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IN VICTORIAN BRITAIN

SALLY MITCHELL, *Series Editor*

VICTORIAN URBAN SETTINGS  
*Essays on the Nineteenth-Century  
City and Its Contexts*  
edited by Debra N. Mancoff  
and D.J. Trela

VICTORIAN URBAN  
SETTINGS

ESSAYS ON THE  
NINETEENTH-CENTURY CITY  
AND ITS CONTEXTS

EDITED BY  
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## 7

## "Oor Location": Scotswomen Poets and the Transition from Rural to Urban Culture

Florence S. Boos

Noo the bodies are gane an' their dwallin's awa'  
An' the place whaur they stood I scarce ken noo ava,  
For there's roarin' o' steam an' there's reengin' o' wheels,  
Men workin', an' sweatin', an' swearin' like deils.

An' the flame-tappit furnaces staun' in a raw,  
A' bleezin' an' blawin' an' smee kin' awa',  
Their eerie licht brichtenin' the laigh hingin' cluds,  
Gleamin' far ower the loc an' the mirk lanely wuds.

—"Gartsherrie," Janet Hamilton

**T**he distinctive contribution of Mary MacPherson, Bell Robertson, Janet Hamilton, Mathilde Blind, and Violet Jacob to the literary culture of late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century Scotland has been largely forgotten, as their less-than-instant name-recognition might suggest. Like their fictional English counterparts present in the writings of Elizabeth Gaskell, studied in this volume by Alisa Clapp, these women gave gender-inflected expres-

sion to a culture marked by constant toil and material anxiety amid great natural beauty, but their attachment to their "mither tongue" also resonated with varying degrees of nationalist and anti-landlordist sentiments and a clear sympathetic identification with the hardships of fellow women.<sup>1</sup> To give a sense for some of the political themes that attracted these women, I will first examine three Victorian Scottish women poets – Mary MacPherson, Bell Robertson, and Janet Hamilton – who consciously tried to record some of the effects of agrarian immiseration, rural blight, and the disintegrating forces of urban conditions. I will then compare their work with that of Mathilde Blind's narration of violent evictions as formal tragedy and consider briefly an attempt by a post-Victorian "internal outsider," Violet Jacob – an educated and sophisticated member of East Angus society – to recover some of the language-patterns and values she projected onto Scottish peasants. All along this spectrum of growing distance from agrarian life women sought to defend, then to preserve and recover social and linguistic patterns of agrarian life that steadily receded from view, and bridge the growing distance between an unreachable past and an ineluctable present.

In my readings from the work of about a hundred Scottish women poets, I have, of course, noticed many parallels with such English Victorians as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Augusta Webster, Christina Rossetti, Jean Ingelow, Amy Levy, or Mary Coleridge, but there are distinctive traits as well. These Scottish women's poems characteristically mix sympathy, complaint, and satire with occasional calls for resistance, and they often share a strong social and political focus, a preoccupation with issues of poverty and labor, and an intense identification with Scottish regional landscapes and the Scots language. Women in the Scotswomen's writings are more likely to be mothers and workers, whose courageous efforts to sustain families the poems commemorate. Many poems also mourn the death of children, and grieve the loss and disruptions of forced exile to the United States or elsewhere; for most of these women, immigration was a source of familial pain and regret, not hope. A separate subgenre

of historical and religious poems celebrates Covenantors and other Presbyterian heroes, and still another pleads in impassioned rimes for temperance. Several of these poems also refract particular social and demographic shifts of nineteenth-century Scotland: depopulation of the Highlands and consequent movement of farmpeople from the countryside to the overcrowded slums of Glasgow and Edinburgh.

The most obvious marker of Scottish women poets, of course, is their use of the Scots (or Anglo-Scots) language. There are several registers of Scots linguistic usage, from Gaelic, to Central Scots, to Standard English shaded with a few Scottish elisions or vowel changes, and most of these writers wrote "English" as well as Scots poems. But the latter are usually among their best work.

Only a few poets of those I have read – Jessie Russell, Marion Bernstein, Joanna Picken, and Bessie Craigmyle, among them – express support for women's suffrage or women's rights to nondomestic work. Most of these writers, however, seem to assume that women should freely state their views on public and private affairs, as they condemn wife-beaters, sympathize with poor workers, and focus more generally on the economic problems of women's lives. They seemed to expect an audience that would appreciate nuances of speech-patterns that reflected regional and class differences, take seriously issues of contemporary Scottish politics and religion, and accept philanthropic sentiment and portrayals of daily life as natural features of poetic topography.

Late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century literary circles fostered Romantic attempts to appreciate distinctive and geographically specific aspects of poetic expression in the language of the rural, regional "folk." Ballads and broadsides had always replicated some features of everyday speech, but the poems of Robert Burns ("What can a young lassie do wi' an old man"; "I hae a wife o' my ain"; "Galloway Tam") and the Scottish novels of Walter Scott facilitated an assumption that certain dialect and regional usages were especially appropriate to emotions of national identity, as well as familial warmth.

As Martha Vicinus noted years ago in *The Industrial Muse*, however, the nineteenth-century dialect poetry of northern industrial England faced inherent limitations: "Dialect had originally been written out of a strong sense of place and class, but a writer who attempted to appeal to a mass audience diluted whatever made his writing unacceptable to his potential audience. . . . Only by writing platitudes acceptable to everybody could such a problem be avoided" (229). The extensive home audience for Scots language writing, by contrast, diminished the need for such accommodation and "dilution," for English laws, customs, and language usages were still felt as inimical colonial impositions more than a century after the Act of Union. The language in which Scottish poets naturally sang and spoke may have been a provincial argot to London bookbuyers, but the Scots prized its lilting rhythms and melodies for their blunt satire and unaffected lyricism.<sup>2</sup>

During the nineteenth century, population shifts and the rise of Scottish industrial centers produced significant changes in the country's social and linguistic patterns. In the fifty years between 1851 and 1901, the proportion of males employed in agriculture dropped from 30 to 14 percent, and the population of the Highlands declined steadily as the population of Scotland continued to grow (Smout 58). More precisely, the population of Scotland grew 12 to 14 percent each decade between 1861 and 1911, but a declining birth rate and heavy emigration depleted the population of the Highland counties in every decade after 1841. About 20 percent of the population lived in the Far Northern and Highland Counties in 1801, 15.7 percent in 1841, and 8.3 in 1901 (Flinn 38). Much of this emigration from the Highlands was forced in "clearances" effected by violence and accompanied by great suffering. Lowland agrarian regions were also depopulated in the same period, but their emigration was for the most part voluntary, and unattended by comparable forms of cultural resistance and disintegration.

