



A Circle of Sisters: Alice Kipling, Georgiana Burne Jones, Agnes Poynter, and Louisa Baldwin

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THE MACDONALD SISTERS--Alice, Georgiana, Agnes, and Louisa--started life in the teeming ranks of the lower-middle classes, denied the advantages of education and the expectation of social advancement. Yet as wives and mothers they would connect a famous painter, a president of the Royal Academy, a prime minister, and the uncrowned poet laureate of the Empire. Georgiana and Alice married, respectively, the pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones and the arts administrator Edward Poynter; Louisa gave birth to future prime minister Stanley Baldwin, and Alice was mother to Rudyard Kipling. "A Circle of Sisters brings to life four women living at a privileged moment in history. Their progress from obscurity to imperial grandeur indicates the vitality of nineteenth-century Britain: a society abundant with possibility. From their homes in India, America, and England, the sisters formed a network that, through the triumphs and tragedies of their families and the Empire, uniquely endured.

A Circle of Sisters: Alice Kipling, Georgiana Burne Jones, Agnes Poynter, and Louisa Baldwin Details

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From Reader Review *A Circle of Sisters*: Alice Kipling, Georgiana Burne Jones, Agnes Poynter, and Louisa Baldwin for online ebook

Courtney says

I am a sucker for a story about matriarchs in times where it was perceived that men were the rulers of families, so I was instantly drawn to *A Circle of Sisters*. The story follows the four protagonists - Alice Kipling, Georgie Burne-Jones, Agnes Poynter, and Louie Baldwin - as they create new lineages in the late Renaissance-era Britain. Judith Flanders does an excellent job of blending history with story-telling and is able to bring each of these women to life. However, I found myself disappointed as their tales ended, less because of Flanders writing and more due to the less-than-fairytale endings for the women. As if I were reading fiction, I wanted a triumphant finish, but, alas, life is not always so. I sincerely recommend this book to anyone interested in Renaissance history, particularly in the realm of art and literature as Georgie Burne-Jones and Alice Kipling are the more heavily featured than their less-prominent sisters, mostly due to who they married and their offspring. Be prepared for a very interesting, albeit obviously human, portrayal of the MacDonald sisters.

Kimberly says

Although, I have read two biographies on The Macdonald Sisters, it is this sweet novella about them that I loved most of all. Judith Flanders, retells the chronological life of not only the sisters and their families but includes their famous husbands to be! The presence artists and the genius of creativity envelops every page. Perhaps, my most favorite aspect of, 'A Circle of Sisters' by Judith Flanders are the quotes of letters by Lady Burne-Jones, her husband Sir Edward Burne-Jones (Ned) and his famous Pre-Raphaelite mates William Morris, John Ruskin Dante Gabriel Rossetti, including Swinburne and The Prinseps.

How I wish I could crawl into the memories held within these pages. Not necessarily go back in time but let the words, the memories of these beautiful artists bring me to their world permanently.

Oh, to walk around the hallway of Rottingdean, Red House, and Kelmscott. To see little May and Jenny Morris tattle about the passages over creaky wooden floorboards disturbing Ned and Topsy in their studios! To see the wives, Georgie, Janey, and Lizzie, huddled together, seated in the kitchen or living room in their long dresses listening, talking, sewing catching up on their lives and how their rambunctious husbands are annoying them!

Leonie says

The subject matter was interesting enough, and the writing wasn't devoid of entertainment, but this was a little disappointing. Part of the problem is that this claims to be a biography of four sisters. It is more a biography of a much wider family milieu and Agnes and Louisa in particular get very little space indeed. This possibly means that the project is a little misconceived and not all the sisters actually did much and there just isn't the material. But that's not really a good enough reason, not least because Flanders herself seems somewhat aware of it as a possible criticism: in her preface and afterward she seems to be trying to argue that the interest of personality and relationships is as worthy of biography as lives full of action.

The flaw is the execution: Flanders sucks at differentiating personality. Georgie gets the most focus, and I think even she came out clearer in Penelope Fitzgerald's biography of Burne-Jones. The other sisters really aren't distinguished from each other at all, and it sounds like there ought to be enough material to at least do that. All of them are described as being quite sharp and judgemental, and while it's interesting to talk about how a shared family culture of traits manifests, they were different people and must have had personalities beyond that.

The other problem is a similar indistinctness when it comes to introducing the many other figures and what was going on in their lives: again, that Fitzgerald biography was probably more help grounding me than this book itself.

Sarah Boothroyd says

Full of interesting information; I didn't care for the occasionally sneering tone.

