

**'CURIOUSLY RARE'?**  
**SCOTTISH WOMEN OF INTEREST**  
*OR*  
**THE SUPPRESSION OF THE FEMALE IN THE**  
**CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY**

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In this article, I discuss some of the ways in which the identity of Scottish women has been bounded, or restricted, and argue for the need for a greater range of potential identities. Although I am going to discuss 'women in Scotland', or 'Scotswomen' it should be acknowledged from the outset that these are not unitary categories, although I shall not be discussing in any detail different dimensions or facets of these. This paper focuses on three ways in which women in Scotland are marginalised - their marginalisation within Scottish history, their marginalisation within British feminist history, and their marginalisation within debates on nationalism.

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## **MARGINALISED WITHIN SCOTTISH HISTORY**

The title of this paper is taken from Hugh MacDiarmid, quoted by Margaret Bain, (now Margaret Ewing MP), in her article on 'Scottish Women in Politics' in **Chapman** 1980. Bain quotes MacDiarmid as saying, 'Scottish women of any historical interest are curiously rare. ... Our leading Scotswomen have been ... almost entirely destitute of exceptional endowments of any sort', an assertion which Bain characterises as 'ridiculous' (Bain 1980, p.9). This quote implies a view of the importance of the role of individuals in history that might be challenged, but the significant thing for this discussion is that it represents a view that women do not emerge as important historical figures because they somehow were not up to it. This view may well have been commonly held until relatively recently, and indeed may still be held by many. Margaret Bain, of course, takes MacDiarmid to task for this statement, referring to the extent of suffragette activity in Scotland. She does, however, wryly acknowledge that if asked to name 'famous national women' she would be hard put to name more than Mary Queen of Scots and Flora McDonald, despite being a history graduate and former teacher of history.

The statement that Scotswomen of historical interest are curiously rare poses the question of whether women were absent in fact, or absent from our historical narratives. It also poses the question by which criteria women are being judged. If there appears to be a disjuncture between the reality of the past and the record we have of that past, what problems, if any, does that create for women now, and what possible explanations might be offered for it?

Women's lack of visibility in Scottish historical narratives, I want to argue, results from their active exclusion from these, or at best their incorporation and containment. This is not to deny that a hierarchy of power relations exists now and existed historically, a hierarchy based on sex, class, religion, race. But even within this hierarchy there is a non-recognition of the place of women. They are screened from view. This is beginning to change with the publication of feminist women's history. Eleanor Gordon and I noted in our introduction to **Out of Bounds: Women in Scottish Society 1800-1945** that there are several ways in which women are denied access to the historical record. These are the use of 'myth, stereotype and idealisation to describe women's role in society, rather than genuine historical investigation', 'neglect of the area of private and family lives', and the 'assumption that women's natural status was one of anonymity' (Breitenbach and Gordon 1992, pp.2-3).

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The ready acceptance of women's anonymity and confinement to the private sphere can be easily challenged by reference to primary sources such as newspapers, private papers, records of organisations, court records, etc. Admittedly these sources are not easily accessible, and many still require research and interpretation, but to the extent that they record the activities and views of women in the public sphere they must give the lie to the description 'anonymous'. If we take 'anonymous' to mean unnamed, and unrecognised as individuals, this is patently not the case. The prime example of this must be the campaign for women's suffrage, in particular the activities of the militant suffragettes, whose activities in the years preceding the First World War, as Elspeth King points out, resulted in almost daily coverage (King 1992). Perhaps underlying the notion of 'anonymous' is really another one: that is, the absence of authorship. Women's activities and actions may have been recorded by others, they may have been described and objectified, but there are very few within a Scottish historical context who have authored their own narratives. The women's suffrage campaign in Scotland appears only to have produced one, unpublished, autobiography, and biographical material of leading campaigners that is meagre in the extreme. It is only now that we are beginning to discover the extent of suffragette activity in Scotland. Leah Leneman has performed a valuable service in identifying leading campaigners, though often she has only been able to bring the barest of details together about them (Leneman 1991). The 'anonymity' then is in the eye of the beholder, the eye which refuses to see what is actually there.

