



Traditions of Victorian Women's Autobiography: The Poetics and Politics of Life Writing (Victorian Literature & Culture (Univ Va Paperback))

Linda H. Peterson

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Victorian women's autobiography emerged at a historical moment when the field of life writing was particularly rich. Spiritual autobiography was developing interesting variations in the heroic memoirs of pioneering missionary women and in probing intellectual analyses of Nonconformists, Anglicans, agnostics, and other religious thinkers. The chroniques scandaleuses of the eighteenth century were giving way to the respectable artist's life of the professional Victorian woman. The domestic memoir, a Victorian variation on the family histories of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, flourished in a culture that celebrated the joys of home, family, and private life. Perhaps most important, Victorian women writers were experimenting with all these forms in various combinations and permutations.

Arguing that women's autobiography does not represent a singular separate tradition but instead embraces multiple lineages, Linda H. Peterson explores the poetics and politics of these diverse forms of life writing. She carefully analyzes the polemical Autobiography of Harriet Martineau and Personal Recollections of Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, the missionary memoirs that challenge Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the Romantic autobiographies of the poet and poetess that Barrett Browning reconstructs in *Aurora Leigh*, the professional life stories of Margaret Oliphant and her contemporaries, and the Brontëan and Eliotian bifurcations of Mary Cholmondeley's memoirs.

The desire to know the details of other women's lives?and to use them for one's own purposes?underlies much Victorian women's autobiography, even as it helps to explain our continuing interest in their accounts.

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