

**CATHERINE
HELEN SPENCE**



**MR. HOGARTH'S
WILL**

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Catherine Helen Spence

Mr. Hogarth's Will

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Gavin Avery

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Introduction

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At the heart of Mr. Hogarth's Will lies the bracing question of whether character and industry can outstrip the accidents of birth and money, as an unexpected testament sweeps protections away and compels its young dependents to prove what sort of lives they can fashion for themselves under the stern gaze of society, and exposes fault lines of gender, class, and law in a world that prizes respectability while withholding the means to attain it, urging its protagonists toward work, education, and self-reliance yet shadowing every step with the pressures of reputation, the entanglements of obligation, and the reckonings that follow when property and affection pull in opposite directions.

First published in 1865, Catherine Helen Spence's Mr. Hogarth's Will is a mid-Victorian social novel that blends domestic realism with a reforming spirit. Spence, an Australian writer, places her narrative within the British world of the nineteenth century, attentive to the ties between metropolitan expectations and colonial opportunity. The book's interest in employment, inheritance, and public morality marks it as kin to the era's debates about women's legal status and economic agency. While it shares the clarity and moral purpose associated with contemporaneous fiction, it remains distinctive for its pragmatic attention to the mechanics of livelihood and the consequences of legal arrangements.

An unforeseen will disrupts the prospects of young dependents who have grown accustomed to security, forcing them to earn their keep and navigate a society that tests independence even as it praises it. Spence guides readers through workplaces, parlors, and public institutions with a lucid third-person voice that favors observation over ornament, balancing patient explanation with lively scene-making. The tone is steady, earnest, and sometimes gently ironic, and the pacing rewards attention to small choices whose cumulative force proves decisive. The result is a narrative that feels intimate in its sympathies while attentive to the broader systems shaping ordinary lives.

Work and education emerge as the book's central tests of character, not as punishments but as routes to dignity, competence, and self-knowledge. By dramatizing the difference between money received and money earned, Spence scrutinizes the moral stories societies tell about worth and respectability. She probes how legal instruments—especially wills and testamentary conditions—can both constrain and enable, revealing the subtle ways paperwork determines the paths available to women. The novel is equally interested in friendship, mentorship, and the uses of sympathy, asking what forms of assistance truly empower and which merely bind recipients to gratitude. Throughout, the narrative argues for a humane practicality that values fairness over display.

Readers today will recognize debates about who deserves security, how labor is valued, and what obligations attach to wealth. Spence's attention to precarious employment, professional training, and informal networks of

support feels contemporary. Her critique of legal structures anticipates continuing conversations about inheritance, guardianship, and financial dependence, particularly for women seeking autonomy. Rather than offering wishful remedies, the novel examines trade-offs—between pride and prudence, ambition and duty—that animate modern lives as much as Victorian ones. Its interest in practical competence, fair opportunity, and ethical use of resources makes it an unexpectedly bracing companion to discussions of social mobility and the responsibilities of prosperity.

By setting its concerns against both metropolitan norms and the pressures of a wider imperial economy, the novel widens its canvas to explore how distance rearranges duty, loyalty, and hope. Spence is alert to the infrastructures—letters, newspapers, voyages, investments—that connect far-flung communities and transmit both opportunity and rumor. When it treats mobility and separation, the picture is double-edged: new starts promise relief while exposing travelers to risk, misunderstanding, and the tests of self-reinvention. In this the book anticipates modern experiences of migration and relocation, showing how identity is negotiated repeatedly in response to shifting circumstances. Its realism attends to such networks as closely as to finely drawn interiors.

To read Mr. Hogarth's *Will* now is to encounter a work of principled clarity that treats money, marriage, and merit not as plot decorations but as forces shaping the texture of daily life. Its restraint yields a quietly stirring drama, as growth is earned through choices rather than bestowed by coincidence. The novel invites reflection without preaching,

and its confidence that practical reforms can enlarge freedom lends a humane steadiness to the narrative. For readers interested in the histories behind present debates about gender, work, and wealth, it offers both an engaging story and a clear-sighted ethics of independence and care.

Synopsis

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Catherine Helen Spence's *Mr. Hogarth's Will* is a mid-nineteenth-century novel that opens in Britain with two young women whose prospects are altered by the unexpected provisions of their guardian's will. Anticipating security, they instead confront a mandate that shifts them from dependence to precarious self-support. Spence uses this disrupted inheritance to test character and principle, initiating a narrative that weighs prudence against impulse, convention against conviction. From the outset, work becomes the axis of identity, and the question of what women can earn—and on what terms—drives plot and theme, foreshadowing a wider journey that spans domestic drawing rooms and the Australian colonies.

