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Letters from the Highlands: Scribal Publication and Media Shift in Victorian Scotland

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Abstract

This essay argues that a little-studied text, Elizabeth Grant's *Memoirs of a Highland Lady*, offers insights into conditions of authorship and publication for middle-class provincial female authors from the early nineteenth century to the turn of the twentieth. While critics have often seen manuscript declining as a form of literary publication by the end of the Romantic period, I argue that Grant—who completed her memoir in 1854—chose to “publish” in manuscript even as she presented herself as historian and historiographer of the Highlands. Grant shows her awareness of a shifting Victorian media environment by analyzing changes in systems of communication and circulation. Her manuscript memoirs demonstrate that Victorians, like

LETTERS FROM THE HIGHLANDS



Scribal Publication and Media Shift in Victorian Scotland

Rachael Scarborough King

In the long, dark nights of a Scottish Highlands winter, prolific memoirist Elizabeth Grant wrote in 1854, "the post was our sunlight." The close-knit community of Rothiemurchus, the Grant family estate, hung on the thrice-weekly arrival of letters, newspapers, and magazines from Edinburgh, London, and the farther corners of the British Isles. Looking back at her girlhood from the vantage point of the mid-Victorian period, Grant (1797–1885) highlighted how the delivery of mail united her neighbors in networks of communication. The mailman arrived with "such a full bag; the franks permitted a frequent correspondence. . . . [L]etters and the newspapers, all helped to brighten the long evenings. [Our neighbor] Mr Caw always came in on the post nights with his little bits of gossip for my Mother."¹ A regular reliable postal service reaching as far as Rothiemurchus was a recent development and, for Grant, a key moment in the modernization of the Highlands. As she saw it, the arrival of mail facilitated the spread of all of the neighborhood's news; friends and family might silently peruse their own letters, but they were more likely to read aloud or share the details contained in their correspondence. Far from our contemporary understanding of mail as a private unidirectional dispatch, the distribution of the post in an early nineteenth-century Scottish town constituted a communal event.

Grant elaborates this history of communication and correspondence in her memoirs, which she composed between 1845 and 1854 but which were only published, under the title *Memoirs of a Highland Lady*, in 1898, more than a decade after her death. In the memoirs, she pursues an array of overlapping strands of public and private history. She details her own childhood and maturation—loosely following the structure of a bildungsroman, she describes her early education, the family's financial struggles, and her first romance, closing with her marriage—but she in fact devotes more space to the changing nature of Scottish everyday life from the sixteenth century through the mid-Victorian period. As she documents the rise and fall of clans, the denuding of the natural environment through logging, British par-



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