

2001

Eliza Ogilvy, Highland Minstrelsy, and the Perils of Victorian Motherhood

A. A. Markley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Markley, A. A. (2001) "Eliza Ogilvy, Highland Minstrelsy, and the Perils of Victorian Motherhood," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 32: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol32/iss1/17>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

A. A. Markley

Eliza Ogilvy, Highland Minstrelsy,
and the Perils of Victorian Motherhood

In 1846, the publication of a volume of poems entitled *A Book of Highland Minstrelsy* won encouraging critical attention for its unknown author. The young Scottish author, a woman by the name of Eliza Ann Harris Dick Ogilvy, who was to become known to Victorian readers as “E. A. H. O.,” was even compared by one reviewer to Lord Byron in having developed a true poetic genius from an early exposure to the unique beauty of the Scottish landscape.¹ Nearly forgotten a century and a half later, *A Book of Highland Minstrelsy* nevertheless has much to offer the modern reader, both in terms of its fine poetic compositions, and in its preservation of a rich catalogue of ancient Scottish legends and bits of folklore, material which Ogilvy collected in order to illustrate “the traditions, the sentiments, and the customs of a romantic people.”² What makes these poems particularly powerful, however, is the consistent presence of a strong poetic voice that is at once deeply sensitive to the range of human suffering exhibited in Scottish history and folklore, as well as profoundly, if subtly, expressive of the suffering of her own personal experience as a woman and as an artist in the nineteenth century.

¹*The Literary Gazette, and Journal of the Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences &c.* No. 1529 (9 May 1846), 421-422.

²Eliza Ogilvy, Preface to *A Book of Highland Minstrelsy* (London, 1846), p. v. Henceforth Ogilvy.

The twenty-nine poems in the collection can be divided along two lines: those based on aspects of Scottish legend and historical occurrence, and those illustrating elements of folk belief, particularly as they pertain to the supernatural. In "The Widows of Lochy," for example, Ogilvy recounts a 1544 conflict between two Scottish clans that resulted in the death of eighty young men. In a highly ballad-like metrical pattern, Ogilvy dramatizes the ensuing legend that each of the dead men's widows immediately bore a son to her dead husband, and that these eighty children all met together thirty years later in order to avenge their fathers' deaths. The poem entitled "The Parting on the Brig," on the other hand, is structured entirely around the simple folk belief that lovers who part from each other on a bridge will never meet again. Ogilvy prefaces each poem with an often lengthy prose headnote in which she explains the elements or anecdotes from legend and folklore comprising the theme of the poem. Of these headnotes, Ogilvy explains in her short preface:

It is hoped that the brief introductions severally prefixed to the following poems will be found more convenient to the reader than the scattered footnotes which would otherwise have been necessary. They have no pretension to erudition, and, unless where they are the result of personal observation, have been drawn from such authorities as are most readily accessible.

Ogilvy then adds an expression of thanks to her Scottish friends "for the local information so obligingly communicated," thus adding a subtle bid for the legitimacy of her subject matter to her previously modest statement about her lack of "pretension to erudition" (p. v).

Despite Ogilvy's poetic skill and exceptional narrative ability, and despite the collection's value as a repository of Scottish legend, perhaps the greatest value in listening again to this forgotten voice lies in what this Scottish poet has to tell us about being a woman and a mother during the mid- to late nineteenth century. In each volume of Ogilvy's poetry, and in the notebooks of unpublished manuscripts that she left at her death, a persistent, almost obsessive anxiety about children pervades her work. This anxiety reveals itself in poems dedicated to the subject of young mothers, the danger of childbirth, and the reality of high infant mortality. In addition, this preoccupation often can be traced just beneath the surface in poems based on legends or historical events that are not ostensibly concerned with these topics. Many of Ogilvy's poems can be classified as *kindertotenlieder*, laments for a dead child, and indeed elements of this poetic form pervade all of Ogilvy's writings. Often composed to provide consolation to women who experienced the loss of a child, *kindertotenlieder* continued to be a popular form of elegiac poetry while infant mortality remained at around twenty-five percent among middle-class families

between 1850 and 1880.³ In her experimentation and innovations within this sub-genre over the course of her lifetime, Ogilvy's work indicates the wide range and appeal of *kindertotenlieder* in the century before our own.

