

# Poetry Porch: Prose

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## ***Lorna Doone: Novels, Names, and Biscuits*** **By Lorna Knowles Blake**

No one reads *Lorna Doone* anymore. Or so my friend and I concluded one pre-pandemic June evening, as we mingled during cocktail hour at a poetry conference. We had been commiserating over her daughter's and my shared first name, which seemed to have lost any connection to its literary provenance, a fact that puzzled and annoyed us. She was from London and my UK connections went as far back as the 1890s when my mother's family emigrated from Scotland to Argentina. To our mutual surprise, the name Lorna, not uncommon where we grew up, seemed to have migrated from the bookcase to a supermarket shelf in the U.S. I think we both enjoyed our shared grumble over a glass of wine, and I filed away the encounter until later that summer.

Summer to me is not just a time for reading but re-reading. I had read many classics much too early: they got under my skin or into my heart before I fully understood them. So I set myself an annual goal of revisiting those novels. Tolstoy, Dickens, and Cervantes had been my most recent summer re-reads. I enjoyed settling in, slowing down and savoring the books I had greedily devoured years ago.

As I considered my summer reading options, that earlier June conversation spurred me toward the novel I share a name with. I remembered the copy in our family bookcase—*Lorna Doone, a Romance of Exmoor* by Richard Dodderidge Blackmoor. The cover was faded, with an illustration of a young woman facing forward against a rural background. The typescript was old-fashioned, the pages made dense with heat and humidity. As a child I felt a little proud and vain to see my name, my given name, on the spine of a book on our shelves. That was the book cover I downloaded to my Kindle; the version I was sure I had read as a girl. Now, as I roamed the table of contents, I wondered: the *Lorna Doone* on my device was much longer than I remembered (450 pages) and reading it was far less rewarding than I had anticipated.

I gamely plowed on, all the while thinking it was no wonder the novel is no longer on required reading lists. And yet it has never been out of print since its first publication in 1869. It was voted the "class book" by Yale's graduating class of 1907. It has been made into a movie six times: first in 1912 and most recently for television in 2001. Several years ago, a musical version opened in London. Lorna Doone is even Cockney rhyming slang for spoon. There must be something enduring about Blackmore's heroine, her story and her name, and I read on, hoping to puzzle out what the appeal might be.

As I delved into the novel, I had a nagging suspicion I had never actually read it. The cover and the name were so ingrained in my imagination that I convinced myself I had. I was known to read novels that no one reads, like *Clarissa* by Samuel Richardson. I was sure I had read *Lorna Doone* curled up in the tree house my father built for us in Ponce, Puerto Rico—really just a

platform with steps nailed into the trunk to allow us to climb up. It was easy to imagine that I had first encountered the novel high up in our tree house, but in fact I did not recognize the characters at all. Especially Lorna: she seemed entirely constructed as a foil for the good John Ridd and the dastardly Carver Doone. She had no agency over her life and seemed boringly too good to be true. Oh, to be sure she had had tragedies, perils and misadventures aplenty, but she had none of the engaging voice and plucky spirit that I loved in the heroines of my favorite books—Jo March, Jerusha Abbot, or Cassandra Mortmain for instance. Lorna had no voice at all and seemed passively destined for victimhood. It was a revelation that disrupted life-long assumptions I had cherished about the heroine who shared my name.

It turns out I was not actually named after the title character of Blackmore's novel; I was named after my Aunt Lorna, my mother's younger sister. I was her *tocaya*, or namesake. My father was very fond of his sister-in-law and my mother was happy to honor her family's Scottish roots. But names were a tricky business in my family, for they had to straddle both the Spanish-speaking culture that we lived in and the English-speaking culture that we came from. My grandparents named their first daughter Waveney Jessie, after the River Waveney, which flows through the East Anglia region in England, and, as was the tradition in Cuba, after her mother.

My mother loathed her unusual name. It was unpronounceable in Spanish, which in her day had no native words beginning with the letter w, excepting foreign words like Wagneriana, whisky, and Winston Cigarettes. Later, when she attended boarding school in Canada, it was frequently mistaken for Waverly. The minute she left boarding school for college in Montreal she nicknamed herself "Kip," a completely random choice. Throughout my childhood all my friends called her *Doña Kip*, though my father called her "Wave," and her parents insisted on Waveney. To me, her name seemed as mutable as any river's water.

Perhaps by the time my Aunt Lorna was born five years later, my grandmother had come to see the practical value of a name that could easily slip across the borders of language. Perhaps they were nostalgically inclined to all things Scottish, as expatriates so often are. Surely they were familiar with Blackmore's novel (or more likely the 1935 movie version), which created an image, if not the reality, of a proud Scottish heroine. In any case, the name Lorna must have seemed perfect, as it was entirely phonetic—no one ever mispronounced it or confused it with another name—yet unmistakably associated with a famous novel, itself associated with Scotland. It comfortably straddled both our emigrant history and our bilingual family fence.

