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## Scottish Women...

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**Reviewer:**

Valerie Wright

Until relatively recently the in-depth historical analysis of Scottish women's lives has been the preserve of dedicated gender historians. Although it is fair to say that Scottish historians have recently begun to include the lives of women in their research, this is by no means extensive. Indeed it could be argued that although not ignored by historians, women's experience in Scottish life is generalized and women do not appear as 'complex individuals' (*Biographical Dictionary*, p. xxvii). However, increasing interest in women's roles in Scotland's history, both from the general public and in academic history, has culminated in the recent publication of several important texts. This began in January of this year with the publication of *Gender in Scottish History Since 1700* edited by Lynn Abrams, Eleanor Gordon, Deborah Simonton, and Eileen Janes Yeo. This was closely followed by the publication of *The Lives of Scottish Women* and *The Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women* within days of each other. Consequently it has been an important year for gender history in Scotland.

*The Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women* is an initiative of Women's History Scotland, an organization for the promotion of study and research in women's and gender history. It provides both a forum for discussion and a support network for women working in historical studies in Scotland. It was through such activities that the idea for the dictionary was conceived, and it is a testament to the hard work and enthusiasm of all involved with this organization that their objective has been realized. The dictionary considers the lives of 820 women and 200 or more cited co-subjects. Over 280 historians, both professional and amateur, contributed entries. The lives of women from medieval and early modern times to the present are represented, as are women from all backgrounds. The editors have also tried to ensure that the whole of Scotland is considered, including both urban and rural areas. Therefore it is truly inclusive of a range of women's experiences from throughout Scotland's history. More importantly the dictionary does not simply offer information on individuals, it presents its subjects in narrative terms, telling the full story of their lives. The editors also argue that the dictionary has the broader aim of contributing to 'a statement of national identity' by actively including women in Scotland's history and recording the many achievements of Scottish women (p. xxv). Consequently, ideas of what forms 'Scottish national identity', which the editors suggest is largely based upon the recorded achievements of men, are challenged through the inclusion of women's lives.

The entries in the dictionary are divided into several broad categories which include, among others: 'famous, eminent and celebrated' women; 'eminent and elite' women; 'tradition-bearers' such as singers and poets; 'women of achievement'; and 'political campaigners'. There are, however, many women in the dictionary who do not fit easily into any of the broad categories. It is difficult to 'pigeonhole' individuals, and this is not the intention of the dictionary. In a volume of its size, there is a limit to how many women could be included, and it is worth noting that those who were omitted for this reason are listed on *The Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women* page on the Edinburgh University Press website, where limited bibliographical information is recorded.

The overall aim of the dictionary is to provide 'accurate, readable and stimulating information, not readily available elsewhere' and this it achieves admirably (p. xxv). Indeed the dictionary provides biographical data, which is essential for any researcher or student of both Scottish women and Scottish, or British, society in any historical period. The dictionary is also easily accessible and user friendly, as no specialist knowledge is required to decipher the entries. Consequently, this volume should also appeal to a broader audience, although admittedly the price of £60 is prohibitive in this respect, and is likely to restrict sales to libraries and enthusiasts. The forthcoming issue of a paperback edition, however, should remedy this situation.

The dictionary also contains a thematic index, which is a particularly useful tool. This allows the reader to search for entries by theme, for example 'politics?', 'religion?', 'education?', etc., with individuals being present in more than one category. In order to assist researchers, the entries also include full dates and places of birth and death, as well as parents' names, where the information exists. Each entry is also accompanied by a list of accessible source materials including primary sources and archive collections as well as recent secondary material. Consequently, genealogists, local historians, and academic researchers will all benefit from the dictionary.

*The Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women* is a unique and important contribution to Scottish History and the history of women. By illuminating or recovering the real lives of Scottish women, this dictionary not only fills a gap in Scotland's historical past but forces historians to reassess the definition of Scottish identity to encompass the experiences of women.

Knox's *The Lives of Scottish Women* is another recent publication with the aim of recovering women's lives in Scottish history. Unlike the *Biographical Dictionary*, Knox limits his text to ten women and provides an analysis of their lives in terms of their beliefs and actions. He describes the book as a series of 'essays in interpretation?', each having the main objective of 'exploring the dynamic relationship between individual women and the patriarchal society they inhabited in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Scotland?' (p. 2). By placing each woman in her historical context and critiquing the views and ideologies prevalent in society that may have influenced her behaviour, Knox provides an insightful account, not only of individual lives, but also the society in which these women lived.