Eliza Ann Harris Dick was born in Perth on January 6, 1822, to Louisa Wintle and Abercromby Dick, an employee of the East India Company. Eliza spent her childhood in Scotland and in India, where she and her sister Charlotte traveled to live for a time with their paternal grandfather William Dick, chief surgeon to the East India Company in Calcutta. Soon after her return to Britain, Eliza married David Ogilvy, of the old Scottish family of Inverquharity, in 1843. Interestingly, her career as a poet seems to have begun literally immediately upon the birth of her first child, Rose. Ogilvy's earliest known poem was reputedly composed on the day that she gave birth to Rose in March of 1844. In a letter to an aunt in which David Ogilvy reported Rose's birth, he enclosed a copy of the poem entitled "A Natal Address to My Child. March 19th 1844," with the explanation that "The elegant stanzas on the opposite page were composed on the day of the Child's birth (really!) by the incorrigible Poetess, my wife." David Ogilvy explains that his wife had begun the poem in a serious mood, but that "the Muse ran away with her."⁴ The final stanza of the poem reads as follows:

O Baby of the wise round forehead,
Be not too thoughtful ere they time;
Life is not truly quite so horrid—
Oh! how she squalls! – she can't bear rhyme! (Browning, p. 179)

"A Natal Address" is noteworthy for the realistic manner in which Ogilvy describes her initial reactions to being a mother, and particularly her newborn infant's appearance. In a none-too-idealized description, she humorously depicts a realistic image of the child, lying "screaming in the Nurse's lap." Ogilvy's reference to having made much "fuss and bother" and many moans and groans in bringing the infant into the world is an unusually direct, if mollified reference to the experience of childbirth, particularly if the poem was indeed composed on the day of the child's birth. The poet deftly moves from her own experience of birth to that of her new daughter, stating that it is now the baby's turn "to groan and grumble, / As if afraid to enter life." Admittedly, in the final line, the speaker loses control over the tone of her address to her child, a conversation with an infant that may remind one of Coleridge's "Frost at

³Patricia Branca, *The Silent Sisterhood: Middle-Class Women in the Victorian Home* (London, 1974), pp. 98-9.

⁴The text of the letter and the poem are printed in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Letters to Mrs. David Ogilvy, 1849-1861*, ed. Peter N. Heydon and Philip Kelley (New York, 1972), pp. 178-9. Henceforth Browning.

Midnight"; nevertheless, although she loses her hold over the philosophical speculation she has begun in the last stanza, her exclamation, "Oh! how she squalls!—she can't bear rhyme!" is both humorous and endearing in its expression of the emotional exuberance a new mother must feel at having just given birth. The reader can hardly fail to be amused and touched by the poet's ostensible loss of control over her speculation and her expressive burst of jubilation at the child's healthy screaming.

Unfortunately, the infant Rose died on July 7, 1845, and Ogilvy found her poetry to be a means of coping with the loss of her child, pouring out a number of poems on her daughter which she collected and published privately in 1845 in a volume poignantly entitled *Rose Leaves*. Ogilvy had six more children over the next twelve years, but the experience of losing Rose was obviously a life-altering event that inspired her many experiments with *kindertotenlieder*, as well as the frequently recurring motif of the lost infant that runs through the body of work Ogilvy produced.

In *Highland Minstrelsy*, Ogilvy's predilection for *kindertotenlieder* occasionally shows itself in poems based on aspects of folklore, as is the case in "The Spinning of the Shroud." In this poem the author describes the old Scottish tradition that required every new bride immediately to begin spinning the yarn for her own burial shroud. As Ogilvy's young speaker imagines the future life that lies before her, the home and the children she will have, she wonders why she must be forced to carry out such a morbid custom at the happiest period of her youth. In answer to her question, the winds reply that when the time comes for her to die, she will be all too happy to embrace the comfort of the grave after suffering the losses that life has in store for her, particularly the loss of loved ones. The comment in her headnote reads: "It must have been a strong impression of the fallacy of earthly hopes which assigned such a task to such a season" (p. 155). Margaret Bennett has recorded the persistence of this tradition in Scotland well into the twentieth century. In her 1985 interview with 105-year-old Margaret Ann Clouston in Orkney, Clouston recalled having been made to sew her own shroud while a young girl in school.⁵