The initial chapters follow the protagonists through the narrow corridors of “suitable” female employment, where social standing collides with meager pay and constant scrutiny. Governessing, schoolroom instruction, and other genteel pursuits promise dignity but not stability. The women meet gatekeepers who uphold propriety even as they exploit it, and they discover that talent and industry are often discounted unless endorsed by status. Spence observes the frictions of class with measured irony, while charting a gradual education in thrift, professional skill, and moral self-command. Marriage appears as one possible refuge, yet the narration keeps open the challenge of earning an independent livelihood.

With opportunities in Britain constrained, emigration is weighed as both risk and release. Spence treats the decision to move as a practical calculation and a moral experiment, framing it within family loyalties, uncertain news from abroad, and the logistics of travel. The voyage extends the novel's comparative lens: old-world hierarchies are packed into close quarters, and new alliances form amid sea routines and shared hazards. Arrival in the colonies reframes expectation; while chance seems to widen, so do responsibilities. The protagonists confront landscape and market, trusting not to luck but to learning as they search for sustainable, respectable work.

In the colonial setting, work diversifies. The women turn to teaching, household management, and small-scale enterprise, adapting to shifting demand and sparse safety nets. Spence maps town and country with attention to cost of living, social surveillance, and the texture of daily effort. Practical friendships supplement thin kinship networks, while speculation—financial and emotional—tests judgment. Courtship enters as a thread braided with employment rather than opposed to it, and the narrative assesses suitors by their respect for competence. The colonial world widens the field for action without dissolving risks, making prudence and esprit de corps essential to survival and growth.

Running beside these labors is the legal and financial puzzle raised by Mr. Hogarth's testamentary design. Trustees, procedures, and public opinion shape how the will is interpreted and enforced, leaving room for opportunists as well as allies. Spence keeps technicalities clear enough to

matter without overwhelming character. Rumors circulate; partial information creates suspense; and the protagonists must navigate advice that ranges from paternalistic to self-serving. The will is less a windfall than a proving ground: it withholds easy rescue, creating a moral economy in which effort and integrity are weighed against entitlement and accident.

As the narrative advances, inquiries into the will's intent intersect with personal turning points. Professional competence builds slowly into confidence; reputations, once fragile, acquire weight. Offers—romantic and commercial—are measured not only by affection or profit but by whether they allow continuity of purpose. Spence orchestrates a series of revelations that clarify obligations and opportunities without prematurely closing debate on justice or desert. The tension lies in what should happen as much as in what will happen, and the resolution is prepared by character and circumstance rather than by contrivance, keeping major outcomes guarded until late.

Without disclosing its final turns, Mr. Hogarth's *Will* endures as a notably early Australian realist novel that links female economic independence to broader social reform. Spence's measured critique of inheritance law, her faith in education, and her pragmatic account of emigration show how material conditions shape moral choices. The book's continued resonance lies in its insistence that talent deserves avenues, that law can enable or thwart fairness, and that sentiment is strongest when joined to self-respect. By making work the crucible of character, the novel speaks

beyond its century to perennial debates over opportunity, obligation, and equity.

Historical Context

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Catherine Helen Spence, a Scottish-born Australian novelist, journalist, and reformer, published *Mr. Hogarth's Will* in 1865, during the high Victorian era. The narrative moves between Britain and the Australian colonies, situating its characters within imperial networks of law, finance, and migration that shaped mid-nineteenth-century lives. Spence wrote from Adelaide, South Australia, a society she knew intimately since emigrating there in 1839. Her readership spanned colonial and British audiences, receptive to realistic treatments of work, morality, and social mobility. The novel's focus on female self-support and legal constraint reflects the period's debates over women's status, inheritance practices, and the possibilities of colonial opportunity.

South Australia, founded in 1836 under Edward Gibbon Wakefield's principles of systematic colonization, aimed to avoid convict transportation and to finance immigration through land sales. Adelaide quickly became an administrative and commercial hub, with free settlers creating civic institutions, newspapers, and churches. After gold was discovered in neighboring Victoria in 1851, thousands left South Australia temporarily for the diggings, disrupting local labor markets but returning with capital that spurred building, agriculture, and trade. By the 1860s, Adelaide's educated middle class sought respectability through work and philanthropy, while opportunities—and

hardships—awaited newcomers and the native-born in pastoral stations, towns, and the growing public service.