My name, as far as I was concerned, was hardly perfect. It had no meaning that I could find in my mother's book of baby names. Who would not want to be *Rose*: origin Latin, meaning *rosa*, the romantic flower of love? None of that was in the entry for Lorna (female variation of Lawrence, said the book, depressingly). Worse, my name had no corresponding saint, a considerable liability for a girl growing up in Catholic countries. My sister Patricia, on the other hand, had more than a birthday to celebrate—she also had a feast day. On Saint Patrick's Day, her "saint's day" she enjoyed special recognition and privileges at school. I used to fantasize that my name was Carmen. *Carmen*: origins in Italian, Spanish and Portuguese, a diminutive for Carmel, from the Hebrew meaning "God's vineyard." Latin origin in *carmen*, which means "song" or "poem" as well as an origin of the English word "charm." Bonus: Carmen was also a saint's name with a calendared feast day, July 16<sup>th</sup>.

Despite these grievances, I was a bookish child and glad to have a first name associated with a literary heroine, even indirectly. Whatever I had heard about Blackmore's novel as a young girl seemed only to affirm my certainties: how serendipitous that I, like Lorna Doone, had long brown hair and brown eyes; like Lorna I was slender, I fancied myself noble and good, in spirit if not by birth. I even went through a phase when I was utterly convinced that I was adopted and, like Lorna, not really being raised among my own people. I was as susceptible to melodrama as any young girl. I loved a tale full of swash and buckle, cliff-hanging danger, and romance. Things could have been worse when it came to the business of my name.

Imagine my surprise when I arrived at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, from my home in Ponce, Puerto Rico, only to discover that I constantly had to spell my easy, phonetic name. "You mean Lauren?" "Lorena?" or "Laura?" people asked. "No, I would patiently reply," spelling it out, L-O-R-N-A, which automatically elicited, "Oh, sure. Like the *cookie!*" My lovely, literary, phonetic name had been vanquished by the hegemony of North America's mass-produced snack foods.

After re-reading the novel, I turned my attention to the history of the ubiquitous cookie. Its popularity has a long history behind it, like the etymology of a name. Biscuits, crackers, and cookies used to be sold by local general stores out of large cracker barrels covered with cheesecloth. The products often spoiled before the barrel emptied and absorbed ambient odors from kerosene stoves and anything else that permeated a store's environment (including bacteria). After the National Biscuit Company (Nabisco) introduced individually wrapped, shelf-ready cookie and cracker products in 1898, the big chain supermarkets demanded constant innovation, variety, and new products.

Nabisco had been trying for years to develop a shortbread biscuit. They had the right technology, but the name, so important in merchandising, proved elusive. The company had developed a product tentatively called "Hostess Jumbles." In 1912, Earl D. Babst, a Nabisco executive, visited Scotland. As he toured Exmoor, his driver and guide said, "This is Lorna Doone country." The novel, at that time, was required reading in schools and popular in well-read households. When he returned, Babst sent a memo to Nabisco's operating department, "We are putting through a requisition today changing the name of Hostess Jumbles to Lorna Doone Jumbles."

When the 1923 film version of *Lorna Doone* was produced, Nabisco put its promotional machinery to work to publicize the movie, starring the actress Madge Bellamy. Brochures featuring glamorous Madge, in period costume and holding a cookie, described *Lorna Doone* as "a good picture and...a good biscuit." Soon shortbread became one of Nabisco's most popular products. R.D. Blackmore's novel, yoked to industrial progress, had unwittingly contributed to the mass production of formerly homemade baked goods, the rise of product merchandising, and the development of crossover marketing tie-ins.

All the women in my family baked: jam squares, lemon bars, and, of course, shortbread. I can fondly visualize my mother's blue gingham apron, her wood box full of recipe cards, sacks of flour and sugar. My grandmother's shortbread was legendary at the tea parties, or *meriendas*, she

hosted in Havana. She made a batch whenever we came to visit, and my mother baked it for Christmas. We loved it, even when the bottom burned a little from butter softening too quickly in the tropical heat. Our family recipe for shortbread calls for four ingredients: butter, sugar, flour, and a pinch of salt. Years later, I had started a shortbread tradition of my own. My version involves a fifth ingredient (ground pecans) and brown sugar instead of the white granulated sugar my mother and grandmother used. But while reading *Lorna Doone*, I decided to bake their traditional shortbread. I wanted to bring my senses back to the tropical kitchens of my childhood. I rolled the dough and stamped out round discs with a jelly cup, marking each center with the tines of a fork. My kitchen filled with the scent of butter and baking. The shortbread was perfect. Four simple ingredients came together in a complex blend of tastes and textures: crumbly, a bit crisp at the edges, buttery, and very sweet.

