GRANT ALLEN

(24 February **1848**–25 October **1899**)

Grant Allen was much admired but also often controversial in his own day. Literarily speaking, he was something of a "jack-of-all-trades," not only a lucid popularizer of science but also a voluminous fiction writer whose works ranged over several genres and dealt with provocative cultural issues. The noted man of letters Andrew Lang called Allen's genius "the most versatile, beyond comparison, of any man in our age."

Grant Allen 1890s

Charles Grant Blairfindie Allen was born on Wolf Island, near Kingston, Ontario, Canada, the second son of Joseph Antisell Allen, a minister of the Irish church who had emigrated from Dublin in 1840, and Charlotte Catherine Ann Grant, Scottish daughter of the Fifth Baron de Longueil, holder of an ancient French title. Allen spent his first 13 years educated at home very happily in rural Canada. In 1861, the family moved to Connecticut, where the sons were taught by a tutor from Yale, but with the outbreak of the American Civil War, the Allens relocated to Europe. After more than a year broadening himself at Dieppe in northern France and in England at King Edward's School, Birmingham, Allen enrolled as a prize scholar at Merton College, Oxford in 1867, his parents moving back to the United States. He taught at Brighton College in 1870–71 and graduated Oxford in 1871. He married the sickly Caroline Ann Bootheway, and when she died prematurely, he soon remarried Ellen ("Nellie") Jerrard from Lyme Regis, a resort village in western Dorset; Nellie was with him through the rest of his life, eventually bearing him a son Jerrard. Having married early out of love, Allen was prevented economically from pursuing an academic career in Britain, which his abilities would otherwise have opened for him.

Allen had supported himself through financial difficulty by teaching school, but the work did not utilize enough of his talent, so in 1873 he took up a job teaching philosophy at Queen's College, the newly founded black government college in Jamaica, whose intended mission was to provide higher education to West Indian blacks. The College ultimately failed, but Allen's years in the Caribbean had a formative effect on him, instilling a nearly fanatical hatred for all forms of human exploitation. Upon returning to England in 1876, Allen embarked on a prominent career as an author. He first wrote non-fictional works of science, as he would through much his career, but eventually in the 1880s and 90s turned to fiction as well—some 30 novels and a great many short stories over nearly twenty years. He eventually settled in Surrey and often entertained a circle of intellectually radical friends, although he also traveled a good deal and produced some popular travel guides. In his last years he became friends with Arthur Conan Doyle, who was also interested in science, particularly psychology. Always prey to bronchitis, Allen's health was chronically poor, and after 1881 he usually wintered in the south of France. He died at his house in Hindhead, near Haslemere, in October 1899.

Allen was to make much of his "Celtic blood," based presumably on his mother's Scottish heritage and his father's Irish roots, but despite the fact that his father was a vicar, Allen was an agnostic and also a socialist. He was a lifelong lover of nature, which obviously had a direct influence on his works—his early books included *Physiological Aesthetics* (1877), *The Colour of Sense* (1879), *The Evolutionist at Large* (1881), and *Flowers and Their Pedigrees* (1886)—but his work was also to cross and test many boundaries on several fronts. He was a follower of the associationist psychology of Alexander Bain and Herbert Spencer, the latter being crucial in the transition to the Darwinian functionalism that marked many of Allen's books and articles. He retained a fine critical eye for the provincialism of manners and morals exhibited by his contemporaries, was full of interesting scientific knowledge, and possessed a gift for expression both in biological exposition and fiction. By the 1890s he was well known, especially as a popularizer of science, having been praised by Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer for his books and articles on biology, botany, physics, philosophy, geography, history, and art.


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Since his scientific writing proved only moderately profitable, in 1884 he gathered together several short stories, which he had contributed to magazines under the pseudonym J. Arbuthnot Wilson, into a book volume he titled *Strange Stories*. In the same year he also published (under the pseudonym Cecil Power) his first full-length novel, *Philistia*, a satire on socialism and modern journalism, and in the following year published *Babylon*, which like much of his fiction takes emancipation as its theme. Over the next fifteen years, Allen produced works of fiction under his own name as well as under various pseudonyms, such as "Olive Pratt Rayner." Being a scientific evolutionist, one of the most persistent themes in his novels was the effect of heredity. His story "What's Bred in the Bone" won a £1000 prize from *Tit Bits* in 1891, which at the time was probably the largest windfall of its kind received by any Victorian writer. Among his more noteworthy novels was *The British Barbarians* (1895), a satire on English society from the standpoint of the 25th Century, and *The Type-Writer Girl* (1897), an interesting novelty written in the form of a journal by a "Girton girl" who resolves to support herself as an office stenographer.

More than anything else, Allen is remembered now for his controversial "New Woman" novel *The Woman Who Did* (1895), which is about an independent woman who declined marriage out of principle and had a child out of wedlock. It was a *succès de scandale* and ran to twenty editions in its very first year of publication. Allen considered himself to be a proponent of the "New Woman" and believed this book established those credentials, but many feminists definitely found the novel to be problematical, more sensational than progressive. His debatable credentials as a feminist were signaled earlier in his 1889 article "Plain Words on the Woman Question" for the prestigious *Fortnightly Review*, which argued that certain debates over the proper qualities and rights of women, particularly those which claimed that a woman's chief purpose was *not* procreation, imperiled the future of Britain. It was not to be his first controversial article of social commentary. Similarly, his 1894 essay on "The New Hedonism," also for the *Fortnightly*

Review, created a significant stir, because he argued in it that self-development was more important than self-sacrifice, that culture should supplant religion, and that sex should serve as a source of inspiration. Even his lighter and more popular works demonstrate not only his scientific outlook but also his persistent questioning of established convention and the institutions and officials that uphold it.

Much of Allen's fiction is now forgotten, and very little of it is customarily in print. However, his detective stories, many of which first appeared in the landmark *Strand Magazine*, have drawn sustained critical praise, and volumes of his detective fiction are still avidly sought by book collectors—his most famous character being the lovable rogue Colonel Clay, which is considered a forerunner of later creations such as E. W. Hornung's Raffles, a deliberate inversion of his brother-in-law Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, and Maurice Leblanc's gentleman thief Arsene Lupin. Allen's *The Scallywag* (1893) and *A Splendid Sin* (1896) are two novels in which detectives play key roles, but *An African Millionaire: Episodes in the Life of the Illustrious Colonel Clay* (1897), which was ranked by Ellery Queen as one of the "cornerstones" of detective fiction, is perhaps his chief contribution to the genre. Besides creating the illustrious Colonel Clay, perhaps the first great rogue of mystery fiction, Allen also produced two lively series of stories featuring female amateur sleuths collected in *Miss Cayley's Adventures* (1899) and *Hilda Wade: A Woman with Tenacity of Purpose* (1900).