(who, as Kathy Chamberlain’s biography of Jane Carlyle reveals, was a clever woman in her commanding manipulations) and Franklin Lushington, whom Lear loved in suppressed silence. Society for Lear, despite his insider status, was not as fertile as solitude.

Uglow is alert to the gaps in the record when it comes to a reticent Victorian. She marks these with questions. One is why Lear did not marry. His homosexual longings are clear, particularly a perhaps one-sided attraction to Lushington, with whom he travelled in Greece in the 1850s. But what can’t be known is why he didn’t follow other gay men such as his friend John Addington Symonds, who married and fathered four daughters. Now and then, Lear thought of the comforts of marriage: a caring angel in the mould of his empathic friend Emily Tennynson. His wants, he joked, were puddings and sharpened pencils, but a more romantic dream may be found in “The Owl and the Pussy-Cat”, whose protagonists sail away in a pea-green boat, for a year and a day, then marry and dance by the silvery moonlight.

During the 1860s, he dreamed of Augusta Bethell (“dear little Gussie”), the daughter of Lord Westbury, the rather bullying Lord Chancellor. Lear engaged in a “dithering dance” of approach and retreat until at length Gussie married an older man. She was “happy enough”, her sister told Lear. A poem pictures a tiny, round-faced Mr Bò who takes a fancy to Lady Jingly and feels tired of living singly. But then it’s too late: the lady weds Mr Jones, and Mr Bò takes to travelling on the back of a turtle:

Through the silent-roaring ocean
Did the Turtle swiftly go...

“Lady Jingly Jones, farewell!”
Said the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò,
Said the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò.

That repetition speaks of lone resolve. Lear kept people at arm’s length, yet had the knack of friendship. It’s the kind of friendship E M Forster characterised as peculiarly English, epitomised by a wych-elm in Howards End: at root sturdy and in its tendrils tenderness. Lear had the “only connect” compulsion: he connected with the nobility (sometimes “a norful bore”); he enjoyed small dinners with his own kind, the cultured middle class; and when he died in 1888 he was buried in San Remo beside a servant, Giorgio Kokali from Corfu. For thirty years Giorgio had tended Lear, cooking with flair and securing him a suitable chamber pot at hotels. When Giorgio retired, he asked if he might kiss his master. It’s not thought to have been a sexual tie, but they are buried, as Lear planned, side by side like a couple who have shared their lives.

These images of the visible Lear are mere “cut-outs”, his biographer declares with admirable boldness. So Uglow sets herself the challenge of seeking out “the pip”. The word comes from a late poem, “The Scoobious Pip”, and the accompanying sketch shows a multiform made up of man-beast parts, who could take any shape. We are left with this convincing image of mutability at the creative core. All the Pip will say for himself is “Pliffatty flip – Pliffity flip”. He hides himself, his biographer discerns, “as Lear hid his inner being, his desires, his epilepsy, his loneliness.”

“Outsiders: Five Women Writers Who Changed the World” by Lyndall Gordon is published by Virago on 26 October

The hills are alive: Kinchenjunga from Darjeeling (1877) by Edward Lear

Black Teeth and a Brilliant Smile
Adelle Stripe

Andrea Dunbar was only 29 when she died of a brain haemorrhage. By that time, she was a mother of three and the author of three plays, one of which – Rita, Sue and Bob Too – was adapted into a celebrated film. She was also an alcoholic whose success could not save her. This slim, vivid debut novel tells the story of the “genius of the slums”, who grew up on Bradford’s Buttershaw estate and whose writing painted a blackly comic portrait of “Thatcher’s Britain with her knickers down”. Stripe’s dialogue has a natural quickness and the glimpses inside Dunbar’s head are all the more powerful for being so sparingly deployed.

Wrecking Ball Press, 178pp, £12

When We Speak of Nothing
Oluumide Popoola

In 2011, two black teenage boys are growing up on a council estate in London’s King’s Cross, an area undergoing rapid regeneration. Soon the capital will erupt into riots after the killing of Mark Duggan. Meanwhile, Karl and Abu are trying to negotiate local thugs, first love, sexuality and identity – leading Karl to travel to Port Harcourt in Nigeria, to meet his father for the first time. The London-based Nigerian-German author Olumide Popoola delineates her characters in inventive, slang-rich prose, telling a coming-of-age story for the 21st century.

Cassava Republic, 256pp, £9.99

The Fabrications
Baret Magarian

This is a big, bold debut comic novel in which life imitates art. Daniel Bloch, a trashy novelist who seeks artistic integrity, decides to write about his directionless friend Oscar Babel in order to reanimate him. But fiction translates into reality, as Oscar becomes a messiah-like philosopher with his own talent agent, and Bloch sees his own life begin to spiral downwards. The Fabrications is an entertaining Faustian tale that captures the absurdity of contemporary life and culture.

Pleasure Boat Studio, 444pp, $19.95