"The Vigil of the Dead" is another example of a poem in which Ogilvy's preoccupation with the reality of losing one's children works its way into an illustration of a Scottish legend. In the prose headnote Ogilvy describes an old belief that when a human being is buried, his or her spirit is obliged to keep watch over the local graveyard until relieved from that duty by the next death in the community. The spirit then moves to heaven on a "dreeng," or meteor, which Ogilvy suggests may refer to the Northern lights. She explores the pathos of this situation from the point of view of the spirit doomed to wait on earth until relieved, and unavoidably placed in the detestable position of run-

⁵Margaret Bennett, *Scottish Customs from the Cradle to the Grave* (Edinburgh, 1992), p. 192.

ning over a list of former friends and neighbors, calculating again and again who among them is most likely to be the next to die, and estimating how long the wait for such event may span. The poet also considers the terrifying position of the sinner who can harbor no hope of salvation, anticipating the dreadful retribution that awaits him or her upon being relieved from the watch.

“The Vigil of the Dead” is a powerful dramatic monologue written in swift anapestic tetrameter couplets in which a recently deceased young herdsman narrates the events of his sudden death, and begins to speculate on how long his hateful watch in the graveyard will be. Halfway through the poem the reader learns that, ironically, the soul who will replace the speaker on his watch will be none other than his own infant child. The speaker is jarred out of his excessive self-consciousness by the thought of his child’s illness and of the agony his young wife will suffer on losing her baby so soon after losing her husband:

The fatherless infant is drooping his head,
To live in the churchyard, to watch in my stead:
Unborn at my dying, his death sets me free,
And his soul in departing opes heaven for me!
The meteor approacheth, it burns on my sight,
It quickens the dawn with its tremulous light;
The dawn that revealeth the baby’s damp cheek,
Which the dark hues of dying so fearfully streak.
Sore weepeth my Morag, she thinks not of me,
As she bends o’er that fast changing face on her knee;
Her heart with her nursling goes down to the tomb,
While the sire he hath ransomed is freed from his doom.

(p. 168)

In the final lines of “The Vigil of the Dead,” the speaker ends this speculation on the death of his child with a prayer to death that his child be spared a long tenure as guardian of the graveyard. Here Ogilvy deftly turns the father’s concern for speeding along his own term in the graveyard to his concern that the spirit of his infant child be spared such an undeserved penance. In the poem ostensibly intended to illustrate the pathos of a particular aspect of Scottish legend, Ogilvy provides a poignant view of the agony of losing a child. More importantly, she uses the emotional content of the *kindertotenlieder* to illustrate a subtle, but profound change in her speaker, whose concerns shift in the last section of the poem from the misery of his own situation to a real concern for the fate of the soul of his infant.

“The Portents of the Night” provides another example of a poem designed to illustrate aspects of ancient Scottish folk legend. Here Ogilvy divides her characteristic anapestic tetrameter lines into stanzas that evoke the call and response ballad, as a woodsman describes for his wife three terrifying portents

he has experienced during his ride home through the forest on a dark, windy night. One of these experiences he recounts in the following manner:

“Nae sight have I seen in the forest, gudewife,
But I heard what I ne’er shall forget in my life,—
A moanin’ and sobbin’ of infant in pain,
A dreary cry over and over again.
It was na the wind, for the wind it was still;
It was na the burn, for there’s frost on the hill;
’Twas the voice of a child, girming sadly and sair,
Sounding close at my footsteps and filling the air;
And I searched the dark wood, but no baby was there.”
(p. 264)

The woodsman’s wife immediately recognizes what her husband has heard, and loudly laments as she explains it to him:

“’Twas the voice o’ your baby unchristened, gudeman;
Unblessed by the priest was her life’s little span;
No waters of mercy were poured on her head,
And therefore she wailth so sair from the dead,
And haunteth the forest, and canna find rest;
Unsealed by redemption, she canna win west.
Oh! Would I had crossed thee with naked claymore
Than barred thee from heaven, my babe that I bore!
Or would I had ta’en thee through corri and spate,
Through the drifts of the snow to the priest’s very gate,
Or ever thou cam’st to such terrible fate!”
(p. 265)