Historians agree that the Highland landscape was unable to support a large population, for the soil was thin and poor, grazing was feasible only in summer, and the

area's valleys supported potato crops that were small at best. The Gaelic-speaking inhabitants of this region were intensely reluctant to leave their traditional land, however, for they believed passionately (in the words of one historian) that "occupation of a traditional area of land, and not acquisition of new wealth, was the greatest good that life had to offer" (Smout 64). Strongly motivated by the desire to preserve their language and the cohesion of their families, crofters and even more marginal cotters (or sub-tenants), divided and subdivided their small holdings among their children rather than emigrate from their wildly beautiful ancestral lands, drawing small supplementary incomes from kelp-gathering, fishing, and migrant farm labor.

A few quotations may illustrate the limited resources available to these subsistence Highland crofters. One of the region's most enlightened landlords was James Matheson, who bought the Isle of Lewis in 1844 and invested much of his income derived from other sources to support the local economy in ways that enabled his tenants to remain. Even under these ideal conditions, however, a visitor to the Outer Hebrides in the 1880s described a typical Lewis croft:

The typical Lewis crofter's house was built by the crofter himself; it had double low thick walls of loose stone united by a packing of earth or clay . . . There was no chimney and often no window. . . only one door, used by the cattle and family alike. Inside, the house usually contained three compartments. In the middle was the living room with a blazing peat-fire filling the house with smoke. Rough stones covered with clay made a cold and damp floor. On the one side of this middle compartment was the sleeping room, on the other the byre. The byre had no paving, and the manure liquids percolated into the ground. (Day 296)

Lowland laws interpreted landlords' traditional rights to dues from hereditary tenants as full ownership rights with the privilege of alienation,<sup>3</sup> and most Highland landlords in the mid- and late-nineteenth century tried to consolidate small plots into larger ones, replaced crofts with sheep pasturage and then with tourist deer-parks, and encouraged former tenants to rely on marginal industries, such as kelp-gathering, which proved to be unprofitable in

the long run (Mitchinson, ch. 21, Smout, ch. 3). Even in the 1820s, Sir Walter Scott wrote that

... the Highlands have been drained, not of their superfluity of population, but of the whole mass of the inhabitants, dispossessed by an unrelenting avarice, which will be one day found to have been as short-sighted as it is unjust and selfish. Meantime, the Highlands may become the fairy-ground for romance and poetry, or the subject of experiment for the professors of speculation, political and economical. But if the hour of need should come – and it may not, perhaps, be far distant – the pibroch may sound through the deserted region, but the summons will not be answered. (Blind 116)

During the Sutherland Clearances of 1811-20, the Ross-shire Clearance of 1855, and a later series of forced evictions in the Outer Hebrides, Skye, and Tiree that led to the Highland Land War of 1881-86, landlords' agents torched crofters' homes, and forced the inhabitants onto emigrant ships.<sup>4</sup> Archibald Geikie, a geologist, visited the Isle of Skye during the eviction of tenants from the Macdonald lands in the 1880s, and later described a scene like that of Richard Redgrave's painting, *The Emigrant's Last Sight of Home* (1858).

As I was returning from my ramble, a strange wailing sound reached my ears at intervals on the breeze from the west. On gaining the top of one of the hills on the south side of the valley, I could see a long and motley procession winding along the road. . . . It halted at the point of the road opposite Kilbride, and there the lamentation became loud and long. . . . It was a miscellaneous gathering of at least three generations of crofters. There were old men and women, too feeble to walk, who were placed in carts; the younger members of the community on foot were carrying their bundles of clothes and household effects, while the children, with looks of alarm, walked alongside. . . . When they set forth once more, a cry of grief went up to heaven, the long plaintive wail, like a funeral coronach, was resumed, and after the last of the emigrants had disappeared behind the hill, the sound seemed to re-echo through the whole wide valley of Strath in one prolonged note of desolation. The people were on their way to be shipped to Canada. (Geikie, 226-27)

Resistance to these evictions especially inspired two of the poets we will consider, Mary MacPherson and Mathilde

Blind. Fierce expressions of outrage informed the powerful Gaelic poems of the Inverness and Glasgow poet Mary MacPherson (Màiri Nic A' Phearsain, "Big Mary of the Songs," 1821-98). Her Gaelic songs forcefully lament in sometimes formulaic descriptors the decline of an ancient rural culture, and place clear blame on landowners and their hired militia. In "Nuair Bha Mi Og" ("When I Was Young"), the speaker returns to the depopulated countryside of her youth, then bitterly joins other forced emigrants at the ballad's end:

... Ach dh'fhalbh an t-àm sin 's tha 'n gleann fo bhròn;  
Bha 'n tobht aig Anndra 's e làn de fheanntaig,  
Toirt 'na mo chuimhne nuair bha mi òg. . .  
'S nam faicinn sluagh agus tighean suas annt',  
Gum fàsainn suaimhneach mar bha mi òg.

Nuair chuir mi cùl ris an eilean chùbhraidh,  
'S a ghabh mi iùbhrach na smùid gun seòl,  
Nuair shéid i 'n dùdach 's a shin an ùspairt,  
'S a thog i cùrsa of Thìr a Cheò;  
Mo chridhe brùite 's na deòir le m' shùilean,  
A' falbh gu dùthaich gun sùird, gun cheòl,  
Far nach faic mi cluaran no neòinean guanach,  
No fraoch no luachair air bruaich no lòn.

