Kevin A. Morrison, ***The Provincial Fiction of Mitford, Gaskell and Eliot.*** Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023, 320pp. Hb £90.00. ISBN: 9781399516082

Reviewed by **Bethany Dahlstrom**

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The opening chapter reclaims Mary Russell Mitford as a pioneering literary voice who shaped the genre of provincial fiction through her 'fugitive pieces' - anonymous and pseudo-anonymous sketches that debuted in periodicals before appearing in book form. Morrison demonstrates how Mitford's seemingly casual observations and digressive narratives served as strategic responses to gendered and economic constraints. Far from representing static, nostalgic views of village life, these early sketches are rich with ironic commentary and subtle social critique. This foundational work laid the groundwork for the narrative voice and emotional resonance that would come to define the genre, particularly in the works of Gaskell and Eliot.

Building on the first chapter, Morrison continues to deepen his analysis of Mitford through her landscape writings. He refutes the critical tradition that has portrayed Mitford's work as timeless or rooted in unreflective nostalgia. Instead, he shows how her descriptions of country rambles register the effects of rural poverty, enclosure, and modernisation – issues often overlooked in later illustrated editions of her work. Morrison demonstrates how Mitford used the sketch to subtly challenge gendered expectations of literary production while embedding social critique through digressive walks and observational asides. Her writings do not resist history; they engage with it obliquely but unmistakably. This careful attention to how later editorial interventions flattened or excised Mitford's political undertones is one of the book's methodological strengths.

Turning to Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*, Morrison explores how Gaskell adapted and extended Mitford's innovations within the episodic structure of the Victorian novel. He identifies Gaskell's character-narrator, Mary Smith, as a key mediator between the village of Cranford and an imagined urban readership. Like Mitford's narrator, Mary is both a participant and an observer – someone who belongs to the village community but retains enough distance

to reflect critically on its habits and values. Morrison's analysis of this narratorial positioning offers a compelling new reading of *Cranford* as a formally experimental and emotionally complex work. He resists reductive accounts of Gaskell's fiction as simply quaint or domestic and instead argues for her as a sophisticated theorist of voice, empathy, and audience engagement. Importantly, Morrison places Gaskell's *Cranford Papers* in a wider publishing context, noting how the serialized nature of their original appearance in *Household Words* influenced their tone and structure. This reinforces one of the book's overarching claims: that the material conditions of literary production – particularly the rise of the periodical and gift book markets – shaped not only what was written but how it was written and by whom.

Morrison next turns to George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* to explore how provincial settings become sites of emotional and political formation. Drawing on liberal theory and affect studies, he argues that Eliot develops a model of citizenship rooted not in abstract rationalism or rights discourse, but in emotional attachments to place. The 'home-scene' becomes a crucible for ethical development, where characters experience both belonging and estrangement. Morrison's reading is informed by narrative theory as well as political philosophy, resulting in a richly layered account of how provincial fiction served as a medium for reimagining the liberal subject. What distinguishes this chapter is its attention to how Eliot inherited and transformed the techniques of her predecessors. Morrison reads Eliot's use of direct address, metalepsis, and descriptive excess as political choices – strategies that invite readers into a reflective engagement with the narrated world and their own. This is provincial fiction not as retreat, but as an invitation to ethical complexity.

The final chapter centres on *Middlemarch*, which Morrison describes as the apotheosis of provincial fiction. Here, he introduces the concept of 'portable interiority' – a way of imagining rootedness not in fixed geographies but in mobile, affective capacities. As national and imperial circuits of movement expanded in the late nineteenth century, Eliot's characters increasingly find themselves negotiating a sense of self that is both shaped by and detached from physical place. Rather than framing this as a loss, Morrison sees it as an evolution. He argues that Eliot uses the provincial setting not to contain identity but to universalise it, enabling characters to forge forms of connection and responsibility that transcend the boundaries of the local. *Middlemarch*, in this view, is a novel of cosmopolitan liberalism – deeply grounded yet forward-looking, reflective of its tradition and critical of its limits.

What sets Morrison's work apart from previous scholarship is its commitment to historical and formal specificity. Unlike critics who have treated Mitford, Gaskell, and Eliot as isolated figures or relegated them to the realm of domestic nostalgia, Morrison presents a coherent lineage of literary innovation shaped by gendered authorship, economic constraint, and evolving forms of liberalism. He skilfully integrates narratology, book history, and affect theory to show how these authors used provincial fiction not to retreat from modernity, but to critique and reshape it. Morrison's intervention is especially timely, as literary studies increasingly seek to de-centre metropolitan and canonical narratives. By restoring the political and formal complexity of provincial fiction, *The Provincial Fiction of Mitford, Gaskell and Eliot* not only reclaims the genre from reductive nostalgia, but also deepens our understanding of how fiction participates in civic life. This book is essential reading for anyone interested in Victorian popular fiction, as it offers a compelling, historically grounded exploration of how provincial writing engaged with modernity and shaped the genre's cultural impact.