In this poem, Ogilvy dramatizes the grave concern over the fate of a child’s soul that faced the mother of a weak newborn who was likely to die. While many Christians over the centuries have believed in the necessity of baptism to ensure a newborn child’s place in heaven, for many Scots the necessity of this rite was compounded by additional folk beliefs. Not only would the souls of unbaptized children be lost forever, “as much as the most hardened sinner,” as Ogilvy explains in her headnote, but they would face an eternity of “bemoaning their wretched fate” in the woods, “upbraiding their forgetful parents” (Ogilvy, p. 261). Through the voice of the Scottish woodsman, Ogilvy makes her reader aware of the terrifying effect that such a portent as the sound of a crying child in the woods could have on one who believes in such supernatural possibilities. What is more, through the voice of the man’s wife, Ogilvy amplifies the agony of losing a child by focusing on the distraught woman’s additional suffering in her belief that she had caused her child’s soul to be lost for eternity, neither having managed to get the infant to a priest before her death, nor having baptized her herself over a drawn sword, as Ogilvy tells us the Scots

would often do “in the emergency of illness and distance from a priest” (p. 261). Margaret Bennett’s research confirms the importance of this belief well into the twentieth century. During her interview with the midwife and neonatal nurse Florence Clow in Dumfries in 1985, Clow described her experiences having been asked by patients to baptize stillborn and sickly infants (pp. 200-201).

In *Highland Minstrelsy*, Ogilvy often extends her interest in the perils of motherhood to treatments of the lot of women in ancient and in modern Scotland. A poem entitled “The Imprecation by the Cradle,” for example, pulls no punches in its scathing denunciation of the treatment of the “fallen woman,” seduced and abandoned by a man. Divided into two parts, this poem’s quatrains, its archaic spellings, and the repeated refrain:

Slumber sweet, my babie,
 Slumber peacefullie,
 Mickle grief and mickle wrang
 I have borne for thee!
 (p. 39)

particularly call ballads to mind. In the first part of the poem, a young mother addresses her infant son in his cradle, and tells him of what she has suffered at the hand of his cruel father who abandoned her despite his promise of marriage. She describes the fair “Lady Ellen” who stole her lover’s heart, and then calls down a curse upon Ellen’s marriage, including a few poignant stanzas in which she begs her child not to wear the likeness of his father, not to smile his smile, not to “speak his accents.”

In the second part of “The Imprecation by the Cradle,” the child in turn addresses his mother, now apparently dead, and describes to her how her curses on his father and Lady Ellen have all come to pass. Upon the discovery of her husband’s past treatment of the child and his mother, Lady Ellen’s mind became “unsettled,” leading her to make attempts both on her husband’s life and on her own before dying raving and childless. The child promises that, in pursuing a career as a soldier, he will win back the wealth, the rank, and the pride that his father denied him and his mother. Far more than merely an echo of an ancient Scottish anecdote fashioned into an old poetic form, this poem’s candid exposure of the wrongs that women suffered when abandoned and left with a child is a harsh critique of the mores of contemporary society, much like such poems on the treatment of women as Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “A Year’s Spinning,” and “Void in Law.” Ogilvy brings the force of the poem’s message home with a final, emphatic sentence in her headnote: “Such are the romantic incidents of a story which is literally true” (p. 38).

Eliza Ogilvy’s mastery of both narrative and suspense reach their height in *Highland Minstrelsy* in a Gothic poem entitled “The Shrift of Janet Campbell.” The meter of the poem is trochaic octameter catalectic, the meter of Tenny-

son's "Locksley Hall," and the detailed and highly melodramatic story pushes the confines of the short poem to its limits in terms of character development, narrative detail, and emotional content. It consists of the extended flashback of mad Janet Campbell, who, on her deathbed, makes a frenzied confession. Her story is similar to that of other fallen women whose stories were a highly popular staple of Victorian poetry and fiction. As a beautiful young woman, Janet had been loved by the young Lord of Balloch, who won her trust with promises of marriage and wealth. After bearing him a son, however, Janet finds herself abandoned by her lover, and subsequently rejected by her father and her community. Not only does she face a life as an outcast, but she is also deprived of her newborn infant. Her father takes the boy from her, and abandons her at the threshold of the local church. Soon after, Janet mourns her baby's death when she learns that her father's cottage has been swept away in a terrible flood.