Individuals were selected on the basis of their own life stories, as well as for the insights that their experience provided, which Knox uses to discuss women's experiences more generally. For example Katherine Ramsay, the Duchess of Atholl, was included because of her political experiences as Scotland's first female MP and because she was the first woman to hold Cabinet rank in a Conservative Government. Knox's discussion of this individual also allows him to consider women's experiences of representative participatory politics more broadly. Knox argues that, 'the personal is therefore hugely important in this set of studies, but only in so far as it establishes a basis for a wider discourse on the nature of women's private and public lives in this period?' (p. 3).

Knox admits that his approach is open to criticism, given the exclusivity of the selection process. But he defends this on two grounds. First, it was his intention to avoid what he terms the 'usual suspects' of female biography in Scotland. He therefore made a conscious decision not to include Mary Queen of Scots, Flora MacDonald, Saint / Queen Margaret or any other woman who had lived before 1800. This was because he felt that a 'new set of female actors' was needed, whose activities, dilemmas, and problems were more immediately recognizable to women in contemporary Scotland. Indeed, figures such as those mentioned above have largely come to represent the history of Scottish women's lives and have received, and continue to receive, a comparatively large amount of attention in both academic and popular history. It is not Knox's intention to exclude such women or to claim that their lives are irrelevant, but merely to include other individuals and make them more visible in the history of Scotland. Many of his chosen subjects are well known in academic circles, indeed all are included in the *Biographical Dictionary*, but he argues that this is not the case for the general public. Consequently, a strength of Knox's publication is that it brings the lives of such women to the attention of popular history in Scotland. It is his opinion that these individuals are deserving of more recognition.

Knox's second defence is that each of his chosen subjects in some way, either directly or indirectly, influenced or shaped modern Scotland, and consequently affected the lives of other women (p. 4). He argues that through their political campaigning for different causes Jex-Blake, Lady Frances Balfour, and Eliza Wigham all challenged or altered Scottish, and British, society. The exploration of Wigham's involvement in the anti-slavery campaign also highlights the extent of the public lives of women in the early- to mid-Victorian period, as well as the development of the women's movement in Scotland. Knox's discussion of Jex-Blake considers her campaign for women's admission to the medical faculty of the University of

Edinburgh. The theme of campaigns for equality is continued in his consideration of Lady Frances Balfour's demands for the vote. In all cases Knox places the campaigns of these individuals within the context of broader demands for equality, women's education, and suffrage, thus highlighting the important role played by these women. Katherine Ramsay, on the other hand, was a lifelong opponent of women's suffrage, but was ironically Scotland's first female MP, as noted above. Discussion of her life allows Knox to provide an alternative picture of women's involvement in politics in the period after 1918.

Knox also argues that some of the women featured changed perceptions through their writings or other notoriety. Most obvious in this category is Madeline Smith, whose trial in 1857 for murdering her French lover, Knox suggests, "redefined the feminine in bourgeois society" (p. 4). He argues that the revelations made during her trial, especially concerning her pre-marital sexual relationship with her victim, challenged traditional views of female sexuality. Knox places Smith's actions within the context of Victorian sexual morality, thus explaining why her behaviour was viewed as morally scandalous. In contrast, Jane Welsh Carlyle outlined her discontent with the limitations of the ideology of middle-class domesticity, and gave voice to her desires for a more socially meaningful life, through her prolific letters. Knox suggests that like many middle-class women of her time, she perceived her own ambitions to have been stifled by marriage and the demands of running a home. Thus Knox uses her letters to uncover how such middle-class women may have resented such restrictions. The writer Willa Muir, who like Jane was married to a perceived genius, also critiqued the contemporary position of women in Scotland, as well as the history of women's subordination, in a series of influential novels and polemical pieces. Nonetheless, Willa, like Jane, often placed her husband Edwin's needs before her own. Where they had worked together on translations of literary works, Edwin was sometimes given full credit for the translation by the publishers. Although Willa often complained about this in letters to friends, she never challenged it publicly. It is not surprising, then, that in the chapter considering Muir, Knox explores the inconsistencies between feminism as an ideology and the reality of the lives of its practitioners.

