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'Recovery' of Modern Scottish Women Writers

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Scottish Literary Review, Volume 14, Number 1, Spring/Summer 2022, pp.  
xi-xv (Article)

Published by Association for Scottish Literary Studies



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AND CHARLOTTE LAUDER

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**Reckoning with the Unforgettable: Taking Stock of the  
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Twenty-five years ago, in Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan's landmark edited collection *A History of Scottish Women's Writing* (1997), Moira Burgess wrote that Susan Ferrier, Mary Brunton, Margaret Oliphant, and the Findlaters were 'merely four of the Scottish women fiction writers of the nineteenth century whose work has by and large been forgotten [...] Clearly, there is a massive task of reassessment to be undertaken by a future generation of scholars.'<sup>1</sup> We argue that this time is now: that the work of Scottish women writers from the late nineteenth century and indeed the early twentieth century is ripe for reassessment.

This special issue began as an online conference titled 'Unforgettable, Unforgotten? Continuing the Recovery of Scottish Women Writers, c. 1880–1940', hosted by the Network for Religion and Literature seminar series at the School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh, in June 2021. We welcomed sixteen presentations from postgraduate, early-, and mid-career researchers, as well as a roundtable discussion about the recovery of modern Scottish women writers. As the organising collective, we were overwhelmed with the encouraging responses to the conference and felt that our aim – to spotlight current research on Scottish women writers – was certainly underway. The conference's subtitle (also the subtitle of this special issue) acknowledges that the recovery of women writers in academic research is an act of persistence and not a reinvention with each generation of researchers. The title comes from the autobiography of Anna Buchan, *Unforgettable, Unforgotten* (1945), whose career epitomises the affliction of critical neglect experienced by the women discussed in this issue. Buchan's work was popular and widely read in her own time but was largely eclipsed by the career of her brother, John Buchan, until the 1990s when her work began to receive public and scholarly attention.

We acknowledge that ‘recovery’ is a loaded term in relation to women’s history and women’s writing. For many archivists, librarians, curators, reference staff, and conservators, it is understandable that there are issues with claims of ‘uncovering’ or ‘recovering’ material held in collections with which they work every day. Indeed, although this special issue stresses the necessity of recovery, and gestures to future possibilities in terms of research methods and methodologies, the essays included here are indebted to the pioneering work of many scholars who have promoted Scottish women’s writing, including Margery Palmer McCulloch, Douglas Gifford, Dorothy McMillan, Catherine Kerrigan, Meg Bateman, Sarah Dunnigan, Valentina Bold, Joy Hendry, Moira Burgess, Aileen Christensen, Glenda Norquay, and Juliet Shields. Pertinently, several of these researchers were precariously employed at times during their career, an issue that still affects more women than men in higher education today, particularly PhD graduates and early-career researchers.<sup>2</sup> Precarity was likewise a very real experience for many of the women writers discussed in this issue.

The research affordances of the current moment, as well as adaptive strategies that have been incited by the measures enforced during the COVID-19 pandemic, have resulted in a deluge of online open access information yet irregular access to on-site primary resources, collections, and archives. For the most part, the digital age has encouraged a wider approach to the process of recovery through access to online catalogues, databases, archival finding aids, document surrogates, digitised magazines and periodicals, and research connections made via social media.<sup>3</sup> These approaches are also defining the current generation of researchers: discussions about recovery and representation that stem from feminist and decolonising priorities are redefining the parameters of recovery. Similarly, self-reflective research approaches in which the researcher considers their positionality and bias in their work has brought renewal to postcolonial, eco-critical and queer approaches to recovery, as well as the inclusion of more diverse forms of women’s writing, such as political tracts, periodical literature, children’s literature, and life writing.

All of these factors were at play during the ‘Unforgettable, Unforgotten?’ conference on 29 June 2021. At the time, the three of us were in the midst of doctoral and postdoctoral projects at Scottish universities on these subjects, and as conferences, workshops, and research trips continued to be cancelled or postponed due to the pandemic, we began discussing (over Zoom) the lack

of opportunities for students and researchers to share their research in 2020 and 2021, as well as our own need for support and motivation in our projects. Certainly this need has increased since March 2020, and the shared responsibility to ensure that fellow students, researchers and colleagues are encouraged and supported has demonstrated the necessity for collaboration and cooperation. Since the 'Unforgettable, Unforgotten?' conference, several of the presenters have written entries for Juliet Shields's website *Scottish Women Writers on the Web*, and some were involved in organising a public event to mark the publication of Juliet's new book on nineteenth-century Scottish women writers which was hosted online by the National Library of Scotland in November 2021.<sup>4</sup> Since the pandemic began, the sororal generosity of sharing information and research findings has increased and strengthened our collaborative relationships and we hope that these connections continue to be fruitful.

