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Shields, Juliet. *Scottish Women's Writing in the Long Nineteenth Century: The Romance of Everyday Life.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 212pp.

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<1>"If romance was masculine literary territory in nineteenth-century Scotland," Juliet Shields asks, "how did Scotswomen who aspired to authorship navigate this terrain?" (6) Shields explores the work of a handful of Scottish women writers—all extremely popular in their time, and some enduringly so—to assess how they responded to the looming shadow of Walter Scott. The result is a reappreciation of a body of work that has been neglected by critics who have embraced both the Great Tradition of the English (not *British*) realist novel and the high-art aesthetics of modernism, as well as by a Scottish literary tradition that "has celebrated the male romancers who followed Scott over their female counterparts" (7).

<2>In five jam-packed and immensely readable chapters, Shields makes a strong case for a reevaluating an intriguingly eclectic group of writers, not just on their own terms, but also in relation to one another. She starts, appropriately, with Margaret Oliphant, whose influence on the other writers in this study is as important as Scott's, and whom Shields characterizes as a "foster-mother" or "sister-mother" to her successors (22). The other Scottish women writers who are given significant attention in this work include Annie S. Swan, sisters Jane and Mary Findlater (who published both separately and jointly), Mona Caird, Flora Annie Steel, Violet Jacob, Anna Buchan (sister of the more famous John, and who published under the pseudonym O. Douglas), and Catherine Carswell. In each chapter, Shields analyzes several novels by each writer, thus giving readers who are not already familiar with specific writers' work a good introduction to it.

<3>Shields's analysis is shaped not only by her assessment of how Scott's historical romances constructed a particular textual tradition that Scottish novelists in general were pressured to embrace, but also by her careful consideration of the particular pressures on Scottish women writers in the century between Scott's death and the

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interwar period. In a sense, this is an investigation that draws from both Bloom's "anxiety of influence" and Gilbert and Gubar's "anxiety of authorship." For example, Shields points to the importance of Evangelical Presbyterianism on artistic and literary expression, especially by women, noting that the Scottish Church's disapproval of novel reading (and writing) and its simultaneous "valorization of sober industriousness" led most of the writers to emphasize that fiction was a valuable "restorative and consolatory form of escape from the monotony of the mundane" (16).

<4>The novels included in this study are quite different in content, style, and substance, ranging from Oliphant's realist novels of domestic life to Swan's sunny serials for working-class girls and women to Steel's gender-reversed "imperial romances" that make women characters into heroes of the Raj to Caswell's impressionistic and sexually frank modernist fiction. But Shields notes that what unites them is a conviction that the novel's purpose is "to provide comfort, refreshment, and pleasure" to readers (182). The subtitle of Shields's study points to another commonality, and that is that most of the writers attempt to present that refreshment and pleasure through a focus on the "everyday." Describing Swan's popularity, for example, Shields observes that Swan's plots tended to be fairly realistic, that her characters were shaped by "local economies and customs," and that their settings in the environments in which her readers lived and worked "allowed readers to see versions of themselves and their world in print" (75). The novelists knew that their readers did turn to fiction for relief and relaxation, whether they were Swan's factory girls or the Findlaters' middle-class wives and mothers, women who had benefited from the higher standards of female education offered to them in Scotland but whose outlets for self-actualization were limited by their remote locales and familial obligations. Revealing the beauty that was near at hand and the opportunities to live meaningful lives of domestic love and service might look like a deeply conservative move, but Shields argues persuasively that such plots provided their readers with "a kind of spiritual renewal—a temporary escape from the petty trials of everyday life that prepare[d] readers to reengage with those trials, newly restored, possibly even fortified" (182).

<5>In addition to offering a new valuation of these novelists' fiction—a valuation that reminds us that "nineteenth-century Scottish women writers will inevitably be found wanting" if they are "[j]udged by the standards they rejected" rather than by the ones they espoused (183)—Shields also offers a valuable new way of reconsidering these writers' self-presentations. Oliphant's self-presentation in her *Autobiography,* where she wistfully notes she will likely never be favorably compared to George Eliot, because she had too much work to do, too quickly, to

aspire to genius, is a well-known example of self-effacement. But Oliphant's case looks less pathetic when she is set besides the other Scottish women writers and we are reminded that the Scottish Church frowned on frivolous expenditures of time and energy. Shields points out that nearly all of these women—like Oliphant—"disclaimed, sometimes vehemently, any aspirations to literary genius" and instead—again like Oliphant—figured themselves more simply as "competent craftswomen or skilled trade workers" (16). Presenting themselves as skilled workers—not artistic geniuses—who could work steadily at a trade that brought relief and pleasure to their fellows' leisure hours enabled them both to justify their own work to the world and to invest themselves in its constant production and renewal.

<6>"Therapeutic reading, or reading to heal the frazzled soul," Shields reminds us at the end of her study, "often entailed returning to a single favorite novel or set of novels." Similarly, "The practice of writing to a pattern" allowed Oliphant, Swan, and others "to offer readers the comforting familiarity they sought while also producing a 'new' novel" (183). These Scottish women novelists' attentiveness to and transformation of the details of "everyday life" into romance encouraged readers to become "absorbed in the everyday world around us," thereby "lift[ing] us out of the self and restor[ing] us to a momentary unity with that world" (186). Shields work should encourage us to return to these works with a new sense of appreciation for what they can offer us, especially for the pleasures of a well-worn plot and a satisfyingly happy ending.

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