[. . . but that time's past and the glen's in gloom;  
Andrew's croft, overgrown with nettles,  
reminding me of when I was young. . .  
had I seen houses and people there still  
I'd be happy as I was when young.

When I turned my back on the fragrant island,  
and boarded the steam-ship which has no jib,  
when she blew her horn and began her churning,  
and made her way from the Isle of Mist,  
my heart was broken, my eyes tear-filled,  
leaving for a land without cheer or song,  
where I see no thistle nor joyful daisy,  
no heather nor rushes on brae or lawn.] (88-91)

Even in the English rendering of Meg Bateman, the heavily stressed, chantlike alliterative and assonantal patterns of the poem resonate mournfully with a sense of the dignity of a lost way of life.

In her 1885 "Incitement of the Gaels," MacPherson urged election of the candidates of the Highland Land Law

Reform Association, who supported the crofters' right to retain their holdings. She reviews for her audience the bloody suppression and forced emigration of the inhabitants of the Isle of Skye, the scene of Geikie's reminiscence quoted above. In the instance she records, local landowners, their Sheriff "Ivory" and his troops crushed a rent-strike, called by crofters to protest the theft of their traditional grazing rights.

Dh'ainmichirín iad air an cinn,  
Bha seinn air ainneart luchd an fhearainn,  
A thionndaidh 'n còta air an druim,  
'S a dh'ith na rann dhe'n d'rinn iad ealain.

Falbh le leabhraichean 's 'gan seinn  
Dha na suinn a bh'aig a' bhaile -  
"Gheibh sibh mìl air bàrr an fheòir  
Am Manitoba, is na fanaibh."

Phàidh na h-uachdarain dhaibh duais  
Mas do ghluais iad o'n a' bhaile,  
Ach 's e'n gad air an robh 'n t-iasg  
A fhuair na sìochairean, 's iad falaigh.

[I could name them one by one,  
who sang against the owners of the land  
and turned their coats upon their backs  
and ate the words which had been their art.

Who went with books, declaiming loudly  
to the young men working the homelands,  
"Why stay here when you can reap honey  
from the top of the grass in Manitoba?"

The landowners offered to pay a reward  
to the young men if they'd leave the township,  
but it was only the withe where the fish had hung  
the wretches got when they were starving.]

The Crofters' Holdings Act of 1886 finally legalized the crofters' right to fixed rents determined by an independent commission, conferred tenure to those who paid these rents, and granted tenants the right to will their land to their heirs. Sadly, however, the population continued to decline throughout the next century. First World War casualties, mechanized farming, contraction of the merchant fleets that provided supplementary fishing income,

and a complex series of other economic changes made more gradual and "voluntary" the dislocation (most) Highland landlords had forcibly begun.

Another voice of lament and protest was that of the Grampian poet Bell Robertson, as recorded in her ballads in the *Greig-Duncan Book of Ballads*, vol. II, *Lays of Buchan and Other Poems*. Robertson's language seems normalized towards Standard Central Scots, but her lilt-ing rhythms grieve the impoverishment of land-reconversion, and attack the landowner who has seized common grazing land.

I hae seen the lambs bleating their careful dams weep-  
ing,  
To guard them frae Lowrie that made them his prey,  
Now Lowrie is starvin', it's what he's deservin'  
Since the beauty of Buchan is banished away. . . .

Woe to our gentry, they've ruined a' our country,  
And brought our fine pasture so deep in decay  
Mong hedges and ditches they've spent a' our riches,  
And banished our beauty entirely away.

Lament all ye shepherds for want o' your clipherds,  
Wi' sighing and sobbing and sorrow for aye;  
Let my song be respected since sheep is rejected,  
And they from their pastures are banished away.

Although the focus of her work was different, one of the most striking of the Scottish women poets was Janet Thompson Hamilton (1795-1873), a Lanarkshire spinner and weaver, and mother of ten, who learned to write at fifty-four, and composed two volumes of poetry and several prose sketches of rural life.<sup>5</sup> A resident of the village of Langloan near Coatbridge (outside of Glasgow), she died before the most violent and publicized of the late-century Highland clearances, but witnessed many shades of the transition from agrarian to urban life. Her political poems and satires, in her native "Doric" and a separate Glaswegian-influenced dialect, memorialized the tales told by her country grandmother, attacked city life and misuse of science and wealth, and noted the hazards of coal-mining and the oppression of women seamstresses. "Oor Location," for example, canvasses a grittily detailed cityscape of toiling workers and tavern-frequenters:

A hunner funnels bleezin', reekin',  
 Coal an' ironstane, charrin', smeeikin';  
 Navvies, miners, keepers, fillers,  
 Puddlers, rollers, iron millers;  
 Reestit, reekit, raggit laddies,  
 Firemen, enginement, an' Paddies;  
 Boatmen, banksmen, rough and rattlin',  
 'Bout the wecht wi' colliers battlin', [weight]  
 Sweatin', searin', fechtin', drinkin',  
 Changehouse bells an' gill-stoups clinkin'. [drinking cups]  
 Police-ready men and willin' -  
 Aye at han' when stoups are fillin',  
 Clerks, an' counter-louppers plenty,  
 Wi' trim moustache and whiskers dainty,  
 Chaps that winna staun at trifles,  
 Min' ye they can han'le rifles. . . .  
 Frae whence cums misery, want, an' wo,  
 The ruin, crime, disgrace an' shame,  
 That quenches a' the lichts o' hame,  
 Ye needna speer, the feck ot's drawn [ask;bulk]  
 Out o' the change-house and the pawn.