Stephanie Matthews says

Wow, amazing book about a fascinating family living in interesting times (and not in the Chinese sense). Worth reading if you like history generally, political history, literary history or art history - but you won't be disappointed by a Judith Flanders book anyway, so just go ahead and read it!

Suzanne says

Absolutely fascinating. Wonderfully readable, the text draws you into the world of the MacDonald sisters, with Georgiana Burne Jones's interactions with the Pre-Raphaelite circle most interesting of all. Recommended.

Anne says

I greatly enjoyed the beginning of this book- I liked the stories of the sisters' childhoods and the peek into Victorian home life. But by the second half, the book became unwieldy. The writer tried to follow the lives of too many people, and the result was confusing (I felt like I had to take notes- I was constantly thinking things like, "Wait, whose son was Phil, again?") and almost turned into a timeline format ("in 1892, this person married this person; in 1895, this person died," etc.) that reminded me more of a dull history textbook than an engaging biography. The writer did mention how, in typical Victorian fashion, the four sisters faded into the background once their children were of marrying age, and I assume that's what she was trying to represent as she spent most of the second half of the book talking about Rudyard Kipling and Stanley Baldwin, but it felt like, in doing so, she was abandoning her original aim (which was telling the stories of the sisters mentioned in the title). If I wanted to read a biography of Rudyard Kipling, I would.

Safiya says

What have the painter Edward Burne-Jones, the Royal Academy of Arts director Edward Poynter, Rudyard Kipling and the Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin in common? they're all directly related to five sisters, Alice, Georgiana, Agnes and Louisa Macdonald, daughters of a Church Minister who rose from lower middle-class to the centre of Victorian Art, Political and Business societies.

Surprisingly, the sisters were not very close, had many mental illnesses and behavioural problems and their husbands, and thus inevitably their children were not that much better either! We would probably call them in today's terms a "dysfunctional family". What strikes most is how some of them thought so little of their own offsprings! It is probable with the place that is given today to women in the art and literary world, they would have been considerably successful too and would not have suffered such mental illnesses, as they would have felt more fulfilled intellectually.

The last paragraph of the book sums it all up:

"...they had a 'real total and quite unquestioning respect for art and learning' [words of writer Colin MacInnes (Burne-Jones' great grand-son):] as well as a lack of respect for money without the corresponding contempt for business that so often goes with it. They were astonishingly literary. Of the siblings, their husbands, wives, parents, children and grandchildren, half of them were published writers. [...] MacInnes adds: "They were not particularly loving [or rather their love:] seemed, however intense, to be rather chill and demanding." and: 'If they were inspiring people, they were also appallingly demanding. They were in fact, the sort of family that one would perhaps rather read about than belong to'."

Absolutely spot on!

I found the part where the sisters are adults and getting married more interesting than the beginning which describes their family background and their childhood which consisted most of moving around to follow their father's various appointments and of coping with their siblings' deaths. But maybe more so because I can relate to what they going through as mothers and housewives - just read a couple of pages describing what the time and effort put into the fortnightly clothes washing, it's amazing that they had time to even think! (pp 141-142).

All-in-all a book that took me a while to read, but which gives an unusual angle to a biography as it looks not just at one extraordinary person, but at a dozen at least at the same time, throughout the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

Brenda Clough says

A linked biography of the sisters, which goes deeply into the things a Victorian woman could (and could not) do.

Michaellyn Martinez says

I agree with other reviews that this book was a grab bag of all the authors research. I was interested in the sisters, thinking they must be a fascinating group, but learned little about them, once they were married.

Good general view of Victorian life.

Felt very sad for them, as they started out with talent and excitement, but were shunted off to the back round of their husbands and children. I guess I would have taken to my bed too - preferably with a large dose of laudanum!

Veronica says

What a contrast to Pandora's Daughters! Instead of indulging in pointless anecdotes and vague generalisations, Flanders gives us a meticulously detailed and exhaustively researched insight into the lives of four sisters born in the first half of the nineteenth century. As the jacket copy says, "Their journey, in a single generation, from provincial obscurity to metropolitan and imperial grandeur symbolized the energy and vitality of nineteenth-century Britain ... a society open to talent and abundant with possibility, where four lowly born sisters could rise to become the intimates of politicians, princes, and viceroys." It's full of interesting domestic detail, and it also portrays vividly how constrained these Victorian women's lives were. As the book proceeds, the sisters fade gradually into the background, overshadowed by the achievements of their husbands and sons -- just as they were in life. Born into the family of a modest Methodist preacher, two of the sisters married artists -- Edward Burne-Jones and Edward Poynter (director of the National Gallery and of the Royal Academy), while the other two became the mothers of Rudyard Kipling and Stanley Baldwin. There was also one poor unmarried sister who fulfilled the suitably Victorian role of being housekeeper and unappreciated general dogsbody, first to her parents and then to one of her better-off sisters.

