Was There a Scottish Novel After Scott?

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6106 AQ, Simon Fraser University

A talk by

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Juliet Shields is Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in English at the University of Washington in Seattle, where she teaches eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British literature. She is author of Sentimental Literature and Anglo-Scottish Identity, 1745-1820 (Cambridge 2010) and Nation and Migration: the Making of British Atlantic Literature, 1765-1835 (Oxford 2016). She’s currently working on a book titled The Romance of Everyday Life: Scottish Women’s Writing after Scott, from which her talk is taken.

The fifty years following the death of Walter Scott have been described as a “great black hole in Scottish literature.” Dominant narratives of the novel’s development suggest that this void should have been filled by the emergence of Victorian realism, a mode characterized by social analysis, narrative sophistication, and the construction of interiority and depth. And to some extent it was. My research has recovered over 500 novels by women writers from the “black hole” of nineteenth-century Scottish literature, most of which were published serially in periodicals ranging from comparatively elite journals—Blackwood’s, Fraser’s, and Macmillan’s—to popular Evangelical magazines such as Good Words, Sunday Magazine and Leisure Hour. Given the sheer quantity of these novels, why have we never heard of most of them or their authors? Most obviously, these novels owe their invisibility to the ephemerality of the media in which they appeared, and to their authors’ preference for anonymous or pseudonymous publication. However, that they have disappeared so completely from our critical purview also reveals the masculinist bent of Scottish literary history, and the tacit Anglo-cenrism of our understandings of realism. For while these novels often feature the social analysis we might expect to find in Charles Dickens or Elizabeth Gaskell, they also share the tendency of Scott’s Waverley novels to privilege plot over character development and descriptive detail over psychological depth. I’ll argue that in the decades following Scott’s death, Scottish women writers used periodical publication to develop a middlebrow realism, uniting a belief in the social and economic value of their writing as work with a healthy skepticism concerning the aesthetic value of their writing as literature.