



Muriel Alleyne and Christabel Lowndes-Yates

Christabel Lowndes-Yates

Lived:

December 1, 1880 - September 13, 1966

Worked as:

co-screenwriter, journalist, novelist, playwright, short story writer, trade journal writer, writer

Worked In:

England

Muriel Alleyne

Also Known As:

Flora Middleton Stanley

Lived:

March 18, 1875 - November 19, 1940

Worked as:

co-screenwriter, film actress, screenwriter, singer, theatre actress, trade journal writer, writer

Worked In:

England

by **Luke McKernan**

Muriel Alleyne and Christabel Lowndes-Yates were a screenwriting duo most notable for the advice they gave to others on making films. In the early 1920s, at a low point in the fortunes of the British film industry, they wrote with urgency, belief, and patriotic fervor on the value of film.

Muriel Alleyne was the professional name of Flora Middleton Stanley. She was born in 1875 in Flixton, Lancashire, UK, the eldest of the four children of Deane Stanley and Flora Middleton Stanley (née Ferneyhough). Her mining engineer father was the son of a follower of John Wroe's controversial Christian Israelite Society, which had been established in their hometown of Ashton in Lancashire (Oliver, "John Stanley"; Oliver, "Mr. Wroe's Virgins").

In 1889, following financial reverses, the family moved from Ashton to Colwyn Bay, Wales, where Flora began a stage career after success in singing competitions. By 1896, she was singing under the name of “Muriel Alleyne,” which she kept for the rest of her professional career. She sang *mezzo* parts in touring opera productions, and, in 1899, joined a touring production of Sidney Jones’s musical comedy “The Geisha,” singing the lead role of O Mimosa San. She then toured in a version of the production that, over 1900-1901, visited India, Burma, Singapore, Hong Kong, China (she was present during the Boxer Uprising), and the Philippines (“‘La Poupée’ at Colwyn Bay”). On her return, Alleyne toured England and Wales for a number of years as the lead in Edmond Audran’s comic opera “La Poupée,” George du Maurier’s “Trilby,” and other crowd-pleasers. By late 1909, she had her own Muriel Alleyne Dramatic Company (“Muriel Alleyne Dramatic Company”).

Somewhere between 1910 and 1912 she began acting in films, probably for the Hepworth Manufacturing Company, though no credits have been traced (*Kinematograph Year Book* 249). Possibly stage work was becoming harder to find, and she had outgrown the young parts in which she had specialized. She turned to writing film scenarios in 1912, still using the name Muriel Alleyne. At this time, there were few women scriptwriters in British film, as the role began to be professionalized. Indeed, Alleyne may have been the first woman to write for British films who was not connected to a film company through family relationships, and among the first of any professional scriptwriters in British film (MacDonald, “Screenwriting,” 48-49).

Her first script, which today remains unidentified, was sold to director Bert Haldane at Hepworth, a company for which she would write *A Bold Venture*, *In Wolf’s Clothing*, *The Indian Woman’s Pluck*, *The Forsaken*, *The Dead Heart*, and possibly other titles between 1912 and 1915. *The Indian Woman’s Pluck*, one of only two of Alleyne’s films now known to survive, is a spirited chase drama in which a family’s faithful Indian wet nurse (played by Alleyne’s good friend Ruby Belasco in redface) tracks down the kidnappers of a baby, memorably doing so by following drops of blood down a garden path. Alleyne proved herself to be a versatile and reliable writer, additionally producing scripts for M.L.B. (*Time and the Hour*), Walturdaw, Barker Motion Photography, and Universal. She also worked before 1915 as assistant scenarist under Paul D. Hugon at the British branch of Pathé Frères (“Scribes of the Screen” [1921]).

Significantly, the lists of scripts that Alleyne provided for biographical entries in trade publications included scripts that were sold but never produced (“Scribes of the Screen” [1921]). For example, *Her Son for His* was sold to Walturdaw, and *The Unfrocked Priest* to Barker, but the scripts were not made into films. This view of her craft, where the effort put in by the writer was central to the idea of film production whether a film was made of a script or not, would inform the distinctive next stage of her film career.

Around 1919, after Alleyne had moved to Amersham, Buckinghamshire, to live with Ruby Belasco and her husband Albert Crowhurst, she met Christabel Lowndes-Yates, a journalist, dramatist, and short story writer. Lowndes-Yates was born in 1880 in Milverton, Norfolk, UK, the eldest of the two children of William, a church minister, and Henrietta Catharine (née Badcock). The

family was wealthy and socially well-connected, giving Christabel ample opportunity to pursue writing ambitions. In the 1910s, she had stories published in prominent journals such as *The Strand Magazine*, *The Smart Set*, and *Quiver*, appearing alongside a number of the renowned writers of the period (in the September 1913 issue of *The Smart Set*, her story “Chance” appears beside pieces by W. B. Yeats, Gabriele D’Annunzio, and D.H. Lawrence). She was an active member of literary societies and self-help writing groups, including the Quill Club, the London Writer’s Circle, and the London School of Journalism (Hilliard 60). She had also been the honorary Dramatic Secretary for the Lyceum Club, the women’s club founded by Constance Smedley (“Scribes of the Screen” [1922]).

