Oliphant & Co.

By Juliet Shields

Margaret Oliphant (1828-96) has attained the obscure place in English literary history that she gloomily predicted for herself in her posthumously published autobiography: 'No one will mention me in the same breath with George Eliot. And that is just. It is a little justification to myself to think how much better off she was. Should I have done better if I had been kept, like her, in a mental greenhouse and taken care of?'[1] As unfair to Eliot as this particular remark might be, it illustrates Oliphant's belief that she hadn't developed her literary talents to their full extent because she had been forced to write for a living, to support her children, nieces, nephews, and lackadaisical older brothers. Despite, or rather because of, her ninety-seven novels, and her countless short stories, essays, and reviews, Oliphant felt that she never quite measured up to her female contemporaries—Eliot, the Brontës, or Elizabeth Gaskell—and wondered whether she might have written better novels if she had written fewer of them. Yet Oliphant was not exceptional in her literary fecundity.

If scholars now rank her beneath the Englishwomen I've just named, she should by rights occupy a quite different place in Scottish literary history. There, she heads a small cadre of exceptionally prolific novelists, many of whom wrote for the periodical press, publishing their works in elite journals including *Blackwood's*, *Macmillan's*, and *Fraser's*, and in popular Evangelical magazines such as *Good Words*, the *Sunday Magazine* and *Leisure Hour*. Henrietta Keddie (1827-1914) published 103 novels under the pseudonym Sarah Tytler, as well as several books on art and history for girls; Lucy Bethia Walford (1845-1915) wrote forty-eight novels and story collections; Isabella Fyvie Mayo (1843-1914) published twenty-eight novels as Edward Garrett; Flora Annie Steel (1847-1929) wrote thirty novels and story collections, in addition to several books on Indian history and a bestselling cookbook; and Annie Shepard Swan (1859-1943) wrote approximately two hundred novels, some under the pseudonym David Lyall.

Oliphant would not be happy at my grouping her with the Henrietta Keddies, Lucy Walfords, and Annie S. Swans of the literary world, rather than as a lesser luminary in a higher class of novelists. However, examining her position at the

forefront of this group of Scotswomen makes visible a neglected tradition of nineteenth-century Scottish women's writing. Over the four decades during which she wrote for *Blackwood's*, Oliphant opened the way for her female contemporaries and successors by exploring the value, in aesthetic, economic, and social terms, of her own writing, and of what we might now call middlebrow fiction more broadly. Her countrywomen attested to her influence in their autobiographies and correspondence. Annie S. Swan acknowledged that one of her earliest novels was 'frankly modelled on the Border stories of Mrs. Oliphant, for whom I had passionate admiration, amounting to worship'. (She later declared that reading Oliphant's autobiography "gave me such a strange sensation, almost as if I read my own life, written by another hand." Henrietta Keddie recalled Oliphant as "a gifted woman, courageous and devoted", adding prophetically that "it will not be to the credit of English literature and English readers if her sound and varied work is slighted and forgotten".) And John Buchan's sister Anna, who wrote under the pseudonym O. Douglas, declared Oliphant 'without doubt the greatest Scotswoman of the [nineteenth] century'.[2] For these and other middle-class Scotswomen, Oliphant legitimated authorship as a profession: she made it respectable to write fiction for a living.

So what do these women and their writing share in common that might allow me to characterize them as a group epitomized by Oliphant? Briefly, they were middle-class Free-Church Presbyterians who wrote what we might now classify as middlebrow realist fiction, often to support themselves and their families. They combined a belief in the social and economic value of their writing as work with a skepticism concerning the aesthetic value of their writing as literature. Why have most of us never heard of most of them, given the sheer quantity of their work? Most obviously, these women owe their invisibility to the ephemerality of the media in which they tended to publish their writing, and to their preference for anonymous or pseudonymous publication. However, that these women and their works have disappeared so completely from our critical purview also reveals the masculinist bent of Scottish literary history, which in turn explains the relatively recent re-discovery of Scottish Victorianism. It's these two issues that I want to focus on today.

Let's begin with a quick glance at volume three of *The History of Scottish Literature: the Nineteenth Century*, which was published in 1988, and which includes a generous two chapters on women writers—one on Susan Ferrier and

one on Oliphant. The contributors to this volume are clearly confounded as to why they have been asked to write about Scottish Victorian literature–something that surely everyone knows doesn't exist beyond Robert Louis Stevenson and maybe George MacDonald. In his introduction to the volume, Douglas Gifford laments that nineteenth-century Scottish writers, dominated by a backwards-looking romance tradition, 'failed to respond imaginatively to society's changes, and failed to interpret and empathise with the mass of ordinary people'.[3] Christopher Harvie, in his contribution, echoes the indictment, describing the 1830s through the 1880s as a 'great "black hole" in Scottish […] literature and social thought'[4] — a black hole that should have been filled with representations of and responses to the problems accompanying Scotland's industrial growth. Gifford and Harvie imply that in clinging to romance nineteenth-century Scottish writers failed to develop their own version of the English Victorian 'novel of political practice and public doctrine', instead remaining 'stuck' at a more primitive stage on the trajectory of literary evolution.[5] In short, Scotland lacked a vibrant Victorian literature because its writers eschewed realism.