Finally, other individuals were included because their experiences highlighted important aspects of women's lives. Knox's discussion of Elsie Inglis's establishment of field hospitals at the front in France and Serbia during the First World War explores the moral issues surrounding women's involvement with war. He argues that her actions questioned traditional assumptions concerning femininity and ultimately opened the door for women's involvement as combatants in warfare. The story of Mary Slessor and her rise from humble weaver to become the first female vice-consul in the British Empire is very well known in Scotland. Knox explores the issues raised by her achievement of fame and power in Africa, especially regarding the imperial project. A particular strength of this chapter is his discussion of how women like Mary could exploit loopholes in the ideology of patriarchy to empower themselves. He therefore argues that Mary's experience undermines the theory of separate spheres. Knox's final chapter considers the life of Mary Brooksbank, a working-class weaver and poet from Dundee. He suggests that her early experiences of poverty radicalized her outlook; as a result of them she was one of the first women to join the British Communist Party. As well as discussing her illustrative poetry, that outlines what life was like for working-class women, Knox uses Brooksbank's experience to discuss women's relationship with the Left in Britain, which, he argues, failed to mobilize large numbers of women in spite of its progressive policies.

The ten women chosen for inclusion in this publication, therefore, while similar in some ways, also represent a range of experiences. Knox acknowledges the fact that there is a danger in viewing women in terms of their gender alone. In contrast he suggests that men's identities are free from such characterization, with men being seen instead in terms of their class, religion, race, or other concept. However, he argues that each of the women discussed, in spite of differences in their personal wealth, power, or influence, experienced subordination in socio-economic and political structures that were built upon male dominance. This is a theme that he explores in each chapter, which is a strength of the text.

It is not Knox's intention to produce a text that outlines the totality of female experience over the last two hundred years in Scotland. Nor does he provide "a basis for the construction of a theoretical model of subordination" (p. 9). Such grand claims are out with the scope of his collection of "essays in interpretation". Indeed, when discussing concepts such as "separate sphere" and "patriarchy", he does not include theoretical

discussions but rather simple definitions. Instead it is his aim to offer an account, or insight, to the history of women's struggle in Scotland for equal rights with men. This he does through the exploration of individual lives and the different ways each woman tried to gain equality.

It is probable that Knox will also achieve his aim of helping to make the women included in his volume more visible in Scottish history, thus gaining the recognition he feels they deserve. Indeed, the format of this volume allows it to be more accessible to a general readership. Each chapter has a similar structure to the others, which facilitates comparison between the individual lives—although this can also be monotonous. Chapters begin with a clear introduction of who the individual was and why the reader might think she is important in Scotland's history. This is followed by an in-depth analysis of her character, actions, and relationships with others, notably those with significant others and parents. The effects that the discourses and ideologies present in contemporary society had on her actions and experience are then discussed. For example, why could Jane Carlyle not realize her own ambitions? Why did Willa Muir put the professional needs of her husband Edwin first? Why were the public so scandalized by Madeline Smith's sexual relationship with Emile? Knox concludes each chapter with a discussion of how that particular individual's experience may have affected others. He also outlines debates that are related to the issues that have been raised by her experience.

Each chapter in Knox's publication is based upon a variety of source material. This includes diaries, letters, and autobiographies, but he also relies extensively on secondary sources such as published biographies and studies of the individuals concerned. It is Knox's intention to challenge the existing historiography of figures such as Jane Welsh Carlyle, Mary Slessor, and Sophia Jex-Blake who have all received some scholarly attention. He attempts to expel the myths and unsubstantiated assumptions about these individuals to discover and explore their real lives and the true motives for their actions. In the case of Mary Slessor, this involved debunking her own story of her awakening to a Christian life, which led to her iconic status as a missionary.

Knox does acknowledge that there were problems with the sources he consulted. For example, some of the individuals studied, such as Sophia Jex-Blake, had instructed that primary materials such as diaries be destroyed after their death. In such circumstances Knox relies on the biographies published by others who had been permitted to view material, which he admits is not an ideal situation. Similarly, many of the quotations from diaries and letters are attributed to published studies by other authors. Consequently Knox runs the risk of replicating mistakes in these secondary sources.

This publication uses individuals to provide a platform, which the author then uses to provide a basic critique the influence of societies' discourses and ideologies on the lives of women. Its main strength is in providing interesting accounts of extraordinary individuals, but the book also considers the restrictions placed on women, and why it was such an achievement that the subjects transcended such boundaries, each in their own way. Another strength of the book is in bringing the lives of these women to the attention of the general public. In fact the volume is more successful in this respect than as an academic text—even the author acknowledges the limitations of the volume—but this does not detract from the fact that Knox is attempting to make the ten women included in the volume more visible in the history of Scotland.

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