

Reviews in The Spectator

References to Cicely's work appeared regularly in *The Spectator*. At least four of her poems were published there:

- 'News from the North' (29 July 1911)
- 'The Old Fiddle' (3 May 1913)
- 'The Ballad of the Eastern Crown' (10 April 1915)
- 'Farewell to Anzac' (15 January 1916)

But it is perhaps the reviews of her work which are of most interest. A selection are reprinted here:

The Spectator 7 March 1914

Review: 'City of Hope'. Romance is not excluded from Miss Fox Smith's story of the great North-West; the fine quality of her verse – familiar to readers of *The Spectator* – is a sufficient guarantee for that. But while her poems have been, for the most part, concerned with the life of sailormen, the scene of her first novel is exclusively laid on land. The book is in essentials a record of hard fact rather than a glorification of adventure. It has its merits as a story, but it is in the warning and instruction which it conveys to younger sons, and, above all, to their parents and guardians, that its value really resides. Of late years Canada has come to be regarded as the El Dorado of the emigrant. The number, not only of individuals, but of families who have gone out to British Columbia to make a fresh start is very considerable. Enthusiasm has in many cases been followed by disillusionment; and Miss Fox Smith is rendering a public service by her unvarnished account of what life on the prairie really means – of its loneliness; privations, perils, and lack of amenity. The life that she describes so graphically breaks all but those of the toughest fibre. It is not that the average young Englishman who goes out to farm is a waster, but that he courts failure by his ignorance and inadequate or unsuitable equipment. Mr. Gladstone condemned the aspiration of those who had in them the makings of good artisans to become indifferent clerks. Here we have the converse in the case of young men whose chief qualifications are literary aspiring to become inefficient labourers.

The Spectator 25 April 1914

Review: 'Songs in Sail and Other Chantors'. It is idle to commend to readers of the *Spectator* the delightful songs of Miss Fox Smith. Her Songs are true chanties, with their outland rhythms and clear directness as of the singing voice. She has many notes: the eternal *Wanderlust* of "The Traveller" and "The Old Whale"; the far-away magic of "The Coast of Barbary"; the homesickness of "The Long Road Home" and "News from the North"; the delicate imaginative charm of "Romance" and "Ghosts in a Garden". In Miss Fox Smith's verses the fancy and the tune are alike wholly satisfying, and he must be a dull soul who does not for long carry these gypsy rhythms in his head.

The Spectator 26 May 1916

Review: 'The Naval Crown: Ballads and Songs of the War'. Miss Fox Smith's ballads and songs need no recommendation to readers of the *Spectator*. She is one of the few people living who can write a real "chanty", combining a mastery of sea-lingo with a perfect command of sea-rhythms. Other poets have sung of the patient heroism of our bluejackets: the special note of Miss Fox Smith's volume is her splendid and well-deserved tribute to the fighting British merchantman. The "Ballad of the Eastern Crown", "British Merchant Service, 1915", "Armed Merchantmen", and the lines on the Grimsby trawlers show her at her best, but there is not a line in the book that does not breathe the spirit of fortitude and endurance. Our only criticism is on the statement in "The Mouth-Organ" that "there ain't no birds in Plug Street Wood, the guns have sent them flying". One of the curiosities of the war is the continuance of bird life in the immediate neighbourhood of the trenches.

The Spectator 20 January 1917

Review: 'Fighting Men'. Miss Fox-Smith's command of "deep-sea speech" and her happy use of the lilt and rhythm of the "chanty" are once more shown in "Fighting Men". "The Rhyme of the 'Inisfail", "The Ballad of the Resurrection Packet", "The Silent Navy", "Torpedo-Boats", and

“Light Cruisers” tell in different ways, but always with the same high spirit and humour, of our debt to the Royal Navy and the Merchant Service. But the Army is not forgotten, and “The Route March”, “Stew”, “Mules”, and “Farewell to Anzac” reveal the same insight into the heart of the British fighting man; his habit of “grousing”, which never impairs his courage in hours of trial; his good comradeship, and his longing for home. Nor is Miss Fox-Smith less happy when she exchanges the homely argot of the sailorman or “Tommy” for the vein of high elegy, as in the closing stanza of “Spring in Hampshire”.