It is becoming more common for historians and other social scientists writing about Scotland to acknowledge women or gender in their work. Nonetheless, well intentioned though this may be, it frequently results in what might be described as a technique of containment: that is, the tokenistic and stereotypical generalisation concerning how oppressed women have been, or their depiction as the self-sacrificing salt of the earth, an image that also has currency in fiction. Siân Reynolds has described this as a sign of bad conscience:

It is possible for historians with a bad conscience about mentioning women (and in Scotland a bad conscience is understandable) to fall into the trap of representing women only as oppressed victims - burying them with full honours so to speak. Thus the 'women of Scotland' are described as 'truly the country's most oppressed group'; or we are told that socialist working class culture 'involved the virtual subordination of women ... with the exception of a few outstanding individuals' or participants in the

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Glasgow rent strikes'.  
(Reynolds 1989, p.142)

At the end of the day, this amounts to a denial of women's agency. Siân Reynolds further comments, 'after so many years of neglect of women in Scotland, historians need to explore what is meant by "subordination" rather than simply assert it'. As she has demonstrated in her history of women compositors in the printing trades in Edwardian Edinburgh, **Britannica's Typesetters**, the opposition of victim and oppressor can be simplistic; the choices and decisions women and men make are often very complex, and if women sometimes seem to acquiesce in their oppression, or the maintenance of their unequal status, they may be doing so because they have weighed up carefully the losses and gains from any particular course of action. This is not merely a passive acceptance.

If we look at the dominant historical narratives of the earlier part of the 20th Century in Scotland, these are of Red Clydeside, striking miners, the General Strike, the Depression, hunger marches - events in which of course women participated, though how is little known. The heroic images that are associated with this period are overwhelmingly masculine, with the exception of the Glasgow rent strike, but even here it has been argued by Jim Smyth that women's action has been incorporated into the image of the Labour movement (Smyth 1992). Smyth agrees with other commentators that the rent strike made a significant contribution to the growth of the Labour Party's political and organisational strength, but, in stressing this, he argues that

we also diminish the role of the women who fought the rent strike and other campaigns. The rent strike and the broader issue of women's political activity become too easily incorporated into the 'forward march of labour'. ... It is not just a question of identifying women with Labour but a submersion whereby the dynamic of women's own activity and the discord which existed between women and the labour movement are too easily overlooked.

(Smyth 1992, p.175)

Smyth emphasises women's different methods of political organisation - 'women-led, direct action, based in working-class communities and involving housewives'; the 'conscious hostility to women playing an active role in the organisations of the labour movement'; the divisions of sex and class that existed over support for women's suffrage, and the 'perceived hostility of women voters to Labour' (Smyth 1992).

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The valorisation of particular types and forms of political or trade union action, which may be regarded as typically masculine, has its counterpoint in the devaluation and negative stereotyping of women's forms of organisation and action. For example, Eleanor Gordon has criticised the conventional view that women workers were hard to organise, and more docile than men (Gordon 1991). As she argues, the privileging of certain forms of organisation and action leads to the exclusion of others. Thus criticisms of women workers came from the craft unions who had been able to create stable and disciplined organisations, and to achieve a position of negotiating round the table with employers. This was to a great extent a function of the nature of their employment, of skill levels and the demand for these skills. Gordon gives detailed evidence of the extent of industrial action of women workers, in particular in the Dundee jute industry.

A further example of the role played by women in industrial action is the 1911 strike at Singer's in Clydebank. In their account of this strike, Glasgow Labour History Workshop records days lost through strikes in 1911. The strike at Singer's accounted for the greatest number of days lost from one single-firm strike. Overall, the industry in which most days were lost was mining, but second in line was the Dundee jute industry, an industry dominated by female labour. In the Singer's strike, while the workforce was predominantly male, action was sparked off by a reduction of pay for 12 women cabinet polishers, who walked out to be followed and supported by the vast majority of the workforce. The authors of the pamphlet on the strike comment that 'the important role of women workers has been grossly neglected' in previous accounts, and that there is firm evidence to 'contradict the male labourist myth that all women workers are innately weak, submissive, conservative, apathetic and acquiescent in their relations with management' (Glasgow Labour History Workshop 1989, p.45). It is perhaps important to emphasise here that in wishing to research, record and analyse women's role, it is not always assumed that men's and women's interests are in conflict. Indeed events such as the Singer's strike and the Glasgow rent strike appear to be classic examples of class solidarity between working women and men, although if we look at a wider range of political activity, this solidarity may be more fragile or fractured.

