Nineteenth-century Scottish literature is full of the unknown: Some of its best known figures--James Hogg, Walter Scott, Robert Louis Stevenson, George MacDonald, and J. M. Barrie--all explore aspects of the magical, supernatural, irrational, or simply mysterious in their fiction. Drawing on Scotland’s heroic past and native traditions, these writers helped to embalm Scotland in faerie dust, much to the disgust of later nationalists like Tom Nairn. They effaced the material realities of life in nineteenth-century Scotland and filled the void, Ossian-like, with tales of days gone by. In nineteenth-century Scotland, romance—the mode proper to explorations of the unknown—was primarily the province of male writers, who incorporated it into the historical novel, the adventure story, and the fairy tale.

What was left, then, for the comparatively few nineteenth-century Scotswomen who took to writing novels? To begin to answer this question, I’m going to turn today to two such women whose current obscurity may be due in part to their rejection of this romance tradition in favor of the banalities of everyday life. Between them, Jane and Mary Findlater wrote fourteen novels, three of which they co-authored, and several of which examine the circumscribed lives of women in rural Scotland at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Their novels interest me because of what I’m calling their domestic naturalism—an unrelenting, entirely matter-of-fact focus on the events of everyday life that reveals the intellectual and material deprivation experienced by a certain class of Scotswomen.

Taking Crossriggs, one of Mary and Jane’s co-written novels, as my example in this paper, I’ll suggest that the Findlaters’ fiction is now largely unknown in part because it resists the romance tradition that dominated nineteenth-century Scottish literature, confining itself to the rather grim material realities of everyday life. In this respect, they resemble better known late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Scottish women writers including Margaret Oliphant and Catherine Carswell, whose novels also countered the romance tradition developed by male writers from Scott and Hogg to Stevenson and Barrie. These women’s domestic naturalism, I will contend, counters the Scottish romance tradition developed by male writers during the nineteenth century. Like Oliphant’s and Carswell’s heroines, the Findlaters’ protagonists are strong-minded women whose struggles for self-realization are hampered by their lack of money, the bleakness of their surroundings, and their obligations towards their less competent family members and dependents. The Findlaters certainly don’t glorify or sentimentalize the small sacrifices their heroines make, yet they invest their daily struggles with dignity and significance merely by suggesting that these struggles are worthy of representation.