

A Note on Women in Scottish Philosophy: Mrs Oliphant

The history of Scottish philosophy contains virtually no reference to women. The explanation is not far to seek. Scottish philosophy over several centuries was almost exclusively university based, and women could not attend universities. It was not until late in the nineteenth century that this changed. In 1876 St Andrews became the first university in Britain to allow women to be students, though initially this was for the LLA (Lady Literate in Arts diploma) rather than the MA (Master of Arts degree). In 1889 the Universities (Scotland) Act finally made it possible to admit women on the same basis as men. The first women permitted to take a degree graduated in 1892, but the first woman to teach philosophy in a Scottish university was not appointed until very much later.

Surprisingly perhaps, despite this exclusion, women occasionally contributed to philosophical debate as writers. Deborah Boyle has uncovered two notable cases. Elizabeth Hamilton's *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, published in 1800, can be read as a philosophical criticism of Godwin, and Lady Mary Shepherd's two books – *An Essay upon the Relation of Cause and Effect* (1824) and *Essays on the Perception of an External Universe* (1827) – engaging as they do with Hume and Reid, among others, are unmistakably philosophical works.¹ However, as Leslie Stephen once remarked, it is a mistake to suppose that the eighteenth century ended with the year 1800. So while Hamilton (1758–1816) and Shepherd (1777–1847) lived into the nineteenth century, they were Enlightenment rather than post-Enlightenment thinkers. I

¹ See *Lady Mary Shepherd: Selected Writings*, edited with an introduction by Deborah Boyle, Imprint Academic, 2018.

1 am not aware of any nineteenth-century women comparable to
2 Hamilton and Shepherd who engaged directly in the philosophical
3 debates with which the essays in this book are concerned.

4 There is, however, one partial and important exception –
5 Margaret Oliphant. Margaret Wilson, always known on her pub-
6 lications as ‘Mrs Oliphant’, was born in East Lothian in 1828.
7 She left Scotland at the age of thirteen, and though she married
8 a Scottish cousin – Frank Oliphant – and visited Scotland on
9 many subsequent occasions, she was never resident there again.
10 While she lived the larger part of her life in Windsor and was very
11 widely travelled, she nonetheless retained a keen interest in things
12 Scottish, and in many respects exhibited a distinctively Scottish
13 outlook throughout her life. Her career as a writer began before
14 she was married, with the publication of her first novel in 1849.
15 In 1851, on a visit to Edinburgh with her mother, she attended
16 a literary event and met William Blackwood, brother of John
17 Blackwood, publisher of *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*.²
18 This meeting began a connection with both the magazine and the
19 publishing house that lasted to the end of Oliphant’s life.

20 In 1859, at the age of thirty-one, and pregnant with her fourth
21 child (one having died), she was widowed. As a consequence, for
22 almost forty years she was under relentless pressure to earn money
23 through writing, to provide for an extended family in the slightly
24 extravagant lifestyle for which she had a taste. Under this neces-
25 sity, Oliphant proved capable of writing with astonishing speed
26 and fluency, and produced publications on a scale so prolific and
27 across so many genres as almost to beggar belief. By the time of
28 her death she had authored several works of history, three travel
29 guides, five substantial biographies involving original research, the
30 volume on Dress in Macmillan’s *Art at Home* series, and, most
31 amazingly, 100 novels, many of them of a literary quality equal to
32 or better than those of her contemporary Mrs Gaskell (who wrote
33 eight). Her five popular ‘Carlingford’ novels are comparable to
34 Anthony Trollope’s Barsetshire series.

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37 ² From its creation in 1817 until 1905, this publication was entitled
38 *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, and thereafter, until it ceased pub-
39 lication in 1980, simply *Blackwood’s Magazine*. But even in the earlier
40 years it was often referred to by the simpler title, which I will use for
41 convenience.

