

**The road to readers' hell is paved with good intentions**

**Vivien Allen, *Lady Trader: A Biography of Mrs Sarah Heckford***

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It took me three months to read this book and it is only 302 pages long. The problem with reading the biography of someone you have never heard of before picking up the book, is that you have no pre-existing affection for the subject to cushion the discovery of their less endearing traits. I found Sarah Heckford to be a person whom I'm very glad I did not know. She is one of those people who is very enthusiastic and helpful but extremely tiring. Her favourite adjective was "comical" and her zest for causes must have been exhausting. This said, the subject of *Lady Trader* demands reluctant respect. Sarah Heckford's life reflects the combined effects of strong personality, a love of adventure and challenge, and a stiff dose of "Rule Britannia" zeal. Filtered through Allen's somewhat unenlightened lens, this makes *Lady Trader* a worthwhile, if occasionally uncomfortable and exhaustingly dense, read.

Sarah Heckford certainly led an interesting life, breaking free early on from the usual constraints that kept most Victorian women tethered firmly to the hearth. She then went on to make a living for herself as a single British woman in the late nineteenth-century Transvaal, publishing several books and a novel, and co-founding the East London Children's Hospital, along the way. If Allen's hagiographical account is to be believed, Sarah Heckford seems to have been made up of equal quantities of enthusiasm, altruism, commitment, and borderline philosophy, as well as a degree of self-confidence that occasionally leaves the reader grateful to have been spared her ministrations. Allen's account of the time Sarah Heckford spent at the East London Children's Hospital is especially arresting in this regard.

*Lady Trader's* great strength is that Allen takes her subject seriously and has great faith in her. Allen's interest makes Sarah Heckford interesting. This lends credibility to writing and research that would otherwise be open to criticism, and also serves to impress upon the reader the real kudos owed to Sarah Heckford, who spent her life never quite in accordance with the majority view. Also counting in the book's favour is its level of detail. *Lady Trader* provides a slice-of-life glimpse into pre-South African War Pretoria that will satisfy the general reader's interest in that era (although it is not likely to offer the expert any new insights). Perhaps more impressively, it chronicles the way in which a Victorian woman could, if possessed of sufficient tenacity, free herself from the usual constraints of housekeeping and childbearing.

That said, *Lady Trader* presents the twenty-first century reader with a couple of problems. The most obvious of these is the research on which the book is based. Allen appears to be unwilling to leave anything out, resulting in a density of detail and incident that can become exhausting. Conversely and rather frustratingly, Allen occasionally makes statements that need to be substantiated or at least further elaborated upon. This begs the question of whether some of the more detailed

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passages could have been redistributed throughout the book. Either *Lady Trader* should have been longer, or the editing process should have been more rigorous. The other pressing problem is Allen's occasional staggering lack of sensitivity for political correctness; even allowing for the book's origin in the late 1970s. This can leave the reader angrily reaching for a corrective pencil.

Even taking into account its problematic terminology and occasional frankly boring parts, *Lady Trader* is nevertheless an interesting book for the casual student of Victorian gender roles and/or late nineteenth-century South Africa. It functions equally well as an account of gold rush Pretoria, and as the biography of a woman who was unafraid to cause a raised eyebrow.

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