In Britain and its colonies, the doctrine of coverture meant a married woman's legal identity and property were largely controlled by her husband, unless protected by trusts. Inheritance customs favored male control of real estate, although wills and settlements could vary outcomes. Reform gathered pace later: in England and Wales, the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 recognized wives' earnings and separate property; South Australia enacted similar protections in 1883. When Mr. Hogarth's Will appeared in 1865, such safeguards were incomplete, and disputes over wills, guardianship, and provision for unmarried female relatives were pressing, practical concerns for families across the empire.

Respectable employment for middle-class women in the 1850s and 1860s usually meant teaching, governing, needlework, shop assistance, or office-related tasks supervised by men. The electric telegraph expanded from the 1840s in Britain and from the mid-1850s in Australia, opening limited clerical posts, while colonial schools and private academies absorbed educated women as teachers. These roles often paid poorly and carried social vulnerabilities, yet they offered rare avenues to self-support without marriage. Spence highlights the skills—arithmetic, correspondence, punctuality, resilience—that such work demanded, and the delicacy required to navigate reputation, class expectations, and the dependence built into domestic service and genteel labor.

Formal higher education for women was only beginning to shift in the 1860s: Girton College, Cambridge, was founded in 1869, and university degrees were generally closed to women earlier in the decade. Middle-class girls' schooling emphasized accomplishments and moral training, with advanced mathematics or political economy uncommon outside exceptional institutions. In Britain, Mudie's Select Library (established 1842) and other circulating libraries shaped what fiction reached broad audiences, favoring morally serious, three-volume novels. Colonial readers in Adelaide, Melbourne, and Sydney avidly consumed British and local fiction through newspapers and subscription libraries. Spence's realist method draws from this print culture to test social ideals against material constraints.

Large-scale Scottish emigration in the nineteenth century linked towns such as Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Aberdeen to colonial ports like Adelaide, Melbourne, and Hobart. Assisted passages, clipper ships on the Great Circle route, and improving steam connections moved people, letters, and remittances across vast distances. The British Penny Post (1840) and colonial postal reforms increased access to correspondence, though mail between Britain and Australia still took months by sea in the 1860s. Inside the colonies, new telegraph lines sped commercial and personal news. These networks underpin the novel's attention to kinship obligations, transnational reputations, and the practicalities of finding work far from home.

Mid-century capitalism brought opportunity and risk. The Victorian gold rush injected liquidity and volatility into

colonial markets; pastoral expansion created fortunes but depended on climate and credit. The global Panic of 1857 tightened finance across the empire, and the collapse of Overend, Gurney & Co. in London in 1866 exposed the fragility of speculative credit. Colonial banks, shipping firms, and merchants navigated boom-and-bust cycles that touched households through wages, savings, and sudden reversals. Churches, benevolent societies, and friendly societies provided limited safety nets. Spence's characters operate within this environment, where prudence, skill, and reputation can mean survival, and unmerited dependence invites critique.

Spence combined literature with public advocacy—publishing a treatise on proportional representation inspired by Thomas Hare in 1861, campaigning for electoral reform, and later serving on South Australia's State Children's Council from 1886. She supported women's suffrage, achieved in South Australia in 1894 with the added right to stand for parliament. *Mr. Hogarth's Will* aligns with these commitments by scrutinizing how legal rules and social custom constrain women's choices, and by demonstrating paths to competence outside marriage. Without divulging its turns, the novel treats work, education, and fair provision as moral tests, arguing—through story—for a society that rewards merit and safeguards independence.

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Chapter I.

The Will

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In a large and handsomely-furnished room of a somewhat old-fashioned house, situated in a rural district in the south of Scotland, was assembled, one day in the early summer of 185-, a small group in deep mourning.

Mr. Hogarth, of Cross Hall, had been taken suddenly ill a few days previously, and had never recovered consciousness so far as to be able to speak, though he had apparently known those who were about him, and especially the two orphan nieces whom he had brought up as his daughters. He had no other near relations whom any one knew of, and had never been known to regret that the name of Hogarth, of Cross Hall, was likely to become extinct. He had the reputation of being the most eccentric man in the country, and was thought to be the most inconsistent.

constituencies; in the book 'a group of burghs' refers to several towns collectively returning an M.P..

50 A French phrase meaning 'blank card' or full discretionary authority; here it indicates the speaker had complete freedom to choose materials for the bonnet.

51 A traditional English/Scottish ballad and tune dating back several centuries; referenced here as a familiar childhood air or folk melody.