In addition to all this, for over four decades Mrs Oliphant was a regular contributor to 'Maga', the insiders' name for *Blackwood's Magazine*, and wrote dozens of lengthy articles on a vast range of subjects. Only two of these essays are directly related to philosophy, though each of them runs to almost thirty two-columned pages. 'The Philosopher' (January 1869) is about Berkeley, and 'The Sceptic' (June 1869) is about Hume. Both are contributions to her series of articles 'Historical Sketches of the Reign of George II' and they are primarily biographical. In the first, Mrs Oliphant includes this disclaimer: 'The present writer has no pretensions to touch the history of philosophy as a philosopher should. It is with the eyes of the outside spectator, or, as the subject of this sketch expresses it, the vulgar, that we regard its strange, long-continued, unproductive toil' (Oliphant 1869a: 3). The essay on Hume ranges across the full extent of Hume's life and writings, with a particular focus on the end of Part One of the *Treatise*, where Hume, faced with deep metaphysical perplexity, turns to dining and backgammon as a solution. For Oliphant, unlike most philosophers, the 'problem' in which she is explicitly interested is not how to make this transition coherent, but how to understand it psychologically. How can Hume's cheerful personality, taste for companionship, and gift for friendship be squared with 'the darkness in which his being was shrouded' by the sceptical conclusions he had reached? She concludes that Hume's contentedness is a consequence of his 'incapacity to understand the heights and depths of the soul, his indifference to his race, and the contempt for it that is involved in all his philosophy' (Oliphant 1869b: 690). But, she adds, 'we forget how superficial are his affections' because '[n]ever Christian fronted death more bravely, nor with a more peaceful calm' (691). She sees a parallel here with Hume's misleading physical appearance, quoting at length the description in which Lord Charlemont remarks on the impossibility of discovering 'the smallest trace of the faculties of his mind in the unmeaning features of his visage' (680).

Mrs Oliphant is markedly more sympathetic to Berkeley than to Hume, and this colours her attitude to their philosophical views. Moreover, it is evident that both these lengthy essays are highly dependent on secondary works, especially on G. H. Lewes's *Biographical History of Philosophy* (1846) and, in the case of Hume, on the somewhat gloomy biography published by Hill Burton (also in 1846). Still, it is no less clear that Mrs Oliphant is

1 not parroting other people's opinions. She has a good understand-
 2 ing of the philosophical positions she discusses, as well as a strong
 3 sense of philosophy's importance. 'By general consent', she says,
 4 'the title of a great philosopher has been allowed to represent the
 5 highest eminence to which the human mind can attain . . . There
 6 is no intellectual occupation to which the common mind yields
 7 such unvarying reverence . . . it is a kind of instinct in humanity
 8 (as appears) to respect philosophy' (Oliphant 1869a: 1). But she is
 9 more interested, we might say, in mentality than in mind, and in
 10 the thinker rather than the thought. Her insight in these matters is
 11 what makes her an accomplished novelist of some distinction, and
 12 it shows itself no less importantly in her biographies. That is where
 13 her value for the study of nineteenth-century Scottish philosophy
 14 is to be found.

15 Blackwood's was a major publisher of philosophy in Scotland.
 16 Between 1838 and 1847 a long series of influential philosophical
 17 articles by J. F. Ferrier appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine*, includ-
 18 ing the essays constituting his *Introduction to the Philosophy*
 19 *of Consciousness*, 240 pages in his *Collected Works*, and, post-
 20 humously, Sir William Hamilton's *Lectures on Metaphysics and*
 21 *Logic*. Among many other philosophy books, Blackwood's pub-
 22 lished Andrew Seth's *Scottish Philosophy*, John Tulloch's *Modern*
 23 *Theories of Philosophy and Religion*, Robert Flint's Baird Lectures
 24 on *Theism*, J. F. Ferrier's *Collected Works*, James Seth's *Study*
 25 *of Ethical Principles* and Alexander Campbell Fraser's Gifford
 26 Lectures on *The Philosophy of Theism*. Beginning in 1881, the series
 27 *Blackwood's Philosophical Classics* was launched, prompted, the
 28 general preface says, by 'a growing interest in Philosophy' which it
 29 declared to be 'one of the marked features of the present age'. The
 30 General Editor was William Knight at St Andrews and most of the
 31 volumes were written by Scottish professors, including John Caird,
 32 Robert Flint, Alexander Campbell Fraser and John Veitch.

