely on extended family for support. Catherine went to her father's brother in Manchester before joining her sister and mother at her maternal uncle William Cooper's home in Cooper Hill, near the village of Ballickmoyler, Queen's County, Ireland, and she lived in Ireland for many years. Although she eventually returned to England, she maintained a sense of her Irish heritage which is evident in her writing. By 1906, she had moved to London, and remained there for at least ten years, before moving to Devon and finally to Bury St. Edmunds where she died at her home, The Cottage, Freckenham, on 28 February 1935. Hamilton never married.

Hamilton supplemented her modest private means through her writing. She published over 25 volumes of fiction, drama and verse. Her first published work of fiction, *Hedged with Thorns*, appeared in volume form in 1875 under the signature 'Retlaw Spring'. This didactic story was sold by Ward, Lock, and Tyler as part of the

sixpence 'Violet Series', which also included books by bestselling author of sentimental and religious fiction, Susan Warner. After 1880, Catherine dropped her pseudonym and tended to sign her work as 'C. J. Hamilton'. *Hedged with Thorns* was followed by *The Flynns of Flynnville* (1876) and *Marriage Bonds* (1879), both of which had been serialised in periodicals previously, and other novels followed. Hamilton also published many shorter tales which were printed in small, cheap, illustrated editions aimed at younger readers, and issued by presses such as the Religious Tract Society and the Sunday School Union. Much of her fiction is didactic in nature, and similar in tone to contemporary novelists such as Anna Sewell, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Susan Warner, all of whom she had read and admired as a girl. Her facility in producing these moralising works is likely the result of her early experience supporting her father in the parish at Kilmersdon, and her desire to emulate writers such as Warner and write fiction that would leave 'seeds of practical good behind it' (Hamilton, 'Recollections', 162).

In addition to publishing novels and tales, Hamilton contributed shorter pieces of fiction and nonfiction to the periodical press over a period of more than fifty years. She wrote for a range of journals, publishing, for example, serial fiction in *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* and *Young Englishwoman*, short stories in *Dublin University Magazine*, *The Graphic*, and *St. Paul's Magazine*, and articles on literature and cultural history, such as 'Land League Ballads' (1889) and 'The Beggars Club' (1884), which appeared in *The National Review* and *London Society*, respectively. She also

produced an array of essays on women writers, actors, and intellectuals of the two previous centuries. Some notable examples include 'The First Lady Novelist' (*Cornhill*, 1898), which assesses the life and work of Aphra Behn, 'An Eccentric Leader of Society' (*Gentleman's Magazine*, 1903), which pays tribute to the Bluestocking Mary Monckton, and 'Romance of a Strong-Minded Woman' (*Westminster Review*, 1910), which gives a sympathetic account of the life of Mary Wollstonecraft. Hamilton is recorded as being on the staff of the *Weekly Irish Times* from 1906, and of the *Pall Mall Gazette* from 1913. She was a member of the Women Writers Club, founded in 1892 by Frances Low, and she joined the Institute of Journalists in 1902. Hamilton's journalism reflects her lifelong interest in the private histories and public achievements of women, and her talents in writing literary biography for a popular audience. She also published a series of six autobiographical articles entitled 'Recollections of Our Village,' which was serialised in *The Treasury* in 1918-19, and reprinted in 1999.

Hamilton's work as a biographer sits at the crossroads of life writing, literature, and history, and makes interventions in the fields of gender and Irish cultural studies. Of particular significance in this respect are the biographical essays that she later republished as book-length multibiographies: *Women Writers: Their Works and Ways* (1892), *Notable Irishwomen* (1904), and *Famous Love Matches* (1908). In lively, accessible prose, these texts celebrate the literary and personal achievements of women from earlier generations, but also demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the challenges

that women face in reconciling their professional, social, and artistic aspirations with the dictates of traditional domestic femininity. In *Women Writers*, especially, Hamilton's progressive aims are evident as she depicts the agency and subjectivity of the 'pioneers of the numerous authoresses of the present day' (Hamilton, *Women Writers*, vi) to promote the values of an emerging *fin de siècle* female professional class. Although Hamilton was considered a 'comparatively unknown writer' (Noble, 121) in her day, her collective biographies were respected as readable and creditable, and were seen to reflect her diligent research, which she undertook in the British Museum Library. Some of her biographical work that was not re-issued in volume form is even more forward-thinking, such as her essays on Peg Woffington, Lady Caroline Lamb, and Mary Wollstonecraft. Hamilton was still writing in her nineties, with her last work of fiction, *The Story of a Little White Cat*, published the year before she died.

Susan Civale

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Wellesley Index

b. cert

d. cert

Archives

[presumably none known]

Likenesses

[presumably none known]

Wealth at Death

£2,133 15s 3d: probate 6 June 1935, CGPLA Eng. & Wales