The industrial Glasgow whose overcrowding Hamilton decried in the 1860s had been a place of rapid change since the early 1800s, when its sudden growth of population herded its new inhabitants into squalid tenements. Augmented by newcomers from the countryside, between 1830 and 1870 the population surged from 200,000 to 500,000, with an increase of 70,000 between 1840 and 1850 alone, and the suburbs grew faster than the inner city (Cage 9). Ninety-four percent of the population was working class, according to the census of 1841, and these people labored to make Glasgow a leading center for all the engineering and mechanized trades (1-7). In 1842, Edwin Chadwick's *Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* called the city "possibly the filthiest and unhealthiest of all the British towns of this period . . . in the courts of Argyle Street there were no privies or drains, and the dung heaps received all the filth which the swarms of wretched inhabitants could give." Some sections of Glasgow had a population density of 500 to 1000 per acre by 1860, but not before the 1866 City Improvement Act was any attempt made to control the excesses of tenement housing or to provide new dwellings. The mortality rate surged from epidemics of cholera and typhus, and by 1850

one half of all children born in Glasgow died before their fifth birthday. Although epidemics became less prevalent after the 1850s, only in the 1870s did the death-rate begin to decline (Cope 43-47; 75).

Against this background, it is hardly surprising that thoughtful observers such as Hamilton commented with satiric bitterness at the industrial "progress" that had disrupted an entire way of life.

It's Mannon we worship, wi' raspin' and' greed,  
 Wi' sailin' an' railin' at telegraph speed,  
 Get gowd oot the ironstane, an' siller frae coal,  
 An' thoosan's on thoosan's draw oot o' ae hole.  
 Wi' oil shale aneath us, an' fire-warks abune,  
 I think we'll tak' lowe, an' bleeze up to the mune.  
 "Rhymes for the Times: IV. 1865"

In other poems, she denounces the ravaging of once-peaceful areas such as Gartsherrie and "sweet Simmerlee".

Oot-ower the aud brig, up to sweet Simmerlee,  
 Sweet, said ye? - hech, whaur? - for nae sweetness I  
 see;  
 Big lums spewin' reek an' red lowe on the air,  
 Steam snorin' an' squeelin', and shiles muckle mair!

Explodin' an' smashin' an' crashin', an' then  
 The wailin' o' women an' goranin' o' men,  
 A' scowther't an' mangle't, ase painfu' to see -  
 The sweetness is gane, noo it's black Simmerlee.  
 "A Wheen Aul' Memories": III. "Simmerlee"

Noo, mark ye, the ashes, the dross, an' the slag -  
 Wad ye think it was they put the win' i' the bag  
 O' the big millionaires; that 'mang danners an' cinnars,  
 The Co. should ha'e gather't sic millions o' shiners?  
 "A Wheen Aul' Memories": IV. "Gartsherrie"

The growth of the Glaswegian alcoholic subculture was an obvious reaction to the unbearable stress of these changes, and one response in turn was one of the British Isle's more vigorous temperance movements, with a large radical wing that promoted many forms of worker self-help and non-alcoholic entertainments. Keir Hardie was among many labor leaders who began their political lives in a Good Templar Lodge (Cage 163). Quite a bit of poetry

was composed for temperance recitation and singing, and many of Janet Hamilton's poems, such as "The Drunkard's Wife," "The Contrast," "Neebor Johnnie's Complaint," and "The Plague of Our Isle," are spirited or moving examples of this genre. In "The Three Golden Balls," for example, she attacks the owner of the local pawnshop as a profiteer in human weakness:

Vampire-like, the blood he drains  
From the drunkard's burning veins,  
The whisky-shop absorbs his cash,  
The pawn-shop swallows down the trash  
Of household gear and wretched clothing.  
Ah! my soul is sick to loathing  
Of the sights, and sounds, and crimes  
Of these murder-tainted times,  
When a bath of blood has charms,  
And power to set a world in arms;  
And the bather may be bolder  
If a forty-ticket holder. [eligible voter]

Hamilton does not sentimentalize rural life, either. One of her "Doric" poems, for example – "Grannie's Crack aboot the Famine in Auld Scotlan' 1739-40" – brings the same passion for telling detail to the ravages of an eighteenth-century famine in the countryside.

More remarkable, perhaps, are Hamilton's self-reflective observations on her own language usage, in two poems, "A Plea for the Doric," and "Auld Mither Scotland." In the first, she laments the passing of her "mither" speech:

Nae, mither! nae; we maunna pairt!  
E'en tho' they say thou's deein';  
That speech is gaun, they say thy face  
We'll sune nae mair be seein'.  
But oh! I fear the Doric's gaun,  
For, mang baith auld an' young,  
There's mony noo that canna read  
Their printit mither tongue.

At one point, she even makes a rare direct reference to English economic imperialism and linguistic dominance:

I like the English tongue fu' well  
In writin' an' in readin';  
But 'tween the English an' the Scotch

There's lack o' truth an' breedin'.  
It's England's meteor flag that burns  
Abune oor battle plains;  
Oor victories, baith by sea an' lan',  
It's England aye that gains.

Her sense that linguistic assimilation is one of the deepest forms of personal loss and cultural betrayal – a sense shared by many members of subordinated cultures – resonates in her "Plea for the Doric":<sup>6</sup>

Forgi'e, oh, forgi'e me, auld Scotlan', my mither!  
Like an ill-deedie bairn, I've ta'en up wi' anither;  
And aft thy dear Doric aside I hae flung,  
To busk oot my sang wi' the prood Southron tongue. . . .

Juist think gif the "Cottar's ain Saturday Nicht"  
War stripped o' the Doric, wi' English bedicht –  
To the leal Scottish heart it wad ne'er be the same;  
Wi' sic truth and sic feelin' it wadna strike hame. . . .

I'm wae for Auld Reekie; her big men o' print  
To Lunnon ha'e gane, to be nearer the mint;  
But the coinage o' brain looks no a'e haet better,  
Though Doric is banish'd frae sang, tale, and letter.