52 A 19th-century series of British parliamentary reform measures (most famously the Reform Act of 1832) that broadened representation and reformed borough and county franchises.

53 A political demand for the extension of the vote to all adult men, i.e., universal male suffrage, discussed in 19th-century British and colonial debates.

54 Here refers to the secret ballot (voting by secret paper or similar means) as opposed to open or public voting, a major electoral reform topic in the period.

55 Rowland Hill (1795–1879) was an English postal and social reformer best known for introducing the Penny Post; he was also involved in various administrative and reform projects linked to municipal and colonial questions.

56 The Rochdale Pioneers were a group of 19th-century English weavers and tradesmen (from 1844) who founded one of the first successful cooperative stores and became a model for the cooperative movement.

57 An older medical term for scarlet fever, a bacterial illness (common in the 19th century) marked by fever and a characteristic red rash.

58 Paper money issued by banks and used as currency; in the 19th century bank-notes were common circulating negotiable instruments of various denominations, including the small sums mentioned in the passage (e.g. shillings).

59 Small plots of land let or assigned to individuals for cultivation or garden use; in the 19th century allotments often provided households with food or a small income and were a familiar rural/urban feature.

60 The national legislature (in this novel's context, most likely the UK Parliament), where elected members debate and pass laws and where public speeches and political careers described in the text would take place.

61 A nationwide or kingdom-wide vote to elect members to Parliament; in the 19th century a 'recent general election' would mean the most recent full contest that determined parliamentary representation.

62 A 'burghs' constituency is a Scottish parliamentary district composed of towns; 'Swinton burghs' refers to such a multi-town constituency that returned a Member of Parliament under the 19th-century UK electoral system.

63 A steamship on a scheduled service that carried mail and often passengers between ports; in the 19th century mail steamers were a principal means of long-distance transport and communication between Britain and the colonies.

64 Paddle or river steamers that operated on the Murray River in Australia carrying passengers, cargo and mail; these inland steamers were a common mode of transport for long river journeys in the 19th century (the text uses the plural "Murray steamers").

65 Refers to the mid-19th century Australian gold rushes (notably in Victoria from about 1851 onward) that brought large amounts of wealth, migrants, and rapid economic and urban growth to colonies like Melbourne.

66 A simple colonial dwelling built from vertical split timber slabs common in early Australian pastoral settlements, often improvised and later enlarged as families became established.

67 In 19th-century Australian usage, a ‘squatter’ was a pastoral occupier who ran sheep or cattle on large tracts of land—initially often without formal title—many of whom became wealthy and influential landholders.

68 An historical name for smelling salts (typically ammonium carbonate or aromatic spirits) used to revive someone who had fainted or felt faint; commonly kept in Victorian households and by nurses.

69 Colonial slang for a recently arrived settler or immigrant, implying inexperience or naïveté; used in 19th-century Australia to describe newcomers.

70 The name of the ship that brought Mrs. Peck from Adelaide to Melbourne; 19th-century narratives commonly identify passenger vessels by name, though this specific vessel would require separate verification in shipping records.

71 Here refers to an undeveloped open area on Melbourne’s Eastern Hill in the period described; not to be confused with the well-known London square of the same name.

72 A small bouquet of flowers traditionally worn or carried as a decorative token; in Victorian times nosegays

were popular for scent and ornament at social visits and events.

73 A place name that could refer to Richmond in England or to suburbs named Richmond in Australia; the text does not make clear which Richmond is meant, so either the London district or an Australian locality is possible depending on context.

74 The Port Phillip District was the bay and surrounding region of early colonial Victoria (including Melbourne) in Australia; during much of the 19th century it was administered as part of New South Wales before the colony of Victoria was created.

75 An infectious disease common in the 19th century caused by streptococcal bacteria, often accompanied by a red rash and high fever; before antibiotics it could be severe or fatal, especially in children.

76 A regular payment made to an individual for life or for a fixed term, often arising from a will, settlement or purchase; in the text an annuity was being paid and later commuted for a lump sum.

77 A French phrase meaning 'newly rich' (nouveaux riches) used pejoratively to describe people who have recently acquired wealth and are perceived as lacking the manners of established upper classes.

78 A Scots nickname for Edinburgh, literally 'Old Smoky,' originating from the frequent smoke and chimneys of the city in earlier centuries and still used as a familiar historical name for Edinburgh.

79 Refers to The Times, a leading London daily newspaper founded in the late 18th century and widely read