The climax of "The Shrift of Janet Campbell" comes with the return of Janet's lover, the Lord of Balloch, many years later, and with a much younger wife on his arm. Gradually and insidiously Janet plays Iago to the witless lord's Othello, constantly pointing out suggestions of his wife's unfaithfulness. When she witnesses an innocent meeting between the lord's wife and a young man in the woods, Janet goads her former lover with the "evidence" of his wife's betrayal until he kills the young man and locks his wife in a turret in his castle where she starves.

Of particular interest in Ogilvy's handling of this story is the way she slows the fast clip of the plot down after the climax as Janet describes in detail her attendance on the corpse of the young man:

By his corse I stood and pondered, for strange memories came back,
Strangely summoned by his features, by his eyebrows straight and black;
By the curve of lip and nostril; and I cried, 'Alas! my son,
Had he lived to such a manhood, had been like thee, hapless one!'

(p. 74)

Janet then recognizes a token among the boy's garments that prove that he is indeed her long lost son, and that the boy's father, in a grim reenactment of Theseus's vengeance on his son Hippolytus, has murdered his own son after wrongfully assuming the boy's adultery with his wife. "Ah! What mine eyes had darkened, bleared with passion truth to shun?" Janet laments upon her realization, "Dulled, indeed, the mother's instinct when she knew not 't was her son" (p. 74). Although the lord was driven mad by these events, Janet has spent the remainder of her days suffering under the agony of her guilt. She laments:

But for me there's no returning, no repentance 'vailleth me,
Till the Tay that leaves the mountains shall flow backward from the sea;

Blood of woman, young and spotless—blood of man, mine only son,
 Did the sky rain down for ages, 'twould not wash what I have done!

(p. 75)

In the headnote to the poem Ogilvy writes that it is based on “a current tradition,” but admits that it has undergone “some alteration in the handling” (p. 62). Her discussion of the background material of the poem suggests that the kernel of the poem borrowed the tradition of an old husband who immured his young wife in a closet, over which he kept watch until the poor woman died of starvation. Ogilvy has taken the popular figure of the fallen woman and allowed her to carry out her revenge until she can see the horror of what she has caused. She infuses an old tale with allusions to Shakespeare’s *Othello* and *Macbeth*, and with emotional elements borrowed from the situation of a handful of Euripidean tragedies: the murder of the innocent son of *Hippolytus*; the boundless vengeance of the wronged *Medea*; the agony of the mother who has destroyed her own child from the *Bacchae*. But most striking is the deft manner in which Ogilvy slows the fast metrical pace of Janet’s narrative just before she identifies the corpse of her son, bringing the suspense to an unexpected climax, and incorporating elements of the lament for the dead child to amplify the depths of the remorse that Janet must suffer upon realizing what she has brought about with her vengeance.

After the publication of *A Book of Highland Minstrelsy*, Eliza Ogilvy and her family spent several years living in Italy, during which time Ogilvy enjoyed a close friendship with Elizabeth Barrett Browning—perhaps the chief factor that has prevented Ogilvy from disappearing altogether in the century since her death. Eliza Ogilvy’s *Memoirs of Barrett Browning* and letters that she received from the more famous poet kept Ogilvy’s name in the public eye, while her poetry was largely forgotten in the decades before recent attempts to revise and expand the traditional canon of British literature. From their first meeting in June 1848 through the early 1850s, the Ogilvys and the Brownings spent a great deal of time together, and often took trips together to Bagni di Lucca, Venice, and Paris. For a while the two families were neighbors in Florence when the Ogilvys rented the upper floor of “Casa Guidi” while the Brownings were living on the floor below. Although apparently none of Ogilvy’s letters to Elizabeth Barrett Browning has survived, nearly forty of Barrett Browning’s letters to Ogilvy were saved and have been published, as noted above. Although it is difficult to gather much specific information about Ogilvy from Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s letters, they offer a great deal of insight into Barrett Browning’s personality and her intellect, her health problems, her relationships with her husband and members of her family back in England, her interest in spiritualism, her grand passion for contemporary Italian politics, and, particularly, her great love for children and her delight in being a mother.