But there's a'e thing I'm sure o – ere lang I maun gang,  
Yet aye whan I dow I maun lilt a bit sang;  
And sae soun' shall I sleep 'neath the auld mossy stane,  
That I'll never hear tell whan the Doric is gane.

The "big men o' print" to whom she refers probably included Norman MacLeod of *Good Words*, which had a circulation of 110,000 before it moved from Edinburgh to London in 1862. The first editors of the *Spectator* and the *Saturday Review* were also Scots (James Rintoul and J. Dutton Cook, respectively), and after Hamilton's time the *Scots Observer* moved southward to become the *National Observer* in 1890.<sup>7</sup>

The Glasgow region's many women and children handweavers earned less-than-subsistence wages, and in "The Lay of the Tambour Frame," Hamilton described the common plight of embroiderers and other needleworkers in rhythms which replicate the heavy monotony of their labor. In stark contrast to the delicately weaving "Lady of Shalott," the tambour worker (embroiderer) is:



There, with colourless cheek;  
 There, with her tangling hair;  
 Still bending low o'er the rickety frame,  
 Seek, ye will find her there.  
 Tambour, ever tambour,  
 With fingers cramped and chill; -  
 The panes are shattered, and cold the wind  
 Blows over the eastern hill.

Notice Hamilton's use here of standard English, perhaps in an effort to appeal to a wider audience. In the tradition of Thomas Hood's "The Song of the Shirt" (1843), she exhorts men to support their working sisters:

Selfish, unfeeling men!  
 Have ye not had your will?  
 High pay, short hours; yet your cry, like the leech,  
 Is, Give us, give us still.  
 She who tambours - tambours  
 For fifteen hours a day  
 Would have shoes on her feet, and dress for church,  
 Had she a third of your pay. . . .

Raise ye a fund to aid  
 In times of deep distress;  
 While man helps man, to their sisters in need  
 Brothers can do no less.  
 Still the tambourer bends  
 Wearily o'er the frame.  
 Patterns oft vary, for fashions will change -  
 She is ever the same.

Hamilton's poems and reminiscences effectively memorialized the transition from weaving to coal-mining and factory work, from village to city outskirts and urban slum, and cautioned her fellow workers to care for the well-being of their neighbors and families. MacPherson and Robertson reworked traditional materials to celebrate cultural and human loss, but Hamilton struggled in her complex exhortations to accommodate the vanishing Scottish language and way of life of the urban industrial environment which engulfed her.

One of the century's more remarkable narrative poems about rural Scotland is "The Heather on Fire," Mathilde Blind's saga of the members of a Skye family who are evicted from their home, forced onto an emigrant ship, and die when the ship wrecks on a nearby coast. Published

the year of the passage of the Crofters' Act of 1886, it was written by the German-born and English-educated poet and biographer Mathilde Blind, daughter of a political exile and lifelong supporter of progressive causes, who had spent several summers in Scotland. Before she published "The Heather on Fire" at the age of 45, Blind had written biographies of George Eliot and Madame Roland, translated Strauss's *The Old Faith and the New*, and published *The Prophecy of St. Oran and Other Poems*.<sup>8</sup>

"The Heather on Fire" is the most ambitious historical poem I have found by a Victorian woman on a Scots subject, and it presents the forced evictions of the Highlands - the likely backgrounds of the members of the Skye family, their histories of attachment for each other, and the nature of their daily work - in carefully elaborated social and physical detail. Blind writes in high English diction whose similes and formal versification are sometimes stilted, but events and set-pieces borrowed from Greek or Senecan tragedy are rendered more poignant and believable by Blind's detailed treatment and careful historical setting.

In her preface, Blind recorded her 1884 visit to the site of a ruined village:

All that remained of the once flourishing community was a solitary old Scotchwoman, who well remembered her banished countrymen. Her simple story had a thrilling pathos, told as it was on the melancholy slopes of North Glen Sannox, looking across to the wild broken mountain ridges called "The Old Wife's Steps." Here, she said, and as far as one could see, had dwelt the Glen Sannox people, the largest population, then collected in any one spot of the island, and evicted by the Duke of Hamilton in the year 1832. The lives of these crofters became an idyll in her mouth. She dwelt proudly on their patient labour, their simple joys, and the kind, helpful ways of them; and her brown eyes filled with tears as she recalled the day of their expulsion, when the people gathered from all parts of the island to see the last of the Glen Sannox folk ere they went on board the brig that was bound for New Brunswick, in Canada. "Ah, it was a sore day that," she sighed, "when the old people cast themselves down on the sea-shore and wept." . . . the once happy people were all gone - gone, too, their dwelling-places, and, to use the touching words of a Highland minister, "There was not a smoke there now." (3-4)

Blind's endnotes describe the firing of crofts and the pain and deaths of those evicted, events which she conflated in the climax of her plot.

Timber, furniture, and every other article that could not be instantly removed was consumed by fire, or otherwise utterly destroyed. . . . Some old men took to the woods and the rocks, wandering about in a state approaching to or of absolute insanity; and several of them in this situation lived only a few days. Pregnant women were taken in premature labour, and several children did not long survive their sufferings. . . . In such a scene of devastation it is almost useless to particularise the cases of individuals: the suffering was great and universal. I shall, however, notice a very few of the extreme cases, of which I was myself an eye-witness. John Mackay's wife, Ravigall, in attempting to pull down her house, in the absence of her husband, to preserve the timber, fell through the roof. She was in consequence taken in premature labour, and in that state was exposed to the open air and to the view of all the bystanders. . . . I was present at the pulling down and burning of the house of William Chisholme, Badinloskin, in which was lying his wife's mother, an old bedridden woman of nearly one hundred years of age, none of the family being present. . . . Fire was set to the house, and the blankets in which she was carried out were in flames before she could be got out. She was placed in a little shed, and it was with great difficulty they were prevented from firing it also. Within five days she was a corpse.<sup>9</sup>

Blind's tale is arranged into four cantos, or "duan," which trace three generations in the life of a doomed Highland family. The old grandfather Rory, crippled during the Napoleonic Wars, has since been unable to farm, and his wife has done field-labor as well as raised their children. Their son Michael marries the poem's heroine, Mary, orphaned daughter of Rory's comrade Donald, and they have four children by the time the evictions begin, in "Duan Third".<sup>10</sup> "Duan First" describes the crofters' long-standing love for their island home, the laborious life of Michael's parents, the young lovers' response to nature, and their happy but serious courtship. In lines reminiscent of Keats' "Isabella, or the Pot of Basil," Blind also marks the exploitive dominion of "the lord of all that land":

## XLVI

To him belonged the glens with all their grain;  
To him the pastures spreading in the plain; . . .  
To him the forests desolately drear,  
With all their antlered herds of fleet-foot deer;

To him the league-long rolling moorland bare,  
With all the feathered fowl that wing the autumn air.