I was really impressed with how cleverly Flanders intertwines the stories of the sisters and their expanding families, carrying the story through to the death of the final sister in 1937 without losing the reader in a mass of minor characters. Some people have criticised the fact that what purports to be a biography of the sisters devotes so much space to the men (particularly Kipling), but I think she provides an interesting balance between individual life stories and the complex dynamics of the family -- or rather families, as the sisters grow up and have children of their own. The first half of the book is perhaps more interesting than the second -- two of the sisters pretty much disappear from the story after their marriages, becoming stereotypical frail Victorian ladies and vanishing into the sickroom. She's clearly also hampered by a lack of documentary evidence for parts of the story (Kipling was a great destroyer of letters, and the Baldwins wouldn't give her access to their papers).

Above all, Flanders writes very well, providing a wealth of interesting detail and background without overwhelming you with the scale of her research -- most impressive for a first book. Amazon's reviewer sneeringly comments "It is readable and undemanding biography, but hardly amounts to challenging history" -- but it's clearly aimed at the general reader, not at historians, so this criticism seems decidedly unfair.

Wealththeow says

A poor family headed by a Methodist minister had five surviving daughters and two sons. Of these, the four daughters who married all had husbands or sons of import, and are supposedly the focus of this book.

I say supposedly because pages go by without one of them being mentioned. The vast majority of this book is actually about their various relations. From the first to the last the four sisters get very little attention, and in fact I came away with only a vague understanding of Georgie Burne-Jones and the rest remained cyphers. After the daughters marry and start having children, they fall out of the narrative almost entirely and the book becomes more and more disorganized and scattered.

Bad enough that the ostensible focus of the book is nearly ignored, but the various children and grandchildren receive very variable amounts of attention--I felt that about half this book was about Rudyard Kipling, whereas three-time Prime Minister of Britain Stan Baldwin gets literally two paragraphs to summarize his entire political career.

And, icing on my hate-cake, the author has the strangest interpretations of letters and happenings that I have ever seen. She decides upon the nastiest interpretation every single time. See my status updates for examples.

Sherwood Smith says

A readably adequate general introduction to the Macdonald sisters and their severally famous husbands/offspring.

It begins quite strongly, painting a solid picture of the Methodists' perspective on the early nineteenth century, but once the sisters marry, the focus seems to shift more to the men and their achievements.

Two of the sisters retire to their beds as professional invalids, and nearly disappear: though Flanders warns of this in the introduction, I thought that meant there would be some digging into why, but as the book progressed, this seemed more of an excuse for leaving them out. By the end, the book is a somewhat tangled recitation of what all the descendants did, and some authorial judgments slipped in; the men have overshadowed the women.

I could have used more quotations of the sisters' voices and fewer rhetorical questions, but overall, a pleasant read.

Hilary Hicklin says

Purportedly about the Macdonald sisters who married Edward Burne-Jones, Poynter, and the fathers of Kipling, and Stanley Baldwin, this was more about their husbands and sons than about themselves. In fact two of the sisters seemed to spend most of their lives on their sick beds.

There was, however, some interesting social history of the Victorian period, but the style was leaden and there was a sense that the author was determined to include all her research however tenuous. Disappointing.

Caroline says

It's almost a pub quiz question - who or what connects pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones, the arts

administrator Edward Poynter, prime minister Stanley Baldwin and writer Rudyard Kipling? The answer and the subject of this book is the four MacDonald sisters: Georgiana and Agnes being wife to the first two, and Louisa and Alice mother to the latter two.

I'm in two minds in reviewing this book - on the one hand I enjoyed it, on the other I can clearly see where it falls down, where it could have been improved. Few of the sisters emerge from these pages with any clear sense of personality, in particular Edie and Agnes, and by the time Flanders is recounting the lives of the children and grandchildren I often became quite lost. I'm still not clear who Denis or Margaret belonged to!

Part of the problem is that none of the MacDonald sisters themselves led especially interesting or exceptional lives - whatever fame they have bequeathed to posterity is a result of the menfolk they were attached to, not for anything they themselves did. So you're left with a biography of four women who were only remarkable in the sense that they connected four well-known male personalities, none of whom are the focus of this book or who emerge with any kind of clear presence either. It's sort of a case of 'damned if you do and damned if you don't' - the sisters are what unites the men who led the interesting public lives, but you can't write a joint biography of them because their ties are only tenuous 'via marriage' relationships, and what's left isn't all that interesting.