Why should women's role be down-played, or even written out of the account? It has been argued that the power of Victorian domestic ideology has influenced up to the present the way in which historians view women, privileging the identity of wife and mother, of the domestic, nurturing, caring role, over one of active participation in public life, whether as political

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representatives, or as participants in industrial or class struggles. This point may be reinforced by an examination of the way in which individual women who campaigned for women's rights have been commemorated, for example Elsie Inglis, after whom a maternity hospital was named, or Flora Stevenson after whom a primary school was named. On the one hand this reflected their public contribution and working lives, but on the other it contains them within the notion of nurturing and caring femininity. Elsie Inglis, as a doctor, was concerned with maternal welfare, and worked to improve this amongst the poor living in the centre of Edinburgh, but she was also one of the first women doctors in Scotland, a campaigner for women's suffrage, a Liberal activist, and initiator of the Scottish Women's Hospitals during the First World War, this latter against the wishes of the War Office, and funded by money raised through the Women's Suffrage Societies. It has been commented of Florence Nightingale that biographies conventionally presented her as the 'self-sacrificing "Lady with the Lamp", making no mention of her "ambition, ruthlessness and iron determination", characteristics which 'did not fit public expectations about middle class women' (Purvis 1995, p.3). It would not be unreasonable to surmise that women like Elsie Inglis had their fair share of these characteristics too. Likewise Flora Stevenson, who was the first woman to sit on a school board in Scotland, was a long-standing suffrage campaigner and campaigner for women's education. The complexity of their lives and personalities is reduced to a safe, conventionally feminine stereotype in their public commemoration. Though neither married and neither had children, their public role has been constructed as a symbol of the maternal.

This creation of a feminine stereotype seems to be the inevitable other side of the coin to the heroic masculine image of the Red Clydesiders. Working class images may not be the only ones in recent Scottish history, but these images and narratives have assumed considerable significance in the attempt to create a Scottish identity in the 20th Century. It is true that there has been a questioning of the extent to which Red Clydeside was truly revolutionary, but this is conducted entirely within a masculine frame of reference, accompanied as it is by a sense of loss, and mourning for a time of industrial strength and the power of the skilled male worker, toiling to create the tools of imperialist expansion. Literature and other forms of cultural production also reflect this, as Alex Howson has commented (Howson 1993). Even images which have the intention of providing something more politically positive (for instance, images of male labour, urban politics and class divisions) use stereotyped images of femininity as a 'a backdrop to quests for masculine identity'. It is an important part of Howson's argument to assert

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that 'we cannot speak of national identity as a fixed category when cultural pluralism characterises contemporary Scottish society', that we need to challenge 'notions of uniform national identity', and to argue for the relevance of recognition of identities (Howson 1993).

It can be argued that the search for a 'national identity' has been an active force in the marginalisation of women, in suppressing the record of actions that disrupt the stereotype. At the very least this means a critical stance should be adopted towards the concept of a 'national identity'. Rosalind Mitchison, in the foreword to **Why Scottish History Matters** claims that 'Scotland's sense of national identity has survived the lack of serious study of national history because a limited amount of knowledge of it has percolated through the educational system to most people. Literature, the press, the structure of Scotland's governing institutions in Church and State have reaffirmed its separate character'(Mitchison 1991, p.ix). However, a survival despite a lack of serious study of history is clearly one that has its dangers in that the notion of 'national identity' that survives is necessarily, partial, incomplete, distorted. Certainly we can say that so limited is our knowledge of the role of women in Scottish history, that they do not appear to have influenced the creation of a notion of 'national identity', and that this is necessarily constructed in a masculine image. If we look at these areas that Mitchison lists as reaffirming Scotland's separate character - literature, the press, governing institutions of church and state - these are overwhelmingly male-dominated, and, although there have been changes in the past twenty years or so, this still remains the case. This notion of 'national identity' is as problematic for women, then, as the heroic imagery of Red Clydeside, and serves to underline the point that the very notion of a unitary 'national identity' stands as a barrier to our understanding of the place of women in Scottish society.

The paradox is that the same kind of arguments that can be made for why Scottish history matters can be made for why women's history matters, but significantly this parallel is not made. Christopher Harvie remarks in his contribution to **Why Scottish History Matters** that 'many of the lacunae of the twentieth century have been filled up ... in the remarkable revival of art and literature that Scotland has seen in the 1980s' (Harvie 1991, p.87). If many of the important lacunae have been filled up, that of women's history has not been, but neither Harvie, nor any of the other contributors, appears to notice.

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It has become a commonplace that the recovery or discovery of their history is an important moment in the development of the political consciousness of oppressed groups, an important part of the process of forging a political identity - this can be said of black people, of people participating in anti-colonial struggles, of the working classes, of women. **Why Scottish History Matters** puts it thus,

For an individual the destruction of memory means the destruction of personality. Human beings are the product and embodiment of their own past. It is only by contact with this past, in thinking and in relationships, that we exist.

