Writing in The Egoist in 1916, Ezra Pound had this to say about the state of modern fiction:

[W]e are still faced with the problem: Is literature possible in England and America? Is it possible that the great book and the firm book can appear ‘in normal conditions’? That is to say, under the same conditions that make musical comedy, Edna What’s-her-name, Victoria Cross, Clement Shorter, etc. etc., so infernally possible among us!

Included in Pound’s black list of antagonists of great literature is the name of a prominent middlebrow author who is almost forgotten today, despite the fact that she was a literary star in her own right in the early 1900s and 1910s: “Victoria Cross”. This was the pseudonym of Annie Sophie Cory (1868–1952),

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2 Definitions of what qualifies as a middlebrow novel are notoriously murky, but most scholars would probably agree with Nicola Humble’s parameters in The Feminine Middlebrow: “the middlebrow novel is one that straddles the divide between the trashy romance or thriller on the one hand, and the philosophically or formally challenging novel on the other: offering narrative excitement without guilt, and intellectual stimulation without undue effort. It is an essentially parasitical form, dependent on the existence of both a high and a low brow for its identity, reworking their structures and aping their insights, while at the same time fastidiously holding its skirts away from lowbrow contamination, and gleefully mocking highbrow intellectual pretensions. It is also a predominantly middle-class form” (Nicola Humble, The Feminine Middlebrow Novel. 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, 11–12). Although I agree with Humble’s list of qualifiers, I believe that the case of Victoria Cross, who produced her most interesting work from the 1890s until the mid-1910s, shows that Humble’s time frame for such writings may need to be expanded to include the feminine middlebrow’s earlier roots (pre-1920s). While Humble shows convincingly that highbrow modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf and others had major gripes about the threatening popularity of middlebrow literature, particularly in the 1930s, at which time it became “the great bugbear for the self-consciously serious writer” (ibid., 16), the examples of Ezra Pound’s and Rebecca West’s open struggles with Cross’ unwelcome fame cited in this essay also show that this inter-modernist battle started much
who also went by V.C. Griffin and Vivien or Vivian Cory Griffin, an Indian-born, English-educated author of bestselling scandalous sexual romances known for their sizzling portraits of forbidden passions and foreign and exotic landscapes. Victoria Cross’ shocking plots centred on transgressive sexual desires and gender relations, including interracial and extramarital sex, cross-dressing, homoeroticism, and even sadomasochism. Cross employed a mixture of recognizable styles and conventions borrowed from melodrama, romance, realism, and sensation fiction; in particular, her knack for staging sexual longings in sublime natural settings in exotic locales invited readers’ sensual armchair tourism. Judging from the numbers of books she sold, audiences apparently savoured Cross’ exciting plot lines and alluring descriptions, but even more so her daring invocations of female sexuality’s darker sides, which surpassed any that had been seen in New Woman fiction to date. Reviewers not only in London but also in colonial India and the USA jumped on “the indecency of Victoria Cross” (Times of India) and her “startling code of morality” (The Washington Post).3 Into this already potent mix, Cross threw the cultural fantasies and fears attached to the New Woman and the New Man, and therefore developed a new kind of middlebrow feminism that seemed eerily politically progressive and idealistic even as she pandered to popular tastes and markets.4 W.T. Stead, one of the few openly supportive reviewers, wrote approvingly in

earlier, in the mid-teens. “Any attempt to define the middlebrow novel in this period must inevitably run up against the monolith of modernism”, Humble writes (ibid., 24). Any such attempt therefore inherits its notoriously unstable, fraying temporal and cultural boundaries as well.


4 That Victoria Cross was an independently minded and active businesswoman who managed her business affairs with determination is amply illustrated in her correspondence with the British Society of Authors (housed at the British Library). As her letter exchanges with G. Herbert Thring, Esq. illustrate, Cross engaged in legal disputes with censors or her publishers, one of whom incurred her wrath as he altered passages in one of her novels without her permission, damaging her artistic integrity but also sales of other editions she depended on for income. Although she was no ardent publicity-seeker (on the contrary, she lived a very quiet life in her small family circle and was urgently concerned for her privacy, as her disinterest in granting interviews and her strong desire to keep her pseudonym intact illustrate), her art was everything to Cross, and she did everything she could to publicize her novels and pursue their exposure to the public. Her writing guaranteed her a steady source of income, presenting a lifeline for an unmarried young woman who depended on her uncle’s good will and a modest inheritance to sustain herself.