Alleyne and Lowndes-Yates started working together, first by putting on local productions of the latter’s plays, with Alleyne acting as stage manager and performing. In 1920, they formed a screenwriting partnership, promising “Original Scenarios and Adaptations” (“Professional Cards” 50). It is not clear how much work this brought in, with some scripts sold but only two produced, so far as can be determined. These were two short comedy films from 1922, starring South African comedian Kimber “Tubby” Phillips: *Fatty’s Overtime* and *Hims – Ancient and Modern* (a third comedy short, *Agitated Agitator*, was announced as being in production in 1923, but was not released).

In 1922, Alleyne and Lowndes-Yates shifted the partnership from scriptwriting to providing advice to would-be scriptwriters, work that Lowndes-Yates had previously done for another firm (“Scribes of the Screen” [1922]). They rebranded themselves as the Kinema Advisory Bureau, with Alleyne as its Director and Lowndes-Yates as Assistant Director (Meredith 65, 959). The Bureau read books, plays, and short stories submitted to them, suggested suitable markets, or gave advice on how to make manuscripts saleable.

This advisory work was accompanied by a remarkable series of short articles in the film trade paper *The Motion Picture Studio*, in which the two women, both individually and as a duo, called upon the British film industry to seize the advantages that awaited it, not least by putting greater value on the work of the scriptwriter. The early 1920s was a particularly poor period for the British film industry, hamstrung as it was by inadequate financing, the block-booking distribution system that flooded the market with American films, and a paucity of talent. For Alleyne and Lowndes-Yates, the answers were to seize initiatives and to put greater trust in writers.

Articles such as “What’s Wrong?” “Story Versus Star,” “Wake Up, England,” and “Do the Public Hate Our Pictures?” were bold in language and relentless in argument. Alleyne’s words on the neglect of scriptwriters, to the detriment of the industry, have been made by many a film author since:

A good story is worth more than a good star or much advertised director, but how are the Scenarists treated by the Industry? They have been made the Cinderellas long enough, their works in many cases have been tampered with by the director and

mutilated in the cutting-up room, and the door of the studio is barred against them. (Alleyne, “Story Versus Star”)

On occasion, the women were controversial in their criticism. For example, Lowndes-Yates was at her sharpest in a response to a series of articles on “screen authorship” by director Sidney Morgan. Morgan bemoaned the lack of stories based on real lives, which necessitated the need to turn to novels and to rely on the celebrity of an author. Lowndes-Yates put the problem down to inadequate appreciation of, and payment for, professional writers, who found greater remuneration in other markets:

Authors are not blind to the value of publicity, but how often is the name of an author advertised in the ordinary paragraphs that appear in the Press as well as on the Screen? Hardly ever. The name of the Director is given, the name of the firm, the names of the stars, even the cameraman [*sic*], but the name of the author comparatively seldom. Why? When it appears on the screen it is flashed on as one of a maze of names, and flashed off again very quickly. To the writer it is very much as though a book appeared heralded as the Startling Novel published by So-and-So, bound by Such-and-Such, printed by Mr. Someone Else, and sold by the well-known bookseller Mr. Blank. Yet it is on the author and his stories that the whole future of the British industry depends. (Lowndes-Yates, “The Position of the Screen Author”)

Such arguments were based on discussions they had had with industry players, and were certainly welcomed by many, to judge from the correspondence section of the journal. However, the duo’s arguments were challenged following Lowndes-Yates’s “What Are Films For?” in which she insisted that the only purpose of the feature film was to entertain:

At the present moment “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” is running at the Palace Theatre, which is a propaganda film against war. This film has split those interested in the kinema sharply into two classes. I have heard it widely discussed in omnibuses, clubs, in the street, in private houses, in the Kinema Club, in the theatre itself and among the Press. So far as it has been my lot to listen to these discussions, I have never yet heard a professional kinema worker of any kind who has not raved about the film, and I have yet to meet the member of any other section of the public who has cared for it. Why this divergence? No film in the last few years has, to my thinking, split the public into such sharp sections as this. Why? I think the answer is—propaganda. (Lowndes-Yates, “What Are Films For?”)

The critical responses to this argument focused on the need for film to inspire as much as to entertain, with some detecting a condescending view of the audience (“a rather unfair and sweeping judgment on the average public who patronises the kinema, ascribing to them a shallow and unprogressive mentality,” wrote Peggy R. Baker) (“Readers in Council”).

Lowndes-Yates's reference to the Kinema Club was a possible sore point. In early 1921, as part of their efforts to galvanize the British film industry, Alleyne and Lowndes-Yates had initiated a "Kinema Arts Club" ("The Kinema Arts Club"). This was intended as a social organization where the members of the industry could discuss common issues in an informal setting, similar to the literary clubs and societies with which Lowndes-Yates was familiar. But it was swiftly superseded by the Kinema Club, which had better financial backing across the sector (Low 87). The duo lacked the influence they desired, perhaps due to their relative lack of a professional profile, perhaps because they were women. Both, however, became members of the Club ("Full List of Club Members").