## XLVII

For him the hind's interminable toil;  
For him he ploughed and sowed and broke the soil,  
For him the golden harvests would he reap,  
For him would tend the flocks of woolly sheep, . . .  
For him the back was bent, and hard the hand,  
For was he not his lord, and lord of all that land?<sup>11</sup>

"Duan Second" briefly describes the couple's wedding celebration, during which Michael's father Rory recalls the virtues of his lost comrade Donald, Mary's father. In "Duan Third," Michael and Mary are happily married, but their years together have been filled with hardship, anxiety, and toil. They and the other crofters continue to love the land, however:

. . . —as mothers oft are fain  
To love those best who cost them sorest pain;  
So do these men, matched with wild wind and weather,  
Cling to their tumbling burns, bleak moors, and mountain heather. (Stanza III)

In stanzas VII-XVII, Mary, who is heavily pregnant, sings and tends to a sick child in Michael's absence. Michael's mother knits socks, and the couple's eldest daughter Ranza carefully milks her dearly-loved cow. This idyll is disturbed when neighbors report that the landlord's men have begun a series of evictions, and Mary anxiously watches flames rise from several adjacent farms.

## XXIV

And through the rolling smoke a troop of men  
Tramped swiftly nearer from the upper glen;  
Fierce, sullen, black with soot, some carrying picks,  
Axes, and crowbars, others armed with sticks,  
Or shouldering piles of faggots — to the fore  
A little limping man, who cursed and swore  
Between each word, came on post-haste; his hand,  
Stretched like a vulture's claw, seemed grabbing at the  
land. . . .

When the evictors arrive at their own cot, Mary shields her younger daughter Maisie, as

## XLII

... the men fell to their work and broke  
 The rough-cast walls with many a hammer stroke;  
 Pulled down strong beams, set the mossed thatch on  
 fire,  
 While Ranza, quivering, flew towards the byre  
 To save their cow and calf; and the young son  
 Of seven seized what he could lay hands upon.  
 And dragged it in the roadway, for the lad  
 Knew well 'twas all the wealth his hard-worked father  
 had.

Old Rory helps his now-aged and palsied wife escape and finds blankets to cover her, but she subsides into shock and dies soon afterward. When Michael's fishing boat returns, he encounters a scene of mass turmoil, with burning crofts and terrified kinspeople everywhere:

## XLVIII

And through the dire confusion and the smoke  
 From burning byres, the cattle roaring broke,  
 And made with terror, rushed down from the fells;  
 Whole flocks tore bleating onwards, with the yells  
 Of furious dogs behind them; whins and trees  
 Caught fire, and boughs fell crackling on the leas.  
 And smouldering rafters crashed, and roofs fell in,  
 And showers of wind-blown sparks high up in air did  
 spin.

## XLIX

Distracted, stunned, amazed, the hurrying folk  
 Sway to and fro; some harness to the yoke  
 The loudly whinnying horses, and on van  
 Or cart, in desperate haste, toss what they can  
 Of their scant household goods: clothes, bedding,  
 chairs,  
 Spades, hoes, and herring-nets, and such like wares;  
 And high atop of all, well nigh despairing,  
 Wives, mothers, children - howling, weeping, swearing.

When Michael reaches his now-homeless family at the beginning of "Duan Fourth," he bears Mary to a nearby ruin and attends to her as she groans in the agony of childbirth, delivers a stillborn daughter, bids Michael goodbye, and dies. He manages at least to bury his dead before the "great Lord's hireling men" drag the surviving family members to the emigration ship Koh-i-noor. The crippled Rory somehow manages to escape to land before

the ship makes its way through a storm out into the open sea, but freezes in horror as he sees the ship suddenly break apart in the distance. Rory imagines Michael holding the children to him as they drown, and a tragic chorus ends the poem.

## XLVII

... Safe in the deep,  
 With their own seas to rock their hearts to sleep,  
 The crofters lay: but faithful Rory gave  
 His body to the land that had begrudged a grave.

In the course of her narrative, Blind employs several dramatic vignettes and set-pieces which resemble genre paintings of Highland life - a girl standing in the fields (Jules Breton, *The Song of the Lark*, 1884), a Highland wedding (David Wilkie, *The Penny Wedding* 1818), women awaiting absent fishermen (Frank Bramley, *Hopeless Dawn*, 1888). Some of her descriptions, however - of Mary defying the invaders, and Michael clutching the children to his body in the sinking ship - are more individuated, and the smoke rising from the burning of crofter homes in the glens, and forced embarkation and shipwreck are grounded in reality. A final Turner-esque description of the departing Koh-i-Noor obliquely recalls Ruskin's commentary on *The Slave Ship* in the first volume of *Modern Painters* (1: part 2, sect. 5, ch. 3):

## XXXIX

Therewith it seemed as if their Scottish land  
 Bled for its children, yea, as though some hand -  
 Stretching from where on the horizon's verge  
 The rayless sun hung on the reddening surge -  
 Incarnadined the sweep of perilous coast  
 And the embattled storm-clouds' swarthy host,  
 With such wild hues of mingling blood and fire  
 As though the heavens themselves flashed in celestial  
 ire. (Stanza xx)

"The Heather on Fire" achieved only one printing, perhaps because much of its London audience found it melodramatic, or cared little about dispossessed crofters, but Blind's epic poem remains a noteworthy example of politically committed Victorian narrative verse.<sup>12</sup> Blind's determination to treat the fate of Highland cotters with the

full palette of classical Roman tragedy also anticipates some aspects of a somewhat later Scottish vernacular revival, a self-conscious fin de siècle and early-modernist effort to fashion psychologically charged symbolic landscapes and haunting refrains from legendary folk-motifs.