(Mitchison 1991, p.vii)

Or, as Tom Johnston put it,

a people which does not understand the past will never comprehend the present nor mould the future.

(Glasgow Labour History Workshop 1989, p.59)

For women to remain dispossessed of their past is for them to remain partially disenfranchised, to have limits imposed on their power and potential both as individuals and collectively. This dispossession results in women being offered a restricted and distorted identity, or at best a very limited repertoire of identities. This does not make it impossible for women, or other groups, to forge new identities, or to challenge confinement and oppression, but it makes it harder.

Thus women in Scotland have been rendered almost invisible in the production of historical narratives. This process is accomplished by a variety of means - denial, dismissal, incorporation and containment - all of which serve to deny women's agency in history. The production of knowledge is located within a particular set of power relations, and often serves to reproduce these. This can be seen in the shape that Scottish history has taken, with its reinforcement of gendered power relations which subordinate women. The search for a 'national identity' is crucially implicated in this process.

### **MARGINALISATION WITHIN FEMINIST HISTORY**

The issue of women's place in Scottish history is one that has more than one dimension. It can be argued that the process of marginalisation occurs twice,

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once in relation to men, and once in relation to 'Britain'. In challenging the neglect of the role of women in Scottish history and the containment of women within nurturing, maternal stereotypes, feminists are essentially engaged in a debate within Scotland, primarily with male writers, researchers, and academics, though not exclusively. There are women historians who do not share a feminist perspective and men who do. In challenging, analysing and reformulating historical narratives, women in Scotland have common cause with women elsewhere in the world, and in making this challenge draw on the work of feminist writers and historians elsewhere, whose analyses and conceptualisations inform our own. This is an important source of inspiration, particularly since the writing of feminist women's history in Scotland has been slow to develop.

It is therefore particularly disappointing in turning to feminist writers in England to see them also perform a conjuring trick of rendering Scottish women invisible. Examples of this are myriad, but I wish to cite just one recent example of a text on women's history in Britain, **Women's History: Britain 1850-1945**, edited by June Purvis (Purvis 1995). No attempt is made in the introduction to analyse what is meant by Britain, though it is acknowledged that studies of Scottish and Welsh women have been published, with details supplied in a footnote. The only contribution in which the issue of nations or national identity within Britain is addressed and integrated into the piece is by Jane McDermid, a Scot, writing on women and education. Otherwise the next best we get to this is an acknowledgement by one contributor that the term 'British' is problematic, accompanied by a reference to Scottish and Welsh texts in a footnote and a statement that Scottish and Welsh women's history will not be considered. The contribution goes on to discuss the history of Jewish, Irish, black, and Indian women in Britain, and to explore British, particularly English, women's relationship to imperialism and racial politics. The best it seems Scottish women can expect is to be referred to in footnotes, or to be acknowledged as different only to be dismissed because that difference renders them irrelevant. If, as a consequence of gendered power relations, the history of women's public role is suppressed, as a consequence of national/regional power relations women as Scots are suppressed from the 'British'. The resulting alienation can produce a concentration on the identity 'Scot', rather than the identity 'woman' (although as women we are contesting the gendered nature of the identity 'Scot'), and in this sense constitutes a boundary between women of different nationalities.

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Much feminist writing, which sets out to challenge gender bias, appears nonetheless to fall unconsciously into the denial of difference within Britain. The equation of British with English can occur all too easily even when the writing on England may itself have a regional focus. Is it a sign of progress to appear in footnotes, or to be acknowledged simply as being different, before being dismissed as exceptional, or perhaps even 'exotic', and therefore irrelevant to whatever subject is being debated? If we can make common cause with Scots men in our claim to have difference recognised, we can also make common cause with other women in the various stateless nations of the United Kingdom.

### **MARGINALISATION WITHIN FEMINIST DEBATES ABOUT NATIONALISM**

A third area in which women in Scotland are marginalised is in feminist debates about nationalism, a subject to which feminists have turned their attention only relatively recently. Scotland, however, is left out of the debate, although an examination of the key themes in these debates helps to explain why. Common themes in feminist writings on gender and nationalism are the frequent emphases to be found in nationalist movements on motherhood, reproduction and racial purity, and the way in which these are linked to control of women's sexuality. It is argued that within nationalist movements use of the symbolism of motherhood is common, both in symbolic representation of the nation as motherland, and in appeals to women, and that in debates around the rights of citizens and women's rights, human individual rights are usually subordinated in the case of women to the family and reproduction. As Nira Yuval-Davis has written,

