

COMMENTARY TO “BLOSSOMING SCIENTISTS”

REBECCA WOODS

INSTITUTE FOR THE HISTORY & PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY, UNIVERSITY
OF TORONTO

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CONTACT

rebecca.woods@utoronto.ca

Vankooten’s “Blossoming Scientists” is a promising contribution to a robust literature on gender, science, botany, and travel-writing in the long-nineteenth century. In it, she explores the participation of women, all with ties to the Scottish Highlands, in the production of a genre, the (scientific) travel narrative, that Vankooten shows was an important avenue for women’s participation in the generation of scientific knowledge in an era in which they were predominantly barred from formal participation due to sex. With Jennie Flemming, an Ontario woman of Scottish descent who visited the Highlands in 1903, as our guide, Vankooten examines how women writers absorbed, embodied, modified, and contributed to the genre of the travelogue from the late eighteenth century into the early twentieth. Pioneers of the genre, such as Sarah Murray, embraced travel-writing as a way to assert a sense of female belongingness in the landscape, while the work of nineteenth century women such as Elizabeth Grant employed scientific standards of the day,

such as objective and dispassionate climate reportage, to assert female credibility.

Fleming stands apart from these female travel-writers in that her account of her voyage to Scotland and time in the Highlands is a private one, accessible from her handwritten journals housed in the archives of the University of Guelph. However, in drawing connections between Fleming’s unpublished travel journal and the published works of her female counterparts, Vankooten convincingly demonstrates commonalities over the long nineteenth century, and between published and unpublished female travelogues.

Vankooten’s analysis is well grounded in Scottish studies and the history of travel writing, with especial attention to the gender politics of the field. Future work on this topic might more fully explore literatures on gender and science; science, empire, and gender; and more broadly the place of Scotland in the imperial (scientific) imaginary. This satisfying and concise essay is a strong first step in this direction.