

# TLS

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## THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

### Old faithful

Emma Donoghue's novel *The Sealed Letter* – first published in Canada in 2008, and now published in Britain following the success of *Room* – could not be more different from that contemporary tale; this is a work of historical “faction”, based on reports of a real Victorian divorce. It is 1864, and an encounter on a London street draws Emily “Fido” Faithfull back into the world of her enchanting friend Helen Codrington. The sombrely dressed, stout Fido cuts a bizarre figure next to the vivacious, ultra-feminine Helen, and the women's lives are poles apart: suffragist and publisher Fido states that “work has been a revelation to me” whereas Helen admits that “I pass my days reading, shopping and yawning”. Returning to the Codringtons' lives at a point of marital crisis, Fido finds herself drawn into Helen's world “as a bloom opens to a bee”, and cannot help fondly recalling her past intimacy with the couple. Although the women's emotional bond is always apparent, no erotic interpretation is placed on their closeness until Helen's infidelity with an army officer blows open the marriage and Admiral Henry Codrington files for divorce. The mud-slinging involved in a Victorian divorce makes modern celebrity splits look civilized by comparison: Helen, Fido and Henry are faced with public scrutiny of their personal and sexual shortcomings. The story is more than just a racy period drama: it is an examination of the social fall-out of the Matrimonial Causes Act (1857), which enabled ordinary couples, not just the wealthy, to divorce. Donoghue weaves historical detail into a rapidly paced story, so that the reader learns without feeling lectured.

The many scenes with Mr Few, Helen's lawyer, set out the Victorian views of divorce; for example, Few's cynical explanation of why husbands were automatically awarded custody of children – “If women could shed their hus-

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Emma Donoghue

THE SEALED LETTER

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bands without risk of losing their children too, it's feared that an alarming proportion of them would do so”. The asymmetry with which the law treated husbands and wives leads to Helen's counter-accusations of cruelty and attempted rape – an example of how women had to prove violent or deviant behaviour by their husbands in order to win a divorce, whereas a man had only to accuse his wife of adultery. Helen is a puzzle of a character – sometimes embodying the Victorian stereotype of pampered “idle femininity”, at other junctures displaying more of a calculating and cool head than Fido the businesswoman.

Although Fido's devotion to Helen despite her frequent disloyalty may frustrate the reader, Donoghue portrays the celibate feminist sensitively enough to demonstrate that she is only guilty of “spinster's naïveté” for failing to understand “the darker games that husbands and wives could play”. Although Admiral Codrington veers close to being a pantomime villain at times, Donoghue's treatment is generally even-handed, showing the misery of man trapped “in the yoke of a matrimonial bondage”, and reminding us that men too could be victims of idealistic fictions about marriage. Donoghue encourages the reader to save their contempt for the legal system and its reliance on “malicious, salacious innuendo”. In a story that gallops along yet is packed with detail, she has brought colour to the black-and-white reports of the Codringtons' divorce, and written intriguingly about the accompanying issues of feminism and love between women.