The Spectator 5 January 1918

Review: ‘Small Craft’. Many of Miss Fox Smith’s verses have appeared in *Punch*, the *Spectator*, and other papers: they will, we hope, enjoy a wider currency in their collected form. Before the war she wrote of the romance and realities of life in tramps; since it began she has become the laureate of the fighting merchantman. She is perhaps at her best in the “chanty” form, but excels in yarns, ballads, and portraits, commands a rich and expressive vocabulary, satisfies the expert by her technical knowledge, and appeals to all lovers of generous sentiment and fair dealing. Nor does the sea monopolize her sympathies – witness the charming war idyll of “drowsy Bullington”, and the tale of the gypsy’s wife whose husband was fighting in Mesopotamia. In short, Miss Fox Smith has many moods, and stirs or touches us in all.

The Spectator 3 November 1923

Review: ‘Sea Songs and Ballads’. Miss C. Fox Smith’s sea-songs are so well known, to readers of *Punch* especially, that they hardly call for comment. They are brinier than the most crusted old salt and more rollicking than the jolliest tar. The present volume contains old and new material to the generous extent of nearly 150 pages.

The Spectator 30 May 1924

Review: ‘A Book of Famous Ships’. Miss C. Fox Smith has written a jolly, exciting record of clippers and other great merchant ships in ‘A Book of Famous Ships’.

The Spectator 11 October 1924

Review: ‘A Book of Famous Ships’. When it was possible to walk along a quay under the bowsprits of the clippers with the attractive names – they were all in a row – we never did it unless it had to be done. They were not more wonderful than are taxi-cabs now in Whitehall. But those clippers went, if not suddenly, yet just at the moment when we were admiring the remarkable increase in the size of steamers. So to speak, when we turned round again the clippers had gone. We feel very sorry now that we did not pay more attention to them while we could. When visiting all the up-river docks quite recently we saw only three barques; one was a Frenchman of no particular interest, and two, side by side in another dock, were Norwegian craft, timber built, painted white, and with square sterns and bright blue scroll work. In the midst of a flotilla of coal barges they looked like beings of another world – or of another age. Even a dock policeman admitted as much, for he was a young man, and did not remember the ‘eighties.

And it is of that age, to which those two barques belonged, that Miss Fox-Smith writes. Whether she remembers the South-West India Dock as it was when the *Cimba* used to berth there, or the London Dock, when the *Loch Garry* was unremarkable in the eastern basin, it is not easy to guess; but this reviewer remembers the time, and there are several things to be said about it. One is, that to read in her book again of the familiar ships, and of their masters, is delightful, for her sentiment is as tender as a summer twilight in which irony would be an offence, and derision an outrage. Those ships were beautiful, and their masters and men were seamen, and it is a pleasure to get back to them in the past in her pages. Lochaber no more! And the other thing to be said is that it is strange that good men put up with such work as those ships provided, for such rewards for so long. Rounding Cape Horn in them about July could be as bad as a longish winter spell in a bad length of the Western Front. One of those beautiful ships, this reviewer remembers, was lost on the Tasmanian coast with all hands, and he had occasion at the time to refer to her articles. The chief officer, who, of course, had the certificate of a master mariner, and was an Englishman, was fifty-two years of age; and his pay was six pounds ten shillings a month.

The Spectator 12 December 1931

Review: 'Sailors Delight'. Miss C. Fox Smith writes with ... metrical skill She is a very accomplished verse-maker and her 'Sailors Delight' has the added attraction of drawings by P. W. Smith.

The Spectator 16 January 1932

Review: "Ocean Racers". Miss Fox Smith's description of the kind of activity upon which the "commerce destroyers" practised their art is a welcome relief. She writes of the time when speed in merchant vessels had begun to be really important, the period which produced the "clipper" ships, the last and finest flower of commercial sailing. She writes quietly, accurately, and without too much technicality; the illustrations are few but good. Her book should be read and kept.

The Spectator 6 November 1936

Review: 'Adventures and Perils', edited by C. Fox Smith. Miss Fox Smith's anthology of sea stories of the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century should be bought by everybody who enjoys tales of perils at sea. Most of the contents are eye-witnesses' accounts from letters and reports – written in the plain, efficient language of the sailor.