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**THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF MARGARET OLIPHANT**

The Story of a Woman - A Landscape of the Self

Preface by Elisabeth Jay



ÉVORA - M M X I



Margaret Oliphant

1828-189



Contents

Preface	
Introductory Note	6
Introduction	
1. The critical fortune of Margaret Oliphant	9
2. The critical fortune of <i>The Autobiography</i>	28
Chapter I – Autobiography: a text of life in a new landscape	
1. Autobiography or the enunciation of experience.....	40
2. Memory, Time and Place.....	57
3. The formal paradigms and the feminist critique.....	67
Chapter II – The Story of a Woman	
1. Questions of Edition	80
2. <i>The Autobiography</i>	85
Chapter III – A Landscape of the Self	
1. The conditions of possibility for the self.....	98
2. The construction of the self in the family circle	111
2.1. The parents and the brothers.....	112
a) The mother – Margaret Oliphant Wilson.....	114
b) The Father – Francis Wilson	120
c) The brothers – Frank and William (Willie)	120
2.2 The Husband – Frank Oliphant	121
2.3 The Children (Maggie, Tiddy and Cecco).....	125
3. The construction of the self in the professional circle	136
4. The different form of autobiographical writing	146
Conclusion	156
Editions of <i>The Autobiography</i>	166
References	167



Preface

A time-honoured introduction to critical re-evaluations of long-dead authors is to say that the writer in question would have been both astonished and delighted to find his or her work receiving such attention. Margaret Oliphant, the subject of this book, however, would have been far more likely to have greeted the news with a wry smile, partly self-deprecatory, partly springing from a barely disguised sense that the belated dues to a lifetime of hard work were finally being paid, and partly conceding that, in the final analysis, it was hard to say what the accolade for her work counted for when set against the fact that all her children had predeceased her. She would, however, have been unequivocally pleased to see her work receiving attention beyond British shores and in a European context. The sense, enjoyed by many leading Victorian writers, that they were playing in a European arena, rather than within the narrower confines of the Anglophone world, is a dimension of nineteenth-century culture which badly needs recuperating. Studies by European critics such as Ana Clara Birrento will contribute to this project.

Oliphant's own attempt to lay out her life 'as a landscape of the self', as this study reveals, demonstrates a particular quality of 'self-reflexivity'. Written over a period of years, which saw her self-inscription change from self-communing, to a document intended at first for her immediate family, and finally for a wider public, her autobiography was forced to negotiate transitions between the confessional voice, and intimate anecdote, and the public world of the professional writer. Ana Clara Birrento opens up for today's reader the political nature of the choices that Oliphant made in creating this autobiographical self. The study attends both to the specifics of Oliphant's *Autobiography* - its composition, textual strategies, and reception history - and views it through a series of theoretical prisms which encourage us to reflect on what this particular text has to teach us about the protean potential of the autobiographical genre.

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