Years after Elizabeth Barrett Browning's death, Eliza Ogilvy wrote two Memoirs of her friend. A short, unfinished Memoir survives in an unpublished commonplace book, and Ogilvy apparently reworked and expanded this piece to be included in the 1893 edition of Barrett Browning's *Poems*. Of particular interest in these Memoirs are Ogilvy's reminiscences of discussions between her husband and herself and the Brownings on the topic of poetry. Ogilvy writes of her disagreement with the Brownings on technical aspects of poetic composition "depreciating [the Brownings'] favourite assonance, and insisting on the more complete consonance of accurately responsive rhymes."⁶ In addition, she writes of a philosophical disagreement regarding the purpose and use of poetry in their times; Ogilvy felt that poetry should be written for and aimed at the masses, while the Brownings argued that it should be intended instead for those of the "Higher Intellect" or the "Lords of Mind," who were then to take the responsibility of interpreting it for the common people (Browning, p. xxviii).

Both Barrett Browning's letters to Ogilvy and Ogilvy's Memoirs of Barrett Browning suggest that one of the most important aspects of the friendship between the two poets stemmed from their common experiences with motherhood. Ogilvy gave birth to a son, Alexander, in September 1848, just after making the Brownings' acquaintance and Barrett Browning gave birth to her only child, "Pen," in March 1849. In her Memoir Ogilvy describes Barrett Browning's anxiety for her baby's survival before delivering him and the details of Pen's birth, when Ogilvy proudly became the first person after his nurse to hold the newborn infant. Although Barrett Browning never mentioned it to her directly, Ogilvy says she knew of her friend's grave concerns for her weak and sickly infant Alexander, who seemed unlikely to survive. The two women shared a passionate interest in mundane aspects of mothering, such as choices of baby clothing; they shared anxieties about their children's sicknesses; and they engaged in lengthy debates regarding the proper way to raise children. Occasionally the reader is given a glimpse at the differences between these two women's personalities, as when Ogilvy wrote that she had to administer medicine to the infant Pen because Barrett Browning could not bear to bring pain or discomfort to any other living thing (Browning, p. xxxi).

Ogilvy's close relationship to the Brownings in the early 1850s—a period of intense poetic composition for the Brownings and for Ogilvy herself—undoubtedly left a strong impact on Ogilvy's sense of herself as a poet and on the work that she produced during these years. In 1851, Ogilvy published her third book of poetry, *Traditions of Tuscany, in Verse*. This volume is very much an Italian version of *A Book of Highland Minstrelsy*, in which Ogilvy composed poems based on her experiences and the Italian traditions and anecdotes to

⁶"Recollections of Mrs. Browning by Mrs. David Ogilvy," the undated Memoir manuscript, first published in Browning, p. xxviii.

which she was exposed while living in Italy. Many of the poems that she wrote during these years reflect interests that she held in common with the Brownings. Her poetic speculation entitled "A December Day in the Campagna, Rome," for example, integrates the past and present characters of Italy in a manner that is so much like Robert Browning's well-known "Love Among the Ruins" (1855) as to indicate not only the poets' common interests, but also an interchange of ideas. Ogilvy likewise shared with the Brownings an ever-increasing interest in the Italian political situation, and a particularly intense devotion to the Italian Risorgimento, as indicated by such political poems as "The Austrian Night Patrol. Florence" and "The End of 1851."⁷

Ogilvy and Barrett Browning often discussed each other's poetry and each encouraged the other's work. In February 1854, Ogilvy sent Barrett Browning a copy of her poem "Charon's Ferry," a dark social commentary in which the dead victims of the modern world are denied passage to the underworld because, in their utter destitution, they are unable to pay the ferryman's fee. Barrett Browning approvingly wrote to her friend, "It's a pleasure to have a stroke on the head of the modern bigots from the end of his [Charon's] black oar" (Browning, p. 115). In the same letter, Barrett Browning praises Ogilvy for being able to compose political poems in response to the contemporary events stemming from the involvement of the British in the Crimean War, particularly in light of the fact that Ogilvy had at least one relative involved in the war. Explaining that she has been struck dumb by grief, Barrett Browning writes, "I hear with unaffected wonder of anyone's being able to write verses, with brain & heart torn to pieces as your's [*sic*] must have been lately, [...] & I really think you should be crowned for it" (p. 115). Clearly Ogilvy held her own in the discussion of poetry and politics that dominated the Brownings' circle in the late 1840s and early 1850s.