The essays contained in this special issue simultaneously serve different strands of 'recovery.' In one sense, they offer a re-evaluation of writers or texts that have been neglected in scholarly studies. In another sense, they promote the re-discovery of women writers who have been siloed through particular critiques. Finally, they present new ways in which to renew these writers through the deployment of theories and insights from various academic fields. We begin with Kate Mathis and Eleanor Thomson's co-authored piece on Gaelic and Anglo-Highland women's writing in the Celtic Revival, which aims to demystify the culture of its Ossianic fog by reclassifying the writings of Catriona NicGhille-Bhàin and Alice MacDonnell. Lois Burke's article considers two under-examined writers who made significant contributions to the periodical press for girls. Isabella Fyvie Mayo and Ethel Forster Heddle were regular contributors to the *Young Woman* magazine and their interactions with young readers reveal their status as admired writers possessing the authority to guide girls' writing ambitions. Grace Borland Sinclair's article contextualises the late-Victorian feminist writer and activist Lady Florence Dixie in the radical social and political movements of the later nineteenth century, and analyses Dixie's utilisation of the speculative text for consciousness-raising purposes. In Fiona Paterson's essay, the poet, writer, and cultural revivalist Rachel Annand Taylor's poetic identities are recovered through an exploration of her collaboration with notable figures of the Celtic Revival and her engagement with ideas of modernism, decadence, and womanhood. By recovering the career of forgotten

Aberdeenshire poet Jessie Annie Anderson, Charlotte Lauder calls into question Anderson's categorisation as a writer on the fringe of the Scottish literary revival and complicates our understandings of cultural and literary revival in modern Scotland. Arianna Introna's piece on the fiction of Violet Jacob examines Jacob's depiction of otherness through the lens of disability studies. Megan Burns's article argues that Helen Crawford's poems offer a unique insight into a woman's perspective on the tumultuous political events in Glasgow in the interwar years which have been largely remembered for the actions of the male organisers. Nancy Brysson Morrison's novel *The Gowk Storm* is reassessed by Julia Ditter through an exploration of grief, the environment, and Morrison's use of elegiac form and non-linear temporalities. Emily Pickard's piece on Willa Muir explores one of Muir's lesser-known works, the unpublished 'Mrs Muttoe and the Top Storey', through the lens of the experiences of women during COVID-19, arguing that this work is important in our understanding of the strain women faced in Muir's time and in our own times.

Some of the figures discussed in this special issue have received little or no attention in scholarly venues, and their inclusion here represents an exciting moment in the literary history of these women. At the same time, there are gestures to future areas of recovery and scholarly attention, notably women writers who were active during the early twentieth century but whose literary outputs have been overlooked by traditionally masculine analyses of Scottish literature. On the other hand, some figures, notably Willa Muir, have received consistent attention in scholarship and the reading public's consciousness since the 1980s. Advancing the question of the recovery of Scottish women's writing therefore happens by continuation and balance: as intersectional feminist theory demonstrates, renewed focus on one author must not come at the expense of another, particularly those who are marginalised by issues of class or ethnicity. We therefore hope that you enjoy reading the articles in this issue and that they will inspire conversations and be instrumental in assuring a future for the continued interrogation of modern Scottish women's writing.

*Lois Burke, Gemma King, and Charlotte Lauder*  
Guest Editors

## Notes

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- 1 Moira Burgess, 'Rediscovering Scottish Women's Fiction in the Nineteenth Century', in *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, ed. by Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 206–07.
- 2 Gianluca De Angelis and Barbara Grüning, 'Corrigendum: Gender Inequality in Precarious Academic Work: Female Adjunct Professors in Italy', *Frontiers in Sociology* 4.87 (2020), doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2019.00087
- 3 Alexis Easley, *New Media and the Rise of the Popular Woman Writer, 1832–1860* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), p. 20.
- 4 Juliet Shields, 'Scottish Women Writers on the Web', [www.scottishwomenwritersontheweb.net](http://www.scottishwomenwritersontheweb.net) [accessed 13 April 2022].