The women had some success, however, speaking to the literary world. They contributed two substantial articles, explaining how to contribute material to the film industry, in the 1921 *Literary Year-Book*: "Authors and the Kinema" and "Writing for the Films." Lowndes-Yates also wrote a well-informed guide to film for the 1923 edition of the important *Writers' and Artists' Year-Book* ("The Kinema and the Author") and a fifteen-part series "Writing for the Films" for the amateur writers' journal *The Writer* ("Writing for the Films"). These pieces provided common-sense advice for freelancers and amateurs on such topics like understanding how the industry operated, constructing a film narrative, and the types of film likely to succeed. They spoke the language that a writing world outside the film industry would appreciate, explaining the difficulties but always assuring the aspirants that others like them had succeeded, so they might do so too. However, they were guilty, to a degree, of encouraging amateurs in publications aimed at them, while simultaneously decrying amateurism to a professional film audience (e.g. Lowndes-Yates, "The Cult of the Amateur").

The two women continued to be active in amateur theater and gardening—they won a national prize for their Amersham allotment in 1922 ("Women and Allotments"). They were also both involved in Conservative politics with Lowndes-Yates speaking to the local Conservative party about the UK film trade and Alleyne addressing the Women's Parliamentary Council, a Conservative body, on the same topic in 1925 ("An M.P.'s Duty"; "Short Shots"). After approximately five years of collaboration, Alleyne and Lowndes-Yates's partnership ended around 1924, for reasons that are not documented.

Alleyne continued to operate the Kinema Advisory Bureau until at least 1929. Her final film credit was the script for a feature film, *The City of Youth* (1928), which was noteworthy for having scenes shot within Oxford University. However, the film—on which future film director Thorold Dickinson worked as editor—appears not to have been distributed. She is last heard of in a film context in 1936, in a death notice for Belasco, whom she nursed through her final illness ("Deaths"). Alleyne died on November 19, 1940. She was unmarried.

Lowndes-Yates, who also never married, seems to have had no further involvement with film after 1924, though her name can be found in film trade directories as late as 1929. She wrote two novels in the early 1930s, *Robbers in Purple* and *Gods Must Be Fed*, then gained some unwelcome publicity when a promising composer, Kalitha Dorothy Fox, who had been living with her for

around ten years, committed suicide. Lowndes-Yates publicly stated that Fox was upset by noise caused by roadworks, information that led to much press attention, but the coroner doubted that noise was a major contributory factor (“This Age of Noise”). Lowndes-Yates moved away from Amersham not long after, living with her younger sister Dorothy in London until the latter’s death in 1940. She died in Epsom, Surrey, in 1966, aged eighty-five.

Alleyne and Lowndes-Yates were impassioned advocates of the creative potential of film. They saw greater respect for writers as being the gateway to a more professional and commercially successful British cinema. Their relative lack of production experience—although Alleyne had played a pioneering role as a scriptwriter—probably limited their influence. That has kept them to the margins of British film history until now. Their enterprise, particularly their understanding of the hopeful amateur, merits rediscovery today.

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Filmography

A. Archival Filmography: Extant Film Titles:

1. Muriel Alleyne as Screenwriter

A Bold Venture. Dir.: Warwick Buckland (Hepworth Mfg Co. UK 1912) cas.: Harry Royston, Ruby Belasco, Alec Worcester, si, b&w. Archive: [BFI National Archive](#).

The Indian Woman's Pluck. Dir.: Frank Wilson (Hepworth Mfg. Co. UK 1912) cas.: Ruby Belasco, si, b&w. Archive: [EYE Filmmuseum](#), [Cinémathèque Française](#).

B. Filmography: Non-Extant Film Titles:

1. Muriel Alleyne as Screenwriter

In Wolf's Clothing, 1912; *The Forsaken*, 1913; *The Dead Heart*, 1914; *Time and the Hour*, 1915; *The City of Youth*, 1928.

2. Muriel Alleyne and Christabel Lowndes-Yates as Screenwriters

Fatty's Overtime, 1922; *Hims – Ancient and Modern*, 1922.

E. Unfinished Work

Scripts and scenarios that were sold but never made (all known titles):

1. Muriel Alleyne as Screenwriter

Her Son for His, *Murphy's Trousers*, *The Mystery of Lady Clinton*, *An Old World Romance*, *The Scent of a Rose*, *To Save a Scamp*, *To Save His Idol*, *The Unforeseen*, *The Unfrocked Priest*.

2. Muriel Alleyne and Christabel Lowndes-Yates as Screenwriters

Agitated Agitator

Credit Report

Several sources confuse Flora Middleton Stanley (aka Muriel Alleyne) with Muriel Elsie Augusta Russell (1884-1966), a member of the aristocratic Russell family, whose married names were Greenfield and Harris-St John. The maiden name of Russell's mother was Alleyne, but she seems never to have gone by the name of "Muriel Alleyne." She had no association with the film industry, and there was no connection between the two women.

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