In the Scottish dialect poetry of Violet Jacob, sophisticated distance and empathy merge in the poetic representations of idealized rural consciousness. Jacob (1863-1946, born Violet Kennedy-Erskine) was born in Montrose, north of Dundee and south of Aberdeen, as the daughter of the eighteenth Laird of Dun. She lived in India for several years before she returned to Scotland, where she wrote *Verses* (1905), *Songs of Angus* (1915), *More Songs of Angus* (1918), and the works collected in *The Scottish Poems of Violet Jacob* (1944). I will conclude this essay with some brief comments on "Craig Woods," one of a line of rustic/pastoral monologues exemplified by Tennyson's Lincolnshire poems ("Northern Farmer Old Style") or the work of Charlotte Mew ("The Farmer's Bride").

The anonymous speaker in "Craig Woods" is an old man, who has lived all his life near the Woods. He believes these Woods are inhabited by a wraith (the sort of spirit whose misdeeds formed the subject of Janet Hamilton's poem "Spunkie"), and their outer bounds provide a somewhat nebulous symbolic image of the rural heaven to which he aspires. Nothing in the speaker's remarks suggests unusual social awareness, but his childlike, mystical response to the material world confers symbolic significance on the commonplace objects and places around him. The poem's slow and mournfully syncopated rhythms convey the speaker's love for the plants, weather, and indwelling spirits of his locale:

Crago Woods, i' the licht o' September sleepin'  
 And the saft mist o' the morn,  
 When the hairst climbs to yer feet, an' the sound o'  
 reapin' [harvest]  
 Comes up frae the stookit corn, [bundled in sheaves]  
 And the braw reid puddock-stules are like jewels  
 blinkin' [red toadstools]  
 And the bramble happs ye baith,  
 O what do I see, i the lang nicht, lyin' an' thinkin'  
 As I see yer wraith - yer wraith?

The old farmer's identification with the Woods culminates in a touching faith that the puddock-stules (toadstools) he loves will travel with him to the Wood beyond death.

There's a road to a far-aff land, an' the land is yonder  
 Whaur a' men's hopes are set;  
 We dinna ken foo lang we maun hae to wander,  
 But we'll a' win to it yett;  
 An' gin there's woods o' fir an' the licht atween them,  
 I winna speir its hname, [ask]  
 But I'll lay me doon by the puddock-stules when I've  
 seen them,  
 An' I'll cry 'I'm hame - I'm hame.'

The old man of Craig Woods is a poetic projection of an old man by a middle-aged woman, of course, and Jacob's syntax and diction, unlike that of Hamilton's "Oor Location" and "Auld Mither Scotland," often seems artful and archaising rather than colloquial. There is something evocatively displaced as well as mournfully precious about the psychological ambiance of this forest, however, an idealized Wood beyond the World of bitter disputes about enclosures and deer forests.

More than stereotypes about the conceptual concerns of Victorian women might suggest, then, the writers I have surveyed took clear political and economic positions in their verse. As a loose confederation of regional social orders became urbanized and industrialized, Robertson, MacPherson, Hamilton and others deplored the human misery caused by economic change, and sought to retain cohesive values of family and culture. A few reformist outsiders such as Blind wrote poetry about the Highlands, but their expressions of solidarity with the victims found little resonance in England. Modernist Scottish poets such as Violet Jacob self-consciously sought to preserve regional character and language as ethnographic artifacts, and pay tribute to the historical qualities of regional poetic languages threatened with dissolution in a twentieth-century sub/urban argot, and the partial successes of such "revivalists" depended heavily on prior traditions preserved in great part by nineteenth-century Scotswomen poets.

Janet Hamilton, we will remember, feared to rise from her grave, lest she should fail to hear the accents of her native "Doric," and see that much of the vigorous village-and-town-life she recorded is now gone. Perhaps Blind's passionate efforts at tragic empathy or the highly crafted work of Violet Jacob and her fellow vernacular revivalists might have provided some consolation to her. If not, the vigorous wraith of Hamilton might still be sighted, as she walks the cityscapes and countryside of "Auld Mither Scotland," and hovers for a few moments to blend with the lights and shadows of Craigo Woods.

### Notes

1. About 130 of the more than 6000 works listed in a recent bibliography of nineteenth-century British and American women's poetry compiled by Gwen Davis and Beverly Joyce were printed in Scotland, or bear titles which suggest Scottish themes. A canvass of Catherine Kerrigan's *Anthology of Scottish Women Poets* and other collections would raise this total to nearly two hundred volumes. Such lists have fuzzy edges, of course: some of these authors were not Scottish, and some Scottish women poets published outside Scotland. But the ratio of English to Scottish women writers as represented in standard bibliographies would seem to stand at about 40 to 1. The collections of the Mitchell Library in Glasgow contain more than a hundred more volumes of poetry by Victorian Scotswomen.
2. Linguists commonly recognize language subdivisions of Scotland that have existed since the Middle Ages. (Scottish) Gaelic is one of two separate languages spoken in the Highlands (the region of Mary MacPherson), though most Gaelic speakers also speak "Highland English." The "Insular Scots" English of the Orkneys and Shetlands is heavily influenced by Norse usage, and "Northern Scots" is the language of the Grampians and the rest of eastern Scotland north of the Dee (the region of Bell Robertson). "Southern Scots" or "Border Scots" is the language of many ballads, and "Ulster Scots" is the language of the Scots-Irish immigrants who have returned to Scotland. Most Scots, however, speak one of the varieties of "Central Scots," subdivided into "East Central" (the language of Edinburgh), "West Central" (the language of Glasgow, region of Janet Hamilton), and "South Central" (Dumfries and Galloway) Scots (Kay, "The Dialects of Scots," ch. 10). Central Scots serves as a partially assimilated standard language, sometimes called Anglo-Scots, whose usages are for the most part common to all regions. Most nineteenth-century readers probably considered Central Scots a kind of "national" language, one that Janet Hamilton and some others called "the Doric."
3. In "Storm-Clouds [of Anarchy] in the Highlands," *Nineteenth Century*, 16 (September 1884): 379-95, J. A. Cameron pointedly describes the evolution in the law as "a great wrong, amounting to a national crime":

