

Frances Hodgson Burnett

(1849-1924)

Frances Eliza Hodgson was born on November 24, 1849, in Manchester, England, the third of Edwin Hodgson's and Eliza Boond's five children. Her father ran a prosperous firm which specialised in the trade of decorative arts for the interiors of houses. At the time, Manchester was experiencing a textile boom which infused the town with a rising middle-class, and because these families were erecting magnificent houses, Hodgson's merchandise was in demand. The prosperity of the Hodgson family was cut short in 1854 when Edwin suffered a stroke. Even more devastating to the family fortune was the American Civil War, which caused a cessation of cotton shipments from Southern plantations, crippling Manchester's economy. Eliza Hodgson decided to emigrate to America, and in 1865, when Burnett was sixteen, the family settled in a small town about twenty-five miles from Knoxville, Tennessee. This move would prove instrumental in Burnett's development as a writer. Although she had always been obsessed with storytelling and often amused her schoolmates by acting out tales of adventure and romance, the financial strain of the emigration caused her to turn to writing as a means of supplementing the family's income. The move from industrial England to rural America was for the family a journey to the green, natural world that would become a central theme in many of Burnett's later works, including *The Secret Garden*.



Burnett's first published story, *Miss Carruthers' Engagement*, appeared in a magazine called *Godey's Lady's Book* in 1868. After the death of her mother in 1872, the family became increasingly dependent on her writing income. She accelerated her career as a popular writer and sold stories to many magazines. In September of 1873 she married Swann Burnett, a doctor from Tennessee who was preparing to specialise in the treatment of the eye and ear. He wished to further his specialty by studying in Europe, and Burnett financed his wish, once again becoming responsible for the bulk of her family's income. In 1874, she gave birth to her son Lionel and began work on her first major novel, *The Lass o' Lowries*. The critical response was encouraging, and many reviews compared Burnett's work to that of Charlotte Brontë and Henry James. In 1879 she published her novel *Haworth*, her first attempt at serious fiction. Later that same year, one of her first children's stories appeared in *St. Nicholas*, a magazine in which she would publish for years to come. It is at this time that Burnett, who was constantly battling illness, acquainted herself with the philosophies of Spiritualism, Theosophy, Mind Healing, and Christian Science. These philosophies' ideas about the healing powers of the mind became a crucial motif in much of her writing, most notably in *A Little Princess*, *The Secret Garden*, and *The Lost Prince*.

In 1886, *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, the book that transformed Burnett's life, was published. It became a runaway bestseller in America and England. While the success of the book branded Burnett a popular and romantic writer rather than a serious artist, it provided her with enough income to free her from an unhappy marriage and allow her to travel through Europe. In 1890 Burnett's first son Lionel was diagnosed with consumption and died that same year. By 1898, Burnett and Swann divorced by mutual consent, and she leased a country house in England where she immersed herself in her passion for gardening. The estate was surrounded by several walled gardens, one of which, a rose garden, served as her outdoor workroom. It was here that the idea of *The Secret Garden* was born.

Over the course of her life, Burnett wrote more than forty books, for both adults and children. While her adult novels are considered to be quite sentimental, her children's books have withstood the fickleness of literary fashions. *The Secret Garden*, the story of how Mary Lennox and her friends find independence as they tend their garden, has been described as one of the most satisfying children's books ever written. Frances Hodgson Burnett died of congestive heart failure on October 29, 1924.

[http://us.penguin.com/static/rguides/us/secret_garden.html] (16 June 2008)