After four years in Italy the Ogilvys returned to Britain, living at various times in Perth, Edinburgh, Peckham Rye, Lower Sydenham, and Forfarshire. While she went about the business of raising her six children, Ogilvy continued in her writing career, contributing poems to literary annuals, stories to *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*, and even publishing a volume of religious puzzles entitled *Sunday Acrostics, Selected from Names or Words in the Bible* (1867). Ogilvy's preoccupation with infant mortality continued to surface in the poems she included in her final published volume, *Poems of Ten Years, 1846-1855*, published simultaneously in London and Edinburgh in 1856. The haunting and

⁷Interestingly, several of Ogilvy's fellow nineteenth-century Scottish women poets also found artistic inspiration in the Italian Risorgimento. Janet Hamilton supported the movement in "Freedom for Italy - 1867"; Ellen Johnston's "Welcome, Garibaldi" acknowledges the leader as the spiritual descendant of William Wallace. See Valentina Bold, "Beyond 'The Empire of the Gentle Heart,'" in Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan, *A History of Scottish Women's Writing* (Edinburgh, 1997), pp. 256, 258. Henceforth Gifford.

lyrical "A Family Picture," for example, demonstrates the profound importance of the loss of her first child as a source of poetic inspiration throughout Ogilvy's life. In simple, eight-line stanzas the poet sets the stage of a noisy cottage, active with children:

Her cottage is a noisy place,
Where healthy children romping play,
Now shouting in a mimic chase,
Now shrieking in a short-lived fray.
Their cup of life runs o'er its brim,
It froths and foams from morn to night,
They are as fish who happiest swim
When most the waves are lashed to white.
(Browning, p. 195)

Following her description of her home, the poet devotes one stanza to each of her four children as of 1852, detailing each child's appearance and personality. Although the speaker of "A Family Picture" could of course be identified as any mother, the association of the four children with Ogilvy's own is suggested by the birth order of the children as she describes them from the oldest girl to the newborn son. Like the little girl in Wordsworth's "We Are Seven" who refuses to consider her dead siblings as having been taken from her family, the speaker of "A Family Picture" admits that she always includes her lost first-born daughter when counting her children"

Lo, these are all that in the flesh
Are present entering at the door,
But to a mother's eye afresh
Her first-born riseth with the four (p. 196).

In a poignant passage the mother describes how the image of her firstborn's spirit takes on new proportions even as her other children grow, and favorably contrasts the "angel-smile" of her spirit to her living children's "passion-storms." When strangers comment on her four lovely children, she thinks to herself that "'There was one fairer in her shroud, / Yea, now is fairer in the skies'" (p. 196). Perhaps excessive in its sentimentality by modern standards, Ogilvy's reference to her "fairer" child in the skies is quite typical of Victorian elegiac poetry. The striking aspect of the poem lies in the speaker's revelation that the thought of her first-born child remains with her from day to day as she watches her other children grow, even amidst the noisy, boisterous domestic atmosphere that she described in the opening of the poem.

A second poem in the *Poems of Ten Years* volume, entitled "Newly Dead and Newly Born," was written at Casa Guidi in Florence. Here Ogilvy describes a young Italian mother who hears the chanting of a dirge and smells the burning censers of a funeral procession while watching over her newborn in-

fant. The speaker compares the newborn child with the corpse in the street below, both deaf to expressions of human love. Ogilvy deftly captures the shudder that the young mother feels during this experience:

Herself yet trembling on the verge
 Of scarce escapèd danger,
 A shudder takes her at this dirge
 From Death, the great all-changer.

And when the requiem's failing sighs
 Expire along the distance,
 She turneth where her new-born lies
 To test its warm existence.

By touch, and sight, and fine-edged ear,
 To certify its thriving,
 Then cry "O Death, go with that bier,
 And leave this life surviving."

(Browning, p. 191)

Ogilvy's subtle depiction of this mother's natural fear for her baby is achieved with great skill as the woman constantly checks her baby, looking at it and listening closely to assure herself that the child is well. In the final stanzas a worldly-wise speaker warns the young mother to give up her anxiety over her infant, as human souls "are born with wings / Which but awhile are folden" (p. 191). Ogilvy again ends a poem with a slightly melodramatic moral; nevertheless, the shift in the poem's tone with the introduction of this unexpected voice of experience, a voice resigned to the fragility of infant life, complicates the psychological aspects of the piece.