If the idea of Scottish Victorian literature, let alone Scottish Victorian literature by women, was laughable in 1988, well, times have changed. A little bit. In an essay included in *Scotland and the 19th-Century World*, published in 2012, Gifford acknowledged that *The History of Scottish Literature*'s third volume neglected 'to recognize sufficiently the achievement of women'.[6] If we take women's writing into account, Gifford concedes, Scottish literature in the latter half of the nineteenth century was in fact flourishing. Quite possibly it was co-editing with Dorothy McMillan the compendious *History of Scottish Women's Writing* (1997), that revealed to Gifford the wealth of nineteenth-century literature by Scottish women. This collection of essays on individual authors and trends in Scottish women's writing from the Renaissance to the mid-twentieth-century remains a notable contribution to the field even twenty years later, but its impact in Victorian Studies seems to have been limited. Ironically, *Scotland and the 19th-Century World* of 2012 is even less concerned with women writers than *The History of Scottish Literature* of 1988, including not a single mention of them other than Gifford's. This volume takes the value of nineteenth-century Scottish literature to lie, as its title suggests, in its engagement with the 'world'—a term that the editors take to entail 'cultural anglification, rampant industrialization,

and willing partnership in British imperial enterprise'.[7] They demonstrate Scottish writers' engagement with these issues first by expanding the reach of literature to include non-fiction prose, and second by demonstrating that romance could in fact engage with imperialism, trade, and other real-world issues. These are both useful endeavors.

Yet this volume, like its predecessors, continued to assume that there was no Scottish realist tradition. The beliefs that Victorian Scotland was either a literary black hole or a fairy-ridden realm of romance and that there were no nineteenth-century Scottish women writers, or none worth reading, turn out to be mutually sustaining. Yet Scotswomen wrote copiously in the realist mode about industrialization, imperialism, and capitalism, poverty, crime, and alcoholism. As just one example of Scottish Victorian realism, we might take Henrietta Keddie's *Saint Mungo's City* (1884), which explores the social distinctions that industrialization and imperial enterprise have created among the people of Glasgow. Keddie introduces us first to the three elderly Mackinnon sisters, who live in one of the great houses built by the Tobacco Lords before the 'tide of trade' had turned and 'sugar had got the better of tobacco, and cotton had rivalled sugar, and iron distanced cotton'.[8] These genteel but impoverished women avoid any 'silly pretence at polished instead of plain manners', and scorn 'any attempt in Scotch people to speak "high English"'.[9] By contrast, the prosperous Mrs. Drysdale, whose husband owns a textile mill, 'had somehow managed, with misdirected ambition, to give an undesirable varnish to the native Doric of her tongue, which, in robbing it of its simple rusticity, lent it a false lustre that by no means improved its quality'.[10] The Miss Mackinnons represent a refined Scottish gentry that is soon to be overwhelmed by the newly monied Drysdales and their mistaken imitation of the English middle class. Yet a younger generation already rejects these emerging social distinctions. Lieutenant Eneas Mackinnon is puzzled as to why his aunts eat 'the sparse meal of enforced self-denial and petty economy' so that they might remain in their grand but echoingly empty mansion.[11] And Tam Drysdale feels an affinity with the workers in his father's mill, until he boards a steamer boat to Rothesay in the hopes of experiencing 'for himself what the people's holiday was like' and encounters a destitute man from North Uist whose fate is intertwined with Tam's own.[12] From difficulties in sustaining life in the Highlands and Islands to the upwards and downwards mobility generated by

industrialization and British imperial endeavors, *Saint Mungo's City* is very much a novel about Scotland's engagement with the world and the world's impact on Scotland.

Saint Mungo's City is just one of many works that might be designated a 'Condition of Scotland' novel, the Scottish equivalent of a Victorian 'Condition of England' novels. Annie S. Swan's *Mary Garth: A Clydeside Romance* (1902), like *Saint Mungo's City*, explores class conflict through generational conflict as Anne Garth supports the miners in her father's coal pits in their effort to unionize. Other novels by Swan explore economic inequality and the vulnerability of the poor, especially women, in Dundee's jute mills and in Glasgow's slums. Swan's *The Guinea Stamp* (1892) and Margaret Oliphant's *Harry Muir: A Scottish Story* (1852), explore another of the evils of poverty—alcoholism. If, according to the editors of *Scotland and the 19th-Century World*, Walter Scott left nineteenth-century Scottish literature 'a wasteland[13], women writers peopled it with bustling cities and busy seaports, sleepy villages and struggling farms, depicting as economically and socially diverse a society as we find in Middlemarch or Bleak House.

The belief persists that nineteenth-century Scotland failed to develop a realist novel—the genre that we tend to regard as the acme of Victorian Britain's literary achievement. I have argued here that this supposition rests on the neglect of women's writing, and that women did in fact develop a Scottish realist novel. Yet it's worth pausing for a moment to recognize that even a concept as seemingly self-evident as 'realism' emerges from the study of what John Kerrigan calls 'Anglo Eng. Lit.', a comparatively narrow canon of works dominated by authors situated in metropolitan England. Whereas the dominant and implicitly Anglo-centric versions of British literary history recount the nineteenth-century emergence of a realist novel that privileged interiority, depth, and narrative sophistication, Oliphant opens up to us a Scottish realist mode that eschewed the grandiose scale of Scott's and Stevenson's romances while embracing their tendency to privilege plot development over character development, surface over depth, and characters' interactions over characters' introspections. Rather than imposing Anglo-centric definitions of realism onto the Scottish novel, might it not be more productive to see how Scottish literature challenges the categories that organize the study of English literature—categories that critics have been inclined to consider as, if not universal, then at least universally British?

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