The Unknown and the Unknowns: Naturalism in Scottish Domestic Fiction

By Juliet Shields

Nineteenth-century Scottish literature is full of the unknown: some of its best known figures — James Hogg, Walter Scott, Robert Louis Stevenson, George MacDonald, and J. M. Barrie — explore aspects of the magical, supernatural, irrational, or simply mysterious in their fiction. Drawing on Scotland's heroic past and native traditions, these writers helped to embalm Scotland in faerie dust, much to the disgust of later nationalists like Tom Nairn. They effaced the material realities of life in nineteenth-century Scotland and filled the void, Ossian-like, with tales of days gone by. In nineteenth-century Scotland, romance — the mode proper to explorations of the unknown — was primarily the province of male writers, who incorporated it into the historical novel, the adventure story, and the fairy tale.

What was left, then, for the comparatively few nineteenth– and early twentieth-century Scotswomen who took to writing novels? To begin to answer this question, I'm going to turn today to two such women whose current obscurity may be due in part to their rejection of this romance tradition in favor of the banalities of everyday life. Between them, Jane and Mary Findlater wrote fourteen novels, three of which they co-authored, and several of which examine the circumscribed lives of women in rural Scotland at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Their novels interest me because of what I'm calling their domestic naturalism — an unrelenting, entirely matter-of-fact focus on the events of everyday life that reveals the intellectual and material deprivation experienced by a certain class of Scotswomen. The Findlater sisters themselves were born into this class of the shabby genteel — too refined to work outside the home, and too poor to live a life of leisure. The predicament of such women is summed up by the eponymous protagonist of their 1911 novel *Penny Monypenny*. At school, Pen, as she is nicknamed, learns 'the pleasure of working in earnest, and wanted very much to have a life worth living filled with useful energy. But at Yarnoch what

was she to do?'[1]

This is a question that the Findlater sisters undoubtedly asked themselves. Daughters of a Presbyterian minister in the Highland parish of Lochearnhead, they managed to write their way out of poverty and out of the Highlands after their father's death, moving first to Edinburgh and later south to Sussex and Cornwall. *Penny Monypenny*'s narrator has no satisfactory answer to Pen's question, acknowledging that: 'To bring a girl up with just enough of education to make her an intelligent companion, yet with no single subject to occupy her mind, is virtually to admit that marriage is to be her occupation. (An ample one it is if children are included.) But then to train her to look upon marriage with distrust unless it is united with romantic passion, is probably to deprive her of the only thing that will make her life satisfactory; for romantic passions are not so common in this everyday world.'[2] Perhaps due to their very pragmatic view of marriage, neither Jane nor Mary attempted it. Their protagonists strive unceasingly but often unsuccessfully to reconcile themselves to the 'everyday world' in which comfortable contentment, let alone romantic passion, seems difficult to attain. As Douglas Gifford has observed, 'Endurance is […] what the Findlaters and their women protagonists do best.'[3]

Taking *Crossriggs* (1908), one of Mary and Jane's co-written novels, as my example in this paper, I'll suggest that the Findlaters' fiction is now largely unknown in part because it resists the romance tradition that dominated nineteenth– and early twentieth-century Scottish literature, confining itself to the rather grim material realities of everyday life. In this respect, they resemble better known late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Scottish women writers including Margaret Oliphant and Catherine Carswell, whose novels also countered the romance tradition developed by male writers from Scott and Hogg to Stevenson and Barrie. Like Oliphant's and Carswell's heroines, the Findlaters' protagonists are strong-minded women whose struggles for self-realization are hampered by their lack of money, the bleakness of their surroundings, and their obligations towards their less competent family members and dependents. The Findlaters certainly don't glorify or sentimentalize the small sacrifices their heroines make, yet they invest their daily struggles with dignity and significance merely by suggesting that these struggles are worthy of representation.

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scholars generally agree that realism entails a polite and progressive liberalism that naturalism eschews. The realist novel depicts a world of moral free agents, who, with the help of others can overcome problems and set whatever goes wrong right without leaving too many casualties by the wayside. The naturalist novel, by contrast, portrays a world 'in which individual effort guarantee[s] neither eternal salvation nor momentary happiness.'[4] Its characters' fates are to a great extent determined by heredity, environment, and chance. While naturalist fiction usually finds these forces at work in the inhospitable settings of the city or the wilderness, *Crossriggs* takes rural Scotland as its setting — not the sublime isolation of the Highlands, but the claustrophobic Lowland village. The tiny community of Crossriggs is situated in what the narrator describes as an 'unromantic bit of agricultural country' an hour's train ride from Edinburgh, where the village 'hugged itself in proud isolation.'[5]

The 'tight little' world of Crossriggs is enlarged ever so slightly when the recently widowed Matilda returns from Canada with her five children to live with her younger sister, Alex, and their father, Mr. Hope, or Old Hopeful as he's known around Crossriggs (8). '[I]n spite of widowhood and all the cares of a family', Matilda is 'the younger looking, and much more placid of the two' sisters (43). Old Hopeful, as his nickname suggests, is no more worldly-wise than Matilda. Alex observes, 'his life has been one long series of mistakes and failures, from a practical point of view, and yet his soul is alive all the time. He goes on believing and hoping and enthusing, whatever happens to himself', or, she adds bitterly, '*to others*' (82). The burden of caring for Matilda's five children falls on Alex, who struggles alone to clothe, feed, and educate them. She initially finds work reading to an elderly neighbor and teaching elocution in Edinburgh — forms of work compatible with her social station. Eventually, though, she must resort to giving public readings in order to make ends meet.