In its wide range of themes and concerns, the body of Eliza Ogilvy's poetry reflects many of the interests and concerns of other Scottish women poets of the nineteenth century. Ogilvy's attention to themes of family and faith echo many of the compositions of such popular poets as Lady Nairne (Caroline Oliphant), Caroline Oliphant the Younger, and Joanna Baillie. Like Ogilvy's, much of Lady Nairne's work is characterized by an attempt to achieve the effect of oral songs. Ogilvy shared with Joanna Baillie a passion for drawing poetic inspiration from figures and events in Scottish history and folklore, and she followed Baillie, and indeed Sir Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* as well, in modifying traditional legend and folklore to fit the tastes of modern audiences. Furthermore, as was the case in Joanna Baillie's having lived the majority of her life in London, Ogilvy's experiences living away from

Scotland (in India, Italy, and England) seem to have strengthened her identity as a Scot and the value she placed on her Scottish heritage.⁸

Ogilvy's celebrations of her young children and of simple domestic pleasures in her poetry reflect a similar domestic focus in the works of countless nineteenth-century British women writers, among them Scottish poets Mary Inglis, Jessie D. M. Morton, Mrs. Lindsay Carnegie, and Isabella F. Darling. Moreover, the popularity of poetry expressing the grief of mothers on losing their children is attested to by the presence of this theme in the works of such poets as Lydia Falconer Fraser, Anna Marie Maxwell, Margaret Thomson Laird, and Jeannie Johnstone. Finally, many nineteenth-century women poets shared with Ogilvy strong feelings about contemporary political issues and social justice. Like Ogilvy's and Barrett Browning's poems depicting the fates of "fallen" women, Agnes Marchbank, Joanna Picken, Jessie Russell, and Marion Bernstein wrote radical works addressing the contemporary treatment of women. Anne Grant attacked the exploitation of native populations in Scotland and of Native Americans. Mary Pyper addressed issues ranging from the victims of cholera to Negro Emancipation. Isabelle Craig-Know, Janet Hamilton, and Ellen Johnston ("The Factory Girl") were particularly concerned with the evils of industrialization and the exploitation of the laboring class. Hamilton, in particular, wrote unusually outspoken poems on current political strife in Spain, Poland, and Italy, as well as on the Crimean War.⁹

After the death of her husband in 1879, Eliza Ogilvy spent twenty-one years at Bridge of Allan, near her father's home, before joining the household of her daughter Marcia Ogilvy Bell at Ealing until her death in 1912, just three days short of her ninetieth birthday. Despite the fact that she gradually lost her eyesight, she left manuscripts of her work that attest to the fact that she continued to write poetry on a wide range of topics and themes at every stage of her life. In a particularly poignant poem from this body of unpublished work, Ogilvy expressed the pain she experienced at once again finding herself confronted with the death of one of her children at an unexpected moment, late in her life. Entitled, "Allan Water, August 27th, 1887," the poem laments the drowning of Ogilvy's adult son Alexander. Compared to her other works, "Allan Water" is unusual both in terms of the speaker's apostrophe to the river, and in her subsequent personification of the river as it makes a reply to her pathetic request that her son be returned to her. The conclusion of the poem concerns the transitory nature of human life that is typical of the vast body of Ogilvy's compositions; the river points out that the assigning of blame for the young man's death is useless; it is Fate that has "foredoomed" him.

⁸See Amanda Gilroy, "From Here to Alterity: The Geography of Femininity in the Poetry of Joanna Baillie," in Gifford, p. 144.

⁹See Bold, "Beyond 'The Empire of the Gentle Heart,'" in Gifford, pp. 248-58.

Forty-two years after the death of her first child, Rose, Ogilvy once again suffered the loss of a child, and she once again found poetry to be an outlet for expressing her grief. The persistence of this theme in poems Ogilvy wrote throughout her lifetime, in works concerned with a wide variety of subject matter, has much to teach modern readers about the realities and challenges of Victorian motherhood. In poems ranging from the rich complexities of Scottish folklore to autobiographical *kindertotenlieder* on the deaths of her own children, Eliza Ogilvy's distinctive voice was clearly formed by the richness of her Scottish literary heritage and by the realities of her experience as a woman, a mother, and an artist.

Penn State University, Delaware County