Women often come to symbolise the national collectivity, its roots, its spirit, its national project. Moreover women often symbolize national and collective 'honour'.  
(Yuval-Davis 1993, p.627)

None of these debates, or dominant themes in feminist writings, however, appropriately describe the situation in Scotland. Despite the fact that women may be said to be still largely dispossessed of their history, and that constraining stereotypes may still be common within historical narratives, and within fiction and other cultural forms, it can be argued that the discourse of Scottish political nationalism does not appeal to an archetypal Scottish womanhood or motherhood. In terms of political programmes for a future

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Scotland, there is no apparent call for greater control of women's sexuality. In feminist debates in Scotland prior to the 1979 referendum there was anxiety that a Scottish Assembly might prove more reactionary than Westminster over issues such as abortion and divorce. In the intervening period this anxiety seems to have been alleviated, though this is not to deny the existence of a strong Catholic anti-abortion lobby in the West of Scotland. There is of course more to control of female sexuality than abortion or divorce laws, and there are ways in which this control is exercised in Scotland as elsewhere. But the significant point to make is that women do not seem to be being asked to safeguard the morality and purity of the nation. Nationalist politics and discourses in Scotland do not parallel either Third World nationalisms or Eastern European nationalisms in their use of woman as symbolic, or in appeals to women as reproducers of the nation, or in the means of exercising control over female sexuality in order to coerce women into performing this function.

### **DIALOGUE ACROSS DIVISIONS AND BOUNDARIES**

If I am able to argue at one and the same time that gender bias in Scottish intellectual and cultural life still poses serious problems for women by inhibiting the assertion of a public and political identity, and that Scottish nationalist politics and discourses do not privilege reactionary stereotypes of women, it is I think because we live in a society where change in the balance of power between the sexes has advanced sufficiently to shift the terms of the debate. However, if there is to be further progress towards a Scottish society in which women have greater access to public and political life, and to sharing in power and decision making, then it is an important question what identities women may assume. I have described a triple marginalisation that makes it difficult to develop these identities. Firstly, women's suppression or containment within narratives of Scottish history (and fiction, and other forms of cultural production); secondly, the way in which Scotswomen, and to a certain extent Scots in general, are absent or suppressed from so-called 'British' narratives; and thirdly the way in which nationalism is derided as reactionary by feminists (and the left in general) whereas in Scotland nationalism (in the broad sense of aspirations for greater political autonomy) appears to offer women the opportunity to increase their political representation and power. These processes of marginalisation create a dilemma of shifting allegiances, where one identity may cement alliances at the same time as another is undermined by that alliance, and this creates a conflict of interest that may make it difficult to sustain stable alliances.

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However, it seems that inevitably this is a dilemma that we shall have to continue living with, and that the best hope of resolving it must lie in dialogue across divisions and boundaries.

Given the current political situation in Britain, in which the achievement of greater political autonomy for Scotland seems a real and imminent possibility, the issue of what notions of 'national identity', or identities, people appeal to is, I believe, of real importance and urgency. My starting point was MacDiarmid's notion that Scottish women of interest are 'curiously rare'. When the nature of patriarchal power and the subordination of women is analysed, this is after all not so curious. Women have been denied access to power on equal terms, denied access on equal terms to the means of making history whether in action or through authoring accounts, and denied agency in the accounts and narratives that have been written. Feminist scholarship has demonstrated that women's presence in history has been actively rendered invisible. This understanding robs MacDiarmid's remark of its force, and exposes its contemptuous misogyny and the limits of his radicalism. It would, however, be an inappropriate response to attempt to elevate individuals to the status of heroines. Rather it is a different kind of history that must be written, with neither gods nor heroes, goddesses nor heroines. But it is intellectually and politically essential that in Scotland we establish the presence of women in history and in society, produce new narratives and reconstruct our history, and generate identities of historical women that will reflect the complexity and variety of women's experience. This inevitably means questioning the images and narratives of male domination and masculine identities, and challenging any attempt to impose a restrictive unitary identity on any Scot, woman or man. This process of rethinking the identity 'Scot' therefore necessitates dialogues and alliances across boundaries of gender.

Similarly, if the identity 'woman' is to form a solid basis for feminist politics, dialogues and alliances across national boundaries are crucial, but these must recognise difference in order to create solidarity and sisterhood around what is held in common. It is therefore also politically important to continue to work toward identifying a strategy for women to support each other in challenging within each national context gender stereotyping and inequalities, and, within the context of the women's movement in Britain, in challenging imperialist constructions of British history and the 'mainstream unionist analysis' that still informs much feminist thinking.

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