33 Oliphant's connection with and work for Blackwood's thus
 34 made her wholly familiar with the world of philosophy and religion
 35 in nineteenth-century Scotland. This became especially apparent
 36 when, towards the end of her life, John Blackwood commissioned
 37 her to write the history of his family's business. Two volumes of
 38 *The Annals of a Publishing House: William Blackwood and his*
 39 *Sons* appeared in 1897. This represented two years' work on a vast
 40 quantity of correspondence. The volumes she completed recount
 41 the history of the firm from the birth of the first William Blackwood

in 1776 to the death of Major William Blackwood in 1861, though she did not live to see their publication. She corrected the proofs of these two volumes on what turned out to be her deathbed.³

A few years previous to this, Blackwood's had also commissioned her to write a *Memoir of the Life of John Tulloch*, whom she had known well. This was published in 1888 and was one of several major biographies that throw light on the intellectual issues of the times. The first was *The Life of Edward Irving, Minister of the National Scotch Church London* (1862), which some critics think to be her finest work. After the memoir of John Tulloch she undertook a life of Thomas Chalmers, published by Methuen in 1893. All these volumes exhibit a remarkable facility for concentrated research, together with a striking degree of imaginative sympathetic insight into both the cultural context and the intellectual motivations of some of its most influential figures. Together with the *Annals*, these books provide an invaluable background against which to explore the philosophical, religious and educational questions that were of central concern to the Scottish philosophers of the nineteenth century. Mrs Oliphant's essays on Berkeley and Hume are still worth reading, but her most valuable contribution to the topics in this book is to be found in the *Annals* and the three biographies.

In this respect, and for the purposes of this book, her books are on a par with David Masson's two collections of essays – *Edinburgh Sketches and Memories* (1892) and *Memories of Two Cities* (1911). Masson was a student at Aberdeen and then Edinburgh at the time of Sir William Hamilton and Thomas Chalmers. After sixteen years as Professor of English Literature at University College London, he was appointed Professor of English and Rhetoric in Edinburgh, a position he held for over thirty years. He was a friend of Alexander Bain, Thomas Carlyle, John Stuart Mill and James Hutchison Stirling, among others, and George Davie makes extensive use of Masson's recollections and reflections in *The Democratic Intellect*. I have drawn on them to great advantage as well, and in the context of this note, it is appropriate to add that Masson was one of the leading protagonists for the admission of women to universities, and a supporter of the suffragette movement of which his wife and daughter were a part.

³ The third projected volume was completed by someone else several years later.

1 One other significant woman author should be mentioned.
2 *James Hutchison Stirling: His Life and Work*, published in 1912,
3 is a biography written by his daughter, Amelia Hutchison Stirling.
4 Amelia Stirling, to my knowledge, never published any academic
5 work of her own, but the biography of her father reveals a natural
6 aptitude for philosophical thinking. Her book is full of insight as
7 well as information, and given her evident devotion to her father,
8 it is remarkably free of any element of hagiography.

9 While there are, then, no women among the philosophers dis-
10 cussed in the essays that follow, the books by Oliphant, together
11 with Stirling's biography of her father, greatly enrich the narrative
12 by revealing intellectual and personal connections between diverse
13 figures from the history of philosophy who might otherwise seem
14 far apart. These include Alexander Bain, Thomas Carlyle, Thomas
15 Chalmers, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Alexander Campbell Fraser,
16 John Stuart Mill, James Hutchison Stirling and John Tulloch. The
17 purpose of this note is to make apparent a debt that would other-
18 wise remain hidden.