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clear that each is suffering from the necessity of constantly hiding their love while living in such close proximity. No wonder, given all these factors, that two-thirds of the way through the novel, Alex declares to her sister:

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The Findlaters' purposefulness in emphasizing the unrelenting drudgery of daily domestic life in small town Scotland is evident in the metafictional moments that punctuate Crossriggs. When Admiral Cassilis employs Alex to read to him, he specifies that the reading materials will not include novels, not because they are frivolous, but, on the contrary, because, 'Life […] is sad enough without fiction' (76). Alex counters that the sadness of life is 'so long and hard and spread out, compared to the brief romantic sorrows of fiction, that it does one good to read about them, I think, and then we can imagine that [our sorrows] are going to be like that!' (76).

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Alex's acceptance of convention perhaps plays a larger role than her futile love for Maitland in her repeated rejection of Van's declarations of love for her. Only after Alex drives Van to marry the coarse, flirtatious Dolly Orranmore does she realize how much happiness he had brought into her life: 'the image of Van — as

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The Findlaters' novels belong to a tradition of Scottish women's writing about domesticity much richer than I can describe here, extending back through Susan Ferrier all the way to Lady Grisel Baillie. Yet their novels should not be confined to that tradition. Indeed, I would suggest that situating their work in a broader context could help us do for naturalism what Scottish writing has already done for Romanticism — that is, to question the geographical and historical parameters of a particular literary aesthetic.[6] Doing so might reveal that the Findlaters have more in common with the nineteenth-century romance tradition than initially appears to be the case. The American naturalist Frank Norris claimed that while naturalism might initially seem like 'a sort of inner circle of realism — a kind of diametric opposite of romanticism', it is in fact closer kin to romance than to realism because naturalism and romance both 'range beyond the polite parlor

conversation of realism.'[7] 'Realism', Norris wrote, 'notes only the surface of things.' Naturalism, in contrast, would not 'stop in the front parlour and discuss medicated flannels and mineral waters with the ladies[…]. She would be off upstairs with you, prying, peeping, peering into the closets of the bedroom, into the nursery, into the sitting room.'[8] And it is here, hidden in these everyday spaces, that we find romance in the Findlaters' fiction.

References & Further Information

[1] Jane and Mary Findlater, *Penny Monypenny* (London: Thomas Nelson, n.d.), p.113.

[2] *Ibid*., p. 114.

[3] Douglas Gifford, 'Caught between Worlds: The Fiction of Jane and Mary Findlater', in *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, eds. Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan (Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 297.

[4] Donna Campbell, 'American Literary Naturalism: Critical Perspectives', in *Literature Compass* 8 (2011): p.499.

[5] Jane and Mary Findlater, *Crossriggs* (Virago, 1986), pp.4, 8. Subsequent references to this edition will be made parenthetically.

[6] See, for instance, Leith Davis, Ian Duncan, and Janet Sorensen, eds. *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[7] Frank Norris, 'Zola as a Romantic Writer' in *Novels and Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1986), p.1106.

[8] Frank Norris, 'A Plea for Romantic Fiction' in *Novels and Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1986), pp.1166-67.

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The Findlaters' depictions of the intellectual and social constraints of rural Scottish life, particularly for women, stand out for their rather grueling intensity. But the Findlaters' novels share in common with other late-nineteenth– and early-twentieth-century novels by Scotswomen an eschewal, or even a critique, of romance that distinguishes them from the novels of their male counterparts. Similar to the Findlaters', many of Margaret Oliphant's novels (as distinct from her ghost stories) explore women's economic and emotional sacrifices, large and small. To give just one example, the eponymous protagonist of *Kirsteen* (1890) leaves the Highlands for London rather than betray her troth to a young soldier who is fighting in India by marrying an aged and wealthy suitor at her father's command. She generously uses her earnings as a dressmaker to buy back part of the family's ancestral lands for her father, despite his insistence that she has contaminated the family name by adopting a trade. While Alex's ethic of self-

sacrifice in *Crossriggs* recalls many of Oliphant's heroines, her yearning for a wider world of possibilities prefigures Catherine Carswell's protagonists, whose resilience she shares. Like Ellen Carstairs in *The Camomile* (1922), and Joanna Bannerman in *Open the Door!* (1920), Alex recognizes that a conventional marriage to a conventional man would only stultify her. But unlike Carswell's heroines, Alex either cannot or will not explore any alternatives to the conventional.

The Findlaters' novels belong to a tradition of Scottish women's writing about domesticity much richer than I can describe here, extending back through Susan Ferrier all the way to Lady Grisel Baillie. Yet their novels should not be confined to that tradition. Indeed, I would suggest that situating their work in a broader context could help us do for naturalism what Scottish writing has already done for Romanticism — that is, to question the geographical and historical parameters of a particular literary aesthetic.[6] Doing so might reveal that the Findlaters have more in common with the nineteenth-century romance tradition than initially appears to be the case. The American naturalist Frank Norris claimed that while naturalism might initially seem like 'a sort of inner circle of realism — a kind of diametric opposite of romanticism', it is in fact closer kin to romance than to realism because naturalism and romance both 'range beyond the polite parlor conversation of realism.'[7] 'Realism', Norris wrote, 'notes only the surface of things.' Naturalism, in contrast, would not 'stop in the front parlour and discuss medicated flannels and mineral waters with the ladies[…]. She would be off upstairs with you, prying, peeping, peering into the closets of the bedroom, into the nursery, into the sitting room.'[8] And it is here, hidden in these everyday spaces, that we find romance in the Findlaters' fiction.

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