What made Nabisco's product a cookie anyway, I wondered? My grandmother always called her shortbread "biscuits" and that is how her recipe is written on my old, butter-stained index card. The word biscuit comes from the Latin *biscoctum (panem)* or twice-cooked bread, after the manner of its original preparation as durable rations for Roman soldiers. The O.E.D. notes that the regular form in English from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries was "bisket" as it is still pronounced and laments that the current spelling of biscuit is a "senseless adoption of the modern French spelling, without the Fr[ench] pronunciation." (Who can fail to love the O.E.D.'s asides?) "Shortbread" is defined as an article of food, in the form of flat (usually round) cakes, the essential ingredients of which are flour, butter, sugar, mixed in such proportions as to make the cake "short" [friable, easily crumbled] when baked. The *Larousse Gastronomique* defines shortbread as "a biscuit (cookie) rich in butter, which is served with tea, traditionally eaten at Christmas and the New Year."

Nabisco's Lorna Doone was called a "shortbread cookie." The word "cookie" derives from the Dutch *koekje*, the diminutive of *koek* (cake). Throughout my adult life in the United States, I made it a point of perverse pride never to taste a Lorna Doone cookie, until one day, in the name of research, I bought a box—yellow plaid, Nabisco's red triangular emblem with its white antenna-like oval in the left-hand corner and a picture of the cookie on the far right. Across the middle, in green letters, shadowed in white, strides the name of Lorna Doone: the "r" swooping under the "n" and across the "a," as if crossing a moor. The cookies themselves are small squares with the name raised across the diagonal. The list of ingredients is long: enriched flour (wheat flour, niacin, reduced iron, thiamine mono nitrate [Vitamin B1], Riboflavin [Vitamin B2], [Folic Acid], Soybean and/or Palm Oil, Sugar, Partially Hydrogenated Cottonseed Oil, Corn Flour, Salt, High Fructose Corn Syrup, Baking Soda, Soy Lecithin, Cornstarch, Artificial Flavor.

*Hah*, I thought balefully, as I prepared to dig in. This commercially sold "shortbread" flunks the O.E.D., the *Larousse Gastronomique*, and my own family recipe definition of shortbread—no butter anywhere on the ingredient list! It did, however, meet the definition of a cookie: small, flat, and sweet, not unlike the shortbread recipe handed down from my ancestors in Scotland and which the women in my family have baked in kitchens from Buenos Aires to Havana to Ponce and every place we have lived since.

In the U.S., the popularity of Nabisco's Lorna Doone cookie had surpassed the popularity of Blackmore's novel as long ago as 1923. Nonetheless, a 2003 survey in Britain called "The Big

Read” sought to identify the country’s “most beloved novels.” There, where Nabisco’s shortbread cookies are presumably less ubiquitous than Walker’s, the novel holds its head up among the top two hundred, certainly not giving second place *Pride and Prejudice* a run for its money but still part of the literary landscape, placing 166<sup>th</sup>.

There are as many ingredients in R.D. Blackmore’s novel as there are in Nabisco’s cookies. The list begins with history, geography, violence, romance, revenge, greed, and redemption. Next we have historical events, weather events, local politics, corruption, villainy, family disputes, stolen jewels, and envy. None of these ingredients are unique to Blackmore’s “historical romance.” All would be completely at home in any classic 19<sup>th</sup> century novel. Like homemade shortbread, Blackmore’s tale has all the basic ingredients: a hero, a villain, a damsel in distress, a protector, and an object that resolves the situation (in Lorna’s case, the necklace). What is unique? To me, what makes the novel endure is her name. Her name is the butter, the emulsifier, *the* ingredient... Her name is what everyone remembers, whether they have eaten the cookie or read her harrowing tale. “My name, Sir, is Lorna Doone.”

Blackmore is said to have coined the name Lorna because he wanted a unique name for his heroine. In his article, “The Mythic Appeal of Lorna Doone,” Max Keith Sutton states, “Her name begins with a suggestion of forlornness and ends with an echo of ‘doom.’” Poets pay close attention to the sounds of words, as much, if not more, than to the meaning. In fact, poets often search for words whose sounds are mimetic or evocative of their meanings. We learn by listening that “o’s” and “l’s” are mournful, tolling sounds. “Forlorn!” wrote Keats, “the very word is like a bell/to toll me back from thee to my sole self.” These lines, from Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” one of the five “great odes” of 1819, resonate with me.

My father liked to quote that line of Keats, linking an iconic ode to a lowly pun upon my name, but I have recast that affectionate association into a literary fantasy about the origin of my name. I imagine that Richard Blackmore, busy working out the elements of his novel, takes morning elevenses or an afternoon tea break. To refresh himself in mind, he opens his volume of Keats. “Forlorn! The very word is like a bell,” he reads, just as a village girl, Fiona, brings in his broth, or tea, and biscuit. His eye sweeps from page to tray to girl and that one moment inspires the name: *Lorn*, full of melancholy and longing, made Scottish by the echo of *Fio-na* at the end. *Lorna*. The very name pealing like a bell in church towers everywhere—and in that instant he has his heroine—whose name has remarkably endured, even as it crumbles, sweet as a biscuit on the tongue.

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Sutton, Max Keith. “The Mythic Appeal of *Lorna Doone*” in *R. D. Blackmore*. Boston: Twayne, 1979.

Cahn, William. *Out of the Cracker Barrel: The Nabisco Story from Animal Crackers to ZuZus*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969.