- "Until 1745, the year of Culloden, the clan system of land tenure prevailed in the Highlands, under which the ground belonged not to the chief alone, but to the community. A clansman could not be dispossessed of his holding by his chief. After 1745, however, the English system was introduced. The clans that had remained loyal to the Crown, as well as those that had thrown in their lot with Prince Charles, had their lands practically confiscated. The Highland chiefs, in short, were assimilated in position to English landlords. They were by the central government invested with the fee-simple of the land which was once held by the laird and the clansmen in common, and so a great wrong, amounting to a national crime, was done to the Highland population."
4. Hugh Miller argued forcefully that such forced evictions occurred on a wide scale, much more than many observers wanted to admit: "Men talk of the Sutherland clearings as if they stood alone amidst the atrocities of the system; but those who know fully the facts of the case can speak with as much truth of Ross-shire clearings, the Inverness-shire clearings, the Perthshire clearings, and, to some extent, the Argyleshire clearings. . . Crossing to the south of the great glen, we may begin with Glencoe. How much of its romantic interest does the glen owe to its desolation? . . . While the law is banishing its tens for terms of seven or fourteen years, as the penalty of deep-dyed crimes, irresponsible and infatuated power is banishing its thousands for life for no crime whatever." *The Witness*, cited by Mathilde Blind, *The Heather on Fire* 117. Hugh Miller was a journalist whose writings on social issues appeared in his *Essays*, 7th ed. (London: Nimmo, 1875).
  5. This edition of Hamilton's poems reprints the contents of two previous volumes, *Poems and Ballads* with Introductory Papers by the Rev. George Gilfillan and the Rev. Alexander Wallace, D. D., 1863; and *Poems of Purpose and Sketches in Prose of Scottish Peasant Life and Character in Auld Langsyne, Sketches of Local Scenes and Characters* (with a Glossary), 1865.
  6. For example, see passages from Gordon Williams, *Scenes Like These*, William McIlvanney, *Docherty*, Lewis Grassic Gibbon, *Sunset Song*, cited in Kay, 126-29; 170-71.
  7. *The Scots Observer: A Record and Review* was published in Edinburgh from 1888 to November 1890, and reappeared in London as *The National Observer* from 1890-1897.
  8. *George Eliot*, 1883; *Madame Roland*, 1886; David Strauss, *The Old Faith and the New*, 1873 and 1874; *The Prophecy of St. Oran and Other Poems*, 1881. The title work of the latter narrates the ill-fated love of one of St. Columba's monks, Oran, for the daughter of a Pictish Chieftain Mona, and the ensuing murder of this pair by the puritanically zealous monks.
  9. "Gloomy Memories," by Donald MacLeod, cited in Blind, 109-110. Another account is given of inhabitants' attempts to escape their evictors, as Rory escapes the Koh-i-noor. In response to a Royal Commissioner, a crofter gave evidence that, "I saw a man who lay down on his face and knees on a little island to hide himself from the policeman, who had dogs searching for him in order to get him aboard the emigrant ship. . . There was another case of a man named Angus Johnson. He had a dead child in the house, and his wife gave birth to three children, all of whom died.

Notwithstanding this he was seized and tied on the pier at Lock Boisdale, and kicked on board. The old priest interfered and said, 'What are you doing to this man? liet him alone, it is against the law!' The wife of the man who was tied and put aboard afterwards went to the vessel. The four dead children would be buried by that time. . . . The people were hiding themselves in caves and dens for fear of being sent away from the island. . . . There were many such cases at the time. It was about forty years ago" (cited in Blind 113-14).

10. Blind's descriptions of Mary in stanzas 35-37, for example, read like an attempt to render into poetry the emblematic scene of Jules Breton's painting *The Song of the Lark*, in which a peasant girl pauses enraptured to listen to the bird's song.
11. See also "Isabella," stanza xv, "For them the Ceylon diver held his breath. . . ."
12. Blind's later volumes of poetry on more general subjects - *The Ascent of Man* (1888); *Dramas in Miniature* (1891), *Songs and Sonnets* (1893), and *Birds of Passage* (1895) - were more favorably received.

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8

## Re-forming London: George Cruikshank and the Victorian Age

Anne L. Helmreich

Over his lifetime, the English artist George Cruikshank (1792-1878) witnessed the rapid industrialization and growth of his native London. The city and its environs more than tripled in population between 1800 and 1871: from 1,265,000 to 3,931,000 (Evans 405). Cruikshank observed London's developments closely and responded with both wit and vitriol in his depictions of the city's varied neighborhoods and inhabitants. Through his art, Cruikshank alerted viewers to many of the issues which were to define the Victorian age, particularly, the emergence and gradual acceptance of the middle class and its values of morality, ideal femininity, and domesticity.

The city became a major focus in Cruikshank's art in the 1820s and 1830s when the artist put aside his caricatures of politicians and the aristocracy, especially the royal family, in favor of social commentaries which slyly poked fun at the foibles of London's classes, whose distinct characteristics became more pronounced as the decades advanced. By the close of his career, Cruikshank was regarded as an apostle of moral reform, best known for his